Real Beauty Equals Real Feminism?

How Femvertising (Re-)Frames Women's Empowerment

Source: Image shot from Dove *Evolution* (2006)

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Abstract

Femvertising, referring to advertising that utilizes pro-women discourse and feminist values, is a marketing trend as well as a sociocultural phenomenon, which has received noticeable public popularity and academic attention in recent years. Through the theoretical lens of framing theory and commodity feminism, this thesis investigates how femvertising frames women's empowerment and discusses the influences it might bring. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) is conducted on three Dove video ads: *Evolution* (2006), *Real Beauty Sketches* (2013), and *Beauty on Your Own Terms* (2016), encompassing the analyses of the content, Dove's company role, the medium specialty of YouTube, and the audience response reflected in the YouTube comments.

Findings indicate that femvertising offers a limited articulation of women's empowerment, where the problem and solution are downsized to 'beauty' and 'confidence boost', and the representation of male participation is absent. Companies problematize the lack of confidence to sell their 'empowering' messages and eliminate products from femvertising to conceal the inherent contradiction. Additionally, YouTube serves as a vibrant online environment that facilitates discussions. As reflected in the audience response, although opinions towards femvertising vary, audiences have formed a close connection between the messages femvertising conveys with the 'mainstream standard feminism' in their perception. Lastly, I argue that, through accountability, internalization, and privatization, femvertising creates a neoliberal understanding of women's empowerment and highlights an internalized psychological path to achieve it.

Keywords: femvertising, women's empowerment, framing theory, commodity feminism.

Content

Introduction

Selling feminism is nothing new. In a neoliberal age where social resistance and activism are commodifiable and marketable (Dowsett, 2010; Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012), advertising has become one of the prominent agents in converting feminist values into powerful selling points. First coined by SheKnows Media in 2014 at Advertising Week (Powell, 2014), femvertising refers to the marketing phenomenon where advertising utilizes pro-women discourse and feminist values to promote products or brand images. More and more companies have adopted this strategy in recent years, as more consumers around the globe are now expecting and willing to support brands that actively engage with social issues (Sustainable Brands, 2015). On the one hand, it caters to consumers' demand of socially responsible corporations who are in line with their ideologies; on the other hand, it undoes the longstanding criticisms that accuse the representation of women in advertising as being objectified, sexualized, or stereotypical.

However, this phenomenon has received mixed reviews. Femvertising is proved effective in attracting female consumers (Stampler, 2014) and arguably in challenging gender stereotypes and boost female audiences' self-esteem (Bahadur, 2014). But it is also criticized as dangerous to the feminist movement as "inauthentic support cheapens the idea of women's equality" (Fineman, 2014) and reduces participation into surface activism (Curtis, 2018). There is a growing body of academic literature that recognizes the importance of femvertising as well as its advantages and pitfalls. After being deemed as a positive advance and effective business strategy in the marketing literature (e.g. Åkestam et al., 2017), feminist and media studies have also appropriated this term and been questioning its 'feminist' nature and the ability to promote actual social changes (e.g. Taylor et al., 2016).

Social and Academic Relevance

In this thesis, femvertising is regarded beyond a mere marketing tool but as a sociocultural phenomenon, for it not only affects product sales and brand loyalty but also people's perceptions and practices. Advertising is inherently a meaning-making process. Once the connection between products and meanings is formed, we would skip the 'translation'

process and "taking the sign for what it signifies, the thing for the feeling" (Williamson, 1978, p.21). Schroeder and Zwick (2004) deem advertising as a ubiquitous and influential discourse in the society that can incorporate "exercises of power, surveillance and normativity within the consumer spectacle" (p.23), while Brooks et al. (2020) also suggest that people acquire knowledge about global social issues through pop culture references including advertising. Given the abuse of the feminist values in these ads and their influence over audiences, the social relevance of this thesis is to provide implications for consumers to reconsider this trendy visibility of feminism in commercialized media contents and the way they shape our perception and engagement of this important societal issue.

As for the academic relevance, this thesis aims to contribute to this growing area of research in two aspects. First, limited researches have so far explored how femvertising works the reverse way of constructing feminism (Dowsett, 2010; Hoad-Reddick, 2017). Thus, this thesis adopts the perspective of framing theory to explore the way feminism is reduced and redefined through emphasis and exclusion in femvertising. Second, previous studies of femvertising often focus heavily on its content and representation. However, by employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the primary method, this thesis takes not only the content but also the company, the platform, and the audience response into consideration in the process of framing.

Research Question

Focusing on Dove, a brand that is often seen as the pioneer of femvertising, this thesis uses CDA and adopts the critical lens of framing theory and commodity feminism to investigate the framing process of femvertising through three selected video ads. Based on the women-empowering feature of femvertising and the attempt to avoid the complexities and limitations of standardizing a singular 'feminism', this thesis uses 'women's empowerment' in formulating the research question: how is women's empowerment framed by femvertising? Based on the research subject and focus in each layer of the analysis, the research question is then divided into four sub-questions:

1) What elements or aspects are emphasized in femvertising to frame the notion of

women's empowerment, and what are not?

    2) How do companies situate or justify themselves in the production of femvertising?

    3) What role does YouTube play in femvertising's process of framing?

    4) How do audiences react to femvertising and the way it frames women's empowerment?

Outline

This thesis begins by giving an overview of femvertising and its relation to women's empowerment and feminism in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, the theoretical framework consisting of framing theory and commodity feminism is introduced to show the theoretical angles this thesis adopts to approach the phenomenon. Then, Chapter 3 explains the usage of CDA, the corresponding sub-methods, and the research materials in each layer of the analysis. It is followed by Chapter 4, which presents three layers of analyses: the text analysis of the chosen ads; the discursive practice analysis of Dove's company role, the medium specificity of YouTube, and the audience response reflected in the YouTube comments; and the social practice analysis referring back to the social and theoretical context of neoliberalism and commodity feminism to discuss the consequences of this framing process. In the final chapter, this thesis concludes by answering the research question based on previous analyses, and reflecting on the limitations of this research and ideas for future studies.

1 Understanding Femvertising

To establish a preliminary understanding of femvertising, the first chapter will be dedicated to an introduction of this phenomenon, including its history and development reacting to different waves of feminism (1.1), previous academic studies on this particular subject (1.2), and its relation to women's empowerment and feminism (1.3).

1.1 The Past and Present of Femvertising

Advertising as a cultural product is capable of mirroring the social trends of thoughts. Long before the term 'femvertising' was created, there have been advertisements that utilized the concept of women's liberation or empowerment aligning with the feminist waves at the time. This section focuses on the past and present of femvertising respectively in the times of the second, third, and fourth wave of feminism.

Developed from the focus on the legal and political rights of women in the first wave of feminism, the second wave expanded the focus into broader social spheres such as work, family, and sexuality (Burkett, n.d.), which made it more applicable to various products in marketing promotion. Some advertisements in the 1960s and 1970s tried to equate liberation to the usage of certain products and promote a 'new image' of women: women who have been 'freed' from traditional gender stereotypes, and are confident and competent in both the workplace and the household. One prominent example is the Virginia Slims cigarette's *You've come a long way, baby* campaign in 1968 (see Image 1), which pictured contrasting images of women 'before' and 'now' and portrayed smoking as the symbol of independence, freedom, and in control of their lives (Harris, 2019). The continuous depiction of successful working women has later led to another 'superwomen' stereotype. As demonstrated in the Enjoli perfume *24-Hour Woman* ad in 1980 (see Image 2), where two women holding a frying pan and a briefcase were shown side by side, 'superwomen' were expected to balance their career and 'the responsibilities of being a wife' (Fillipow, 2019).

The more modern version of femvertising is often considered to be associated with the third and fourth waves of feminism. Built upon the severe backlash and critical reflections, the third wave highlighted diversity through embracing different currents of feminisms and

tried to be more inclusive for women from different backgrounds including races and classes. The call for diversity was also reflected in the visual representation of femvertising at the time. A printed ad of the famous Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty* is emblematic of this point (see Image 3), where they chose models "of all colors, shapes and sizes" to represent the concept of 'real women' (Dan, 2017).

Image 1. Virginia Slim (1968)

Image 2. Enjoli (1980)

Image 3. Dove (2004)

Lastly, around the past decade, the fourth wave of feminism has arguably emerged and is characterized by the use of digital media and the Internet, which "(allows) women to build a strong, popular, reactive movement online" (Cochrane, 2013). This trait is also reflected in the distribution and consumption of femvertising. Many well-known examples of femvertising during this period (e.g. Dove's *Real Beauty Sketches*, Always's *Like A Girl*, Under Armour's *I Will What I Want*) are made in the form of short videos and have first gone viral on YouTube while expanding their impact and discussions through social media and other online platforms. This thesis focuses on the latest type of femvertising, where the short-video form and Internet distribution have become its main battlefield, and the discussions and disputes over important societal issues have become more visible and

influential in the online world. Particularly, this thesis pays attention to YouTube as a platform, for it is often one of the first stops where audiences encounter the ads (Dans, 2018). It is also the pathway to generate engagement, as demonstrated by discussions in the comment section, and further enter the public sphere through links and comments sharing on various social platforms.

1.2 Previous Studies of Femvertising

The academic attention on femvertising has been noticeably increasing since 2016. This section features a review of previous studies on femvertising, which can be roughly divided into the ones in marketing literature and the ones in feminist and media studies, based on their perspectives and the general opinions towards femvertising.

