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**THE REPRESENTATION OF BEAUTY INCLUSIVITY IN DOVE'S U.S. "SELF-ESTEEM PROJECT" ADVERTISEMENTS: A SEMIOTIC STUDY**

Gytta Nur Fadhilah Dhila  
Institut Prima Bangsa Cirebon  
fadhilahgytta@gmail.com

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**Abstract**

*This study examines how Dove US's "Self-Esteem Project" campaign redefines beauty through visual and verbal signs in seven advertisements released between 2019 and 2024. The objective is to reveal denotative and connotative meanings and explain how myths are constructed to challenge dominant beauty ideologies. A qualitative descriptive approach was applied using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory of denotation, connotation, and myth. Data were collected from seven advertisements available on YouTube and Dove's official website, focusing on layered meanings in texts and visuals to identify how beauty is socially constructed. The findings show that Dove promotes inclusivity by portraying diverse body types, ethnicities, gender identities, elderly women, and people with disabilities. Denotative and connotative meanings work together to redefine beauty as authentic and emotionally resonant, breaking away from ideals of perfection. These meanings also produce counter-myths that frame beauty as fluid, diverse, and rooted in self-esteem. This study contributes to media and cultural studies, particularly advertising, semiotics, and gender studies, and provides insights for academics and practitioners promoting inclusive media practices. The originality lies in demonstrating how advertisements function not only as marketing tools but also as cultural interventions that destabilize consumerist and exclusionary ideals, advancing discussions on representation and inclusivity.*

**Keywords:** *Semiotics, Performativity, Intersectionality, Beauty Inclusivity*

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana kampanye "Self-Esteem Project" dari Dove US mendefinisikan ulang kecantikan melalui tanda visual dan verbal dalam tujuh iklan yang dirilis antara 2019 hingga 2024. Tujuannya adalah mengungkap makna denotatif dan konotatif serta menjelaskan bagaimana mitos terbentuk untuk menantang ideologi

kecantikan dominan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan teori semiotika Roland Barthes tentang denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Data diperoleh dari tujuh iklan yang diunggah di YouTube dan situs resmi Dove, dengan fokus pada makna berlapis dalam teks dan visual guna mengidentifikasi bagaimana kecantikan dibangun secara sosial. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Dove menekankan inklusivitas dengan menampilkan beragam tipe tubuh, etnis, identitas gender, perempuan lansia, dan penyandang disabilitas. Makna denotatif dan konotatif berpadu untuk mendefinisikan kecantikan sebagai autentik dan emosional, lepas dari standar kesempurnaan tradisional. Makna tersebut juga melahirkan mitos tandingan yang membingkai kecantikan sebagai cair, beragam, dan berlandaskan harga diri. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian media dan budaya, khususnya periklanan, semiotika, dan studi gender, serta memberikan wawasan bagi akademisi dan praktisi dalam mendorong praktik media yang inklusif. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada penjelasan bahwa iklan berfungsi bukan hanya sebagai alat pemasaran tetapi juga sebagai intervensi budaya yang menggoyahkan ideal eksklusif dan konsumtif, sehingga memperkaya diskusi tentang representasi dan inklusivitas.

**Kata Kunci:** Semiotika, Performativitas, Interseksionalitas, Inklusivitas  
Kecantikan

## INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, media plays a pivotal role in shaping people's perspectives on various aspects of life, including the construction of beauty. Advertising and mass media often reproduce narrow and uniform beauty standards through their visual and verbal representations. These standards shape social expectations and directly influence how individuals, particularly women, perceive and evaluate themselves. As one of the most powerful mediums in constructing public perceptions, advertising not only communicates explicit messages but also embeds implicit cultural meanings within signs. In this regard, Dove's "Self-Esteem Project" campaign occupies a distinctive position in the global advertising landscape because it consistently promotes narratives of self-acceptance and rejection of restrictive conventional beauty norms. By showcasing diverse representations of women across body types, skin tones, and cultural backgrounds, Dove creates not only a marketing message but also a discursive space for inclusivity.

