



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree Programme
in Language Sciences

Final Thesis

Beauty Beyond Gender:
A Multimodal Analysis of Gender Inclusivity in
Sephora's Campaigns

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Academic Year

2025 / 2026

Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

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INTRODUCTION

Advertising is a form of communication through which products and services are promoted, but also through which social values and identity representations are produced and circulated (Cook, 1992; Grau and Zotos, 2016). Through the combination of visual and verbal resources, advertisements construct meanings that contribute to how different identities are represented in society (Cook, 1992). A long-standing debate in advertising research concerns the extent to which advertising reflects or shapes society. According to the ‘mirror’ perspective, advertising reflects the dominant values, beliefs and social norms already present within a society (Pollay, 1986, as cited in Grau and Zotos, 2016). In contrast, the ‘mold’ perspective attributes a more active social role to advertising, suggesting that it can contribute to shaping audience’s perceptions of reality and reinforcing particular systems or beliefs (Pollay, 1986, as cited in Grau and Zotos, 2016). While the ‘mirror’ perspective argues that advertisers only reflect existing stereotypes, the ‘mold’ argument suggests that advertising can also contribute to challenging such stereotypes and normalising diversity, potentially producing more positive social outcomes (Campbell et al., 2025). Although advertising has traditionally relied on stereotypical representation of gender, race, age and other social characteristics, in recent years there has been an increasing interest in diversity and inclusion in advertising practices (Grau and Zotos, 2016; Campbell et al., 2025). Inclusive advertising is an important aspect to take into consideration because accurate and diverse representations can promote feelings of inclusion and identification, while absent or stereotypical representations can contribute to the reinforcement of negative self-perceptions and social stigma (Eisend, 2019; Campbell et al., 2025). Moreover, repeated exposure to diverse identities can lead to habituation, a process where consumers become accustomed to seeing diversity, resulting in more positive or accepting attitudes towards it over time (Campbell et al., 2025). Therefore, the ways in which identities are represented in advertisements may influence both how audiences perceive themselves and how they understand and respond to others.

Among the different dimensions of diversity represented in advertising, the analysis of gender has received considerable critical attention. Previous research has

extensively documented the presence of gender stereotypes in multiple types of advertising and has reported how women and men have been represented according to culturally established roles and behaviours (Goffman, 1976; Grau and Zotos, 2016; Eisend, 2010, 2019). However, recent advertising research has begun to consider a wider range of identities and expressions, including LGBTQ+ individuals, transgender people and non-binary identities (Eisend and Rößner, 2022; Taylor, 2022; Campbell et al., 2025). The study of the representation of these identities is fundamental because it challenges the assumption that gender can be reduced to two fixed categories and lays the groundwork for the representation of gender inclusivity in advertising.

The changing representation of gender is a major area of interest within beauty industry, where appearance and identity are closely interconnected. Peñaloza's (1994) distinction between gender consumption and gender production provides a useful account for understanding the relationship between products and gender identity. According to the scholar, marketers draw from existing gender norms when promoting products, while consumers use gendered products and consumption practices to construct and express their gender identities. Cosmetics can therefore function as means through which individuals communicate and perform gender in their daily lives, while beauty products and practices can themselves become gendered through marketing and advertising. Advertisements have traditionally associated makeup with femininity, so that it became closely tied to the construction and performance of feminine identity (Del Saz-Rubio, 2018). Gendered representations in beauty advertising can therefore contribute to maintaining the perception that cosmetics are naturally and primarily feminine products.

In recent years, however, the relationship between cosmetics and gender has visibly changed. The development of digital platforms has created new spaces in which individuals can experiment with fashion, cosmetics and gender appearance, allowing forms of self-presentation that may challenge conventional gender norms (Jairath and Daima, 2021). As a result, beauty marketing has begun to redefine the gendered nature of its advertisements by increasing visibility of men, LGBTQ+ individuals and gender non-conforming people (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023). Moreover, the development of 'femvertising' has contributed to changes in the stereotypical representation of women by presenting them as empowered subjects rather than merely as objects of the male

gaze (Sánchez-Labela Martín et al., 2024; Iyer and Dani, 2025). These developments indicate a transformation in the relationship between beauty and gender, with makeup being less represented as a practice strictly associated with one particular gender.

