



An exploration of the personal identities of differing socially positioned women in the discourse of personal advertisements

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore how women of differing social positions construe personal identity in personal advertisements. The study explored numerous theories of identity, whilst paying particular attention to Darwin's sexual selection theory. Personal advertisements were used to highlight identity because they 'offer a rich approach to understanding the processes by which individuals construct their self identities within the dating context' (Winn & Rubin, 2001, p.394). The 'women seeking men' personal advertisements from a broadsheet UK newspaper and the 'women seeking men' personal advertisements from a red top UK newspaper were obtained for the purposes of analysis. Discourse analysis was used to analyse the advertisements and compare the discourses operating within them. Discourse analysis is concerned with the ways in which language constructs objects, subjects and experiences, including a sense of self (Willig, 1999). Guidelines as set out by Fairclough (1989) were used as a framework for the discursive analysis of the personal advertisements. This involved three stages in which numerous factors within the text were scrutinized. This study offered an interesting insight into how women construct their identity in personal advertisements and illustrated a slight difference between descriptions of personal identity between women of differing social class.

KEY WORDS:	DISCOURSE ANALYSIS	IDENTITY	SOCIAL CLASS	PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS	SEXUAL SELECTION
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Introduction

Personal identity is a central topic in everybody's lives, even to the extent that Erikson (1963) relates successful identity formation to being psychologically healthy. However, an abundance of past research has shown that women's quest for personal identity has been problematic, describing it as a 'soap opera, endless and never advancing' (Gardiner, 1981, p.348). This problem is also apparent in literature, for example Gilbert and Gubar (1979) propose that the woman's quest for self definition has been the underlying plot of women's nineteenth century writing, while Showalter (1977) sees self discovery and a search for identity as the main theme of women's literature since 1920. In other words, identity formation has been a site of struggle for women for many years.

When researching personal identity, the idea of embodied identity has been a focal point throughout history. Embodied identity concerns the extent to which appearance is considered central to identity. In the 1960's Erikson (1968, p.283) produced research that suggested 'much of a young woman's identity is already defined in her kind of attractiveness'. This can be seen in more modern times, for example, Bartky (1979) recognises that 'identities can no more be kept separate from how our bodies look' (p.41). Foucault (1988) suggests that the body is a public presentation of identity and proposes that people often attempt to change their bodies to fit with prevailing cultural notions of identity. The extent of this theory is reinforced by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) who suggest that the face is deemed the most precious characteristic of human identity. Likewise, Giddens (1991) sees the body as essential to the creation of self identity.

Empirical studies have supported this view by showing how some women attempt to control their identities through cosmetic surgery.

"Cosmetic surgery is not about beauty but about identity...cosmetic surgery becomes a way to renegotiate identity through her body...In a context of limited possibilities for action, cosmetic surgery can be a way for an individual woman to give shape to her life by reshaping her body" (Davis, 1995, p.163).

This hints that many women view their appearance as central to their identity, and may attempt to change their identity through changing their appearance. Moreover, the idea of embodied identity is not restricted to research findings. Support can be seen in poems such as *Phenomenal Woman* (1978) by Maya Angelou who writes about finding her identity through her body: 'it's in the arch of my back, the sun of my smile, the ride of my breasts, the grace of my style. I'm a woman'.

Darwin's evolutionary theory of sexual selection (cited in Buss, 1999) can be used to build understanding of women's identity. Sexual selection suggests that if members of one sex have an agreement about the qualities that are desired in members of the opposite sex, then individuals of the opposite sex who possess those qualities will be more likely chosen as mates. For example Buss (1999) specifies that men tend to have a universal desire for qualities that centre upon women's reproductive value, such as youth and physical attractiveness. In support, previous research into personal advertisements have shown that men have a higher response rate to

women who claim to be young and physically attractive (Buss, 1999). As a result, women emphasise these aspects when defining their identity (Buss 1988). Ussher (2000) presents a compilation of research that indicates the extent to which women feel under pressure to conform to the ideal created by male preferences. Bartky (cited in Weitz, 2003, p.34) noted: 'in contemporary patriarchal culture...woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal other'. In other words, women construct their identity in response to men's ideals, which furthermore and inevitably, introduces the idea of male gaze and patriarchal power.

