

# The Implications of Women Empowerment in Beauty Products Advertising

Jiahui Zhang

College of Media and Culture, Zhejiang University, Zhejiang, China

## Abstract

**This study is based on textual analysis of women empowerment messages contained in advertising taglines, slogans and lines from promotion videos released by 18 well-known beauty brands from 2012 to 2019. Two types of empowering including uniqueness of women individuals, and positivity in their personality traits are identified in this research. Nevertheless, underneath is primarily commercialization of women images by bringing social issues into light.**

## Keywords

**Textual analysis; Empowering; Commercialization; Beauty brand.**

## 1. Literature Review

In academia, it is commonly agreed that women empowerment is mostly concerned with women's confidence-building. It is the idea of inspiring women to confidently take control and responsibility for their identity and choices (Alcoff, 1988; Valsamma Antony; The Kurukshetra, February 2006, p. 27). And social empowerment is one of the dimensions of empowering women. According to scholar Keshab Chandra Mandal, it refers to the enabling force that inspires women to be more confident with the purpose of strengthening women's social position.

Advertising industry is universally acknowledged to assume a significant role in social empowerment of women (Davide C. Orazi, Liliana L. Bove, Jing Lei, 2016). In advertising, women empowerment is the approach of inspiring women to confidently accept themselves and pursue their own dreams through delivering positive affirmations to women. In other words, such positive affirmations serving as empowering messages are statements or any messages intended to release women and society from any prejudice or stereotypes against female group.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, there is an influx of marketing campaigns in advertising including Dove's "Real Beauty", Always' "Like A Girl", and Under Armour's "I Will What I Want". Advertisements in these campaigns have incorporated women empowerment messages, encouraging women to be more confident. This has attracted much scholarly attention.

In 14 related papers on women empowerment in advertising, researchers have mostly investigated characteristics and its influences from the perspectives of changes in women portrayals, the promotion of gender equality, emotional appeals to female consumers and the expansion of market interests.

According to researcher Nicola Kemp, three characteristics of changes in women portrayals include women's body positivity, diversity and strength. "Real me" by Aerie and "My beauty, my say" by Dove are illustrative of body positivity: both explicitly advocate the freedom of different beauty standards and acceptance to them. Diversity refers to the changing role of gender representations in advertising, for instance, the men in the Asos beauty ad, the older woman in the H&M ad, and plus-size women in the Aerie (a shop for bras, undies, swim and more) ad. As

for strength, women shown in powerful positions such as leading a board meeting in the H&M ad could be the evidence.

Current literature agrees that changes in women portrayal is affected by hidden or glaring gender inequality in advertising. Scholars including Srivstav (2001), Mira Shivaa (2001) and Jaimon Varghese (2012) have seen the improvement of gender equality through emphasizing women's strength, power and knowledge. In effect, conclusions made in previous literature are mostly concerned with gender equality, namely, the fact that women possess more power than before in family, workplace and other social spheres. Few researches have particularly examined the content of women empowerment messages in advertising and explored behind social implications.

Beauty product refers to any products of personal care including skincare, haircare and fragrance products and of cosmetics that are intended to improve a person's appearance. Cassandra McNeill suggests that every beauty brand is seemingly hopping on the women empowerment bandwagon, and that it seems like an obvious choice for women empowerment. The market for beauty products and services is growing and expanding rapidly. However, so far, beauty product advertising with women empowerment seemingly remains an untapped area of research.

Thus, This paper intends to fill the neglected area of beauty product in advertising by examining women empowerment messages in it and exploring social implications behind. Questions that this research attempts to answer include:

- a) In what aspect beauty products advertising is empowering women?
- b) What social implications it may reveal concerning women's role in the society?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Questionnaire

Since participants in this study are from one certain group, whether the ranking of "millennials' top beauty brands" can also be generalized to them is uncertain. And considering that this study will be presented to only BFSU teachers and students, these questionnaires intend to rule out those beauty brands unknown to most participants and help target effective research objects.

195 college female students in Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) between age 18 to 25 have filled out questionnaires via social media. Participants are supposed to rate 25 beauty product brands from 0 to 5 (from low to high degree). 23 of these brands are included in "millennials' top beauty brands" as a result of Professor Jordan Muto's survey (2015) and the other 2, Dove and SK-II are brands that have gained popularity since its marketing campaigns of women empowerment.

According to the rating results, the extent to which participants on average know about these 25 brands can be revealed. Although participants may be limited in number, age and gender, they can represent the female group who are reportedly starting paying closer attention to beauty brands according to Professor Jordan Mut (2015).