From a marketing standpoint, femvertising is considered as an effective business strategy. Rodrigues (2016) suggests that consumers respond to femvertising positively and engage actively online using hashtags, which may lead to more positive brand attitudes. This is later substantiated by Drake (2017), who discovers that audiences hold higher brand favorability, purchase intent, and emotional connection towards the same brand after watching a femvertising ad. Similarly, Åkestam et al. (2017) claim that femvertising can reduce the reactance of female audiences in comparison to traditional advertising. Generally, marketing literature deems femvertising as positive and promising in achieving business goals and branding for the companies.

However, in the field of feminist and media studies, reviews are much less optimistic. Discussions surrounding femvertising can be summarized into three central questions, which are usually related and intertwined in one research. The first question asks how feminism is presented in these ads and campaigns. Some scholars choose to summarize or exemplify themes or elements of feminism within a selected scope of ads: Lazar (2006) explicates the construction of empowerment through discourses of beauty, knowledge, agentive power, and sexual power in a range of Singaporean 'beauty ads'; Windels et al. (2020) summarize six common postfeminist elements through content analysis of award-winning femvertising ads between 2015 and 2018. While other scholars usually focus on one specific brand or

campaign and analyze it on the semiotic level: Murray (2013) studies the linguistic and visual features in Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty* to see how it reproduces the beauty ideology; Dans (2018) adopts the framework of commodity feminism and examines how the 'feminist values' and 'feminine visual signifiers' surfaced in Always's *Like A Girl* campaign.

Built upon a more comprehensive understanding of the representation in femvertising, the second question further deals with whether these representations are 'authentic' and 'feminist'. Taylor et al. (2016) conduct focus groups among self-identified feminists and conclude that the Dove campaign is a kind of 'faux feminism' as it is not transgressive and political enough to bring actual changes. Couture Bue and Harrison (2019) critically call femvertising 'ostensibly empowering advertising' and suggest that it might lead to self-objectification with its "explicitly non-objectifying message along with an implicit emphasis on beauty and body ideals" (p.629).

Lastly, the third question that centers the discussion of femvertising asks whether it is beneficial for the movement and can promote social changes. Comparing with grassroots activism, Johnston and Taylor (2008) suggest that femvertising has greater accessibility, but it is also confined to the commercial purpose to be less radical and critical, and even reinforces the beauty ideology. As discussed later in another research, they argue that we should remain cautious about their fusion given the anti-capitalism feature of feminism, although it is difficult to imagine the alternatives in a ubiquitous capitalist world (Taylor et al., 2016).

Although the representation forms and strategies vary, in general, the visibility of feminism in femvertising is often regarded as not 'feminist' enough as it is diluted and neutralized to fit in the commercial context, and the effectiveness in promoting feminism is also doubted given its corporation background and the capitalist nature. While there have been thorough analyses of the contents, inadequate attention has been paid to the media nature and the distribution means so far (Rodrigues, 2016; Feng et al., 2019), which are important characteristics of contemporary femvertising. Also, only a few studies have attempted to incorporate the audience response as a supplementary angle (Taylor et al., 2016; Dans, 2018), while by using methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, none of them obtained the feedback of audience from non-experimental circumstances. Therefore, this thesis uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the method to encompass the analyses of

the content, the production and distribution (Dove and YouTube), and the consumption (the audience response in YouTube comments).

1.3 Femvertising, Women's Empowerment and Feminism

According to SheKnows Media (2015), the company that coined and popularized the term, femvertising refers to "advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls". In other words, empowerment is the inherent and defining characteristic of femvertising that distinguishes it from other advertising practices. Apart from the abbreviation of 'female empowerment advertising' (Åkestam et al., 2017; Windels et al., 2020), femvertising is also understood as the combination of 'feminism' and 'advertising' (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). The interchangeability of feminism and women's empowerment within this context can be noticed in multiple studies (Lazar, 2006; Couture Bue & Harrison, 2019), where researchers use women's empowerment as the indicator to conduct feminist analysis and criticism.

Women's empowerment does not have a unified definition despite its wide and frequent usage in various contexts. One of the most recognized definitions is from the World Bank, where empowerment is understood as "the process of enhancing individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Alsop et al., 2006, p.1). In this thesis, it is understood as a process through which women acquire feminist consciousness and the power to live their lives freely without unequal obstacles or restrictions. In essence, women's empowerment is 'a longstanding aim of feminism' (Griffin, 2017) as well as the approach to realize feminism. More importantly, although there is no singular standardized 'feminism', women's empowerment is the common factor and the road must travel for whatever variants of feminisms: no matter what specific groups they care for, what difficulties they face, and how varied their means are. Thereby, this thesis uses 'women's empowerment' rather than 'feminism' to study femvertising.

In today's popular and commercial culture, a few scholars have noticed that the concept of empowerment might have been abused (Gill, 2008; Zeisler, 2016; Eisenstein,

2017). Especially in advertising, the discourse of empowerment is increasingly celebrated to target female consumers (Gill, 2008), which creates 'a female being' that is "both gender-essentialist and commercially motivated" (Zeisler, 2016, p.169). More than a decade ago, an article titled *Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does* was published in the American satirical newspaper The Onion (2003), and the situation of today is still much, if not more, the same. Women's empowerment is shaped as associated with supporting companies that brand themselves as active supporters of pro-female discourses and purchasing products that labeled power and independence, which is precisely a trend that femvertising involves and helps to accelerate. This gives the urgency and significance of this research to explain how women's empowerment is understated while abused in the commercial context and further influences people's perception of it.

2 Approaching Femvertising

In the second chapter, I will set up the theoretical framework that this thesis utilizes to approach the phenomenon. Firstly, framing theory will be introduced as the fundamental media approach towards femvertising in examining its representation as well as the influences on audiences perception (2.1). Then, commodity feminism will be introduced as the supplementary feminist perspective, which determines the critical tone and research focus of this thesis (2.2).

2.1 Framing Theory

In this section, I will first explain the theoretical angles framing theory provides to understand the framing procedure of femvertising: salience and applicability. Then I will further introduce the four framing functions proposed by Entman (1993) as the operational framework for the textual analysis.

According to Goffman (1974), people make sense of the world and organize experience based on their own 'primary frameworks'. This suggests a premise of framing theory that there are multiple angles to view certain subjects and the one people choose is often related to their 'frames' (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Framing theory suggests that through packaging and presenting a message in a specific manner, framed media content can influence the way audiences receive and process the message. Although framing seems inevitable in communication, Tucker (1998) argues that it is not random but a 'powerful discursive strategy'. Framing essentially involves selection and salience: to frame is to select some aspects of the reality over the others and emphasize them until they become salient (Entman, 1993). This unveils the nature of media framing: by including some aspects into the frame, other aspects are simultaneously excluded from the audience's attention. Tucker (1998) believes that framing theory can be used to examine how social power is produced through the construction of common sense. As audiences become more and more familiar with only the aspects that are presented, these aspects are shaped as the 'important' or 'normal' topics within this issue and thus realizing the defining power of media frames on public discourse. In the context of feminism, it is crucial to remain alarmed about such selection because what

it includes might not be able to bring real empowerment as it claims but is merely another consumerist trap that promotes sales. These aspects emphasized might form people's 'common sense' of women's empowerment and feminism, and successfully strip our attention away from the more important issues at stake.

Frames can be divided into media frames and individual frames, existing respectively in media productions and the personal cognitive process (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Framing theory is sometimes regarded as the second level of agenda-setting, for it not only tells audiences what to think but also how to think (Davie, 2014). However, instead of emphasizing accessibility (how often audiences are exposed to certain issues) as agenda-setting theory does, framing theory underlines applicability, which is "the ability to generate interpretive schemas that can be applied to many different situations" (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015, p.427). In other words, the framed message has an impact on audiences' individual frames and applies to their understanding of this particular issue. Take femvertising during the second wave as an example, when balancing work and household chores are often displayed connecting to the 'new image' of women, audiences might internalize it as a crucial factor of being a 'new woman' in real life. Similarly, the feminist subjects portrayed in femvertising might be regarded as the common or standard feminists today and thus establish a new set of 'code of conduct' that is in favor of company benefits and harmless in the political field. As the trend of femvertising is growing stronger, both its accessibility and applicability are enhanced and making it more influential than ever. Therefore, it is urgent and necessary to examine what is framed in femvertising and what is not.

Framing theory contributes to the theoretical framework not only as a critical perspective to investigate the power of media in emphasizing certain aspects over the others within a social discourse (Tucker, 1998), but also encourages the inductive exploration of femvertising and provides a useful tool for the analysis. Entman (1993) uses the 'cold war frame' in the U.S. news as an example to illustrate the four framing functions: the frame would first define problems by highlighting certain events (e.g. civil wars) in foreign countries, then it would diagnose causes and make moral judgments of these 'problems' that eventually pointing towards the communist force, and finally it would suggest remedies by

proposing the U.S. support. Situating women's empowerment as the topic issue, these four functions can help better deconstruct the way contents are organized in the selected ads and gain a more detailed understanding of the framing strategies in femvertising.

Lastly, situating framing theory in the age of new media, Cacciatore et al. (2016) proposed a new paradigm to rethink and research framing effects: preference-based effects models. This paradigm includes tailored persuasion and preference-based reinforcement, which are closely related to the advent of the fragmented narrowcast communication and the self-selected/algorithm-supported 'filter bubbles' (Cacciatore et al., 2016). In this way, not only the content part helps shape the framing process but also the producing forces and the distributing methods. Especially, the use of new media functions is accentuated, both in light of their interactivity and their social networking functionality. For example, when examining the framing of medical tourism, the new media features (including the use of embedded YouTube videos) of the broker websites are taken into account (Lee et al., 2014). Therefore, viewing YouTube as a 'medium' and a contributing actor in the framing of women's empowerment, this thesis pays attention to how it facilitates and catalyzes the circulation and discussion of femvertising in the online environment.

