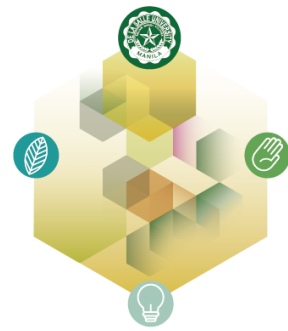


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Fostering a Humane and Green Future: Pathways to Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development



Be-You-Tiful: A Multimodal Analysis of Cosmetic Surgery Advertising in the Philippines

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Abstract: Advertisements situated in ideologies of beauty standards become a critical area since it embodies varying purposes and motivations. This is because beauty industries tend to exploit the experienced inadequacies of females to activate their aspirations of having an unrealistic, ideal appearance. For instance, one of the most known spectrums interested in beautification is cosmetic surgery. This process is elective and is done just for the pure enhancement of the face and body to satisfy one's preferences. Yet, the marketing done by these companies through their incorporation of beauty principles and physical paragons into their advertisements is competent as these industries continue to emerge, effectively pressuring women to undergo operations even with the risks included. This study then investigated how Belo Medical Group, the leading Philippine cosmetic company, stimulated the engrossment of females to concur with cosmetic surgery through the linguistic and visual features of their Facebook cover photos. Significantly, it uncovered the repressive representations of female faces and bodies that emulate narratives of "Symbolic Gender Violence" with the portrayal of beauty standards related to slimness, youthfulness, and fairness as well as the notion of "performative feminism."

Key Words: cosmetic surgery; cosmetic surgery advertising; multimodal analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The opulence of the digital age has offered grounds for cosmetic industries to present constructive and beneficial effects of cosmetic procedures to the market. Many social media platforms now give personal access to interested clients on how cosmetic procedures are done which vary in the forms of infographics, posters, or short clips of videos (Reissis et al., 2017). These promotion techniques epitomize ideological codes through the verbal and visual union which are then grasped by the audience (Johnson, 2008). Therefore, the combination of the texts, depicted characters, settings, backgrounds, and other elements in any chosen format creates a meaningful illustration that does not just build a distinct identity for the cosmetic company but also constructs covert messages regarding beauty standards.

Cosmetic procedures, scientifically belonging to the vast scale of plastic surgeries, are exclusively focused on the aesthetic aspect of medical intervention

(American Board of Facial Cosmetic Surgery, n.d.). While plastic surgeries are concerned with the reformation of a body's normal appearance, cosmetic surgeries are purely voluntary and are executed by reason of beautification. Despite this classification, Dean et al. (2018) stated that cosmetic procedures shall be defined beyond medical areas. In terms of sociocultural knowledge, cosmetic procedures were nonexistent until Jewish and Italian-Americans relied on this to modify their appearances and embody "common American features." Elliot (2008) then reported that Asians now also heavily confront the idea of "passing," coercing them to depend on cosmetic surgeries to look more Caucasian in order to feel validated and included in society. Davis (1995) argues that these procedures do not demean women, and rather empowers them to have the control to do what they want with their bodies. But, valuable feminist, sociological, and psychological studies counter this by declaring that women are rather victimized by the male-built standard of beauty since



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cosmetic procedures indulge them with a momentary solution to their submerged dissatisfaction with their bodies (Negrin, 2002; Morgan, 1991).

As of now, the growing visibility of cosmetic procedures is being positively received (Furnham & Levitas, 2012). There is also a concrete apprehension that women are more susceptible to these processes as the 2018 Plastic Surgery Statistics Report disclosed that 90% of cosmetic procedures are executed on women (Pearlman, 2022). Now conceived as a lifestyle, women consistently modify their bodies and faces to reside in the idea of beauty and youth (Wijsbek, 2000). In a study by Markey and Markey (2009), they examined how cosmetic procedures appeal to women due to various factors; namely, this is rooted in the woman's physical appearance, body dissatisfaction, reception of negative jokes, and influence of the media.

Previously, cosmetic procedures were viewed in a negative light due to their former portrayal linked with health risks and self-addiction. Gradually, with incessant efforts, newer consumers started to admit its legitimacy, noting that the Baby Boomer generation initially inclined to it with the approval of *Botox* by the US Food and Drug Administration in 2002, making the injected substance that manages wrinkling and frozen lines in the face the most in-demand procedure in North America in 2007 (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2009). Now, numerous studies have further claimed that these "body norms" are propagated through several marketing strategies (Reisenwitz & Fowler, 2021; Gurrieri et al., 2013). Hartono et al. (2022) argued that aesthetic companies exploit this discontentment of women with their bodies, utilizing them to promote the services that they offer, yet concealing them with "femvertising," a feminist-based advertising act that makes the women believe that they have the utmost freedom and responsibility with their bodies. Consequently, these industries heavily rely on the valuable influence of celebrity endorsers that depicts ideal beauty through mass media, as found in studies situated in the U.S., China, and South Korea (Jung & Hwang, 2016; Sun, 2013). To build rapport with their target audience, celebrity endorsers were found to be one of the key factors that drive cosmetic surgery to be positively reviewed (Elliot, 2008). Sun (2013) provided an extensive review of this, explaining that because celebrities embody the cultural meanings of a country, brands use them for their efficient representation.

