Master Thesis
Media, Construction and Deconstruction of Beauty Myth
– A Case Study of Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign

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Abstract:

The paper examines the media portrayal of real women in Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign. Through the semiotic analysis and reception analysis of the ad “Evolution”, the author investigates how Dove attempts to challenge the myth in most beauty advertising and present the “real beauty” idea to the audiences. The study further discusses about the gender issues aroused from the campaign. The findings show that the untouchable images of women are created under the pressures of male-dominated culture. In terms of feminism, the definition of beauty needs to be diversified. The significance of the campaign lies in its business success and social meaning as well. In the end, the paper reviews the impacts of this five-year-old campaign and gives further suggestions on its future development.

Keywords:

Real Beauty, Denotation, Connotation, Myth, Self-esteem, Media, Feminism, Gender
1. Introduction

The images of women in most advertisements are portrayed as a beauty myth. Liesbet van Zoonen depicts myth as an imaginary world constructed by mass media to appeal to individual and social fantasies. “Mass media produce and reproduce collective memories, desires, hopes and fears, and thus perform a similar function as myths in earlier centuries.” Advertisements of beauty industry often take advantage of the collective desires or hopes of their target audiences (women consumers) by constructing beauty fantasies. The beauty myth has long existed in the whole industry. “The women that do appear in media content tend to be young and conventionally pretty.”

Stereotypical beauty myth is constructed and reinforced in most advertisements of beauty industry. In the book Feminist Media Studies, Liesbet van Zoonen defines “stereotypes are not images in themselves but radicalized expressions of a common social practice of identifying and categorizing events, experiences, objects or persons.” There are obvious biases in the gender representation perspectives in mass media. According to van Zoonen, “not only does television tell us that women don’t matter very much except as housewives and mothers, but also it symbolically denigrates them by portraying them as incompetent, inferior and always subservient to men. The symbolic annihilation of women will make girls and mature women lack positive images on which to model their behaviour.” Mass media are always criticized by the feminist scholars to produce the stereotypical roles of women in order to reflect the dominant social values. These advertisements make the female audiences unsatisfied with themselves and feel worse about their appearances. The lack of respect towards women is embodied in many ads of beauty industry. These ads are often limited to a narrow definition of beauty and carefully maintain the distorted stereotypes of beauty.

Media and gender problems have often been discussed in communication studies. Media has a function to produce social or cultural symbols. The value conveyed in these symbols dominates the judging criteria of mass audiences: how people look on themselves and how they think of others. The beauty myth constructed or deconstructed by ads, to some extent, affects the aesthetic criteria of most people, the male and female gaze and gender identities in the whole society.

However, Dove’s real beauty campaign breaks through this kind of beauty myth that has long existed in the beauty industry and attempts to reveal how beauty is
constructed. We are surprised to see that diverse and real women without retouching or manipulating the images are shown in both its product and brand advertising. This campaign has aroused extensive discussion about beauty and women in the world. What is real beauty? So here is a question. Does it mean this time Dove tries to deconstruct the myth of stereotypical and flawless perfection and tell the truth to female audiences about the beauty?

1.1. Campaign Background

“The Real Truth About Beauty”\(^5\): A Global Report is a part of the Real Beauty Campaign. This study found that the definition of beauty had become unattainable and women around the world were greatly affected by it. The study reported that only 2% of women around the world reported themselves as beautiful, while 81% of the women in the US believed that the media contributed to the unattainable definition of beauty\(^6\).

Dove created The Campaign for Real Beauty in order to provoke discussion and debunk stereotypes involving beauty, especially in regards to what is portrayed as beautiful in the media. The campaign launched in September of 2004 and featured women who were not the stereotypical definition of beauty. Viewers were then asked to rate the women on the campaign for real beauty website and were given such choices as Oversized? Outstanding? Or Wrinkled? Wonderful?\(^7\). The study also forged into television advertising by showing that hairstyles are not one-size fits all so beauty was not either. Viewers were challenged to change their hairstyle thus implying they should change their definition of beauty.

In June of 2005 Dove entered into its second phase of The Real Beauty Campaign using advertisements that featured six real women who did not have the thin bodies typical of models in the media. The women were real and curvy and inspired thousands of women to the campaign for real beauty website to discuss the advertisements and again challenge the definition of beauty.

\(^5\) “The Real Truth About Beauty study was commissioned by Dove, one of Unilever’s largest beauty brands, to further the global understanding of women, beauty and well-being – and the relationship between them. The survey was fielded between February 27 and March 26, 2004, using the field services of MORI International. Interviews were conducted across ten countries: the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, Italy, France, Portugal, Netherlands, Brazil, Argentina and Japan. The survey has a margin of error of ±1.7 percentage points among the total sample of 3,200.”


\(^6\) http://www.dove.com

\(^7\) http://www.dove.com
The third phase of the Dove campaign was launched in February 2007 with a focus on aging beauty. Dove did another global study, this time titled “Beauty Comes with Age” and found that 91% of women age 50-64 believe that its time to change the view about women and aging. Dove launched its newest campaign to challenge the only young can be beautiful stereotype and produced ads showing women who were outside of the typical age range featured in beauty advertisements.

The special feature of this campaign was its ads and it also became the most successful part of the campaign. Dove posted its ad “Evolution” on YouTube in the October of 2006. In addition to release it on YouTube and Google video, Dove also used other marketing tactics such as: put it on the campaign website, email with a link to the video to its target audiences and use online teaser ads with a click through to the website. Until now, “Evolution” is still under discussion and the comments on the YouTube are updating everyday. We can even find parody pieces of “Evolution” on YouTube and it has also attracted great public attention. After that, Dove launched “Onslaught” on YouTube in 2007, which is the follow-up video of “Evolution”. It further generates wide topics about beauty and self-esteem problems among teenage girls.

1.2. Research Aim

The aim of this paper is to study how beauty myth and gender issues are constructed in the advertisement of the Dove campaign. The ad “Evolution” is the main research object. In order to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings encoded by the advertisers, I will use semiotics to do the research on Dove’s case. With more and more YouTube users actively engage in the online dialogue, different interpretations of the ad have emerged. Thus, the audience reception of the ad is the other important aspect for me to analyze. However, I want to further investigate how Dove launches this campaign to create a beauty debate and makes it global. Therefore, the social and commercial meanings of this campaign are both worth to research.

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8 http://www.dove.com
2. Theoretical Background

2.1. An Overview of Gender Construction in Media

“With regard to gender, the problem lies mainly in the observation that media distort the ‘true’ nature of gender, assuming a stable and easily identifiable distinction between women and men." The mass media tend to express gender in a clear dichotomy to the audience and try to educate the audience to behave properly as a female or male role in the society. The gender stereotypes are no more than pretty women or successful men constructed by the mass media. The topics of how to become attractive women and men are always shown in television, magazines and films. The gender patterns are frequently repeated by the media in order to pump a common sense about gender recognition into the audience.

However, how does the individual deconstruct the gender in the real life? Do they agree with the binary divide between femininity and masculinity socially constructed by the mass media? Here it is worth mentioning queer theory. The queer theory is created by Judith Butler in her book Gender Trouble. It is said that our identity is not fixed at all and it can be changed due to some social and cultural factors. It can also be applied to the gender perspective, namely that “gender is a performance and it should be seen as a fluid variable which can shift and change in different contexts and at different times." In other words, it is irrational for the mass media to construct gender stereotypes and repeatedly impart these images to the audiences. The mass media never think of the self of the audiences. In the past, the audiences are always considered as the passive information receivers. The self of the individual is always ignored by most media products. The mass media incline to create collective memories. These mediated memories do not imply the real world. Instead, they express some biases. It is even more obvious in terms of gender.

It seems that currently the mass media start to respect the proliferation of gender interpretations. The images of real women without retouching are shown in the advertisements of beauty industry. Women gain more social power than ever before. The mass media begin to place great emphasis on the women issues and don’t limit themselves to the sexist representation of women. The traditional gazed objects (women) begin to gaze at whoever they like. The mass media realize the necessity to spread the images of women and challenge the prevailing norms of gender construction. From this point, gender problem seems to find a balanced resolution through this mediated world. “By spreading a variety of non-traditional images and ideas about how people can appear and act, the mass media can serve a valuable role

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9 van Zoonen, P.40
10 Gauntlett, P.139
in shattering the unhelpful moulds of ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles which continue to apply constraints upon people’s ability to be expressive and emotionally liberate beings. The mass media are gradually holding a flexible attitude towards gender performance.

### 2.2. Women, Media, Past

In the early stage of feminist textual research, much work focused on the images of women present in the mass media, such as advertisements, news, soap operas and women’s magazines. Researchers attacked the stereotypical beauty images portrayed by the traditional mass media and further argued that images in most media forms produce “woman as commodity-object and as a negative sign in a male-dominated culture.”

In the book *Media, Gender and Identity*, David Gauntlett analyzes the representation of gender in the past and notes that “women in ads were found to be more concerned about beauty, cleanliness, family and pleasing others.” Women were often portrayed as housewives and seldom present in the working environment. Even though they might be sometimes illustrated in the working place, they were always in the subordinate positions such as secretary or other junior level titles. Compared to men, women seem to have less power in the mass media. They are just the objects to be gazed. The unrealistic images of young, thin, blonde and flawless women were defined as beauty in most advertisements in the beauty industry. The advertising in the past feared to “challenge certain elements of what it thinks the audience needs and expects.”

Besides the textual analysis of images of women present in the mass media, the previous feminist studies also paid attention to the production and reproduction of femininity in media representations. Women were in the positions as passive audiences to consume the media products, by contrast, “men control the meaning of expression – from the press and broadcasting, to advertising, film, publishing and even criticism – by occupying dominant positions within them, and by using the power this give them to convey the ideas and values of a patriarchal order.” From this point, we can easily find that the element that the past advertisements mostly concerned about was not the expectations of their target audiences, but how to embody the male-dominated culture into their commercial values. Even if women were the biggest ads targeted groups, advertising agencies and corporations spared no efforts to reflect the vision of men and their recognition of heterosexual beauty.

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11 Gauntlett, P.151  
12 Thornham, P.6  
13 Gauntlett, P.55  
14 Gauntlett, P.56  
15 Thornham, P.7
The functionalist feminist media theory criticizes that women are often underrepresented in the media and further points out that what the mass media want to reflect is just the dominate social values instead of the subjects of women. The role of media acts negatively towards the audience. It harms the social development of the female group. “The models that media offer are restrictive and endanger the development of girls and women into complete human beings and socially valuable workers.”

2.3. Women, Media, Today

However, since 1990s, the terminology of post-feminism has been put forward. “It is a feminism grounded in consumption as play and it celebrates individuality not collective action, pleasure not politics.” There are some shifts between the past and current feminist studies. Feminist researchers no longer confine themselves to women’s genres; instead, they begin to extend their researches to break the boundaries between the feminine and masculine spheres. Women are exposed to more choices and emancipate themselves from the gender stereotypes. Within the popular culture, the mass media start to pay their attention to the individualism of the audiences. Moreover, “advertisers invented ‘postfeminism’ as a utopia where women could do whatever they pleased, provided they had sufficient will and enthusiasm.”