For these reasons, beauty advertising represents a relevant context for investigating gender inclusivity. The close relationship between cosmetics and identity provides advertisers with an opportunity to challenge established assumptions concerning who uses beauty products and how gender can be expressed through appearance. Previous research on cosmetic advertising has identified a strong gendered division in the representation of consumers and products. Women are frequently associated with beauty, attractiveness and youth, with cosmetic products presented as means of correcting perceived imperfections and achieving culturally valued standards of beauty (Tehseem and Kalsoom, 2015; Radzi and Musa, 2017; Purba et al., 2025). Male consumers, by contrast, have traditionally been represented through ideals of strength, activity and control, with grooming products framed in ways that minimise their association with feminine practices (Cheong and Kaur, 2015; Kenalemang-Palm, 2023; Islentyeva et al., 2024; Romero, 2025). There is a growing body of literature that has investigated attempts to challenge these conventional representations and has identified the emergence of ‘femvertising’ in advertisements directed towards women, as well as emotionally open and caring male figures in advertising targeted to men (Anderson and McCormack, 2018; Sánchez-Labela Martín et al., 2024; Iyer and Dani, 2025; Kumari et al., 2026). Finally, a few studies have examined attempts to move beyond gendered marketing altogether through strategies such as unisex labelling, gender-neutral product naming and the foregrounding of lifestyles rather than gender (Hämäläinen, 2019; Afreh and Atta-Asamoah, 2023).

Despite the increasing visibility of men, LGBTQ+ individuals and gender non-conforming people in advertising, research has paid very little attention to these representations and has predominantly considered advertising in general, rather than focusing specifically on the cosmetics sector. Studies on LGBTQ+ representation have examined the visibility and portrayal of queer identities across different advertising campaigns (Nölke, 2018; Eisend and Rößner, 2022; Grad and Fusea, 2025), providing insights that are also applicable to the study of beauty advertising. In contrast, research within beauty advertising has continued to focus on the construction of femininity and

masculinity, leaving the representation of non-binary gender relatively unexplored. The review of the existing literature has identified only one study conducted by Wiid et al. (2023), who examined the representation of genderfluid and agender identities in genderless beauty advertisements. Their findings demonstrate the potential of beauty advertising to challenge conventional associations between cosmetics and gender, while also revealing the limited attention that has so far been paid to identities beyond the feminine consumer. Furthermore, although some research has been carried out on linguistic gender neutralisation in advertising in general (Monakhova et al., 2023), no studies reviewed in the literature for the present thesis have specifically analysed the linguistic dimension of gender-inclusive beauty advertising. Further research is consequently needed to examine inclusive advertising in the beauty industry by considering both its visual and linguistic dimensions, and the ways in which these resources contribute to challenging existing stereotypes and to represent diverse gender identities and expressions. In fact, the sole inclusion of diverse identities in advertisements does not automatically result in meaningful inclusivity. As Eisend (2019: 76) argues, effective gender-inclusive representation requires “a mix of imagery, plots, iconography and appeals that represent the diversity of gender concepts”. Inclusivity cannot be assessed simply by identifying the presence of non-stereotypical gender identities or LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming participants, but attention must also be paid to the ways in which these individuals are represented.

For all these reasons, the present thesis analyses the construction of gender inclusivity in contemporary makeup advertising by focusing the analysis on three selected Sephora campaigns. More specifically, the study explores the ways in which both binary and non-binary gender identities and expressions are represented through the combination of visual and linguistic resources. Rather than treating these resources as separate components, the dissertation considers their interaction as central to the construction of inclusivity. The study investigates whether and to what extent the representational and linguistic choices made by Sephora challenge conventional gendered associations between beauty and gender identity. In this way, the dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive account of the multimodal strategies employed to construct gender inclusivity in the contemporary beauty industry.

Sephora was selected as the case study for this thesis because of the explicit role that diversity and inclusion occupy within the company's contemporary brand communication. In particular, Sephora has placed these notions at the centre of its brand identity through its official slogan "We Belong to Something Beautiful" (Sephora, n.d.). The company's commitment to inclusion can also be observed in the campaigns and advertisements through which the company promotes its products and communicates with its audience. Its advertising frequently presents participants differing in age, ethnicity, gender identities and expressions, making Sephora a relevant case for investigating the ways in which inclusive meanings are constructed through the interaction of both visual and linguistic choices.

In order to examine the inclusive strategies employed by Sephora, the present dissertation provides an in-depth analysis of three campaigns published on Sephora's official YouTube channels and selected according to their clear reference to gender diversity. The present thesis adopts a multimodal approach to the analysis of the selected campaigns, using the framework for visual meaning-making proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020). This framework allows the analysis to consider different aspects of visual communication, including the representation of participants, interpersonal meanings and composition. These visual resources are examined in relation to the linguistic dimension of the campaigns, with particular attention paid to pronoun use, lexical choices and narratives. By considering these dimensions together, the analysis investigates how visual and linguistic choices interact in the construction of representations of diverse gender identities and expressions and in the broader creation of inclusive meanings.

