

The Au Pair Cultural Exchange Program Advertising: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Advertising is everywhere, and the effects of advertisements on people are notorious. Consequently, through ads, you can convince the audience to follow an ideology or to acquire certain products. The following article examines the au pair cultural exchange program online advertisements from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective. The article sets out to explore the linguistic features used in the au pair program advertisements that persuade participants to become au pairs and hosts. The analysis was achieved through a three-dimensional framework (Fairclough, 1994; 2001; 2003). This model demonstrates the correlation between linguistic forms, discourse, and social practices. The findings imply that advertisers use different linguistic forms and strategies to persuade Mexican girls from the age of 18 to 26 years old to enroll in the cultural program, as well as US citizens' families who are persuaded to host someone.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, advertisements, au pair.

1. Introduction

This article explores advertisements related to the au pair cultural exchange program by using Fairclough's three-dimensional model. This article has a central aim: to analyze the language used in online advertisements for the two participants who decide to take part in this cultural exchange program: (1) the au pair, and (2) the host families. Advertisements were taken from different websites and publicity on Facebook pages. To begin with, I will provide the key aspects of the literature that support this study. Then, the analysis of the advertisements will be presented. Finally, conclusions will be given.

1.1 *The au pair program*

Domestic workers have existed for a long time; they are characterized for an affordable means to take care of the household duties. Child care can be considered as a type of domestic labor, Ariza (2011) states that "since 1980 the US has been the principal element behind the rise of the child care services" (p. 7). However, it is not until the 20th century when the au pair exchange programs were implemented in some countries (Bahana, 2006).

The au pair program exists in various countries such as Australia, Germany, France, New Zealand, but the US is the most prominent due to its growing au pair market and the migration history between the USA and Mexico (Aguilar Pérez, 2015; Durand, 2007). In recent

times there has been an increment of cultural exchanges that permit young adults to travel abroad to continue with their studies or to live in a different culture and have the experience of traveling abroad (see Secretaría de Gobernación, 2019).

- At the textual level, advertisers seek to persuade young Mexican women by using adverbial and adjective phrases in advertisements.
- The analysis revealed that negative adjectives are more utilized in ads directed to host families.
- The discursive practice analysis exposed that more discursive strategies are implemented in advertisements for host families.

Rohde-Abuba and Tkach (2016) mention that “the au pair stay is officially defined as a cultural exchange program, thus au pairs are legally not granted the status of migrants, workers or students” (p. 193). They are granted a j-1 status visa, which permits au pairs to travel within the country, to work, and to study. According to the US Department of State (2020), the au pairs and host families take part in an intercultural opportunity in which au pairs become part of an American family and continue with their studies, and hosts are benefited from reliable childcare from the au pairs. The au pair cultural exchange program is one of the most popular exchange programs among young Mexican women since the program comprises improving the target language, studying abroad and learning a new culture.

Au pairs are not merely ambassadors of their culture, but they work at least 45 hours per week. Their primary responsibility is to take care of families’ children and the aspects that involve childcare such as: preparing kids’ meals, doing laundry, cleaning kids’ areas, drop-offs and pick-ups from school, among others (Cultural Care, 2020). For this cultural exchange to happen, two elements are needed, the host families and the au pairs (participants); therefore, it is somewhat essential to discuss what are the characteristics of each component.

1.2 Requirements to become participants in the program

In this small critical discourse study, the focus is on the Mexican au pairs and host families in the US as the main participants enrolled in this exchange program. Before discussing the requirements of each part, it is necessary to address that at this moment, many agencies function as program sponsors for the cultural exchange experience. The list of agencies that promote such an exchange program is long, and some examples are Cultural care, Au pair in America, Au pair care, to name a few. They are required to be mediators for both participants – the host families and the au pairs – and to promote the program in different countries. Agencies need to be immersed in the selection of participants (US Department of State, 2020). Since the au pairs need to move to a different country, there are requirements they need to fulfill to be eligible in the program. One of the benefits of this type of program is that they have the opportunity to work and study overseas. The US Department of State (2020) outlines specific criteria for au pairs and host families (Table 1).

The Table 1 specifies the logistics of becoming an au pair and for hosting one. In other words, this cultural exchange program is mediated by the US Department of State, and they provide a list of specifications to be immersed in the cultural exchange. Additionally, there are other rules for au pairs and families. These rules can vary according to the agencies that promote the cultural exchange program. Examples of the different regulations within the agencies are the following: provide the au pair with their own space (room), the host families provide food for the au pair, host families and au pairs can enter into a rematch if they are not a good fit to each other, au pairs must take a training one week before traveling to their hosts, au pairs must count with CPR certifications, to name a few (Cultural Care, 2020; Au pair Care, 2020).