While these studies have to be commended for the in-depth analysis of cosmetic surgery inclination and emergence, there is a huge gap as to how cosmetic surgery situates itself in Southeast Asian

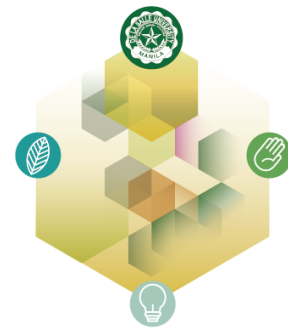
countries—particularly the promotion of it to women. Currently, there are also no published empirical studies using a multimodal framework directed at the Philippine cosmetic industry and its advertising. This elicits more questions of whether cosmetic companies in Southeast Asia offer grounds for renewed, agentive beauty standards or if they still succumb to the male-inflicted and rather destructive epitome of beauty. Thus, this study will then examine Belo Medical Group, the leading cosmetic company in the Philippines, to analyze how they employ linguistic and artistic elements in their advertising posters in persuading women to conform to their offered services.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

To ensure an exhaustive approach, this study applies various theories that will expose the linguistic, visual, and ideological natures of the topic. Halliday's (1985) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) will be initially employed, first focusing on the textual elements of these advertisement posters.

Moreover, by applying Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar theory, specifically *representational meanings*, other semiotic forms will be seen in the images. Under representational meanings, *narrative processes* unfold the events happening in an image through vectors. These *vectors* may be formed from a number of objects, from bodies to limbs to tools that connect the participants in the image which then results in various scenes. Meanwhile, *conceptual processes* will convey the ideas relayed in an image; a conceptual process does not contain vectors and is leaning on meanings embodied by the characters depicted, the elements, or the image in general (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) expounded on the conceptual process' sub-concepts "in terms of class (symbolic-suggestive), or structure (symbolic-attributive), or meaning (symbolic-suggestive)" (p. 79).

Finally, the deference of this paper to Lirola's (2009) "Symbolic Gender Violence", a new form of gender abuse directed at women through visual depiction, will explicate how business companies portray an image of women that are expected to be slim, delicate, and young as possible in the field of advertising. To specify, these preferences are reflective of a society that usually encircle Western-influenced features, heterosexist, class-biased, and ableist standards.



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2. METHODOLOGY

This study is particularly interested in Belo Medical Group, the Philippines' leading and most-known cosmetic group. With over 900,000 followers on Facebook, the promotional posters found on their presented cover photos were the chosen data for this study. Certain parameters were implemented in the first data collection; the author criticized if 1) the posters have prominent female personalities as endorsers, 2) there are ample linguistic elements present, and 3) if the posters were posted within the years 2018-2022 to review whether Belo has shifted their advertising strategies of ideological beauty presentation before and after the pandemic. Overall, twenty cover photos (20) initially passed the screening. But, there are circumstances where endorsers repeatedly posed in the promotional posters. Since this paper greatly considers the presentation of females as strengthened by prominent identities, the author sifted a total of ten (10) cover photos that had different personalities and dissimilar linguistic components. This was done to ensure the diversified content of each data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Verbal Elements

Language of Affirmation and Command. Under the three metafunctions of SFL, the *interpersonal* spectrum allows for the comprehension of how Belo establishes relationships between the depicted characters and the target audience through its linguistic features; this is specifically studied with the concept of *mood*. In the analysis, the grammatical mood of the catchphrases exhibits that 4 posters display declaratives with 4 posters also being imperatives, excluding the remaining 2 posters since they cannot be classified given the lack of finite, reflecting syntactic limitations within the taglines (See Table 1).

Table 1. Grammatical Mood of the Posters' Catchphrases

Category	Results
Declarative Posters	<i>Best arms win</i>
	<i>The time to bloom is now</i>
	<i>Skin goals achieved</i>
	<i>Your beauty is your art</i>
Imperative Posters	<i>Find your light</i>
	<i>Look 35 at 49</i>
	<i>Love your skin</i>
	<i>Flex your beauty</i>

The mood justifies the insistence of Belo to pressure women by pronouncing how women should only aspire to look a certain way so that they will attain satisfaction once they undergo the procedure. The balance of declaratives and imperatives is prominent in this aspect. Within declarative mood, they instill stimulation of positive messages to uplift the women, with undertones of "claiming" that their models possess that ideal beauty because they are already inclined with cosmetic surgery. The imperatives, on the other hand, instruct women to exert efforts in enhancing one's self.

