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## NAIL POLISH AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY: A CRITICAL LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LABELS

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Beauty practices have been the subject of discussion of feminist theory and sociology since Bartky's (1990) critique of beauty standards, which, following arguments such as Dworkin's (1974), iterated that the constant subjection of women's bodies to alteration is the result of an oppressive social scrutiny (Forbes et al. 2007: 266). With the harmful nature of beauty practices ranging from the psychological (Wolf 1991) to the physical (Jeffreys 2014), cosmetic products are transgressive actors in their role of the subtle and covert oppression of women.

The nail industry focuses on the beauty capital sought out by the consumers of its products (Kang 2010). The labels that can be found on the hundreds of bottles of nail lacquer of brands such as O.P.I.<sup>®</sup>, Essie<sup>®</sup>, and Revlon<sup>®</sup> are demonstrative of the culturally well-seated popular archetypes of femininity which exist on socio-cultural grounds. The present study looks at the semantic weight of Essie's<sup>®</sup> brand labels in particular, and the way in which a leading brand creates linguistic representations abiding by the age-old, deeply entrenched archetypes that describe the attractive woman, in turn targeting the average female consumer and her cognitive associations (Goddard and Patterson 2000;

McLoughlin 2000, Bulawka 2013). The presence of such typing, which veers towards being an all-encompassing representative statement of women, also plays a role of upholding sexist gender ideologies in a semi-covert manner. This, as action, places women in a subversive role through semantic and cognitive association.

Nails, and the state they are in when on the female hand, are the object of much scrutiny in the socially impressed importance of their being well-maintained, and they constitute an equation with the socially entrenched conviction of there being such a thing as true femininity. Because long nails are a sign of manual dexterity and erotic appeal (Brownmiller 1984; Lupton 1996), the so-called art of nail painting is yet another practice which places many women at the mercy of cosmetic products. What is often overlooked in the study of the oppressive nature of the beauty industry is the linguistic aspect, and how cognitive associations constructed by discursive, textual and lexical means maintain harmful generalizations.

When considering the performative quality of doing one's makeup – or, in other words, “making oneself up” – there is a transformative and equally transformational quality embedded within that performance of femininity. The idea behind the notion of the performative nature of gender adds to the dimension of its importance in comprehending the gravity of what implications this might have on women, men, and other genders not included in the binary. In this, what becomes clear is the way that subordination, as such, continues to hold women in a marginalized position.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theory upon which the current analysis is based includes different critical theories applied in linguistic study. Although the overarching framework for the analysis is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Critical Metaphor Analysis, stereotype analysis and Archetype Theory have also been utilized as tools to carry out the work of critical discourse analysts.

### *2.1. CDA as a framework*

Critical Discourse Analysis, is used as a framework because it discusses the social context in which the linguistic construction bears burden on society (Fairclough 1992). Given that the main tenets of CDA include addressing social problems and seeing power relations as discursive ones, this framework, alongside the methodological axis discussed below, works in exploring the ways in which discourses present in tiny texts construe ideas of femininity.

CDA has roots in rhetoric, text linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, sociolinguistics and pragmatics, among other disciplines (Wodak 2013: 302). Because CDA sees discourse as a form of social practice, this implies that a dialectal relationship takes place among discursive situations and social situations (*ibid.*). As a framework, CDA takes linguistic descriptions of text and applies them to the surrounding social conventions which bind them.

### *2.2. Construal and construction*

It must also be kept in mind that “we may textually construe (represent, imagine, etc.) the social world in particular ways, but whether our representations or construals have the effect of changing its construction depends on various factors – including the way social reality already is, who is constituting it and so forth” (Fairclough 2003: 8). The way in which reality is presented in discourse shapes and molds its construction, almost by nature. The construal analyzed here is that of femininity, in other words how gender ideologies regarding women are maintained in text, which leads to the construction of such, as constructs cannot exist independent of their construals.