Table 1. Requirements for the au pair program

<i>Au pairs</i>	<i>Host families</i>
- Proficient in spoken English - A secondary school graduate or equivalent - Between 18-and-26-years-old - Capable of fully participating in the program, as evidenced by the satisfactory completion of a physical. - Personally interviewed, in English, by an organizational representative who shall prepare a report of the interview which shall be provided to the host family - Successful in passing a background investigation that includes verification of school, three, non-family related personal and employment references, a criminal background check or its recognized equivalent, and a personality profile.	- Pay up to \$500 toward the cost of the au pair's required academic course work; - Be US citizens or legal permanent residents fluent in spoken English; - Pay a weekly minimum stipend based on the program option selected; - Give the au pair one complete weekend off each month - Provide a minimum of two weeks paid vacation for each 12-month - Include the au pair whenever possible in family meals, outings, holidays, and other events.

Note. Adapted from "Au pair program" by US State Department, 2020, *J-1 Visa*. <https://j1visa.state.gov/programs/au-pair> [Accessed 2 May 2020].

1.3 The discourse of advertising

It is well-known that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) involves the examination of linguistic features that deal with social performance, cultural processes, and structures (Fairclough & Wodak, 1999; Paltridge, 2000). Therefore, conducting a CDA could shed light on the social disproportion among the sender and the receiver within a discursive practice. The purpose of CDA is to reveal the covert elements in discursive practices that lead to unequal power relations (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 1999). As it is known, the concept of discourse is concerned with all forms of language and practices, such as spoken interaction, written texts, and visual texts. Although discourse analysis explores the language in use, the term critical emphasizes on the reflection, relevance, and socially-based interpretations (Candlin, 1990). This criticality conveys insights not only in the linguistic forms but also on the social aspects and power relations.

Advertisements are mainly presented in written or spoken forms. The focus of the present study lies in the examination of online text advertisements. The discourse of advertising is grounded on the supposition "that the text is produced to persuade the viewer to buy a product or a service or to present that product or service as desirable as possible to the viewer" (Karlsson, 2015: 3). In general, advertisements are comprised of some elements like fiction, wordplay, storytelling, photography, among others. These are typically presented amusingly (Cook, 2001). Thus, for others, advertising encompasses the discussion of several instances, such as: "the wealth gap, the merits of socialism and capitalism, the growth of world culture" (Cook, 2001: 2), to name a few. According to Cook (2001), an ad involves the interaction of participants, function, substance, pictures, music, society, paralanguage, language, a situation, and other advertisements. The elements analyzed in this study will be detailed in the following section.

2. Discussion of findings

The presented analysis was interpreted through a three-level framework based on Fairclough's (1994; 2001; 2003) ideas on how to analyze a written discourse. These ideas are represented under three elements: the textual level, the discursive practice, and the social practice. In this section, I will provide critical analysis of the advertisements directed to the participants of the Au Pair program: the host families and the au pairs. In this article, the language, situation, and functions will be the elements to analyze within Fairclough's framework.

2.1 *The text*

As it was mentioned above, one of the objectives of this article is to find out the linguistic features behind the Au Pair advertisement. Therefore, it is vitally essential to open the section of results, as it was suggested in Fairclough's model, with the textual analysis. In this section, I will focus on the following linguistic features, vocabulary, semantic structure and cohesion.

In both advertisements, few personal pronouns were found. The use of pronouns might imply that the ads were not directly addressing the information to the participants. Examples of the use of pronouns are shown in the following comparative Table 2:

Table 2. Pronouns in au pair advertisements

The au pair advertisement	The host family advertisement
Develop skills that will be helpful in your future.	Au pair lives right in your home. Hosting an au pair with Au Pair in America will help you eliminate stress. Finding the right child care option for your family can be taxing.

The previous table shows examples of using pronouns to refer to the participants directly and on an individual sensitivity level. Fairclough defines this aspect as "synthetic personalization" (Fairclough, 1989: 62). Although the evidence of this characteristic is little, it can be observed that it is more visible in ads for host families. The particular way in which ads are using personal pronouns is to convince participants that they will find relief regarding their responsibilities (host families) and offering opportunities for personal growth (au pairs).

