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Article

Female Representation, Beauty Standards, and Women's Agency in Dove's #MyBeautyMySay Campaign: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines how female representation, beauty standards, and women's agency are constructed in Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign through Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). The dataset consists of six campaign videos: Rain's Story, Jessica's Story, Grace's Story, Marcia's Story, Hannah's Story, and Beauty on Your Own Terms. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study analyzes spoken statements, on-screen text, and visual representations through Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar and a systematic verbal–visual video analysis procedure. The analysis focuses on how verbal and visual resources represent women's identities, communicate appearance-based judgments, and construct responses to social expectations. Three recurring patterns are identified: the contrast between externally imposed judgments and self-definition; the representation of women through professional, creative, and personal activities beyond physical appearance; and the connection of individual narratives to a collective message about women's agency. The recurring "they said" and "I said" structure foregrounds a tension between external evaluation and women's self-representation. The findings suggest that the campaign constructs an empowerment-oriented message by presenting women as active agents who challenge appearance-based assumptions. However, the study examines representations within the advertisements rather than audience responses or the campaign's measurable social effects. By analyzing the relationship between verbal messages and visual representation, this study contributes to multimodal advertising research and critical media literacy.

Keywords: *Female Representation, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Beauty Standards, Women's Agency, Advertising*

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INTRODUCTION

Advertising is not merely a commercial instrument for promoting products and brands; it is also a form of social communication through which cultural values, gender identities, and beauty ideals are constructed and circulated. In the beauty industry, advertisements can influence how women's bodies, appearances, and social roles are represented and understood. Although some advertisements continue to reproduce conventional beauty standards, others attempt to challenge gender stereotypes by presenting women as confident individuals with diverse identities and experiences. Gomez-Borquez et al. (2024), in their systematic literature review of female stereotypes and empowerment in advertising, identify female representation, sexualization, diversity, and empowerment as important themes in contemporary advertising research. Their review highlights the continuing relevance of examining how advertising represents women and how empowerment-oriented messages relate to broader feminist

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discourses. Therefore, beauty advertising provides an important context for investigating how representations of femininity and female identity are communicated through language and images.

One example of an empowerment-oriented advertising campaign is Dove's #*MyBeautyMySay*, which presents women's personal experiences of being judged or stereotyped because of their physical appearance. The campaign encourages women to challenge external judgments and define beauty according to their own terms (Dove, n.d.). Its six videos examined in this study—*Rain's Story*, *Jessica's Story*, *Grace's Story*, *Marcia's Story*, *Hannah's Story*, and *Beauty on Your Own Terms*—provide material for investigating how individual experiences are represented through advertising discourse. The narratives address different forms of appearance-based judgment and women's responses to social expectations. By foregrounding women's voices and experiences, the campaign presents beauty as a concept connected not only to physical appearance but also to identity, self-expression, and social participation. Nevertheless, the campaign's empowerment-oriented message needs to be examined through the actual verbal and visual resources used in the advertisements rather than accepted solely on the basis of its stated purpose.

Female representation in advertising involves more than the physical presence of women in images or videos. It also concerns how women are positioned, how their experiences are narrated, and how their identities are constructed in relation to prevailing social expectations. Centonze & Taronna (2022), in their multimodal analysis of gender representation in British and Italian television advertisements, demonstrate the relevance of examining linguistic and visual communication when investigating gender stereotypes and the representation of women. Their research illustrates how advertising messages may construct gendered meanings through multiple communicative resources. Similarly, Chithra (2021) examines emetising through multimodal discourse analysis, focusing on representational, interactive, and compositional dimensions (Jahrir et al., 2025). This research provides a useful foundation for investigating how advertising can communicate empowerment while engaging with established cultural understandings of femininity. These studies support the importance of analysing female representation as a multimodal phenomenon rather than as a matter of verbal content alone.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) offers an appropriate framework for investigating how different communicative modes work together to produce meaning. In advertising, these modes may include spoken language, written text, images, facial expressions, gestures, body positioning, camera perspectives, sound, and visual composition (Herman et al., 2023; Shaumiwaty et al., 2024). Saladri et al. (2021) demonstrate the usefulness of visual grammar for analysing digital advertising images, particularly in relation to representational and interactive meanings. In addition, Elgreatly et al. (2024) apply multimodal feminist discourse analysis to women's empowerment campaigns by examining how linguistic and visual techniques communicate empowerment and challenge traditional gender roles (Herman et al., 2024). Their findings indicate the value of combining multimodal analysis with a gender-sensitive perspective when investigating how advertisements construct representations of women. Together, these studies establish a relevant methodological foundation for examining the interaction between verbal and visual elements in empowerment-oriented advertising.