The present dissertation is subdivided into five different Chapters. **Chapter One** provides a historical overview of cosmetic practices in the West and the East, examining how beauty ideals change depending on cultural and gender norms across centuries and societies. **Chapter Two** provides the theoretical and scholarly background of the research, tracing the conceptualisation of gender as a social construct and reviewing how gender stereotypes and inclusive representations have been analysed in advertising discourse. **Chapter Three** introduces Sephora as a case study, describes the selection criteria of the dataset and outlines the methodological approach of the thesis. **Chapter Four** presents the multimodal analysis of the three

selected Sephora campaigns, examining the visual and linguistic resources employed to represent binary and non-binary identities. Finally, **Chapter Five** discusses the main findings emerging from the analysis in relation to the existing literature, focusing on the ways Sephora constructs gender inclusivity and a broader sense of belonging, before providing the Conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER ONE

History of Makeup

The present Chapter provides a historical overview of cosmetics and makeup practices in order to understand how beauty is deeply connected to culture and gender performance. The Chapter is divided into two sections: the first section traces the history of makeup in the Western world, while the second section deals with Eastern beauty traditions, with particular attention to East Asian countries. Nowadays, countries like China, Japan and especially South Korea play a leading role in the global beauty industry, exporting both products and aesthetics to Western markets. Examining both Western and Eastern histories of makeup is crucial to understanding how culture and society shape beauty ideals and how cosmetics contribute to the construction of gender identities and performances across various societies.

1.1 Western makeup

Makeup and cosmetics date back to ancient times. Although archaeological evidence suggests that the Neanderthals already used coloured pigments for bodily application, Ancient Egypt is the first to provide the most substantial documentation of cosmetic practices, as they were very important both in daily life and in death (Jaubert et al., 2022). The Egyptians regarded death as a crucial transition into the afterlife, and for this reason, individuals were buried along with objects considered essential in their daily life, which would serve them beyond death as well. Among these items, cosmetic equipment such as containers and applicators has been found in tombs, suggesting the significant role that they played in the Egyptians' everyday life (Stewart, 2017; El-Kilany and Raoof, 2017).

The paintings discovered on the walls of Ancient Egypt's buildings further document how cosmetics were worn. One of the most distinctive features of Egyptian makeup was the application of kohl around the eyes in an almond shape to enhance their size and make them more glowing (El-Kilany and Raoof, 2017). Kohl was typically produced from ground antimony or stibnite (a lead-grey mineral), and the colours that were worn the most were black and green (Stewart, 2017). Aside from its aesthetic use, kohl was also applied to protect the eyes from diseases and inflammation,

as documented by Ancient Egyptian medical recipes (El-Kilany and Raoof, 2017). Moreover, Egyptians believed that cosmetics and the symbolic designs created with them had the power to combat evil. The heavily lined eye recalled the gods Horus and Ra, the god of the sky and the god of the sun, making Egyptians believe that they would protect the wearers against diseases (Stewart, 2017). Other than kohl, wealthy people also wore lapis lazuli on their eyelids. Apart from the eyes, cheeks and lips were also painted with red ochre (El-Kilany and Raoof, 2017). Some scholars have argued that lip colouring may have served as a marker of social status (Schaffer, 2007). Cosmetics were applied by both Egyptian men and women, as suggested by the discovery of cosmetics containers in tombs of both pharaohs and queens. Rather than denoting gender, makeup signified social rank, which was also signalled by the craftsmanship of cosmetic containers and applicators (El-Kilany and Raoof, 2017).

Egyptian cosmetic practices influenced the development of cosmetics in Ancient Greece. Similar to Egyptians, Ancient Greeks applied dark pigments on their eyes to define and enlarge them, usually using kohl, antimony or a mixture of burnt cork and soot (Belzer, 2026). In addition, they employed colour cosmetics on their eyes such as chalk, lapis lazuli, and malachite (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023).

Despite the similarities in the materials and techniques used for applying makeup, the two societies differed in the social context in which cosmetics were employed. Contrary to Ancient Egypt, where cosmetics were used across genders and primarily signalled social status, in Ancient Greece, cosmetic practices became gendered. The use of makeup was largely associated with women, with little to no representation of men wearing cosmetics. Although women were frequently depicted at their toilette performing the act of applying cosmetics, they were rarely portrayed wearing visible makeup (Stewart, 2017). This is because heavy makeup was often associated with sex workers, who used cosmetics to advertise their services (Belzer, 2026). Excessive cosmetics application became a moral marker, distinguishing women considered sexually transgressive from those considered respectable (Matić, 2022).

Scholars also identify Ancient Greece as a period where fair skin as a beauty ideal became popular. During the archaic period (800–490 BC), lead-based creams began being used to achieve a pale complexion (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023). Fair skin was desirable because it was a marker of wealth, as it signified that an

individual did not engage in outdoor manual labour. However, the pursuit of this beauty ideal came with health risks as the constant application of lead-based products exposed users to its toxic effects.

The light skin beauty ideal also reached Ancient Rome, where it was associated not only with wealth but also with an aesthetic ideal linked with the goddess of beauty, Venus (Stewart, 2017; Waldo, 2025). The goddess was described as possessing a porcelain-like pale skin, blonde hair and large dark eyes. This model influenced Roman conceptions of feminine attractiveness, encouraging Roman women to emulate her appearance (Stewart, 2017). Apart from whitening the skin, Roman women applied red ochre and red chalk to the cheeks and used kohl to darken the eyelids and brows (Olson, 2009).