Women seem to be more liberal and free than ever before. Nowadays, women try to do whatever they want if it brings them pleasures. They start to reconsider their social identities. They begin to realize that they are not the objects subordinated to the power of men. They have their own uniqueness. Sue Thornham pursued the women of post-feminism further. In the book Women, Feminism and Media, she wrote that “feminism itself is seen to belong to the past; what characterises the post-feminist woman of popular culture is individualism, sophistication and choice.”

It seems that today’s media tend to give more space to women and try to diversify the images of women. The social role of women shown in the mass media has gradually changed from just acting as a housewife or working in the service industries, to chasing high-level positions in the business world. Women gain the power to develop their own images. They become professional and sophisticated. However, it is worth pointing out that the feminine beauty defined by the mass media is still quite conservative, especially those present in the product or brand advertisements of the beauty industry. The traditional beauty myth is carefully maintained. Though some slogans of advertisements more or less show the respect to the modern women’s

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16 van Zoonen, P.17
17 Thornham, P.15
18 Gauntlett, P.76
19 Thornham, P.16
uprising social status, the stereotypical images of beauty are still flooded in the vast majority of advertising.

Women are still regarded as the objects of consumption rather than the subjects to produce some meanings. They passively accept the flawless beauty that advertisements represent. Just as van Zoonen writes in her book *Feminist Media Studies*, “representation is a social practice in which current beliefs and myths about women and sexuality are (re)constructed, and that the act of consuming there representations is more than a private pleasure, but also embedded in gendered social and formations that defined women’s bodies as sexual objects.” Today, it is undoubted that women get the freedom to choose and become more and more independent. They don’t regard themselves as the objects to be gazed. They give more consideration to their own identities and needs rather than others’ gaze. But in the context of popular culture, it is also very easy for people to lose their identities and assimilated by others, especially the effects of the mass media.

### 2.4. Beyond Post-feminism, Dove Campaign

“Women’s identities are marked by many other subject positions beyond that of gender – or an unchanging one.” In reference to queer theory, our personal identities are changeable because of various social factors. “Our identities are formed and re-formed through experience, relationships, society, culture, history and language. Our sense of self is not illusory, but neither is it unchanging: it is a matter of constant (re)interpretation, an interpretation of ourselves in time.” Who we are, is an embodied and inherent uniqueness. But each of us has the right to choose who we are, namely that we can behave in some ways to be defined by others. In this case, our identities become even more complicated and multiple. On one hand, the mass media try to control the ideology of people and limit the judging space of the audience; on the other hand, today’s audiences are never passive. They tend to decode the media messages independently and have a critical attitude towards the mediated fantasies represented by the media. Precisely because of this, current media no longer constrain the gender construction. Instead, the mass media become more tolerant and respect the proliferation of gender identifications. Media start to listen to the narratives of the audience and diversify the images of real women or men to meet the needs of various social groups rather than just focusing on the construction of standardized gender models.

With the advent of the digital age, the multi-faceted new media challenge the single-molded traditional media. Old-fashioned gender construction has been

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20 van Zoonen, P.21  
21 Thornham, P.18  
22 Thornham, P.18
criticized by the audiences. At the same time, for instance, the advertising campaigners are no longer blindly creating the gender stereotypes or beauty myth in their product or brand ads. They are attempting to break the traditional gender construction. It is not hard for us to find now in the ads, men have gradually become the objects to be gazed (such as some sexy perfume ads) and while women are portrayed in the important social positions (for example, an increasing number of women are present in the ads of professional business solutions). This change is a product of integration of post-feminism and media digitalization. Digital media make everyone have the right to produce. In the past, the media market was male-dominated. Today, the voice of female audiences has been turned into reality. When the mass media deal with the gender issues, in particular the issues of women, media put women at more and more dominated positions. Women are not only the main body of the consumer group, but also the subject to create their own personal identities. New media technologies create space for women to realize themselves.

Then take a look at Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign and we can find that a global study “The Real Truth About Beauty” is a starting point for the campaign development. It is this global study that gives Dove opportunity to insight into the true thoughts of modern women and their attitudes towards the distorted beauty myth. Moreover, it helps Dove to explore the narrative self of female consumers and develop the real women idea. The subsequent execution of the entire campaign is based on the interactive features of new media technologies, such as developing campaign websites and uploading ads, etc. It allows women to participate in producing media topics and thus invokes widespread concerns in the society, which is unprecedented.
3. Methods

3.1. Semiotic Analysis

Like TV programs and films, ads also make use of visual and aural signs. They are often produced frame by frame. The sequences of an advertisement are constructed by different kinds of signs such as graphic images, use of lighting, sound effects, background music, etc. Viewers can easily pay attention to the denotative elements shown in the advertisement. In the book *Semiotics The basics*, Daniel Chandler defines the term denotation. He points out that “‘denotation’ tends to be described as the definitional, literal, obvious or common-sense meaning of a sign.” The denotative level of meaning seems to be the most literal description which is free of value judgment. However, at the same time, receivers often tend to make the interpretations on the advertisement in their own cultural perspectives. The process of the interpretation is a way to analyze the connotative meanings of an advertisement. Signs encoded in the advertisement always have multiple meanings. They are polysemic and open to different interpretations. The connotative level of meaning is in a higher order to do semiotic analysis. According to Chandler, “the term ‘connotation’ is used to refer to the socio-cultural and ‘personal’ associations (ideological, emotional, etc.) of the sign.” From this point of view, “connotation is thus context-dependent.” It is about how the audiences feel about what they have read or heard. It also helps to make the two-dimensional descriptive advertising images into a three-dimensional real world, the world with conventional social values and culturally-agreed ideology.

“Semiotics or semiology is the study of signs in society. It encompasses every use of a system where something (the sign) carries a meaning for someone.” The semiotic approach can be used to discuss the language-based media and image-based media. Advertisements are the combinations of both linguistic and visual media. Advertisers make their slogans bold and visual signs creative to draw attentions from the viewers. Apparently this is just the denotative aspect of an advertisement. It labels the products that the advertisers want to promote. However, some frames of the ad intentionally decode some meanings which come from our social experience. A special camera angle, focus, graphic color, lightings and sounds in the advertisement will endow an ordinary product with more meanings. It is not just an image of static object. “Products become signs with a certain social value.” The aim of advertisements is to bring the signs and their connotations together to construct a particular myth. “For
Roland Barthes, myths were the dominant ideologies in our time\textsuperscript{28}. Myth is above the connotation level. Thus it can be seen that it's hard to deconstruct the myth long existed in our society. The function of myth is “to naturalize the cultural – in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely natural, normal, self-evident, timeless, obvious common sense – and thus objective and true reflections of ‘the way things are’\textsuperscript{29}.” Myth holds its social significance.

In the book \textit{Media Semiotics: An introduction}, Jonathan Bignell says that “the semiotic analysis of the signs and codes of advertisements has also often been used to critique the mythic structures of meaning when ads work to communicate\textsuperscript{30}.” Advertising has its commercial and ideological functions. The signs and codes in the advertisements tend to create certain meanings. “The aim of ads is to engage us in their structure of meaning, to encourage us to participate by decoding their linguistic and visual signs and to enjoy this decoding activity\textsuperscript{31}.” The viewers are supposed to understand the meanings of the signs in ads based on their own cultural or social experience. The connotations of these signs are what the advertisers intend to present to the audience and want to make them clear to the consumers.

Semiotics is considered as one of the strategies of textual analysis. “The goal of textual analysis is not finding the ‘correct meaning’ of the text but ‘finding out likely interpretations’ (McKee, 2003)\textsuperscript{32}.” A text brings together different signs such as graphic images, conversations, gestures and sounds, etc. These signs can be either word based or image based. “Semiotics seeks to study the relationship of one element in a system to another. All elements in a text function as ‘signs’, and signs produce potential meanings, not through their relationship to the ‘real world’ (the referent) but to other signs\textsuperscript{33}.” For Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign, there are three main elements to be analyzed in the perspective of semiotics: technology, character and narrative. Through studying these elements of the ad, it will help to reveal how this ad tries to deconstruct the mythic meaning of feminine beauty and how gender/beauty issue is positioned by the mass media.

To be specific, the technological elements consists of camera use, lighting and the pace or speed of the ad. This part is the most denotative level of analysis. It is about what can be seen, what can be heard and how different materials of the ad are organized. But the technological elements will also imply the connotative meanings of the ads. For instance, the advertising producers can use different angles or positions of the camera to induce the products with particular meanings and commercial values.

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28 & Chandler, P.144 \tabularnewline
29 & Chandler, P.145 \tabularnewline
30 & Bignell, P.33 \tabularnewline
31 & Bignell, P.33 \tabularnewline
32 & Hughes, P.255 \tabularnewline
33 & Hughes, P.258 \tabularnewline
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\end{tabular}
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Sometimes the camera movements such as scanning scenes up and down (tilts), or horizontally (pans), tracking shots, zoom in or out lenses etc might signify specific meanings for the products. Therefore, “these camera positions and movements can all be used to produce connotations.” Similarly, lighting techniques can be also used to connote the mythic meanings the ad wants to promote and make their target group be aware of that. The use of the ‘key light’, ‘fill lights’ and ‘back lights’ on the subjects or characters will help to make the environment more realistic. However, it might also yield more atmospheric effects to obtain the audience attention onto the important details. “Lighting can also become a foregrounded effect, when light, darkness or particular shadows signify as part of the narrative, and extend lighting’s role in emphasizing parts of the frame or parts of figures in it.” The changes in the pace or speed of the advertisements have some transitional effects on the story and increase some kind of pleasure or entertainment for the ads. It sometimes helps the viewers to grasp the intention of the ads quickly.

The second element that will be studied based on semiotic analysis in the ad is its characters, especially the leading role in this ad – the ordinary real woman who is dressed up and retouched into a photoshopped version of ‘beauty’. The young models or celebrities who have good shaped bodies and flawless faces are always seen as the signs of ‘feminine beauty’ in the advertisements of beauty industry. Their figures and names are carried onto the brands of the skin care products or make-ups. The gender positioning issues in advertisements are tied up with the character, her face, her pose and her body. The character herself and how she displays herself in the advertisement determine the audience’s perceptions of beauty in the ground of mediated world.

The third element that will be discussed here is the narrative of this ad. “Narrative is the term for the process by which the story is told. Story and narrative are common to all human culture, and always encode a way of making sense of our experience through their structure and form.” In order to attract the eyeballs of target audiences, the commercial ads always put some contradictions and problems in their narratives. The oppositional parts of the narrative will produce some disorders and conflicts, which further helps to amplify the effects to a large extent. Products are often given some mythic meanings by the advertisers through the conflicts in the story and narrative of the advertisement. The features of narrative in an advertisement will never be stable. The functions of narrative seek pleasures and something tends to make a change. For example, advertisers like to use comparative approach to show the difference between before-use the products and after-use the products and to exaggerate this change to meet the consumer psychology. Myth inserted in the ads will be strengthened by this kind of approach to make the audience believe in. “Like myth, narrative plays out and encodes real issues at a symbolic level.” But overall,

34 Bignell, P.188
35 Bignell, P.189
36 Bignell, P.191
37 Bignell, P.191-P.192
the aim of advertising narratives is to “keep the viewer watching by assembling verbal and visual signs in ways which are entertaining or informative.”