Studies have also shown a strong association between women and the traditional feminine role, designated by the sub categories of mothers and wives (Deaux *et al.* 1985). This can be seen in times as far back as 1879, in the play *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen who wrote 'before everything else you're a wife and a mother'. This is also evident in slightly more modern times, as Bettelheim (1965) noted 'as much as women want to be good scientists or engineers, they want first and foremost to be womanly companions of men and to be mothers' (cited in Yates, 1975, p.145).

Erikson (1964) suggested that women use these traditional feminine categories to create their identity when he noted 'young women often ask whether they can have an identity before they know whom they will marry, and for whom they will make a home.' This suggests that women must meet a man and become a wife and a mother in order to have a personal identity. This trend can be seen in much more recent times through a multitude of media including self help books written by women such as *Creative counterpart: becoming the woman, wife, and mother you've longed to be* by Dillow (2003) and recent website articles by women that suggest women should not feel ashamed to 'admit they enjoy fetching their husband's slippers after a long day or seeing the shine from a freshly mopped floor' (Tumlin, 2010). This shows how the trend of defining women and women self identifying in terms of mother and wife categories is still evident, indicating that patriarchal power plays a great role in shaping women's identities.

Darwin's theory has received a great deal of support, Weiderman (1993) for example, conducted a cross cultural study on personal advertisements and findings provided the first extensive cross cultural evidence supporting the Darwin's sexual selection theory. However, the theory has been subjected to large amounts of scrutiny, largely by feminists (Bleier, 1985; Haraway, 1991). For example, Weisstein (1993) argued that Darwin's theory placed an overemphasis of woman's true nature as that of a 'happy servant' (p.196). Consequently, many feminists have deemed Darwin's theory of sexual selection to be sexist to the point where it was once considered to be at the top of the feminist hate list (Ruse, 1979).

One channel that many women use to aid their identity formation is social status. There is plentiful past research that indicates a relationship between social class and identity formation. Class identity fits Tajfel's (1978, p.63) definition of social identity: 'part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.' Accordingly, one possible way that women may derive their personal identity is through the knowledge, value and emotional significance they attach to their positioning in a social class.

Tajfel (1978) proposed that being positioned within a social group, such as class can produce a sense of identity. This can be seen within previous research, for example, as Gumperz (1982) pointed out; humans often take class as a given boundary within which social identities are created. Some women would even consider class as the defining characteristic in shaping their subjectivity, for example, Zwerdling (1987) embodied artist Virginia Woolf's views when she wrote 'her firm middle class identity undermined her feelings of kinship with working class women' (p.232). Therefore suggesting that how women construct their identities depends on the discourses about identities available in the corresponding society. Hooks (2000) takes a similar viewpoint to describe how 'there is much evidence substantiating the reality that class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status and lifestyle' (p.4). Likewise, Hacking (2007) suggests that 'with the course of empire the individual will increasingly be filed in one class or another and for at least some purposes, they will self identify in that way' (p.288). In other words, social class is considered to play an important role in establishing personal identities.

These ideas of women's identity, however, have received criticism. For example, in many cases, in order to reach a theory of women's identity, theories which have been constituted by male theorists (Darwin, 1909; Erikson, 1964; Tajfel, 1978) must be adapted. Gardiner (1981) noted that these theorists assume a male paradigm for human experience and so to use them to explore women's identity is subjective and unreasonable.

The reason behind conducting this study was to offer further insight into the intricate issue of women's personal identity. Specifically this study focused on exploring how women from different social class groups express their personal identity. The subject of social class was chosen as it is seen to be 'the most important divide in Great Britain' as said by leading politician Harriet Harman (cited in Kirkup & Pierce, 2008). Consequently, it was deemed interesting to explore how this divide is evident in women's descriptions of their identity. This was done by analysing the language women use when placing personal advertisements in newspapers.