2.2 Commodity Feminism

Apart from the operational media approach, commodity feminism is another important theoretical framework from the feminist perspective that recognizes the nature of femvertising and helps shape the critical angle of this thesis. In this section, I will introduce the notion of commodity feminism, and how it inspires and facilitates this research in determining the research focus.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a noticeable expansion of advertisements that appropriate the cultural power of feminism (Goldman, 1992). Gill (2008) argues that such shifting is the result of communication technology developments, the new generation of 'media-savvy' audiences, and more importantly, women's increasing purchasing power. To win over the newly targeted consumer group, advertisements naturally began to adopt a more 'friendly' representation of girls and women and try to incorporate feminist values. Based on

a close reading of ads in women's magazines, Goldman et al. (1991) suggest that key aspects of the feminist discourse are translated into 'semiotic markers' that can be attached to brands and products, and feminism becomes an 'attitude' or 'style' that consumers can demonstrate in daily life through consumption. In other words, commodity feminism refers to the phenomenon where companies use feminist rhetoric to promote sales and feminist values are transformed from ideological concepts to commodified signs. Dowsett (2010) regards commodity feminism as "the way feminism is imagined in the corporate media and popular culture" (p.1), while Hains (2014) considers it to be the 'consumerist bent' of girl power. Similar terms that describe this phenomenon include pro-girl rhetoric (Riordan, 2001), power femininity (Lazar, 2006), and feminist consumerism (Johnston & Taylor, 2008).

As a theoretical perspective, commodity feminism provides three layers of consideration when interrogating femvertising practices. Viewing femvertising as a practice of commodity feminism helps set the critical tone and determine the scope and objects of this research. For the representation, it pays attention to the chosen (and forgotten) signifiers and their notions in the texts, and more broadly to "how feminism is enacted and silenced" in the capitalist consumer culture (Hoad-Reddick, 2017, p.145). Secondly, it doubts the legitimacy of corporations as the acting subject and the cooperation between capitalism and feminism (Taylor et al., 2016). Finally, for the result, it concerns the influences commodification casts on feminism and the movement: whether it can introduce the basic ideas and lead audiences back to the sources (Hains, 2014), or it is inefficient in promoting and may even hinder the development of feminism as a whole (Hoad-Reddick, 2017). This is alarming as commodity feminism produces 'visual abbreviations' that would gradually erode the original referent system and bring 'hermeneutic reductivism' to feminism (Goldman, 1992). However, limited researches have focused on whether and how such advertising would in turn influence feminism (Dowsett, 2010; Hoad-Reddick, 2017). Therefore, this research aims to study how feminism is framed both from the content angle and from the company role angle and hopes to further answer the potential harm femvertising can do to feminism.

Lastly, two concepts are vital to the understanding of today's commodity feminism and our discussion on femvertising: neoliberal rationality (Rottenberg, 2014) and confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Neoliberal rationality calculates personal conducts "in

entrepreneurial terms" and forms a new morality that closely links with "self-reliance and efficiency" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 421). It underlines the personal responsibility to the extent where external conditions can be regarded as trivial, which makes it a convenient tool for denying the responsibilities of societal unjust and structural barriers. Confidence culture refers to "the new gendered imperative to 'be confident'" (Gill & Orgad, 2017, p.4) that has spread in multiple domains in recent years. It highly individualizes the sources and solutions of problems to each woman's mentality and body, offers a universal solution regardless of the differences among women in various contexts, and forcibly renders the insecurity or lack of confidence as weak or 'unhealthy'. In femvertising, the normative demand of self-regulation and self-improvement is further gendered exclusively to women by confidence culture and ultimately affects how femvertising frames the problems and solutions of women's empowerment.

Based on the first and second chapters, although the research heat has been growing continually in the past few years, femvertising is still a relatively new phenomenon that needs further research, both in quantity and in depth. Current studies of femvertising focus heavily on its content, how they present feminism in the commercial context, and whether femvertising as a whole benefits the development of feminism. However, limited researches have included the audience response to complete the analysis of the communication circle. The media nature and distribution methods of femvertising today have also received scant attention in the previous literature. Besides, there has been little discussion about how the way advertising portrays feminism would influence or even reconstruct feminism. On this basis, situating in a commodity feminism perspective, this thesis adopts framing theory to understand the media power of femvertising in affecting audiences' perception of feminism, and uses CDA as the primary method to encompass the analysis of contents, senders, distributing channels, and receivers.

3 Methodology

This thesis uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the primary research method to study the way women's empowerment is framed in femvertising. CDA regards discourse as a social practice, and power is established and enacted through discourses in our society (Ramanathan & Tan, 2015). It is suitable for this research for its inherent critical focus on social issues and power imbalance (Van Dijk, 2001), as well as its ability to encompass the analysis of the multiple influencing factors within the process. Quantitative content analysis is an often-used method in framing theory and advertising studies, allowing a larger scope of research corpus and conclusions with higher applicability. However, CDA enables more in-depth analysis and interpretation based on a complete logical chain from the textual level to the social level, which fits the need to explore a relatively new and understudied phenomenon as femvertising.

The analytical procedure follows Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional model, which includes a three-layer analysis of text, discursive practice, and social practice. In the first layer, rhetorical analysis and frame functions analysis are used as sub-methods to study the language use, visual representation, and plot of the selected ads (3.1). The second layer pays attention to Dove's company role, YouTube's medium specificity, and audience response as reflected in the YouTube comments respectively (3.2). Lastly, the analysis of social practice situates femvertising in the context of neoliberalism and commodity feminism and discusses through what ways has it influenced our understanding of women's empowerment (3.3).

3.1 Text Analysis

In the analysis of text, three video ads from Dove are selected as the research corpus. Considered as the brand that paved the road of femvertising (Stampler, 2014), Dove is one of the most iconic companies in femvertising and displays a clear 'women empowering' characteristic in its company image. It is often studied as an example to explicate the relationship between femvertising and feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Murray, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016). To capture the highlights and virality within nearly two decades of Dove's femvertising practices, video ads are selected based on two criteria: the number of views on

YouTube, which indicates the popularity and audience reach; and an open comment section, which enables the analysis of the audience response. On this basis, *Evolution* (2006), *Real Beauty Sketches* (2013), and *Beauty on Your Own Terms* (2016) are chosen as the research materials. Basic information including the release date, time length, views, comments, and the link to each video is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Dove ads selected for analysis

Name	Release Date	Time Length	Views	Comments	Link
Evolution	Oct 06 2006	1:14	20,455,084	3,524	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U
Real Beauty Sketches	Apr 14 2013	3:00	69,424,687	9,987	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpaOjMXyJGk
Beauty on Your Own Terms	Jun 28 2016	1:30	13,343,554	888	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_XOa7zVqxA4

(Data retrieved on 23 March 2021)

Following Xu and Tan's (2020) format of analyzing video ads, three selected Dove ads are coded using screenshots ('image shots') and transcriptions ('verbal text' and 'on-screen text') and organized based on the timeline (see Appendix). Then, the textual analysis is conducted in two steps. Firstly, rhetorical analysis is applied to study the language use (verbal or written) and visual representation. It is a type of textual analysis that is suitable for interpreting persuasive texts, as it specifically focuses on how the text uses 'a variety of rhetorical devices' to influence audiences (Brennen, 2017). Secondly, four frame functions proposed by Entman (1993) are used to summarize and compare the plots, which enables the discovery of what Bainbridge (2011) called the 'exnominations' (what is present and too dominant to be noticed) and the 'structuring absences' (what is missing from the text), and therefore answer the first sub-question: what elements or aspects are emphasized in femvertising to frame the notion of women's empowerment, and what are not?

3.2 Discursive Practice Analysis

The second layer of analysis focuses on the discursive practice in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of femvertising, respectively examining the role of the company, the medium specificity of YouTube, and the comments section of YouTube as an indicator of both its social networking functionality and the audience response.

On a macro level, previous studies have discussed the ambivalence of Dove as a corporation in conflating feminist purposes with profit goals (Taylor et al., 2016). While this thesis hopes to add a more specific analysis of the company's role in the femvertising process, and how this affects its strategies and choices in practical framing. Specifically, I look into Dove's official website and analyze its wording to see what are the roles Dove claims to play and how it establishes them, and thus answer the second sub-question: how do companies situate or justify themselves in the production of femvertising?

Another important influential factor in the discursive practice of femvertising is YouTube as the distributing platform. YouTube as one of the milestones of web 2.0 communication has contributed to the circulation and discussion of social issues in online spaces immensely during the past years. Yet the platform itself has rarely become the focus of current research on femvertising (Feng et al., 2019). Thereby, the medium specificity of YouTube is briefly analyzed in this thesis to understand how it functions and facilitates the framing effect of femvertising, and to answer the third sub-question: what role does YouTube play in femvertising's process of framing?

Finally, a qualitative content analysis (QCA) of the YouTube comments is conducted, aiming not only to verify YouTube's function of stimulating social discussion, but also to gain a general understanding of the audience response towards femvertising, and thus answering the last sub-question: how do audiences react to femvertising and the way it frames women's empowerment? This analysis adopts the conventional approach of QCA, where no preconceived categories are implemented but allow categories "to flow from the data" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1279).