The previous aspect makes sense since one of the characteristics of the participants lies in the age. Perhaps, there is a common denominator that points out that when one is in their twenties, the goals are concerned to have personal and professional experiences that will aid young people in their future. One characteristic of advertisements is that they tend to manipulate consumers, so they take action on something. Advertisers manipulate consumers by using imperatives and interrogative sentences. However, in these advertisements, there was a lack of interrogative sentences, also scarce examples of imperatives were found in the au pair advertisements:

- *Live* in another country for one year,
- *Travel* for one year,
- *Make* friends all over the world,
- *Have* a second family,
- *Study* another language.

Another strategy implemented to persuade consumers to get into the cultural exchange program is through the fair use of adverbial and adjective phrases. These sentences do not count on verbs or subjects. Some examples are shown in the following Table 3.

Table 3. The use of adverbial and adjective phrases in the au pair advertisement

No.	Adverb/Adjective phrases	Type of advertisement
1	Better work-life balance	Au pair in America Hosts
2	Unique cultural exchange experience	Au pair in America Hosts
3	High level of schedule flexibility	Au pair in America Hosts
4	Less stress	Au pair in America Hosts
5	One-on-one attention	Cultural Care Hosts
6	Personal growth	Au pair Care Au pair

Regarding the adjectives found in the advertisements, Delin (2000) mentions that they portray a “positive or a negative affective meaning” (p. 133). In this study, the ads showed two types of adjectives. In the case of the host family advertisement, the list of positive adjectives is related to the benefits of hosting an au pair. Contrary to the au pair advertisement that shows that positive adjectives reflect the benefits of becoming part of the program:

Positive adjectives in host family advertisements: *common, reliable, unique, cultural, right, specific, less, fun, sane, consistent, invaluable, love, easy, clean, happy, eager, young.*

Positive adjectives in au pair advertisements: *native, new, incredible, safe, cheap, unforgettable, confident.*

American host families and Mexican au pairs are being attracted to the advertisements through the use of powerful adjectives. These are represented in the previous list; however, there are also “negative affective meaning” (Delin, 2000: 133) adjectives. These negative adjectives are presented in the host family advertisement, and they are utilized for showing the challenges of being a parent with plenty of responsibilities. Contrary to the advertisements directed to the au pairs, which no evidence of negative adjectives was found. The following are examples of this category in the host family’s ads:

Negative adjectives in the host family’s advertisements: *Difficult, steep, stressful, sick, challenging.*

Another feature involved is the extensive use of nouns that the advertisements use for making participants more engaged to the ads. Therefore, it catches the audience’s attention to consider the idea of being enrolled in the program, Table 4 shows the nouns utilized in both advertisements:

Table 4. The use of nouns in the au pair advertisement

No.	Nouns	Type of advertisement
1	Au pair, family, childcare, home, children, time, peace, stress, challenges, schedule, caregiver, flexibility, costs, solution, benefits, hours, work-life, balance, exchange, experience, ages, life’s surprises, date night, routine, meals, energy, foreigner	Au pair in America Hosts Cultural Care Hosts
2	Language proficiency, native people, culture, costumes, traditions, smiles, flavors, smells, aptitudes, hosting, support, friends, world, future, year, country, international, school, English level, independence, confidence, memories, life	Au pair care Au Pair Cultural Care Au Pair

2.2 Discourse practice analysis

The purpose of conducting a discourse practice analysis is to provide insights into speech acts, coherence, and intertextuality, which connects it with the context of the text. These elements involve the analysis of the text's production and consumptions (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000: 449). The following chart summarizes the strategies used in advertisements.

Table 5. The strategies used in au pair online advertisements

No.	Strategies	Linguistic devices
1	Reasons for becoming an au pair	Contribute to kids' education Perfection your English level A gain of international professional skills Acquire confidence and independence Study another language You create unforgettable memories for your whole life
2	Benefits for hosting an au pair	Better work-life balance Unique cultural exchange experience Caters to children of all ages High level of schedule flexibility Reliable care during life's surprises Sonja [au pair] can work at night and on the weekends Au pairs are young, full of energy, and eager to participate.
3	Au Pairs as a solution for host families	She knows the routine, so it's much easier. Help around the house Au pairs can help with some of the household duties Assistance with kid-related chores give us more quality time as a family Au pair lives right in your home Cost per family not per child 45 hours of child care per week; 10 hours per day
4	Host family's representation among their responsibilities	Our schedules are all over the place and rarely consistent. No flexibility with my schedule Difficult to get children to caregiver Steep hiring & screening costs
5	Emotional aspects	Less stress Having au pairs has helped keep us sane! We don't have to deal with stressful drop-offs or pick-ups or finding coverage for sick days We love going on a date every once in a while The kids feel safe with the au pair- and happy! All of our au pairs have added a layer of fun and excitement to our lives! Au pair in America will help you eliminate stress, save time, and gain peace of mind.