### 2.2. Textual Analysis

The main research method of this study is textual analysis of women empowering messages in the advertisements of beauty brands which are selected according to the results of questionnaires. This study examines women empowerment messages contained in advertising taglines, slogans and lines from promotion videos released from 2012 to 2019, which can be found from their official websites.

Hence, this study firstly confirms whether the selected beauty brands have incorporated empowering messages in its advertising by examining the presence of positive affirmations.

Positive affirmations are messages that inspire women to confidently accept themselves and pursue their own dreams. Based on this criteria, this study can screen out women empowering messages for further research.

Women empowerment messages then are categorized as advertising taglines, slogans, and lines from promotional videos. Taglines are often short phrases conveying direct inspirations for women, and they usually serve as the names of advertising campaigns. While advertising taglines are about phrases, slogans refer to explanation or statements of beauty products which may not be directly related to products themselves but involve much irrelevant information.

This study sorts out these textual messages of women empowerment in an attempt to capture in what aspect does these messages empower women. However, due to the limited number of beauty brands in this study, future research is still worth conducting to refine and enrich findings.

### 3. Results and Findings

#### 3.1. Results of Questionnaire

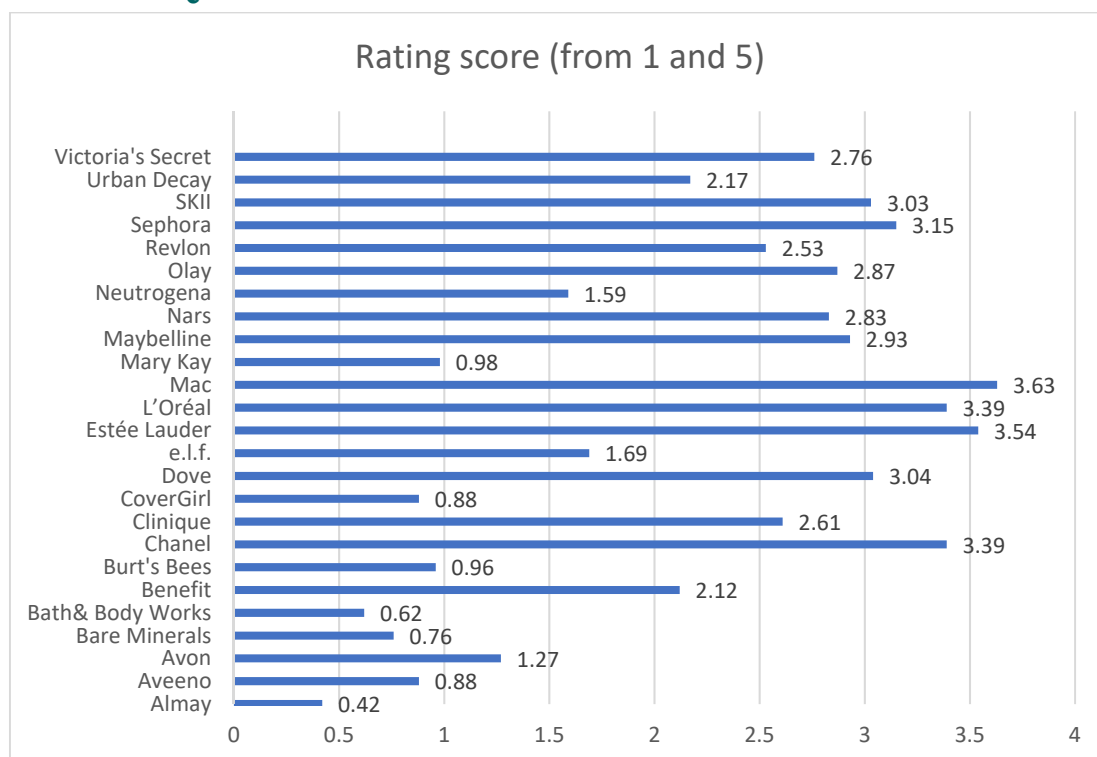


Figure 1. Rating score

According to the rating results, 7 brands that participants on average rate below 1 point are relatively unknown to participant, including Mary Kay (0.98), Burt's Bees (0.96), CoverGirl (0.88), Aveeno (0.88), Bare Minerals (0.76), Bath & Body Works (0.62), and Almay (0.42).

Among the rest 18 beauty brands, 8 including MAC, Estée Lauder, NARS, e.l.f., Chanel, Benefit, Victoria's Secret and Urban Decay are found to be products-oriented in delivering advertising messages. For instance, NARS' tagline "Laced with Edge" (2014) and "Dream Home. Find Home. Own Home" (2016), and Urban Decay's slogan "Beauty with an edge" (2018) indicates values and effects of these products. Moreover, their promotion videos demonstrate little women empowerment information. Instead, they mostly demonstrate details and effects of these products such as e.l.f.'s promotion videos "Makeup Brush" and "Eyeshadow Palette", Estée Lauder's "Advanced Night Repair".

