

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Filipino Women's Standpoint on the Representation of the "New Women" in Beauty Product Advertisements' Co-optation of Feminism

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### ABSTRACT

This study rests on the premise that feminism has been co-opted by advertisements of beauty products. "Co-optation" is the borrowing of surface elements of a progressive philosophy while ignoring its other important elements. By calling the sales pitch in beauty product ads as "co-opted feminism", the recurring appropriated concept of the "New Woman" is continually hailed. This social construct has been actively produced and reproduced since the early 1890s in popular media as both a relief and a cautionary tale of the woman "breaking free" from tradition. At present, the "New Woman" is a fortified version of her many previous fortifications in popular culture, but who is still in a continuing metamorphosis of herself. In this study, the real "New Women" who are consumers of these co-opted images of feminism are the educated, the earning and the independent Filipino women. Their "readings" of the advertisements are the units of analysis of this research paper.

As the most represented sectors in beauty product ads, this study surfaces the standpoint of seventy two (72) educated, earning, and independent Filipino women on how the "New Woman" is hailed through concepts of beauty and empowerment in twenty (20) beauty product advertisements. Using the feminist lenses in Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood's Standpoint Theory, as well as in Cheris Kramarae's Muted Group Theory, and applying the qualitative reception analysis method, findings show that real "New Women" have strong objective readings of the advertisements' format and story line; the representation of the character of the "New Woman"; the advertisements' premise and prescription; and the ethics and aesthetics of the advertising industry vis-a-vis beauty products. On the other hand, they have an ambivalent take on how they related the advertisements to how they see their bodies. The results of the study confirm the powerful halo that co-opted feminism casts on women's perception of their supposedly empowered bodies.

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The reception analysis results also prove that the standpoint of the subjugated even if they are supposedly the empowered “New Women” need not always stand in complete contrast to the language of the dominant as embodied in the advertisements. Sometimes, they carry hints of the dominant’s language by admitting that they have succumbed many times to the ads’ promises. Their acceptance of the prescriptions was, nevertheless, submitted through several revisions and rejections. In this sense, standpoint is not the “other” of the dominant’s language. This particular standpoint reveals the managing of contradictions in women’s appraisal of their body and beauty.

*Keywords.* Representation, standpoint, advertisement of beauty products, reception analysis

### INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

This paper examines how educated, earning, and independent Filipino women “read” television advertisements of beauty products and these advertisements’ hailing of the “New Woman” in what I term as co-opted feminism. Consequently, it examines the culture on beauty and its subsequent beauty advertisement consumption.

#### *Evolving Feminism*

Feminism encompasses matters of pedagogy, epistemology, ontology and theory. It is both an articulation and a way of living that questions, deconstructs, subverts and improves rules and regulations that govern gender, personhood and knowledge-building just to name a few. Feminist concerns over meaning are not a light topic since they imply not only what a certain philosopher might offer but also in terms of what feminism might become.

The following themes in feminism were adapted for some of the parts of this study: a.) equitable treatment or “equity”, b.) women-centered “standpoint” and/or “embodiment”, and c.) the post-modern rendering of “difference” (Bordo, 1993; Bowden & Mummery, 2009; Farganis, 1994; and Jaggar, 1983).

The start of the women’s movement stood on very basic notions of entitlement. The slogan, “anything a man can do a woman can do too,” summarizes the *equity* concept of earlier feminisms. According to Mitchell (1987), feminism, as a self-conscious protest movement, arose as part of a

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revolutionary bourgeois tradition that had equality of 'mankind' as its highest goal. Equality-as-sameness became an easy principle that brought women together in the pursuit of liberation. This has been the foundational philosophy of a brand of feminism called Liberal Feminism. Liberal Feminism rests on a conception of the human being as rather individualistic. Women can be equal with men with determination and the right amount of personal enlightenment. Jaggar (1983) explained that since this is how liberals see it, freedom or progress is often taken as a solitary undertaking. The standard of being equal with something is the standard of being equal with men. Definitions of concepts like strength, for instance, are that of men's. This naturally extends to definitions of knowledge and knowledge-building. Most present-day feminists believe that such an equality-as-sameness notion of feminism should be expanded, if not, altogether overcome.

Women-centered standpoint and/or embodiment highlights the uniqueness of the identity, "woman". For instance, right-brain attributes like intuition, emotionality, nurturance, and relationality are magnified to be important characteristics of being a woman. These supposedly predominant female characteristics which have long been considered inferior to left-brain characteristics identified with males like objectivity, logic, reason, mental linearity, etc., are celebrated by standpoint feminists. This does not mean that males do not use their right-brain hemispheres. However, by virtue of biology and social upbringing, they do not tend to use these abilities as much as women do. Furthermore, some feminists reject the biological determinism of women's uniqueness to men since, according to them, this becomes an additional burden to being females -- society expecting more from women as being primary care-givers, for instance (Borysenko, 1996).

Meanwhile, feminism's "embodiment" is considered as phenomenologically and psychoanalytically attached to "standpoint". Women's subjectivity is *of* their bodies and, as emphasized by feminists rallying for embodiment, "the weightiness" of one's body interjecting with one's race, class, gender, age and (dis)ability. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the early feminists who treaded on theorizing the body. Others have followed suit carrying the project started by de Beauvoir. Meanwhile, Merleau-Ponty expanded contemporary interest on embodiment by making visible the variable experiences of gendered, raced, classed and differently abled and aged bodies, as well as bodies in pain; to reflect on the way such experiences mediate, and are mediated by, social positionality; and the way in which they constitute our sense of self (Lennon, 2004).

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Thus, women-centered stand-point/embodyment becomes an important feminist thought since it is yet another departure from traditional fare. By upholding its importance, it becomes a feminist critique of mainstream society's claim to universality. At the heart of feminist theory, therefore, is the role of standpoint in understanding women's place and women's means of resistance. Alongside these insights are feminist views on the "politics of meaning-making and the structure and consequences of discourse within which women are spoken to or about or must stake their claims as persons who have a right to be heard" (Rakow and Wackwitz, 2004, p.94.).

