

# The Beauty Discourse Impacts upon Consumer's Behavior

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## Abstract

This article, through a review of various theories and relevant researches, purports to conduct an analysis on how beauty discourse impact consumer's behavior. Due to a continuous growth and fierce competition between medical healthcare business and the beauty industry nowadays in Thailand, this has led to a creation of beauty discourse which effectively sets up today's mainstream social values. From the study, it is revealed that consumers are influenced by these discourses unknowingly, leading them into discursive practices. Beauty discourse, with its rhetoric powers, affects people's perception, ways of thinking, and their behaviors with regards to beauty. From an individual discursive practice which intermingles with the perceptions towards mainstream beauty, the role of such discourse has employed certain concepts, which have primary notions on social construction of reality and representation, to frame a reality based on the manufacturer's point of view. This is done in order to induce consumers to want to buy unnecessary products or buy certain products in excessive quantity. Also, it changes people's perceptions and ways of lives, rendering them to actually believe that what is said in the commercial is a fact. Women are enticed with numerous beauty discourses which make them believe that they have a complete control over their bodies and minds. Repetitive discourses are made with regard to a notion of 'perfection and beauty', which arouses women to stay with the concept of an ideal beauty. Nonetheless, it is discovered that such discourses have only focused on just one side of the story without mentioning any danger or side effects that could have come from the use of such products. Accordingly, the study into such issue is essential and considerably effective in order to prevent consumers' being lured into a trap of mainstream social values.

**Keywords:** Beauty Discourse, Commercials, Consumer Behavior

## Introduction

In 2017, the medical healthcare and beauty industry is listed to be on the top amongst all businesses with distinctive features, scoring 94.1 our of 100 (Economic and Business Forecasting Center, 2016). Considering sales revenue, capital input, net profits, and popularity, including the ability to deal with risk factors, this industry is still ranked as number one for 6 consecutive years. This is because a continuous attention has been given to the healthcare and beauty industry, which is considerably similar to those in skincare and beauty products that is ranked second, scoring 92.2 thanks to a rapidly increasing consumer's behavior regarding beauty care of all ages. It is estimated that the beauty industry has approximately THB 12,000 million cashflow annually (Pimol, 2016) and it has been forecasted that in 2017, Thailand will have an overall marketing value of THB 20,000 million a year. This can be reflected through seeing many physicians, celebrities, and investors jumping into the business, opening up more and more beauty facilities that are in need of product improvement and a more up to standard merchandises, including having qualified personnel who works under ethics and good perspectives for their professions. Nevertheless, with the current market shares and the growing in numbers of competitors, this has rendered the

business highly and fiercely competitive, leading to heavy uses of discourse, creating false social values with respect to the notion of beauty. The effects are negative for the people who happen to believe in these discourses, adversely affecting their health and wellbeing. For example, one study reveals that from a group of women who wish to loose weight, none of them are BMI categorized as overweigh, yet, it is their dissatisfaction over their own figures that drives them to want to loose weight (Tangpaiboonsap, 2010). For the women who wish to loose weight, they yearn to look as how society dictates them to be, that is to say, beautiful women need to be skinny in order to be accepted and feel confident in their daily lives. This notion comes from a constructed discourse that impacts relevant people and somehow forces them to suffer from abstaining food, taking diet pills or laxative, or using advance technology which comes with considerable amount of pain. In addition, a yo-yo effect can be followed after going through such weight-loss approach. Many women wish to have new figures in order to gain more power within this social discourse reality, opting to stand out by using beauty. Accordingly, it is important to examine such context vis-a-vis beauty discourse and its impacts so as to support and foster accurate and right perceptions as well as preventing any damages or losses, physically and mentally, which may arise out of such misrepresented social context.

