Performing Beauty: Dove’s “Real Beauty” Campaign

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Dove, a popular beauty brand, impressed some in the advertising world with its unique “Campaign for Real Beauty” and made others cringe. But little is known about how real women respond. “Real” beauty according to Dove means various shapes and sizes—flaws and all—and is the key to rebranding, rebuilding women’s self-esteem, and redefining beauty standards. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with sixteen Canadian women and guided by social semiotics and dramaturgy, I examine Dove’s presentation of beauty and women’s reactions to it from a “beauty as performance” frame. This study examines processes of interpretation and finds that expressing beauty, the self, and a public image inextricably requires elements of performance.

Keywords: beauty, advertising, Dove, women, performance

As part of its 2004 “Campaign for Real Beauty,” Dove, Inc.—a leading beauty and personal care company—released a powerful short video titled Onslaught. As of January 2009 the video could still be seen on the company’s official Web site (see www.campaignforrealbeauty.com). The footage opens with a young redheaded girl peering innocently into the camera as the song “Here It Comes” plays in the background. Moments go by, as anticipation builds. Then a fast montage of thin female models’ images, pro-dieting messages, plastic surgery scenes, and sexualized flesh smacks the screen, dramatically evoking the mighty world of beauty advertising to which the young girl and women everywhere are exposed. A simple tagline follows: “Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does.” This video—plus television, billboard, and print advertisements featuring photos of women of different ages, ethnicities, body shapes, and sizes—is part of Dove’s mission to rebrand itself, rebuild women’s self-esteem, and redefine beauty standards (Neff 2004; Prior 2004). The Real Beauty campaign has gained widespread attention in the popular media (Howard 2005; Schrobsdorff 2005), but less in academic circles (although see Johnston...
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and Taylor 2008), and little is known about how women respond to Dove’s imagery and discourses. What do “real” women think and feel about Dove’s definition and portrayal of “real” beauty? How do they interpret the images and messages? What does “real” beauty mean to them? This article explores women’s perceptions and interpretations of Dove’s nontraditional beauty campaign.

Different persons, different women, dissimilarly define beauty in terms of its meaning, importance, and the role it plays in everyday life (Black 2004). It is widely known that, among other factors, advertising heavily influences beauty standards and that women in particular compare themselves with models despite the gap between retouched perfection and reality (Richins 1991). Research has primarily focused on the consequences of exposure to beauty advertising on women’s body image, anxiety, and self-esteem (e.g., Groesz, Levine, and Murnen 2001; Halliwell and Dittmar 2004; Henderson-King and Henderson-King 1997) and mainly in terms of how these messages are communicated (Ford and LaTour 1996; Hirschman and Thompson 1997; Schroder 2000). Audience negotiation of meaning from advertising—or media discourses and imagery in general—is complex, especially since many contextual factors, as well as habits, assumptions, emotions, and cognitive schemata, influence interpretations (Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Indeed interpretation is a complex act, rich with nuances, contradictions, and idiosyncrasies. Thus the specific goal of this article is to explore the diverse and contradictory meanings and messages women fashion about female beauty from Dove’s advertisements and how this process of interpretation occurs.

This study draws from sixteen interviews with Canadian women. Guided by dramaturgical and social semiotic concepts, I examine the processes of managing impressions and negotiating interpretation with regard to beauty and the beautiful body. I examine beauty in the complex context of contemporary Western culture and society—thus treating interpretations and definitions of beauty as deeply situated in the world of popular advertising, the particulars of participants’ own lives, the boundaries of the research setting—as well as the unique research setting and my own social position and embodied self as a young woman and a researcher. In adopting a performance approach to beauty, I am able to extend static and realist notions of beauty as well as previous studies that stop at textual analysis, product testing, or unreflexive reporting. Beauty, I conclude, emerges from social interaction.

BACKGROUND

Dove: A Beauty Company

Dove, Inc., and its products are known worldwide. Since the days of simple, white bar soap, Dove’s product line has expanded, and its marketing strategies have become more aggressive. In 2004 Dove launched its “Campaign for Real Beauty” after commissioning a global report on beauty that found that of the 3,200 women surveyed from ten countries, only 2 percent considered themselves beautiful (Etcoff et al. 2004). Sales of Dove products support the continuation of the Real Beauty
campaign, as well as the Dove Self-Esteem Fund that provides self-esteem resources and events for women (anonymous Dove marketing manager, pers. comm., February 24, 2008; www.campaignforrealbeauty.ca). Real Beauty advertisements show so-called real people, that is, people who are not professional models and do not look like typical fashion models. Dove claims that these photos are not retouched or digitally altered. Furthermore, Dove’s campaign involves teaching media literacy, and its efforts have won it praise from advertising peers. For example, Dove’s Evolution video, which shows a “regular woman” transforming into a billboard model, won two international advertising awards in 2007 (Waymark 2007).

Dove’s campaign and attack against beauty stereotypes have generated considerable media attention since 2004. Articles about the campaign have appeared in mainstream newspapers (e.g., Globe and Mail: Agrell 2008), magazines (e.g., Chatelaine: Hannon 2008), and marketing publications. These articles generally fall into two broad camps: Dove supporters and Dove skeptics. Supporters congratulate Dove for promoting broader definitions of beauty (Neff 2004), growing its brand in a positive way (Prior 2004), putting older and bigger women in the spotlight (Westphal 2005), and using a smart advertising strategy that stands out against the competition (Beyer 2006; Stevenson 2005). Skeptics, on the other hand, question Dove for becoming “a brand for fat girls” (Schrobsdorff 2005), downplaying its skin-whitening campaigns in India (Tumato 2007), and being hypocritical by marketing under the same parent company, Unilever, as Axe cologne (known for its controversial, sexy advertisements) and Slimfast (a diet supplement) (Neff 2007).