Feminist ideologies are further complicated when the issue of *equality* versus *difference* is confronted. Beyond the equality debate there is more to the battle-cry than what is commonly mistaken to be a denial of sexual difference, "men and women are alike, therefore, both deserve equal entitlements." Yet as long as women bear children there is at least one inescapable difference between the sexes and this Liberal Feminist strand is at present often labeled as bourgeois feminism.

Dissecting further the notion of *difference*, feminists are also confronted with the difference of women from other women in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. These are intersecting points of "being" that compound the essentiality of "woman". Consequently, feminists are forced to do the difficult, yet necessary, task of taking in other feminist perspectives. White feminists, for instance, are expected not just to be aware of their commonalities with women from the third world but to be less ignorant of their privilege over third world women and also over third world men, or vice versa, depending on the site of power and privilege. Sexual orientation is also an equally important point of departure for *difference*. Compulsory heterosexuality, for example, is seen as a problematic automatic assumption in the analysis of gender power relations. This means transcending the male-female/man-woman dichotomies. Lesbians, bisexuals, trans-sexuals and even celibates have their own lamentations regarding emancipation in their respective worlds.

Aguilar (2012) brought down to earth the idea of difference via "intersectionality". According to her, "intersectionality" is perhaps feminism's most enduring concepts, but one that cannot be oversimplified. Aguilar traced "intersectionality" to Third World feminists' coining of the term "triple jeopardy". Women are not only oppressed by men but by the triple jeopardy of sexism, racism, and capitalism/imperialism. Each form of oppression is equal in weight and pain. Aguilar argued for the revitalization of feminism fighting these

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three. For her, feminism must not stop at individual discontent but must also work at resisting societal acceptance of the economic default of capitalism and imperialism.

By going through these themes, I was guided as to how I could analyze Filipino women's standpoint of co-opted feminist themes in advertisements. I found it important to "belabor" this section because this will contribute to the understanding of, particularly the complexity and richness of feminism that I believe has been greatly deradicalized especially in popular discourse. My intention is not to be trapped in the framework of "stereotype" because many have already treaded on that road before. This is the kind of feminism I defend against co-optation -- rich, complex, profound, intellectually and practically enriching and challenging, something so far-off from the token feminism in mainstream consciousness.

### *Co-optation of Feminism*

To co-opt or coopt literally means "to assimilate, take or win over into a larger or established group" or "to neutralize, to appropriate as one's own or preempt (i.e., the dissidents have co-opted the title of her novel for their slogan)" (Random House Dictionary, 2015). Therefore, co-optation, as a concept in this paper, is taken to mean as the process through which a progressive idea (feminism) is accommodated as surface elements of mainstream text (in this case, advertisements), without engaging its complex and intricate positions on issues.

My contention of co-optation is its being a very clever communication strategy. Eventually though, I found it as a method of further sifting the conflicting images of feminist ideology in a system that proliferates it. It is revealed both as tweaked versions of feminism in advertisements, appearing as actual ad content and as a process embedded in the advertising industry, as in ad-makers' "borrowing of feminism's surface elements" (Baldo-Cubelo, 2015).

I am personally interested in advertisements because advertisements remain to be the most obvious pop-culture content that exists with the sole purpose of prescribing notions of the ideal. Advertisements not only prescribe ideas but actually exhort these ideas to be bought with literal monetary value (Packard, 2007). Aside from this, advertisements remain to be the most intrusive pop-culture unit that literally "pop out" of any media content -- television program, YouTube video, Facebook newsfeed, and even one's SMS texts. This over-presence of advertisements has not yet been paralleled by any other form of pop-media content (Yakob, 2015). Advertisements also prescribe a

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lifestyle and/or sell a lifestyle of beauty that subscribes to a Western imagery of beauty.

I argue that women continue to feel ambivalent because representation is at best only co-opted, thus women feel the sense of being represented as “free”, but at the same time being told “only if you adhere to a particular sense of beauty.”

### *The New Woman and Her “Beautiful Body”*

Literature would reveal that “beauty” is culturally linked with the social construct, “New Woman”. As discussed above, this so-called New Woman has historically appeared every now and then. This would be when the Filipino woman is mindlessly extolled as having gone through darkness in lieu of deceitfully hiding her from the reality of her bondage.

The term “New Woman” first appeared in the 1890s ((Pykett, 1992; and Robbins, 2001) to describe a construct or a diluted symbol of disorder and rebellion .This social construct was actively produced and reproduced in novels and newspaper pages as both a relief and a cautionary tale(Pykett, 1992; and Robbins, 2001).

Being well-educated, she treads the fine-line between science and religion. Moreover, by openly demonstrating her disinterest in marriage and domesticity, she has been seen as a cause for moral panic. The New Woman as representation has evolved across decades and each new transformation has often disturbed the typical arrangements of gender roles and domesticity. She has become very mannish in one period and too feminine in one. In the US, she has been futuristic and rustic. In Asia, she has metamorphosed from being traditional to being edgy in just one decade (Pykett, 1992; and Robbins, 2001).

I take this “old” concept of the New Woman as someone who has appeared again and again in pop-culture and, in every resurrection; she is the improved version of her old self. She is the subject of contemporary studies in representations centering on how the quintessential feminine is continually evolving in response to the times (Pykett, 1992; Rajan, 2004; and Robbins, 2001 ;). In fact, although the term New Woman is not used, the advertising world itself admits to resurrecting her in recent years (Torres, 2010). Thus, my use of the concept is due to my analysis that the women in ads are always both “new”, given the new sense of empowerment she is heralded with, and, at the same time “old”, given the old notions she is tied with.

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The depoliticization occurs at the point when feminist social goals -- such as self-definition, equal treatment in labor markets and inside the household economy, control over one's body and personal freedom -- are framed and in fact, punned, as commodity form and forgets its origin as a critique of unequal social, economic, sexual, racial and political relations.