The data collection process is supported by YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015). All retrievable comments and related information such as authors, time, replies count, and likes

count are obtained as raw data. Since there is no generally agreed sample size for qualitative research as it is highly determined by the research purpose, question, and data richness (Elo et al., 2014), purposive sampling is applied to further process the data. To study the direct reaction to the ads rather than dialogues initiated by other users, only top-level comments are included as analytical materials. Then, to quickly grasp the typical opinions among audiences, the comments are sorted in descending order based on the likes count. The rationales for using 'likes' as the selecting criterion are: 1) it quantifies the number of users who agree on certain remarks and helps improve the representativeness of data; 2) it can potentially encompass opinions of users that did not leave a comment; 3) comments with more likes are counted as 'top comments' and displayed by default on the video page, which may influence the opinions of first-time viewers. After filtering out comments with no 'likes', 100 most liked comments are extracted from each video in consideration of balancing the sample size of each video. Then, non-English and irrelevant comments (e.g. ads links, questions about the background music, etc.) are excluded. Finally, 273 comments in total are obtained for the analysis. Each step of the data processing is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Comments of each video

Video	Retrievable Comments	Top-Level Comments	TL Comments with Likes (n≥1)[1]	Analyzed Comments
Evolution (2006)	3520	3502	104	87
Real Beauty Sketches (2013)	9992	9573	286	90
Beauty on Your Own Terms (2016)	890	462	205	96
Total	14402	13537	595	273

(Data retrieved on 04 April 2021)

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[1] The 'n' refers to the likes count of the comment.

3.3 Social Practice Analysis

As four sub-questions are answered respectively by the sub-analyses above, the analysis of social practice functions as a macro reconsideration and discussion of femvertising in the social and theoretical context and a direct engagement with the main research question.

To further understand how femvertising today differentiates from commodity feminism in Goldman's (1992) time and how it works to influence people's perception of women's empowerment, neoliberal rationality (Rottenberg, 2014) and confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2017) are highlighted as the important social and theoretical background in the analysis. Based on the previous analyses and through situating femvertising as a branch of this larger current, three features of contemporary femvertising are identified, which contribute to the explanation of how femvertising frames and reconstructs women's empowerment.

4 Analysis

In this chapter, three layers of analysis are conducted subsequently revolving around the selected videos and femvertising practices in general. First, three selected ads are analyzed on the textual level to identify the present and absent aspects in femvertising (4.1). Then Dove and YouTube are analyzed respectively in light of their roles in the framing process, and the audience response reflected in the YouTube comments (4.2). Finally, social practice is discussed juxtaposing with neoliberal rationality and confidence culture to see the specific ways through which femvertising changes our perception of women's empowerment (4.3).

4.1 Text

In this section, rhetorical analysis was first performed to study each ad in terms of its language use (written and/or spoken) and visual images (4.1.1). Then, in the frame functions analysis, the plots of the three ads were read inter-textually to discover the present and absent aspects in these ads (4.1.2). Together, this section answers the first sub-question: what elements or aspects are emphasized in femvertising to frame the notion of women's empowerment, and what are not?

4.1.1 Rhetorical analysis

***Evolution* (2006)** *Evolution* was launched in 2006 as a part of the Dove *Campaign for Real Beauty*. The 74-second video mainly uses time-lapse sequences to show how makeup and digital retouching software produce and distort our perception of beauty.

At the beginning of the video, the female protagonist appears without makeup and hairstyling, implying the 'natural beauty' that is relatable to female audiences. For most of the time, the camera angle is a fixed close-up above the shoulder (Shot 1-2), which provides an visually intuitive before-and-after comparison. However, by putting an unexplained female body in a camera frame and excluding all other recognizable information about her, it also reveals how femvertising focuses on the physical appearance (in this case, only the face and hair) of a woman that is 'nameless' and merely functions as a signifier.

Shot 1-2 [2]

The title 'evolution' refers to two stages of transformation of her outer appearance: the grooming (Shot 1-4) and the retouching (Shot 1-7). The ad chooses time-lapse sequences rather than a direct before-and-after contrast. The process can be seen as a deconstruction of the beauty standard they claim to overthrow: the vague sense of beauty is concretized into specific alterations that are done to her hair, her face, and even her neck and shoulder. Meanwhile, by showing the production procedure of an ad, which is usually unseen by the general public, Dove separates itself from the beauty and advertising industry and takes on the role of a women-friendly debunker who reveals the 'secret' behind the scene.
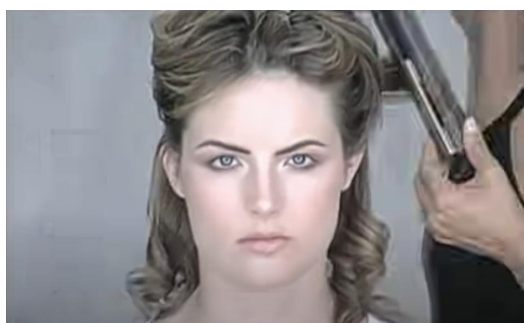
Shot 1-4   Shot 1-7

Nearly towards the end, the camera zooms out and the altered photo is shown on a billboard, two young girls walk by and look at the billboard (Shot 1-8). Through switching the camera angle, the ad connects with the audiences by showing a 'reality' scene and uses female pedestrians to signify women who are (unconsciously) affected by this kind of images. The closing line of this ad, "no wonder our perception of beauty is distorted", highlights the key message of distorted beauty perception, and closes the distance between Dove and its female audiences by using words such as 'no wonder' and 'our'.

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[2] The first number indicates the video (1: *Evolution*, 2: *Real Beauty Sketches*, and 3: *Beauty on Your Own Terms*), and the second number indicates the sequence number of the shot (see the appendix of each video).

Shot 1-8

***Real Beauty Sketches* (2013)**   *Real Beauty Sketches* (2013), belonging also to the Dove *Campaign for Real Beauty*, is arguably the peak of Dove's femvertising practice. It aims to show the gap between self-perception and perceptions from others through contrasting sketches drawn by a forensic artist, and encourage women to have a more positive view of themselves.

The ad begins by introducing the forensic artist Gil Zamora. Information such as 'FBI trained' and '16 years of working experience' is used to build his professionalism, which is vital as the whole experiment is based upon the premise that the sketches are objective reflections and thus comparable. When asked about their hair, chin, jaw, and the "most prominent feature", several adjectives and descriptions of facial features are answered in self-deprecating tones (a protruding chin, "a big jaw", "a fat rounder face", freckles, and "a pretty big forehead"). This scene is accompanied by extremely close-up shots showing the unpleasant facial expressions (e.g. Shot 2-5) or the related facial features they mention (e.g. Shot 2-6).
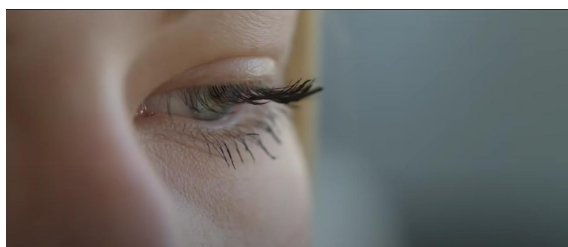
Shot 2-5
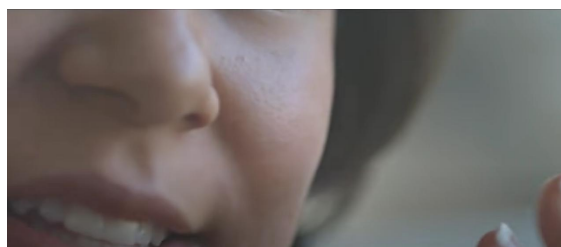
Shot 2-6

Then the first shift of this video emerges when the 'others' start to give descriptions. Conceivably, these comments are much more positive, but also vaguer ("nice thin chin", "nice eyes (that) lit up when she spoke", "cute nose", "very nice blue eyes"). Two male

characters appear in this part (Shot 2-12, 2-14), carefully balancing the representation of others (2 females, 2 males). However, no male character is drawn by Zamora, nor do they become Dove's target group who have deprecating self-perception. Their presence reaffirms the fact that the perception gap is problematized and gendered into an issue that is entitled to women only by Dove. Men are shown in this ad as the untroubled ordinary mass together with 'other' women, in comparison to the 'protagonist' women who suffer from self-criticizing and lack of confidence.
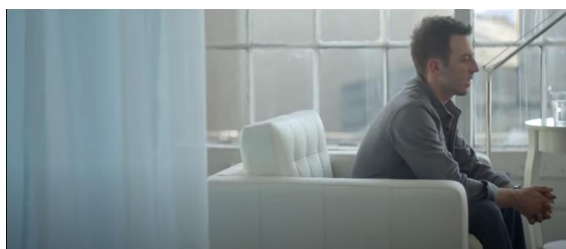
| Shot 2-12 | Shot 2-14 |

The second half of the video is the 'results display', where two sketches of each participant are presented in juxtaposed frames in the form of a gallery exhibition. Two short interviews are included as the conclusion of this event. The first stresses the significance of physical appearance and the self-perception of it in women's life: "It impacts everything. It couldn't be more critical to your happiness" (Shot 2-19). Moreover, both interviews advocate for internal change of women: they should "be more grateful with (their) natural beauty" and "spend more time appreciating the things that (they) do like". Brighter and warmer light is used to signal the transformation of their mood as well as the 'promoted' self-esteem (Shot 2-21). By displaying how 'relieved' these women feel after realizing their self-perception has been wrong, this ad ends with suggesting shifting the way you see yourself would be the most efficient solution to end struggles and unhappiness in life as a woman.
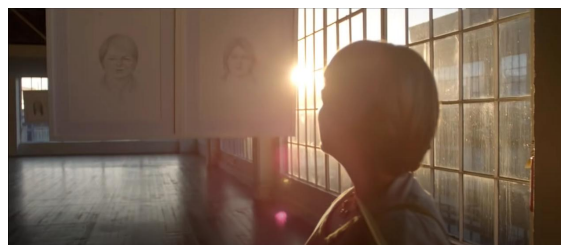
| Shot 2-19 | Shot 2-21 |

***Beauty on Your Own Terms* (2016)**   *Beauty on Your Own Terms* was released in 2016 as a part of the *#MyBeautyMySay* campaign. It features stories of different women who receive judgment because of their appearance and encourages women to define their own beauty instead of being subjected to the comments of others.