The analytic approach

An analysis of language was chosen for this study because there is increasing support indicating that language serves as a vehicle for expressing and constructing personal identity. For example, as Edwards (2009) stated; 'the language we use forms an important part of our sense of who we are' (p.1). Hence, language in personal advertisements would serve as a direct link between women and their identities. Meill, Phoenix and Thomas (2007) support this by noting how language is central to the construction of identity. Subsequently, as this is a study of identity and language acts as a method for woman to express their identity, it was considered essential to analyse language in this study.

Discourse analysis was chosen as a method for exploring language. Banister *et al.* (1994) describes discourse analysis as a type of analysis that examines how language is used to produce meaning. Empirical methods were disregarded as they often produce artificial results and lack insight whereas discourse analysis allows deep and fruitful analysis that centres upon exploring and understanding meaning. This was considered more appropriate for the study of personal identity.

The form of discourse analysis that was used in this study to analyse personal advertisements is critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989). This is because identity can be examined from the perspective of critical discourse analysis in terms of the socially structured discourses manifested within texts e.g. social class. By exploring the discourses in personal advertisements through critical discourse analysis, it was possible to capture the socially constructed and representational aspects of women's identities (Pietikäinen & Dufva, 2006).

Method

The texts and their contexts

This analysis was conducted on personal advertisements in two newspapers. Newspapers were chosen as a means of distinguishing women of different social class as Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) report a strong and systematic association between social status and newspaper readership.

One text was the 4th April 2009 edition of UK broadsheet newspaper The Guardian. The National Readership Survey used a sample of 37,454 between July 2008 and June 2009, and obtained that The Guardian received a readership of 3.9% (1080) ABC1 adults and 0.6% (125) C2DE adults. The reader profile section of The Guardian's website describes readers as 'typically young, well educated, upmarket and professional' who 'enjoy a cosmopolitan lifestyle; boast high-income levels and display a strong loyalty to their paper' (The Guardian Reader Profile, n.d). This newspaper was chosen over other similar broadsheet newspapers as it boasts superior class-relevant statistics such as '87% classified social grade ABC1 and 62% classified AB readers' and '56% of Guardian readers are educated to degree level or above – a higher proportion than any other quality daily, while 57% are in full-time employment.' Therefore the readership of The Guardian newspaper generally consists of middle to high class individuals.

The second text used was a tabloid 'red top' newspaper. Red top newspapers tend to be sensationally and simply written and dominated by pictures, with more prominence given to celebrities, showbiz and sports. The newspaper used in this study was the 15th November 2009 edition of The People. The People's typical readership in a sample of 37,454 between July 2008 and June 2009 is 1.9% (517) ABC1 adults and 4.2% (914) C2DE adults (The National Readership Survey).

In both sets of texts, all the 'women seeking men' advertisements were used for analysis; this amounted to 21 advertisements in The Guardian and 61 advertisements in The People. Analysis of personal advertisements is a relatively new phenomenon, most likely coinciding with the increase in their use (Coupland, 1996). They were chosen for analysis in this study because they offer personal identity descriptions relying on the specific choice preferences of the writer; they overflow with the personal fingerprints of human nature. This led Parekh and Bersesin (2001) to describe personal advertisements as a 'window' into society and individuals. Bearing this in mind, it was thought possible to perceive women's identities through the 'window' of personal advertisements. Another reason that personal advertisements were chosen was because, due to the limited space, the writer has to control their self presentations, therefore only the information they

believe most important is selected. This leads to personal advertisements offering rich language for analysis.

Procedure

This study explored the personal identities of women from differing social class from the particular standpoint of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989). This included raising questions on how women construct their own version of social positioning and how women use language to maintain or construct their personal identity. Using Fairclough (1989) as a framework, the first step involved reading the personal advertisements in both sets of texts, noting any recurrent words, themes or discourses. This allowed the analyst to choose appropriate terminology to name the discourses operating within both sets of texts (Parker, 1992).