Semiotic approach is always considered as a way to analyze the signs and codes of any medium. Therefore, “the discourse of semiotic analysis is limited by its focus on texts and a tendency to forget the social context of media involvement.” It is the same case when semiotics is introduced to study the texts of advertisements. Its limitation is that it only pays attention to the denotative level – the contents of the advertisements. It is mostly based on studying the descriptive perspective of a media production and lack of doing further research on the connotative level. Bignell points out that “films exist in a complex social context, where the mythic meanings circulating in a culture affect the ways they are decoded, and where the film text is not the only source of meanings.” It is true for the advertisements as well. Advertising is just like a short film. The advertising text is not the only source of meanings. The ways that target audiences decode the text are another important aspect to do analysis. How viewers understand the connotative meanings of the advertising text and the mythic ideology embodied in the advertisement will been well worth a fairly detailed consideration.

3.2. Reception Analysis

It is the viewers who consume and decode the meanings and ideology that the advertising producers try to construct in their advertisements. In the process of decoding the denotative level of an advertisement, viewers usually take up their own subject-positions to read the advertisements based on their different social experience and culture knowledge. Therefore, the connotative meanings of an advertisement can be interpreted into wide ranges. “This issue of positioning by the text is central to the way that ads (and other kinds of text) have been discussed by semiotic critics. In order to make sense of the signs in an ad, it is necessary for the reader to adopt a particular subject-position.” The mythic representations conveyed in the advertisement can be identified by the viewers through decoding these visual and aural signs. “So different decodings are produced by viewers who occupy different social positions in a particular society, as well as by viewers who live in different nations and cultures.”

Advertising, like other media has its social effects. In the past, viewers are always looked as completely passive media-generated culture victims. The reception approaches at that time focus on what the media will do to the viewers. Nowadays, with the emergence of the social media, such as YouTube, Facebook and MySpace,
etc, advertising producers make use of these new media to attract their target audience more easily, but at the same time, the social media provide the immediate feedback function for the audience to interact with each other. It seems to be a big challenge for most advertisers. The audiences are no longer affected by the media in the same way. Even the same piece of media products can be interpreted in different perspectives. Thus, current reception analysis intends to study what the viewers will do with the media and how they interact with each other. The innovation of media technology makes the recent advertisements become more interactive and this new feature of advertisements helps them to invite the target audience to participate and involve in their campaigns. The viewers on the internet help the advertisers to create topics and make the brands go global. The internet user-generated contents become even more important for the advertising producers to do research on and take advantage of them to prepare for their next campaign.

There are different methods to conduct reception analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative ways are widely used by researchers to study the way how the audience interact with the media and deconstruct the media messages. Scholars in media and communication field always refer to Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model to do audience research. Hall’s encoding and decoding communication model is like a basic guideline for researchers of media studies to do reception analysis.

According to Hall’s model, we can find that the audiences are active during the process of their media consumption. The text messages are never fixed or static. Hall thinks that these text messages themselves have multiple meanings. In Hall’s words, they are polysemic. The decoding process of the media messages is somehow influenced by the dominant ideologies and social contexts. Different receivers can interpret the messages in different ways based on their own cultural experience or social positions. “Hall thus gave a significant role to the ‘decoder’ as well as to the ‘encoder’ and presented communication as a socially contingent practice 43.” The media messages themselves do not simply transmit the meanings encoded by the senders. In other words, the message senders are not the only one to construct meanings. The receivers are also actively participating in the processes of meaning construction. Both encoders and decoders are involved.

“In media reception research, processes of meaning construction are the object of analysis 44.” Different social positions of the readers will lead to different interpretations on the mass media texts. “Audiences, in their decoding, are assumed to accept, negotiate or oppose the preferred meaning of the text 45.” It is because that “mass media codes offer their readers social identities which some may adopt as their own. But readers do not necessarily accept such codes. Where those involved in communicating do not share common codes and social positions, decodings are likely

43 Chandler, P.186
44 Hagen, P.59
45 Hagen, P.60
to be different from the encoder’s intended meaning. Hall proposes three kinds of specific readings of the text by social positions of different social groups: dominant reading, negotiated reading and oppositional reading. Dominant reading is also called hegemonic reading. “The reader fully shares the text’s code and accepts and reproduces the preferred reading – in such a stance the code seems natural and transparent.” In the case of negotiated reading, “the reader partly shares the text’s code and broadly accepts the preferred reading, but sometimes resists and modifies it in a way which reflects their own position, experiences and interests – this position involves contradictions.” As for oppositional reading, it is called counter-hegemonic as well. “The reader, whose social situation places them in a directly oppositional relation to the dominant code, understands the preferred reading but does not share the text’s code and rejects this reading, bring to bear an alternative frame of reference.”

The processes of meaning construction are just like the negotiations between the senders and the receivers. The text encoders and decoders are simultaneously creating meanings. The interaction between the mass media text and different social groups is worthy of further research.

In the article Creation of Socio-Cultural Meaning Media Reception Research and Cognitive Psychology, Ingunn Hagen lists six most important features of reception analysis and further mentions that “one of the most fruitful achievements of reception research is the attempt to combine interests in textual signification and interpretive action.” This combination has gone beyond the denotative or connotative levels of meaning. It reaches the third level of meaning: “the socio-cultural meaning level, which is the one of most interest for reception analysis.” The socio-cultural level of meaning is like the myth constructed in the media texts. The third level of meaning is more than simply decoding the media texts. Instead, the meaning is decoded in context.

Hall’s encoding and decoding model is significant in the theory of reception analysis and it is applied by numerous reception researchers, such as Morley, etc. “The model is an attempt to theorize the role of ideology in textual production under certain social, economic and historical conditions.” Without a doubt, there are some limitations existed in Hall’s model. However, it still gives a good reference for researchers to do reception analysis. Back to Dove’s campaign itself, the YouTube online audiences are the main subjects for me to study. I will examine how they interpret the ad (decoding the meanings of media texts) and how they interact with each other and the advertiser to discuss the beauty myth (creating new meanings in different contexts).

46 Chandler, P.186
47 Chandler, P.194
48 Chandler, P.195
49 Chandler, P.195
50 Hagen, P.62
51 Hagen, P.62
52 Hagen, P.60
How to precisely conduct the reception research also needs some practical approaches. The popular way to do audience analysis is quite qualitative and empirical. Qualitative interviews such as focus group are regarded as allowing researchers to get in-depth thoughts from the respondents. The qualitative group interviews really help the scholars to get more detailed results about how the audience interpret and decode the text messages. Furthermore, during the interviews, investigators can observe the actions of interviewees and catch their face expressions to reach the psychological level of audience analysis. But it is not quite fit into my case. It’s very hard for me to select ideal representative samples because I will be limited to the following aspects. The first issue is ethnography. I’m doing my master thesis in Uppsala, Sweden now. I may tend to choose the interviewees from the Swedish people since it’s easier to carry out and more random than average. But the campaign is a global case. The ethnographical problem of the sample data will be a big weakness for my study. The second problem concerns about the range of age. Most people I know here are students studying in Uppsala University. The limited social connections of mine will lead to the neglect of other social classes and occupations. Once again, this will be another weakness when doing research on audience reception especially for the advertising campaigns. Commercials are like a piece of our everyday life. Everyone encounters them whether intentional or unintentional.

Based on these limited sample data to conduct interview, the results will be biased to a certain extent. In addition to this, some other elements such as the number of the groups, different designs and arrangements of the interview questions, may also have some effects on the results. It may overlook the generalized conclusions, which results in the subjectivity of research.

Therefore, I will choose the other way to do my reception analysis on Dove’s case. I will examine the comments from YouTube users on this ad. I will randomly choose the sample data and do some simple data mining work to eliminate some useless or meaningless comments. Then categorize these comments based on different positionings of the online audience to gain the basic conclusions. I’m not sure that I can get very insightful results through studying these comments but at least I can obtain a general and objective overview of how the target audience interpret and decode this campaign and interrelate with each other to generate more valuable topics. It may also helps me to understand how online communication impacts on audience reception of media production in a non-traditional way.

3.3. Data Selection

3.3.1. Selection Rules

Till the 25th of Nov, 2009, there are 4,729 comments about the ad “Evolution” on
YouTube website. The ad has been launched online over 3 years. For the year 2006, it receives 335 comments. It gets 1,365 feedbacks in the year 2007. During the year 2008, 1,518 comments can be found on the YouTube site. There are still 1,511 new comments this year. From the above simple statistic data, we can find that the ad has attracted widespread attentions from the online audiences. It seems that the number of the comments on the ad has been rising year by year. The audiences are still quite interested in the topics generated by the ad and actively involved in the discussions about the campaign.

In order to get more detailed investigations about how the online users interpret the ad in different perspectives, I will randomly choose 100 comments from each year. That will be 400 comments in total to do reception analysis. In the following paragraphs, I will further specify how to handle these data and make sample data from the 4,729 comments.

The first step is to access these data and document them. Go to the YouTube website and search for the ad “Evolution” posted by one of the director Tim Piper on the 6th of Oct, 2006. It is because that this version is the most original one uploaded by the producer of this ad. There are 4,729 comments in all till the 25th of Nov, 2009. I copy and paste them in the Microsoft word doc to save these data. Then I try to convert the Microsoft word doc into Microsoft excel sheet to make it easier to do data processing.

The second step is to do basic data cleaning based on Microsoft excel sheet. I separate these data into four columns: YouTube User Names, Post Time, Comment Ratings and Comments. In order to further clean these data and do data mining more effectively, I will try to add three more columns to make some marks. It will help me in filtering useful data information from all the data. One column will be inserted to mark the number of the data. 1, 2, 3, 4…100…1,000…3,000…4,729 each number will be assigned to each row of data. It’s a sequence column. It helps me refer to the data easily when doing the reception analysis. The numbers in this column do not contain any meanings or values. I put them here to arrange the data in order. The second mark column I will add in the excel sheet is time mark. It is named Mark 1 (Time) in the excel sheet. I will insert this mark column before the column of Post Time. According to the post time of the comments, I will mark number 0 to 3 in this column. To be specific, 0 means this year, 1 means 1 year ago, 2 means 2 years ago and 3 means 3 years ago. Using these time marks to filter data, I can get the exact batch of data according to the time period. As mentioned above, the sample data will be selected year by year to do further study. This mark column will help me to identify the target data quickly. The third additional make column I will put in this sheet is about comment category mark. It is called Mark 2 (Comment Categories) in the excel sheet. This mark column will be inserted before the column of Comment Ratings. Here, I will also use the Arabic numbers to categorize different types of comments. For examples, 0 means invalid data, which is meaningless or unfit to my research frames. Number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and so on will be applied to different categories these comments
in. As long as a new category of the interpretations on the ad is found and identified, this new category will be given a new value (marked a new Arabic number) and so on. For instance, if we mark the comments related to beauty issues as number 1, once we find another type of comments such as gender problems, then we mark this new category a new number, such as number 2. So the numbers shown in the second and third additional column do imply some meanings and values. They are different from the numbers in the first column.