The diversity highlighted in this campaign provides fertile ground for semiotic analysis to explore how inclusivity is constructed, negotiated, and represented in contemporary media. Roland Barthes's semiotic framework is particularly relevant for analyzing denotation, connotation, and myth in advertisements, while Judith Butler's performativity and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality provide supporting perspectives to understand how beauty is performed and experienced across intersecting identities. Beauty, as scholars argue, is a social construct that evolves over time, shaped by cultural, media, and technological changes. Conventional beauty standards often prioritize slim bodies, fair skin, and certain facial features that become universal benchmarks of attractiveness. As Johnson (2023) explains in *Necessary Performativity: Historicising and Contextualising Twenty-First Century British Female-Authored Advice on Performative Beauty*, and earlier by Bordo (1993) such standards have spread across cultures, replacing previously diverse ideals. For example, Nigerian culture, which

once valued curvaceous bodies, has increasingly embraced slimness as the ideal due to the global dominance of Western standards (Johnson, 2023).

This issue is particularly relevant in relation to its psychological impact on women and girls. A global survey by Dove reported that “nine out of ten women and girls” had encountered online content reinforcing harmful beauty ideals (Dove, 2020). Moreover, extensive use of social media is strongly linked to decreased body satisfaction, low self-esteem, and increased body surveillance among adolescent girls (Yang et al., 2020). Young women who are plus-sized, or those with facial birthmarks, dark skin, or acne, frequently experience feelings of inferiority because they do not align with dominant beauty narratives. As a result, they often withdraw socially or attempt to conceal their bodies in order to meet unrealistic standards, even though many of these conditions are genetic or biological in nature.

Against this background, the Dove “Self-Esteem Project” campaign becomes a compelling site for analysis because it reconfigures the visual narrative of beauty. Unlike traditional advertisements that reinforce exclusivity, Dove offers alternative representations that emphasize self-confidence, diversity, and acceptance. A semiotic approach is crucial for uncovering how meanings are constructed through the campaign’s visual and verbal elements. In this study, Barthes’s concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth are employed to analyze the campaign as a cultural text that destabilizes dominant ideologies. Supporting theories such as Butler’s performativity and Crenshaw’s intersectionality enrich the analysis by showing how symbolic actions in advertising can function as performative acts that reconstruct beauty norms and accommodate diverse identities.

Previous studies on beauty and media have extensively examined the negative impact of advertising on women’s self-image, often highlighting the reinforcement of unattainable ideals (Bordo, 1993; Yang et al., 2020; Johnson, 2023). However, there is limited research exploring how counter-narratives in global advertising campaigns attempt to disrupt these norms. This gap becomes the basis for the scientific novelty of the present study, which focuses on semiotic analysis of Dove’s U.S. “Self-Esteem Project” advertisements released between 2019 and 2024. By analyzing both verbal and visual signs, the study aims to demonstrate how the campaign not only constructs inclusivity but also challenges entrenched ideologies of beauty.

Based on this framework, the research addresses two main problems: (1) What denotative and connotative meanings are identified in Dove’s U.S. “Self-Esteem Project” advertisements? and (2) How are myths constructed, and how do they reconstruct dominant beauty ideologies through semiotic and performative representations? These research problems are designed to provide clarity and focus in analyzing the semiotic structures of the campaign.

The purpose of this study is therefore to explore how visual and verbal elements in Dove’s “Self-Esteem Project” advertisements challenge conventional beauty norms and promote inclusivity. Specifically, it aims to identify and analyze denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in the campaign, and to examine how such representations can be understood as performative acts that reconstruct traditional norms. Through this approach, the study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it enriches semiotic and gender studies by offering insights into how advertising operates as a site of cultural negotiation. Practically, it provides valuable lessons for advertisers, communication practitioners, and policymakers in developing inclusive and ethical media strategies that embrace diversity and resist harmful standards.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design with Roland Barthes's semiotic theory as the central analytical framework. A qualitative orientation is deemed appropriate because the research focuses on uncovering implicit cultural meanings embedded in both verbal and visual signs. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) emphasizes, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to explore complex, nuanced, and context-dependent phenomena, especially when the data involve non-numerical forms such as images, texts, and symbols. Within this design, Barthes's semiotics provides a critical lens for tracing the process by which signs operate on the denotative, connotative, and mythical levels, thereby revealing how cultural ideologies about beauty are produced and potentially subverted. The study also draws upon Butler's theory of performativity to interpret how symbolic actions in advertising may constitute performative acts that reconstruct beauty norms, and Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality to account for how inclusivity intersects with race, age, and other identity categories. These supporting theories enrich the semiotic analysis by situating the representation of beauty within broader cultural and ideological formations.