Once discourses were identified, the analyst used Fairclough's (1989) notion of description to describe vocabulary and textual structures. This involved exploring the physical structure of the personal advertisements as well as classification schemes, over wording, rewording, oppositional wording, meaning relations and the relational value of words.

The process of interpretation followed this, which involved a dependence on background knowledge and assumptions. This stage involved a combination of what is in the sets of texts and what is 'in' the analyst (Fairclough, 1989). As a result, schemata, frames and scripts all played a role in the interpretation of the texts.

"...they act as stereotypical patterns against which we can match texts and once we identify a text as an instance of a pattern, we happily dispense with the mass of its detail and reduce it to the skeletal shape of the familiar pattern for purposes of longer term memory and recall" (Fairclough, 1989, p.160).

In other words, the analyst used pre-existing background knowledge and common sense assumptions to interpret discourses at this stage of interpretation.

The third stage is named by Fairclough (1989) as explanation. This stage involved exploring the relationship between the named discourses and social practices and processes, specifically social struggles and power relations. Theories and ideas were introduced at this point to aid understanding of the language chosen by the writers. In other words, this stage involved using a broader perspective to explore the discourses in the two sets of texts.

Although Fairclough (1989) was used as a basis for critical discourse analysis, this was applied with a degree of flexibility. This is because some parts were deemed irrelevant for this analysis and in other cases, supplementation was considered useful. For example, Fairclough's (1989) suggestion of exploring grammar in the description stage was deemed irrelevant because the texts do not contain aspects of grammar that can be analysed; they are written in a structure similar to lists. Furthermore, the analysis included ideas from Parker (1992) and the inclusion of corpus analysis which involved exploring the frequency of words relating to the named discourses. This in turn created an innovative and creative methodology.

There were a number of ethical considerations within this study. Because the personal advertisements used were placed in public newspapers it was presumed that there was no invasion of privacy as the writer intended their advertisements by the public. It is also for this reason that informed consent was not obtained. Ethical approval was sought prior to the study in the form of a PSC Application for Ethics Approval Form (Appendix: 1) and a PSC Ethics Check Form (Appendix: 2). Also, because all texts are open to diverse interpretation, it was important that the analyst declared their attitudes towards or interests in the topics within this study prior to conducting research. This was acknowledged in terms of a reflexive analysis.

Analysis and discussion

Fairclough (1989) outlines three perspectives of critical discourse analysis – description, interpretation and explanation. In line with this and to aid fluency, it was decided that this study will include discussion alongside the analysis. As Parker (1992) suggested a significant part of discourse analysis is to name discourses operating within the texts, the discourses recognised in this study were social class, appearance, power and femininity. These discourses can be seen as ways of expressing aspects of the writer's life from a particular point of view, but also assuming and offering particular identity positions.

Structure and layout

Personal advertisements provide limited possibilities for the writer to be creative, requiring instead, a highly direct personal and partner presentation within a sparse contextual framework (Coupland, 1996). Below are two examples of the typical personal advertisements that were analysed:-



Figure 1: Examples of personal advertisements analysed, from The Guardian (left) and from The People (right)

The personal advertisements that were analysed from The Guardian can be found in appendix: 3 and all the advertisements analysed from The People can be found in appendix: 4.

The general presupposition in the personal advertisements is that a single woman wants to find a male partner. This is evident through exploration of the large scale structure. As Fairclough (1989) noted, 'the whole of a text may have structure; it may be made up of predictable elements in a predictable order' (p.114). In this analysis,

the personal advertisements in both sets of texts follow a similar structure. In *The People*, there is a headline for each advertisement that is in bold capitals (ROOM WITH A VUE) presumably intended to catch the readers/possible partner's attention. This is typically followed by an immediate description of the writer (slim F, 42, 5'7", GSOH) followed by a description of interests (enjoys pubs, cinema, eating out & travel) then partner preferences (seeks genuine, down to earth M) and completed with a reason for this desire (for friendship, maybe more).