While makeup was primarily associated with women, men also engaged in grooming and used moderate amounts of cosmetic products to maintain a socially acceptable appearance. In Roman society, bodily maintenance was highly valued, and the culture of cleansing and grooming was shared by both men and women (Stewart, 2017). However, the boundaries of acceptable male grooming were strictly regulated, and men had to keep a balance between effeminacy and unkemptness. Literary references to men wearing visible makeup are typically critical as they were often portrayed as morally suspect, effeminate or sexually transgressive and were positioned outside traditional legal and political power structures (Olson, 2014).

If goddesses such as Venus were the aesthetic model in Ancient Rome, the rise of Christianity introduced a new model of feminine beauty: the Virgin Mary. This shift did not radically alter the visual characteristics of the ideal, as it still promoted pale skin, with hints of rose on the cheeks and lips (Stewart, 2017). However, this new ideal associated physical appearance with purity and modesty, further moralising the female body.

During the Middle Ages, knowledge about cosmetics became closely linked with medical knowledge. The circulation of recipe collections offered instructions for facial cleansing, skin whitening and the treatment of dermatological conditions. Therefore, cosmetics were not considered merely decorative, but also as therapeutic and hygienic practices. In this context, it is particularly significant the collection of texts called the 'Trotula', especially its third volume, the 'Trotula Minor' or 'De Ornatu Mulierum'

(on the ornamentation of women). The text functioned as a guide on the preparation of cosmetic products, the treatment of skin diseases and the use of natural remedies. The 'Trotula' originated in Salerno, which at the time was a major centre of medical excellence thanks to its renowned medical school and botanical garden, where many plants were grown for therapeutic and cosmetic purposes (Pisanti, Mencherini, Esposito et al., 2023).

The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century further amplified the circulation of cosmetic recipes and manuals that advised women on appropriate forms of makeup and techniques of application (Stewart, 2017). The dominant aesthetic ideal of the period consisted of a pale complexion, rouged cheeks and lips, a high forehead and honey-blond curly hair (Park and Hong, 2024). Particularly important in shaping this beauty ideal was the figure of Elizabeth I. In her official portraits, she is consistently represented with a smooth, porcelain-white face and bright coral lips and cheeks (Allen-Flanagan, 2020). While this appearance has often been interpreted as a strategy to conceal the Queen's signs of ageing, especially after her bout with Smallpox, it must also be understood within the broader context of England's early colonial expansion. During Elizabeth's reign, English merchants and travellers returned from overseas expeditions with new cosmetic materials and substances (Poitevin, 2011). Cosmetics were not merely seen as aesthetic tools but also as material markers of expanding global trade networks. The Queen's use of makeup derived from these substances displayed the material results of her colonial efforts. Moreover, Elizabeth's skin whiteness may also be interpreted in relation to her belief that only people with light skin belonged in England, as demonstrated by her proclamations calling for the deportation of Black individuals (Allen-Flanagan, 2020).

Elizabeth never married and produced no heirs, further complicating her relationship between cosmetics, gender and power. Her 'Virgin Queen' persona became central to her political legitimacy, as she was required to embody both the authority of a masculine political ruler and a feminine physical body. As a woman governing within a patriarchal system, she could not appear weak, aged or unattractive, which could undermine perceptions of her authority as a ruler. Her right to rule was closely correlated with the disciplined presentation of her body.

Beauty manuals from the Elizabethan era encouraged the use of cosmetics to emulate the Queen's appearance, making white ceruse on the face and neck, rouge on the lips and red pigments on the cheeks increasingly fashionable (Allen-Flanagan, 2020). The use of white ceruse became particularly popular during this period. While it was previously only applied to the face, it was now extended to the neck and bust (Stewart, 2017). However, ceruse was a lead-based substance, and therefore highly toxic. Its continued use frequently caused skin eruptions, which women tried to conceal by applying more ceruse, producing a harmful cycle of cosmetic dependency in which the product used to achieve beauty simultaneously damaged the skin and the body (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023).

Although sonnets and lyric poetry of the time idealised the white complexions that women tried to imitate, they also denigrated those painted faces. Writers of the period often portrayed English women who used cosmetics as morally degenerate or as individuals who had failed to become civilised Christians (Poitevin, 2011). Moral anxieties surrounding cosmetics were not limited to reasons of vanity or deception. Snook argues that the anti-cosmetics discourse could be linked to "gendered attempts to undermine and delimit the knowledge and intellectual authority of women in the field of medicine and natural philosophy" (2011:35). In fact, the production of beauty products required knowledge of subjects that were reserved to men, such as ingredients, chemical reactions and botanical properties. By producing and circulating cosmetics recipes, women participated in a domain that could allow them to function within a normative and patriarchal social order.

