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CONSTRUCTING THE NEO-LIBERAL WORKER: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF POWER IN CORPORATE ONLINE JOB ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This research examines entry-level job postings from ten Multinational Corporations (MNCs) across the technology and Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sectors, including Microsoft, Nestlé, and Unilever. Modern recruitment texts have evolved beyond simply listing qualifications; they increasingly employ linguistic strategies that shift the burden of accountability away from the corporation and onto the individual. Applying Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, this research analyzes the data at the textual level (examining modalities and word choices), the discursive level (exploring the marketization of recruitment), and the social level (investigating how extreme workplace ideologies become normalized). Ultimately, the goal is to uncover how these organizations discursively construct the "ideal" employee as a constantly available and self-reliant neoliberal subject. By deconstructing this promotional language, the study aims to equip job seekers with Critical Language Awareness (CLA) to better navigate the power dynamics of the modern labor market.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Job Advertisements, Corporate Discourse, Neoliberalism, Fairclough, Recruitment, Power Relations, Marketization, Entry-level Employment.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital economy, corporate career portals act as the primary interface between organizations and applicants. While job ads are often seen as neutral information, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) reveals they are sites of ideological work where power relations are solidified. Fairclough (1995) argues that institutional discourse has undergone "marketization," blending promotion with information (Bhatia, 2004). This process naturalizes neoliberal values, like relentless flexibility and self-management, presenting corporate demands as universal virtues. As Machin and Mayr (2012) contend, lexical choices like "dynamic" and "resilient" construct an ideal worker who internalizes market logic, allowing corporations to exert unprecedented control over their employer narrative.

Despite their everyday presence, the ideological role of online job advertisements remains largely invisible. Early-career job seekers often internalize the constructed "ideal candidate" persona, unaware that this language frames unrealistic expectations as neutral standards. The core problem is the naturalization of corporate dominance and neoliberal ideology within recruitment texts, which masks underlying power asymmetries (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). When phrases like "thrive in a fast-paced environment"

are accepted uncritically, they obscure systemic issues like potential burnout, effectively shifting the responsibility for workplace well-being from the organization onto the individual. There is a critical need to deconstruct these texts to expose their hidden socio-political agendas. By illuminating how language manufactures consent, this research aims to empower applicants with critical language awareness and prompt conversations about equity in corporate hiring.

The primary rationale for this study lies in the unexamined shift of recruitment power to digital spaces. As corporate career portals increasingly replace traditional hiring methods, they have evolved from neutral administrative tools into sophisticated instruments of ideological control. Unlike third-party job boards, these native portals allow corporations to unilaterally define the "ideal worker," often embedding neoliberal values that shift the burden of risk and flexibility entirely onto the applicant. Despite this, there is a lack of critical scrutiny regarding how these "unfiltered" corporate narratives shape the professional identities of vulnerable, early-career entrants.

Research Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to conduct a critical discursive examination of online job advertisements to uncover their role in shaping professional identities and power dynamics. This aim will be realized through the following specific objectives:

- To deconstruct the specific linguistic features utilized in job advertisements on corporate career portals.
- To analyze how discursive and rhetorical strategies actively construct and naturalize the identity of the ideal candidate as a neoliberal subject.
- To expose the hidden power structures, ideological assumptions, and socio-political agendas embedded within the discourse of corporate recruitment texts.

Research Questions

Guided by the theoretical framework of Faircloughian Critical Discourse Analysis, this study seeks to answer the following central research questions:

1. What specific linguistic choices are employed in job advertisements on corporate websites to project institutional authority and define candidate requirements?
2. In what ways does the discourse of these advertisements synthesize a specific, idealized professional identity for the candidate?
3. How do these advertisements reproduce, reinforce, or occasionally challenge existing socio-economic power asymmetries between the employer (capital) and the applicant (labor)?

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance across academic, professional, and social domains. Academically, it contributes to Applied Linguistics and CDA scholarship by applying Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework to under-researched digital corporate genres. It bridges discourse studies with critical management, showing how language constructs professional reality. Practically, the findings will foster Critical Language Awareness (CLA) for job seekers, equipping them to decode power dynamics and ideologies in recruitment texts. For HR professionals, the study highlights how unconscious biases and exclusionary norms can exist within job descriptions, guiding more equitable communication. As Tannen (2006) notes, even inclusive narratives often rely on hidden hierarchical structures. By making the implicit explicit, this research promotes more democratically accountable discourse in the employment sector.

Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges certain delimitations that scope its focus. Firstly, the analysis is confined to the English-language versions of job advertisements on the official career portals of selected Multinational Corporations (MNCs). It does not encompass third-party job boards or materials in other languages. Secondly, the research is purely textual and discursive; it does not measure the real-world effectiveness of the advertisements, nor does it investigate actual

applicant perceptions or responses through interviews or surveys. The focus remains on the ideological construction and potential social implications of the discourse, not its reception or measurable impact. Finally, while Fairclough's CDA framework provides a robust analytical structure, the interpretative process inherently involves scholarly subjectivity. This will be mitigated through rigorous, textually grounded analysis and transparent methodological procedures, but the findings are presented as a critical reading rather than an absolute truth.

Literature Review

The study of recruitment language has evolved significantly, moving from a functional view of job advertisements as simple information conduits to a critical understanding of them as complex sites of ideological production. This review synthesizes existing scholarship into three interconnected themes that frame the present study: the marketization of professional discourse, the linguistic construction of the ideal worker, and the reinforcement of power asymmetry. Furthermore, it defines key theoretical concepts and culminates in identifying the precise gap this research aims to fill.

The Marketization and Hybridity of Recruitment Discourse

A foundational concept for this analysis is the marketization of discourse, a process whereby the linguistic styles and persuasive strategies of consumer advertising colonize non-commercial domains like education, healthcare, and recruitment (Fairclough, 1995). This shift means job advertisements are no longer purely informational documents. As Bhatia (2004) argues, they have evolved into a hybrid genre, strategically blending descriptions of duties with promotional rhetoric designed to "sell" the organization's culture and values to potential employees. This promotional turn obscures the traditional employer-employee contract, reframing a transactional relationship as an exclusive "opportunity" or a call to join a "passionate" mission (Fairclough, 2010). The discourse itself becomes a key tool in employer branding, making the language of job ads a primary site for investigating how corporate identity is manufactured.

Construction of the Neoliberal Ideal Candidate

Central to this manufactured identity is the discursive figure of the ideal candidate. Critical scholarship demonstrates that this is not a neutral profile but a linguistic construct that embodies core neoliberal values: self-reliance, constant adaptability, and internalized competition. Machin and Mayr (2012) show how seemingly positive lexical choices, such as dynamic, agile, resilient, and self-starting, are ideologically loaded. They naturalize an expectation that workers must perpetually self-optimize and thrive under conditions of instability, thereby shifting responsibility for workplace well-being from organizational structures onto the individual (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This process of naturalization is crucial; it makes socially constructed and corporate-specific demands appear as universal, common-sense professional virtues.

Power Asymmetry and Modality in Job Ads

The construction of this ideal is inseparable from the exercise of power. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how language enacts, reproduces, and legitimizes social power imbalances. In recruitment texts, power is often exercised grammatically through deontic modality, the use of verbs like must, should, and will that express obligation and necessity, which firmly establishes the employer as the authority setting non-negotiable terms. This occurs even amidst narratives of inclusivity and teamwork. As Tannen (2006) observes, corporate discourse frequently employs synthetic personalization, using the pronoun "you" to simulate a personal relationship, while the underlying grammatical structures (like imperatives and modal verbs) reinforce a deep-seated hierarchy. Analyzing transitivity, who is grammatically positioned as the actor with agency versus the passive goal of actions, further reveals how agency is allocated within the recruitment narrative, often privileging the corporation.

Gendered Power and Exclusion

A recent study by Knott (2020) at the University of Iowa examined how language in job advertisements for executive leadership roles actively constructs gender barriers. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze 40 job postings from nonprofit institutions, Knott found that these texts are not neutral; instead, they often rely on "masculine-coded" language that subtly privileges male candidates while discouraging women. The research concluded that these discursive choices function as an institutional gatekeeping mechanism, reproducing leadership inequities by framing the "ideal leader" through a gendered lens—a finding that directly supports the need to deconstruct hidden power dynamics in recruitment.

Neoliberalism in University and Corporate Recruitment

The recent study by Bori and Block (2023) investigates how recruitment pages on institutional websites have become saturated with neoliberal ideology. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, they found that these texts no longer just describe roles but actively construct a "marketized identity" for the applicant. The study highlights how the discourse uses "entrepreneurial" language (e.g., self-driven, competitive, hustle) to shift the responsibility of success entirely onto the individual. This confirms that recruitment platforms function as ideological tools that normalize precarious labor conditions by framing them as opportunities for personal growth.