The New Woman is supposedly claiming her entitlements. It is "harvest time" for her. She is embracing her essential womanhood which largely rests on her physical self. She is not apologetic about this anymore. Her purchasing power deems her commanding of what choices to make because she is supposed to have many options at this point in history. She is both able to take care of everyone and, most importantly, herself. Her body is an autonomous entity capable of will-power and discipline. Her sexuality is something she exercises by choice rather than because of its ascribed gender role. As Torres of AdEdge magazine (2010) declared it,

Women will always be women. No matter how "evolved" women are, there is still that natural need for women to look beautiful. But whereas before women did this for men in their lives, nowadays women dress up or pretty themselves for their own personal satisfaction. (Torres, 2010, p. 32)

It is therefore crucial to consider "beauty" as a fertile conceptual venue for analyzing the conflicting consideration of feminism's *embodiment*. The New Woman's "beauty", being seen as both a liberatory aesthetic enterprise and a constricting cultural imposition, is an axis of understanding further the influential ideas that make feminist inquiries a major force in contemporary progressive thought.

My use of the concept "New Woman" is my reconstitution of feminism's *embodiment* -- "beauty" being closest to the body. Women's standpoint is *of* her body. Representations of beauty and women's actual relationship with "beauty" are fertile sites of provocation that reflect the diversity in feminist response strategies encompassing both socio-economic and culturally symbolic concerns.

Feminism *troubles* the dualistic soul-body and mind-body hierarchy. Western patriarchal notions of the body are based on the body as an "unfortunate necessary condition (Bowden & Mummery, 2009, p.46)" --- something of an irrelevant distraction. Part of feminist responsibility is to challenge the way women's bodies have been categorized as inferior and incomplete. Another challenge is to give social form and meaning to the contradictions and ambivalence of bodily existence. Other feminists even say that "race and gender oppressions

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may both resolve around the same axis of disdain for the body" (Collins, 1990, as cited in Bowden & Mummery, 2009, p. 50).

"Beauty" reflects the idea of *standpoint* as *embodiment*. Feminism's *standpoint* as a particular perspective, voice or position is from a woman's whole body and not just her mind alone. This body is immersed in experience and not just in abstractions. Bowden and Mummery (2009) argue that these revisionings are as constraining as they are enabling. As a socialist feminist, I take "beauty" as *embodiment* because it is very much of the body -- felt, lived and struggled with.

I, therefore, asked the question:

**What is Filipino women's standpoint on the representation of the "New Women" in beauty product advertisements' co-optation of feminism?**

### STUDY FRAMEWORK

This study uses the feminist communication theory, Standpoint Theory by Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood.

Standpoint Theory makes the following principal claims:

- 1.) Knowledge is socially situated.
- 2.) Dominant and non-dominant groups have different accounts of reality.
- 3.) Subjugated groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-subjugated.
- 4.) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the subjugated group.

The concept of a standpoint employed in feminist standpoint theories takes on the Marxist term of standpoint as achieved through collective identity or consciousness. The establishment of a standpoint is the political achievement of those whose social location forms its starting point; it is not merely ascribed from beyond that location. However, there is a consensus among feminist standpoint theorists that a standpoint is not merely a perspective that is occupied simply by dint of being a woman (Harding, 2004). Whereas a perspective is occupied as a matter of the fact of one's socio-historical position and may well provide the starting point for the emergence of a standpoint, a standpoint is earned through the experience of collective political struggle, a struggle that requires, as Nancy Hartsock put it, both science and politics ( as cited in



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Harding 2004, p. 8). To clarify, this is the definition of standpoint I adhere to in this research.

### *Operational Definition of Terms*

Co-optation: Since co-optation literally means “the process whereby a dominant discourse adopts elements of non-dominant discourse, draining the alternative discourse of its radical or oppositional implications,” the word is taken to mean the whole advertisement *text*. By *text*, latent language interpreted by the researcher to be patterns of depoliticization of feminist concepts of empowerment, entitlement, and privilege. The twenty (20) selected advertisements used in this studied have been identified to have messages of co-opted feminism (Baldo-Cubelo, 2015).

Educated, earning, and financially independent Filipino women: These are the units of analysis of this study as an approximation of the represented sector of the “New Women” in advertisements. All of them are college-degree holders, most have master’s degrees. They earn 50,000 pesos or more monthly within the last 5 years. They all consider themselves financially independent from their spouses/partners. Those who have children equally share the financial obligation for their children’s and over-all household needs. Those who do not have kids are the primary income earners in the family with parents and relatives as members of the household.

Ideal feminine beauty: As postulated by the Standpoint Theory by Sandra Harding and Julia T. Wood, the ideal feminine beauty comes from dominant ideologies. In this study the dominant ideology is presented in the television advertisements of beauty products. It is indicated through a colonial consumerist brand of feminine beauty emphasizing a youthful, fair-skinned, spot-free, flawless, skinny, “healthy”, perfect-haired feminine beauty.

New Woman: This concept was observed through the woman character in the television advertisements of beauty products. She is portrayed to be financially independent, modern, liberated, powerful, happy, in-control, ambitious yet “feminine” and determined to “have it all”.

Standpoint: This concept was explored through selected women’s (as consumers) standpoint. Their standpoint was

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analyzed based on their reading of twenty (20) TV advertisements of beauty products. Their standpoint is considered here as the subjugated group's standpoint because being earning, educated, and independent, they represent the sector of the New Women in the advertisements.

### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative exploratory approach to research. It presents a reception analysis of seventy-two (72) educated, earning, and financially independent Filipino women in order to surface their standpoint vis-à-vis advertisements that sell the “ideal feminine beauty” and what I claim to be messages of co-opted feminism. The qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for this type of study since I wanted to surface the details, nuances, and depth in women's standpoint.

