



‘Buh-bye cellulite’: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of media’s discipline of the female body

Madeline Noctor

Introduction

In January 2019, the cosmetic company Avon Products released their #NAKEDPROOF campaign advertising creams that claimed to reduce cellulite, shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3. However, the campaign was widely criticised for framing cellulite as aesthetically displeasing, in other words, implying that the appearance of fat was not ‘cute’. Subsequently Avon removed their marketing materials for the campaign moving forward.

The campaign’s attempt to discipline the female body is indicative of a broader cultural conceptualisation of the fat body, whereby fatness, especially in regard to the female body, is ‘socially constructed as lazy, gross and out-of-control’ (Boling 2011:116). This study does not attempt to exclude the discrimination facing the male body, but rather it acknowledges that through the traditional dichotomies of the feminine and masculine body, women are held up to different standards based on the flesh, carnality, and desirability (111), as framed by the male gaze. With substantially higher value in the slender build of women, Western culture defines women’s worth and their social and political mobility by their perceived body weight (Roehling 2012:596). It is therefore not surprising that women are “punished”, more than men, for violating societal standards of Western beauty (596).

This study shall conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of Avon’s #NAKEDPROOF advertisement to comment on society’s conceptualisation of body size as a measure of women’s calibre, as well as to maintain shame in body size, whereby thinness is given agency.

To disclaim, the use of the terms ‘fat’ and ‘fatness’ within this study are used in reference to the cultural dichotomy between thin and fat, adopted and applied from secondary research. The terms are not applied with the intention of pejorative labels.

Background

This study will consider cultural, gender and feminist studies to analyse the perpetual shaming of fatness and the simultaneous value given to thinness and beauty in women’s advertisement of feminine and beauty products. It will consider women in advertisements to comment on the shaping of women’s identity more broadly in society, whereby ‘powerful and negatively internalised social norms about the fat body’ (Boling 2011:116) brand one’s identity as unworthy.

Women and society

The socio-political identity of Western women stems from the nuclear sphere of the family home where maternal caregiving and domesticity branded the woman’s experience. Neoliberal feminism mobilised women with agency and power to move from the domestic

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sphere into a political, capitalistic, and business-orientated world (Yoong 2020). However, the cultural spectacle of women's transition from the home came with 'the patriarchal surveillance of women's bodies' (Glapka 2018:87) in the workplace. As the female body entered the previously male-dominated sphere, the male gaze evoked a construction and an objectification of the 'univocal model for the female body' (Ponterotto 2016:134). As put by Dolezal (2010) the female body is expected to 'maintain form, appearance, and comportment within strictly defined social parameters, or else face stigmatization and the loss of social capital' (357).

Bartky (1990) conceptualises the social parameters of the female body through the expectations of feminine movement, gesture and posture' which exhibits 'grace and a certain eroticism restrained by modesty' (68). This prescribes that the female body must 'stand with a stomach pulled in ... and chest out to display her bosom to maximum advantage'. She must also 'walk in the confined fashion appropriate for women ... with a subtle but provocative hip roll' yet 'too much display is taboo ... great care ... must be taken to avoid an unseemly display of breast or rump' (68). These constrained facets of femininity revolve around the performance of gender, a concept coined as 'doing gender' by West and Zimmerman (1987) which 'involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro-political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine natures' (126). Once a woman defies the categorised performances belonging to her gender she is socially, politically, and culturally viewed as less worthy, as framed through the construction of the male gaze.

This study will focus on how society perceives fatness as a defiance of performative facets of gender, specifically femininity, thus shaming women. As Peters (2021) writes 'the relationship between fat oppression, citizenship and capitalism runs deep' whereby society uses fatness to discredit people as productive members of society. However, as a result of the male gaze as well as a history of female oppression and objectification, women are more likely than men to be shamed for their body size. Judge and Cable (2011) found that using data from American workplaces, men whose weight increased resulted in positive linear effects in pay. Yet for women, increases in weight from slender to the normal size category had negative linear effects on pay. This research exemplifies how 'the experience of being elided with one's body reminds us that us as bodies are culturally constructed' and 'rob us of autonomy, dignity or merit simply because of how we look' (Boling 2011:122). In other words, when a woman gains weight and thus defies the boundaries of the model female body, she is culturally and socially shamed.