The third step is to decide how to randomly select the sample data year by year. Before proceeding data selection process, I have roughly gone through all the 4,729 comments and reach the conclusions that there are several types of data are invalid. The invalid data in this project means the comments are totally nonsense or out of the research topics I will later do analysis on. These invalid data will be marked as 0 and then filtered out when doing the reception analysis. However, they will be still documented in the new excel sheet as the sample data.

The comments can be marked as 0 are generally as follows:
1. The comments which are removed by the authors. It turns out blank in the column of Comments and marked as “Comment removed by the author” in the column of Comment Ratings;
2. The comments which are slanderous or insulting and they are not relevant to the issue: e.g., “lol you dumb or what...” (Comment No.1553 by TVAExtreme); “yeah and go stick a finger in your mouth like the rest of them” (Comment No.4486 by jol1bee);
3. The comments which are written in other languages except English, such as Spanish, Japanese, etc: e.g., “Pocos ven lo que somos, pero todos ven lo que aparentamos.” (Comment No.268 by red938); "やり方を教えてくださいいっ!!;とくに首を長くする方法と小顔にする方法。7,0?” (Comment No.801 by ASKISKW);
4. The comments which do not make any sense: e.g., “I once ate a man whole.” (Comment No.3101 by lawlzore); “w w w . m y s p a c e . c o m /operationclass” (Comment No. 4006 by feedtheflamex2);
5. The comments which are too simple without any interpretations on the ad: e.g., “stupid” (Comment No.2571 by johanmog); “Lol i like it.” (Comment No.4102 by Mishatje2901);
6. The comments which are only inquiring for the techniques or background music of this ad without further decoding these elements: e.g., “The song is Passage D by The Flashbulb. He is one of my favorite musicians of all time. Look him up.” (Comment No.598 by MCRenaissance); “No I’m quite sure is not Photoshop, may be a custom tool perhaps.” (Comment No.4023 by ArturoN);
7. The comments which are duplicated, keep the first one and the others are defaulted as invalid: e.g., “I wrote this book called BEAUTY: EXTINCT. I see a
lot of girls who eat less to be more pretty and more skinny. But they don’t understand and nobody is out there to teach these young girls that the less you eat the more you lose your physical beauty. I give it out free and it is part of a campaign for beauty (physical beauty). If you want a free book just email me at rankotutu at yahoo and i will email you a pdf file. My full name is Ranko Tutulugdzija (google me if you think this is a joke)” (Comment No.54 & No.61 by tutulugdzija).

With regard to the process of data selection, I will choose the newest 100 comments (according to the post time) for all these years. I will use the standards discussed above to judge the data invalidation. If it’s invalid, I will mark it as 0 and then filter it out. Specifically, take the data of year 2009 as an example, I will take the latest 100 comments from No.1 to No.100 as my sample data and save them in a new excel sheet to further determine the validity of these data and categorize them. This data selection process will be also applied to the other 3 years. Briefly 400 comments will be randomly selected as the sample data to be documented in a new excel sheet, further categorized and made comment marks.

One important thing need to be emphasized in the end of this section is that one of the ad producers Tim Piper also joined the dialogues generated by the audiences. He is the one who first posted the ad on YouTube website. His user name on YouTube is tipper. Mr. Piper answered some questions from the online audiences from the perspective of an advertising creator. The comments he posted online also includes his interpretations on the ad and sort of thoughts about the media industry and marketing tactics. It is necessary to document the conversations between the encoder (Time Piper) and the decoders (the online audiences) as well besides the 400 sample data. This will be another interesting part to do reception research on.

3.3.2. Selection Process

According to the above-mentioned data selection rules, for the year 2009, I choose the latest 100 comments from comment No.1 to No.100 as a set of sample data. Document them in the sample data sheet and then determine the validity of these 100 comments. After reading all the selected data, only 52 comments among them are valid and can be categorized. While the left 48 data are identified as invalid for my case, marked as 0 and filtered out. In terms of the year 2008, the comments from No.1512 to No.1611 are selected from the total 1,518 comments. Among the 100 sample data of year 2008, 54 of them are valid while other 46 comments are identified as invalid. As regards the year 2007, I choose the comments from No.3029 to No.3129. In this set of data, 1 of them is from the year 2008, so it will not be saved as the 100 sample data of year 2007. However, among the documented 100 comments

Comment No.3031
from the year 2007, 39 of them are unqualified and the rest 61 comments will be further categorized. As for the oldest year 2006, the comments from No.4388 till No.4494 are selected. In the meantime, 754 of this batch of data are from the year 2007. So they will not be considered as the sample data for the year 2006. They will not be saved in the new sheet. The sample data qualification rate of year 2006 is 58%. That means 58 comments out of the 100 samples are qualified to be marked depending on which comment categories they might be in. The other 42 comments are unqualified and marked as 0.

Among the 100 sample data from the year 2006, 55 sets of data are different from the other comments. They are the conversations between the encoder (Tim Piper) and the decoder (the YouTube users). However, among these 14 comments, 5 of them are identified as invalid because they only involve the discussions about the background music and photoshop techniques of the ad. But it’s worth mentioning that these kinds of data still need to be paid more attentions to and are valuable for my research. They are the direct interactions among the producer and the audience.

In general, there are 32 comments from the producer Tim Piper out of 4,729 comments. Most of them (27 comments) are from the first year 2006 when the ad was just launched. 4 of them are from the second year 2007 and only one comment is from a year ago. As mentioned in the early Data Selection part, the conversations among Tim Piper and the audiences are also an important aspect to do comments analysis. There are 89 comments generated through the communication between the encoder and the decoder. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, 14 of these comments belong to the 100 sample data of the year 2006. So there are 75 more data will be saved and documented as sample. Tim Piper as one of the creator of this ad, he tries to ask the questions put forward by the audiences, such as the background music, retouching program, character, campaign background, media and the beauty industry. However, it is apparent that some of them are invalid for my case to do further reception analysis. But at the mean time, he shares lots of his own insights about the campaign and the industry as well. This kind of comments definitely generates the meaningful discussions about the beauty and the industry among the audiences. The online users seem quite excited to join in the conversations and express their own points of views. After generally reading these 89 comments picked from the dialogues between Tim Piper and the audiences, 50 of them are talking about the background music, retouching techniques or some simple compliment words towards the ad, etc. So they will be marked as 0 and considered as invalid. But they will still be saved as the sample data. The other 39 valid comments will be used to further categorize.

So as a conclusion for the comments description, there are total 475 comments are

54 Comments No.4390, No.4394, No.4397, No.4431, No.4432, No.4433 and No.4452
55 Comment No.4400 & No.4401, Comment No.4444, No.4445 & No.4446, Comment No.4448, No.4449, No.4450 & No.4451, Comment No.4463 & No.4464 and Comment No.4466, No.4467 & No.4468
selected from the original 4,729 data. They are all documented in a new excel sheet to do further analysis. Among these 475 comments, 220 data are identified as invalid and marked as 0. There are still 255 data can be further categorized. The comment categories will be judged through different perspectives. As long as one comment could be found with a new meaning or implying something new, a new set of category will be created. The way to categorize the comments and do further reception analysis will be discussed in detail in the following part of this paper.

3.4. Method Reflection

The issue of method validity and reliability will be discussed in this section before moving to the next analysis part. The methods I choose to do further analysis on the ad are semiotic analysis and reception analysis. As have discussed before, these two approaches have their own limitations but they can complement each other. Semiotic analysis is a way more concerned about the denotative level of meaning, while reception analysis is a method related to the connotative level of meaning. Using semiotic analysis, I can easily get some likely interpretations on the ad from the perspectives I choose: technology, character and narrative. The three dimensions I choose to analyze this ad cannot be considered as well-rounded. But at least, these three parts are the most important elements to consist this ad and worthy of further research. Besides the potential limitations in the objective research aspects of semiotics, my interpretations on the ad will be another possible deficiency. It’s inevitable for a researcher to obtain some personal opinion based on his/her social experience and culture background when conducting semiotic analysis on a piece of media product. That’s why reception analysis should be taken into account. It can bring actual interpretations from the perspective of audiences and diversify the research themes. From this point, reception analysis can be seen as a way to complement the limitation of semiotics. The combined use of these two research methods will give me a better view on the purposes and meanings of the ad and ensure the objectivity of the paper as well.

In terms of the data selection for this case, the comments on the YouTube website from the online users are good data resource for me to conduct reception analysis. The total amount of comments is a huge database. So I randomly select 475 comments (around 10% of the total 4,729) as my sample data. Judging from the amount of the sample data, it’s kind of small. But in order to do qualitative analysis on the comment, I think it’s a reasonable amount and I can get more in-depth results from these comments. Another note on the comments is that before I decide to choose 10% of the total data as my sample, I generally go through all the 4,729 comments and get some rough ideas that these comments can be basically categorized into specific themes. However, common sense may tell us that the bigger the database is, the easier to find a new category of the comments. But for this case, I don’t think it will be a good idea
to handle all these data or half of these comments. On the contrary, it will be a mess since the themes of these comments can be assumed to some extent. So what is left is to do more in-depth analysis on them. Other than this reason, how to explain the problems clearly limited to the length of the paper I work on is another aspect to consider.
4. Analysis

4.1. The Shotlist for Dove’s “Evolution”

Before doing close and in-depth analysis of the ad “Evolution”, it is necessary for us to document the image and sound codes in this ad. As Peter Hughes mentions in his article *Text and Textual Analysis*, “one way of trying to record notes for a semiotic analysis is by means of a shot list.” It is a way to help us visualize the syntagmatic structure of the ad and assist us in “‘freezing’ the text long enough for some analysis.”

The purpose of this shotlist is that it can make the relationships among different elements such as image, sound, music and narrations, etc within the ad clearer and easier to see and follow. But one thing should be mentioned here is that when writing down these elements, I am actually trying to create another version of the text because it is constructed in my words. Hence, it is unavoidable to eliminate my personal interpretation of the ad in the process of creating shotlist.

To do the shotlist, I choose the film posted by tpiper (A YouTube account belongs to Tim Piper who created and co-directed the ad) on the 6th of Oct, 2006. It is the very first version of the ad uploaded on YouTube website and launched as a key element of Dove Real Beauty Campaign to generate gender issue or feminine beauty discussion in the virtual world. Till today (25th of Nov, 2009), it has received 9,780,025 views and 4,729 text comments. I will use this version of the ad and play it on my computer to do further research. It is quite easy to control the YouTube video on the internet. We can play, stop, pause and replay the video at any time. We can even drag the timeline to see each frame of the video to document the important codes and signs in the ad.

The ad can be divided into seventh segments. The shotlist of this advertisement will be created segments by segments. The fourth segment will be the main one to describe. It is the transformation of a real girl from average-looking to billboard-looking. This transformation is the most dramatic part of this short film. It indicates how the representation of feminine beauty is evolved from the reality by the mass media. Hence, this segment should be thoroughly analyzed.