Advertisements in *The Guardian* follow a similar structure. Although they do not have a headline; the immediate description of the writer is in bold type (warm and intelligent). This presumably has the similar intention of attracting attention. This is followed by further description (optimistic and petite F, 43, with a sense of fun) and interests (films, theatre, travel and literature). Lastly there is a description of the man desired (seeks kind, bright M) and a subsequent reason (to help make summer sunnier). This order is perhaps based on importance, with the immediate description giving what the writer regards as most important.

Social class

The discourse of social class is evident in both sets of texts and can be explored through vocabulary. However, it must be acknowledged that both sets of texts implicitly convey meanings through the analyst's background knowledge also. For example, the advertisement from *The Guardian* that reads 'warm and intelligent, optimistic and petite F, 43, with a sense of fun. In it's in films, theatre, travel and literature' induces a sense that this writer is of fairly high social status. Yet social status is not explicitly mentioned in the advertisement. This discourse comes from the mental representation within the analyst's minds of what high social class is stereotypically supposed to be and what it is characterised by. Likewise, an advertisement in *The People* which includes the description 'brunette, 38, likes pubs/clubs, dining, travel, holidays and socialising' induces a sense that the writer is most likely of a lower social status than the women described in *The Guardian* advertisement even though social status is not mentioned explicitly. Instead, the analyst recognises attributes related to social class which occur in the personal advertisement and infers the meaning.

There seems to be indication of oppositional wording in the two sets of texts. Oppositional wording occurs when words contrast each other. Words such as 'bubbly' and 'professional' are oppositional in the sense that they belong to different ideological frameworks. Consequently, the occurrence of either one tends to ideologically place a text. For example, an advertisement in *The Guardian* in which the writer describes herself as 'professional' creates the impression that the writer is more educated, academic and consequently of a higher social status than the writer who describes in *The People* herself as 'fun-loving'. In *The People* 3% of advertisements analysed contained words related to the ideological framework of high class such as 'professional', 'intelligent' and 'smart' (see Table: 1). Instead there seemed to be a preference for descriptive words such as 'bubbly' and 'outgoing'. In *The Guardian*, a larger majority (33%) of advertisements contain words related to the ideological framework of high class. There seemed to be a running emphasis on words relating to the high class life such as 'intelligent', 'ex-nurse', 'professional', 'witty' and 'pianist'. These words all relate to the discourse of high social class and

the fact that the writer included them within their personal description suggests that these qualities were deemed central to their identity. The presence of oppositional wording acts as a noticeable divide between the two sets of texts, thus placing them on opposite ideological frameworks (see Figure: 2).

Table 1
Frequency of discourse related words within The Guardian and The People as resulting from a corpus analysis of both sets of texts

	The Guardian		The People	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Social class				
Intelligent/smart	5	23	2	3
Professional	2	9	0	0
Appearance				
Attractive/good looking/beautiful/gorgeous	11	52	8	13
Slim/petite	3	14	6	10
Hair colour	5	23	15	25
Eye colour	3	14	8	13
Power				
Widow/divorced/single	4	19	18	29
Mum	0	0	8	13
Femininity				
Loving/warm/caring/considerate	3	14	7	11

This table shows that there are differences in word choice between the two sets of texts. Presumably, the words the writer chooses to include relates to her concept of personal identity and how she would like to portray herself to a possible partner.

There is also evidence of over-wording in the advertisements. Fairclough (1989) describes over-wording as ‘an unusually high degree of wording, often involving words that are near synonyms’ (p.115). There is indication of over-wording in The Guardian, specifically with relation to education. Words such as ‘intelligent’, ‘ex-nurse’, ‘professional’ are included within 33% of advertisements analysed, along with interest descriptions such as ‘reading’, ‘books’, ‘poetry’, ‘dance’ and ‘literature’. As education and academia are closely related to high social status, this over-wording of academia related words perhaps shows a preoccupation with the high class lifestyle. This in turn could hint at a class struggle in the sense that the writer uses high class related words to reassure their position of social status. This is very possible, as Fairclough (1989) recognises, language is often used in struggles concerning class. Furthermore, class, coincidentally is the most fundamental form of struggle (p.35).