Makeup was not only used by women, but also by men in theatre to impersonate both racial groups and gender. While blackface was a practice used to impersonate foreigners, whiteface functioned as a primary way of representing femininity. Since all roles were performed by male actors, cosmetics whiteness became essential to construct femininity (Butterfield, 2024).

In the eighteenth century, cosmetics were particularly used within the French court. During the reign of Louis XVI, both men and women adorned their faces with visible makeup in order to show their status and respectability. A pale complexion combined with red cheeks remained the dominant aesthetic ideal, continuing the earlier European tradition of associating whiteness with a high social status. White face paint

was often applied in thick layers across the face, neck and shoulders to conceal signs of aging, illness and blemishes. In addition to white face paint and rouge, elites wore mouches, small black silk beauty patches placed on the face. These patches not only functioned to accentuate the whiteness of the skin but also carried meaning depending on their placement, such as various forms of flirtation (Martin, 2009). This beauty ideal did not last long, as the Enlightenment and the French Revolution brought profound changes in aesthetics. After the Revolution, excesses of aristocratic fashion, heavy white face paint and exaggerated rouge became associated with the decadent aristocracy and in their place, critics promoted ideals of simplicity and natural beauty. Cosmetic minimalism became a signal of virtue and morality, women's beauty practices were simplified, and men were removed from elaborate rituals of the toilette (Martin, 2009).

While cosmetic use by elite men was normalized within the French court, attitudes in Britain were different. It is of particular interest the case of the British men who travelled on the Grand Tour and came into contact with the continental fashions, particularly those of France. Those men adopted elements of their elaborate aesthetics, including ornate clothing, wigs and cosmetics and kept them even when they returned to Britain. Critics began to refer to these men as 'Macaroni' in a mocking way. Their decorative excess and cosmetic embellishment were increasingly associated with femininity and in some cases to sexual deviance. Satirical representations often ridiculed them and what once had been an aristocratic marker of refinement became reframed as a threat to normative masculinity (Butterfield, 2024). The backlash faced by the Macaronis reveals the emergence of stricter norms of masculinity in Europe.

In fact, Thomas Laqueur, in his book 'Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud' (1990), explains that it is in the eighteenth century that a new language and vocabulary to refer to gender arose. Laqueur argues that Western thought underwent a fundamental shift, moving from a 'one-sex model' of the body, where male and female bodies were understood as hierarchical variations of the same structure, to a 'two-sex model' grounded in biological difference. This difference in anatomy was used to support all manner of claims in a variety of social and cultural contexts and to reinforce distinctions in aesthetics. This new language mainly served for "maintaining clear social boundaries, maintaining the categories of gender."

(Laqueur, 1990: 135). Now outdated or traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity date back to this time and are responsible for binary conceptions that are still present in contemporary society.

The nineteenth century was characterised by a continuation of the pale beauty ideal and the reinforcement of the gender binaries. Queen Victoria played an important role in shaping attitudes toward cosmetics during this period. She declared that visible cosmetic use was to be associated with vulgarity and moral impropriety, encouraging the idea that respectable women should present a natural and modest appearance. On the contrary, women who wore visible makeup risked being labelled as women of low morals (Eldridge, 2015).

Despite this condemnation of visible cosmetics, beauty remained a significant preoccupation for Victorian women across social classes. The concept of ‘consumptive beauty’ became a widespread phenomenon that dictated the ideal beauty of the period. The prevalence of Tuberculosis during the nineteenth century contributed to a romanticised image of fragility characterised by pale skin, flushed cheeks and delicate thinness. Women suffering from the disease were often portrayed in literary texts and artistic representations as ethereal and spiritually refined, further reinforcing this ideal. Women often resorted to subtle methods to achieve rouged cheeks and lips, such as pinching and biting. In some cases, they even put their health at risk to achieve a pale complexion without cosmetics (Eldridge, 2015). When cosmetics were used, they were expected to remain undetectable. Many women still relied on various mixtures designed to bleach or lighten the skin, even when these substances contained toxic ingredients.

Victorian beauty standards cannot be separated from the broader imperial and racial ideologies that continued to be present in Britain. As the British Empire expanded during the nineteenth century, ideals of whiteness functioned as markers not only of beauty but also of racial and cultural superiority. Advertisements and beauty manuals often promoted pale skin as the highest aesthetic ideal while contrasting it with darker complexions associated with colonised populations (Giannotta, 2023).

Alongside these ideological developments, the Industrial Revolution also brought transformations in the production and commercialisation of beauty products. While many cosmetics preparations were previously produced within domestic

contexts, advances in manufacturing technologies allowed cosmetics to be produced on a much larger scale, making them available not only to elite consumers but also to the growing middle classes (Park and Hong, 2024). A sector that deeply contributed to the development of cosmetics is theatre. Stage performers were highly skilled in the application of theatrical makeup, and their expertise helped standardise many cosmetic techniques that later became incorporated into everyday beauty routines. Some of the most influential figures in the emerging beauty industry drew directly from this theatrical background. Max Factor Sr. was one of the first entrepreneurs to recognise the commercial potential of professional makeup techniques and began producing cosmetic products for a wider market (Laham, 2020). The expansion of industrial production also led to the emergence of major cosmetic companies that would later become central actors in the global beauty market, such as Shiseido, Guerlain, L'Oreal, Maybelline, Lancome and Garnier.