Generally, these 8 brands do not adopt advertising as empowering tools, yet some of them choose to empower women in other fashions. Benefit’s “Bold it Beautiful Project” and Urban Decay’s “The Ultraviolet Edge Initiative” empower women by supporting organizations and charities that fight for women’s rights. Victoria’s Secret and Chanel are devoted to providing perfect and fashionable beauty products, thus allowing women to be confident.

Therefore, above 8 beauty brands are then excluded from this study owing to their lack of clear positive affirmatives toward women in their advertising taglines, slogans or promotion videos. And the rest 10 which present the theme of women empowerment in their advertising are selected as research targets, namely, Avon, Benefit, Clinique, Dove, L’Oréal, Maybelline, Neutrogena, Olay, Revlon, Sephora and SKII.

### 3.2. Findings of Textual Analysis

After studying advertising messages in the 10 brands, two types of empowering messages are identified as seen in the table 1. One is based on uniqueness of women individuals, and the other is concerned with positivity in women’s characteristics or personality traits.

**Table 1.** Key empowering messages in beauty brands advertising

Categorization	Empowering messages	Beauty brands
Uniqueness	authenticity	Olay, Revlon
	individuality	Maybelline, Sephora, Olay, Dove
	creativity	Maybelline, Avon
Positivity	Confidence and independence	Avon, Benefit, Clinique, Chanel, Dove, Maybelline, Neutrogena, Olay, Revlon, Sephora, SKII, L’Oréal, Chanel
	Courage and strength	Benefit, Clinique, Dove, Neutrogena, SKII
	potential and ambition	Clinique, Revlon, Neutrogena, Olay, Neutrogena, Dove

#### 3.2.1. Uniqueness

Beauty brands indicate three tenets of uniqueness of women individuals, which are identified as: authenticity, individuality and creativity.



**Figure 2.** Olay’s video of “Face Anything” Campaign



Figure 3. Dove’s taglines of “Real Beauty” Campaign



Figure 4. Dove’s taglines of “Show Us” Campaign

Authenticity emphasizes being and accepting who one truly is unapologetically and confidently without using any beauty products. Rather than flawless woman images, advertising messages are found out to alter people’s perception of women’s beauty. For instance, inspired by women’s difficulty in being their authentic selves under the weight of society’s conflicting expectations, Olay launched a new campaign by the name of “Face Anything”. In its advertising video (figure 2), nine diverse women in video share their stories of embracing their appearance as their natural beauty which they are born with. Their success aims to empower women to go makeup-free and embrace their skin in its natural glory. In 2012, Dove released its campaign named Real Beauty, denoting taglines as “grey or gorgeous”, “withered or wonderful”, “fat or fit” and “flawed or flawless” with corresponding photographs. Together with its project of “Show Us”, it encourages women to embrace their natural or authentic look as real beauty, rather than conform to societal beauty standards.

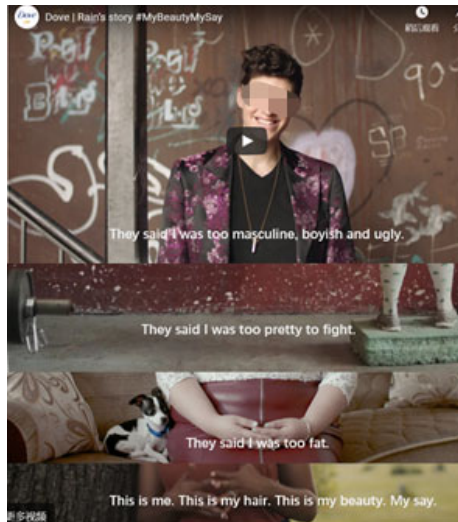


Figure 5. Dove's video of "Beauty on Your Own Terms"



Figure 6. Dove's video of "Celebrate the many shapes and sizes of beauty"

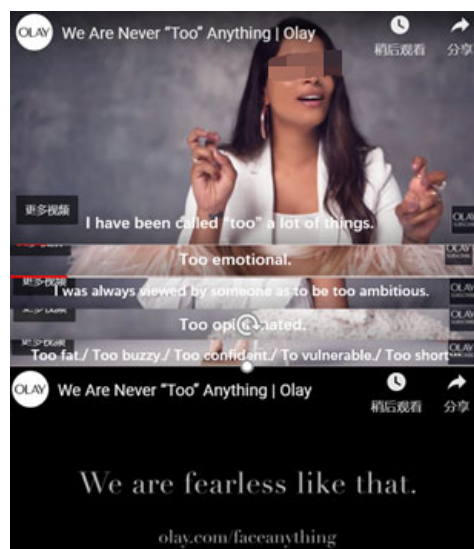


Figure 7. Olay's video of "We Are Never 'Too' Anything"