This video is a montage of stories from 9 women: each has an appearance feature that is often criticized by others, either for it does not fit in the definition of beauty (fat, old, masculine, big nose, teeth gap, curly hair), or it fits right in stereotypes associated with beauty (too pretty to be a boxer/lawyer/photographer). In most of the quotations, the not gender-specific pronoun 'they' is used (e.g. "They said I was too pretty to fight."), while the pronoun 'he' appears only once ("He said you can fix those teeth quite easily.") and the pronoun 'she' is absent in any specific quotations. However, all three of them are used in a parallel structure in the closing line of the quotation part, "They said, he said, she said". Here, the usage of personal pronouns maintains a clear division between 'self' and 'other', where the 'self' is evidently and exclusively female, while the notion of the 'other' is kept as unspecified as possible to avoid offending any groups.

During the quotation part, the sound becomes faster than the image and the sentences begin overlapping as the emotion piles up. The discomfort and overwhelming feeling caused by the dislocation is analogous to the feeling of hearing excessive comments as such in the real world. The desynchrony stops when Marcia says "I said, no way" (shot 3-10). The speed is back to normal and the sound and image synchronized again, mirroring the stable condition one can achieve once they reclaim self-awareness and refuse the definition from others. Each character rebuts the comments they quote at the beginning, which involves heavy usage of first-person pronouns including 'I', 'me', 'my', and 'myself' to assure the sense of assertiveness and confidence. The slogan of the campaign, "my beauty my say", is stressed and repeated by multiple protagonists by the end of the video. It ends with a montage in a close-up of all 9 women and their confident expression, subtitles showing their names and professions (e.g. shot 3-16).
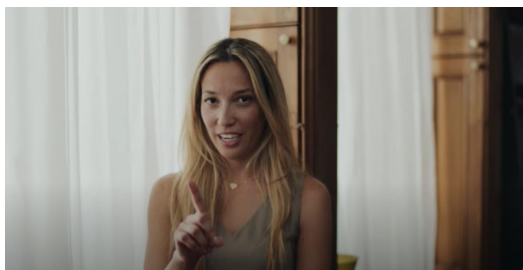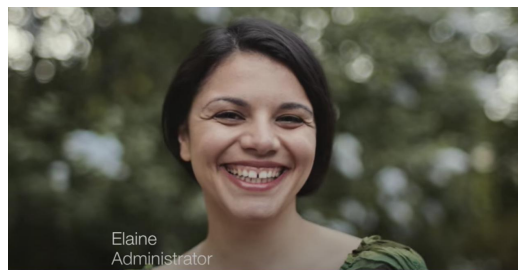
Shot 3-10   Shot 3-16

4.1.2 Frame functions analysis

Applying the four frame functions proposed by Entman (1993), I summarized the topics that each ad focuses on in each function (see Table 3). Through horizontal comparison among three ads in each function, I compared their plots and discovered the 'exnominations' and 'structuring absences' in these ads (Bainbridge, 2011).

Table 3

Plots of the selected videos

	Evolution (2006)	*Real Beauty Sketches* (2013)	*Beauty On Your Own Terms* (2016)
Defining Problems	distorted perception of beauty	self-perception of beauty	definition and stereotypes of beauty
Diagnosing Causes	media / advertising representation	self	others
Making Moral Judgments	portraying the unreal 'perfect' woman	self-deprecating and criticizing	body shaming, verbal harassment
Suggesting Remedies	understand the process and its falsity	appreciate the natural beauty of self	reclaim the definition initiative

Firstly, exnominations refers to aspects or elements that are presented in femvertising while have become too dominant and common to be noticed (Bainbridge, 2011). Through analyzing the texts with the four frame functions, exnominations in femvertising are identified as follows: 'beauty' as the major issue at stake, the criticizing self and/or the faceless others as the cause of problems, and the self inward mentality change as the solution.

  Defining Problems Taking these three ads as a miniature of femvertising as a genre,

the problems that women face in life are largely defined as the physical appearance under the examination of themselves and/or others. In the first two ads, women are portrayed as the mere carriers of their beauty. The concept of beauty is visualized by the fixed close-up above the shoulder and the facial sketches, breaking down into fragments of physical features (e.g. hair, neck, and facial features, etc.). The third ad includes more judging criteria of beauty (e.g. age, body figure, style, etc.) and some women's occupations to reach beyond simply attacking body-shaming comments but also stereotypes that associate beauty with the incapability of conventionally serious or 'masculine' jobs. However, in all three ads, (external) beauty is given great significance in valuing women's happiness and causes serious issues that women face daily. Although seemingly attacking the beauty norms that have put women under the stressful gaze, femvertising is reinforcing the superior position of 'beauty' by framing it as the critical source of most problems in the first place. It also reinforces the impression of women being shallow and fixated on their looks rather than concern about more 'serious' issues.

Diagnosing Causes and Making Moral Judgments   *Evolution* (2006) directs the distorted perception of beauty at the unrealistic media and advertising representation, but the underlying accusation still points to women who can not see through the 'truth' and has formed the 'wrong' perception. *Real Beauty Sketches* (2013) makes a bolder claim in calling women the cause while the opinions from others are considered as objective and real (which are generally more positive). In both cases, substantial conditions (i.e. the retouched representation and the unattainable beauty standard) are mentioned but soon faded into the background, while women become the major causes of their own problems for being unable to escape from these norms. In *Beauty On Your Own Terms* (2016), the self becomes the strong-minded one and is advised to ignore the harsh or discriminated comments from others. The target shifts from the criticizing self to the faceless 'others', who have no specific social or cultural identities. Johnston and Taylor (2008) criticize femvertising for avoiding anger and pain but merely presents a 'happy feminism'. But I argue that, as in *Beauty On Your Own Terms* (2016), the anger appeal is mobilized but towards a (deliberately kept) blurred target. It is expressly substantiated through the usage of the not gender-specific and plural pronoun 'they'. In both cases, whether confronting the self or the others, femvertising is able to create

a sub-space away from reality, where women can feel empowered through 'challenging' the unjust, while remains harmless and inoffensive to the dominating forces in real life.

Suggesting Remedies   It is generally agreed that empowerment must be realized by women themselves instead of being given by a third party (Mosedale, 2005). Apart from external supports (e.g. resources, assets, and services), it is important to generate 'shifts in consciousness', which entails women's internal change of understanding "about themselves, about the situations they are in, about their social worlds, relationships and horizons" (Cornwall, 2016, p.356). However, with a target group of female consumers who are clearly aware of and sensitive about gender inequality, femvertising today has taken the subjectivity to another extreme, where the solutions and responsibilities solely depend on women and all external supports or obstacles are overlooked.

From understanding the cause of distortion to changing one's view of oneself, and not caring what others say, the common idea in all three remedies is to 'fix it on your own'. Through making an oversimplified logical link among 'positive body image', 'confidence', 'self-esteem', and 'realizing one's full potential' (Dove, n.d.), Dove chooses to ignore the realistic burdens that keep women from 'participating fully in the society' but only suggests an inwardly therapeutic self-consolation. This resonates with what Gill and Orgad (2017) called the 'confidence culture', where the lack of confidence is regarded as the source of the problem as well as a sign of weakness or unhealthy. Thus, to empower themselves or demonstrate the feminist identity, women are compelled to a new set of ideologies that understates the existing problems and leaves no room for failure since it only depends on internal mind-switch and confidence boost.

Based on the analysis above, there are two structuring absences in the representation of femvertising. First, femvertising provides a strictly limited articulation of both the problems and solutions to women's empowerment. Although it is impractical to demand the incorporation of all issues feminism concerns, there are certainly more reasons than 'beauty' to the gaze, biases, and discrimination of women in contemporary society. In the world that femvertising depicts, deeper causes such as biological differences in body strengths and reproduction function, historically formed labor division, and institutional exclusion in the

public sphere are not even 'in the picture', but merely a commercially targeted husk of (objecting) beauty anxiety. Conceivably, since there are no clear objects of resistance, there is no effective means but a general call for 'self-liberation and empowerment' which equals women's empowerment to the process of liberating oneself from self-evaluation and the evaluation of others. Compromised views argue that however problematic, the promotion of positive body image is necessary as long as the dominant gaze at the female body exists (Bahadur, 2014). But seeing through the framing theory perspective, it is dangerous to let beauty become the focus in the frame because when a "cultural sore spot" as such is touched upon, it will "quickly (become) the most visible representatives of mainstream feminism" (Rottenberg, 2014, p.430), and thus minimizing the spaces and attention available for other critical issues and advocacy.

