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From "Tough" To "Tender": A Linguistic Analysis of Gendered Adjectives in Labels of Personal Care Products

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how gendered meaning is created through adjectives applied to the labels of personal care products within a daily consumer society. It targets at the language of front-of-pack labels of male and female advertised products (shampoos, deodorants, face washes, face washes, and moisturizers). The study employs qualitative thematic analysis to compare adjectives of 20 products that were chosen around the brands in Gillette, Dove, Axe, Nivea, Sunsilk and Pantene. The analysis reveals that words that are related to power, force, performance, and hardness are most likely to be used in masculine products whereas the words related to softness, beauty, care, and sensory comfort are used in feminine products. This opposition implies that branding language is more than a product description; it is some mute training to consumers on how masculinity and femininity ought to be appeared and how it ought to be felt. The male is depicted as a being who is active, strong and vigorous subject whereas the female is depicted as delicate, ornamental and emotional object. The research concludes that gendered adjectives can strengthen traditional gender norms via everyday shopping experiences and put the gender dichotomy as a natural part of everyday life.

Keywords: *gendered language, personal care products, adjectives, binary opposition*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not the object of communication only; it is also a social power which influences people in the perception of identity, gender, and social roles. Gender, in sociolinguistics, can be researched in terms of speech styles, politeness, conversation patterns, and discourse practices, yet the language of commercial products should be considered as much as it is introduced to consumers in their everyday life. Product labelling can appear to be straightforward, but it has well thought-out words which aimed at establishing emotional and cultural connotation concerning gender identification. everyday words of products can replicate social rules about their strength, softness, beauty, and performance (Angouri & Baxter, 2021). Kiesling (2024) suggest that more broad social norms regarding masculinity and femininity as well as more or less acceptable identity performance is replicated by everyday words.

This paper dwells on the usage of adjectives in the labels of personal care products and finding out how it develops a psychological separation between masculine and feminine identity. The value of this work is related both to the field of linguistics and gender studies. The analysis of such labels contributes to

understanding that commercial discourse popularizes binary thinking and that the brands capitalize gender distinctions (Eisend et al., 2023). Hence, the study is an attempt to unveil the ideological roles of product labels on branding personal care.

Research Questions

This research has four guiding research questions.

1. Which categories of adjectives prevail in male and female target products of personal care?
2. What are the linguistic constructions of masculine and feminine identities using these adjectives?
3. How does language of personal care labels perpetuate past gender stereotypes?
4. What does gendered branding language tell us about broader sociolinguistic and ideological aspects?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lakoff (1975) posited that the language used by women has been frequently considered socially soft, polite, more emotional and more descriptive as compared to the language used by men. This Deficit Theory despite of being classic, is still effective in explaining how the concept of femininity is called delicacy. The dominance paradigm, which has been attributed to Dale Spender (1980), sees language as a construct of social power as opposed to the neutral communication. In this sense, male language takes up the position of power, dominance, and action whereas feminine language is relegated into the domain of adornment, creating man-made world, and add-ons. The use of particular words triggers particular mental associations (Breal, 1893).

In the light of the relevant literature, the correlations between language and social constructions are not coincidences; particularly, the language of advertising is created in such a way that it produces fast emotional and mental reactions (Buchanan et al., 2025). This correlation is obvious in personal care products, where strong industrial terms like steel, carbon, charcoal and intense are incorporated in male labels (Ridgway et al., 2025). Though syntactically minor, labels are potent discourse sites where gender meanings are being reproduced and recreated. In a front-of-pack label of face wash, word ‘tough’ impels men to be tough, hard and in control of their emotions (Rashid, 2024). Similarly, the word ‘steel’ on a men deodorant can activate the concepts of hardness, strength, machine, durability when read by a consumer. Reading the word ‘silk’ on a woman shampoo might set some thoughts of softness, smoothness, elegance and delicacy. In branding products that are aimed at personal care, the use of adjectives like gentle, soft, nourishing and radiant are associated with unequal symbolic power along with promoting femininity as something that needs care and beautification. These words form a feminine identity which is satisfying, sensuous and non-threatening. Recent research on gendered advertising demonstrates that the language used to target women in the advertising looks more full of word description and emotions than the language used to target men (Deng, 2024). Williams and Best (1982) revealed how the gender stereotypical language is used consistently over 30 countries in South America, North America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Such type of studies compelled the researchers to explore whether the language of labels on personal care products is gendered or gender neutral for commercial purpose.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative thematic technique to discuss adjectives on labels of personal care products. The sample was comprised of 20 personal care products, where 10 were male targeted products and 10 were female targeted products. The chosen brands were Gillette, Dove, Axe, Nivea, Sunsilk, and Pantene. Product segment is shampoo, body wash, face wash, deodorant and moisturizer. These were selected due to the wide availability and to the common usage of gender specific packaging and label language of these brands.