Dove is not the first to show women au naturel in advertising, although there is no evidence of a campaign as global and coordinated as Dove’s or one that has garnered as much recent media attention. In 2002, for example, Jamie Lee Curtis, then aged forty-three, made waves by posing without makeup in plain, unsexy underwear in More magazine (Schrobsdorff 2005). Other examples can be found, but their collection—as thorough as it may be—inevitably points to the fact that these are exceptions to the norm. On the other hand, it could be argued—as did Pederson (2002) about Kellogg’s print advertisements with atypical models—that this sophisticated semiotic strategy of empathy gains advertisers a double profit. In the words of Pederson (2002:169), “They look like champions and oust the competition by outselling and making others look bad” (or worse than them). Indeed, empathetic advertising helps consumers not feel guilty by consuming products from good companies.

Despite all the “ifs” and “buts,” it is certain that after years of popular press attention and academic research dedicated to the harms of stereotypical advertising, the popularity of reality television, and ordinary-people advertising, Dove’s Real Beauty is a new bandwagon to jump on. To date, however, few academic studies have studied the campaign or consumer reactions to it in-depth. In a recent study Gustafson, Hanley, and Popovich (2008) examined women’s perceptions of female
body shapes and celebrity models in health and beauty advertisements, with specific emphasis on Dove advertisements with plus-sized women. Through interviews, a survey, and a sorting exercise with thirty-nine American women, the authors found that reactions to plus-sized models fell into three groups: positive, neutral, and negative. While overall consensus indicated support for using “real” women in advertising, 40 percent of respondents disliked images of plus-sized women in their underwear (Gustafson et al. 2008). This contradiction is curious, but not unexpected because it reflects the cultural belief that thin and beautiful are synonymous.

Audience Reception and Social Semiotics

Audience interpretation of advertising has been studied in many ways, from marketing angles (Richins 1991; Scott and Vargas 2007) to gender analysis (Beetles and Harris 2005), textual analysis (Machin and Thornborrow 2006), social semiotics (Machin and van Leeuwen 2005), and audience ethnography (Murphy 1999). Many of these studies show that audiences are active, that interpreting media texts is complex and involves agency, and that interpretations vary across individuals. According to Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2004), information and meaning are separate concepts in advertising. That is, ads say and do more than relay product information. Furthermore, individuals draw on different codes and resources to generate their own meanings of texts even if the creator manipulates the semiotics and nuances. Viewers regularly create meanings that suit their own purposes, and this process is largely dependent on using advertisements in practice and personal relevance of the content (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2004). Other factors, such as social context and media literacy, are also likely to influence interpretations (Duke 2002; Ford, LaTour, and Lundstrom 1991). In advertising, self-esteem is thought to be one of the most important motivators of consumer behavior (Banister and Hogg 2004). This study is relatively unique in that it uses a combination of audience research and social semiotics.

Social semiotics provides a strategy and a set of conceptual tools that allow for a better understanding of the interpretive processes at work within and between the various players involved in those processes. Like traditional semiotics, social semiotics concerns the study of signs and associated meanings. However, in pragmatist fashion, social semioticians believe that signs (or semiotic resources) acquire meaning as a result of interaction and practice that are always embedded in situational contexts specific to a culture or community (Vannini 2004). Social semiotics takes a multimodal approach, in that meaning is believed to be derived from language and/or speech as well as other modalities of unspoken interaction (Vannini 2008). In addition, semiotic resources have actual and potential meanings relevant to the people who use them within a given historical, cultural, and institutional context (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; van Leeuwen 2005). Semiotic resources can be used to both confirm and contest assumed meanings, and to both produce and interpret them (Ferguson 2004; Vannini 2008). For the present study, social semiotics provides me with a common language for describing the negotiation of beauty and observed
performances. Both Dove and the women reacting to Dove use the advertisements and other features of beauty as semiotic resources (as we all do), albeit in different ways, for different purposes, and in various contexts.

Maintaining Impressions

Understanding what beauty is and how beauty occurs is central to this study. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, beauty—as an expression of embodiment—is not intrinsic but a result of action (Waskul and Vannini 2006). Despite the adage that some people are born beautiful or that some forms of beauty are universal, it is consensus within a culture and society that determines which features are defined as beautiful and which are not. Therefore, to make beauty happen requires effort and manipulation of semiotic resources, such as hair or skin, to achieve desired ends. Her choice of semiotic resources depends on what kind of beauty she wishes to perform (e.g., natural, glamorous, alternative) and on what potential those semiotic resources have to offer—preferably, ostensibly, social rewards. Social norms and dominant cultural industries, such as Hollywood or high fashion, also influence the looks women choose for various social situations. Choice is obviously structured, and one’s performance of beauty is limited by skills, financial resources, anatomical attributes, and many other components, but beauty is still not something one has but something one does.

In Western culture, those with beautiful bodies and faces “get more” out of life because beauty is highly valued (Black 2004). Beautiful people are viewed as more intelligent, powerful, healthy, and of higher class than the masses of regular Joes and Janes (Plous and Neptune 1997). To be part of the beauty elite requires a carefully managed set of semiotic resources, including long, shiny hair; clear, smooth skin; cosmetics; thin body; straight, white teeth; and trendy clothes. While different scripts for the performance of beauty exist across the world, the beautiful body is often acted out in similar ways by members of subgroups and cultures. With its Real Beauty campaign, Dove is attempting to adjust the yardstick for measuring beauty performances by altering the meaning and combination of such resources. Nonmodel features and shapes are now allowed in the beauty arena. At the same time, Dove is advocating for variety and “realism” within beauty advertising scripts.