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56 Hughes, P.265
57 Hughes, P.265
58 http://www.youtube.com/watch?index=0&feature=PlayList&p=051344725FBFBF07&hl=en&v=iYhCn0jf46U&playnext=1
### Shotlist – Dove’s “Evolution”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>segments</th>
<th>Time codes</th>
<th>Visual signs</th>
<th>Aural signs</th>
<th>Texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>The appearance of the leading role character – she is young, looks like in her early twenties wearing a tight white vest. She is accompanied by a woman to the studio. The woman seems to be a studio assistant. After she enters the studio room, she sits on a chair and faces the big mirror.</td>
<td>The noisy sounds (daily working environment) from the studio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>Black background</td>
<td>a Dove film</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>The girl looks at someone who is near her in the studio. She gives the nod to the staff besides her and softly says ‘yes’. This indicates that she is ready. Then she finally turns her attention to the camera lens.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; (Transformation process)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>Lights on.</td>
<td>Background music begins: Passage D from The Flashbulb. It lasts till the end of the ad.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>At this moment her face is without any make-ups and her hair is not stylish.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>Turn on the light in a new way.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>Black background</td>
<td>Evolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>Makeup process:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Put foundation on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>Photo shooting.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>Photoshop retouching process:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Lengthen her neck;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Adjust the curve of her shoulder;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Adjust the color of her face;</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Adjust the shape of her face;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Alter her hair;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Raise her brow ridges;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Make her eyes bigger;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▲ Make her forehead narrower;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make her lips look more full, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>A new image is born. The girl on the billboard looks quite different from the very beginning of this ad.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Black background</td>
<td>No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>Black background</td>
<td>Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshop for Girls. Visit campaignforrealbeauty.ca the dove self-esteem fund</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.2. Technology, Character and Narrative

As mentioned in the previous part, I will do semiotic analysis of the ad based on three key elements: technology, character and narrative. These three elements are the main components to constitute this ad. They imply both denotative and connotative meanings of this ad. These three elements are worthy of further investigation here.

#### 4.2.1. Technology

In the first place, I will study the technological part of this ad. We can easily see, hear and feel the camera use, positions and movements, lighting effects, background music and changes in the pace of the advertisement. The producers encode some meanings through these visual and aural signs. No special shooting angles could be found in the ad “Evolution”. Most of the time, from the very beginning to the end of the ad, the advertising producers keep the same positions and angles of the camera to record the whole process of the beauty evolution. Only one zoom-out lens (at 0.50, the 5th segment of this ad) shows when the image of the leading role character (girl) is on the billboard. It somehow indicates a new image is born. An average-looking girl turns into a billboard-looking model.

The lighting effects are used in this ad as well. The first few frames of the advertisement look relatively dull from 0.00 to 0.11. However, at 0.12, the beginning of the 4th segment, the light is turned on. This lighting effect shows the start of the...
transformation process. The second light is turned on in a different way at 0.15, followed by a black background with white text ‘evolution’ on it. The change of lighting effects at this moment highlights the main plot (make-up and photoshop retouching process) of this ad. These two lighting effects only appear in the 4th segment during the whole ad. It further emphasizes the importance of that segment.

With the lights turn on, the background music starts to play. The sudden change in both visual and aural codes at the same time (0.12) indicates that the most dramatic story will happen then. The background music Passage D is created by the Flashbulb. It is remixed for this ad. It’s sort of experimental electronic music. The rhythms of the background music are very consistent with the scenes of the film. It makes the make-up and photoshop retouching processes more noticeable. It also helps to make the story of this ad more tensional and dramatic. At the moment the studio workers start to help the girl making up (at 0.22), the rhythms of the background music become slightly faster. Here, the advertising producers tend to encode an exaggerated effect into this dramatic transformation process. It not only highlights the beauty evolution process of the ad, but also calls the attentions of the target groups. The changes in the rhythms of the background music can make the audience feel a bit more excited to watch the ad. This includes some kind of psychological implications. When the cover girl arises (at 0.50), the music begins to ease down. It indicates the end of the advertisement.

The camera use, positions and movements, lighting effects and background music play important roles on the changes in the pace of the advertisement. The advertising producers encode these technological elements to make the ad different. In the ad “Evolution”, the producers encode the noisy sounds from the studio in the first three segments of the ad. The aural signs reproduce the working environment of everyday life. These signs bring the audience to the real life experience. When the music begins to play, the 4th segment of the ad starts. This is the most dramatic segment of this ad. The pace begins to change when there are more intense rhythms of the background music coming out (at 0.22). The combined use of the lighting and sound effects make the 4th segment different from the previous ones. Something unreal or in other words, beyond our imaginations occur in this segment. With the acceleration of the pace, the advertisement also reaches its most creative and eye-catching part. At the same time, it indicates the end is coming soon as well. When the zoom-out lens appears and the music slows down in the 5th segment (at 0.50), the stories have been told by the advertising producers. The results of the beauty evolution present in the 5th segment, followed by the slogan of this ad: “No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted.” The relatively slow pace in the end of the ad leaves more space for the audience to think about.
4.2.2. Character

Secondly, I will analyze the character in the ad “Evolution”. It’s quite obvious that the leading role character in this ad is a pretty but ordinary girl. Her name is “Stephanie Betts, a cartoonist and producer of Canadian animated television programming”. When choosing the model for an advertisement, the advertising producers will definitely consider whether the model is suitable for the character and can present the key messages encoded in this specific advertisement. From this point, Stephanie Betts is not the ordinary girl that we usually define as. She is pretty. She also has some potential to be a real model especially after making-up and some other studio work. To a certain extent, she is carefully selected. One of the original art directors of the ad says that “she would be an ideal representation of the norm, highlighting the extreme changes that models undergo in the fashion industry.”

Then come back to the ad, it’s undeniable that the girl is an ideal candidate to be selected as the leading role character for this ad. The advertisement opens with this average-looking girl entering the studio. She is like every ordinary girl we can meet on the streets in our real life. Nothing special or stunning could be found through judging her appearance. The compliment words such as “hot”, “beautiful” or “gorgeous” are a little bit exaggerated to describe her appearance. In the beginning part of this advertisement, the girl is without adding any make-ups. It’s a bit out of the audience’s expectations that there should be some strikingly beautiful women with flawless faces and perfect curves shown in the commercial ads, especially the advertisements of beauty industry. In addition, she looks very nervous and feels uncomfortable in front of the camera. It seems that this is her very first time to join such kind of advertising campaign. Just like an ordinary people, she is not confident enough to show herself before a whole studio team. In the first three segments of this ad, the girl leaves us with the impression that she is an ordinary girl, not good looking enough to be picked as an advertising model and with limited experience in shooting project. She is just like every one of us. It’s hard to define her as a beauty when you make a comparison between this girl and the other typical stereotypes constructed by the mass media. But at least you may think that she is a real woman. She is different from the traditional models in the commercials.

During the 4th segment, i.e. the transformation process, the girl stares at the camera. A team of people help her adding make up and altering her hair. She is transformed into a billboard looking woman. After all these physical adjustments, a series of camera flashes begins. The photographer takes pictures of the woman in various poses. One picture is chosen from a pile of photos, which is used to do further photoshop retouching. The final image is transferred into a billboard advertisement in the 5th segment of the ad. The new image of the girl is born. She’s not the shy girl who enters

60 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution_(advertisement)
the studio at the very beginning. She becomes a cover girl with elegant facial features, perfect facial form, flawless skin and curved body. She looks confident and sophisticated. The real girl is turned into a fake beauty in the end.

The girl herself and how she performs in the ad makes the dramatic transformation process into an extreme. It achieves the advertising effects. What we can connote from the display of the character is that we should rethink about what beauty is. From this perspective, Dove intends to break the conventional way of representing women in the advertisements and challenges the stereotypical beauty characters in most advertisements through using this real woman to debunk the mythical ideology of feminine beauty.

4.2.3. Narrative

The last element I will analyze here is the narrative aspect of the ad “Evolution”. Within a few seconds of an advertisement, the narrative of the story is particularly important. It determines whether this advertisement can attract the target groups to read about it and have the interests in interpreting it. The advertising agencies always present bold creative ideas to their clients to make what they want to sell sound special. There are many different ways for the producers to organize the narrative of the story. The most common approach used by the advertising producers is to make comparisons among oppositional parts. It usually results in some conflicts and changes and has certain entertaining effects.

Take a look at the ad “Evolution” and we can find that Dove gets rid of the conventional way of storytelling tricks in most advertisements of beauty industry which intend to show the magic functions of the skin care products or make-ups. An ordinary girl has taken the place of super models or celebrities to become the leading role character of the advertisement. This is a pair of oppositional codes (ideal women vs. real women) existed in our connotative ideas. At the beginning of the ad, an average-looking girl without any make-ups comes into the view of the audiences. This scenario is beyond the audiences’ expectations. She is not the type of ideal women (super model or cover girl) endorsed in the most cosmetic advertisements. She is just as real as possible to show in the advertisement. This well-designed beginning of the story is bound to cause the audiences’ curiosity.

With the development of the story, the 4th segment i.e. the evolution process is the very essential part of this advertisement. We can easily find that the main story of other commercials is to display the magic functions and advantages of the products to the target audiences. For examples, the advertisements in the beauty industry always present ideal images of women to show how magic their products are. However, Dove is not trying to sell their products. Back to this ad, dove attempts to tell the story in
another different way rather than just simply show their products in the ad. Dove tends to encode their beauty definitions through the dramatic transformation process. It’s an ironic process but quite meaningful. The extremely dramatic part is the photoshop retouching process which reveals how the beauty industry strives to construct the beauty myth. As previously mentioned technology aspect of semiotics, the changes in the lighting effects and the rhythms of the background music adjust the pace of the advertisement and further confirm the importance of the beauty evolution process. Those changes are made to serve the development of the story. Another pair of oppositions (real beauty vs. fake beauty) can be found in the narrative of 4th and 5th segments. This pair of oppositions is more than talking about beauty issues. It also indicates some gender problems hidden in the current advertisements of beauty industry.

The story does not end here. It is followed by the slogan of the ad: “No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted.” The producers of this ad want to generate an open discussion about the beauty definitions among the target groups. To some extent, the advertisers also reach their purpose to educate the consumers, but through a different story-telling way. It is not that direct, but more effective.

4.3. Levels of Meaning

When reading a piece of advertisement, the first thing we usually notice is what is produced in the film and then we may start to think about how it is produced. Here ‘what is produced’ refers to the denotative level of meaning; while ‘how it is produced’ is beyond denotation – it’s about connotations of the signs in the advertisement. “No sign is purely denotative – lacking connotation.” Thus, the meaning encoded in the advertisement should include both denotative and connotative levels.

In the ad “Evolution”, what we can see and hear could be considered as the denotations of this ad. The film starts with a girl in her twenties walking in a studio and sitting in front of a big mirror. Two lights are turned on and the background music Passage D by The Flashbulb is heard. Then a team of studio workers begins to help the girl adding make-ups and do hairdressing. After all these adjustments have been done, a photographer takes various pictures of the girl in different poses. One shot has been chosen from a pile of pictures and the photoshop retouching process is applied to do further adjustments on the appearance of the girl. A billboard advertisement with the refined image of the girl is shown as the last visual signs of this ad. The denotative level of meaning does not contain any evaluative elements. It depicts the story of the advertisement in an objective way. It can be seen as a lower order of signification, but it is the basic level for the media researchers to do further semiotic analysis.