The primary data consist of seven selected advertisements from Dove's U.S. "Self-Esteem Project" campaign, released between 2019 and 2024. These advertisements were retrieved from Dove's official YouTube channel, ensuring accessibility and authenticity of the sources. The advertisements were chosen through purposive sampling, guided by inclusivity indicators that highlight diverse ethnicities, body shapes, culture Identity, gender identities, age and disability representation. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) note, purposive sampling enables researchers to select information-rich cases that are most relevant to the study's objectives. By applying these criteria, the study focuses on advertisements that explicitly engage with the themes of inclusivity, self-confidence, and the critique of conventional beauty standards.

The data analyzed include both visual and verbal components. Visual data consist of moving images, colors, gestures, facial expressions, and symbolic objects, while verbal data include narrations, slogans, captions, and spoken lines that accompany the visuals. Background songs, graphic layouts, and purely technical elements were excluded, as the focus remained on signs that explicitly contribute to the representation of beauty. In qualitative research, documents and audiovisual materials are recognized as important sources for understanding how meaning is socially and culturally constructed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, these advertisements serve as cultural texts that both reflect and contest dominant beauty discourses.

Data collection was conducted through documentation methods in four stages. First, a compilation of Dove advertisements was made to identify potential data sources. Second, purposive sampling was applied to narrow the scope to seven advertisements most relevant to the study's inclusivity framework. Third, data reductions was carried out following Miles et al.'s (2014) qualitative model of selecting, simplifying, and transforming raw material into meaningful data. Finally, the documentation stage involved transcribing verbal content and extracting key frames from visuals that depict relevant signs. In line with Hall's (1997) notion of representation, both verbal and visual elements were treated as signifying systems through which meanings are produced, circulated, and contested.

To enhance the credibility of findings, the study employed theoretical triangulation. Barthes's semiotics served as the primary framework, while Butler's performativity and Crenshaw's intersectionality were integrated to provide multidimensional perspectives. The triangulation approach increases dependability and confirmability by ensuring that interpretations are not limited to a single theoretical lens but rather draw from multiple

frameworks that intersect around representation, gender, and cultural identity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data collection was conducted during April 2025, while the analysis process took place between May and June 2025.

Data analysis followed Barthes’s semiotic mapping of signs. The first stage involved identifying signifiers (forms) and signifieds (concepts) within the advertisements, both in visual and verbal forms. The second stage analyzed the meanings across three levels: denotative (literal meaning), connotative (associated or implied meaning), and myth (cultural or ideological meaning).

Signifier	Signified
Denotative sign	
Connotative signifier	Connotative signified
Connotative sign	

**Figure 1**

*Roland Barthes’s Semiotic Map of Signs Adapted from *Introducing Semiotics* by Paul Cobley & Litza Jansz (Cobley & Jansz, 1999, p. 51).*

For example, a plus-sized woman smiling in bright clothing may denote “a woman in casual dress,” connote “confidence and self-acceptance,” and form a myth that challenges the exclusive association of beauty with slimness. The third stage classified the analyzed signs into categories of inclusivity such as ethnicity, cultural identity, body shape, age, gender identity, and disability, following the indicators outlined in the research framework. The fourth stage interpreted these signs through the lens of performativity, highlighting how the advertisements enact symbolic practices that destabilize traditional beauty norms. The final stage involved drawing conclusions about how Dove’s campaign both represents and reconstructs beauty narratives.