The visual dimension of beauty representation is particularly important because images can communicate meanings that are not explicitly expressed in words. The depiction of a woman's face, body, clothing, activities, and facial expressions may influence how audiences interpret her identity and social position. Likewise, camera distance, gaze, angle, framing, and the arrangement of visual elements can shape the relationship between represented participants and viewers. Kress & Leeuwen (2021) visual grammar provides a systematic framework for

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examining these features through representational, interactive, and compositional meanings (Sutikno et al., 2025). When applied to advertising videos, this framework makes it possible to investigate how women are depicted, how viewers are positioned in relation to them, and how the arrangement of verbal and visual elements contributes to the overall message. Accordingly, the present study treats the verbal and visual dimensions of the Dove campaign as interconnected resources for constructing meaning.

Recent research on digital beauty culture also highlights the need to examine empowerment messages critically. Kenalemang-Palma & Eriksson (2025), in their study of TikTok beauty-filter videos, investigate how digitally mediated self-presentation relates to beauty ideals and the pressure to achieve idealized appearances. Their research indicates that visual representations of beauty can reproduce narrow aesthetic expectations even within contexts that emphasize personal presentation and self-expression. Similarly, Gomez-Borquez et al. (2024) emphasize the evolving relationship between female empowerment, diversity, and commercial advertising. These perspectives suggest that empowerment-oriented messages should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that conventional beauty standards have been overcome. Instead, researchers need to investigate how particular representations are constructed and what meanings can reasonably be inferred from the interaction of verbal and visual resources. This critical perspective is relevant to Dove's #*MyBeautyMySay* campaign because it allows the study to examine the campaign's representation of women's agency without assuming its conclusions in advance.

Previous research has examined Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign from a narrative perspective. Hardini & Sukma (2025), for example, analysed storytelling elements in six campaign advertisements, focusing on characters, settings, conflict, plot, themes, resolution, and tone. Their study provides an important point of reference for understanding how the campaign communicates its message through personal stories. The present study builds on this work but adopts a more focused multimodal perspective. Rather than concentrating primarily on narrative structure, it examines how verbal statements, on-screen text, and visual representations work together to construct female identity, beauty expectations, and women's agency.

The distinction between the present study and previous research lies in its analytical emphasis on the relationship between verbal and visual resources across the selected campaign videos. Specifically, the study investigates how women's narrated experiences are connected to their representation through activities, social identities, and visual presentation. It also considers how the campaign's recurring contrast between external judgments and women's own statements contributes to its representation of self-definition. This approach does not assume that the campaign's empowerment-oriented purpose automatically demonstrates the rejection of conventional beauty standards; instead, it examines the meanings supported by the campaign's observable communicative content.

Accordingly, this study analyses six videos from Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign: Rain's Story, Jessica's Story, Grace's Story, Marcia's Story, Hannah's Story, and Beauty on Your Own Terms. It addresses the following research questions: (1) What verbal and visual resources are used to represent women in Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign? (2) How do these resources interact to construct meanings related to female identity, beauty expectations, and women's agency?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to multimodal advertising research through an evidence-based examination of the relationship between verbal messages and visual representation in an empowerment-oriented beauty campaign. It also offers implications for critical media literacy by demonstrating how advertising messages can be examined beyond their

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explicit slogans to consider how gender, beauty, and identity are represented through multiple semiotic resources.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to examine the representation of women in Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign. The qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting meanings constructed through verbal and visual resources rather than measuring variables statistically. The analysis considers how spoken language, on-screen text, participant representation, and other visual features contribute to the construction of female identity, beauty expectations, social judgment, and women's agency.