3.2 Visual Embeddings

This portion discusses the *representational* meanings of the images which are either *narrative* or *conceptual*. In the complete analysis, only 1 poster belonged to the narrative process while 9 were conceptual processes. Under conceptual, 7 were *symbolic-suggestive*, 1 is *symbolic-attributive*, while the last 1 is *symbolic-classificational*.

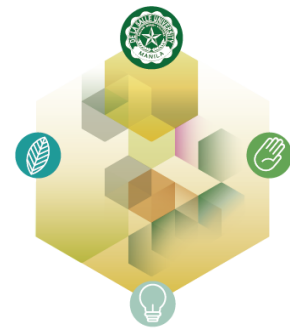
Prolongation of Youthfulness. In the first visual theme seen, Belo continuously exploits the idea of "youthfulness" in older women by having endorsers who are mature, but do not physically manifest aging problems as they still possess that vibrant face with no traces of wrinkles or blemishes. Two posters (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) strengthen women's self-empowerment. But, there is a contradicting epitome of consciousness for these women to maintain their youthful appearance. This then extends its acknowledgment of women's sexualization, especially in how Figure 1 places considerate visibility of the model's upper body, especially her exposed chest, boosting the sensuality of the image. This is aligned with the anti-aging and skin-tightening promises of Belo's *Ulthera Plus*.



Fig. 1. Conceptual Poster - Symbolic Suggestive

Subsequently, Figure 2 puts more prominence on the model's face as her clothing covers her neck down to her chest. Belo foregrounds the smooth and healthy-looking skin of the model, following the *Facelift* procedure that will fix one's wrinkling and loose skin. But, the model then clasps her hands in her attire to show more of her neck which then hints at her confidence and suggestive allusion. Both of these

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posters advertise how these Belo procedures sustains the prime beauty of these older women, having the audience acknowledge their maturity yet balancing it with seductive and bold innuendoes.



Fig. 2. Conceptual Poster - Symbolic Suggestive

Submission to Slimness. The singular poster under the *narrative process* entails an image that uncovers a happening. Narrative processes are known to be further categorized into *action* or *reactional*. In Figure 3 though, the characters both play as *agents*, and they are under an action process since they are contributing to an event through the vector of their fists colliding. As they are both contributing to the action, it is considered a *simultaneous bi-directionality*. Significantly, the action in the event illustrates arm wrestling, a sport that centralizes strength and force. In this poster, Belo then aims to elevate the woman, seemingly defeating the male opponent who is conflicted, proven by his scrunched nose, gaping mouth, and tensed muscles. Belo also used foregrounding techniques for the woman through the lighting, her direct gaze with the audience, center placement, and the mirroring of her soft smile and eye lines. Though this promotional poster especially diverges from the illusive *patience* seen in other posters since they are suppressing the male, Belo remarkably accentuates the female's toned arms, parallel to the *Liposuction* procedure that will eliminate unwanted fat in the body. Hence, there is a conceived idea that a female's beauty will be celebrated if they embody fitness and firmness.



Fig. 3. Narrative Poster - Action

Additionally, another feature of the conceptual process conveys a hierarchical meaning. In Figure 4, Belo draws on a before-and-after beauty representation through the *symbolic-classificational* process. Belo insinuates that a rounder face shape can be improved by

availing their *Thermage FLX* which can erase the sagginess of the skin through tightening of tissues, ensuring a contoured and lifted face. Figure 4 then places an inferior suggestion to the “before surgery” face of the model while complimenting the enhanced, “after surgery” appearance.

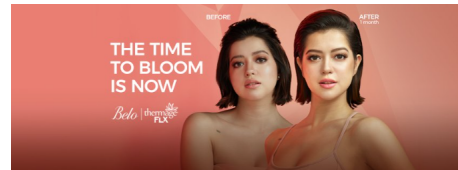


Fig. 4. Conceptual Poster - Symbolic Classificational

Inclusion to Complexions. In this part, Figure 5 symbolizes beauty in “fairness,” as the model is now illuminated by the flaunting of her pale-white skin, resulting in a *symbolic suggestive* specification. With a revealing outfit, the back of the model is exposed, emphasizing the smooth and fair skin. This poster was also posted in the pre-pandemic year of 2018, a vital point that proves how Belo demonstrates an exemplary skin tone of fairness before. Yet, in 2021, Belo promoted a procedure that is also related to skin tone and texture correction. Figure 2 comparably centers on a new model, though now notable with her darker complexion, posing with considerable attention to her tightened arm muscles. During the post-pandemic, Belo adjusted their portrayal of skin tone appreciation with more inclusivity to darker complexions. However, the comparison between these two posters gives a substantial difference in the presentation of not only the “ideal skin tone,” but also in the depiction of “femininity” as the recent model's robust body challenges the first poster's delicate and elegant portrayal of beauty.