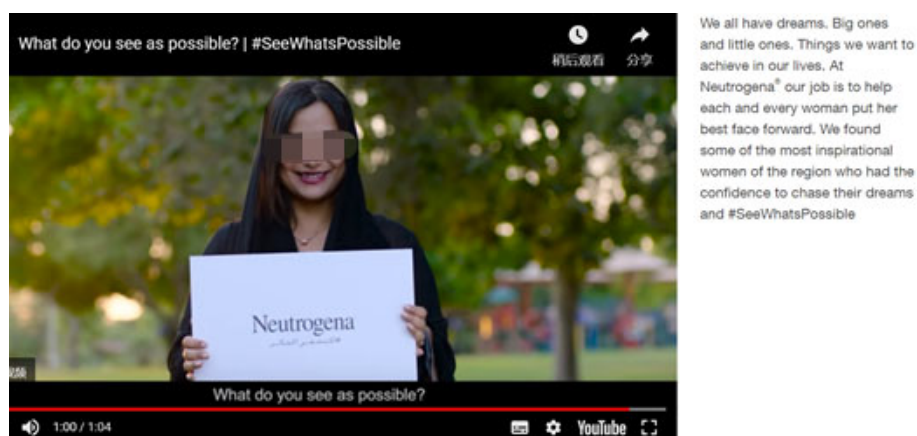
On the basis of embracing the authentic self, individuality further indicates that beauty consists in the aggregate of qualities and characteristics which distinguish her from others. Dove's advertising videos named "Beauty on Your Own Terms" (figure 4) released in 2016 features real-life portrayals of a group of diverse women, recognizing their being too masculine, boyish,

ugly, pretty and fat as their own beauty. Likewise, another video by Dove titled “Celebrate the many shapes and sizes of beauty” (figure 5) introduces six exclusive bottle designs for body positivity, celebrating women’s different versions of shapes as individuality. And such individuality defines the beauty in various versions.

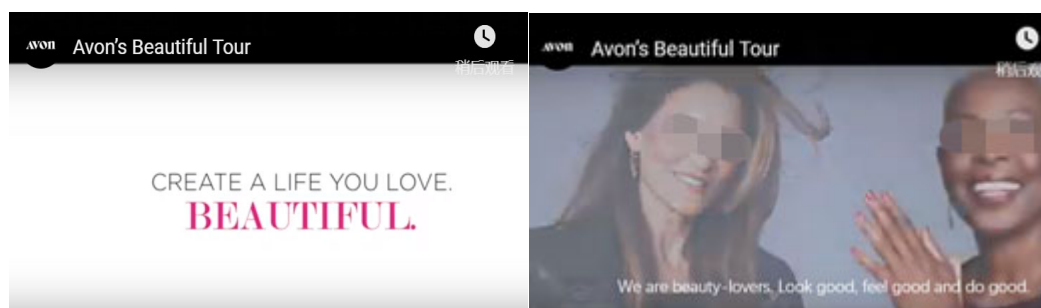
Apart from individuality of appearance, empowering messages also underlines individual characteristics. In Olay’s promotional video titled “We Are Never ‘Too’ Anything” (figure 6), a range of diverse women share their stories of overcoming hardship and embracing their unique characteristics. It aims at helping women counter social judgements that they are “too” emotional, opinionated or other expectations placed on them. Sephora’s slogan of “Beauty Rewritten” and Maybelline’s claim of flaunting women’s individuality are also themed with it.



**Figure 8.** Maybelline’s slogan in its official site



**Figure 9.** Neutrogena’s video of “See What’s Possible”



**Figure 10.** Avon’s video of “Beautiful Tour”

Creativity further encourages women to create their individual beauty with their products motivated by commercial benefits. In Maybelline’s official site (figure 7), it introduces itself as “empowering all women to make a statement, explore new looks, and flaunt their own individuality and creativity”. Its tagline “Make It Happen” released in 2017 also suggests the

realization of one's dreams through highlighting creativity of beautifying appearance. In 2018, Avon's video named Beautiful Tour inspires women to create their desired life.

### 3.2.2. Positivity

Positivity here specifically refers to positive characteristics in one's character or personality traits that a person may have. This becomes another set of beauty standard recognized by the society. Nouns categorized in the "positivity" table cell (table 1) have been affirmed by checking "The Lists", a widely website designed for collection of lists. Therein, confidence is the most frequent word incorporated in empowering messages, with courage and ambition followed. Other aspects of positivity in women including confidence, courage, strength, potential and ambition are also discovered as connotations of empowerment. Advertising taglines, slogans and promotional videos are different in ways of empowering women.