Anxieties about the stability of gender categories developed into the institution of legal and social regulations for gendered appearance, especially in the United States. For instance, the New York Masquerade law of 1845, made it illegal for individuals to appear in public with their faces painted, covered or otherwise disguised. Although originally intended to prevent tax revolts in which farmers disguised themselves as Native Americans, the law allowed for broader interpretations concerning gender representation. Similar legislation soon appeared in other American states, more precisely targeting gender appearance. In 1863, San Francisco introduced one of the first laws that explicitly prohibited individuals from appearing in public in clothing 'not belonging to his or her sex' (Butterfield, 2024). Such laws were frequently used to police and harass queer and transgender communities, reinforcing rigid expectations regarding gender expression.

In response to these restrictions, new forms of gender performance and resistance began to appear. One important figure in this context is William Dorsey Swann, a formerly enslaved man who organised drag balls in Washington, D.C., during the late nineteenth century. Swann is often considered by scholars to be one of the earliest documented drag performers in the United States. His gatherings provided spaces where participants could experiment with gender expression despite the risks of legal persecution. Eventually, these events were shut down following police raids,

and Swann himself was arrested and sentenced to ten months in prison on charges of ‘keeping a disorderly house’, a phrase commonly used to criminalise spaces associated with sexual or gender non-conformity (White, 2022). Despite his unfortunate end, Swann remains a very important figure in drag history.

After World War I, cosmetics became socially acceptable and part of modern femininity. This is particularly due to the rise of the Hollywood film industry, which played a significant role in popularising cosmetic practices. Film actors and actresses regularly wore makeup in order to achieve a polished appearance under the studio lights and these images helped normalise the use of cosmetics among audiences (Butterfield, 2024). Nevertheless, appropriate cosmetic use continued to be conceived as an enhancement of natural beauty rather than transformation of the face. Acceptable makeup during this period mainly consisted of face powder and blush (Alexander, 2015).

The expansion of the cosmetics industry not only made products accessible to middle-class consumers, but it also led to the creation of the first Black beauty cosmetic products. The forced displacement of enslaved Africans during the earlier centuries disrupted their beauty traditions, where hair and bodily decoration were important forms of cultural and spiritual expression (Hughes, 2025). During the slave era, Black beauty practices were devalued and reframed through Eurocentric standards. In the 1920s the first cosmetic products specifically for Black women appeared on the market, but among these products skin bleaching creams were the most popular items sold by both Black-owned and white-owned cosmetic companies (Baird, 2021). Though the beauty needs of Black people began to gain recognition during this period, they were still positioned into a society standard that privileged whiteness.

During World War II, advertisers promoted the idea that maintaining a polished feminine appearance was a sign of patriotism and national morale. While pale skin had historically been associated with social privilege, the post-war decades witnessed the increasing popularity of tanned skin. A tan skin was a signal of access to leisure, travel and outdoor recreation and therefore to economic stability and prosperity (Butterfield, 2024).

This change also led to shifts into Eurocentric beauty standards. After the war, cosmetic companies began promoting the concept of 'brown beauty', though these definitions of brownness frequently excluded darker-skinned women and reproduced existing colour hierarchies within Black communities. A more radical transformation emerged during the late 1960s with the rise of the 'Black is Beautiful' movement. This cultural and political movement celebrated Black skin and natural hair textures and challenged dominant beauty norms that privileged whiteness. This prompted changes in the cosmetics industry itself, with the creation of new brands specifically designed for Black consumers (Baird, 2021).

Alongside these changes in mainstream beauty culture, the 1960s also witnessed the growing visibility of drag performance. Drag balls and performances, often held in bars, clubs, and hotels, created spaces where performers could experiment with exaggerated forms of femininity and challenge conventional gender norms (White, 2022). Although these performances often took place on the margins of mainstream society, they played an important role in demonstrating the performative nature of gender and beauty. Through elaborate makeup and costumes, drag performers highlighted how femininity itself could be constructed and styled through cosmetic practices.

By the mid-1960s and early 1970s, mainstream makeup centred around natural looks and cosmetics were typically designed to enhance face features. Light and sheer foundation were extremely popular, as well as subtle colour palettes (Belzer, 2026).

Aside from mainstream beauty culture, the countercultural movements and the music scene of those years brought the most significant changes in gendered appearance. In the late 1960s, the hippie movement emerged in opposition to the Vietnam War. The main characteristic of this movement was the rejection of the materialistic values associated with mainstream consumer culture, which extended to fashion as well. Hippies typically wore long hair, loose clothes, floral prints and second-hand clothing, blurring conventional gender boundaries and rejecting the rigid stylistic codes of earlier decades (Butterfield, 2024).