Dramaturgy, or performance theory writ large, also contributes to this study because beauty and maintaining appearances involve impression management and thus performance. The dramaturgical perspective suggests that, like beauty, self is a social process, not an intrinsic entity that exists inside an individual (Tseelon 1992a). A person’s self and beautiful body arise from all kinds of interactions, face-to-face or mediated—so even media consumers play a crucial role in shaping how personas are played. In the context of media culture, popular personas often bend to match the ideals defined by social scripts and the expectations of dominant industries. In return, media consumers’ personas are shaped by how advertising and fashion script performances. For example, women may diet to lose weight for the ultimate goal of fitting into trendy clothes that are available only in models’ sizes.
In this context the significance of what Dove is attempting to accomplish is potentially enormous. Dove challenges the dominant beauty script by advancing countercultural images and rules while building its identity as a caring company. Thus, examining Dove’s Real Beauty campaign and women’s reactions to it within a group setting is the perfect opportunity to observe impressions and semiotic resources in action. This is especially the case because Dove’s marketing tactics are bold and transparent. The company has publicly committed to broadening beauty definitions and, in doing so, stands out from its competition. Brilliantly, the company uses the same semiotic resources as do women to make this change happen; advertisements are thus personal and communal indicators of beauty. If this campaign is successful in transforming beauty standards, Dove will have successfully produced a “semiotic change” or “transformation” (cf. van Leeuwen 2005) by either changing or adding new meanings to beauty-related semiotic resources because of its advertisements. Whereas before wrinkles signified old age, now wrinkles are beautiful. Or so is Dove’s presumed hope. Furthermore, Dove creates a positive impression by appearing as a company that cares about women and rejects stereotypes, unlike their “uncaring” competitors. This, in turn, increases the “modality value” (van Leeuwen 2005)—in other words, the sincerity value—of its image by being different and better than other brands. It is a win-win situation, except when critics accuse Dove of being insincere and profit driven. The idea that maintaining any impression must necessarily be insincere is a debate in the dramaturgy literature; however, Goffman states that sincerity and dishonesty are different things (Tseelon 1992b).

Yet even among the critics—media insiders, consumers, my participants—skeptics have something to gain from responding negatively to Dove, as do Dove supporters. The women in this study are not models but regular women living in the Canadian prairies. If Dove is successful in expanding beauty standards, all sixteen participants could feel better about themselves by now belonging to the beautiful category. Fitting in for them could mean less effort will be required to maintain a beautiful impression because the rules are going to be less rigid and the beauty buffet is going to offer more choice, thanks to Dove. For skeptics, on the other hand, critiquing Dove’s intentions contributes to maintaining a different impression—the smart, critically minded consumer. Regardless of the various readings of Dove—preferred, negotiated, or oppositional (Hall 1980)—Dove’s attempt to challenge the status quo is still praised by some media, by some participants in this study, by those in my social circles, and by me. This praise owes to the fact that Dove offers widely accessible counterimages that spark public and private debate about beauty and stereotypes.

**METHOD**

During February and March 2008, I interviewed sixteen women from Saskatchewan, Canada, in three focus groups and three individual interviews. All interviews and focus groups were semistructured (Morgan 1996) and lasted between thirty
and ninety minutes. I obtained written consent from all participants prior to beginning the sessions. As well, I secured consent from the parents of four teenage girls under eighteen years of age. Confidentiality was assured, and pseudonyms are used throughout this article. All participants completed a short demographics questionnaire that asked for background information about age, income, education, and ethnicity, as well as their media habits (how often they read magazines, watch television, and use the Internet). On this questionnaire I also asked how satisfied they were with their body shape and size, their physical attractiveness, and how influential they thought beauty advertisements were on their self-perception of physical attractiveness. I requested this information prior to our conversations about Dove as a glimpse into their beauty self-image. The women ranged from fifteen to fifty-nine years of age, all were Caucasian except for one African Canadian, and most were students or homemakers. One woman had a graduate degree, and five had undergraduate degrees or technical training. Income ranged from low and none to moderate (approx. $40,000), given that many were not working or were currently in school.

I recruited the majority of participants through free online advertisements posted on a university announcement board open to all students and employees and on a local buy-and-sell Web site. A high school psychology teacher in a nearby community, whom I know, allowed me to post my recruitment advertisement in his online classroom; seven girls responded, and four participated in a focus group session. Within four days of posting all the online advertisements, I received thirty-two responses. After coordinating schedules, the final sample consisted of sixteen women. I arranged focus groups roughly by age: four teens aged fifteen to seventeen, five women aged nineteen to twenty-four, and four women aged twenty-seven to fifty-nine. I also conducted interviews with three other women, aged thirty-three, thirty-five, and forty-one, and a telephone interview with a marketing representative with Dove Canada.

Participation was voluntary; in exchange, refreshments were provided, and everyone’s name was entered in a drawing for one twenty-five-dollar spa gift certificate. I did not know any of the women prior to the study, and all interviews and focus groups took place in public venues, including the public library and coffee shops. I led all interviews and focus groups while a female graduate student took notes. Since the teen group required travel, I could not have a note-taker present. The note-taker recorded contextual and nonverbal cues and, for the most part, did not participate in the conversations. I recorded and selectively transcribed all sessions, except for one that was typed by a research assistant (on this see Bertrand, Brown, and Ward 1992). I then used step-wise open, then focused, coding to analyze the transcripts (Dahlin Ivanoff and Hultberg 2006; Rapley 2004) and interpreted the data from a social semiotic and dramaturgical perspective (Vannini and McCright 2004; Vannini 2007).

I followed a semistructured question guide in all interviews and focus groups. The guide included such questions as “What are some beauty standards that exist for women today?” and “What are Dove’s intentions with the Real Beauty campaign?”
A range of Dove print advertisements selected from women’s magazines were laid out on the table and freely and repeatedly referred to by me and the participants during the sessions. In addition to our conversation, focus group participants provided written comments to specific advertisements. Participants answered three questions: “What feelings and sensations do you get from this ad?”; “What is the main message Dove is trying to communicate with this ad?”; and “How do you know?” Each interview and focus group loosely followed the same format, beginning with general conversation about beauty and advertising, and then zeroing in on Dove specifically. I asked them to discuss their overall impressions and to identify basic semiotic features of the advertisements (e.g., color, body positioning, text, facial expression, or product placement) that helped them make their interpretive decisions.