#### *Reception Analysis using Focus Group Discussion (FGD)*

In reception analysis, audiences are seen, as Fiske (1982) suggested, as active producers of meaning, not just mere consumers of media meanings. They decode media texts in ways which are related to their social and cultural circumstances and the ways that they individually experience those circumstances.

Rather than using solely the questionnaire technique generally used in uses and gratifications research, reception researchers will normally also use qualitative methods on a smaller scale. For example, in-depth interviews and group interviews as a means of uncovering the meanings which small groups of readers generate for media texts, focusing on the audience's 'situatedness' within a particular socio-historical context (Pernia, 2004).

For this study, I utilized the FGD method to find out the audience's *reading* of twenty (20) selected advertisements. An FGD offers room for an informal interview and a non-rigid reception analysis by the participants.

The aim of these FGDs was to solicit the audience's interpretation of the images of feminine beauty and find out how they relate to such representations. In total, there were six (6) FGDs conducted, with 8 to 12 women in each FGD session. Each FGD had the women participants view eight (8) TV advertisements of beauty products randomly selected from a list of twenty (20) TV products shown on

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Philippine TV from 2014 to 2017. A short discussion followed in between videos. A more thorough discussion was further facilitated after the eight commercials were shown. The participants would sometimes ask for some videos to be played again. Specifically, the participants were guided on four areas of reading with regard to the advertisements:

1. The product being sold
  2. The woman character in the advertisement
  3. The idea of beauty being sold
  4. The meaning of the advertisements to the women
- (See Appendix I for the guide questions)

### a. Sampling Method for the Focus Group Discussion

Seventy-two (72) female research resources (informants/participants) were asked to participate in the study. A maximum variation sampling method was utilized in the selection of FGD participants. For maximum variation, at least six of the following categories were represented by the participants:

- a. A married woman (with or without a child/children)
- b. An unmarried woman/single (may or may not be in a relationship, may be a widow, may or may not have a child/ children)
- c. A solo mother (more popularly known as “single” mother)
- d. Works in an urban area ( may be a government, private, or informal worker)
- e. Works in a non-urban area/Non-Manila area
- f. Does not have paid work/ “unemployed” or Self-employed
- g. A lesbian, a bi-sexual, a trans-sexual, or a celibate

### b. Analytical Procedure for the FGD

The transcripts and “clean notes” for the FGD were examined using axial and cluster coding techniques. These coding techniques were guided by the points mentioned above, namely:

1. The women’s say on the product being sold;
2. The women’s say on the woman character in the advertisement;
3. The women’s say on the idea of beauty being sold; and
4. The women’s say on the meaning of the advertisements to their own lives.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of the women informants in this study are college-degree holders with thirty-six (36) having master's degrees and fourteen (14) having doctorate degrees. Eighteen (18) work for the government, twenty-eight (28) for private companies, and twenty-six (26) are self-employed. Their ages range from 30 to 52. All have a monthly income of PhP50,000 or higher within the last five years.

Eleven (11) are solo/single mothers. Twelve (12) are lesbians (7 unmarried, without children and 5 married and/or with children). Forty-nine (49) are heterosexuals, married and with children whose ages ranged from two to 22 years old. Out of the 72 participants, thirty (35) come from the National Capital Region (NCR), twenty-two come from Visayas, and fifteen (15) come from Mindanao.

The women's reception of the TV ads was aimed to understand how the real "New Women" actually see the TV ads on beauty products. Their standpoint being situated at the other end of producer-audience spectrum is deemed as an important source of knowledge as proposed by Standpoint Theory. A subjugated standpoint is not always in total contrast to the dominant's, especially if it comes from those who are not altogether dis-infranchised. It was my analytical bias to pinpoint that the women were subjugated on virtue of their profile – educated, earning, and independent – being co-opted as New Women in the ads. As the co-opted sector in the ads, I deem their standpoint to be reduced to over-simplification, romantization, and sentimentalization, and therefore, subjugation.

#### *1. Comments on the "New Woman" Character*

Although I did not isolate their comments on the women in the ads, the informants automatically in many instances of the FGDs commented on the New Women. The comments were on the following: a.) the women's physical trait, b.) the women as actors with "real life" stories outside the ads, c.) women as celebrities portraying a role and d.) the connotations of the New Women's actual traits inside the ads.

Compared to others comments presented later in this paper, these types of comments t showed a very detached yet "curious" position on the women models. The participants had specific disappointments on

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how some of them stoop to the level of endorsing anti-aging soap. They were not demeaning on the celebrities though. The following are examples of their comments<sup>1</sup>:

- 1.) In all fairness, Kris [Aquino] is pretty in this commercial.<sup>2</sup>
- 2.) Kris Aquino is most beautiful when she is in a shampoo commercial.
- 3.) I bet she's slim even she doesn't use Fitrum.
- 4.) Or, does she even use that product?
- 5.) I was really disappointed with Miriam [Quiambao] that she stooped down to this level – endorsing an anti-aging product. 'Good thing it's not whitenine.
- 6.) I like Bea here, she's not pretending like she's still a teenager.
- 7.) I can't believe that Toni Gonzaga had a close-up shot without her false lashes. An actress does look young when she doesn't have make-up. We're kinda used to them with so much make-up.
- 8.) It seems like her friends are not of her age. They look like they're her assistants or nannies in the background.
- 9.) Iza Calzado is perfect here and I like the fact that she is brown-skinned. Also, I like that Myra E never claimed that its whitens skin. If they do, I'll be hysterical!
- 10.) Ay, Ruffa! Way to go, turn yourself into a princess. 'Looks like she has not yet separated from Ylmas around this time.
- 11.) If I remember correctly, Anne Curtis is for Creamsilk, right? Why is she endorsing L'Oreal which is Creamsilk's competitor?
- 12.) KC really takes after Gabby, not Sharon.
- 13.) I used to like Toni. Now she has become so cocky.
- 14.) And what are you doing in the dessert, Anne Curtis?
- 15.) I don't like Bea here, she looks so angry at the world. Why is it when they portray sophisticated women they hardly smile?