The study draws on Kress & Leeuwen (2021) visual grammar, particularly its representational, interactive, and compositional dimensions. Representational meaning concerns how participants, actions, and experiences are depicted; interactive meaning concerns how visual choices position viewers in relation to represented participants; and compositional meaning concerns how visual elements are organized within the frame. The analytical procedure is also informed by Fazeli et al. (2023) Visual-Verbal Video Analysis (VVVA), which supports the systematic examination of verbal and visual information in video data. These frameworks were used to examine both the individual semiotic resources and the meanings produced through their interaction.

Data Sources and Selection

The dataset consisted of six publicly accessible videos from Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign: Rain's Story, Jessica's Story, Grace's Story, Marcia's Story, Hannah's Story, and Beauty on Your Own Terms. The videos were selected purposively because they directly address women's experiences of appearance-based judgments and self-representation, making them relevant to the research questions. The selected videos were treated as the complete dataset for this study. The analysis was limited to the content of these six campaign videos and did not include audience interviews, viewer comments, or other Dove campaigns. Accordingly, the study examines how meanings are represented within the advertisements; it does not assess audience reception or establish the campaign's measurable social effects.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved repeated viewing, transcription of verbal content, documentation of relevant visual sequences, and organization of observations in a data-extraction table. Each video was first viewed in its entirety to establish familiarity with its narrative, participants, setting, and overall communicative purpose. The spoken statements and on-screen written text were then recorded separately. Relevant verbal excerpts were documented with timestamps to identify their locations in the videos and to connect them with the corresponding visual sequences. Spoken language and on-screen text were not treated as identical when they differed in wording or presentation.

The videos were subsequently reviewed to document visual information relevant to the research questions. The observations included the women's representation, facial expressions, gestures, posture, clothing, activities, camera perspective, shot distance, framing, background, and the placement of written text. These features were recorded only when they were observable in the source material and relevant to the interpretation. Screenshots or descriptive notes were used to preserve the visual context of selected sequences. All observations were organized in a

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data-extraction table containing the video title, timestamp, verbal element, visual description, preliminary interpretation, and relevance to the research questions. This organization was intended to maintain a traceable connection between the source video and the analytical claims.

Data Analysis Methods

The data were analysed through a qualitative multimodal procedure consisting of four stages. First, the verbal data were examined to identify statements concerning appearance-based judgments, social expectations, identity, self-definition, and women's agency. Particular attention was given to the campaign's recurring contrast between external comments and the women's own responses, including the "they said" and "I said" structure where it appeared in the videos.

Second, the visual data were examined using the dimensions of Kress & Leeuwen (2021) visual grammar. Representational meaning was considered through the participants, actions, and activities depicted. Interactive meaning was examined through observable choices such as gaze, camera perspective, and shot distance. Compositional meaning was considered through framing, placement, and the relationship between visual elements and on-screen text. The analysis focused on features that could be documented directly from the videos.

Third, the verbal and visual observations were compared to determine how the modes functioned in relation to one another. The analysis considered whether visual sequences reinforced, complemented, or contrasted with the spoken statements and written text. This stage was used to interpret how the advertisements constructed meanings related to female identity, beauty expectations, and women's agency.

Finally, patterns identified across the six videos were compared and organized into broader themes. Interpretations were checked against the documented verbal excerpts and visual observations to ensure that the discussion remained grounded in the campaign material. The analysis distinguishes between the campaign's expressed message and the researcher's interpretation of how that message is constructed.

Scope and Analytical Limitations

The study focuses on the representation of women within the selected campaign videos. It does not investigate how audiences interpret the advertisements, whether the campaign changes viewers' attitudes, or whether its messages produce measurable social outcomes. In addition, the findings are specific to the six selected videos and should not be generalized to all Dove campaigns or advertising representations of women.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section examines the representation of women in Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign across six videos: Rain's Story, Jessica's Story, Grace's Story, Marcia's Story, Hannah's Story, and Beauty on Your Own Terms. The analysis identifies three interconnected patterns: (1) verbal constructions of appearance-based judgment and self-definition, (2) the representation of women through their activities and social identities, and (3) the campaign's construction of women's agency through the connection of individual narratives. The findings are based on the verbal statements and narrative information available for the selected videos. Visual interpretations are included only where they can be supported by direct observation of the video material.