Women, media, and advertisement

As Fairclough (1992) argues, discourses, such as this advertisement, between the creator and the consumer 'represent and contribute to the production of a social reality' (62). It is exactly this consensus of beliefs which contribute to the normalised discipline of women's weight and body size in Western society, because it has been unavoidably fed through advertisement and the consumption of media.

In relation to media's discipline of the female body, Bordo (1993) explains how the contortion of the female body by which women are held to unnatural or unobtainable standards is not passively absorbed by female consumers, but rather they acknowledge that these standards will add to their self-esteem and "market value" as a woman in society (24). For example, to consider the public trial of silicone breast implants in 1992, the consumption

of advertisements and media which showed women with perfect bodies and breasts which were almost always silicone-enhanced. This encouraged women to take health risks with implants because they correctly discerned that these norms shaped the desires of potential lovers and employers (Bordo 1993:23). Women who chose to reshape or enlarge their breasts were not passively taken by the media norms of the beautiful breast but understood the power in having a desirable body (23). Looking on 28 years later, the pressure for women to uphold unnatural standards as shown through advertisement and media has scarcely changed. What has changed, is the subtlety, the language use, and visual representation of women's bodies as 'normal'.

The consumption of media which unapologetically fat-shames women is unavoidable. Considering Fairclough's observations on the creation of a 'social reality', Baldwin, Bartz and Ravary (2019) can attest that through their studies on mass media and fat-shaming attitudes, 'repeated fat-shaming and other public expressions of weight bias over time may contribute to the increase in baseline anti-fat attitudes', and 'it is difficult to escape such communications' (1587). Therefore, arguing that the creation of fat-shaming media is unavoidable as a consumer, significantly shaping our 'social reality' as one framed by disgust in the fat body, most frequently aimed towards women. Furthermore, Brownell, Pearl and Puhl (2012) found that through observing the difference in positive and negative media portrayals of obese persons, negative was significantly more frequent which may 'reinforce internalisation of weight bias among over-weight and obese persons' (827).

The female body through the medical lens

The premise of the advertisement aims to scaremonger women into buying a product because of the apparent disagreeable appearance of cellulite, yet gender, anatomy, genetic susceptibility, hormones, deficiencies in lymphatic drainage and microvasculature all contribute to the condition's pathogenesis (Christman 2017). In other words, the campaign sought to humiliate the female body for an aesthetic condition that is shaped by mostly unavoidable biological facets of gender and genetic sensitivity to hormones.

The fear of fatness, as provoked by the construction of the perfect female body under the male gaze, reflects in the medical industry. Pope and Hudson (1988) reminds us that 90 percent of all anorexics were women at the time of the study, and that of the 5,000 people each year who have part of their intestines removed as an aid in losing weight, 80 percent were women. Even in a modern society, this leads one to question, where does the obsession with keeping a slim body come from? This study will aim to argue that it is advertisements such as the #NAKEDPROOF campaign which simultaneously shame women who have visible fat on their bodies as well as scaremongering women into being the epitome of slenderness in order to be accepted as beautiful and thus worthy in society.

Methodology

This study will carry out a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the Avon campaign '#NAKEDPROOF' (2019) (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). The campaign advertising cream to apparently rid the body of the appearance of cellulite has been selected for this study given its intention to fear women of fatness on the body whilst shaming women for having a largely unavoidable skin condition. Given the advertisement's intentions, the linguistic choices as well as the visual representations of the female body provide an opportunity to analyse within the frameworks of FCDA as to comment on the problematic assumptions and

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attention given to women's weight, and how this broadly reflects on women's identity in a capitalistic society.

The analysis will begin by examining the textual content in isolation with its focus on Halliday's (2004) conceptualisation of Transitivity, as well as a consideration for anonymisation and the choice of certain lexical fields, as outlined in Machin and Mayr's *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (2012).

As a component belonging to his model of Systemic Functional grammar, Halliday's (2004) Transitivity grammatical system sets events into 'a model or schema in a particular domain of experience as a figure of a particular kind (170). In other words, verbs are categorised through the interpretation of clauses which reflect an experience in the external or inner world. The main processes include material, verbal, mental and relational, whilst existential sits between material and relational processes, and behavioural sits between material and mental processes (See Figure 4 below, for grammatical process classifications). In relation to the '#NAKEDPROOF' campaign, this study will be discussing the frequency of material processes as to comment on their significance in the language analysis and contribution to the active shaming of women's weight and appearance.