It was very clear that the informants were aware of the ads as a commodity that can be deconstructed into pieces, scrutinized and studied. For the less vocal ones, automatically commenting on the women became more pronounced only after three video clips. They somehow learned “the game” and one expressed that what others have observed were usually her thoughts when watching TV alone. “This time, I was just thinking out loud, but thinking out loud with other people.”

Likewise quotes numbers 6, 13, and 15 revealed how relational the audience can be not just to the model's (or the celebrity endorser's) role

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<sup>1</sup> Since the quotes were taken from an FGD transcription, most of them are listed here without attribution, since the transcriber I hired could not recognize whose voices belonged to whom. My apologies.

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itself, but to the actresses as persons. Their comments came both from the context of the ad and outside it. "Liking" and "not liking" Bea Alonzo and Toni Gonzaga blurred the line between the universe inside the commercial and real life.

Meanwhile, quotes 5, 7, and 9 locate the actresses as people with a standard to uphold -- people who could have done better. Therefore, the informants showed a sense of the politics of making ads for beauty products and the moral imperatives it entails.

In quotes 3, 4, and 11, the informants were concerned about how realistic the claims are of the products endorsed as well as the economics of product endorsing.

### *2. Reaction to the Ads' Format and Story-line/Narrative*

Just like the comments they had on the women in the ads, the participants' comments on the ads' format or storyline came unsolicited. It was almost automatic that the moment I played each video, they would be pouring out their minds and the comments on the format and storyline were among the first to come out. It should be taken into consideration though that they were very much relaxed, "movie-watching relaxed" as they did this. However, they thought that prior to my asking them questions, the FGD session has not yet formally started. But still, I included these pre-question comments here because they show realness that illustrates a certain level of "media literacy". In addition, I was surprised at how my new acquaintances seemed to be showbiz oriented, a matter that fooled me because the first impression I had of them was very much different. It also surprised me that even the two engineers who said that they knew nothing about TV turned out to be well-versed with "camera shots," "production value," or the "quality of the pitch". They just attributed it to their college electives which they took for granted. Here are some of their observations:

16.) I don't like this style which always has "red carpets events". This is so passé in shampoo commercials.

17.) The soundtrack is so nineties, "I'm too sexy for your love..."

18.) Isn't it automatic that when you walk down the red carpet, you have your hair blown and set-up?

19.) I wish there'd be one that's so realistic -- with a camera following an ordinary person the whole day then let's see what happens.

20.) This one is so mythical -- no less than Cleopatra! And what are these, slaves? Is this really true? The production is so cheap!

21.) This storyline is one of my favorite from Kris or from Pantene. It's so simple, yet so powerful.

3. *Processing the Ads' Premise and "Prescription"*

Without putting much pressure on whether or not they could read the sales pitch of the ads, I simply asked the participants :“What do you think is the product selling aside from the actual product itself?”

Given their answers, the detection came easy for some while quite difficult for others. Again, it was a revelatory experience for others this act of “problematizing the ads”. What was interesting was that, usually, after the first two videos, it was easy for the rest of them to detect the ads' basic premise and “prescription”. Here are some of their observations:

22.) It appears to me like they're in a talk-show. There's such a big revelation of a great mystery now that they found out that they can be prettier than pretty. It's like a breakthrough!

23.) It appears to me that if you use Pantene, you can whip it in life. Or because you are one woman whipping it, Pantene salutes you. Since Pantene salutes women like me, it's worth patronizing because it's a product that has a heart for women like me.

24.) As clear as the blue sky: If you use Fitrum you can have unlimited access to the ocean.

25.) The cream will make you rich. Or, when you are rich, you deserve the cream.

26.) Hooray for this soap, women can stop feeling guilty for ourselves because it is perfectly okay to claim that I am beautiful!

Some of them also were able to detect the mixed-signals that the ads were telling them. On one hand, the women felt that there was the message of empowerment, but on the other hand, they still felt confused as to the kind of empowerment that was prescribed. They mentioned the ads for Myra-E where the New Woman, in the personification of actress Iza Calzado, is portrayed as an all-around advocate for health and volunteer work. At the end of the ad though, she glides down a grand staircase in a wearing a black gown. To the women participants, the message of the commercial at the start of the clip was muddled by the woman gliding down the stairs. They could not locate her vis-à-vis the previous images of the down-to-earth woman.

Here are some more observations from the women informants:

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27.) [On Met Whitening] Si Ruffa [Gutierrez] here is about luxury, being pampered, being the queen. The message is: if you like to feel like a queen, use Met. Because of your white skin you feel less ordinary, above the rest who have a pedestrian beauty.

28.) I am really offended, no kidding, how Toni Gonzaga would profess in her TV appearances that natural beauty is a must, that the morena skin is supreme. Then, in her ads, she is saying some other thing. She is practically lying to us. She's also lying to herself!

29.) There have been many instances when I fought with my mom because I wanted my hair straightened. We used to call it straightening, not rebonding.

Although I did not ask them if they found the ads' claims to be realistic or attainable (because the atmosphere in the FGD already revealed that all of them didn't find the message attainable), the discussion actually became a fun game that sort of made the participants compete for the most reasonable pitch they could detect. They would junk a particular "reading" if they thought it was an over-reading of the ads. The observations above were the answers that "passed the test". The less logical but obviously exaggerated ones were, "[On Palmolive shampoo] If you use Palmolive, Sharon at Gabby can get back together]" and "[On Olay Beauty Bar] If you use the soap, you will sleep as 40 year old and wake-up as a teenager."