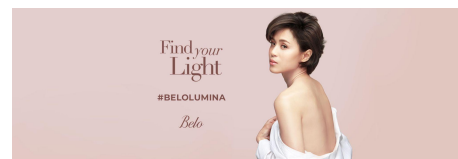


Fig. 5. Conceptual Poster - Symbolic Suggestive

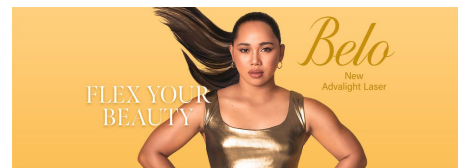
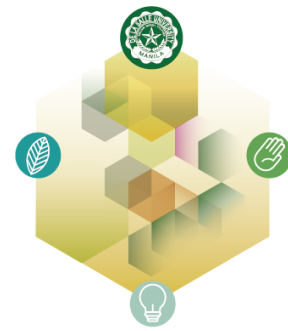


Fig. 6. Conceptual Poster - Symbolic Suggestive



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4. CONCLUSIONS

Hoping to fill the gaps in the lack of Southeast Asian studies regarding cosmetic companies' selling of enhancing procedures to women, this paper navigates the advertising strategies of Belo Medical Group, set on the topic of beauty representations in the contemporary setting. This study then achieved a multimodal and ideological investigation of cosmetic surgery advertising in the Philippines, confined to the profound sociocultural matters that disseminate beauty standards and ideologies. It was able to identify how the leading cosmetic company in the Philippines utilizes performative feminism or "femvertising" to influence women to imagine that they have control over their bodies, when in reality, they put them in a liable state of reliance on the concrete standards of patriarchal-ran society favoring heterosexual women who mirror Western-beauty attributes.

The abstract undertones and language orientation of their Facebook cover photos were regarded, with a valuable address of the few evolutions in their promotion. Ultimately, it is regarded that Belo resides in the argument of Hartono et al. (2022) on beauty industries' exploitation of women to front their marketing strategies with hidden "femvertising," a surface-level feminist technique that pretends to give women "agency" to deal with their bodies, yet affixing its position to standards that submerge women to be protractedly soft, thin, young and fair to exhibit femininity and be recognized as beautiful.

The linguistic aspects summarize how the imperative tone pressures women to desire a body type that is being displayed, affirming them that once they undergo these procedures, they will avail the satisfaction that they have always longed for. There is also an explicit order for women to do something with their bodies. Supporting this, though with a more positive approach, the declarative mood uplifts the notion that women will also be content with their bodies since their models have undergone the procedures.

Moreover, the visual aspect uncovered the fetishization of these stereotypical ideologies since the symbolic meanings of these posters validate visible features that suggest refinement and superiority. It bared the deviation of Belo to studies that give women *agency* since the majority of the posters still showed that women are still *patients* that will be exposed to these procedures. The domination of conceptual processes altogether suggests adherence to Western beauty standards since Belo parades beauty in slimness, smoothness, and delicateness, all of which are stereotypically acknowledged and approved qualities of

women by society (Lirola, 2009). There is at least, a valuable transition in how Belo now displays exemplary skin with more acceptance of tanned skin tones. But, in their other posters, the idea of "youthfulness" still strongly emanates as they continue to centralize the satisfaction of "looking" and "feeling" more beautiful when young.

Aligned with Lirola's (2009) Symbolic Gender Violence, Belo strengthens the idea that even in contemporary settings, beauty industries depend on this traditional outlook and still imprison women with their oppressive representation in advertising. This study then inspires further papers that will analyze larger data regarding cosmetic surgery and other semiotic processes in the fields of the beauty industry to deepen the understanding of the Philippines' stance in the spectrum of beauty standards.

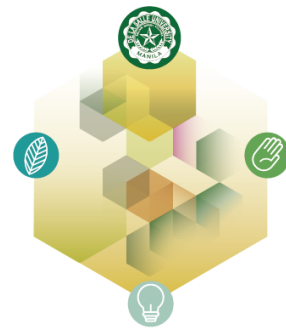
5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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