In looking at the social and performative nature of a text, it is important to consider what message lies underneath the literal semantic meaning of the text. By observing what is construed in the discourse of the text at hand, what is, inasmuch, constructed as interpretation of the author’s intentions and the ideologies to which he, she or they abide by takes place. With gender construals equating to “discursive

rules and modes of description which contribute to the production and maintenance of unequal relations of power between men and women" (Bulawka 2013: 173–174), also known as *gendering*, the role of discourse, both textual and spoken, in the construction of femininity and masculinity, is quite obvious. Its subsequent role in projecting masculine or feminine roles as being of a certain type is then communicated through the construal.

The *social constructionist approach* to socio-cultural study, in turn, assumes that social practices and societal belief systems (ideologies) are the by-product of construction, rather than naturally occurring in any system of belief. When it comes to gender, instead of the notions of masculinity and femininity existing as part of a binary dichotomy which is difficult to change, notions that are oftentimes taken for granted have been structured as a result of surrounding messages communicated to the general public.

Previous works have discussed construals and constructions of masculine and feminine stereotyping in the media (Kilbourne 1999), and the linguistic aspect has been equally covered (Bulawka 2006). What I aim to do here is look at a specific media of communicating femininity through beauty culture and adherence to its importance. Not only is the analysis an example of the way in which femininity has become exploited in upholding stereotypical norms of what it means to be feminine, but also an example of the way in which notions of femininity work as a mechanism of social control that demonstrate hegemonic masculinity. Women are arguably more marginalized than men in everyday talk, language and in the discourses which discuss them (Moustgaard 2004), be it on political grounds or in the field of advertising and product marketing.

### 2.3. *Critical Metaphor Analysis*

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 3) stated, metaphors are clues that our language is connected to existing schemas in our cognitive state, working "not just in language but in thought and action." In the case of gender ideologies, this is all the more obvious, with some work al-

ready having been done on the stereotype cementing which takes place in metaphor analyses of the press (Rodríguez 2009; Bulawka 2013). The metaphors which were found in the minimal texts analyzed were those of edible items, food and drink, decorative items, and children, and, as will be argued further in the analytical section of the article, that women are cognitively associated with such categories.

A metaphorical analysis will be conducted on the basis of Charteris-Black's (2004) critical metaphor analytic methodologies, which have the aim of looking at metaphorical representation from a critical and cognitive perspective. I aim to show that in representing women as being of a certain type by association, cognitive dissonances are subsequently provided for in the scheme of the more progressive feminist façade that makes up a large part of the cosmetics and fashion industries.

Women have been found to be referred to as edible items, children and décor in previous analyses of text in popular media, and the case proves no different in the cosmetics industry (Rodríguez 2009). Keeping in mind the transformational properties of cosmetics, the references to food and drink are not solely references to color, but also transfer the edible property onto the female consumer.

#### *2.4. Stereotyping in discourse*

In feminist critical analyses, as well as in the discussion of gender ideologies, stereotypical notions are a common point of discussion. The obvious link between ideologies and stereotypes lies in the perpetuation of stereotypes through their reinforcement in media representations. Although negative stereotyping has arguably undergone much change, certain industries, such as the beauty and fashion industries, do much to uphold and maintain negative images of women in advertising and otherwise. These images pervade international markets' push for a more globalized image of a supposed so-called true femininity, which leads to detrimental and limiting attitudes in the chain reaction of what it is that dictates gendered behaviors (i.e., what is and is not considered appropriate).

Although the role of gender in advertising has undergone significant investigation, the cosmetics industry (Radzi and Musa 2017: 22)

and their devices have still been greatly overlooked in much of the research. Despite the fact that the quasi aim of cosmetics is to boost self-esteem by transforming the user or wearer into something more akin to the image of the woman who belongs to the traditional canon of beauty, research has shown that the rhetoric found within labels and names of cosmetic products has quite the opposite effect (Rai 2013; Tehseem and Kalsoom 2015).