Advertisements use linguistic devices that permit participants to assimilate the information and consider the idea of acquiring a product; in this case, they become part of an exchange program. The table below (Table 5) shows some examples of linguistics features utilized in advertisements. One particular au pair company promoted an ad by using the narratives of another family who has been immersed in the program. These narratives express the experiences of a member within the au pair program and company. By implementing this strategy, advertisements create a safer bond with possible costumers, and it also promotes reliability.

What stands out in Table 5 is the lack of discourse strategies used for advertisements directed to the au pairs. Therefore, the table shows more strategies used for host family's advertisements, and the approaches they use are in terms of explaining the benefits, solutions, and

emotional aspects. Another aspect concerning the discourse practice lies in the use of headings, for example: *How au pairs solve child care challenges, the perks of becoming an au pair, why being an au pair? Common child care challenges*. These examples show how costumers direct their attention to this type of advertisement. The power of these strategies implements solutions for a cheap and safer way to travel around the US for young Mexican women. Likewise, American families are involved in possible solutions for having a better lifestyle and less stressful conditions. The advertisements imply that young women want to experience a cultural exchange, and American families do not have enough time and control of their extensive activities.

2.3 Social practice analysis

The first two sets of reports examined the textual and consumptions of a text. This section displays the correlation between ideologies and “the hegemonic struggles” of discursive instances (Fairclough, 1992: 86). Therefore, this section includes the ideologies of hiring a child care person and the ideologies of becoming an au pair for the Mexican context. For Latin American settings, the goal is to seek opportunities to grow in the professional and economic aspect, and sometimes a specific group of people tends to pursuit the American dream. In the advertisements for au pairs, it can be seen elements that emphasize personal growth and the idea of gaining a better language level. Consequently, agencies emphasize the opportunities to learn a new language; however, in the requirements for becoming an au pair, they have to be proficient in the literature. That is to say, au pairs might be attracted to the chances they can have to learn the lingua franca, English, and this could represent as part of their personal and academic development. Therefore, these examples of advertisements invite au pairs to achieve the American dream and to be immersed in an environment where the English language is exposed in a real context, which may mean acquiring the target language faster, and in an affordable way.

From the host family’s side, it can be analyzed that for host families, it is more natural to hire child care help due to practicality and the idea of having a balance between their work and personal life. Moreover, in regard to all the aspects, the au pairs need to cover are idealistic. In one advertisement directed to host families can be seen some linguistic devices such as:

- au pairs are proficient in conversational English,
- Au pairs are Red-Cross certified in adult and pediatric CPR, AED and First Aid,
- Au pairs have at least 200 hours of childcare experience.

These sentences are clear examples of what the agencies are selling to the hosts. Agencies sell au pairs as functional helpers with plenty of skills. Although the US State Department does not mention these as fundamental requirements, it might be that the agencies undertake other measures to sell the right-skillful product.

Also, it is vital to point out that advertisers promote to the au pairs the ideal and safest way to accomplish individual goals. These goals are related to the academic experience, acquiring English in a real context, and the opportunities to have international life experiences such as traveling and making friends from all over the world. Likewise, they promote American families the opportunity to solve challenges concerning child care most cheaply and safely. Moreover, offering the au pair’s flexibility to work 45 hours per week and by stating that *the au pair lives right in your home* creates a sense of control and the benefits of having child care help at your disposal. Advertisements for au pairs tend to focus on the cultural learning experiences they could gain by taking this program. However, the ads analyzed for this study did not show the expectations and obligations related to the childcare program. The lack of specific information in regards to their requirements could create inevitable disappointment to au pairs since they are expecting to become cultural ambassadors.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis conducted through the three-level framework proposed by Fairclough shows that the use of negative adjectives is implemented in the ads directed towards American families. They attempt to demonstrate empathy to the parents who faced challenges in their daily life. Additionally, the implementation of strategies used tends to be more attractive and persuasive for families. Two interesting strategies applied are related to providing solutions to their lives and the emotional aspects that encounter without an au pair, as well as the benefits that an au pair can contribute when it comes to their emotions as parents. In regards to the advertisements for young Mexican girls, the fixation lies in the use of nouns that conveys experiencing activities that involve international elements such as *friends*, *traveling*, *language*, *traditions*, *memories*, to name a few. In other words, advertisers use the wordplay to persuade this young audience to be immersed in the program. Nevertheless, the scarce information of what becoming an au pair entitles of is absence. Young Mexican women's first attraction to the program may rely on the idea of experiencing living abroad without noticing the other activities they have to fulfill along with her stay in the program.

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