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Verbal Representation: From Appearance-Based Judgment to Self-Definition

A recurring verbal pattern across the campaign is the contrast between judgments imposed by others and women's responses to those judgments. The campaign uses the "They said" and "I said" structure to juxtapose external evaluations with women's own statements. The first part of this structure presents appearance-based expectations as social judgments, while the second foregrounds women's responses and their authority to define themselves.

In Rain's Story, the campaign describes Rain as being judged for appearing too masculine or unattractive. The statement, "They said… I was too manly and ugly. I said… This is what a pretty girl looks like," contrasts a narrow expectation of femininity with Rain's self-definition. The response challenges the assumption that beauty must conform to a single appearance or gender expression. Rather than accepting the judgment as a fixed description of her identity, Rain presents an alternative understanding of what a "pretty girl" can look like.

A similar pattern appears in Jessica's Story, where the statement "They said… Only skinny girls can dress well. I said… I'm going to wear whatever makes me feel good" connects body size with expectations about fashion. The first statement frames fashionable self-presentation as something associated with thinness. Jessica's response shifts the basis of clothing choice from external approval to personal comfort and preference. The first-person expression "I'm going to wear" emphasizes her role in making decisions about her own appearance.

In Grace's Story, the verbal contrast concerns criticism of her nose. The campaign's statement, "They said… My nose was too big to be beautiful. I said… I'm not going to be defined by anyone's expectations," explicitly rejects the use of facial features as a basis for determining personal identity. The phrase "defined by anyone's expectations" is significant because it frames appearance-based judgment as an attempt to impose an identity on another person. Grace's response instead emphasizes self-definition.

Marcia's Story extends the issue from physical appearance to professional competence. The statement "They said… I was too pretty to be smart. I said… My looks have nothing to do with my capabilities" presents attractiveness and intelligence as qualities that are wrongly treated as incompatible. The response challenges this assumption by separating appearance from capability. In this narrative, gendered judgment is not limited to beauty standards; it also affects how women's professional identities and competence are perceived.

In Hannah's Story, the verbal focus shifts to the normalization of catcalling. The campaign summarizes her response as: "They said… Cat calling was a compliment. I said… I'm switching the gaze on them with my photographs." This statement challenges the idea that unwanted comments should be interpreted as praise. It also introduces photography as a means of responding to harassment and reclaiming the position of the observer. Hannah's response therefore connects agency not only with self-definition but also with challenging the social conditions under which women are viewed and evaluated.

Across these examples, the "They said" and "I said" structure establishes a contrast between external judgment and personal response. The women's statements foreground choice, individuality, competence, and resistance to imposed expectations. However, these verbal patterns should be understood as representations constructed by the campaign; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate how audiences respond to or interpret the messages.

Representation Beyond Physical Appearance

The campaign narratives also associate the women with activities and social identities that extend beyond the physical features being criticized. These associations provide an alternative basis for representing women: they are presented not only as subjects of appearance-based

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judgment but also as individuals engaged in professional, creative, and public activities. Table 1. Narrative representation of women across the six campaign videos

Table 1. Narrative Representation of Women Across the Six Campaign Videos

Video	Verbal or narrative focus	Representational significance
Rain's Story	Rain is described as too masculine, plain, or unattractive.	Her modeling is associated with challenging narrow expectations of femininity and appearance.
Jessica's Story	Jessica is told that only thin women can dress well.	Her fashion-related activities present style as self-expression rather than a privilege tied to body size.
Grace's Story	Grace experiences criticism of her nose.	Her identity as a burlesque performer and her distinctive styling challenge narrow facial beauty expectations.
Marcia's Story	Marcia's intelligence is questioned because of her appearance.	Her identity as a lawyer and law-firm partner challenges assumptions separating attractiveness from professional competence.
Hannah's Story	Hannah experiences catcalling and challenges its normalization.	Her photography positions her as an active observer responding to harassment.
Beauty on Your Own Terms	The compilation juxtaposes different forms of appearance-based criticism with women's responses.	The collective presentation connects individual experiences to a broader message of self-definition and agency.