## A Concept on Discourse

‘Discourse’ is considered as a Postmodernism (Kaewthep, 2010) first introduced by Michel Foucault, a very powerful philosopher in the 20th century. Foucault’s concept of discourse is constructed upon various Structuralism such as Fernand Braudel from History, Claude Levi Strauss from Anthropology, Jacques Lacan from Psychiatry, and Ferdinand de Saussure from Languages. On one hand, structuralism seems to pay more attention to a concrete and definite structures of languages, known as Semiology-a system comprises of 3 parts namely Signifier, Signified, and the relationship between Signifier an Signified e.g. different semiology of Khon. A belief in absolute structuralism is to believe that within all 3 relationships, this brings meanings to other things in life, to certain society and cultures over a certain period of time. On the other hand, for Foucault, he sees that such structures do not have an absolute pattern, in fact, they are vary and interactive towards one another. Sign and the meaning of it including its relationship are constantly changing. Foucault believes that the play of signs is beyond the control of human and in fact has a control over human. Discourses which include ways of communication e.g. oral languages, written languages, visual languages, or gestures and postures under the said structure are the players who dictate individual’s identities, knowledges, relationships, and the meaning of things. Therefore, it is crucial that we conduct an analysis in order to direct back to the root origin of the establishment, interpretation, and the implications of such discourses. As discourses are abstract, hence, they need to manifest themselves into concrete entities such as writing, speaking, photographing, and acting for example. The work of discursive practice is based on taking relevant discourses and merging them all together. Discourse has come to dictate different values such as perceptions and understandings, rights and wrongs, things that can or cannot be said, how to or not to act. It also pinpoints the role and the power of discourses over human and the society, showing its true nature of power and righteousness of which certain groups of people have hinged upon such sources and revealing that in reality such resources and knowledges are simply a course of discourses.

**The Technical Science of Discourse Power:** The author of certain discourses is acting by selecting relevant existing meanings and using them to suppress other meanings, which is a fluent linguistic system that depends upon the relationship between signs and the meaning of signs, creating new meanings in order to serve the postulated discourse power (Charoensinolarn, 2011).

**The Role of Discourse Communications upon Power, Knowledge, and Identity:** Human life in today's world is prescribed by several institutions e.g. economic institution, political institution, hospitals, schools, and family units for example. These institutions employ languages as an actor. The use of such social power via languages does not only act through thoughts and ideas alone, on the contrary, it infiltrates into human bodies. According to Foucault, discourses contain rules and social practice that could generate meanings to arise from the context. It has the power to frame a layout, curb or dictate as to whether when and what can be operate. Communications have been participated into every processes whether it is about categorizing, distinguishing, getting to know and understand oneself, for instance. From the easiest viewpoint, it is the media or communication channel that acts as a venue of manifestation of power and knowledge. This can be in a beauty articles and health programs on television, to name a few. The use of power through discourses can be performed directly upon women figures e.g. building up a concept or notion of being fat or skinny, having a different type of fair complexion skins. Such powers are considered as an absolute covert ones which are extremely difficult to notice or being recognized, in which the power player is invisible but yet the powers are still spreading through the use of discourses (Kaewthep, 2010).

**Practical Definition of Discourse within this Essay:** It can be concluded that discourse is a type of communication which is communicated through different types of concrete things such as writing, speaking, and advertising. This is done by using a selection of meanings and the suppression of it in order to get the desired meanings. Its construction is built upon the purposes of determining different values e.g. the rules and concepts on beauty, which is considered as a use of social power that is being acted upon the people's perceptions.