Another cultural movement that transformed the relationship between cosmetics, performance and gender expression is Glam Rock. Glam Rock is a youth subculture that developed in the music sphere of the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. Artists

such as Marc Bolan of T.Rex and David Bowie were the pioneers of the glam aesthetic, which frequently incorporated glitter makeup, elaborate costumes and androgynous styling. These male performers used clothing and cosmetics to challenge conventional distinctions between masculine and feminine appearance (Stratton, 2021). The birth of Glam Rock coincided with significant social developments related to sexuality and gender politics, including the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the United Kingdom in 1967 and the growing gay rights activism surrounding the Stonewall riots of 1969 in New York City (Butterfield, 2024). Although glam aesthetics often circulated within more marginal cultural spaces, the visibility of artists such as Bowie and Bolan in popular media brought these forms of gender experimentation into mainstream public view (Stratton, 2021).

Subcultures continued to exist throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, and with them, the use of cosmetics and fashion as tools for challenging traditional gender norms. Punk culture for example, which appeared in the late 1970s, was particularly influential in redefining the relationship between appearance and identity. Punk fashion rejected conventional standards of beauty and respectability, with coloured hair, bold makeup, piercings, tattoos and torn clothing, while also destabilising rigid distinctions between masculine and feminine. On the one hand, men wore tight clothing, often made of fishnets and accessorised with jewellery, while also putting on makeup and dying their hair. On the other hand, women wore leather, neckties or bowties, cut their hair short, and generally appropriated men's fashion (Rokvity, 2020). By adopting elements associated with the other gender into their style, punk fashion draws attention to stereotypes associated with binary notions of gender.

A related but stylistically different movement appeared in the early 1980s with the rise of the New Romantic scene in the Blitz Club in London's Covent Garden and other London venues. Here, British youths gathered to respond to the right-wing agenda of the period. Strongly influenced by Glam Rock's aesthetics and its expression of alternative sexualities, New Romantics went on to defy gender dichotomies. Cosmetics, elaborate costumes and decorative adornment were not restricted by gender categories, and members of the scene actively challenged conventional understandings of gender by using makeup and flamboyant clothing (Morère, 2019).

Music subculture and celebrity culture remained an important site of gender bending expression even in the 1990s, though for this reason, male cosmetic use was still not seen as an ordinary practice but as a form of artistic performance or rebellion (Jairath and Daima, 2021). Nevertheless, in the same period, the new concept of ‘metrosexuality’ was on the rise. This word described men who invested time and resources in grooming while still maintaining conventionally masculine identities (Shugart, 2008). The cosmetic industry began to recognise men as potential consumers and in the early 2000s brands such as Nivea and Vaseline launched product lines targeted specifically at men. However, these products were typically marketed through imagery emphasising strength, toughness and heterosexuality, reinforcing the idea that male grooming was clearly differentiated from feminine beauty (Butterfield, 2024).

The circulation of beauty trends was further transformed with the rapid expansion of the internet in the twenty-first century. Digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, where users are able to share multimedia content and interact with each other, became especially important for beauty creators to demonstrate cosmetic techniques in an accessible format. These platforms also increased the visibility of cosmetics among men and gender non-conforming individuals. Among the most influential vloggers and makeup artists, figures like James Charles and Patrick Starr were particularly relevant in challenging traditional assumptions about who could wear makeup. Their influence also reached beauty companies, making James Charles the first male ambassador for CoverGirl and paving the way for inclusivity in the beauty industry (Jairath and Daima, 2021).

Digital media also contributed to bringing previously marginalised forms of beauty performance into mainstream visibility. Drag culture, which had historically developed in underground clubs, reached wider audiences through television. A key example is the reality competition show RuPaul’s Drag Race, hosted by RuPaul. The programme features drag performers competing in themed runway presentation and performance challenges, echoing earlier traditions of drag balls (White, 2022).

The rise of digital platforms created new opportunities for individuals to experiment with fashion, cosmetics and gender appearance. This helped reshape the meaning of cosmetics, which are understood by the newer generations as tools of personal expression rather than markers of a single gender.

1.2 Eastern makeup

The history of East Asian makeup is equally important to that of Western makeup for a complete understanding of how cosmetics are connected to cultural traditions and how they construct different gender performances.

One of the earliest recorded cosmetic practices in East Asia is the use of nail polish, which can be traced back to ancient China. Initially, only red and black tones were used and the practice was strictly reserved for the upper classes. However, during the Zhou Dynasty (1050-221 BCE), the application of nail polish spread to other social classes as well, although the colour began to function as a sign of social status. High-ranking individuals often decorated their nails with gold or silver dust, while women of lower social status were limited to neutral shades such as pink (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023).