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However, the connotative level of meaning would be limited to the personal experience, cultural backgrounds and social values of the researchers. It is obvious that the interpretations of the same piece of advertisement by different people will definitely generate different points of views. For Dove’s case, what I have done semiotic analysis on this ad is mainly based on my own values about beauty, gender and media. From my perspective, the connotations of the signs in this ad indicate two pairs of oppositions: ideal women vs. real women and fake beauty vs. real beauty. The sign of the young girl encoded in the ad can be connoted in various ways. She is not the typical cover girl for an advertisement of beauty industry because she only has average-looking face. But the advertising producers of this ad select her as the leading role character. In the end, she is evolved into a billboard looking girl. The dramatic transformation process brings up the question of beauty definitions. It seems that our perception of beauty is distorted by the media. Dove attempts to reveal how the myth of beauty is constructed in the beauty industry to the audience. The sign of this young woman encoded in this ad makes the connotative level of meaning more controversial. The ad is not just telling the advantages of the products and persuading the target audience to buy the products. It indeed has its commercial meanings. But what is more the ad wants to present is the deconstruction of the beauty myth – its social effects on the media receivers.

Like everything else on earth, beauty has its own rule. The definition of beauty has been determined by the man power society. The meaning of beauty is biased, narrow and superficial. What can be seen and hear from the mass media depicting an ideal woman is someone who is young and tall with flawless face and curved body. The images of real women are seldom shown in the media. Beauty myth has been constructed and continually naturalized as a common sense to judge a woman. “The power of such myths is that they ‘go without saying’ and so appear not to need to be deciphered, interpreted or demystified.” In the ad “Evolution”, Dove is not trying to consolidate the beauty myth, instead, Dove is deconstructing the myth and educating the audience (both men and women) what the real beauty is. The evolution process records how the fake beauty is produced by the industry. From the other side, it’s a way to challenge the common sense beauty myth in our society. Furthermore, it also challenges the ideologies and social values the audience may hold.

4.4. Comments Description and Analysis

4.4.1. Comment Categories and Descriptions

I roughly go through all the 4,729 comments from the 6th of Oct, 2006 till the 25th of Nov, 2009 when conducting data selection process and draw a draft conclusion that there are some general themes about the comments, namely that I can categorize the

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sample data starting from these general themes and do further open coding on the sample comments to find other unique categories.

After careful observations on the 475 sample comments, 220 of them are identified as invalid and marked 0 in the column of Comment Categories, while 255 of them are valid and can be further categorized into different themes. As mentioned in the Data Selection part, different numbers such as 1, 2, 3 and so on will be applied to different themes and the valid comment will be marked with a specific number or two or even more. It really depends on the comment itself so to speak. If the comment implies two different meanings, then it will be marked as two different numbers which represent the specific meaning respectively. I will give detailed descriptions and corresponding data examples in the following part of this section.

As for the left 255 valid sample data, further categorization will be helpful to analyze the audience reception. In the end, four different themes are determined. That is to say these 255 valid data could be categorized into four themes. However, this is not to say that each comment falls in only one theme. The comment itself may contain more than one simple meaning. So one comment will imply multiple meanings based on how the interpretations are presented and from which perspectives to decode the signs of the ad. The general four themes identified among the comments are as follows:

1. Beauty. This kind of comments on the ad is very common to be found. The audiences express their reflections on the ad about the real or fake beauty. They also discuss about the character if she’s beautiful before or after make-up and photoshop retouching. They even challenge today’s beauty standards, for example normally people tend to consider that becoming skinny is a way to be beautiful while fat people are kind of ugly. Some of them criticize this kind of beauty standard and give their own opinions on what is beauty. However, the audiences also present some general feelings about the beauty issues in their comments of this ad. So based on the above observations, this “beauty” category can be further classified into four sub-categories.

   (1). Character: e.g., “She looked better beforehand. The make-up seems too severe to my eyes. She did not need the eyebrow pencil, nor the eyeliner. I don't think much to the blusher style either. The eyeliner seemed to make her eyes shrink XD btw, just to be clear: I like make up, tis fun stuff. But I believe in wearing whats right for you. As in what suits you, not whats trendy.” (Comment No.6 by lovejuicexx);

   (2). Real or fake: e.g., “the video was to show that even the super models that some women try to be is a fake, and that it isn't naturally achievable. You have the whole idea wrong.” (Comment No.31 by dansk4evigt);

   (3). Fat or skinny: e.g., “i wish models wouldn't be so skinny and anorexic and women wouldn't look up to them. skinnier does not equal sexier.” (Comment No.1601 by Chenzo2323);

   (4). General: e.g., “Research shows that no matter what the conditioning is, we are naturally programmed to recognise better looks, irrespective of what we are told.
Influence could probably only mould our choice slightly. In fact, even babies can get attracted to good looks!” (Comment No.1600 by magnamia).

2. Self-esteem. Some of the audiences, especially women, think that it is a really good instructive ad to let them feel better about themselves and begin to care about themselves more. E.g., “omg, this totally makes me feel a hell of a lot better about myself. its stupid what the term of beauty means these days. I honestly think that everyone can be beautiful without looking like a stick. :) <3.” (Comment No.91 by GlassDoll14).

3. Discuss about the intentions of Dove to launch this campaign and rethink about the media and the beauty industry. The comments in this category seem more critical than other valid sample data. Some audiences show support for Dove to launch this kind of campaign, while others challenge the hidden intentions of Dove to make this ad. They point out that Dove just want to sell more products. The audiences even go further to challenge how today’s mass media and the whole beauty industry propaganda the “fake” beauty and distort the reality. However, the third category can also be further classified into three sub-categories according to the aspects the audiences discuss about.

   (1). Dove: e.g., “I love Dove's commercials. All of them have such deep meaning and such good messages behind them. This is one of my favorites.” (Comment No.3105 by sillyplink);

   (2). Media: e.g., “my friend once modeled for a teen magazine here in the Philippines. she and her family got surprised when the issue came out as she said that she was so ‘heavily’ photoshopped that it was unbelievable. it kinda ruined her self esteem after that.” (Comment No.42 by antisafeguard);

   (3). Industry: e.g. “a mime artist came to our school today steve murray and he is an amazing man and told us about this.. its disgusting how the beauty industry is and we are all beautiful no matter what we look like.. so these models beauty industry whatever can fuck off.” (Comment No.3029 by buomgiorno).

4. Gender Issues. This type of comments from the audiences involves some topics about the gender issues, though they are something related to the unhealthy idea of beauty. E.g., “Why is it always about women. What about men -- there are men that have problems to deal with too just like this!!” (Comment No.3057 by momoyen).

However as mentioned in the beginning of this part, one comment does not simply imply only one meaning instead it probably has more than one interpretations. For example, “Actually: 1. I don't have a TV; 2. Yes, skinny and athletic is attractive; 3. No I don't think being obese is attractive; 4. You can't blame TV producers and magazine editors when women are the ones watching all the shows and buying all the mags. 5. Yes extreme anorexia is disgusting, but that doesn't mean thin girls are disgusting; 6. Stop looking to blame people for your own problems; 7. Your angst and hatred show a lot about your character. Your attitude is more unattractive than
anything.” (Comment No.76 by planetdarwin). This comment fits for all the four categories mentioned above. So the audiences’ perceptions are really complex and diversified. That’s why the decoding process of an advertisement is an interesting aspect to do investigation. Close analysis of some specific comments will be helpful to get insightful details about the audience reception.

Other than what have been said in this part before, the conversations among the encoder (Tim Piper) and the decoders (online audiences) should be paid attentions to, especially when they are talking about the intentions of Dove to make this ad. The comments about this exactly belong to the third category. It’s not common for the audiences and the producers to give their direct exchanges of opinions on a piece of advertisement. Usually the audiences are passive media message receivers, but in this campaign the decoders and the encoder hold the same amount of chances to challenge each other. The internet offers them a new free space to express their point of views. The comments generated between both parts is worthy of further research.

### 4.4.2. Comment Analysis

After categorizing these valid sample data into four different themes, I will do more detailed analysis of these comments based on those four themes. The first category is about beauty and it has four sub-categories: real or fake, character, fat or skinny and some general discussions about the beauty issue. 161 of the 255 valid comments are somehow related to the first category. It shows that the audiences tend to interpret this ad from the perspective of what beauty is.

There are 80 comments discussing about the real or fake stuff. This batch of data accounts for half of the first category. Some audiences think that the point of this ad is to show us how beauty can be faked. The flawless looking women are not existed at all. “This is just showing young girls not to fall into the trap of trying to achieve ‘TV-like Beauty’ because there is no such thing. It’s showing you that they took an already average & beautiful woman but spent hours to look like a ‘goddess’.” (Comment No.64 by IveGotAwesomeness). The audiences also point out that make-ups, airbrushing and photoshop make the normal beauty odd. “How is this thing pro-normal girl? They do her up crazily with make-up, which is fine, but then Photoshop her? That’s...plain odd. Most of the changes were okay up until the eyes, and then it was obviously fake.” (Comment No.1584 by FlutterbyLullaby). “The result barely looks like a human in my opinion.” (Comment No.1585 by AkiraChan24). In their points of view, the real beauty does not necessarily need make-ups. While on the other hand, some audiences disagree with the point that there are no naturally good looking girls. They think the creative idea of this ad is somehow way too extreme. “This vid is stupid lol, okay so they made ugly pretty, but I’ve seen pretty girls that just walk around. My girl is gorgeous lol and there are plenty of
women who look very stunning without that bullshit. They look just like that photo but more natural.” (Comment No. 28 by CVXQ). Other than this, the audiences also indicate that the dramatic narrative of this ad does not truly reflect the fact. It’s just the tricks used in every advertisement. Here the intention of this ad is quite obvious to make the ugly girl feel comfortable about their appearance. “ Seriously, fat ugly chicks love the implication that all beauty is faked in this way. But tell me then how entire movies of beautiful actresses are filmed. Do you really think each frame of film is photoshopped in this manner? Sorry, but there really is beauty in the world, and it’s not a big blob of lard sitting on a couch. Thin is beautiful; it recalls an ancestral savannah heritage for most of us. Clean skin is beautiful. Lush hair is beautiful. Stop making excuses and get to the gym.” (Comment No.71 by planetdarwin). “What is beauty?” It’s a question for everyone. But each of us will give different answers based on our own standard. Just like some other comments from this sub-category says that “this vid sux, it’s fake, and when you say ‘our’ perception of beauty speak for yourself, there is no ‘our’ my perception of beauty is flawless u ass.” (Comment No.43 by FornaxFlaminius). Beauty in their eyes should be close to perfect and flawless. The make-up and photoshop thing can make someone more beautiful. So who care about what is real or fake. “Are you fucking kidding me? Everybody I mean everybody (except for a few naturally blessed) looks like crap without make up, and that doesn’t even mean that they look like crap, just in comparison to when they wear make up.” (Comment No.1541 by nlyly). “What I learned from Dove campaign: You can be beautiful...with photoshop!” (Comment No.90 by touchemebooty).