### **The Use of Discourses and Beauty Commercials**

From the study, it is found that the discourse on beauty for women in Thai society (from 1945 up to present days) (Sareechantalerk, 2008) contains factors that lead to changes in the standard of beauty, of which are able to carry out thanks to technological advancement, business expansion, and other related technologies that have come into play and become powerful influencers on the people's values, especially the values created from commercials and advertisements that manufacturers are constantly trying to entice and induce consumers and growing their needs to keep wanting and buying endlessly. The presentation of such beauty discourse is delivered in the form of mythology, now considered as the new standard for beauty, and acts as a stimulator for product purchasing in order to use that products on improving one's beauty and make it up to the current standard, as dictated by the media. The beauty discourses that can often be found are namely fat vs skinny and fair vs colored complexion. Such discourse is presented and repeatedly displayed so often that it makes the majority view that being skinny and fair complexion is an ideal beauty. As a result, consumers are trying to get themselves to such beauty discourses by using the advertised services or products, all of which are being promoted in various media channels across beauty products commercials (Pathamathamakul, 2007). This also generates beauty discourses that are no different from those social expectation, through repetition and reproduction of mainstream beauty discourses or creating meanings for superficial beauty that is considered mainstream and contains the value to judge womanhood. The use of presentation techniques including the uses of visual aids are carried out so as to portray the concept of beauty to be within its framework of perceiving and assessing physical beauty. This, as a reality, echoes the beauty standards that can be accessed using particular products and services, and is presented by using definition of problems and solutions. In addition, the support from a set of discourses containing scientific data and medical advancement, the creation of age bias, the notion of depletion of human bodies, all of which are conveyed in a

tone that signifies the said scenarios as ordinary and it would be perfectly usual and normal to act on such problems.

### **The Beauty Discourse Impacts upon Consumer's Behavior**

From the research findings, it reveals that beauty discourse created from the power of commercial languages contains significant impacts upon how woman perceive and think and how they act and behave when it comes to the notion beauty (Pathamathamakul, 2007). Women think that they are the one who opens up for information concerning beauty, that they are selecting the goods and services basing on their free choices, yet, in reality, underneath those selections and options, it has been suppressed with discourses on how to think about their own bodies, without any knowledge or recognition to actually be subject under certain controls from the work of discourses, upon individual level which has been intertwined with the concept and the recognition of mainstream beauty. The role of discourses employ the aforementioned belief upon establishing the social construction of reality and representation, which gives meanings and identities to other things, making them a social reality through the use of segregation and discrimination e.g. the mainstream beauty discourse that define the rules of beauty, unless otherwise said, beauty is not perceived or it will be under-appreciated. Such presentations through different media channels can therefore be said that it is a reality that is constructed and compared so as to serve as a representation of values built upon the producer's point of views, aiming to inducing consumer's needs for unnecessary or excessive quantity of goods and services. The study finds that the use of commercial discourse in magazines has changed the reader's perception and ways of life on a level that renders them to actually believe what is said in the commercial is true (Kaur, Arumugam. & Yunus, 2013). For women to being taught and physically controlled by using certain values that are difficult to follow or achieve (Sareechantalerk, 2008) such as to have a skinny but strong body, to have flawless facial beauty even at old age, such correlation linking individual beauty together with constructed beauty made by the media is perceived as natural. Such feelings are fortified with mythology of thinking that these things can be controlled. Women are lured with various beauty discourses making them believe that they actually have the power over their body and mind e.g. the act of dieting, food abstaining, forcing themselves to throw up after meals which leads to a mental condition known as Anorexia where ones who are already very skinny still think of oneself as fat, or Bulimia-a condition where a person is trying to get rid of the digested foods by forcing oneself to throw up after every meal. Moreover, the use of beauty discourse in advertising also create repeated meanings that aims to generate the notion of perfect beauty by inducing people to stay within the framework of ideal beauty practice routines (Ruengpanichpibarn, 2008). This is carried out by using wordings and messages that point out the problem and explain the usefulness of emptying difference approaches in order to deal with certain beauty condition. None the less, it is discovered that such discourses have only focused on just one side of the story without mentioning any danger or side effects that could have come from the use of such products. From the study on beauty discourse in advertising and health and beauty magazines in Thailand (Phakdeepasook, 2009), it is found out that these commercials are presenting women's beauty features and attributes basing on 3 ideologies, namely, (1) women have to be skinny, look young, have fair complexion, proportionate bust size, and no undesired smells, all of which constitute a concept of being beautiful and healthy; (2) natural figures that do not fall within the description of what prescribed as beauty will be considered a problem that is needed to be fixed. The women with these attributes will not have the confidence to live their daily lives; (3) To solve such problems are simple-by using the products or receiving the services claimed to be effective from the commercials. Hence, women should improve themselves by choosing the right product and services presented amongst the broadcasting