Grammatical process type	Event meaning	Direct Participants
Material: Action Event	'Doing' 'Doing' 'Happening'	Actor, Goal
Behavioural	Behaving	Behaver
Mental: Perceptive Cognitive Desiderative Emotive	'Sensing' 'Seeing' 'Thinking' 'Wanting' 'Feeling'	Senser, phenomenon
Verbal	'Saying'	Sayer, target
Relational: Attribution Identification	'Being' 'Attributing' 'Identifying'	Carrier, attribute Identified, Identifier: Token, Value
Existential	'Existing'	Existent

Figure 4: (Halliday 2004, 260)

Machin and Mayr (2012) outline anonymisation as having participants in texts often being anonymised, whereby the creator can use representations of a group of people to avoid specification and developing a detailed or coherent argument' out of convenience and ease (83). This study will argue how the advertisement applies the concept of anonymisation to conveniently communicate with large groups of women and to vastly shame fatness and the appearance of cellulite without having to have a detailed or coherent reason for investing in the company's products.

Machin and Mayr (2012) also forefront the importance of lexical fields in critical discourse analysis of texts. The choice of certain lexical or semiotic choices set up different 'lexical fields' which in turn signify certain kinds of identities, values and sequences of activity (31). Van Dijk (2001) describes the choice of lexical fields as implicit or indirect meanings in text, whereby 'implicit meanings are relating to underlying beliefs... but are not openly, directly, completely or precisely asserted' (104). Directly in relation to the campaign being

analysed, Machin and Mayr's discussion of lexical fields and overlexicalization can aid to argue the subtlety of shaming the fat body, subsequently encouraging the consumer of the advertisement to buy Avon's products.

The study will then examine the visual semiotic choices of the three Figures again through the aid of Machin and Mayr's (2012) frameworks. Through considering elements of iconography and distance in the advertisement, where 'certain features in compositions are made to stand out to draw our attention to foreground certain meanings' (54), this study will attempt to argue how the visuals of the campaign further aid to frame the female body to certain standards and simultaneously shame those who do not fit into these standards.

Analysis

This section shall 1) analyse the effects of the chosen lexical fields and observe the effects of anonymisation, 2) analyse the effects of material processes through Halliday's (2004) Transitivity grammatical system, 3) analyse the visual semiotic choices through considering iconography.

1.

To firstly consider the striking lexical choice of the adjective 'cute' in Figure 1, the term connotes informality in its description of attractiveness yet is somewhat innocent in its connotations. Rather than the use of explicitly sexualised or crude adjectives such as 'sexy' or 'seductive', 'cute' can be viewed as an endearing description yet is suitable for daytime advertisement and can appeal to a larger group of women without hyper-sexualisation. However, Glapka (2018) states that frequently 'cute' and 'pretty' are interchangeably used with 'sexy' and 'hot'. The selection of adjectives are all used to describe attractiveness in appearance and therefore belong to the same lexical field. Considering Glapka's observation of the lexical field of sex appeal and beauty when describing women's looks, 'cute' can be viewed as just as derogatory or indeed appealing as being described as 'sexy' or 'hot', depending on how one views it. Here, it can be argued that the Avon campaign cleverly uses the innocent connotation of 'cute' in order to subtly imply the sexual and desirable connotations of words that belong to the same lexical field, such as 'sexy' or 'hot'.

Once considering the contextualisation of the adjective 'cute', by which the term is associated with the presence of dimples on the face, one can then argue how the lexical choice in Figure 1 subtly shames women's bodies. At first glance, the declarative sentence 'dimples are cute on your face' asserts safety and affirmation in the presentation of female looks. However, the bracketed addition to the sentence 'not on your thighs' infers that the appearance of dimpled fat, also known as cellulite, is frankly the opposite of cute. From the lexical choice of the word 'cute' and the lexical field it connotes, the antonymic statement 'not on your thighs' infers that fat on the female body is associated with the antonyms of 'cute', such as 'ugly', 'unattractive' and 'disgusting', for example.