### *4. Relating the Ads to their Bodies*

This was the part where the women were serious in reflecting how the ads made them feel about their bodies. It is important to note though that I did not use the term "effect" or "affect" in how the ads relate to them. Instead, my initial question was, "Now that we have identified the 'pitch' of these ads, what now can you say about it?" The discussion eventually led to the "effect" they perceived these ads (or ads in general) have made on how they view their bodies. Most of them related that the ads were most influential on their self-esteem when they were much younger. For the mothers in the group, they were mostly concerned how these same affects may have on their children, especially their daughters. Three of them expressed the disappointment at how prevalent such messages still are. Except for Met Whitening, many of them have actually tried all of the products that were shown in the sample videos. They were very candid how these products worked or have not worked for them. Here are some of their reflections:



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30.) The product I'm looking for is not in the grocery store. I have to find it in the specialty stores. These are very same things I see in the commercials.

31.) I often say, 'It's not true it works that way. It's a waste of money, that conditioner because it doesn't work.' But when I am already in the grocery store, almost without thinking, I'd get a conditioner. When I get home, I'd be surprised that I still got one.

32.) I really do not think much of brands, and lately I seek the organic which are more expensive. However, when I buy for the rest of the household, I buy the big brands. It's like I think really well for myself, but for my husband's shampoo, or for my kids', I don't think much about the toxins that go to their products. So selfish of me.

Almost all of them had insecurities with their skin color, even those who would normally be considered as fair-skinned. Three of them expressed the frustration of not having a choice of not buying whitening products because all brands have whitening products – from bath soap to moisturizers to feminine wash.

All of them also pinpointed the ads' preoccupation with aging. To them, aging seemed to be a dreaded event in their life when they were much younger. Fortunately when they got into their late 30s and 40s, they realized that aging was not that bad after all. In fact, all of them attested that they all got better "after 35". For most of them, their 35th was the year when many great things happened.

Others shared how investing in one's look is ridiculously compared with other forms of investments. Quote number 36 is an example of this:

33.) There was one who told me, 'Ma'am, if you can afford to invest on a bag, why don't you invest on your skin as well.'

I would like to highlight that except for quote number 32, none of the statements above ever mentioned about the direct effect of such commercials on how they view themselves. But it was obvious how such images brought back memories of how they struggled with their hair, skin, and body. However, one woman was the most articulate in her analysis on how the commercials have indeed affected her,

My mother told me many things about how to be a woman, that I should be like this or like that, but these ads, they're very clear with their dictations. What we just in-passing understand from what the world expects us to be, is very much clear and direct when these messages from these commercials we see.

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The FGDs revealed how the women related the ads to their body image. Some of them admitted that watching television affected their self-esteem when they were much younger. It is no longer the case at present. This means that their appropriation of the beauty ideals have become more discerning and cautious. Meanwhile, the mothers now think of how their children, especially their daughters, may be protected against the “onslaught of false promises” projected from the advertisements. They expressed knowledge of how these messages can have power over undiscerning audiences.

### *5. Beauty Products and/or their Ads Affecting their Buying Behavior*

When it came to the women's buying behavior, most of them expressed that if there is one thing that the advertisements have taught them, it is the sense of vigilance that now practice. “I know what not to buy”, “if it's sold on TV, I am most doubtful of it”, and “they don't need to pay millions just to convince us the product works” are statements showing this vigilance. Still, the proliferation of a certain prescription from the ads overpowers them by limiting the choices they have. One woman said,

I don't have a choice even at the Mercury Drug Store. All bath soap products are whitening products. So I'm sometimes pressured to just use whitening soap because my bikini area is dark. But aren't all bikini areas dark especially when you're brown-skinned, right?

Since the women attested to being mindful in their purchasing habits, all of them confessed of being a “captured market”, “especially when it boils down to staring at the products in the grocery aisles”. The limited array of products in stores is mostly the ones that they see on TV, on billboards, etc. To some, buying can be a form of being held up or being “cornered”:

34.) The sales lady was telling me I looked like Carla Abellana in a Palmolive commercial. Of course I didn't believe but she was able to make the sale.

35.) If the government is strict on tobacco and alcohol, it should be the same to all products, especially because beauty products have a long-term effect. They have effects on health, and mental health no less.

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36.) I have tried Myra E a few years ago, no effect. My skin was still dry. Hahaha! And then why do they claim “holistic”? No therapeutic claim, right? They still somehow play around the law.

37.) I tried Myra E, and you’re right, no effect when swallowed. But there was effect when you cut it in half then you apply the oil on your face directly. Try it.

38.) Olay is a brand that I have used for years. I stopped using it a few years ago when a friend introduced me to “serious skin care”. Eventually I went back to Olay because the so-called serious skin care was just too complicated to follow. All I need is moisture. But as for the wrinkles, they did not disappear. And I have more [wrinkles] now than 4,5, years ago.

There was also a discussion on how women of their age become targets of the beauty industry. They all agreed that the industry actually see them as women with money “even if we just look rich even if we are not really”, quipped one of them.

39.) I appreciate the attempts by Pantene and Dove to showcase the empowered woman. But for me, I still appreciate the innocent and direct messages. Tell us what your product can actually do. Does it clean your hair? Then stop there. No more lies.

They also shared anecdotes when the ads have been mentioned in how they were convinced to buy certain products at home (through direct sellers) or in the department and grocery stores.

40.) I welcome the ads on beauty that are not really just sexy-sexy, or the women “just beautiful”. There has to be about strength, about inner beauty. I still welcome it as something positive.

41.) For me, advertising is mythology. It is not either good or bad. Just imagine how the mythology of Zeus or Hera drive people’s imagination, desires, longings. There’s purpose to our collective imagination if not taken literally but as “mythologies”. Meaning, there’s so much possibilities in the interpretation. This is where I see the salvational elements of the ads even if the bottom line is they’re literally selling us something.