commercials. Examples for the beauty discourses used in Thailand (Ruengpanichpibarn, 2008) are, namely, binary opposition with regards to fair skin-implying having fair skin as beauty when comparing to colored or tarnished skin, and once being through with such comparison, the meaning and concept of fair complexion is then being described in a concrete and tangible ways such as white like rose petals, white as pearls, or discourses that prescribe standard numbers e.g. see the results within 7 days or 99% of the users are satisfied with the result. These discourses are made to reinforce greater confidence for the consumers. Symbolism is also introduced using presenters who are considered as a symbol for beauty to attract consumer's attention, in particular, consumers seem to be more interested in the presenters than the features of the products or services. However, creating certain false values might widely produce adverse effects e.g. one supplementary commercial in Thailand uses a channel through a famous presenter coming up side by side with a photograph of fair vs colored skin and labeled the photo as 'simply being white wins', of which later became a hot controversial issue of skin color discrimination that spread throughout the world. It can be concluded that nowadays the persuasion created by the media has led many to be unsatisfied in their own skins and need to make certain changes in order to comply with the standards and values set by the constructed discourses, this is done with the aim to increase sales volume of the products and businesses within the already competitive industry, seeking to exploit those mainstream discourses.

## **Relevant Legal Issues**

Advertisement and reproduction of mainstream beauty discourse (Pathamathamakul, 2007) found that the presenting of certain facts and attributes portrayed as a set of problem, the use of scientific data, the use of bringing in famous celebrities as presenters, presentation with visual aids before and after, the use of ordinary customers who claimed and vouched for the products, referring figures and numbers of satisfying results perceived by product or service users, together with the product's appearances and a face with a bubbly smile looking happy and satisfied with the rejuvenated skin, fair complexion without blemishes and dark spots, all of these are beauty attributes and features that are described and framed as 'fair beautiful complexion', of which is a beauty accepted by mainstream values and the general society. This is consistent with the study which reveals that the use of celebrities to present relevant discourses is a very powerful and effective commercial tool (Tehseem & Hameed, 2015). Acceptance and certification from public figures are highly essential upon the portrayed commercial, in which consumers all agree that certification from famous celebrities have great influence on deciding to purchasing certain products. When considering legal issues of Thai laws, there are several discrepancy in various topics relating to the issue. Pursuant to the Announcement by the Ministry of Public Health No. 11 B.E. 2546 regarding the regulations, procedures, and conditions in medical facilities (The Ministry of Public Health, 2003), it lays down important principles which are prohibitions on using false advertisement, overstatement, or possible to lead to misunderstanding vis-a-vis key information relating to healthcare facilities e.g. advertisement relevant to giving out medical related information must contain warnings such as risks associated to the ineffectiveness or producing certain side effects for the users, banning an advertisement in the form of providing false statement or a statement which does not contain all relevant facts or partial facts, containing features of deceit or hidden important facts which make consumers misunderstand. The use of institution, organization or personnel who are not certified by state entities to verify and guarantee healthcare facilities unless otherwise permitted from authority, advertising certain knowledges and expertise within the medical facilities, quality or the effectiveness of the personnel or attributes of medical tools, relevant gears and equipments, treatment procedures, or comparing the before and after results and conveying messages in a way that may lead

customers to misunderstandings without correctly or appropriately keeping up to the medical professional standards or making the public expect in overstated advertising claims.

