

Essay Title: A Semiotic Analysis of Female Identity in Dove Advertisement Campaigns:
From 1957 Early Print Media to Contemporary Digital Campaigns.

Research Question: To what extent have Dove advertisements adapted their use of language and visual codes to reconstruct representations of female identity from early print campaigns (1957: Dove Beauty Bar) to contemporary digital media (2013: Real Beauty Sketches)?

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Introduction

Advertisements have long functioned as more than simply a form of media communication or a tool for product promotion. They serve an important role in defining how identities, especially that of women, are created and understood by society. The presentation of beauty through advertisements relies heavily on the cultural values communicated through the media. However, this can reinforce narrow ideals of femininity that have been set by society for years. Furthermore, representations have changed over time, with advertising increasingly portraying itself as inclusive and empowering. However, this progress requires further analysis as the industry continues to operate within a commercial system in which empowerment can also function as a marketing strategy.

Dove is a brand founded in 1957 which serves as a prime example of the challenge being discussed. At the beginning of its history, advertisements portrayed women in a period right after World War II, when gender roles were more rigidly defined and represented in an idealised manner. There was this notion of women being associated with domesticity, taking care of children and being attractive. On the contrary, Dove's later promotions, such as the "Campaign for Real Beauty", stand out as a stark contrast to this image as they promote diversity and appear to encourage women to define beauty on their own terms. Nevertheless, although such campaigns aim to be socially responsible, it is necessary to question whether these campaigns genuinely challenge traditional beauty standards or whether the brand simply uses these concepts in a new manner while trying to preserve the same ideas.

This essay examines three significant stages in Dove's advertising history: the 1957 Dove Beauty Bar print advertisement, the 2004 Campaign for Real Beauty, and the 2013 digital campaign Real Beauty Sketches. These campaigns were selected because they represent distinct shifts in both advertising medium and Dove's construction of

female identity, allowing changes in visual and linguistic codes to be compared across more than five decades. The focus will be on how the visual and linguistic elements combine together in order to create meaning, while simultaneously putting these representations into the context of the larger culture. It will include ideas about gender roles in the post-war period and the emergence of postfeminism alongside concepts of individual empowerment, as well as self-regulation. Thus, what seems to be empowering for women can also be viewed as a sort of control over them, because the burden of attaining “real beauty” is placed on the individual.

To answer the research question, the essay will take a semiotic approach, drawing on Roland Barthes’ concepts of denotation, connotation and myth to examine how advertising constructs meaning (Solik 207-217). Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model is also used to consider the possibility of dominant and oppositional readings of Dove’s messages (Xie et al.). Finally, concepts of postfeminism and commodity feminism provide a framework through which the campaigns’ language and empowerment can be examined alongside their commercial purpose (Murray 83-85).

Analysis

The 1957 Dove Advertisement

To shed light on how Dove initially constructed female identity we can explore its early print advertisements, particularly the 1957 campaign built around the line, “Dove creams your skin while you wash”. At first glance, the advertisement appears visually sparse, with the attention concentrated on the woman’s face and the product claim. However, if we examine it more closely, it is evident how both the visual composition and the wording work together to construct a controlled idea of what femininity should look like.



Figure 1: Dove (1957) early print advertisement (“Dove creams your skin while you wash”)

Visually, the above advertisement appears to be deliberately minimalistic, as the viewer’s attention is drawn almost entirely to the woman’s face, which is softly lit and carefully framed. There are also minimal distractions in the image. On a literal level, the advertisement shows a woman with smooth skin associated with the Dove product. However, the effect is not neutral. The lighting, the clarity of the skin, and the absence of any imperfection over the face and body, suggest a particular standard of beauty that feels polished, effortless, and flawless. Together, these visual choices construct flawless skin as a norm, allowing this particular appearance to represent an idealised form of femininity.