### *6. The Women’s Articulations on the Ethics and Aesthetics in Advertising*

Aside from the women’s comments on the text as actual content and how their buying behavior have been influenced by the beauty products and the ads, they also discussed the context of the ads as a culture industry. They spoke of the “ethics in selling”, the “morality in telling

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false claims”, and “advertising as new religion”. One woman talked about the business of celebrity endorsements,

I thought about the ethics on getting celebrity endorsers, if it's right to get Sam Pinto as endorser because she epitomizes the body which is the intended effect of Fitrum, even if she doesn't use the product in the first place. Does she even try it and then wait for the results if Fitrum actually works? But how can she find out if she's already slim in the first place? 'Thou shalt not lie'. But it seems like lying is a way of life sa advertisements.

One informant also mentioned about the unnecessary lies beauty products make. She made an analysis and a recommendation,

The greatest propagandists, propagandists na all lies, for me are the shampoo products. Not the commercial but the product itself. They should just claim that the product cleans your hair, it makes your hair smell for a certain number of hours, period. I use it everyday so there's no need in lying to me.

Here are some more analyses from the women on the ethics of selling products with “false claims”.

42.) I try to imagine a world without ads. I think it's boring. But, BUT, when I look at my 8 year old daughter feeling bad about her brown skin, I really like to break the TV set. I'm sure it's TV who's to blame because she's not yet allowed to use the internet.

43.) I have tried Myra E a few years ago, no effect. My skin is still rough. Hahaha! And why does it claim 'it's holistic'? Isn't it supposed to not have any therapeutic claim? Why is the FDA [Food and Drugs Administration) not being strict about this?

44.) I tried Myra E. You're right, it has no effect if you swallow the tablet. What I did was to directly apply this serum-like capsule directly into my face. It sort of made my skin a bit suppler.

45.) I appreciate the attempts by Pantene and Dove to showcase the empowered woman. But I would still appreciate the innocent and direct ads – the types that would tell us what your product can actually do. Does it clean your hair? Then it stops there. No more lies beyond this point. No foolings us into some shenanigans.

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46.) There are just so many unbelievable claims. A shampoo cleans your hair but it also makes it dry. A conditioner makes it smoother, but it also has silicone that just piles up in your hair.

Lastly, some of them took a more forgiving stance with regard to the advertisements. To them, beauty product advertisements, or advertisements in general are still “art forms” that should always be doubted but also be taken with humor and vigilance too. They had these views:

47.) I welcome the ads on beauty that don’t just sell sexy for sexy’s sake, or just for the sake of beauty. I like the ones with a bit of message, but no overkill please. I still welcome it as something positive.

48.) I try to imagine a world without ads. I think it’s boring. But, BUT, when I look at my 8 year old daughter feeling bad about her brown skin, I really do want to throw something at the screen.

49.) I want to believe that we can have a world without ads, but now that we are on social media, I am more pessimistic about it when I thought before, in social media I would have more control, I can skip ads. However, I also sense that some, just some, ads have improved. I see curly women being celebrated now.

50.) I appreciate how brands are highlighting the “ordinary”. So, yes, somehow, there is hope that more realistic beauty can be out there in the ads. I feel like as super models continue to be endorsers, I would like to think that more ads will also showcase the likes of me.

All of the FGD participants expressed strong objections to how women are portrayed in the advertisements. Although they have their individual beauty regimens that involve beauty products they buy from stores, they nonetheless protested against the “unrealistic” prescription of what a beautiful woman should be. More than this, they also testified to how unachievable the type of beauty that the advertisements promise and positive effects the products claim. Some of them learned this the hard way – buying expensive products sold on TV. However, at present they all shared the confidence that they were not to be fooled again. This, they qualified to be “transactional” and always subject to being struggled with. Resisting and adhering to the advertisements and how they “trickle-down” to their buying behavior are an “adult enterprise” that requires self-control and an open mind.

Sitting down with them made me realize that I was like them in many ways with regard to how I process the ads and relate them to my personal life. I too was laughing, pointing fingers at the TV screen, and in

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many instances, at myself too for being a “consumer” of some of the products sold. Like them, I applauded the efforts of the advertising world for coming up with innovations in how “beauty” was sold. Furthermore, the FGD results prove several things:

The standpoint of women as regards the advertisements in particular and beauty ideals in general, shows how multi-layered their reception is especially to how automatic it was for them to relate everything they see to their personal lives. Although they were able to critique the ads as art forms and as documents that could be scrutinized from inside-out, they were most empathic and most articulate when they were connecting the text to themselves.

The women also attested of the felt effects of the ads on them. For most of them, the act of “reading” with the other women showed a complex process of analysis which all of them attested to be actually doing on a regular basis. Only this time, the analysis came as thinking out loud and in the company of others. They were “intentionally analyzing”, as one of them called the FGD.

The FGD results also prove that the standpoint of the subjugated need not always stand in complete contrast to the language of the dominant's. Sometimes, they carry hints of the dominant's language by admitting that they have succumbed many times to the ads' promises. Their acceptance of the prescriptions was, nevertheless, submitted through several revisions and rejections. In this sense, standpoint is not the “other” of the powerful's language. In the case of the FGD participants, standpoint reveals the managing of contradictions. However, I see the necessity to put forth my critical reading as “knowledge” in itself, a text written within a particular number of pages as an “unnatural act”, as all academic writings are (Jansen, 2002). My reading could not pass for meaningful conversations, otherwise I would sound heretic, and the footnotes in my ideas would further add to the unnaturalness of it.

However, I wrote my analysis because I take seriously my scholarly role: to state the obvious (yes, ads co-opt because they are prone to co-opt by virtue of its craft), by stating what seems to me an obviousness that was not spoken all the time. As I have mentioned in Section A, when I spoke of it by writing it, I have provided “the discursive space”, or in this case, the “discursive voice” “where the anomalies, paradoxes, gaps and evasions in prevailing explanatory frameworks can be interrogated and exposed, [so that] new ways of seeing can take form” (Jansen, 2002, p. 4).

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When I compared the “light comments” of the informants (on the New Women characters and on the ads’ story-line) to the seriousness of how the ads triggered memories and feelings of body issues, I am convinced of my mandate to contribute to knowledge that “disturbs the peace”. This task is an inconvenient task, if I may, because I would rather just eat popcorn with the women and laugh it out most of the time. By being critical in the limited number of pages, I do not mean to be problematic about women in general all the time. As the scholar rests, my theories do too. When theories end, the wonderful messy inconsistent life begins.