#### 1) Confidence and independence

Confidence and independence have long been popular themes of women empowerment in beauty products advertising. Taglines and slogans of advertisements center on inspiring women to increase the awareness of their own beauty as well as the power or ability to succeed. Whereas, promotional videos place particular emphasis on empowering women through presenting real women's stories of exercising self-government or autonomy over their own life paths.

After studying these empowering messages, women's confidence and independence are manifested in two aspects. For one thing, women are inspired to be confident in their external beauty and independent from societal expectations of their appearance. The societal expectations of women's beauty which is perfect, flawless, and almost unattainable have been undermined.

Maybelline's "Make it happen", Neutrogena's "See what's possible", Avon's "Beautiful Tour", Sephora's "Beauty Rewritten" and Dove's "Real Beauty" target at raising women's awareness of and confidence in their own versions of beauty. In addition, Benefit's "Bold is Beautiful", Clinique's "Start Better", and Revlon's "Beautiful Tour" are released in hopes of challenging mainstream beauty standards and establishing women's confidence in accepting their true selves separated from societal expectations.

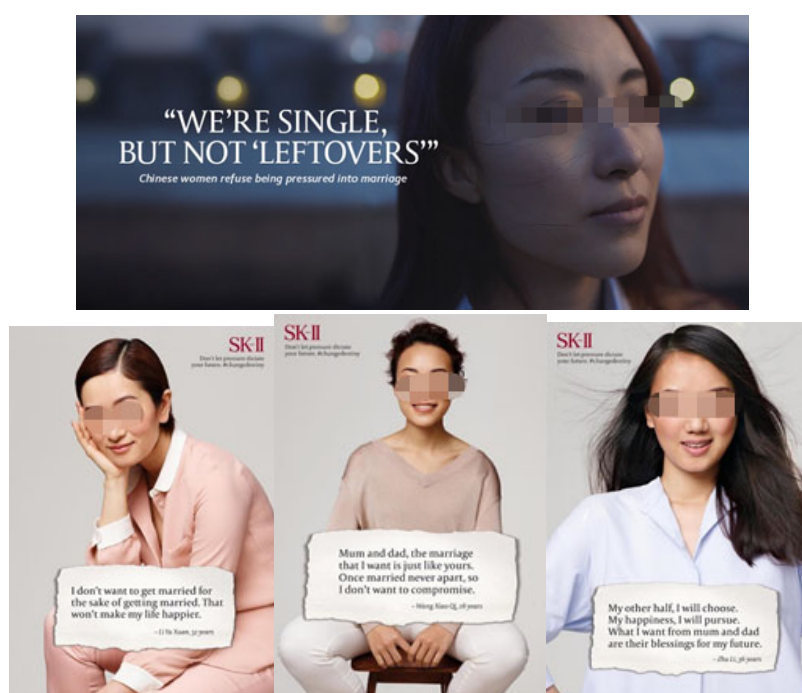


Figure 11. SKII's posters contained in its video "Marriage market takeover"




For another, confidence and independence also come from women's inner power to free themselves from societal expectations and pressure. With confidence in mind, women are also inspired to gain independence in leading their own life journeys regardless of any societal expectations. This has been conveyed through promotional videos characterized by real-life stories of women.


In 2016, SKII launched a video titled "Marriage Market Takeover," putting a spotlight on "leftover women" who suffer anxiety due to unmarried state before 27 (figure 10). This video is set in the marriage market in Shanghai's People's Park, where SKII builds an installation and replaced the dating ads with its own "marriage ads" that are in fact not ads but messages from hundreds of independent women. These ads state women's eagerness to be in control of their own destiny. The purpose is to create a platform where women are inspired to be independent and confident, which is the opposite of the desperate image of Sheng Nus often being portrayed. Besides, Maybelline's "Make it happen" and Neutrogena's "See what's possible" also feature women who possess the autonomy over choosing their own life goals, thus succeeding in pursuing their dreams from professional to artistic and athletic success. Despite pressure from society, family and friends, women in these videos refuse to conform to age-old traditions and ask for support to change the perception of women's life paths. By taking a stand for rights to control their own destinies, they give women the confidence to fight for independence.

## 2) Courage and strength

Courage and strength are also incorporated into advertising as empowering messages. While courage is the quality of not being afraid or intimidated easily, strength refers to the quality of being strong enough to withstand great force or pressure. The most frequent approach to encouraging women to be courageous and giving women the strength is through portraying real-life stories of women who successfully overcome difficulties.