Three social semiotic concepts are particularly relevant in this study: semiotic resources, modality, and semiotic change. **Semiotic resources** are actions, materials, and artifacts that we use to communicate and that can have actual and potential meanings embedded in the use or practice of that artifact, not existing intrinsically within it (van Leeuwen 2005; Vannini 2007). In other words, semiotic resources are the fundamental units of meaning that people practically use to communicate with others. **Modality** refers to truth value: how true or how real something is represented. **Semiotic change** refers to a transformation in meaning and thus in the process, and thus to how it adds or subtracts meanings to and from semiotic resources (van Leeuwen 2005). For example, extending the notion of beauty to include bigger, older, or non-Caucasian women is a case of semiotic change.

In approaching data analysis, I first frame beauty as an outcome of performance, and I describe how that performance happens and what semiotic resources are engaged throughout this process. Second, I examine how Dove’s marketing strategies and advertisements help the company manage a positive impression. Third, I explore women’s response to and interpretation of Dove’s advertisements, which involves several performances of their own. In addition, I wish to acknowledge my role as the researcher and a twenty-eight-year-old Caucasian, middle-class female and graduate student with enough personal interest in Dove’s Real Beauty campaign to choose it as the topic for my MA thesis. These filters were active as I interpreted my participants’ words and thoughts and considered them in relation to my own. I acknowledge that my appearance and positive self-image places me in a position of privilege and perhaps even “power” over those participants and Dove models who are larger than me. I am five feet eight inches tall, with a lean athletic build, dark brown hair, and olive skin, and am satisfied with my personal appearance. I would describe my use of beauty products as moderate, and I prefer a natural, sporty appearance. As a woman who encounters stringent beauty standards, I can praise Dove for its counterefforts, yet still feel good about my appearance in relation to those standards because my thin body type still places me in a “desirable” category. However, I have a genuine interest in advertising communication as shown by my area of study (communications) and previous work on gender stereotypes and advertising.
BEAUTY IS WHAT BEAUTY DOES

Performing Beauty

When asked about the beauty standards that exist for women in our culture today, participants described a similar female image. The ideal woman is a model, according to Western social and cultural standards. She is tall, thin, tanned; has large breasts, clear skin, and long hair; and is often blond-haired—many of the same features that researchers and critics blame for women’s low self-esteem and unrealistic expectations because so few women possess them (see Groesz et al. 2001). Furthermore, beauty standards have gotten tougher to achieve with time, particularly for teenagers.

JM: How have the beauty standards changed from the past?
Vivian: Huge.
Cherri: I think they've gotten worse, if I remember right. I don’t know. When I got into high school I started to look around and was like “oohhh,” and I am starting to be concerned with myself. Before, I didn’t care.

Beauty standards are the equivalent of a “beauty script,” in which audiences expect actors to wear masks (makeup) and costumes (fashion) that fit the characters they are portraying. To be (act) beautiful is to play one’s role in line with expectations. In westernized cultures, celebrities and models are the stars of the show. They know the beauty script, inside and out, and have the resources to pull off a convincing beauty performance. Meanwhile, regular people watch and learn as understudies. I was not surprised by the participants’ descriptions of ideal beauty for two reasons: images of models permeate our daily world (television, Internet, billboards, shopping malls, etc.), and media and scholarly debates over the constraints of the model image keep the issue fresh in our minds. Participant statements against traditional beauty scripts are, no doubt, influenced by this larger social world (see Ford et al. 1991). None of my participants closely fit the model description, except one of the teenage girls who is tall and thin, with blond hair. Hence for most of them to achieve the model image would require a lot of effort, and, for some, it might be impossible.

Participants (unknowingly) identified two semiotic resources as essential to performing beauty: a fit body and a fashionable appearance. Social beauty scripts portray thinness as a highly desirable goal for women, and the participants readily acknowledge this as a reality. Heidi, a petite, athletic first-year university student, says,

It’s also what there is very few of, like in cultures where there is not an abundance of food, the beautiful women and men are going to be the ones that are bigger because there’s so many slim people. But here, because it’s North America and we eat too much and we sit on our butts, it’s the people who are thin who are beautiful because we don’t get to see that very often. And when we see thin people I think we think, they must be athletic, they must be motivated, they must be like “on their game,” because they aren’t affected by this food like so many are.

A fit body is not something to simply possess. It is an expression of work, a going concern, something to constantly work toward and to be rewarded for, and more
today than ever. Many of the participants’ comments lead me to understand that a fit body connotes health, discipline, superiority over overweight women, increased attractiveness in the eyes of men, and sometimes jealousy in the eyes of other women. Thus, when one observes a fit body, he or she does so through a seductive frame that suggests thinness and toned muscles are positive and valued (cf. Vannini and McCright 2004). The body’s semiotic power is therefore achieved through the social process of performing and being observed through various frames (Vannini and McCright 2004). The seductive frame is dominant in Western popular culture, with beauty regularly tied to sexuality and seduction. In addition, Western culture values thinness over obesity and attributes other positive qualities, like intelligence and work ethic, to thin women and negative ones to obese women (Edgley 2006; Peck and Loken 2004).

Staying current with fashion trends appears especially important for the four teenage girls in the study. Wearing untrendy clothing downgrades the quality of their beauty performance (as judged by others in the high school hallways), as two fifteen-year-old friends describe:

Kelly: There are so many trends and if you’re not up with all the new things you think wow, I’m “cool” [in a sarcastic tone].
Sasha: You can just not pay attention for like a day.
Kelly: And . . . you’re the odd one out.

Being the “odd one out” brings up feelings of self-doubt for Kelly and her friend, making them even more self-conscious about their appearance and fitting in. As Karen, a seventeen-year-old teen in this same group, says, “It’s hard to have, like, a down day because you’re always pressured to look great.” I asked the girls about their morning getting-ready-for-school routines:

Sasha: It’s a pain in the ass.
Monica: Getting up an hour early every day just for extra hair and makeup stuff, and it’s like, I hate this.
Sasha: Then there’s days I just go to school like this (gesturing to herself dressed in jeans and T-shirt).
JM: Do you wish it was different?
Kelly: I wish I didn’t have to wear makeup. [I wish] I just looked like this normally.
Monica: Wake up, my hair’s done.
Sasha: It’d be pretty sweet. You’d get a lot more sleep time.