Additionally, there appears to be rewording in the personal advertisements. Fairclough (1989) described rewording as ‘an existing, dominant, and naturalised wording is being systematically replaced by another one in conscious opposition to it’ (p.113). Advertisements within The Guardian tend to use more formal words than

advertisements in *The People*. For example, in *The Guardian* words such as 'salsa dancing', 'principled', 'literature', 'merriment', 'painting', 'positive', 'optimistic' and 'passionate' are replaced by more colloquial wording in *The People* - 'pubs/clubs', 'bloke', 'DVDs', 'clubbing', 'telly' and 'cosy' and 'having a laugh' (see Figure: 2). This difference could be due to the writers expressing their identity in terms of social class, supporting Tajfel (1978) who proposed, being positioned within a social group, such as class can produce a sense of identity. It could be suggested therefore that the writers in *The Guardian* reinforce their high class identity through their choice of formal wording. Also, people often change their language depending on their social goal. Because the social goal in personal advertisements revolves around obtaining partners, it is possible that women in *The Guardian* who emphasise aspects of their class identity by using formal words do so to attract similar socially positioned partners. However it is also worth mentioning that social groups such as age and ethnicity can play a role in shaping language, for example older women may use more formal words in their advertisements than the younger writers, regardless of social status.

Appearance

Advertisements are effective when they enable their audience to draw upon ideological elements in their knowledge in order to establish an image for the product being advertised (Scott, 1994). Consequently a large amount of the content within personal advertisements concerns description of appearance. In *The People*, words such as 'curvy', 'slim', 'blonde', 'brown hair' and 'blue eyes' are used for descriptions of appearance. In *The Guardian*, words regarding appearance tend to be more general and more subjective such as 'beautiful', 'good looking', 'attractive' and 'gorgeous' (see Figure: 2). This is to enable the reader/possible partner to establish an image of the woman writer. Language is being used in a powerful way as part of a larger objective; to elicit desire from possible partners. Women can be seen as 'hailing' (Althusser, 1971), in the sense that they are using language to seek the attention of men.

Over-wording is apparent regarding appearance with both sets of texts containing words that are near synonyms. This can be seen in individual advertisements, for example in *The Guardian*: 'v. attract, sporty, fit 41 young looking, blue eyes, blonde hair, gorgeous features', the words 'fit' and 'sporty' are very similar in terms of meaning. A similar pattern can be seen in individual advertisements in *The People*: 'attractive, blonde, young-looking', in this case all words indicate that the writer wants to emphasise her attractiveness. Also, over-wording is evident more generally in both sets of texts with words relating to appearance (slim, attractive, petite, fit) generally plentiful within advertisements. In *The People*, 13% of the advertisements analysed contain the word 'attractive', and 52% of the advertisements analysed in *The Guardian* (see Table: 1). Fairclough (1989) suggests that over-wording is a sign of preoccupation with some aspect of reality, which may furthermore indicate a focus of ideological struggle, which in this case is a struggle with identity and perhaps a fixation on appearance.



Figure 2: Venn diagram to illustrate identity and interest descriptions within the two sets of texts and where they overlap

Figure: 2 shows that some descriptive words are used in both sets of texts. Looking at these words, they seem moderately neutral, for example 'attractive', 'lovely', 'walking' and 'cinema' are not class specific words. Rather these characteristics and interests are somewhat universal.

This analysis corresponds with the theory of embodied identity. As Featherstone (1982) pointed out, the body has become the visual carrier for the self, and this is apparent in this study. There has been an abundance of previous supporting research that suggests physical appearance is a personal attribute considered important by women (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Jagger (1998) notes that this current emphasis on the body is likely to be due to the idea that youth, beauty, slenderness and fitness are thought of as universal ideals, created by male desires (Buss, 1999). This therefore supports Darwin's sexual selection theory which suggests that the universal ideals of beauty that women seek to adopt embody cues to their reproductive value (Buss, 1999). The sexual selection theory suggests that men desire women who appear fertile, hence the pattern of women emphasising

child bearing qualities – youth ‘young looking 50’, beauty ‘attractive’, health ‘slim’, ‘fit’ - in their personal advertisements. The body has become an important identity marker when marketing the self, especially for women. Through this analysis it was possible to see that women try to create socially approved images of themselves by manipulating their language.