### 2.5. *Female archetypes in earlier studies*

Archetype theory has been applied to feminist analyses of cultural contexts in fields of anthropology, sociology and linguistics alike (Kaplan 1994; Olsson 2000). The female archetype has seen much study (Kanter 1977; Moustgaard 2004), with work in linguistics also performing analyses of the cultural dominance of certain role representations in discourse (Kramarae and Spender 2000). Because archetype theory focuses on representations which are culturally salient and reinforce cognitive shortcuts that expand existing universal gender paradigms, it is a useful tool in critical analysis.

In her analysis of the discourse of Polish political magazines on female politicians, Bulawka (2013), for instance, discusses the presence of archetypes in the texts found in issues of *Wprost*, *Polityka*, and *Newsweek Polska*. What she has shown is that patriarchal gendered ideological representations are highly salient in Polish culture, and she utilizes the framework of archetype theory to show how. Those archetypes are as follows: the witch, the mother, the seductress, the eccentric, the housewife, Cinderella, the bride and the Teflon princess (Bulawka 2013: 177–200). These are not only present within Polish culture, but within the countries such as the United States, demonstrating how culturally embedded notions of femininity are on a global scale, making the recycling of such tropes universal. As will be demonstrated in the analysis, almost all of the archetypes listed by Bulawka (2013) are present in the tiny texts, with the exception of the mother archetype; however, the analysis looks at one in particular, namely the archetype of the seductress.

### 2.6. *Labels as tiny text*

In her study of text found on sugar packets from a South African airport café, Sunderland (2012) locates tiny texts as pertinent to her work in the field of CDA. *Tiny texts*, which constitute between two to four words, are a term coined by Widdowson (1995) as being “minimal texts” in his analyses of single words such as “ladies” and “gentlemen”. Labels as tiny or minimal texts have the same value as any text, which is to send a message to be interpreted by the receiver(s) (Widdowson 2007). In the field of discourse analysis, the way that the reader might interpret the text, as well as what the texts harbinger wants to convey are equally important in analysis.

### 3. AIMS

The study aims to make connections between gender ideologies and the projected attitudes that women should feel towards their own bodies, as well as those attitudes towards what constitutes femininity on the whole. Here, discourse is viewed as playing an active role in the construction of ideals that adhere to socially construed notions of femininity. The analysis demonstrates how metaphors, archetypes and stereotypes present in the labels construct images of femininity, are representative of attitudes towards femininity and, in turn, categorize women into subjugated social positioned human beings. What is important is the semanticity of the discourse of the labels, as well as what they do in their act of construing a certain representation of femininity.

The feminist analysis of names given to cosmetic products is not new to linguistics, having been studied from a stylistic perspective on the basis of the work of Mills (Radzi and Musa 2017), as well as from the textual perspective (Merskin 2007). The material previously analyzed has not, however, taken into consideration the names given to the color spectrum of nail polish, nor has the question of what CDA might do for the question of gender inequality and the subordination of women within social spheres that propagate themselves as feminist, such as that of the cosmetics industry, been investigated.

#### 4. DATA

Considering the weight and influence that discourse has on its surrounding social context, an appropriate methodology in the investigation of questions regarding inequalities also takes into account wider social perspectives. The object of analysis is the list of nail polish labels, to demonstrate the way in which women are represented in the discourse of the tiny texts.

A total of 323 labels were taken from the list of nail polish names provided online on Essie's® website,<sup>1</sup> analyzed and subsequently divided into categories of labels which perform a certain linguistic typing. It must also be mentioned that although an obvious marketing technique, the maintenance of emphasis on the sexist undertones of the labels remains relevant to the discussion of present gender ideologies that exist within mass culture (Tehseem and Kalsoom 2015). It is my view that these labels as tiny texts communicate a certain ideology which is at the same time overt and covert in expressing chauvinist and sexist ideologies. Through conducting and producing the results of such an analysis, the way in which sexist gendered ideologies which lay in the foundation of patriarchal ideologies are upheld will be made clear, as they are complicit in reproducing sexist notions that are being challenged by feminist critical discourse analysts (Lazar 2005: 1–3). The three major categories into which the nail polishes have been placed, including representations of the female as food, materialistic and seductive, have been listed in the sections below.