The conceptual framework of this study maps the process of analyzing the representation of beauty in Dove advertisements. Beauty representation is constructed through visual and verbal factors, which are further contextualized within cultural and gender values. These values are then analyzed using Barthes’s semiotic theory to uncover denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings, and Butler’s performativity theory to interpret symbolic acts that reconstruct beauty norms. Through this integrated approach, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of how Dove’s “Self-Esteem Project” functions simultaneously as a semiotic analysis of signs and as a performative intervention in media discourse.

By employing this methodology, the study ensures rigor and depth in analyzing how Dove advertisements challenge conventional beauty standards. The combination of semiotic analysis, theoretical triangulation, and purposive sampling creates a methodological orientation that is replicable, transparent, and theoretically grounded, thus contributing to scholarly discussions on inclusivity and representation in media.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of seven advertisements from Dove’s U.S. “Self-Esteem Project” campaign (2019–2024) demonstrates how the brand constructs inclusive narratives of beauty by embedding

visual and verbal signs that contest dominant ideals. Across the data, inclusivity is represented through diverse ethnicities (ET), cultural identity (CI), body shape (BS), ages (AG), gender identities (GI), and disabilities (DS). These aspects are not derived from the researcher’s subjective interpretation but are synthesized from critical theories and empirical findings. As Hall (1997) emphasizes, media representations are never neutral but serve as ideological sites where meanings are constructed and contested. Previous studies have identified ethnicity and cultural identity (Mack et al., 2023), body shape and size (Bordo, 1993; Gill, 2007), age (Wolf, 2002; Johnston & Foster, 2025; Qayyum, 2025), gender identity (Butler, 1990; Das, 2024), and Disability in advertising has been studied and explored by Hartsock (1983) and further examined by Harding (1991), then revisited in more recent discussions by Mack et al., (2023) and Anderson et al., (2022) as marginalized categories in media. By acknowledging these recurring aspects, the present study examines how Dove reconstructs beauty representation through inclusivity and challenges dominant beauty ideals. These representations are analyzed using Roland Barthes’s semiotic model, which interprets them across denotative, connotative, and mythical levels of meaning.

**Table 1.** Denotative, Connotative, and Mythical Dimensions along with Inclusivity Aspects in Dove Advertisements

Title of Ad	Denotative	Connotative	Myth	Aspect of Inclusivity					
				E T	C I	B S	A G	G I	D S
We Deserve To Shine	The animated characters of Steven Universe sing positive songs about self-esteem and beauty	Encourage children to recognize that they have the right to feel valuable and beautiful without external standards	Beauty and self-esteem are individual rights that are not dependent on external standards; children are encouraged to feel valuable and beautiful naturally			√			√
I’m Fine	Teenage girl says “I’m fine” while showing sad expression and stressful environment	The phrase “I’m fine” represents a denial of emotional problems resulting from social pressures on appearance.	Ignoring social pressures on appearance doesn't diminish one's self-worth; emotional and mental health are important	√		√	√		
Courage is Beautiful	Close-up image of medical personnel’s faces with mask marks on their faces	Beauty is depicted as courage and sacrifice in a pandemic situation, not just physical appearance	Courage and sacrifice also reflect beauty, not just physical beauty	√					√
Reverse Selfie	The photo editing process carried out by a teenage girl who reversed the photo	Addressing teenage girls’s anxieties about beauty standards on social media and the	Self-acceptance is more important than social media beauty standards; perfection			√	√		

	editing process to show her real face in the mirror	pursuit of perfection	is not absolute					
Kids' Mental Health	Children and adolescents as social media users are emotionally impacted by the representation of toxic beauty standards	Social media is positioned as a source of mental stress that disrupts children's psychological development.	Beauty standards on social media can cause mental stress; it's important to protect children's psychological development	√	√	√	√	√
Hard Knocks	Adolescent girl of diverse identities and ethnicities in competitive sporting situations with confidence	Demonstrating that young women can compete without fear of pressure regarding their appearance and performance	Young women have the right to compete and appear confident without pressure about appearance or performance	√	√	√	√	√
The Code	Visualization of several women with diversity (skin color, body, culture, shape, age, etc.) by AI from Dove	Voicing the importance of digital education to build self-confidence and beauty literacy in women	Physical and cultural diversity should be valued; digital education can support self-confidence and beauty literacy	√	√	√	√	√