VICTORIA PENDETON  
CYCLIST



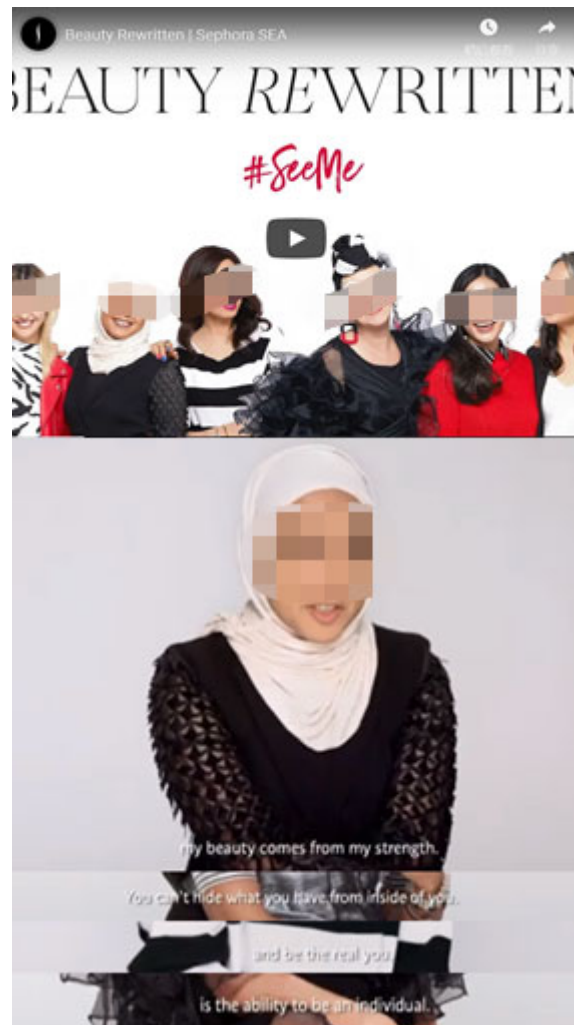
Clinique has partnered with Difference Makers around the world. Watch their empowering stories.

The Clinique Difference Initiative helps women build the courage to be their best selves. Learn about the difference we are making.

[LEARN MORE](#)

THE  
**CLINIQUE**  
DIFFERENCE  
INITIATIVE

**Figure 12.** Clinique's video of "Everyone Can Make A Difference"



**Figure 13.** Sephora's video of "Beauty Rewritten"

One theme of these stories is women's capability to succeed in all aspects, especially in balancing career and family. Clinique's 2014 advertising video "Difference Maker" (figure 10) and Sephora's video "Beauty Rewritten" (figure 12) share the same empowering methods. Both feature ladies of different ages, race and cultural background narrating their stories of juggling multiple roles every day but bringing dreams into reality ultimately with strength and courage. Another theme that conveys positive affirmations is concerned with women's pressure from societal expectations. In 2016, SKII launched a video titled "Marriage Market Takeover," putting a spotlight on "leftover women" who suffer anxiety due to unmarried state before 27. Despite pressure from society, family and friends, women in this video refuse to conform to age-old traditions and ask for support to change the perception of "leftover women". By taking a stand for rights to control their own destinies, the video also empowers women to fight for happiness, independence and success.

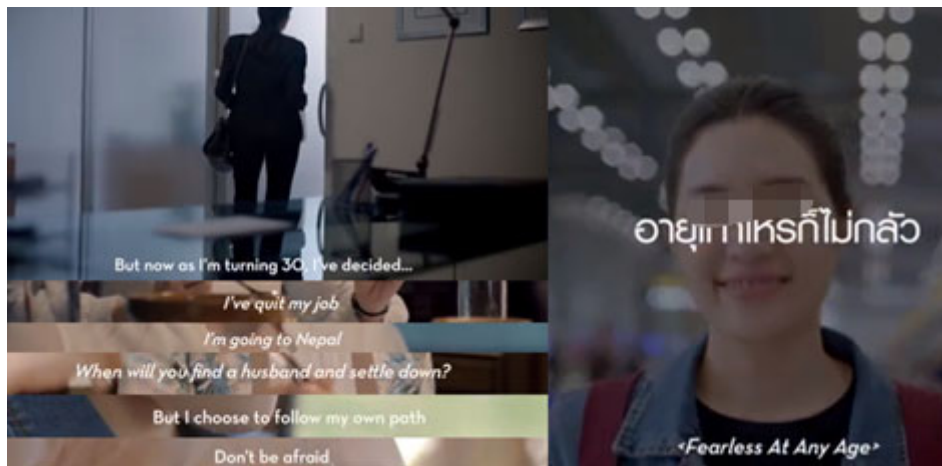


Figure 14. Olay's video of "Fearless at Any Age"



Figure 15. Olay's taglines in "Face Anything"

Also, Olay's advertising video titled "30! So What?" with tagline "Fearless at Any Age" also tells a woman who defies all social expectations of what would she be like at her age. It captures the life lessons of being fearless by a woman on the brink of a major change in her life at a time when everyone around her expects her to have an established career and get married. Olay's campaign of "Face Anything" (Picture) also shares the same empowering messages that women should have the courage to free from unfair expectation or age label and the ambition to succeed in their personal journeys.