Table 1 contains 104 of the labels analyzed, which have been divided into the categories to which they correspond. These categories were chosen because of the subcategories belonging to the main categorizations of metaphor, stereotype and archetype are the ones which produced the highest number of examples. Some of the remaining labels selected have been mentioned in the analysis to illustrate how they abide to their categorizations, although the number of examples is smaller.

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1 Essie.com. Accessed March 10, 2017.

**Table 1.** Categorization of Essie® labels

<b>Labels A: Food metaphor</b>	<b>Labels B: Materialist/consumer stereotype</b>	<b>Labels C: Woman as sexuality – seductress archetype</b>
Aperitif	A lot of Shekels	After Sex
Angel food	Alligator purse	After Sex A-List
Berry Hard	Angora Cardi	Allure
Cabi-Au-Lait	Aruba Blue	Below the Belt
Café Forget	Bahama Mama	Bikini so Teeny
Cherry Pop	Barbados Blue	Bungle Jungle
Chocolate Cakes	Big Bag Theory	Chastity
Clam Bake	Big Spender	Cherry Pop
Cocktails & Coconuts	Boat House	Demure Vixen
Fruit Sangria	Bobbing for Baubles	Exotic Liras
Jam-N-Jelly	Buy me a Cameo	Exposure
Jelly Apple	Decadent Diva	Fishnet Stockings
Licorice	Downtown Brown	Flawless
Lollipop	Dramatic Drachmas	Flirt
Marshmallow	East Hampton Cottage	Fondola Gondola
Mint Candy Apple	Exotic Liras	Frisky Femininity
Peach Daiquiri	Fifth Avenue	Guilty Pleasures
Pink Lemonade	Fiji	Hard To Get
Plumberry	Garnet	Infatuation
Potato Fields	Golden Nuggets	Intimate
Raisinnuts	Imported Champagne	Lacy not Racy
Raspberry	Island Hopping	Luscious Lips
Rock Candy	It's in the Bag	Midnight Cami
Strawberry Shortcake	Jag-U-are	Mini How High
Strawberry Sorbet	Jamaica Me Crazy	My Place or Yours
Tangerine	Lapis of Luxury	Naked Truth
Very Cranberry	Limo-scene	Pillow Talk
	Mink muffs	Pole Dancing
	Material Girl	Sexy Divide
	Mucho Dinero	Smokin' Hot
	Pink Diamond	Thigh High
	Pink Glove Service	Turning Heads Red
	Poor Lil Rich Girl	Tart Deco
	Room with a View	Velvet Voyeur
	Shop till I drop	Virgin Orchid
	Silver Bullions	Who's She Red
	Status Symbol	Wild Thing
	Turquoise & Caicos	
	Vermillionare	
	Wrapped in Rubies	

## 5. METHOD

The present analysis has been carried out on only a select number of examples (104 labels), which constitute the permanent collection of Essie® labels, excluding labels which belong to limited edition collections. The categories that have been presented above, namely those which represent women as food, materialists and seductresses, are the ones that have been found to be the most prevalent representations of metaphor, stereotype and archetype in the minimal texts analyzed. Below, the categorizations are listed in full.

Different analyses carried out on the subject of different media types have focused on the metaphorical representations of women in popular and publicly accessible discourse (Bulawka 2006, 2013; Rodríguez 2009). The typical metaphorical representations of women that have been found in magazines, in advertisements and online are presented below (Rodríguez 2009; Bulawka 2013), and are considered to carry embedded objectification of women:

- woman as edible item;
- woman as décor;
- woman as child.

The second category of analysis was that of stereotypes present in the labels, which have been divided into the following categories:

- woman as materialist/consumer;
- woman as hard to please;
- woman as the object of sexual desire.