*Source: Author's analysis of Dove U.S. advertisements (2019–2024).*

This table illustrates how Dove strategically integrates denotative and connotative signs to challenge conventional beauty and to construct counter-myths centered on inclusivity, diversity, and self-esteem.

### Beauty Inclusivity in the Representation of Ethnicity (ET)

Dove's "Courage is Beautiful" advertisement presents a series of close-up portraits of medical workers with sweaty faces, fatigue, and deep mask marks from prolonged use of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the COVID-19 pandemic. These unfiltered, unretouched images feature male and female doctors and nurses from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Asian, and White individuals, with no makeup or forced smiles. Denotatively, the campaign frames these authentic faces as visual signs of real-life heroism, celebrating beauty not through idealized features but through lived experience and labor. Connotatively, the mask indentations and tired expressions signify emotional resilience, empathy, and moral strength while highlighting the physical strain of long working hours. Research on facial cues of fatigue shows that hanging eyelids, swollen eyes, dark circles, pale skin, and drooping mouth corners are universally perceived as indicators of exhaustion and sadness (Sundelin et al., 2013). By incorporating these genuine markers of tiredness, Dove shifts the meaning of beauty away from flawless perfection and locates it in acts of endurance and service.

Moreover, the inclusion of both women and men from varied racial backgrounds challenges dominant beauty representations that privilege whiteness, youth, and femininity (Gill, 2007). The portrayal of women in active, exhausted, and unembellished states disrupts normative gender expectations that demand polish and composure even in extreme circumstances (Butler,

1990). From a Barthesian semiotic perspective, the ad deconstructs the myth of commercial beauty that equates attractiveness with flawless skin, symmetrical features, and artificial smiles. Barthes (1957) argues that myth transforms culturally constructed meanings into taken-for-granted truths; here, Dove re-signifies physical markers of stress and trauma visuals typically deemed unattractive as symbols of inner strength and collective care. The verbal sign “Courage is Beautiful” functions as an ideological reversal, redefining aesthetic values from surface-level perfection to emotional authenticity and social contribution. As Banet-Weiser (2018, as cited in Cho, 2019) explains, popular feminism can align with market-friendly values while also generating new narratives that resist hegemonic norms. Through this subversion, Dove constructs a new myth: that beauty resides in real human courage across racial and gender identities, rather than in sanitized commercial ideals.

### **Beauty Inclusivity in the Representation of Cultural Identity (CI)**

Dove’s “The Code” advertisement denotatively presents a vibrant diversity of women of different ages, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Close-up portraits capture a hijab-wearing woman in an urban style, a dark-skinned woman with curly hair in a festive setting, and a brown-skinned woman in a softly embroidered Indian head covering, each framed against a dynamic crowd. These visuals highlight beauty as it appears authentically within everyday life, emphasizing that it exists across different cultural expressions and personal styles rather than within a single standardized form. At the connotative level, the imagery communicates that beauty is not merely physical but also rooted in cultural identity, self-comfort, and the courage to appear genuine. The woman in hijab symbolizes strength in practicing her beliefs in public spaces, the dark-skinned woman with curly hair confidently resists narratives that exclude darker skin from beauty ideals, and the woman in traditional Indian cloth affirms that aesthetic value also resides in cultural heritage. Together, these representations position beauty as arising from diversity, freedom of expression, and self-acceptance.