Another important structuring absence that this thesis discovers is the lacking of male presence, regardless of positive or negative depictions. In the selected ads, males are generally absent or merely presented in a genderless way. In *Evolution* (2006), there are no recognizable male characters. In *Real Beauty Sketches* (2013), two male characters are shown as the genderless others and Gil Zamora as the sketch artist. I argue that, the presence of Zamora is less of an embodiment of the 'male gaze' but more of the incarnation of Dove, who is the omniscient narrator that condescendingly informs women about their unnecessary struggles. Lastly in *Beauty On Your Own Terms* (2016), no male characters are presented directly, and the personal pronoun 'he' in specific quotes is only mentioned once compared with the repeatedly used 'they'.

There are two possible reasons for the lacking of male presentation in femvertising. First, it attempts to create a vacuum environment where achieving self-empowerment would encounter no setbacks as long as one is determined to change (herself). Popular misogyny is the "distorted mirror image" of popular feminism in real life (Jennings, 2018), which is an objective existence that should not be exaggerated or understated. Yet, to create a comfortable and promising pseudo environment for female consumers, the counterpart of feminist messages is intentionally elided. Second, it attempts to avoid stirring the antagonistic relation between men and women and offending male individuals. However, it reflects a premise that femvertising assumes: males are the vested interests of gender inequality and they in no

chance would support the feminist advocacy. Through minimizing the presence of males in femvertising, it automatically places male in the opposition of women's empowerment and eliminates the possible imagination and representation of male participation in this process. To conclude, I argue that, to build a sisterhood-sense of community where female consumers can feel safe and 'empowered', femvertising is creating a self-marginalized female utopia, where changes and empowerment are participated and realized solely by women. It denies the potential setbacks and the existence of reality misogyny, as well as the possibilities of male participation in achieving women's empowerment.

4.2 Discursive Practice

In this section, the company role was analyzed in the way it functions to affect the producing strategies of femvertising (4.2.1). Then, the medium specificity of YouTube was examined in terms of its contribution to the distribution of femvertising, and YouTube comments of the selected videos were studied through qualitative content analysis to understand how audiences decode the framed message in femvertising (4.2.2).

4.2.1 Company analysis

Companies as Dove position themselves in the practice of femvertising as helpers for women and debunkers of norms. The roles are established through victimizing the majority of female consumers. Dove needs to create a subject it can serve: women who are insecure and lack of confidence, unaware of the beauty scam, and trapped in the social expectations of their physical appearance. According to its company page, there are only 4% of women globally who would consider themselves as beautiful (Dove, n.d.). Given the fact that there is a dominant cultural gaze on women's bodies and appearance, it is easy for Dove to blur the priorities and make use of emotional appeal in reshaping the urgent issue. They highlight an existing problem from the reality 'content pool' and amplify its value in restoring the self-esteem and the empowerment of women. The need for a confidence boost is man-made before femvertising attempts to fulfill it.

However, the 'positive body image' goal is fundamentally at odds with its products, which function as solutions for body features that consumers are unsatisfied with. So instead

of selling anxiety directly to female consumers, brands like Dove change their strategies and make an insidious detour: the disappearance of products and the inward psychological turn.

Firstly, commodities used to be the carriers of the fetishized feminist values and displayed in usage scenarios that labeled as empowerment. Lazar (2006) argues that beauty industries create a 'suppressed feminine self' that can be 'revealed' or 'elevated' with the help of cosmetic products and frame the pursuit of beauty as an extension of women's empowerment. But as consumers increasingly see through this contradiction, we are witnessing the disappearance of products in today's femvertising. It is more of an advertisement for brands, in most of which products are never the focus and are rarely mentioned or shown (none of them are shown in the selected ads). To conceal this contradiction, the purpose of purchasing their products rises beyond relieving the 'true beauty' and is portrayed as in support of the advocacy. The rhetoric of terms like 'self-esteem' transfers the discourse of empowerment into new grounds of the expanding neoliberal capitalist practices (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Secondly, femvertising today no longer requires 'aesthetic labour' (Banet-Weiser, 2017) of its audiences but only asks for an internal mind-switch and confidence boost. I argue that, companies like Dove choose this aspect to emphasize is not because of its necessity, but because it is the safest way to avoid challenging the capitalist logic and it is the most seemingly solvable problem since the solution is up to individual's internal self-perception building and the burden of effect is shifted. However, such a strategy is also risky as it completely detaches from the attributes of products but only attempts to gain positive views and brand loyalty through emotionally appealing stories.

4.2.2 Platform analysis

4.2.2.1 Medium specificity of YouTube

Another influential factor in the discursive practice is the distribution via YouTube, which reflects characteristics of the fourth-wave feminism that mobilizes the Internet and social media as the new way to communicate and accentuate feminist discussions (Varghese & Kumar, 2020). According to Carroll (1988, as cited in Maras & Sutton, 2000), medium

specificity focuses on what the medium does the best ('excellent requirement') and how it differentiates from other forms of medium ('differentiation requirement'). Following this understanding, the medium specificity of YouTube can be understood in terms of what it excels at and how it is different from the previous advertising distribution techniques.

First of all, YouTube enjoys great popularity and exposure to audiences worldwide, holding the third biggest web traffic in the world behind Google and Facebook (Benson, 2015). It has become a major medium of people's video consumption, and the links and HTML codes it provides have been conveniently and widely embedded in other websites and thus enabled further circulation. In a sense, YouTube has become a video format. For companies, releasing their advertisements on YouTube not only guarantees accessibility, reduces the publicity cost to the minimum, but also has more freedom in content creation since the time length is no longer subjected to budgets: unlike television ads that are calculated by seconds, short video ads can be produced in minutes without extra running cost.

Besides, the important feature that distinguishes YouTube from the traditional advertising distribution methods is its social networking functionality. The comment section is akin to an online public sphere, which enables and encourages dialogues between positive and negative opinions, while the focus and the tone are somewhat directed by the video (Edgerly et al., 2013). Furthermore, the recommendation algorithm of YouTube invisibly forms a kind of 'community storytelling' (Pace, 2008), where audiences are loosely bound together based on their interests indicated in the browsing history, and a shared experience in exploring the same topic is created. According to Wojcicki (2016), femvertising on YouTube are 2.5 times less likely to be skipped and 80% more likely to be commented or shared by females between the age of 18 and 34. YouTube not only provides the environment to build the 'community' but also supports further expansion of it with conditions that enable algorithmic recommendation and spontaneous sharing. Lastly, YouTube enables the fusion of 'top-down' distribution and 'bottom-up' participation and creation, which establishes tighter relationships while more flexible identities among the senders and the receivers (Burgess & Green, 2018). User-generated content such as reaction and parody of femvertising can further the transmission and ignite the discussion of related topics, gaining higher visibility of the feminist discourse in popular and commercial culture. In a word, YouTube provides the

common ground, the community experience, and the environment for open dialogues and discussions of whatever central ideas that femvertising tries to promote.

Finally, the discussion sphere enabled by YouTube also opens a new door for academic analysis of audience response. As "a standard feature of the web 2.0" (Ernst et al., 2017, p.4), online comments have shown their value of spontaneousness in reflecting audience opinion, as they are "of (audiences') own volition" rather than "provided at the request of a researcher" as in surveys, interviews and other experimental methods (Antony & Thomas, 2010, p.1285). It is also believed that comments have potential effects on people's perception regarding the related topics (Ernst et al., 2017). Therefore, instead of conducting interviews of audiences or ethnographic research of social media speeches, this thesis investigates audience response directly from the YouTube comments under each selected video, as they are the instant reaction after viewing, highly relevant, and feasible to collect.

4.2.2.2 Audience response on YouTube

To measure the audience response to femvertising and the way it frames women's empowerment, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on the YouTube comments under the selected videos. The comments were retrieved using YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015) and sampled as described above (in 3.2.2). The user names of comments were excluded for privacy and ethical concerns. MAXQDA 2020 is used to code and analyze the data.

The central purpose of this sub-analysis is to obtain a general impression of the audience reception of femvertising using these videos as typical cases. Therefore, comments of three videos were studied and coded separately as they were reacting to different contents, but non-comparatively in the process of inductive category development. In open coding, I first conceptualized and abstracted each comment in the principle of being true to the original words as much as possible. After constant comparison and restructuring among existing labels, 15 subcategories were obtained after the elimination of labels whose frequency was no more than 3 times (labeled as 'others'). On this basis, I analyzed the relations among different subcategories and formed 6 categories: positive attitude, negative attitude, convinced opinion, unconvinced opinion, counter-opinion, and viewing occasion. Each category consists of several subcategories (except for 'viewing occasion', which is both the category and

subcategory), definitions and examples of which are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