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The women’s reading of the ads showed a multi-layered reading of meanings on content, format and ethics. Furthermore, the FGD results prove several things:

The standpoint of women with regard to the advertisements in particular and beauty ideals in general, shows how multi-layered their reception is especially to how easy or natural it was for them to relate everything they see to their personal lives.

Although their reading was not aimed at finding the ads’ effects on their body image, they themselves attested to the felt effects that the ads had on them.

The FGD results also prove that the standpoint of the subjugated, as postulated in the study’s framework, need not always stand in complete contrast to the language of the dominant. Sometimes, they carry hints of the dominant’s language by admitting that they have succumbed many times to the ads’ promises. Their acceptance of the prescriptions was often revised and rejected. In this sense, standpoint is not the “other” of the powerful’s language. In the case of the FGD participants, standpoint reveals the managing of contradictions. Comparing my strong critical stance on the ads to the women’s reading, I see the necessity to put forth my critical reading as “knowledge” in itself - a text written within a particular number of pages as an “unnatural act” - as all academic writings are (Jansen, 2002). My analysis is fulfilling my scholarly role of stating the obvious that is not always spoken about. The critical voice offers “discursive voice” “where the anomalies, paradoxes, gaps and evasions in prevailing explanatory frameworks can be interrogated and exposed, [so that] new ways of seeing can take form” (Jansen, 2002, p. 4).

Having compared the “light comments” of the informants (on the New Women characters and on the ads’ story-line) to the seriousness

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of how the ads triggered memories and feelings of body issues, I am convinced of my mandate to contribute to knowledge that “disturbs the peace”. This task is always an inconvenient task. Moreover, the women’s revelation, that they succumb to the ideals, was part of the intended un-muting I have envisioned this study to be – un-muting through content (data from the FGD) and un-muting through the process (the chance to talk it out with me and with the others). This is Harding and Wood’s Standpoint Epistemology. The content, form and process of research need to be emancipatory no matter how minor these may be. It is important to raise these collective and individual standpoints suspected to have come with the misinterpretation that we already know what they knew and what they were about to say.

Although the women’s standpoint did not necessarily bring out a critical voice, the standpoint nevertheless surfaced frustration on how bodies are idealized in the ads. The women also expressed that they could not be fooled. They know that they are simply being lied to.

It is hoped that there would be more to advertisements than just the surface elements or the sanitized and summarized form of a progressive world-view such as feminism. This is my scholarship’s “reasoned utopia.” Representations should be deepened to include a wider and more inclusive shape, color, age and size of women. More importantly, though, the message of empowerment, taken under the guise of celebrating women’s emancipation, should not forget many other alternative routes to liberation. These routes are far from a focus on personal agency but rather on structural reforms and societal transformations. Linking this to how the women’s standpoint in the study reflects an active and agentic position of consumers with purchasing power, I am hopeful that this sector of Philippine society, albeit being a minority, can have a say on how beauty products can be made and how these can be sold to them.

Another recommendation that this study can make is an intensified media literacy campaign from the academe that extends beyond its walls. The education of the public about the powerful images in advertisements is one that will make long-term dents on the elevation of discourse. Since Media Literacy is a course in the new K-to-12 curricula, advertising-as-a-process and advertising-as-an-industry should be substantially tackled and critiqued.

Lastly, I recommend for a continuous conversation among feminists on the messiness of lived feminist narratives especially with



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regard to self-care. Part of this continuing exploration is the dialogue on how it means to live a feminist life, how feminism informs and complicates everyday resistance against patriarchy, the neo-liberal economy and the notions of normativity, of what it means to be a feminist according to feminists and how we are perceived by those who do not share the label. There should be a critical analysis of feminists' theoretical practice and "everyday practice" that are not always within the bounds of "the movement". My recommendation is that the conversation should go beyond the power-feminism/victim-feminism divide of the 1950s Second Wave feminist movement and present day's anti-feminist/pro-feminist binary. Consequently, every Filipino woman standpoint with regard to the "New women" in advertisements will ultimately be elevated to one that is pro-active --- demanding elevated discourse and better quality of products from manufacturers when the over-all regard for women's bodies is elevated not just in representations but in how these bodies are regarded in the streets, in halls of powers, in factories, in schools, in sports arenas, in farms , and every space where women contribute to the economy, nurture others, and question failing discourses. It is obviously a long shot from here onwards. However, the findings of this study are proof that women who spend for themselves are actually processing, critiquing, and demanding better representations in advertisements.

In ending, I affirm the socialist feminist critique that for a standpoint to break the bond of oppression, the agentic will- power does not suffice. Women, no matter how "empowered" they are in a liberal sense, will continue to predominantly echo the dominant's version, in this case, the capitalist market's prescriptions of "beauty", empowerment, and independence. For Filipino women's standpoint to be emancipated from the dominant's prescriptions, structures have to be widened to include sanctions on products that make claims more than they could actually provide; strict provisions on how products should be ethically made; and a strong subsidized support for micro-manufacturers for better sustainable alternative products for women. Likewise, for this standpoint to be a dominant force in consumer discourse, more surfacing of voices similar to this study's method, has to be made to counter what co-optation the advertising industry has done in soliciting women's points of view.

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### APPENDIX

#### Guide Questions for the FGD

1. What can you say about the woman in the commercial?
2. What can you say about the product? Have you used the product for yourself? Can please you tell me about it?
3. What can you say about how she looks, her physical appearance?
4. What can you say about what she does? What do you think is her work, her life?
5. Do you think that the image of beauty shown is attainable?
6. How do you feel about advertisements in general?
7. Do you feel empowered by the ad's message?
8. Would you buy the product? Are you convinced by its promises? Why or why not?



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