The linguistic elements further convey a similar message. The antithetical construction, “Soap dries your skin, but Dove creams your skin”, creates a binary opposition between the damage and care. The conjunction “but” positions Dove as the corrective alternative to ordinary soap, while the parallel verbs “dries” and “creams” make the contrast appear direct and definite. The word “creams” reinforces this belief as it allows us to treat the

process of washing as a caring act. Its use as a verb also transforms the product's ingredient into an action performed upon the woman's skin. The advertisement also adopts scientific-sounding language through the claim that Dove contains "one-quarter cleansing cream". The numerical claim creates an impression of scientific precision, lending the product greater credibility and constructing an ethos of scientific authority.

"Creams your skin while you wash" comes across as matter-of-fact instead of simply an alluring marketing tool. The declarative statement contains no modal qualification such as "might", "may" or "can", meaning the product's effect is presented as certainty rather than possibility. It also does not just provide information on what the product does. The second-person possessive "your" directly addresses the female consumer, positioning her as the recipient of Dove's promised transformation.

Placed within its late-1950s context, the advertisement reflects a media culture in which femininity was frequently associated with appearance, domestic care and self-presentation. Within this advertisement specifically, beauty is represented less as self-expression than as routine maintenance: the repeated emphasis on smooth, flawless skin suggests that female appearance is something to be continually cared for and improved. Furthermore, it does not include different age groups, races, or types of body structure. Therefore, the advertisement presents only one type of femininity without showing alternative images of it.

The Contemporary Dove Campaigns: "Campaign for Real Beauty" (2004) and "Real Beauty Sketches" (2013)

The 1957 advertisement therefore constructs femininity through direct product promises and a narrowly idealised visual image. Dove's later campaigns appear, initially, to disrupt both strategies. Here, we particularly focus on the 2004 initiative called the

Campaign for Real Beauty and the digital 2013 project dubbed the Real Beauty Sketches.

The campaign for Real Beauty (2004)

Dove's launching of the "Campaign for Real Beauty" in 2004 marked a significant change in how the brand represented women within beauty advertising. Rather than presenting the singular idealized female image seen in the 1957 advertisement, the campaign featured women across a wider range of ages, body sizes and skin colours. In comparison with the singular ideal presented in 1957, this creates a more plural visual representation of femininity. The campaign consisted of a number of posters and billboards with pictures of women along with the slogan above them. All the slogans were formulated in binary questions such as "Wrinkled or Wonderful", or "Oversized or Outstanding". Dove's name and logo were also often featured in the corner of the advertisement. At the level of denotation, the advertisements simply present individual women alongside a choice between two descriptive terms.



Figure 3: Dove "Campaign for Real Beauty" (2004) billboard ("Wrinkled or Wonderful?")

The framing conditions imply that the advertising is straightforward and simple, portraying women as they are really seen in real life. What is presented to the viewer is a notion of a woman who looks different from the accepted standard of beauty. Connotatively, however, the visual presentation creates a more complex meaning. The white background symbolizes honesty and openness, rather than being neutral and bland. At the same time, women are still interpreted based on the logic of the “either-or” process of definition.

This advertisement is a powerful piece of communication in its own right, and this is why it is necessary to take a look at its wording in detail. Each advertisement consists of similar questions, such as “Wrinkled or wonderful?” and “Oversized or Outstanding?”

The binary construction makes the two alternatives appear grammatically equal while setting a negatively connoted physical characteristic against a flattering judgement. “Wrinkled”, for example, denotes a visible feature associated with aging, whereas “wonderful” evaluates the woman positively as a whole person. Similarly, the pairing of “oversized” and “outstanding” contrasts bodily measurement with personal value.

The text attains an empowering and enticing tone when urging the audience to “vote” but the either/or question means that a woman’s appearance is still subject to judgement. The campaign therefore challenges which women may be judged beautiful without challenging the underlying assumption that female appearance should be judged at all. Therefore, Dove reconstructs female identity from the passive recipient of a beauty prescription in 1957 into an apparently empowered participant in defining beauty in 2004. Nevertheless, both campaigns continue to position female appearance as something that must be evaluated.