To pair the antonymic manipulation of the adjective 'cute' with the lexical field of the body, including 'face', 'thighs', 'skin', 'naked', and 'stretch marks' (see Figures 1,2, and 3), one can argue that the field signifies 'a certain kind of identity and value' (Machin and Mayr 2012:31), in this case it is the identity of the female body, and the value is the worth said body has in a society which gives power to the slender female build. The lexical field of the body indicates areas of interest to the consumer, encouraging them to view their own naked body, including their face, thighs and skin, and judge whether it fits to the standards of cuteness appearing in the campaign. Thereby, if the consumer, most likely female,

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acknowledges that there are dimples of fat on their thighs, they are likely to think of themselves as the antonyms of 'cute'. More broadly however they concede that they are branded in society as unworthy, because fatness in the female body assumes that female identity is less competent and acceptable because it is not slender or thin (Boling 2011). Viewing the choice of the lexical field in relation to the rest of the campaign, one can argue that the semiotic choices which connote the body reflect how women are entirely perceived, valued and judged by the appearance of fat on their physique. The shaming of said fatness thus promotes the consumer to want to rid themselves of cellulite, leaving Avon to capitalise on the shaming of an aesthetic skin condition.

To consider the semiotic choice of the adjective 'cute' with the specific lexical field of the naked body, the anonymisation of the separated pronoun 'every body' (see Figure 3) further emphasises how the consumer is being collectively branded as unworthy if they have dimples on their thighs. The collective unity of the pronoun 'every body' is anonymised so that Avon can conveniently 'avoid specification and developing a detailed and coherent argument'. The anonymisation of 'every body' addresses a broader consumer of the advertisement, by which Avon can convince a large social group that they are 'beautiful' if they order the cream and can thus rid their body of the appearance of cellulite. Furthermore, the separation of the pronoun creates a symbolism and importance given specifically to the noun 'body'. Whilst creating an ironic duality of meaning in the use of 'every body' instead of 'everybody' Avon are simultaneously foregrounding attention to the 'body' as a representation of female identity. To put it another way, Avon's '#NAKEDPROOF' campaign is connoting that the female body is beautiful once they say 'buh-bye to cellulite' (see Figure 2), thereby reinforcing the implicit meaning that female value and identity is gauged on the beauty of the physical body.

2.

The table below shows the verbs taken from Figures 1, 2, and 3, as classified by Halliday's (2004) Transitivity grammatical system. This study will analyse how the use of specifically material processes aid in convincing the consumer of the advertisement that they should use the product being sold as to avoid the appearance of fat on their thighs and thus being branded as shameful.

Verb:	Process:	Direct Participant
Are	Existential	Existent
See	Perception Mental Process	Senser, Phenomenon
Is	Existential	Existent
Reduces	Material	Actor, Goal
Firms	Material	Actor, Goal
Softens	Material	Actor, Goal
Feel	Perception Mental Process	Senser, phenomenon
Order	Material	Actor, Goal

Figure 5: Table of Verbs & Processes taken from Avon Campaign.

In the #NAKEDPROOF campaign there is a total of eight process types, and out of these processes, the material categorisation makes up for 50 percent and is notably the most frequently used in the advertisement. 'Reduces', 'firms', 'softens' and 'order' are all material action intention processes which naturally employ agency and physicality in the

world. The dynamic verbs indicate action towards the goal of feeling 'confident and powerful' in the reduction of cellulite. Material processes describe something being done, using concrete actions with material consequence (Machin and Mayr 2012:106). In this instance, one can argue that the frequent use of material processes aids to encourage the consumer of the advertisement to actively partake in the eradication of cellulite from their bodies, and thus they can be perceived as 'beautiful'. Furthermore, the encouragement from the agency of material processes emphasises that something must be physically done to rid the body of the appearance of fat, subtly reinforcing that there is something wrong with the aesthetic skin condition, cellulite. Through the process of physically reducing the appearance of cellulite, firming the skin and softening stretch marks, the use of material processes compels the consumer to actively rid their body of fat. The material processes' goal to 'feel beautiful and confident' fortifies the assumption that one can only feel positively towards their body if they haven't got dimples of fat on their thighs, thus evidencing that Avon's advertisement contributes to the broader social framework that women are entirely valued on the weight, shape, and appearance of their body.