## 3) Potential and ambition

Home / Beauty / Brands / Maybelline

## Maybelline

Introducing Maybelline New York. Maybelline's makeup takes trends straight from the catwalk to the sidewalk, empowering all women to make a statement, explore new looks, and flaunt their own creativity and individuality. Inspired by confident, accomplished women, Maybelline's makeup gives you advanced formulas, textures and up-to-the minute, trendsetting shades effortlessly, affordably, beautifully. Maybelline New York combines technologically advanced formulas with on-trend expertise to create accessible cosmetics with a cool, urban edge and a spirited style. With everything from products to make your skin glow to that all important bold lip, there is something here for every occasion and for every woman.

**Figure 16.** Maybelline's slogan "Make it happen" campaign

Ever since its rebranding in 2004 and the launch of the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty and The Dove Self-Esteem Project, Dove has become the beauty company best known for their empowerment message in its official site (figure 10). It not only attempts to build women's confidence in themselves, but also inspire them to explore their potentials and achieve their ambitions by virtue of their products. Avon's promotional video of "Beautiful Tour" (figure 9) in 2018 also claims to empower women by exploring their potential in appearance with new Avon makeup collection.

The empowering messages of potential and ambition also consist in taglines of advertising campaigns of 4 beauty brands. Maybelline's "Make it happen", Neutrogena's "See what's possible", Maybelline's "Make it Happen" and Revlon's "I Can. So I Did" are intended to render women the power to explore their infinite potential to transform themselves in appearance. Thus, their potential of and ambition in realizing their dreams from professional to artistic and athletic success or, from family to career can also be discovered by themselves.

## 4. Discussion

The content of women empowerment messages in beauty products advertising mainly consist of individual uniqueness and positivity. The tendency towards incorporating empowering messages into beauty brands advertising is in accordance with the historical transformations of their market strategy. And such market strategy is characterized by the focus on women issues.

### 4.1. Historical perspective: The Essence of Commercialization

It can never be neglected that the ultimate driving force of the development of women empowerment in beauty products advertising lies in the pursuit of economic interests. The true motives and essence of women empowerment messages are to gain business profits while the social value of empowering women is basically by-product. This can be seen from the historical development of women empowerment in beauty products advertising.

Back in 2004 before the campaign started, beauty was a very narrow-minded idea. Dove was concerned that this "limited portrayal of beauty was preventing women from recognizing and enjoying beauty in themselves and others". This was the overarching issue that prompted Dove to launch their study, *The Real Truth about Beauty: A Global Report*. This study explored what beauty means to women today and why they feel the way they do. Through the study, Dove was able to analyze women's relationships to their own beauty, as well as the perceptions of how beauty is portrayed in popular culture. (McKenzie, Altman, Madison, Bamman and Ashton).

Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign has been named the #1 Ad for the 21st century by Ad Age for it marked of Dove and a series of following beauty brands' transformation from releasing function-oriented advertisements to emotion-oriented one.

When Dove was still a single product (soap) brand, its advertising messages were mainly functions of their products, for instance, "Darling, I'm having the most extraordinary experience....I'm head over heels in Dove". Yet in 2003, hand- and face-care products took Dove to an entire beauty brand, therefore, it was looking for a way to revive its brand. Then in 2004, the executives at Dove saw a great opportunity from the findings of a major global study, *The Real Truth about Beauty: A Global Report*, which revealed that only 2% of women around the world would describe themselves as beautiful (Nance, Susie, Jennifer, and Heidi, 2004). Indeed, not only did women require positive affirmations towards their beauty from the society, but the whole society was in need of changes in perceptions of women's beauty if women's self-confidence and living status were to be facilitated.

Under such circumstance, Dove successfully captured this social tendency by unveiling its revolutionary campaign titled "Real Beauty". By ditching perfect-looking models in favor of real women who were happy and confident women with very real body types, its promotional video generated great emotional appeal to a large women population. More importantly, its sales increased from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion in the 10 years since "Real Beauty" campaign. This achievement was also partly ascribed to an astonishingly increase in women's consumption of beauty brands which came along with their improved socioeconomic status.