The third of the main categories was that of the archetypes of the female provided by Bulawka (2013), which are argued to embody femininity:

- the mother;
- the seductress;
- the eccentric;
- the housewife;
- Cinderella;
- the bride;
- the witch/the crone.

The categories presented were chosen after the analysis was carried out as they were the ones which were found to work towards specific stereotyping categories that produce certain definitions or construals of femininity and the way the texts construe images of femininity. The other categories located within the analysis (such as the crone, child, etc.), although equally important, were less representative than the ones discussed here. I believe that discourse is omnipresent in the social arena, and that consumers are, through the labels, indirectly asked to identify with the names given to these polishes as a marketing technique.

## 6. ANALYSIS

The analysis was carried out in line with archetype theory, Critical Metaphor Analysis, and stereotype analysis within the framework of CDA. The first section of the analysis presents the representations of femininity within the archetype theory framework, the second section analyzes the metaphor of women as food and sexual objects within the tiny texts, and the third section discusses stereotypical representations of women as materialists.

### *6.1. Metaphor of woman as food*

Just as certain archetypes become familiar to audiences, metaphors also make up the cognitive symbols which are representative of ideas hinged upon ideological notions. Women are oftentimes physically juxtaposed against or placed in comparison to edible items (Rodríguez 2009: 20). This metaphorical perspective on women is also representative of their objectified role in society, since representations of food are less agentive ones. The examples provided have been taken from the corpus of Essie® nail polish labels:

1. tangerine;
2. lollipop;
3. marshmallow;
4. mint candy apple;
5. plumberry.

The fact that women are often associated with edible items, animals, children and decorations (Rodriguez 2009) is in line with feminist critique of discourse and its prolonged association of the female with things secondary to their being considered persons. This objectification takes place not only on the more superficial level of referring to women and their nails as food items, but also within the types of food that are chosen. The fact that women are often referred to as sweet edibles (see Examples 1–5), such as fruits, chocolate, candies and cakes demonstrates the submissive role into which they are representationally placed.

### *6.2. Woman as stereotypical materialist*

One popular stereotype of women today is that of the materialistic, money-minded or consumer who cannot help but shop (see, e.g., Kelan 2008). This image of the woman has been revolving in linguistic gender ideology since as far back as the 1960s (Stern 1993). Feminist theorists have brought light to the issue of materialist associations with women, reminding us of the fact that “the traditional societal role for women is already a passive one, already one of a consumer, already one of an emotional non-intellectual who isn’t supposed to think or act beyond the confines of her home” (Embree 1970: 196). Although this statement is over 40 years old, marketing strategies of today demonstrate the market benefit of preserving a popular belief in stereotypes of female money-minded and consumer nature. This, in turn, works upon still-existing stereotypes of the feminine woman as a non-thinking individual who is co-dependent in relation to a male partner (Radzi and Musa 2017: 23). Some of the labels provide direct reference to money or money-mindedness in the value of expensive things or services, as in Examples 6–7:

6. show me the ring;
7. buy me a cameo.

The “woman as materialist” stereotype category is characterized by any textual reference found within the labels to anything that symbolizes attachment to material things, money or the stereotype of the “gold digger”. I have looked at the labels which lexically represent

the female target consumer as an object she might be tempted to buy, including the stereotype of the female gold digger, names associated with expensive brand names, and symbols of wealth as being ones of importance construing femininity. The symbolism of wealth also includes the names of popular vacation spots known for their costliness, as shown in Examples 8–11:

8. shop till I drop;
9. Aruba blue;
10. East Hampton Cottage;
11. island hopping.

Not only is it that consumer qualities are ascribed as being ones of femininity, the sexist ideologies behind the text also present themselves in the fact that these qualities are naturalized though the process of construction. By labeling cosmetic products which automatically share the negative connotations of having consumerist properties, those properties and the connotations that go with it are then transposed onto the user of the product.