The reviewed literature establishes a critical foundation, framing job ads as marketized tools that construct neoliberal subjects. However, a distinct multi-layered research gap remains. First, while scholars like Fairclough and Bhatia provide macro-theories of marketization, and Machin and Mayr offer critical vocabulary analysis, there is a scarcity of research that systematically applies a comprehensive three-dimensional CDA framework, integrating text, discursive practice, and social practice, specifically to digital recruitment genres. Second, and most critically, existing studies have predominantly analyzed print advertisements or aggregated job boards (e.g., LinkedIn, Indeed). There is a significant dearth of research focusing on native corporate career portals. Unlike third-party platforms with standardized formatting, these official websites function as autonomous discursive spaces where organizations exercise total control over their self-presentation and employer branding. Furthermore, while executive roles have been studied, entry-level postings remain an under-utilized data source, despite being the site where the power asymmetry between the "gatekeeper" (corporation) and the "vulnerable applicant" is most acute. This study addresses these gaps by conducting a Faircloughian analysis of entry-level ads on multinational corporate portals, offering a nuanced understanding of how digital spaces authoritatively shape the professional identities of the next generation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design, anchored in Norman Fairclough's (1995) Three-Dimensional Framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This methodological choice is driven by the need to move beyond a surface-level content analysis and instead uncover the deep connections between language, institutional practice, and social power. Fairclough's model provides a systematic, tripartite structure that aligns perfectly with the study's objectives: it first describes the concrete linguistic features of the texts, then interprets the institutional processes that shape them, and finally explains their ideological function within a broader socio-economic context. This dialectical-relational approach treats the job advertisement not as an isolated text but as a social practice, making it the most appropriate framework for critically examining how corporate discourse shapes and controls the narrative of work.

Data Collection and Sampling

Data is collected through the purposive sampling of 10 entry-level job advertisements. The sample is sourced exclusively from the official, English-language career portals of ten prominent multinational corporations (MNCs), specifically

chosen from the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and Technology sectors. FMCG sectors chosen are (Unilever, Nestlé, P&G, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo) and the Technology sectors are (Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Meta, Apple). Purposive sampling is employed to ensure the selected texts are informationally dense and "discourse-rich," meaning they contain substantial descriptive passages about company culture, candidate requirements, and role expectations, rather than being mere bullet-point lists. The focus on entry-level roles is strategic, as these positions target recent graduates who are most vulnerable to the internalization of corporate ideologies. The sampling timeframe is the most recent complete fiscal year to ensure contemporary relevance.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is conducted using Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, which serves as the core analytical framework. This model insists that any discursive event must be analyzed at three interconnected levels: the text (linguistic features), discursive practice (processes of production and interpretation), and social practice (ideological and institutional context). This framework moves analysis from simple description to critical explanation. For instance, it allows the researcher to trace how a single word choice like "resilient" (textual dimension) is part of a broader corporate strategy to promote adaptability (discursive practice), which in turn naturalizes a neoliberal expectation that workers must individually absorb systemic workplace pressures (social practice). This holistic approach ensures the research does not just catalogue linguistic features but explains their role in sustaining specific power relations and ideologies within the digital recruitment landscape.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The anonymized "Sector-Code" style is used (e.g., Tech-01 for Microsoft, FMCG-02 for Nestlé) which keeps the focus on the neo-liberal discourse rather than specific brand critique. Fairclough's 3d model is applied and data is analyzed accordingly.

Table 1: *Data analysis of one line job advertisements*

Companies	Representative Data	Key Linguistic Feature (Textual)	Discursive Theme (Meso-Level)	Social/Ideological Focus (Macro-Level)
Tech-01	Growth Mindset" and navigating "Ambiguity"	Psychological terminology applied to labor ("mindset"), paradoxical framing.	Psychological Conditioning: Uses the "growth mindset" to demand perpetual self-optimization.	Naturalizing Precariousness: Translates a lack of clear corporate direction ("ambiguity") into a demand for the worker to figure it out alone.
Tech-02	Demonstrating "Googliness" and thriving in chaos	Neologisms ("Googliness"), metaphorical demands.	Cultural Gatekeeping: Uses vague, branded terminology to enforce strict behavioral compliance.	Exploitation of Role: Normalizes role expansion and constant availability without corresponding compensation.
Tech-03	Bias for Action" and "Deliver Results"	Declarative absolutes, extreme action verbs ("Bias", "Deliver").	Codified Ideology: Translates capitalist demands into quasi-religious "Leadership Principles."	Totalizing Control: Blurs the line between professional duty and psychological surrender to the corporation.