Front-of-pack adjectives are chosen as the source of data since such words are the most obvious and intentional marketing decisions. The front-of-pack labels produce the initial perception of the product, and can drive the consumer's interpretation of its purpose. The primary unit of analysis is the gendered adjective, i.e. any adjective that codes masculine or feminine identity e.g. tough vs. gentle or ragged vs. radiant (Bui, 2021). The data analysis technique is thematic analysis. At the initial phase, open coding is employed to enumerate all the adjectives that appear on the labels. The second stage involves the thematic organization of these adjectives into groups: power, texture, performance, beauty and emotional tone in form of an axial coding. The general trend of gendered meaning is discovered in the process of selective coding in the final stage.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

The Masculine Lexicon

In the masculine labels, words like Xtreme, Steel, Carbon, Active, Intense, Tough, Deep, Rugged, Arctic and Charcoal are used. These words put into context the male body as a machine that entails control, energy, protection, and endurance. The speech is straight forward, practical, and violent, and not so much focused on emotional or sensory contact. Terms like steel, carbon are borrowing words in industrial imagery, whereas words like rugged, arctic bring out images of survival in the outdoor and physical prowess. According to Deng (2024), this tendency aligns with the recent results when male-targeted skincare advertising typically involves a smaller number of words and more practical and useful words as compared to female-targeted advertising.

The Feminine Lexicon

Feminine product labels are adjectives that include the words Radiant, Soft, Silk, Gentle, Velvet, Glowing, Floral, Pure, Blossom, and Pearl. Such terms contextualize the feminine body as an object of sensuality, nurturance and aesthetics. The language is colorful and emotional, and attributes much to the emotional aspect of how the product feels, rather than what it does in terms of functionality. Silk, velvet, pearl and other words used help generate the idea of luxury, smoothness and delicacy. Santoniccolo et al. (2023) claims that this practice is a part of a wider tendency in advertising, where women are commonly targeted on the basis of beauty, appearance and affective appeal as opposed to technical performance.

Table 1: Adjectives used on Front-of-Pack Products for Males and Females

Category	Masculine Adjectives	Feminine Adjectives
Texture	Hard, Rough, Solid	Smooth, Soft, Creamy
Performance	Protection, Power, Energy	Nourishing, Caring, Soothing

Imagery	Arctic, Forest, Midnight	Blossom, Pearl, Rose
Emotional Tone	Aggressive, Intense, Fierce	Gentle, Tender, Delicate

The table demonstrates that there is a binary opposition of the two adjective groups. Masculine adjectives are those that are used to stress hardness, action and control whereas feminine adjectives feature smoothness, beauty and emotional comfort. The sociolinguistic significance of the difference lies in its indication that brands are categorizing similar products departmentalized by gender through language. Yin et al. (2025) observed that it is possible to decrease the effect of binary gender cues to decrease dependence on stereotypical assumptions among consumers when evaluating the product.

DISCUSSION

Functional Versus Emotional Language

The analysis indicates that the products of men are provided with the help of the use of the functional language, whereas the products of women are provided with the help of the use of the emotional and sensory language (Roth-Cohen et al., 2023). Adjectives targeted at men reveal functionality of the product i.e protection, energizing, control or strengthening.

Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes

A face washed by men is said to be tough and a face washed by women is praised to be gentle; the words that are used to describe the products tell more than what the product is like. It conveys a social script that men are not to be soft and women are not to be aggressive. These terms educate the consumers on what type of traits are acceptable by their gender (Chitra, 2023).

The Linguistic Pink Tax

The linguistic pink tax can be described as how the products that are made to be consumed by women are commonly angeled or distilled rhetorically in a way that makes them appear luxury, delicate or high-end. Though the products are similar in the functions, feminine words like velvet, radiant, pearl, and so on can be used to enhance the product image, thus making it more elaborate and thus worth higher price (Moshary et al., 2023). Similarly, according to another study conducted by Wishart (2024) on the pink tax, the experience of gendered economic inequality and brand differentiation are associated with products targeted at women and labeling femininity.

The Absence of Neutral Language

One of the most notable results of the research is that neutral words (clean, effective, healthy, or balanced) are not used widely. This lack seems intentional since using gender-neutral wording would undermine the binary approach to marketing. Viglia et al. (2023) empirically detected that brands can make sales with two sets of consumers of diverse but related products.

CONCLUSION

In this study, adjectives in the labels of personal care products were discovered to perpetuate gender binarities in mundane practices in everyday life. Male products are targeted using adjectives relating to power, toughness, action and performance and the female products are based on adjectives relating to softness, beauty, delicacy and care. These trends demonstrate that there is nothing neutral about product language; it forms gendered identities by relying on repetitive lexical selections.

The implications in the findings include that everyday language of branding must be approached critically by linguists and consumers. The statements made on labels of shampoo, deodorants or face wash might seem innocuous, but they form the way people think about their body and their place in society (Eisend & Rößner, 2022).

It should be analyzed by a bigger product corpus across other cultures and languages in the future. It ought also to look at the way in which gender-neutral brands are transforming personal care marketing language. The alternative direction of interest would be to examine the reaction of the non-binary consumer to the label that keeps on segregating products into masculine and feminine categories (Wiid et al., 2023).

DELIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

The study has delimitations regarding the sample that can be broadened to more products of personal care to see whether this male chauvinistic hegemony in labels is pervasive in all the products of daily use or just limited to a few products.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

There exists no conflict of interest with the current organization and no unethical practices (i.e plagiarism, animal testing, human testing etc.) followed during the study.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Hafsa Khali worked on the data collection and analysis of this research paper. Alishba Tariq reviewed the relevant literature. Dr. Shazi Kousar drafted this research paper particularly focusing on research methodology.

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