Power

The personal advertisements analysed contained aspects of power, particularly patriarchy which is evident through the concept of male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Male gaze is the tendency to objectify women as men want to see them, for example, Lacan (1975) stated ‘woman is a symptom of man’, suggesting that woman can only gain significant recognition by men as an object of their desire. This is evident in media where women are very frequently portrayed as sexual objects, always slim and attractive. Interestingly, this trend can be seen in personal advertisements in which women commonly include words relating to attractiveness and/or slenderness both in *The Guardian* (61%) and *The People* (23%) (see Table: 1). This supports Darwin’s sexual selection theory and the corresponding notion of patriarchal power in the sense that women writers are conforming to the ideal woman as shaped by men. Boyle (2000) confirms this by noting how women generally present an idealized self-image which is largely mediated by the roles the men in their lives and society have encouraged them to adopt. In other words, women’s identity within the personal advertisements, although written freely by women, is manipulated and directed somewhat by men’s ideals.

Power concepts are also clear through categorisations within the personal advertisements. Both sets of texts include self descriptions based on categories, for example – ‘widow’ ‘divorced’ or ‘single’ is often used in both sets of texts as an identity marker. In 29% of advertisements analysed in *The People*, women used ‘single’, ‘divorced’ or ‘widow’ to describe themselves. In *The Guardian*, 19% of advertisements analysed contained such identity descriptions (see Table: 1). This hints at a need to define the self in terms of past or present relationships with others, specifically with women of lower social status. Generally it suggests that the women’s sense of personal identity is closely tied to others. It could also suggest an identity struggle in the sense that the women feels that her main sense of identity is not her own, rather it lies in her relationship with others. Specifically, when women describe themselves as a ‘widow’, ‘divorced’ or ‘single’, there seems to be a sense that the women’s identity contains strong aspects of relationships with men, hinting at a sense of patriarchal power that is still noticeable in women’s personal identities. This supports much previous research which illustrates how men hold the power to shape women (Bartky, 2003; Erikson, 1964; Ussher, 2000).

Femininity

In a separate study of personal advertisements, Jagger (1998) coded feminine attributes to be those associated with nurturing, empathy, coquetry and passivity. Based on this coding, the sets of texts analysed in this study show interesting findings. In advertisements analysed in *The People*, 11% contained such feminine attributes (warm, loving, caring, considerate) and in the advertisements analysed in *The Guardian* 14% contained such attributes.

This can be explained with help of Darwin's sexual selection theory also in the sense that men tend to desire women who appear able to bear and rear children. Consequently qualities such as 'caring' and 'considerate' are consistent with this 'mothering' view. Therefore women place emphasis on their 'mothering' attributes within their personal advertisements in order to attract a partner. This occurs consistently in both sets of texts thus indicating this is a common identity marker, unaffected by social class. However, only in *The People* do women describe themselves as a 'mum' (see Table: 1). This might suggest that women of low social status consider the category of 'mother' to be more central to their identity than any of the higher socially positioned women who placed advertisements in *The Guardian*.

However, there are signs of contradiction. McRobbie (1996) has implied that what constitutes a feminine identity has now diversified, moving away from the old terrain of traditional domestic femininity and the notion of separate masculine and feminine identities are now blurred. This can be seen in the analysis of the personal advertisements within these sets of texts. For example, although many women do identify with stereotypical feminine characteristics, many women describe themselves with attributes that were once deemed stereotypically masculine. These include words such as 'intelligent' and 'independent' alongside traditionally masculine interests ranging from 'football' to even 'rock music' and 'motorbikes'. These findings actually conflict with Darwin's sexual selection theory and the notion of patriarchal power as it shows not all women find it necessary to emphasise fertility qualities or shape themselves into the ideal woman. Furthermore, this implies that women have gained independence and confidence in forming their identity, perhaps gaining more power of their own. Overall, it adds support to many post-modern theorists who suggest that identities are no longer stable and fixed but plural and fluid (Jameson, 1984; Kellner, 1995).