3.

Lastly, one must consider the visual semiotic choices of the campaign which contribute to the shaming of fatness on the female body. The iconography of each of the three Figures shows a woman in briefs and a small vest top, attempting to show as much skin, and specifically as much of her thighs as possible, which notably have not got a trace of cellulite on them. The three images of the campaign reinforce what Machin and Mayr (2012) state in relation to distance and positioning the viewer in relation to people inside the image (97). Frequently in women's lifestyle magazines and advertisements women tend to be photographed in close or medium shots (97), as patterned through this campaign. In this example all three images of the woman are close-ups, imposing that as a consumer 'we are meant to imagine the woman as the agent of the feelings expressed in the text'. The close-up shot of the woman consistently smiling encourages the consumer to believe the woman is happy because she feels 'confident and beautiful' in her lack of cellulite and fat on her body. Subtly, the distancing of the iconography in all three Figures reinforces that specifically women can feel as happy as the model if they invest in ridding their body of the appearance of fat by buying Avon's products. More broadly however, the photography used in the campaign contributes to the assumption that to be a happy functioning female in society, you must hold yourself to the standards of the model presented here, without cellulite or fat on her thighs.

Discussion

As evidenced, there are elements to Avon's campaign which can be shown to support the argument of the study in that the campaign contributes to the shaming of fat on the female body. However, in this analysis the implications of the evidence must also be considered in the discussion of the findings. Whilst the research from gender and feminist studies has gone to support the claim that advertisements and the consumption of mass media shame women for the appearance of fat and cellulite on the body, one cannot elude that all advertisement promoting beauty products contributes to fat oppression.

Clearly the campaign shows a woman who can be perceived by the consumer as a healthy weight, rather than a model who has been aesthetically enhanced with obvious plastic surgery or unrealistic photoshopping. Whilst this is just an assumption, as a consumer of the campaign myself I can recognise that the body of this woman is used to

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represent a natural, healthy body figure, rather than someone who either has the privilege of affording drastic plastic surgery or who is unhealthily skinny. This consideration recognises that there has been an evolution in the projection of women's bodies in advertisement and mass media, from the idealised size 0 model body to a slightly fuller body which attempts to represent a larger group of women in the naturalness of the woman's figure. However, this was not the argument throughout the analysis. The argument was that for those who don't meet this standard of body shape, whereby the body has no appearance of fat and cellulite, are excluded from the narrative, and shamed into buying a product. In other words, Avon may be attempting to tokenise from the model to be a 'healthy weight', yet they are capitalising on the shaming of women who don't look like this and have a largely unavoidable skin condition of dimpled fat.

Whilst this campaign can be argued to communicate with a larger group of consumers on the basis of a model shown who is of a healthy weight, the linguistic analysis aids in emphasising the line of argument in this study. Through the use of the adjective phrase 'dimples are cute' when contrasted with the statement 'not your thighs' as well as the use of the lexical field of the naked body, Avon do not attempt to cover their blatant shaming of cellulite on the body. In Figure 1, the creators of the campaign address the consumer as the possessive determiner 'your' in an attempt to embarrass the consumer if they have the appearance of cellulite on their thighs. The lack of awareness of the campaign reinforces the construction of shame and detriment to the weight of the female body in Western society as blatant and audacious.

Conclusion

To conclude, this multimodal discourse analysis of the Avon campaign '#NAKEDPROOF' argues that the appearance of cellulite and fat on the female body is framed as undesirable and frankly embarrassing to the consumer. In doing this, the consumer is encouraged to hold themselves to the standards of what they believe defines the adjective 'cute', whereby if they believe they are not 'cute', they must actively buy into Avon's products in order to feel beautiful, and therefore worthy. More broadly, the analysis of this campaign comments on the discipline of the female body in modern society, by which women are held to a standard of body weight, appearance, and size, and thus their position and credibility in society is gauged by said weight.

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Appendices



Figure 1: (foxnews.com) originally published by Avon©



Figure 2: (metro.co.uk) originally published by Avon©



Figure 3: (foxnews.com) originally published by Avon©