As Karen mentioned above, the pressures to look good are high. But not trying hard enough also has negative consequences. Negotiating the logonomic order (Vannini 2004) of beauty appears to be a winless fight for many of the participants, and women in general, yet this does not stop them from trying.

As expressed in the interviews and focus groups, some women cross the line in terms of appearance when the result is looking fake. Fake was described as orangey tans, heavy makeup, plastic surgery, overly tight clothes, acting self-absorbed, and airbrushing, among other things. A natural look is preferred, as Tanya notes:
JM: Do you think you can relate to any of these women?
Tanya: Yes, these ones especially [a black underwear advertisement] because they are my age group, or they seem to be. . . . they are just average. They are not knockout gorgeous but if you put makeup on them, especially her because she’s darker, she could be a model. How tall and skinny she is and really natural. And, that’s what I like, natural.
JM: You think natural is a good thing?
Tanya: Absolutely. I think it’s good for everybody to wear a little makeup, but not painted on.

The terms *natural* and *normal* were used to describe the true self, whereas fake and phony appearances were used to connote fake and phony people. Fake appearances hold less modality or sincerity value than a natural or healthy appearance, even if that natural appearance is also carefully crafted (van Leeuwen 2005). Vannini and McCright (2004) made similar conclusions in their study of artificial tanners; despite the fact that both are “artificial” and manufactured, a healthy glow holds a positive connotation, while a “fake-baked orange” has a negative one. In their study, looking as though one is “trying too hard” risked being judged as shallow and superficial.

Finally, dominant beauty scripts also played a role in the women’s negotiation of beauty—sometimes minor, other times major. Even rejecting them outright gave them power, as Kate says,

> For me personally, I think there was a time when I was . . . like, I specifically went against them all through high school. I specifically did things to set myself against the standard and dress against the standard. . . . in that way at one point I realized that I still think you are letting that standard control the way you dress, like you’re . . . if you are specifically rebelling against a specific ideal, you’re still letting it determine what you think is beautiful.

The women I interviewed resent the rigid scripts, especially when the ideal look is opposite to their own appearance; these women have the most to lose when comparing themselves with models. Ostensibly, many women simultaneously strive to meet beauty standards and wish for them to disappear, as beauty guidelines are viewed as both influential (and sometimes even fun) and interfering. This internal struggle is what Hall (1980) called a negotiated reading, which Kate illustrates in her statement, “Yeah you feel superficial, you feel shallow for caring about how your hair looks that day, but you do [care].” She cannot help but look to advertisements for guidance but feels guilty for doing so. Furthermore, two processes are at work here: Kate *reads* the advertisement in a negotiated way, but she also *acts* on it by styling her hair to meet expectations (and is likely pleased with the result). Here, reading media products is coupled with performance.

By not having access to the necessary semiotic resources, such as trendy clothes or a fit body, participants are unable to showcase their best beauty performance—the one that others expect and reward positively. Dove’s looser rules, as shown by their advertisements, make this process a bit easier, as Tanya illustrates:

> Tanya: I would feel the most comfortable with this lady [larger black woman] because she’s not intimidating.
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JM: Because she weighs more than you?
Tanya: Yup. And because she’s older. It’s a very personal thing. This woman puts me at ease.

In this case, Tanya used the Dove advertisement as an additional semiotic resource to destigmatize her own nonnormative appearance. Tanya is reading the text for her own purposes based on her needs and unique life experiences (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2004). This might be due to Tanya recently having a second baby and wanting to lose the fifteen pounds of baby weight, as she stated in our conversation. The Dove model, who is carrying more than fifteen extra pounds, helps Tanya feel better about the way she looks.

Transforming Beauty Definitions

Attention to the use of semiotic resources is crucial in understanding beauty performances. The term resource implies action or movement in the meaning-making process, as opposed to a static sign that is preloaded with meaning. And meanings of semiotic resources accumulate and change over time (van Leeuwen 2005). Beauty advertisements, for instance, have a long list of uses: to sell products, to build a brand, to raise awareness of social causes, to relay information, and so on. Through repeated exposure to advertisements that follow the same rules, audiences form expectations for what future beauty advertisements will look like. Dove plays within these rules by using the same components, but manipulating them to present an image that is similar yet unique (and even better).

Dove has stated, in media articles and on the company’s Web site, that one goal of the Real Beauty campaign is to broaden beauty definitions for future generations. For example, by the end of 2010, Dove aims to reach five million young women and teach them about self-esteem (www.campaignforrealbeauty.ca). There was some evidence of Dove’s intentions being interpreted this way in several focus group conversations. As discussed in one older-women focus group:

Vivian: I think they did a tremendous job with this campaign. I personally do. Cuz it makes people realize it doesn’t matter what you look like, or what color you are, or how big or how small you are, or how old you are, you’re still beautiful.
JM: Do you think this campaign actually will change people’s minds?
Vivian: Oh for sure, I do.
JM: Yeah? How would it change somebody’s mind?
Melissa: It makes it OK to be different. To be different. To not be the typical size, height, color, age, whatever, you don’t need to be that.

Similar sentiments were expressed in a younger-women focus group:

JM: What is your first impression of this campaign? What did you think when you see it?
Melanie: I thought finally, finally. Somebody’s actually saying, “Wait a second we all don’t have to be one idea, we can all just be ourselves and be beautiful. That there just isn’t one idea.” I was very excited and very happy to see it finally happening.
Kate: I was in agreement with her pretty much, like that's how I feel about it, but like I was saying to her in the car on the way here that I'm just a little hesitant and I kind of take it with a grain of salt because it's a big corporation and they're trying to sell you a product. So how much are they trying to satisfy this women's dissatisfaction with their body by feeding you something else that's just you know it's just how much can we really trust them? What is their motivation? Is it to make us feel good or to sell us something?