Figure 4: Dove "Campaign for Real Beauty" (2004) group billboard

The campaign links self-acceptance with the consumption of cosmetic products, allowing Dove to position itself as an ally of women excluded by traditional beauty advertising while simultaneously expanding its potential consumer base. According to the campaign, love for “real beauty” comes down to a love for Dove.

Through the lens of Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model, the primary message conveyed by this campaign is Dove’s desire to confront these limited definitions of beauty and promote diversity (Xie et al.). However, Dove’s challenge to conventional beauty standards nevertheless remains embedded within a commercial campaign. Inclusivity therefore functions both as a social message and as a way of extending the brand’s appeal to consumers previously excluded by traditional beauty advertising. Rather than positioning itself completely outside the beauty industry, Dove rhetorically critiques its narrow standards while continuing to market itself from within that industry (Murray 83-101).

The technique of noticing absence used in the 1957 ad can be applied here as well. For example, the campaign “Campaign for Real Beauty” shows how boundaries of acceptability are strictly defined. Although the campaign visibly broadens representation, the diversity presented remains selective. The women continue to conform to several conventional visual codes of beauty, while women with visible disabilities, prominent skin conditions and other characteristics that may disrupt the campaign’s polished aesthetic are largely absent. Dove therefore widens the boundaries of representable beauty without eliminating those boundaries together.

Real Beauty Sketches (2013)

While the 2004 campaign expanded the concept of women’s beauty, the “Real Beauty Sketches” campaign of 2013 changed focus of that dialogue from external appearance towards the internal perception of the self. Presented in the form of a short film, the “Real Beauty Sketches” campaign involved a forensic sketch artist who made two sketches of each of the female subjects, one based on how she described herself and the other based on how a stranger described her. The sparse, clinical setting minimises distractions and lends the encounter the appearance of authenticity, allowing the campaign to resemble a psychological experiment rather than a conventional beauty advertisement. The women’s reactions to the side-by-side sketches are then filmed as part of this emotional revelation.



Figure 5: Dove "Real Beauty Sketches" (2013).

The forensic-sketch format borrows authority from criminal investigation, giving the exercise an appearance of objectivity and suggesting that women's negative self-perceptions can be externally disproved. The women's emotional responses encode vulnerability and sincerity in the campaign by positioning the viewer as a witness to a genuine and private moment of their own truth. The campaign presents itself not as an advertisement, but rather as a social experiment.

The campaign's use of language sends a clear message to its target audience and deserves further exposition. The use of the figure "Only 4% of women believe they're beautiful. We inspired the extra 96% to think the same" appeals to logos: the figure lends credibility to the statement while the term "inspired" gives it the impression of a benevolent mission (Dove). The tagline "You are more beautiful than you think" uses a second-person address, thus connecting with the audience immediately and establishing a close relationship with it. However, the comparative phrase "more beautiful than" still positions beauty as something measurable and suggests that the woman's own judgement is incorrect.

The words “believe,” “think,” and “see” introduce beauty to the psychological dimension of the issue rather than associating it with something external. Thus, the claim that only 4% of women “believe” that they are beautiful hints at the psychological aspect of women’s insecurities instead of blaming the industry. This shows a shift in ideology that dates back to 1957. Where the original campaign presented beauty as something women should physically work towards, the campaign of 2013 tells women that they already have beauty and just need to realise it. The regulation now takes place inside women rather than outside them, which is a principle that postfeminist researchers agree is typical for modern media culture (Murray 83-101). The standard has therefore not disappeared but has been internalised. As the pressure now presents itself as self-knowledge rather than explicit social prescription, it becomes less visible while continuing to regulate how women understand their appearance.

Using Hall’s model, the preferred interpretation of Real Beauty Sketches presents the campaign as promoting self-acceptance and solidarity among women. An oppositional reading, however, interprets the project as a new form of commodity feminism where profits are made not only through women’s continuing concern with beauty, but also through playing on their lack of confidence regarding their beauty and good looks (Murray 83-101). The idea of absent presence is important here too for the artist who determines the more accurate portrait is male and the authority to determine the more reliable description is passed to a man and other individuals. Although the campaign appears to return control to women through self-acceptance, the final judgment of their appearance therefore still depends partly upon external validation.