However, it’s a really controversial topic regarding real or fake. Some comments among this sub-category are really thoughtful. The audiences jump out of the traditional perspectives to think about real or fake problems. As mentioned in the last paragraph, people have their own standard about beauty. But this standard is more or less influenced by the society. It’s not our own perception about real or fake beauty. Instead, it’s more like the collective agreement on this issue. “First of all, society doesn’t have an ‘eye’. People have eyes and they are free to create their own concept of beauty. What society creates is a stereotype, and then society stigmatizes people who can’t achieve it, people who deviate from pre-conceived ideas, of, for example, what women should look like. A stereotype is artificial and distorted because is a collection of characteristics isolated from a real subject.” (Comment No.3090 by pr0jecti0nist). I think this comment is fairly decent and true to explain the real or fake problems about the beauty.

The second sub-category of beauty theme is about the character. There are 49 comments involved in this topic. Some audiences think that the character looks pretty before any changes such as make-ups and photoshop retouching. “She looked better beforehand. The make-up seems too severe to my eyes. She did not need the eyebrow pencil, nor the eyeliner. I don't think much to the blusher style either. The eyeliner seemed to make her eyes shrink XD btw, just to be clear: I like make up, it’s fun stuff. But I believe in wearing what’s right for you. As in what suits you, not what’s trendy.”
(Comment No.5 by Kasutei). Others think that she’s ugly in the beginning and airbrushing and retouching make her look better, while some of them think she’s still ugly in the end. “Damn, she was very ugly in the beginning but in the end... wow!” (Comment No.1548 by CrazyWoWGamer). “She is still ugly as shit.” (Comment No.3078 by 88Gplaya). The comments made here is mainly about the appearance of the character before and after make-up stuff and photoshop retouching. This kind of comments seems a bit shallow. However, there are some insightful discussions about the character when the encoder (Tim Piper) and the decoders start the conversations on why they choose her (Stephanie, 22 year old) rather than other girls as the character of this ad.

“This girl was already a hundred times more beautiful than the average woman. We all know actresses and models are made up and photoshopped. But as I say, she already had the raw materials...” (Comment No.4596 by zombiefrankenstein); “People have different views on that. I liked this girl because although she was ‘real’, she still had what it took to look like a model/celebrity after being photographed and lit. Yet she STILL gets all this work done to be ‘poster perfect’. The point being that even models don’t look anything like their posters. I’m with you, she isn’t ordinary like some media coverage is suggesting. (But shhh!” (Comment No.4597 by tipper).

The above conversation between Tim Piper and the audience reveals us some inside information about why they choose that girl as the character. How she looks like is not that important because different people hold different opinions on that. But as what Tim Piper replies to the audience in this comment, the girl has some kind of potential to be changed into a cover girl. The potentials indicate that she is not ordinary at all. Otherwise, every random “real” girl on the streets can be chosen as the character of this ad. With that kind of potential, she is a better version of average-looking woman to fit into the point of this ad. In other words, the unique features in her appearance can be well used to properly represent the drastic effects of make-up and photoshop retouching.

The third aspect of beauty theme is the topic of fat or skinny. 11 comments are concerning this topic. Whether being fat or being skinny is beautiful seems not fixed. It really depends on the time and space. Different cultures have different beauty standards. “Actually up into the 50’s being fat was beautiful in many cultures of humanity because everyone was fighting famine. So really being thin as being beautiful has only been a tiny fraction of human history. I know what you mean about obesity, but really, husky and hefty and plump was pretty much the ideal in human history until TV came along and blasted that to bits.” (Comment No.78 by Fandalg). Nowadays, under the influence of popular culture worldwide, people tend to accept the standard that being skinny is healthy and beautiful. But it does not necessarily mean that the thinner the better. Anorexia is disgusting and unhealthy. “Skinny and athletic is attractive. I don't think being obese is attractive. Extreme anorexia is disgusting, but that doesn't mean thin girls are disgusting.” (Comment No.76 by
When talking about the beauty issues, fit body and pretty face are most likely to be mentioned.

The fourth sub-category is some general discussions about the beauty issue. It includes some very broad idea about what beauty is. So contents in this sub-category are quite wide-ranging. I put 20 comments in this sub-category. The audiences express their own ideas about beauty. Some of them think that the reality is too cruel for girls because they are suffering continuous comparisons. It’s a sick society to judge girls appearances based on picky standards. Beauty should not be that shallow. “Beauty is more than skin deep.” (Comment No.3042 by dorkydonkey). “Beauty is more than bra deep” (Comment No.3043 by asthenia166). One interesting finding in this sub-category is that “Less craps in Scandinavia than elsewhere.” (Comment No.1545 by CesarPaleAss). It’s like a myth that many people believe that there are lots of naturally pretties in Nordic countries. Another interesting comment is that “Research shows that no matter what the conditioning is, we are naturally programmed to recognize better looks, irrespective of what we are told. Influence could probably only mould our choice slightly. In fact, even babies can get attracted to good looks!” (Comment No.1600 by magnamia). It’s somehow pathetic but true indeed. Most of us are attracted to good looking persons. It’s nature. So what’s the real point in this ad? Does it can really help the audiences to realize their perceptions of beauty are distorted? Nowadays the cognitions of the audiences are not easily influenced by the propaganda. People have their own definitions of beauty. If everyone can be seen as beautiful, it will be another ridiculous myth.

The second category is about self-esteem. 43 out of 255 comments are more or less about this theme. Most audiences feel relieved after they watch this ad. “God I hate the society today. All about being skinny, natural beautiful, tall with the perfect personality. Love this commercial. As a 17 year old I am very affected by this.” (Comment No.1579 by Ullygirldk). Young girls are very susceptible to the mass media and their peers. Their views of beauty are somehow influenced by the fashion magazines and popular cultures. In this male-dominated culture, it’s inevitable for the girls to feel the pressures from being looked as an object. Women incline to care about how they are looked in the eyes of others. It doesn’t matter if their perceptions of beauty are changed or not. They are too lost in other people’s surreal definitions of beauty. So many audiences think that it’s important for women to care about themselves and love themselves. Women don’t need to cater to other people’s standards. To be oneself will make women feel good and behave confidently. “This is such a good commercial. Dove is great for doing this for girl’s self-esteem. A lot of times girls get anorexia because they see pictures like this in magazines. They want to look ‘perfect’ but nobody’s perfect. The point of this video is to show girls that NOBODY looks like that--they were just photoshopped like COMPLETLY. Dove is trying to say all girls are beautiful and no girl deserves to feel like poor just because they don’t look perfect.” (Comment No.25 by VeryPookieful). “Shows you how retarded the perceptions of beauty genuinely are and how its all fake anyways...be
yourself and disregard people’s perceptions...you will get old, we all eventually become aged/ugly, and we all die someday...wake up and smell the coffee.” (Comment No.1547 by Xoldar2600). Most audiences think that this ad really help people with low self-esteem to feel better about themselves. From this point, it has some instructive meanings. “Good job!!!! This has been needed for some time. I have a daughter, and I will not let her grow up thinking she has to fit in some company’s standard of beauty.” (Comment No.3106 by melbookermusic).

In this category, there are some other inspiring comments as well. The topic about fat or skinny has been discussed before, but there are some comments from that topic also fit into the self-esteem theme. Usually we may think that only fat people will have self-esteem problems. But it is not necessarily true.

“Why is it that when it comes to society perceptions of beauty everyone wants to jump on the skinny people? Like skinny people don’t have it just as hard as fat people.” (Comment No.92 by AllyceHudson);
“Being someone who is fat, I’ve gotten a lot of flak by skinny people who have never been fat. It’s really annoying. (I get the ‘Oh she must be stupid and lazy’ thing ALL the time...while there ARE people like that it’s annoying to be assumed so by someone who doesn't even know you.)” (Comment No.93 by crimsonrose);
“When skinny people do that it’s because they are insecure about themselves. Like I said it’s hard for skinny people too. Guys would be like eww your too boney or you don’t have a nice body becuze your skinny. Skinny girls wanna have some curves too (not be fat) but have a figure.” (Comment No.94 by AllyceHudson).

The above conversation is quite interesting and insightful. It’s the discussion between a skinny person and a fat one. It’s undeniable that our society is mean to fat people. We tend to assume some retarded personality fat people may have from judging their appearance. They have low self-esteem and always feel bad about themselves. But it seems that we always overlook the fact that skinny people also have some self-esteem problems. Like what AllyceHudson says in her comment it’s also hard for skinny girls. From this point, everyone seems to pursue what they don’t actually have. So what’s the problem about the society and the distorted perception of beauty? Can we really jump out of our own standards of beauty? It seems that the only problem existed in the self-esteem is ourselves. How can we jump on others?

Another comment is worthy of consideration. “It may not be true for you, but, sadly, it is very true for many women and men.” (Comment No.4585 by MeringueJ06). Most comments regarding self-esteem problems are talking about how badly women are suffering today. But the reality is that not only women but also men have the same kind of problem. It’s true for both genders.

The third comment category is discussing about the intentions of Dove to launch this campaign and rethinking about the media and the beauty industry. 105 comments are in this category. Most of them are quite critical. Some audiences think that the idea of
this ad has significant social meanings. Dove challenges the tricks that most ad campaigns would like to use to portray perfect images of women which is unachievable for the audiences. “It played off of the typical ‘stereotype’ that the beautiful women you see in ads, magazines, etc. all have bodies and appearances that are achievable. In reality this campaign shows you all the tedious work that goes into just one production shot for an advertisement. Even then, after all the lighting, makeup, positioning, etc. they still need to use a substantial amount of post-editing in Photoshop before it’s ready to go ‘live’. (Comment No.47 by lomera24). Besides bringing the advertising tricks to light, Dove strives to redefine what beauty is. “Basically the main point of the Dove workshops is to let girls and young women find something about themselves that’s beautiful. Maybe they don’t look like a superstar/celebrity, but they have their own personal beauty and talents.” (Comment No.99 by Moosenogger).

However, commercial is commercial. It’s very easy for the audience to associate the real intentions of Dove to make this ad with helping them to sell more products. “Dove really hit hard the fashion industry with this one. But how long its trick will last? I mean after all, this shocking commercial is for sell their products. ‘Buy dove because its make you feel beautiful the way you are’ Then I said, don’t buy Dove and already feel beautiful.” (Comment No.1603 by AR700). Another note on challenging the intentions of Dove is that “Dove and a brand like Axe are owned by the same company. One brand is making women feel good about themselves while the other is degrading. They don’t care about your self esteem, they care about your money.” (Comment No.12 by CatSingingzoo). This is really ironic but true at least. Dove just use another way to tell the story to women and make money from the insecurities of women.