Melissa and Melanie both liked the variety of images; to them this is an important positive feature of the campaign. Their statements indicate that variety is appreciated, while cookie-cutter images are not, and that the latter have been dominant in the beauty industry for too long. With a long-term, successful campaign, Dove could be a leader of semiotic change—the process of semiotic resources acquiring new or additional meanings because of using that resource in a new or different way (van Leeuwen 2005). Here, I refer to beauty advertisements as the semiotic resource in question. Dove’s Real Beauty advertisements have an easily recognizable style, most often showing close-up shots of regular-looking women with little or no makeup, with flaws “right out there” (see Figure 1).

By showing older faces and curvy shapes, Dove may contribute to a changing definition of beauty advertisements in the future. Changes could include new ways of thinking about female beauty (e.g., older women can be beautiful, too), societal beauty standards (e.g., women are not going to put up with this anymore), and advertising (e.g., not all big corporations are evil). Dove’s chances of successfully initiating a semiotic change are high for several reasons: it is a well-known and respected brand with a long history; Dove advertisements appear across popular media alongside other top brands (as opposed to being an independent, alternative brand); the campaign has garnered media attention and public support; and the Real Beauty idea has spurred copycat campaigns, such as Nivea and Burt’s Bees (see Jack 2007; Neff 2008). However, as Kate raises in the above excerpt, trust in the company’s motives (to make us feel good or to sell products), are barriers that Dove must carefully handle as part of its impression management strategy.

Dove’s advertisements make beauty standards more achievable for regular women, by showing real models, women “as they really are,” and not “what beauty scripts suggest that they should be.”

JM: And you would like to see real people?
Kate: Yeah, I think so.
JM: In advertisements, in stores?
Victoria: I think it would help us relate to them better. Cuz it’s like them that’s trying to sell the product. It’s the advertisement company using a person, a being that’s using that product, to sell that product. If they look computerized, unrealistic, it’s kinda like a hoax. It’s nice to see Dove and see how they’re using real people. And you can totally connect with that.

Some participants, like Victoria, found images of “real” women appealing and spoke more positively about Dove’s campaign compared with other campaigns. The concept of modality, specifically naturalistic modality, applies here (van Leeuwen 2005).
Naturalistic modality refers to authenticity. Social semioticians use the concept of modality to decipher truth claims. This approach involves analysis at two dimensions: representation (real vs. fake) and social interaction (true in one context, but not in another) (van Leeuwen 2005). And, creators of texts use semiotic resources to express these
truths. Media texts have higher naturalistic modality value when they most closely and accurately resemble real life; for example, a photograph of an apple compared with a painting of an apple. Not only do Dove advertisements have higher modality because they portray “truer” images of real women, but this makes Dove advertisements more highly valued against competitors’ advertisements that now appear even more fake.

Although Dove’s definition of “real beauty” points to regular-looking women, and while many participants supported this definition, others, like Beth, were quick to point out the underlying process at work in the seller-buyer transaction.

JM: I’ve heard from others that people are surprised at how small the product is given it is a full-page advertisement. Do you find one ad more appealing than the other?
Beth: in terms of the size?
JM: Mm hmm . . . of the product.
Beth: I definitely like the smaller ones I think; because really if they are doing their jobs as marketers they’re not selling the product, they are selling what the product sells, right?
JM: Which means?
Beth: Which means that, in this one they are selling a fabulous shower experience that’s oh so luxurious; they’re not selling a bottle of Dove body wash. So, it makes sense that that’s what they want. They want to sell you on the experience and here’s how you can get the experience with this bottle.

Beth’s comment refers to the fundamental, and somewhat ironic, purpose of these advertisements: to tell women they are beautiful as they are and then sell them products to enhance their appearance. This experience of embodiment is produced through social and cultural rituals that are personal and communal (Waskul and Vannini 2006). Dove promises beauty in a bottle as other beauty advertisements do, but with a twist by suggesting that their products enhance what is already there with little additional effort. Some of my participants and popular press writers appreciate this gentler approach (and so do I) (see Stevenson 2005). Still, questions linger about the honesty of Dove’s intentions—to influence positive change, to make money, to boost the company image, or some combination thereof.

In my interview with a Dove marketing manager, she said she felt good about coming to work because she believed in what the company was doing. She confirmed that Dove and Unilever are committed to the new vein of advertising and will no longer use airbrushing and digital alteration, although they hardly used these techniques before (compared with other brands). The apparent match between Dove’s public and private persona, as illustrated by my conversation with the Dove manager, sets the brand apart from competitors who appear willing to say (and sell) anything for the bottom line. Yet this interpretation must be considered cautiously, as Dove employees are also consumers influenced by the same social trends as Dove customers. Ultimately, since meaning is co-created as a result of social processes, no single “truth” exists about Dove’s true intentions. All we can ascertain is modality: that is, putative truth, truth as impression. As a multimillion-dollar brand and subsidiary of the profit giant, Unilever, Dove has access to a substantial advertising
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budget and a team of marketing specialists to help manage this caring public image. Creating an appearance involves a process—mechanics and energy—to produce the desired result, and this process is deliberate, not accidental. That said, dramaturgy suggests that while all appearances are staged and created through deliberate effort, they are not necessarily dishonest (Tseelon 1992b). Rather, appearances are dramatized representations, not deceptive ones.

For profit reasons, beauty brands have a vested interest in keeping beauty standards out of reach so people will continue to buy products in hopes of enhancing their looks. Yet decades of criticism of unrealistic standards and their harmful influence have called on advertisers and the beauty and fashion industries to make a change (Beetles and Harris 2005). Small steps like the banning of much too thin fashion models from Spain’s runways have peaked media interest (Associated Press 2006), but Dove’s campaign has garnered massive media attention. It seems Dove is ready to take beauty standards head-on and that people are ready to listen. And, as long as consumer feedback is positive, the company can adjust its tactics until the campaign no longer meets the company’s interests. As a result, Dove has managed to challenge the status quo while increasing profits and popularity. According to reports, sales have grown steadily over the last several years (Neff 2004). How audiences respond over time will determine Dove’s long-term success, until a new advertising fad takes center stage.