Since 2004, an increasing number of beauty brands began to incorporate empowering messages into their advertising, making it a global trend for beauty brands to follow. It is evident that many brands have pivoted their marketing strategies to leverage this emotional tactic, which is an effective strategy given that females are in higher need of affect when evaluating advertisements (McMahan, et al., 2005). And due to the emotions evoked from these ads, they also succeed in creating positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions according to Victoria E. Drake. But as Rossiter & Bellman, 2012 pointed out, emotional messaging is commonly used in hopes of strengthening the relationship between the brand and consumer and ultimately increasing sales.

Therefore, this is essentially a commercial act with emotional tactic, which hopes to create additional social value to the products. Such value lies in its efforts and effectiveness in empowering women, in the absence of which, virtually any beauty products can be only be driven down to the most bottom line, namely, price. Therefore, the conclusion can be made that the essence of women empowerment messages in beauty products advertising is still commercialization, or business matter.

The essence of “3B principle” is to make women feel exhilarated in imagination which has no relation with beauty products themselves, thus maximizing promotional effects. It is the imagination created by the empowering messages that plays the role of appealing to women customers. Similarly, the essence of empowering messages is right located in its commercialization of women images. By bringing women’s problems of aging, marriage and career into public view with authentic portrayals in short documentaries, empowering advertising successfully promotes the product value of its brand to social value. And its seeming social value can appeal to a new generation of women experiencing these challenges, thus promoting itself to a higher commercial level due to the rising consumption level of a new generation of women.

#### **4.2. Social Implications**

The reason why such a commercial act has emotional appeal to large women population lies in that it sheds light on real-life women issues. These women issues are concerned with how women perceive themselves and are perceived by the society, which are basically women’s self-awareness and societal expectations. Self-awareness refers to the ability to recognize oneself as an individual separate from the environment and other individuals. And societal expectations of women are general standards that women are expected to uphold.

For one thing, both individual uniqueness and positivity could be understood as new sets of beauty standards, inspiring women to be aware of their diverse beauty. For decades, beauty brands advertisements have featured models that appear practically flawless. From blemish-free skin to perfectly arched brows, advertising messages epitomize seemingly unattainable beauty standards for women to achieve in physical appearance. However, since Dove’s revolutionary campaign of “Real Beauty”, new sets of beauty standards have been established. In addition to self-confidence proposed by Dove in 2004, beauty keeps being expanded by definition, meanwhile, social empowerment of women is no more constrained to improving confidence as its definition suggests. As the findings demonstrate, every woman individual has her own version of beauty that lies in her uniqueness in appearance, and a series of positive personality traits or characters such as courage, strength, independence, potential, ambition and so on.

For another, empowering messages in advertising demonstrate to the public how women become aware of real-life women issues which are rooted in societal expectations and start to challenge them. These issues faced by women include being labelled as leftover women, facing age problems and suffering marriage anxiety. For instance, promotional videos of Dove, SKII and Olay presented in the findings directly project women’s psychological state of being pressed and pressured in many facets of life. But by allowing them to speak out their real-life issues, they mark great achievement for beauty products advertising in promoting women’s self-awareness and challenging societal expectations.

Therefore, although the true motive of beauty products advertising is the pursuit of business profits, its approach of expanding positive affirmations towards women and empowering them to challenge societal expectations is effective to a certain degree. And gender equality can be promoted somehow in this way.

### 4.3. Practical Effects of Empowering Advertising

Admittedly, women empowerment advertising of beauty products has conveyed positive and advanced ideologies toward the society. However, such advertising is conflicting and contradictory in conveying empowering messages since its ultimate purpose lies in business profits rather than women empowerment.

On the one hand, it is with the goal of changing women's attitudes toward their perception of beauty. Specific approaches proposed by these beauty brands are through women's recognizing their own unique beauty regardless of wrinkles, freckles, scars and so on. This essentially is also affirmation towards women's natural external appearance. In positivity part, women's diverse appearances are also affirmed, either they are too short or fat pointed out by societal expectations. Such affirmation seemingly offers women the confidence to be themselves, yet it is mixed positivity that recognizes all aspects of women regardless of the objective existence of beauty and the consideration of health condition. Therefore, it misleads women in shaping their own social identities to some degree.

Despite all the positive affirmations toward women, these advertisements hardly kept consistent in its societal goals of promotion. Instead of allowing women to be themselves as uniqueness indicate, the encouragement of transformation through make-up and the desire for beauty never disappears. Latent meanings of these empowering messages, especially those appearing in creativity, confidence, courage, ambition and infinite possibility parts, are the indispensability of beauty products and ideal appearance preferred by societal expectations.

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