Discussion

Comparative analysis: 1957 TO 2013

Comparing the three campaigns reveals both substantial transformation and significant ideological continuity in Dove's construction of female identity between 1957 and 2013. Comparing these advertisements shows a significant shift in their visual construction. The 1957 advertisement centres a single idealised woman, creating a relatively closed representation of femininity closely connected to the advertised product. By contrast, the 2004 campaign, women of various ages, skin colours, and figures are shown against a plain background, visibly expanding the range of bodies associated with beauty. In 2013 the campaign moves further away from the body as its primary focus and instead centres women's emotional perception of themselves. Therefore, the visual trajectory moves from a singular bodily ideal, to visible diversity, and finally towards psychological self-perception. However, each campaign continues to position Dove as an authority that is capable of shaping how women interpret their relationship with beauty.

The progression of the language used throughout the period of the three campaigns is similarly significant and coincides with the visual development. The 1957 advertisement uses assertive declarative language, presenting the product's guaranteed effect through the second-person statement ("Dove creams your skin"). The 2004 campaign starts with the binary interrogative "Wrinkled or wonderful?", creating an invitation to rethink the standards of beauty while somewhat preserving the grammar patterns of evaluation. By 2013, the language becomes more intimate and affirmative through, "you are more beautiful than you think." The shift from declarative certainty, to interrogation, to affirmation indicates the post-feminist shift where advertising increasingly addresses women as self-conscious persons who do not need to change but rather validate their own appearance. However, Dove retains authority over the terms through which that appearance is understood.

The continuous ideological premise linking the three campaigns is the idea that women's relationship with their appearance is meaningful and that the management of that relationship is needed while Dove repeatedly places itself in a position to facilitate it. The form of authority changes with each cultural moment: in 1957 it appears through product-led maintenance of female appearance; in 2004 through the rhetoric of inclusive empowerment; and in 2013 through the language of psychological self-discovery. Despite these shifts, each campaign maintains a commercial relationship in which Dove mediates the female consumer's understanding of beauty.

Examining what each campaign excludes further reveals this ideological continuity. The 1957 advertisement excludes racial diversity, age difference, and imperfections in the body. The 2004 campaign expands representation but continues to omit disability, visible skin conditions and other characteristics that might disrupt its more controlled image of diversity. The commercial from 2013 on the other hand omits any sort of structural critique and does not explicitly critique the beauty industry's own role in producing female insecurity. In each of these cases, what was left out of the picture is something that would disrupt the narrative.

Across all three campaigns, Dove nevertheless remains positioned as a mediator between women and beauty. In 1957, the brand promises to improve the consumer's skin; in 2004, it invites her to reconsider conventional judgements of appearance; and in 2013, it encourages her to reinterpret her own self-image. The form of authority therefore changes, but Dove retains a role in shaping how women understand their appearance.

Evaluation

The comparative approach used in this essay makes it possible to identify long-term changes in Dove's linguistic and visual codes of female identity across different advertising eras. Examining campaigns from 1957, 2004 and 2013 reveals patterns that

would be less visible through the analysis of a single advertisement, particularly the movement from physical prescription towards self-regulation. Though, the limited scope also restricts the extent to which these findings can represent Dove's advertising as a whole.

The semiotic approach presents a further limitation because interpretations of connotation, absence and ideologies are necessarily influenced by the researcher's reading of the texts. Hall's encoding and decoding model partly addresses this by acknowledging that audiences may produce different interpretations, but this essay does not include audience-response data and therefore cannot establish how actual consumers understood the campaigns (Xie et al.). Its conclusion should consequently be understood as an analysis of how Dove's advertisements construct preferred representations of female identity rather than evidence of how all women received those representations.