From Roland Barthes’s (1972) myth perspective, The Code dismantles the homogenous construction of beauty long dominated by mainstream media, which privileges young, white, straight-haired, and modernly dressed women. The ad creates a new myth in which beauty is multifaceted, appearing in varied faces, skin tones, cultural practices, and clothing choices. Crenshaw’s (1991) concept of intersectionality further clarifies how race, gender, and other identity categories overlap to shape unique experiences of marginalization. Within this framework, the visibility of women wearing hijab, bearing darker skin, and dressing in traditional garments signifies more than aesthetic inclusion—it serves as an ideological challenge to dominant beauty narratives that have historically excluded such identities. This aligns with Tsai et al. (2019), who argue that many contemporary beauty campaigns adopt empowerment discourses that present diverse identities as sources of agency and autonomy. Through this intersectional and semiotic intervention, Dove asserts that beauty is inclusive, contextual, and a symbolic challenge to the ideological dominance of Western beauty standards.

### **Beauty Inclusivity in the Representation of Body Shape (BS)**

Dove’s “We Deserve To Shine” advertisement denotatively presents Ruby and Sapphire two non-human gem beings singing on stage in their Garnet fusion form, performing lyrics such

as “we’re small but we’re strong” and “we’re cool but we’re kind,” before Garnet herself appears to declare “we deserve to shine.” The scene also highlights the contrasting body shapes of the tall and very thin Pearl and the short, round Amethyst, who even transforms into a muscular figure under dramatic stage lights. Although these characters are alien gems, their expressive gestures, human-like emotions, and energetic stage actions underscore the coexistence of multiple body types and personalities. Connotatively, the performance carries a message of existential equality and self-acceptance: Ruby and Sapphire affirm that being small or different does not diminish strength or worth, while Garnet’s fusion symbolizes that softness and power can harmoniously exist within one body. Pearl and Amethyst reinforce this theme through lyrics such as “we’re gritty and tough” and “we’re smooth and refined,” celebrating the coexistence of contrasting traits. Amethyst’s choice to present a muscular body commonly associated with masculinity in Western culture (Bordo, 1993) while identifying as she/her further demonstrates that femininity and strength are not mutually exclusive, directly rejecting the narrow beauty ideals of slimness, youth, and flawless features critiqued by Gill (2007, p. 149).

On a mythical level, *We Deserve To Shine* advances a narrative that all individuals, regardless of physical form, origin, or strength, share an equal right to “shine,” meaning to exist, express themselves, and receive social recognition. Garnet, as the fusion of Ruby and Sapphire, embodies the union of empathy, love, and emotional strength, creating a new kind of power. This scene constructs a counter-myth in which diversity of body shape, character, and self-expression is celebrated as a source of strength rather than weakness. As McRobbie (2009, as cited in Butler J., 2009) notes, empathy and tenderness can themselves become dominant forms of power, challenging the association of physical might with masculinity. Although Garnet’s hourglass figure recalls the 19th-century ideal female body that emphasized breasts and hips with a slim waist (Bordo, 1993), she is not objectified. Instead, her body serves as a medium for leadership, courage, and compassion, transforming the body from an object of aesthetic judgment into a vessel for complex, liberating, and subversive human values that resist the myth of normative beauty.

### **Beauty Inclusivity in the Representation of Age (AG)**

Dove’s Kids’ Mental Health advertisement denotatively portrays real social media activity that promotes a narrow body ideal. The scene shows a mobile phone scrolling through a social media feed featuring a thin woman whose post highlights her flat stomach and toned thighs, including an influencer measuring her thigh circumference. These visuals underscore how beauty standards on social media are anchored in images of a perfectly flat or slim stomach and a “perfect” thigh size that is neither too large nor too small. Within the same sequence, Mary is shown mimicking these ideals posing with her cheeks pulled in to appear slimmer, measuring her arms, and pinching the skin around her stomach as if testing whether her body matches the promoted beauty norms. The clip closes with a close-up of Mary’s face staring directly into the camera, her expression flat and tense, suggesting discomfort, emptiness, or anxiety about her appearance.