In addition to criticize the intentions of Dove, the audiences reexamine the media as well. Media makes people more superficial than before. People tend to pay their attention to the images instead of the texts. The habits of reading have changed a lot during recent decades. Especially some fashion magazines and commercials work hard to achieve some visual effects. They don’t really care about if these effects will mislead the audiences. The media industry is guilty. Companies have their business intentions to launch the advertising campaigns. Advertising agencies on the other hand, as a party to provide services, their creative idea won’t be purely innocent. It also includes business deals. So from this point, though their starting point is good for audiences, the sales-driven idea will definitely ruin what should be presented to the audiences in the end. Just like what Tim Piper writes in one of his comment: “Every agency is guilty, true enough. Clients demand the stereotypes. All we can do is take advantage of opportunities like this in order to help our other clients see the light. But ads like this need support if there’s to be change, not cynicism.” (Comment No.4710 by tipper), no great balance could be found between moral standards and business interests. It seems that the only solution to save our perceptions of beauty is to stop watching TV and reading magazines.
With regard to the beauty industry, much more critical comments come along. The audiences think that the beauty industry is unreal and unhealthy to some extent. One insider from the industry says that “I work for L’oreal advertising and retouching these models everyday. They take pictures of baby skin, then crop textures and put on models face for silky smooth skin looks. It’s impossible to gain such skin. This ad is pure truth. It’s just sad that it forms insane beauty standards. It’s all about money.” (Comment No.3126 by ohbozhetymoj). The industry is blamed for aiming at the women who are insecure of their appearances.

The fourth category of these valid comments is the discussion about the gender issues. 20 comments are classified into this category. Although this category does not include as many comments as the first three categories, it doesn’t mean it’s not important, instead, the gender category really reveals some insightful thoughts.

In the male-dominated society, women are often looked as sexual objects. Women easily feel lost in their self-esteem and thus believe in the myth encoded in the beauty products. They are always portrayed as the victims of consumption. “TPiper ... I’ll vote only if there is a category for ‘Yet Another Propaganda Piece To Give Women More Excuses for Being Stupid.’ More promotion of female victimhood. How can women EVER become leaders in numbers if they are constantly portrayed as being led by the nose so easily? Unable to think for themselves. It’s NEVER THEIR fault as individuals is it? ALWAYS someone else’s fault. I am so sick of this women-as-victims mentality. It treats them like children and is insulting!” (Comment No.2357 by femicide). This comment somehow reflects certain facts about the social identities of women. The images of women are weak and lack of individualism. From this point, the ad here is interpreted as certain promotion of female victimhood. This interpretation seems to go against the point of the ad which Dove wants to share with the audiences. But to put it another way, this audience believes that there is no gender biases between men and women. Women should have the same ability as men to think independently.

So what is the point Dove wants to present from the perspective of gender issues. Is it true as what the audience femicide stated in the comment: female is a problematic gender and the commercials always take advantage of this mentality? Well, maybe it’s true in most advertisements of beauty industry. But there is something obviously different in this ad from others. Dove does not try to construct a flawless image of woman to put the pressures on the not-so-perfect real women. Instead, Dove uses another angle to tell the story. The purpose of this ad is to make women feel better about their looks and enjoy the pleasures. Most audiences suppose to see the stereotypical image of women in this ad. But Dove give up the idea of feminine beauty and diversify the definitions of beauty. Dove has managed to encode female-dominate culture into the commercial. “I love how Dove has done this. Too long have we been bombarded with what the world tells us we should think is
beautiful. Girls, especially, suffer the consequences of cruel comparison. And the photoshop? Just goes to prove... beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The beholder has been brainwashed.” (Comment No.4399 by ochispiret). The brainwashed definition of beauty is unfair for both genders. The ad more or less opens a window for the audiences to rethink about the gender positions women should have in our society.

However there are some very old-fashioned gender interpretations in the comments. These comments are especially made by guys. “To become a natural women, women should be virgin :)” (Comment No.3050 by pinoyword7up). “I wish my girl friends could go through that every day! That would be freaking sweet!” (Comment No.3124 by floydspiritz). In their eyes, women are still looked as sexual objects. The social role of women is to be gazed by men. From this point of view, the gender biases still exist in our male-dominated society. Although some progresses have been made, it’s still hard for women to certain extent.

4.4.3. Comments and Film

In this section, I will compare the results from previous film analysis and comments analysis. In the section of semiotic analysis, I list three main elements to do research: technology, character and narrative. They are the most important elements to construct an advertisement. However, when doing reception analysis, I choose to use the method “open code” the valid comments theme by theme. After going through all these 255 valid data, I classify them into four categories. There should be some connections among different elements in both semiotic analysis and comment research.

Take a look at technology part of film analysis. The camera use, lighting effects and the background music are the main parts I do the analysis. These technological elements are meaningful to the ad. On the other hand, when trying to categorize the comments, I cannot open code a new category for the technology part of this film. Though some of the sample comments are about the background music or lighting, but they have little connections to the points of the ad. For example, if the conversation is about the background music, it’s only about the music itself. Nothing will be found to be related to the interpretation of the ad. So it’s kind of meaningless. Such kind of comments are identified as invalid and marked as 0.

When comparing the results found in the character and narrative parts of the film to the findings of reception analysis, it’s totally another case. It seems that there are much more connections between the semiotic part and the reception part when discussing about the character and the narrative. These two semiotic elements generate wide topics about the beauty definitions, self-esteem, real intentions of the ad, media, the industry and the gender issues. These topics constitute the main themes of the comment categories.
The carefully selected character is one of the most important semiotic elements of the ad that generate extensive discussions among the audiences. Some of the comments are purely related to the appearance judgment on the character. The audiences argue whether she’s beautiful or not. This kind of comments are a bit shallow but still meaningful. It goes even further into putting forward the question: what is beauty. The low self-esteem problems have been long existed in the female groups. The fake beauty constructed in most advertisements put pressures on women to achieve the unrealistic images. The character, an average-looking girl, in this ad is totally different from other models in most advertisements of beauty industry. She does not belong to our traditional definition of beauty. She can be looked as a symbol representing the post-feminism culture. The position of the character in this ad somehow tries to debunk the beauty myth in the male dominated society, criticize the narrow definition of beauty in the industry and enlighten a new way for men and women to interpret the mediated beauty. From the points of post-feminism, women are not the sexual objects to be seen, instead, they are subjects to create their own identities.

The narrative of the ad is another important element which arouses great interest among the audiences. There are two pairs of oppositional codes encoded in the ad. One is ideal women vs. real women; the other is real beauty vs. fake beauty. These oppositional parts result in the dramatic development of the story which is also what the audiences talk with great relish. The pairs of oppositions generate more topics than just talking about the reconstruction of the beauty myth. The narrative of the ad, especially the evolution process also makes the audiences to reflect on the beauty industry and the mass media. It brings the post-feminism into the commercial and diversifies the images of women. Woman’s identity is not unchanging. It’s beyond the social traditions and gender stereotypes.
5. Conclusions

5.1. Summary of Findings

Referring to the previous analysis part of the ad, I will conclude several interesting findings here. From the perspective of the film itself, there are some new ideas presented in the ad. The signs and codes in the ad are decoded into some positive meanings. Dove attempts to diversify the definitions of beauty by the unconventional deconstructions of the myth which has been long existed in our society. This time beauty is redefined in terms of feminism through the character and narrative of the ad. Female-dominated culture is encoded in the ad by Dove. Instead of threatening the self-esteem of women, this ad makes women feel better about their looks and become confident. However, from the perspective of the audience reception, some of the comments made by the viewers are quite critical. The audiences partly agree with Dove’s beauty definition. But they further question the real intentions of Dove to make this ad. To some extent, Dove constructs its myth of “real” beauty as well to sell more products.

5.2. Discussions and Future Research

Here I want to discuss about the significance of the campaign. Two aspects need to be considered when examining the meanings of an ad. One is its commercial value, the other is its social significance. There is no doubt that the campaign is very successful
on the part of its sales profits. At the same time, Dove has also enhanced its brand identity in the beauty industry with its positive image of redefining beauty. This is a tremendous business asset for a company. The social significance of this ad goes even broader. From the aspect of comment analysis, we can easily find different interpretations on the ad. The audiences not only discuss about the commercial value of the ad, but also argue about the social meanings encoded in the ad. They point out some problems such as self-esteem crisis and challenge the beauty industry, the industry focused on unrealistic definitions of beauty that has lead to the self esteem crisis that we see in the population of women worldwide today. Some of the audiences go even further to question the beauty myth and propose to redefine what beauty is. The social identities of women are not supposed to be someone else. Women have their own thoughts to achieve their life goal. They can be someone they want to be rather than someone the male-dominated society forces them to be. The ad enlightens both genders to rethink about the social relationships between men and women. Though the gender issue might not be the key message of the ad, it really generates some insightful interpretations on the ad. Beauty is not restricted into only one standard according to the points of the ad. So what about the gender? The gender issue also needs some spaces to break the traditions.

Here let’s get back to the gender construction in media again. The mass media tend to construct some mediated memories, which include some biases in terms of gender. The images of women shown in the advertisements are somehow unrealistic and unachievable for most of the real women. It is well known that young, tall, thin, blonde girls are the usual models for most advertisements in the beauty industry. The mass media impart this kind of feminine beauty to the audiences. Women are considered as commodity-objects. This point has been accepted by both female and male groups for a long time in the male dominated society.

However, we have to say something has been gradually changed in the industry. Though most advertisers still carefully preserve the traditional beauty image of women, Dove tries to make a step to do something different. In the ad, we find a real woman instead of a flawless woman to be a character. This is a special feature of this ad. The social significance in this ad can be also perceived like this: Dove brings the post-feminism culture into its commercial values. The standard gender models are outdated in Dove’s eyes. Women are not subordinated to the male group. They are independent. They are not the passive media message receivers. They pursue their own positions in the society. The way Dove tells the story is to reconstruct the gender stereotypes. Women are not the objects to be seen. The character (real woman) as a symbol of the post-feminism culture encoded in the ad generates wide discussions about beauty and gender. Gender is more than beauty and ugliness. But the picky judgment on the women’s appearance implies something unequal between male and female. This is the gender basis existed in our society. Beauty myth for women is like the rich myth for men. The dominant ideology and mass media put pressures on women’s self-esteem. The post-feminism culture has some impacts on the creative
idea of the ad. The narrative of the ad does reveal the facts of the beauty industry. The image of real woman diversifies the definition of beauty and debunks the beauty myth as well. The female audiences start to think about the role and responsibility of media and advertisers should have. They should be honest about the images they used for the commercials.

It is inevitable that the “real beauty” idea encoded in the ad is very successful. It makes the campaign alive from 2004 till now. The audiences are still engaged in ongoing communication with the brand either on YouTube or campaign website. So how to make the campaign go even further in the next five years will become Dove’s next challenge. The comments from the audiences will be a great resource for Dove to revamp their campaign. The redefinition of beauty is a good idea to be kept in the campaign in the new decade, but how to make the campaign still unique needs further development in their creative work to launch new and different phrases. Dove claims that they have made the campaign global. But after checking their campaign websites, the countries they have presented in so far are mainly western countries. From this point, if it’s a real global campaign, Dove should introduce the idea of “real beauty” into more markets, especially Asia and Africa. Women there probably have more self-esteem problems than western countries because the society there is more male-dominated.
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