Coding Results

Categories	Subcategories	Definition	Example of Comments
Positive Attitude	Appreciation	Recognition and enjoyment.	yes i love a good powerful vid like this. (V3-51)
	Self-acceptance	Good or improved self-image after viewing.	I keep this in mind every time I see a model. And I never feel so bad about my appearance anymore. (V1-2)
	Emotions	Emotions stimulated by the content.	I still cry every single time I watch this. (V2-2)
	Defense	Responses to negative remarks.	People keep complaining about feminist ads everywhere. Maybe if there was less sexism around, there wouldn't be the need to advocate feminism so much. (V3-7)
Negative Attitude	Marketing Strategy	Utilization of emotional/woke appeal.	I don't like how Dove is manipulating its target audience by tapping into their emotions. I don't believe they're being sincere at all. (V3-41)
	Propaganda	Propaganda that are irrelevant to the products.	This commercial has nothing to say about the soap product, not into seeing a political narrative. (V3-28)
Convinced Opinion	Agreement	Acceptance of the intended message.	No wonders we can as women can never feel we are ever as beautiful as what we see in magazines and everywhere. (V1-29)
	Elaboration	Further discussion or reaffirmation of the message.	I think the underlying problem why we see ourselves like that, is that we have been told by our parents, friends, teachers, people we work with etc. that we are conceited and egoistic, if we like ourselves as we are. (V2-18)
	Encouragement	Advocacy or personal experience sharing for other viewers.	whoever is reading this please know you are beautiful. (V2-7)

Categories	Subcategories	Definition	Example of Comments
Unconvinced Opinion	Contradiction	Contradictions in Dove's role or the content.	So, they won't be needing that Dove crap then.... (V2-6)
	Rationality	Authenticity and rationality of the ad's setting or premises	of course the other person won't say anything negative about the looks of another person when asking what they look like. fail! (V2-72)
	Inadequacy	Inadequacies or possibilities of how the message can be conveyed.	Trust me, this is a problem that is also faced by many men. It's not just a 'female' issue. Everyone has issues with self-image. (V2-30)
Counter-opinion	Objection	Opposite opinion of the intended message.	Obesity is A SEVERE PROBLEM, it's nothing 'to be happy about'. Feminism is cancer. (V3-55)
	Deconstruction	Deconstruction of the message through mocking or sarcasm.	So you are actually telling me with Photoshop I can make me look good? :-) (V1-13)
Viewing Occasion		Occasions where they watched the ad.	They always show this every year at school. (V1-1)

The comments are mainly divided into two types: attitude, which indicates the evaluation of the ad; and opinion, which refers to the reception and discussion of the intended message in each ad. Positive attitudes usually include recognition of the ad, improved self-acceptance, emotional stimulation (e.g. moved, sad, angry, etc.), and defense against other negative remarks. As for negative attitudes, there are two main reasons: they dislike Dove's manipulative marketing strategy that makes use of women's insecurities or feminist messages, or they are tired of commercial companies taking political stances instead of selling their products properly. In convinced opinions, audiences tend to further elaborate arguments, share experience, and encourage other viewers or 'all women' in the broader sense. Those who are not convinced, in addition to questioning the rationality of the ads, also point out the contradictions in the content's logic (e.g. claiming to have 'my say' while care too much about what 'they say'), the ambivalent nature of femvertising (e.g. Dove's company role in femvertising), and what is missing in its articulation (e.g. attributing self-image issues to male

as well). The difference between counter-opinion and unconvinced opinion is that the former holds an opposite view of the ad on this particular topic, or does not accept the premises or circumstances of the ad; the latter agrees with the idea, but questions the subject initiating the discussion and the methods it mobilizes.

As shown in Image 4, audiences generally hold a positive reaction towards femvertising as the number of positive attitude comments (n=24, 23, 36) outweigh the negative ones (n=2, 14, 11) in all three videos, whereas no obvious patterns are shown in terms of the opinions towards the messages each video conveys. Audiences are mostly convinced by the intended message of *Evolution* (2006) (n=41), while least convinced by the one of *Real Beauty Sketches* (2013) (n=9). In *Beauty On Your Own Terms* (2016), the number of convinced opinions (n=19) and the number of counter opinions (n=25) are relatively close, indicating a polarization in the comment section.

Code System	1E (87)	2RBS (90)	3BOYOT (96)	SUM
> positive attitude	24	23	36	83
> negative attitude	2	14	11	27
> convinced opinion	41	9	19	69
> unconvinced opinion	3	27	2	32
> counter-opinion	5	10	25	40
> viewing occasion	10	4		14
> others	2	3	3	8
Σ SUM	87	90	96	273

Image 4. Code Matrix generated by MAXQDA 2020

Goldman et al. (1991) suggest that female audiences would interpret these ads with "a taken-for-granted familiarity with the codes of patriarchy" and "a sense of commodity logic that has become second nature" (p.334). However, this thesis found that the audience opinion on the intended messages varies, in which 'oppositional reading' and 'negotiated reading' sometimes outweigh 'preferred reading' (Hall, 2003). But on the other hand, this thesis also discovered a closer connection in people's perception between femvertising and feminism. In the first two videos, a number of comments mentioned their viewing occasion, mostly in class or from other bloggers, showing that the content has gone beyond its advertising nature and becomes an 'educational' message that worth spreading. However, in the last video, after audiences have become familiar with the operation pattern of femvertising, the content is no

longer novel or surprising, and its political connotation becomes more of concern. The audience response is much more political, including multiple debates of 'SJW' (social justice warrior), feminism, and misogyny. I argue that, although there are reservations of the producer and the expression methods, both supporters and opponents tend to agree on the common premise that the 'feminist messages' these ads propagate can be largely equated to or completely considered as the 'mainstream' or 'standard' feminism, which results in the decline or even cease to reflect the distances and differences between them.

4.3 Social Practice

In the analysis of femvertising's social practice, I would like to juxtapose femvertising together with neoliberal rationality and confidence culture, two concepts that have spawned new understandings and standards regarding women's empowerment in various domains. With positioning femvertising as a noticeable branch of this larger torrent, this section attempts to discuss how femvertising as a practice of commodity feminism affects and reconstructs women's empowerment.

Commodity feminism is traditionally criticized for depoliticizing feminism and assimilating social resistance into market operation and consumption. It is "a feminism tailored to the demands of the commodity form" (Goldman, 1992, p.130), which would 'water-down' the original meanings of feminism to fit in the commercial context and appeal to wider audiences (Riordan, 2001). Moreover, as feminist values are attached to certain commodities, possession becomes equivalent to participation and the feminist supporters and activists are uniformly transformed into consumers. The empowered women are largely defined by their economic power and active engagement in consumerism. Here, commodity feminism is neoliberal in the sense that everything is marketable and 'economized'. However, this thesis suggests that, as shown in femvertising today, commodity feminism has taken an inward and psychological turn: under the influence of neoliberal rationality and confidence culture, femvertising brings accountability, internalization, and privatization to feminism and reconstructs the common practice of being feminist or empowered.

Firstly, women are suggested to hold full accountability for their empowerment as

well as the failure to achieve it. In femvertising, realistic obstacles are merely mentioned as a non-judgemental objective existence, while women take the blame for incapable of realizing the traps or overcoming the norms. As Gill and Orgad (2017) put it, "the brutal effects of patriarchal capitalism are dismissed as trivial compared to women's own toxic baggage" (p.13). There is no room for failure and no causes to be prosecuted since the overarching critical factor is the personal inner mind-switch.

Secondly, femvertising frames empowerment as an easily achievable target through internalizing the solution. By attributing the disempowered situation to the 'toxic baggage', femvertising has built itself a target that can be easily beaten. Acknowledging their beauty and feeling beautiful becomes the handiest way to feel empowered and be a feminist. It is something that each woman can 'choose' to employ easily rather than any external changes that would require active engagement with the existing systems and challenging the normativity. At this point, a new neoliberal feminist subject is produced: she is aware of gender inequality, while disavows "the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality" and accepts "full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg, 2014, p.420).

Lastly, women's empowerment is highly privatized into a personal affair in femvertising. Goldman et al. (1991) have warned that commodity feminism turns feminist movement and empowerment from collective efforts into possessive individualism. However, femvertising today no longer focuses on commodifying feminism into specific commodities but into the new normativity of the confidence culture. The new standard instructs "individual solutions to structural problems" and utilizes "the psychological language of empowerment, choice, and self-responsibility" (Gill & Orgad, 2017, p.4). In this way, collective goals are atomized into personal success or mind-liberation, which mostly takes place in private individual mentality rather than the public sphere, and does not change the status quo or bring any joints of collective forces.

In conclusion, commodity feminism is both the incarnation and the vehicle of neoliberal rationality in its assimilation of feminism. The accountability, internalization, and privatization are together turning women's empowerment from collective emancipation into individual consolation. The structural inequalities are framed as surmountable through

individual achievement (mostly psychologically), and the political appeal of feminism is dissolved into private matter that succeeds or fails at women's own cost and harmless in the greater discourse.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I will first answer the research question based on the findings of the previous analyses and their answers to the corresponding sub-questions. Then I will reflect on the limitations of this research in terms of methods and research focus, accompanied by suggestions for further explorations or future studies.

Answering the Research Question

Out of numerous femvertising practices that have emerged in the recent two decades, this thesis uses three Dove ads as exemplary cases to explore the representation of women's empowerment under the context where feminism is commodified and highly visible in the commercial and popular culture. Through conducting critical discourse analysis, I subsequently analyzed the emphasized and missing aspects in femvertising, the role of companies and how it affects their producing strategies, the affordance and contribution of YouTube as the main distributing platform, the mixed and increasingly politicized audience reception, and the influences that femvertising brings about equipped with neoliberal rationality and confidence culture. Ultimately, this thesis aims to answer the main research question: how is women's empowerment framed by femvertising?