Interpreting Dove

The sixteen female participants and I serve as one audience for which Dove can perform. I listened to women express their thoughts and observed that they compared themselves with the Dove models when evaluating their own beauty. They did this in several ways. First, the advertisements provide a means to join the fight against impossible standards. Second, the regular features of the real-people models help viewers feel better about their own physical appearance and self-image. Third, the advertisements generated a discussion that allows participants to appear as intelligent consumers and critics of mass media without stepping out of the bounds of political correctness. The advertisements are helpful resources people can use to achieve desired performances.

Many of the women who liked the advertisements were also skeptical of Dove’s hidden sales agenda, calling the campaign a gimmick, albeit a positive one. Melissa, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of one, stated,

Even though it’s a gimmick, I think it’s a good gimmick. Because so much advertising out there that these young kids see for the skinny, little Barbie-doll type, and I like my daughter to see these ads (Dove) because I don’t want her to be the tall, skinny, wail-looking-type kid when she grows up. I want her to know that however she looks, she can be beautiful. It doesn’t matter. So more advertising like that, whether it gets more people to buy products from them or not, in my opinion as a mother, I just like my daughter to see something like that and see that, that’s OK and that it is accepted, or can be accepted.
Women with children, like Melissa, especially appreciate realistic female role models for their daughters. They also thought these images are better for men to see to lower their expectations of regular women. I heard participants say “finally!” several times, expressing their pleasure in seeing standout images. Participants generally took multiple messages from these advertisements and tended to accept a negotiated reading that suited their own circumstances. Hall (1980) classified the most common readings of visual images by audiences into three categories: dominant (e.g., real people are beautiful), negotiated (e.g., Dove’s campaign is a gimmick, but at least a good one), and oppositional (e.g., who is Dove kidding, beauty standards will never change!). Viewers can also accept polysemic interpretations, even if they are contradictory (Schroder 2000). The “good gimmick” theme raised by participants reflects what media articles have said about the campaign (see Neff 2007; Westphal 2005), which implies a potential societal influence on the women’s language and behavior choices while participating in the study (or vice versa).

Gimmick or not, some participants still felt the ads had value and a place in the advertising world. In our one-on-one interview, Beth agreed with the oppositional reading (cf. Hall 1980) but supported Dove for trying, which results in a negotiated reading.

So I mean it would make sense to me that there is certainly marketing logic behind a campaign like this. On the other hand, I’d like to say it’s absolutely necessary and good that somebody does campaigns like that and a nonprofit foundation wouldn’t have that kind of dollars to put out something this massive, so I guess in that way I’m glad that somebody’s doing it as opposed to nobody doing it.

I suspect her reading was strongly rooted in her graduate-level education and higher-than-average interest in beauty advertising. Later, in one of the focus groups, Cherri, a thirty-year-old woman with dyed black hair and pale white skin, made similar comments:

Cherri: At first I thought it was really neat when they came out with it, but now I think it’s their little ploy to sell products. Instead of showing the whole over-make-up’ed-type person is beautiful, now they are doing the opposite thing, but they are doing the same thing.

JM: What’s “the same thing”?

Cherri: Like the majority of ads, like in Flare, oh beauty blah blah blah, look how beautiful I am and sell products. And Dove is in a way doing that, too, be the opposite just be yourself, but I still think it’s kind of a gimmick. So now they are playing on, well people should be more conscientious, like parents, so oh we’ll do it this way. Maybe it’s a pessimistic way of thinking. I’m starting to think like that. But now they are doing it so much, which I still think is good, but at the same time I still think it is a gimmick too because they know people are going to respond to it.

Despite participants’ awareness of such marketing tactics, the Real Beauty images still hold value for them, which indicates a primarily negotiated reading. A major complaint of women, feminists, and researchers is that despite decades of research that shows thin images are harmful, advertisements have only marginally improved
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in the same time period (Peck and Loken 2004). Dove's semiotic transformation of the beauty ideal helps women feel better about themselves in terms of their own beauty performances; they feel more beautiful when they look at Dove advertisements. Advertising studies have shown that women compare themselves with models (Richins 1991), and Dove reduces the gap between reality and advertising; now it takes less effort (beauty work) to look like a model. By providing more reasonable beauty scripts, consumers might feel even better about themselves by being thinner or more attractive than the women in the advertisements.

Talking about Dove's beauty advertisements also provides an opportunity for participants to appear as media-literate consumers. Kate, a young student with red curls, feels insulted when advertisers assume she is a naive consumer:

Kate: I think even from a practical standpoint, like if I was marketing a product and I know this isn't the normal way of thinking for people who are marketing products now, I would want to show people that OK this is an average person and this is how they can look with our product, instead of this is someone who is already gorgeous and beautiful and has everything and we threw some makeup on her. Like, what can be more impressive? But I guess they want you to think that it was their specific product that made all the difference in the world.

JM: Even though . . .

Kate: Even though I know better. I'm not stupid. Yeah. It's insulting.

Her reaction is directed two ways: toward Dove as the clever marketer and toward the other participants around the focus group table. Impression management theory states that appearance is most important when one is less familiar with the audience (Tseelon 1992b). Kate was one of the most outspoken women in the group, and, by making statements like this one during the session, she was able to present herself as an intelligent critic of advertising and avoid being seen as naive or easily duped.

One advertisement in particular sparked the most discussion—a Pro-Age product line advertisement featuring an overweight, nude, strategically posed African American woman. Responses from two focus groups were drastically different. As discussed in the older-women focus group:

Vivian: There's no way that twenty, even thirty years ago, that you would see a heavy black woman sitting naked in a picture for all of the world to see (others agreeing). NEVER.