### *6.3. The female archetype*

Archetypes are cultural tropes which exist as salient representations of stereotype in media and discourse (Bulawka 2013; Vázquez Rodríguez 2017). The “witch” (or crone) was found present in certain labels which associate with negative images of the woman as a villainous character from a fairy-tale or a figure with bad intentions. They present the image of the female as being that of an ill-intentioned woman (see Examples 12–14), if not the positive, bright and innocent girl:

12. Wicked;
13. Devil’s Advocate;
14. Spellbound.

The archetype of the “bride” was also found in the analyzed texts, although also to the limited extent of nine labels. Labels which adhere to heteronormativity and the ideologies which stem from that norm, including a socialized pressure for a woman to marry, have been found on the list of Essie’s® labels. Any instance of singlehood found

in the texts is accompanied by phrases and expressions which denote more negative cognitive associations. There were five texts overtly associated with the bride archetype (see Examples 15–19), and within the category I have placed linguistic metaphorical expressions representing heterosexual relationships (Example 18), which represents the intertextuality present in Essie's® labels:

15. bachelorette bash;
16. blushing bride;
17. happily ever after;
18. happy wife happy life;
19. main squeeze.

What is visible in all of the labels here is their representation of a hetero-normative society, as marital ideologies are known to revolve around male and female sex roles. Some of the labels are particularly interesting as they illustrate views of toxic femininity in a heterosexual relationship (see Example 20). This coincides with stereotypical representations of a woman as being materialist, consumerist and money-minded:

20. no pre-nup.

The image of the woman as a seductress was also found in 37 of the labels analyzed. By using the following labels on cosmetic products, the construal and construction of femininity devotes itself to narrow categories of femininity. The sexist ideologies represented in the following labels provide categories which both subordinate and objectify women (see Examples 21–25):

21. flirt;
22. mesmerize;
23. turning heads red;
24. berry naughty;
25. demure vix.

The fact that the archetype of the mother was absent altogether demonstrates a social silence with regards to certain female roles in certain contexts. This, it may be argued, may not fit the aim of the cosmetics industry, namely that of the propagation of femininity as being equal to the idealization of youth and hyper-sexuality.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis has taken to the task of exploring how gendered constructions and ideologies are maintained through the labels of nail polish for female consumers. Although labels on cosmetic products have been analyzed and discussed from a feminist perspective in previous studies (see, e.g., Radzi and Musa 2017), CDA has not been applied on such a micro-textual level (i.e., tiny texts). Although it is said that we live in a post-feminist era where one can choose to partake in gendering practice, discourses present in marketing encapsulate the power that marketing practices have over the female body. The 25 examples analyzed are demonstrative of the fact that Essie's® marketing techniques do not challenge stereotypical representations of women, but rather work to reinforce them (Machin and Thornborrow 2003; Merskin 2007). Women, as such, remain in the submissive, demure or hyper-sexual position that society has placed them in over the course of patriarchal systems of power and their gains. Their submissiveness lies in the masquerading of the text as promoting attributes of femininity which work against women in reinforcing their objectification rather than empowering them.

Because sex is one the leading themes regarding these representations, and not quite unusually referred to as such in feminist analyses, the juxtaposition to the powerful stance of a male figure, next to which a woman lacks dominance and almost automatically takes on a submissive role, is all the more normalized. The representations of the female nail polish wearer as being predominantly focused on exercising her inborn right to shop, rather than her intelligent autonomy, constructs women as being, above all, a consumer. Through this, the female consumer (especially considering that she is the target consumer), is thus all the more a socially constructed phenomenon, done so as to abide by social expectations not only to purchase cosmetic products, but also to be sexual, appetizing in her sexuality, with the added benefit of conforming to a heterosexual marketplace in which girly representations are enforced by discourses found on cosmetic products.

If one considers the transformative property of cosmetic products, which aim to create an ideal product out of a woman, it becomes quite

clear that the discourse present in minimal texts does just the same thing by reinforcing such construals, which inform the final construction of femininity that emerges. The examples provided, which are discursively representative of metaphorical, stereotypical and archetypal ideals of femininity, reinforce the idea that women are to fit within the ramifications of being a perpetual object of consumption and desire.

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