On the content level, I found that women's empowerment is restrictedly framed in the sphere of the self- and external evaluation of one's physical appearance (i.e. 'beauty'), and is encouraged to fulfill by implementing internal mentality change (i.e. 'confidence', 'self-esteem'). Besides, the absence of males in femvertising eludes both the reflection of potential setbacks as well as the positive male participation in women's empowerment. On the production level, the victimization of women serves as the basic premise for companies to frame the lack of confidence as the most critical issue and thus marketize the 'empowering' messages. Femvertising is distanced from products to conceal the inherent contradictory logic between the 'empowering goal' and the profiting nature. On the distribution and consumption level, YouTube as a distributing method facilitates accessibility as well as the conditions to initiate and guide the discussion, and the comments on YouTube also indicate a tighter bond between what femvertising promotes and the 'mainstream standard feminism' in people's

perception. Lastly, I conclude that femvertising reconstructs women's empowerment through accountability, internalization, and privatization of both the problems and the solutions, which eventually leads to a neoliberal understanding of the concept and highlights an internalized psychological path to achieve it.

Limitations and Future Studies

For the textual analysis, this thesis adopts an inductive approach to examine the presences and absences in femvertising, which serves a descriptive purpose rather than an explanatory one. The finding of this part is limited in terms of its generalizability, as it was obtained based on three selected texts as typical cases. It can be further verified through a deductive approach in future research, by expanding the sample size and using quantitative content analysis.

This thesis also studies audience response through YouTube comments, as they are the direct reflection of audiences' attitudes and opinions that are free from experimental intervention. However, restricted by the personal and single-sided nature of online comments and the researcher's sociocultural background, the interpretation of these comments is confined to a certain level of subjectivity. A more accurate interpretation might be achieved in future studies with the assistance of research methods that entail interpersonal interaction and allow verification or explanation seeking, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Lastly, due to time constrain and sample limitations (i.e. ads mainly launched in North America, the Dove US website, and YouTube comments written in English), examination and discussion of intersectionality are not included in this thesis. Previous studies have noted that the mainstream of femvertising offers a universal version of feminism, which is often 'white and middle class' (Rotteberg, 2014). Future research can explore the diversity in globally launched femvertising in light of its representation and framing strategies, or compare the approaches adopted by the same femvertising brand in different cultural and social contexts. As the definition of 'women' is intertwined in a matrix of other identity labels, research on women's empowerment should also be more context-specific, and cover domains that are currently 'on the fringe of the crowd'.

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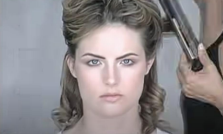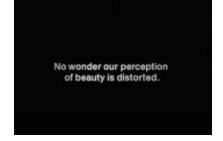
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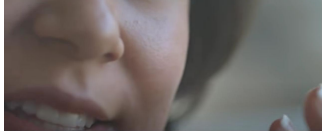
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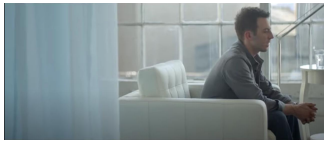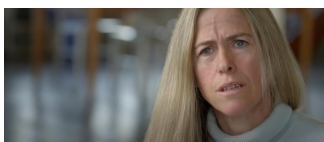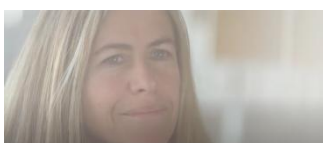
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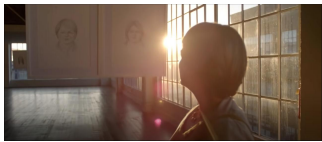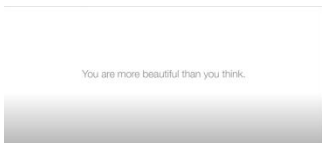
Appendix 1 *Evolution* (2006)

Time/Shot	Image shots	On-screen text
0:00 - 0:20 (1-1)		(distant chattering background sound of the photo studio) (dark screen) a Dove film (music begins) (dark screen) evolution
0:21 - 0:36 (1-2)		(music and speed-up dialogues)
(1-3)		
(1-4)		
(1-5)		
0:37 - 0:49 (1-6)		(music and camera shutter sound)
(1-7)		(music and computer clicking sound)
0:50 - 0:58 (1-8)		
0:59 - 1:14 (1-9)		No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted. Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshop for Girls. Visit campaignforrealbeauty.ca
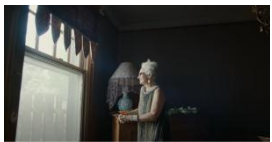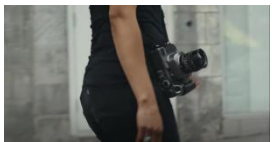
Appendix 2 *Real Beauty Sketches* **(2013)**
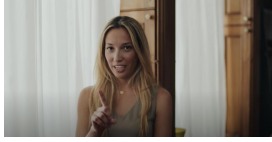
Time/Shot	Image shots	Verbal text	On-screen text
0:00 - 0:07 (2-1)		I am a forensic artist worked for the San Jose Police Department from 1995 to 2011.	Gil Zamora FBI Trained Forensic Artist
0:08 - 0:14 (2-2)		I showed up to a place I've never been and there was a guy with a drafting board.	
(2-3)		We couldn't see them, they couldn't see us.	Melinda
0:15 - 0:56 (2-4)		Tell me about your hair. I didn't know what he was doing. But then I could tell after several questions that he was drawing me.	Florence
(2-5)		Tell me about your chin. It kind of protrudes a little bit, especially when I smile.	Olivia
(2-6)		Your jaw? My mom told me I had a big jaw. What would be your most prominent feature?	
(2-7)		Kind of have a fat rounder face. The older I've gotten, the more freckles I've gotten.	Shelly
(2-8)		I would say I got a pretty big forehead. Once I get a sketch, I say thank you very much, and then they leave. I don't	Kela
(2-9)		see them.	
0:57 - 1:26 (2-10)		All I had been told before the sketch was to get friendly with this other woman Chloe.	

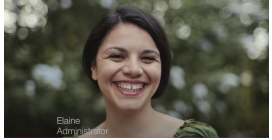| Time/Shot	Image shots	Verbal text	On-screen text
(2-11)		Today I'm gonna ask you some questions about a person you met earlier. And I'm gonna ask you some general questions about their face.	
(2-12)		She was thin so you can see her cheekbones. And her chin, it was a nice thin chin.	
(2-13)		She has nice eyes, they lit up when she spoke. Cute nose.	
(2-14)		She had blue eyes, very nice blue eyes.	
1:27 - 2:12 (2-15)		So here we are. This is a sketch that you help me create, and that's a sketch that somebody described of you. I see, yeah, that's...	
(2-16)		She looks closed off and fatter, sadder too. The second one looks more open, friendly, and happy.	
(2-17)			
2:13 - 2:25 (2-18)		I should be more grateful with my natural beauty. It impacts the choices and friends that we make, the jobs we apply for, how we treat our children. It impacts everything. It couldn't be more critical to your happiness.	
(2-19)			
2:26 - 2:47 (2-20)		Do you think you are more beautiful than you say? Yeah. Yeah. We spend a lot of as women analyzing and trying to fix the things that aren't	

Time/Shot	Image shots	Verbal text	On-screen text
(2-21)		quite right. And we should spend more time appreciating the things that we do like.	
(2-22)			
(2-23)			
2:48 - 3:00 (2-24)			You are more beautiful than you think. Watch the whole experience at dove.com/realbeautysketches

Appendix 3 *Beauty On Your Own Terms* (2016)

Time/Shot	Image shots	Verbal text	On-screen text
0:00 - 0:20 (3-1)		They said I was too pretty to fight. "Ah she can't fight." "You 're gonna mess up that beautiful face."	
(3-2)		They said I was too fat. Only skinny girls can dress well. (non-English) They look at me head to toe, "how can she be a lawyer?"	They look at me head to toe, 'how can she be a lawyer?'
(3-3)		They said I didn't dress for my age. They said my nose was too prominent. They said I was too masculine.	
(3-4)		They thought the cat calling was a compliment. He said you can fix those teeth quite easily.	

Time/Shot	Image shots	Verbal text	On-screen text
0:21 - 0:36 (3-5)		Boyish and ugly. When they were talking about female, they weren't talking about me.	
(3-6)		This was not pretty. They would holler from across the street. Look sophisticated. Embarrassing nose.	
(3-7)		Too chubby. Was too skinny. Man-like.	
(3-8)		Crazy hair. (overlapping) Never looked good. Too wild. Too cute. Too beautiful. Too fat. He said. They said. She said.	
(3-9)			
0:37 - 1:08 (3-10)		I said, no way. You aren't me, I am me. I am not gonna be defined by anyone's expectations.	
(3-11)		I don't dress my age, I dress myself, the way I am. 'Cause my face has nothing to do with my	
(3-12)		boxing. I'm ranked No.1 in the country and No.2 in the world. As a fashion blogger, my style is 100% unapologetic.	
(3-13)		I don't wanna change my teeth. (non-English) My looks have nothing to do with my capabilities.	My looks have nothing to do with my capabilities.
(3-14)		This is me, this is my hair. My beauty. My Beauty. My Beauty. My say.	

Time/Shot	Image shots	Verbal text	On-screen text
1:09 - 1:23			
(3-15)			Hannah Photographer
(3-16)			Elaine Administrator
(3-17)			Grace Burlesque Dancer
(3-18)			Jessica Fashion Blogger
(3-19)			Elizabeth Poet
(3-20)			Marcia Partner, Law Firm
(3-21)			Judith Clinical Psychologist
(3-22)			Rain Model
(3-23)			Heather Boxer
1:24 - 1:30			#MyBeautyMySay
(3-24)			