Tech-04	Move Fast" and "Build Community"	Imperative clauses ("Move fast").	Speed as Morality: Elevates execution speed above all other professional virtues.	Structural Instability: Explicitly removes the corporation's obligation to provide a stable strategy, shifting the chaos onto the worker.
Tech-05	Do the best work of your life.	Hyperbolic promises ("best work"), imperative invitation.	The Prestige Trap: Uses the allure of brand prestige to justify extreme labor demands.	Self-Exploitation: Encourages the applicant to willingly participate in their own overwork and burnout.
FMCG-01	You're a born leader… work under pressure in a fast-paced environment…	High-modality assignments ("born leader"), temporal pressure adjectives.	Hybrid Promotion: Blends personal identity with demands for high-speed corporate productivity.	Neoliberal Subjectivity: Naturalizes high-pressure environments by masking them as opportunities for "leaders," shifting the burden of stress management to the individual.
FMCG-02	Inclusive working environment that's flexible, adaptable and fast-paced.	Juxtaposition of supportive ("inclusive") and demanding ("fast-paced") adjectives.	Synthetic Personalization: Disguises institutional demands as an empowering, adaptable culture.	Shifting Burden: Uses "adaptability" to normalize unpredictable work conditions and structural instability.
FMCG-03	Face new and diverse challenges every day from Day 1	Absolute temporal markers ("Day 1"), imperative/promissory tone ("you'll face").	Marketized Identity: The romanticization of immediate, heavy workloads as "growth" and "challenges."	Power Asymmetry: Legitimizes the immediate extraction of heavy labor from vulnerable graduates without gradual onboarding.
FMCG-04	We act with a growth mindset… curious, empowered, inclusive and agile.	Neoliberal corporate buzzwords ("agile," "growth mindset").	Agility as Virtue: Frames corporate instability and shifting priorities as an exciting personal challenge.	Labor Flexibility: Legitimizes the erosion of stable working conditions in favor of total corporate flexibility.
FMCG-05	Dare to Do More	Rhetorical challenge/imperative ("Dare").	Gamification of Work: Uses a dare to manipulate applicants into accepting high pressure as a test of courage.	Hegemony: Manufactures consent for potential burnout by equating high-pressure endurance with personal strength

Dimension 1 Textual Level Analysis

At the textual level, the recruitment discourse across both the tech and FMCG sectors relies heavily on imperative clauses and declarative absolutes (e.g., "Move fast," "Deliver"). The vocabulary is characterized by high-modality statements and psychological terminology that blends corporate demands with personal attributes, frequently utilizing neoliberal buzzwords such as "agile" and "growth mindset." Furthermore, the juxtaposition of supportive adjectives with terms indicating temporal pressure, alongside the creation of neologisms like "Googliness," constructs a highly specific, intense linguistic environment designed to direct applicant behavior.

Dimension 2 Discursive Practice Level Analysis

On the discursive level, these linguistic choices function as mechanisms for psychological conditioning and cultural gatekeeping. The texts romanticize heavy workloads and structural chaos by framing them as exciting personal challenges or necessary "agility." Through synthetic personalization and the gamification of work—such as framing tasks as a "dare"—the discourse elevates speed and execution to moral virtues. Consequently, this marketized identity leverages the allure of brand prestige to mask Institutional demands, presenting them instead as empowering opportunities for self-actualization and leadership.

Dimension 3 Social Practice Level Analysis

At the macro-level of social practice, this discourse actively constructs the ideal neoliberal subject by naturalizing precariousness and structural instability. The language establishes a profound power asymmetry that manufactures consent for self-exploitation, encouraging applicants to willingly accept role expansion, constant availability, and high-pressure environments. Ultimately, by shifting the burden of stress management and corporate flexibility entirely onto the worker, this ideology totalizes control, successfully blurring the boundary between professional duty and psychological surrender to the corporation.

Conclusion

The analysis of recruitment texts across the technology and fast-moving consumer goods sectors demonstrates a systematic naturalization of neoliberal ideology. Through the strategic deployment of high-modality vocabulary, imperative structures, and branded neologisms, corporate job advertisements transcend mere recruitment to function as instruments of psychological conditioning. The discourse romanticizes structural instability and excessive labor demands by framing them as opportunities for personal growth and leadership. Consequently, this linguistic framing establishes a profound power asymmetry, shifting the responsibility for stress management, career stability, and work-life balance entirely onto the individual applicant. Ultimately, these texts manufacture consent for self-exploitation, constructing an ideal worker who willingly internalizes totalizing corporate control as a moral and professional virtue. Future research should expand the scope of this analysis by examining recruitment discourse in other high-pressure sectors, such as finance or healthcare, to determine if these neoliberal linguistic patterns are universally applied.

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