Limitations and directions for future research

It must be acknowledged that there were important issues concerning the texts chosen for this analysis. The identities constructed in personal advertisements have a partiality which is produced by the constraints and confections of the genre itself (Coupland, 1996). For example, as Jagger (1998) noted, advertisers construct personal identities whilst operating within certain implicit norms. For example, advertisers writing in British newspapers automatically adopt a white/able bodied norm (Jagger, 1998). Because of this there will be content that the writer assumes can be left unspoken. An example that is relevant to this study and particularly to the issue of social class is the possibility that women who place advertisements in *The Guardian* may feel that their political stance is central to their personal identity but do not state so in their advertisement as they assume it is implied by the nature of the newspaper. Consequently this has implications concerning analysis as the analyst will not establish political stance as an important aspect of the woman's personal identity. Therefore it must be noted that this analysis was not necessarily an analysis of the complete and inclusive identity of the women who placed the personal advertisements, only an analysis of the women's identity as evident within the advertisement.

This study showed a slight difference in identities between women of social class specifically in choice of wording and vocabulary in the sense that women who placed

advertisements in *The Guardian* tended to use slightly more formal words. However, further exploration is deemed important for this conclusion as there are additional social factors such as age or ethnic background that could shape women's language in this way. Furthermore, an idea for future research would be to explore how women of differing age or ethnic background construct their identity within personal advertisements.

Reflexive analysis

As mentioned previously, the issue of analyst's background knowledge is an important point to highlight within this study. Interpretations are generated from what is in the text and what is 'in' the analyst (Fairclough, 1989). In other words, as an analyst, I acted upon my own individual background knowledge to interpret the personal advertisements and select attributes that were not mentioned explicitly. This involved identifying and combining theories and ideas in my own unique and creative way. For example, I chose to apply and combine the theories of sexual selection, male gaze and embodied identity to my interpretation.

There were no additional analysts involved in this analysis. This possibly acted as a minor limitation as no different interpretative opinions or values were offered alongside my own, making my interpretation possibly narrow and subjective. On the other hand, having only one analyst served as a benefit as it allowed harmonious and unproblematic interpretation. Overall, because interpretations are open, dynamic and subject to change, there is no ultimately 'correct' interpretation of texts (Wodak, 1999).

As an analyst, and a woman with my own experience of personal identity and social status, I was aware that it was impossible to avoid bringing into research personal values and evaluations. As a result this analysis has been self reflective. I discovered much about how language is used in such a powerful way, even in strictly governed texts such as personal advertisements. I thought it was very interesting how many aspects of the personal advertisements could be explained with help of Darwin's sexual selection theory considering the theory is over 100 years old. I also discovered how unanimously women strive towards positive presentation. Although, upon personal reflection, I find myself unsurprised by this, most likely because I do the same myself, and if I was to write my own personal advertisement, I imagine it would not differ vastly from many of the women's advertisements I analysed.

Conclusion

This study has offered insight into how women construct their identity in personal advertisements, showing a slight difference in descriptions of personal identity between women of differing social class which was most evident through vocabulary. The study uncovered the issue of power, particularly how patriarchal power is evident within women's personal identities. This introduced the topic of social struggle and how some women form their identity based on their relationship with men. The overwhelming finding was that all women, regardless of social class, placed emphasis their physical appearance. This is a trend that supports many previous studies (Buss, 1999), and offers strong support for Darwin's sexual selection theory. It was also revealed how, although the majority of women included

traditional feminine attributes in their identity formation, the notion of traditional feminine identity is becoming more diverse. This could be due to women gaining more independence and power over their personal identity. It shows overall how identities are far from fixed, they revolutionize constantly.

In summary, the study offered insight into the problematic area of women's identity, showing the multitude of struggles women confront when forming identities. It also demonstrated how personal advertisements can be explored using a variety of theories. In general, the study demonstrated how personal advertisements can be a prolific and convenient area of exploration.

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