## **Role of the Medical Personnel**

Advertising discourses have dictated the meanings and features that go beyond the concept of beauty. Such discourses list out a set of problem (Pathamathamakul, 2007) such as wrinkles that come with age and uneven skin tone. However, it presents that the treatment for such problems are available and can be answerable to such concerned, notwithstanding how difficult the problems are or how hard to avoid them. From the discourse displayed in the commercials, they lead the consumers to think that such problems must be taken care of and this can be achieved with the use of certain products and services, developed and invented by experts who are highly knowledgeable, with top-notch physician expertise and technological advancement-this is conveyed using technical or expert terminology in order to build greater credibility and confidence for the products. Furthermore, it also includes the use of a proof of effectiveness given by physicians. The beauty attributes created by advertisement are constructed within the framework of explanation and problem solving by physicians, which will lead to higher consumer's confidence regarding product safety. It also acts as a sign which treats beauty as health, equating beauty care to health care-justifying the definition of perceived beauty and its related discourses. Accordingly, medical personnel are highly essential in providing correct and valid information without withholding any data or choosing to display only a part of the whole facts so as to attract consumers or seek to exploit such discourses for their business benefits. The presenting of oneself to vouch for certain products or treatments or building up credibilities will be likely to fall under the prescribed offenses e.g. the event where the secretary of medical facilities has ordered an investigation on the selling of cream and revoking medical licenses (Sariyaporn, 2015) due to an incident where a nurse was wearing official uniform while reviewing products online, of which will result in a punishment ranging from giving out notice, issuing a ban or a pause on license, to even revoking such licenses. Also, according to the patient's rights and proclamation (Jirapaet, 2012), it states that the patient has the right to be informed and adequately notified from those working in medical healthcare sector so as to be able to make an informed consent or decision, unless it is done in the course of emergency. Upon providing healthcare services and beauty care, its nature are mostly non-urgent. The professional values (Sngounsritham, 2010) are those agreed upon by all relevant parties e.g. not to bring harm to the patient, not to state false data, to have justice and respect the patient's autonomy, and to act for the patient's best interest, all of which are considered an important tools and mechanism that help drives and functions the healthcare facilities, especially when facing with problems that directly concerns ethics and benefits of the patients, the service providers, and the organizations, including medical personnel. Consequently, it is not advisable to create a discourse that would lead away consumers from actual facts. Also, legal obligations are put in place and require relevant parties to inform and point out key context regarding warnings arising out of receiving the services and any possible side effects that may occur. This allows consumers to be fully well informed and be able to make informed decision for themselves, not falling into the trap created by beauty discourse. It is therefore crucial to create right values and perceptions with respect to beauty, avoiding them to be subject under the mainstream discourse which are create by the beauty industry in hopes of boosting sales and excessive demands. These concerning discourses are, for example, mainstream values with beauty identification such as having a fair skin. To combat with such notion and discourse, the notion of healthy skin without having to be fair complexion are brought into the picture, or the standard BMI weight that in fact prescribes being healthy, which is not necessary to be as skinny as portrayed in the commercial, for example.

## Conclusion

Nowadays, changes towards mainstream beauty values following the creation of beauty discourse by businesses, which affects how consumers behave once falling under such claimed values, including the exploitation of discourses so as to make commercial benefits tend to keep increasing. According to future business trend, most consumers are fall under the status of message receivers who are not truly free from having businesses planting constructed perceptions into their ways of thinkings. Such constructed perceptions are created in order to boost and generate excessive needs and demands and producing false values with regards to beauty. Consequently, as a consumer, one needs to carefully examine and consider such display of notions and not falling under its framed discourses. Also, medical personnel should cooperate and come together to become stronger and refuse to abide by the businesses dictations which are falsely misleading, immorally and unethical, what is more, the staff should comply with their own professional standards and ethics and act as a model amongst their peers. They should also pay close attention to giving out relevant verified information as within the beauty industry, healthcare information are highly essential for consumers, helping them not to go along with false or wrong mainstream beauty values that could eventually adversely affect the consumer's health and wellbeing.

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