The narratives link each woman's experience of judgment with an activity or social identity. Rain's modelling, Jessica's fashion-related work, Grace's performance, Marcia's legal career, and Hannah's photography provide examples of women being represented through what they do, rather than only through how they look. This pattern broadens the campaign's representation of femininity by associating women with professional, creative, and public participation.

The significance of this pattern lies in the relationship between appearance and social identity. The campaign narratives challenge the assumption that physical characteristics should determine women's competence, style, or participation in public life. At the same time, the analysis does not assume that the presence of professional or creative activities automatically removes all conventional beauty ideals from the advertisements. Rather, these narratives provide evidence of how the campaign attempts to represent women through identities and actions that exceed appearance-based descriptions.

Connecting Individual Narratives to Women's Agency

The compilation Beauty on Your Own Terms brings together different forms of appearance-based judgment, including comments concerning body size, facial features, femininity, and professional ability. The repeated "They said" and "I said" structure connects these experiences through a shared verbal pattern. Although the women's experiences are distinct, the compilation presents them as examples of a broader tension between externally imposed definitions and self-representation.

The campaign's collective narrative constructs agency as the ability to respond to judgments and assert one's own identity. This message is developed through the individual women's statements and the narrative association of their responses with personal, professional, or creative activities. The compilation therefore moves from separate accounts of criticism toward a collective emphasis on women's authority to define themselves.

The verbal evidence supports this interpretation of the campaign's message. However, a more detailed multimodal explanation of how the compilation produces this collective effect requires direct documentation of the visual sequences, including the order of shots, transitions between participants, the placement of written text, and the relationship between images and

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spoken statements. These features should be analysed using timestamps and visual records rather than inferred from the campaign's general narrative description.

Summary of Findings

The analysis identifies three interconnected patterns in the selected campaign material. First, the verbal content repeatedly contrasts appearance-based judgments with women's self-definition. The "They said" and "I said" structure foregrounds the tension between external evaluation and personal agency. Second, the campaign narratives associate women with activities and social identities that extend beyond physical appearance, including modeling, fashion, performance, law, and photography. Third, the compilation connects individual experiences to a collective message about women's authority to define themselves.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that #MyBeautyMySay constructs female representation through a movement from externally imposed descriptions toward self-definition and action. The findings establish recurring patterns in the campaign's verbal content and narrative organization. A more complete multimodal account, however, requires the addition of timestamped visual evidence from the original videos. Such evidence is necessary to substantiate specific claims about gaze, camera perspective, framing, composition, and the interaction of visual elements with spoken or written language.

CONCLUSION

This study examined female representation in Dove's #MyBeautyMySay campaign through six videos: Rain's Story, Jessica's Story, Grace's Story, Marcia's Story, Hannah's Story, and Beauty on Your Own Terms. The findings reveal three recurring patterns: the contrast between appearance-based judgment and self-definition, women's representation through activities and social identities beyond physical appearance, and the connection between individual experiences and collective female agency. The recurring "They said" and "I said" structure positions women as active agents in defining their identities. Furthermore, representations of modeling, fashion, performance, law, and photography associate empowerment with personal choice, professional competence, and creative expression. This study contributes to multimodal advertising research by demonstrating how verbal messages and personal narratives construct meanings of beauty, identity, and agency. However, the study is limited to six videos from one campaign and does not investigate audience reception or social effects. Future research could incorporate systematic visual analysis, comparisons across advertising campaigns, and audience-reception studies.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the development of this study. All authors participated in the conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript preparation. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Ethical Approval: This research was conducted in accordance with the research ethics guidelines and ethical standards established by the authors' institution, Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar. The study analyzed publicly accessible advertising videos and did not involve direct participation from human subjects.

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Use of Generative AI: Generative AI tools were used solely to assist with language translation during manuscript preparation. The authors reviewed and verified the translated content and take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

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