Connotatively, Kids’ Mental Health exposes how social media not only showcases but also reinforces specific body images as standards of beauty, shaping how individuals evaluate themselves. Mary’s verbal expression in her diary “look at yourself, you gross ugly self” reveals an internalized negative label and the pressure to conform to the thin-ideal aesthetic. At the

mythic level, this excerpt illustrates the internalized myth of beauty as a natural and absolute truth, leading to self-rejection when one's body falls short of these standards. Mary's self-directed verbal abuse reflects what Meadows (2018) describes as internalized weight stigma: "not only as awareness, or even support, of negative stereotypes, but also as a form of applying those negative attributes to oneself, and then devaluing oneself because of it" (p. 9). By making these hidden psychological effects visible, the ad critiques the cultural forces that turn beauty norms into a source of self-loathing and mental distress.

### **Beauty Inclusivity in the Representation of Gender Identity (GI)**

Dove's We Deserve To Shine advertisement echoes a scene from Steven Universe in which Connie and Steven sing the lines "we figure it out," "there's plenty of time," and "for everybody in every mine." In the series, the word "mine" refers to the Kindergarten, a gem-production site where Gems are artificially created by injecting Gem seeds into the planet's crust, "like a mine" (Fandom, n.d.-b). The sequence culminates with the composite character Stevonnie singing, "and every facet to finally find that we deserve to shine." Within this narrative, "facet" functions as a production code signifying each Gem's unique identity such as Amethyst's designation of "Facet-5, Cut-8XM" a detail reinforced by the production team's explanation that "Each Gem produced by the Homeworld Kindergarten has a unique designation consisting of a Facet and a Cut" (Fandom, n.d.-a). These lyrics and visuals establish that every being, regardless of origin or social status, possesses an individual identity and the inherent right to recognition.

Connotatively, the term "mine," once denoting a physical site of extraction, expands to symbolize marginalized positions within exploitative social systems (Marx, 1987), while the phrase "every facet" metaphorically celebrates the diversity of identities. Earlier lines such as "we figure it out" and "there's plenty of time" subtly invite audiences to engage in a gradual struggle against discrimination, emphasizing time and process as crucial steps toward acceptance. This resonates with Hall's assertion that "representation is the production of meaning through language" linking concepts to both real and imagined worlds (Hall, 1997, p. 15). Stevonnie using they/them pronouns and presenting an androgynous blend of feminine and masculine traits embodies this fluidity, demonstrating that identity is not singular but multifaceted. At the mythic level, the character and song critique rigid social categories of class, gender, and race, aligning with Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, which explains how overlapping forms of discrimination create unique experiences. Through Stevonnie, We Deserve To Shine affirms that identity is dynamic, complex, and resistant to fixed classification.

### **Beauty Inclusivity in the Representation of Disability (DS)**

Dove's The Code advertisement denotatively presents a laptop screen displaying AI search results with the command "imagine the most beautiful woman in the world according to Dove Real Beauty Ad." The search generates an image of a large-bodied woman with fair skin, curly hair, and seated in a wheelchair, clearly positioning a woman with a disability as central to the narrative of beauty. The presence of this figure communicates that beauty is not confined to medically or aesthetically normative bodies but also exists within those long marginalized in mainstream representation. By showcasing a disabled woman as the AI's answer to ultimate

beauty, the campaign visually rejects traditional standards and asserts the diversity of women's bodies as inherently beautiful.

Connotatively, this representation critiques both artificial intelligence systems and digital culture for perpetuating narrow and exclusionary beauty ideals. By making a disabled woman the AI-generated “most beautiful,” Dove challenges technological and cultural mechanisms that dictate what counts as beautiful, disrupting the tendency of mainstream media to sideline disabled bodies. In the context of post-feminist media culture, women may be highly visible yet remain pressured to meet dominant aesthetic norms (Gill, 2007). Instead, *The Code* reframes beauty as inclusive and plural, showing that women who fall outside conventional ideals also deserve recognition. Within Barthes's (1972) semiotic framework, the ad dismantles the dominant sign system that naturalizes beauty as an absolute, revealing it instead as a cultural construction. By foregrounding a woman with a disability as a complex individual rather than an object of pity or exaggerated inspiration (Södergren & Vallström, 2023), the campaign creates a symbolic space where beauty is understood as a diverse, lived experience that cannot be contained by a single standard.