The visual shift towards greater representation is significant, but the language more clearly demonstrates how Dove's construction of female identity has changed. The 1957 ad ("Dove creams your skin while you wash") is assertive, and direct, while containing a second-person promise. By 2004, the interrogative "Wrinkled or wonderful?" appears to give the audience a choice; however, the binary structure still requires the woman's appearance to be judged. The slogan from 2013 ("You are more beautiful than you think") is also positive and personal, yet it is still comparative, meaning it implies a kind of measurement as well. Thus, Dove has not removed the evaluation of female appearance; instead, it has changed the tone through which that evaluation occurs. A more supportive mode of address can therefore appear politically transformative even when beauty remains the central standard.

This shows that Dove's 2013 campaign is its most developed advertising campaign rather than a complete rejection of earlier beauty standards. The brand shifted the

beauty standards from physicality to self-perception, thus making them more difficult to reject. An explicitly external beauty standard can more easily be identified and rejected as socially imposed; an internalised standard instead appears to stem from the individual herself. The idea of insecurity remained, but it was relocated inward, while Dove positioned itself as offering a way to tackle the insecurity that the campaign itself continues to foreground.

This claim is important to analyze since these campaigns have created some real changes by including older women, bodies of different shapes, and women of different skin colours within mainstream beauty advertising. Additionally, the emotional responses shown in Real Beauty Sketches contribute to the campaign's appearance of sincerity and authenticity. Therefore, to simply say that this is a marketing strategy would be an oversimplification. Thus, the point is not that nothing changed, but rather that the nature of the relationship between women and the beauty industry has changed but not the relationship as such, and that it partly changed because making such changes was profitable.

Conclusion

Dove's advertisements have substantially adapted their linguistic and visual codes between 1957 and 2013, although the extent of this transformation differs between representation and underlying ideology. The visual transformation is substantial, with the advertisement depicting only one idealised face in 1957, where the image promotes a relatively narrow ideal of femininity, then moving to showing visibly diverse people in 2004 using a completely white background, to not showing the body as the primary object of judgement in 2013, with the focus moving to how women perceive themselves. The shift in language is no less significant, with the advertisement from 1957 stating that "Dove creams your skin while you wash", the 2004 one asking "Wrinkled or wonderful?"

and the 2013 film using the affirmation “You are more beautiful than you think”. This progression from declarative certainty to interrogation and finally affirmation changes the relationship constructed between the brand and its female audience.

Though the specifics of each of these campaigns may have changed over the past sixty years, the fundamental idea underlying them has remained relatively consistent. Each campaign assumes that beauty is something that requires attention and that Dove can play a role in managing it. The fact that this idea has persisted allows later campaigns to modernise the representation of femininity while retaining a similar commercial relationship with the female consumer. In 1957, the advertisement normalizes a young, blemish-free and racially narrow image of femininity; in 2004, the boundaries are widened but not removed; and in 2013, structural criticism of the beauty industry itself is clearly absent because it would complicate the campaign’s positive narrative of self-discovery.

Ads made by Dove over the years have thus reconstructed female representation instead of setting it free. This is particularly visible in the 2013 ad campaign as Dove’s most elaborate effort in terms of the recreation process. While beauty has been shifted from the outside to the inside through that campaign, the external standard is converted to an internal standard that is less visible and therefore becomes more difficult to deny. The woman told that she is ‘more beautiful than she thinks’ still has to think about her beauty; she is just provided with a more lenient verdict.

This does not mean that Dove’s changes are insignificant. The inclusion of older women, women with a wider range of body types, and women of different skin colours represents a meaningful expansion of the whole may be visibly represented within mainstream beauty advertising. Similarly, the psychological focus of Real Beauty Sketches expands the representation of femininity beyond the body alone. Ultimately, while Dove has managed to change its visual and linguistic codes and make a big step

towards changing the language of beauty, it has also ensured that beauty continues to be an area of life that women need to pay attention to. Dove has therefore reconstructed rather than removed the standards through which female identity is represented: the language and visual codes change substantially, while the expectation that women understand themselves in relation to beauty remains.

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