JM: Why not?

Melissa: People's perception.

Vivian: It wasn't acceptable.

Cherri: Especially for a black person. It takes a long time for a black person to just, do anything. And when they finally did something, it's like oh cool. I think that's a really huge step.

Karen: And when you look at that picture, you don't, well at least I don't, dwell on the wrinkles or the love handles. I see the smile and her eyes and I think, I'd like to get to know her.

Melissa: She seems like she's very happy.

Vivian: And proud. That's what I see.
In contrast, the teen focus group was much less supportive:

Sasha: Sometimes I’m like ew, I wonder why is this even in here? Like all these Dove ones, there is old wrinkly lady. Her legs are like this and you can’t see anything and it’s like why is she in here?

Monica: She’s naked and like oh no!

Sasha: And I was reading an article and like she was here, so I had to flip it over so I didn’t have to look at her anymore.

JM: Because she was naked, or because she was old?

Sasha: All of it.

Kelly: It’s kind of a shock, because it’s in a teen magazine and it’s like oh what’s going on?

JM: You think they don’t belong there?

Kelly: Not that they don’t belong, but it’s just really different.

This is one of Dove’s boldest advertisements, which I purposely included in the study, anticipating it would raise eyebrows, given the model’s size and nudity. I was surprised by the teen group’s strong reaction, which is likely due to their reading, contrasting my own preferred reading of the advertisement. The teen group was also the last focus group I conducted, and no other participant had made similar statements until that point. The difference in opinion is related to the purposes that teens and older women (and I) have for the advertisement, which depends on age and personal circumstances. As Couldry (2004) states, people do not passively watch or read media, but do things with their products. Older women can then look into the Dove advertisements as forgiving mirrors and therefore judge their own appearances less harshly because they look more like the model. Although they were strangers to each other, these older women share similar body flaws and thus had more to gain from Dove’s presentation of real beauty. Also, the Pro-Age line targets women over forty. The teens, on the other hand, look the least like the Dove model; none are obviously overweight or suffered from severe acne, and I would consider each attractive.

Discussion of the nonsexual nature of the nudity in this advertisement was especially interesting because participants talked around or backtracked about the notion that big women are not sexy, but no one stated it outright. Note how the teen group conversation began with a harsh statement (Ew! What is this doing in here?) and ended with the opposite comment—that it was OK for the photo to be there, but it was just “different.” Talking around rather than directly exposing social taboos is one way to maintain a positive, politically correct impression. Likely, speaking in a group setting influenced individual comments. Teens spoke more bluntly than did older women, although they were still polite, perhaps related to maturity and the social awareness that comes with age. One teen girl commented that because the woman was overweight it made the nudity acceptable and that showing a thin model naked in the same pose would “have politicians all over that.” Her statement also reflects the ingrained image of thin as sexualized in Western culture. Somehow, Dove and similar others are allowed to break these rules. Interestingly, older women were just as shocked by a nude heavysset black woman in an advertisement, but focused on positive comments about her smile, face, and sense of confidence.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Various degrees of performance and self-presentation by different players have been presented in this study. Dove performs an impression of its company and morals for society and consumers. The participants performed a specific version of themselves, for each other and for me, and they also engaged in beauty performances in their everyday lives. All of these “acts” involve social action and interaction; beauty, the body, and self are not preexisting or intrinsic qualities but negotiated and created through a revolving process of expression and reception (Frost 2005; Waskul and Vannini 2006). People perform for an audience, and being seen is a necessary part of the process. Semiotic resources were crucial tools used to enact the performances present in this study. Dove’s Real Beauty print advertisements and features of models were resources used by both Dove and the participants to negotiate their desired impressions. Further, the displays enacted in this study involved maintaining not only an impression but a positive one. Being viewed positively brings greater gains than being viewed negatively, particularly among strangers, as is the case here (Tseelon 1992b).

The existence of impressions and the desire to create positive ones do not mean that Dove or participants are insincere or that the women here were deceitful. In contrast, I shared many moments of genuine conversation and laughter with these women. In many cases, my own reactions to Real Beauty advertisements prior to this study mirrored theirs. Dramaturgical theorists have different views on the level of sincerity present in performance because performances are acted out in different ways. From Goffman’s (1959) view, people choose from an arsenal of faces as opposed to one true private and many false public personas. Following this theory, Dove is not concealing an inner truth and presenting a necessarily false front, but choosing to build itself in a way that is appropriate for its immediate audience—the current state of popular culture and beauty advertising today. Calls for more varied images of women in the media (Beetles and Harris 2005), feminist displeasure with stereotypical portrayals (Ford and LaTour 1996), and unhappy female consumers create a broad audience primed for something new in women’s advertising. Through its Real Beauty campaign, Dove is responding and, at the same time, meeting its own needs to sell products, carve a big niche in the market for the brand, and attract consumers. Stevenson (2005) says it nicely: “Real Women. Real Curves. Real Smart Ad Campaign.” Providing the language and semiotic resources to also encourage consumers and others to join Dove in its fight against unrealistic beauty standards is another way that Dove can meet its needs. It is not important that people believe Dove’s good intentions, but that the performance of playing out the good intentions helps Dove achieve its own goals as a company and empowers consumers. And, as long as the performance holds strong against criticism (Neff 2007), Dove will likely continue its campaign.

This study contributes to more than one literature body because it weaves performance study with social semiotics, hopefully taking what could have been a simple paper about media reception and a list of themes gathered from focus groups and
interviews further. This study looks closer at how women arrive at their interpretations, rather than only listening to what they say; as a result, I explore the processes of creating the self, beauty, and a public body image. The participant-interviewer relationship and the purposeful research setting does influence the data, yet sitting around the table with these sixteen women is not unlike the everyday experiences of women who flip through magazines and stand with their girlfriends in the drugstore, wondering what moisturizer to buy.

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