### **Historical Shifts and Inclusive Counter-Myths of Beauty in Dove's Campaigns**

The evolution of beauty standards in Dove's campaigns cannot be separated from broader historical and cultural contexts. As Haris (1999) notes, Victorian beauty ideals were linked to morality and patriarchal domesticity, while in colonial Indonesia, light skin and European aesthetics were imposed as markers of modernity (Suratminto, 2004; Aryani, 2023). However, post-reform narratives have increasingly celebrated local and diverse beauty, which campaigns such as Dove, Wardah, and Citra continue to promote (Ismianti & Swarnawati, 2023; Kurniawan et al., 2024). This demonstrates Barthes's (1972) idea that myths evolve through repetition and re-signification. As Yens et al. (2025) observe in their study of Gen Z in Jakarta, resistance to homogenized beauty is emerging through advocacy for bodily and racial diversity. Dove's representations thus participate in producing counter-myths that expand beauty beyond whiteness, slimness, and youthfulness, offering more inclusive and empowering identities.

Specifically, Dove's advertisements visualize beauty through real, diverse, and intersectional representations that challenge conventional ideals. Campaigns such as “Courage is Beautiful,” “The Code,” and “We Deserve To Shine” redefine beauty as authenticity, resilience, and individuality rather than perfection. These ads portray people of varied ethnicities, body shapes, ages, gender identities, and abilities, framing their lived experiences as beautiful acts of self-acceptance and strength. For instance, the tired faces of medical workers, women in hijab, non-binary characters, and even a disabled woman in a wheelchair collectively signify that beauty exists in emotional courage, cultural expression, and bodily diversity. Through these visual and verbal signs, Dove transforms beauty from a superficial aesthetic into a moral and social value-one that celebrates humanity in all its forms.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that beauty is not a fixed or universal standard but a cultural construct shaped by ideology, history, and performance. Dove's advertisements contribute to dismantling dominant myths by providing inclusive narratives that foreground diversity, authenticity, and psychological well-being. In line with Barthes's (1972) theory of myth and Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, these campaigns show that beauty is produced through repeated social practices that can be contested and redefined. By doing so,

Dove not only intervenes in the aesthetics of advertising but also participates in broader social movements advocating for equality and inclusivity in identity construction.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze seven Dove US advertisements using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory and Judith Butler's performativity theory, with the aim of examining how beauty is represented and how conventional standards are challenged. The findings demonstrate that Dove consistently constructs an inclusive and critical representation of beauty by rejecting dominant ideals that equate beauty with whiteness, slimness, youth, and traditional femininity. Instead, the advertisements foreground diverse bodies, identities, and gender expressions, redefining beauty as plural, performative, and rooted in authenticity. In doing so, the campaign illustrates how media can destabilize hegemonic myths of beauty and reconstruct cultural meanings that are more empowering and equitable.

In response to the research questions, the analysis shows that the denotative and connotative meanings of visual and verbal signs emphasize diversity, emotional depth, and self-empowerment. These signs operate as counter-discourses, encouraging audiences to reconceptualize beauty not as a fixed standard but as a dynamic cultural construct. Furthermore, by deconstructing conventional myths and constructing counter-myths that celebrate difference, Dove reinforces Butler's notion of identity as performative and Crenshaw's intersectional framework that exposes how overlapping identities shape representation in media.

Theoretically, this research contributes to scholarship on media, gender, and representation by demonstrating how semiotics and performativity can be integrated to analyze advertising as a site of cultural negotiation. Practically, the findings highlight how campaigns like Dove's Self-Esteem Project can serve as cultural interventions, offering communication strategies that are more inclusive, ethical, and sensitive to identity diversity. Ultimately, Dove's campaign does not merely function as a marketing tool but as a cultural intervention that empowers audiences, challenges discriminatory standards, and positions beauty as an inclusive right. If sustained, this approach may establish Dove as a pioneer in shaping a global ideology of inclusive beauty and contribute to dismantling narrow beauty standards over time.

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