An aesthetic shared across several East Asian cultures, and similar to Western cultures, was the preference for pale skin. One of the earliest recorded skin-whitening substances was rice powder, which was used in both China and Japan (Eldridge, 2015). Over time, other ingredients were also processed into facial powders, including starch, pearls, flower seeds and minerals. Pearl powder was not only valued for its cosmetic value but also for its medicinal properties (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023). Despite the presence of these non-toxic materials, white lead became the most frequently used cosmetic ingredient in East Asia as well, due to its smooth texture, adhesive properties and affordability (Ji, 2025). The practice of whitening the skin was not only linked to aesthetic purposes but also connected to medical beliefs. In traditional Chinese medical theory, a fair complexion was seen as the result of internal balance and bodily health. Consequently, skin problems were interpreted as indicators of internal imbalances affecting the organs, blood and bodily channels. Cosmetic whitening was therefore not only considered an aesthetic practice but also an attempt to reproduce signs of physical well-being (Ji, 2025).

A similar connection between external appearance and inner quality was also present in Korea during the Silla dynasty (57 BCE - 935 CE), though external appearance was linked to moral character, rather than physical well-being. The beauty ideal of the time was strongly shaped by the philosophical concept of *young-yook-il-chi-sa-sang*, which can be translated as the belief that 'within a beautiful body rests a

beautiful soul'. As a result, aesthetic practices were not merely superficial acts but were considered as outward manifestations of spiritual and moral refinement (Asia Society, 2021a).

As cosmetic traditions further developed in China, they also began influencing neighbouring regions. During the Han (202 BCE - 220 CE) and Tang (618-907 CE) dynasties, cosmetic practices became more elaborate, although the basic palette of Chinese makeup remained centred around three colours: white, red and black. As mentioned above, white powders were applied to create a pale complexion, then rouge was used on the cheeks and lips, and black pigments were used to shape the eyebrows (Ji, 2025).

During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties (third and sixth centuries CE), makeup became widely popular and was not exclusively associated with women. At this time, beauty ideals briefly extended to men and cosmetic practices were adopted regardless of gender (Wu, 2023). This trend did not persist and, by the late imperial period, makeup was again viewed as a feminine art, but men continued to indirectly participate in cosmetic culture. While women were the ones who produced their own cosmetics, men frequently documented and disseminated cosmetic knowledge by recording beauty recipes in medical and everyday treatises. Literary works also documented women's beauty practices, demonstrating the cultural significance of cosmetics in elite society (Ji, 2025).

A different situation regarding men's beauty practices was present in Korea during the Silla Dynasty, where the figure of the *Hwarang* appeared. *Hwarang* were an elite group of male warriors who existed within the Silla state and are often credited with contributing to Silla's unification of the Korean peninsula, despite the kingdom being the weakest among the competing states of the period (Kim, 2019). The term *Hwarang* is often translated as 'Flower Knights' or 'Flower Boys', indicating the combination of sophisticated aesthetic and martial strength associated with the group. The *Hwarang* were not merely soldiers but also underwent extensive education in artistic practices such as music and dance, religion and moral instruction (Butterfield, 2024). Following the aesthetic ideals of the time, *Hwarang* ideology explicitly linked personal appearance to moral character, reinforcing the idea that external beauty mirrored the qualities of an individual (Kim, 2019). While direct historical evidence

of their cosmetic practices remains limited, elite cosmetic traditions likely influenced their appearance, in particular their use of red pigments around the eyes, which may have been worn during ceremonial contexts (Butterfield, 2024). The *Hwarang* also represent a distinctive model of masculinity within historical Korean culture. Unlike many modern Western conceptions of masculinity that are based on toughness and the rejection of aesthetic adornment, the *Hwarang* embodied a form of masculinity that integrated beauty, refinement and martial discipline. Their masculinity was defined less by bodily presentation and more by moral conduct, dedication and service to the country. In other words, *Hwarang* masculinity did not rely on the denigration of femininity to establish male identity (Kim, 2019). This stands in contrast to modern hegemonic models of masculinity in which feminine traits are often marginalised or rejected.

Aside from the figure of the *Hwarang*, cosmetic traditions in Korea similarly regarded pale and clear skin as an important beauty ideal. Historical murals from the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392) depict noblewomen with carefully shaped eyebrows and rouge applied to the lips and cheeks. During this period, social status influenced the degree to which makeup was applied. Upper-class women typically used light cosmetics to enhance their facial features, while heavier makeup was more commonly associated with lower social classes (Belzer, 2026). *Yeonji*, a red pigment made from safflower, was characteristically applied on the lips by women from the upper classes. On special ceremonial occasions, makeup became slightly more elaborate. Brides not only applied *yeonji* on their lips but also in the form of circular marks on their cheeks and forehead. The red dot placed on the forehead was known as *gonji* and formed part of the traditional bridal adornment (Asia Society, 2021b).

Cosmetics developed in Japan around the sixth century CE and were strongly shaped by cultural exchanges with China and Korea before gradually evolving into distinct practices (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023). Similar to Chinese and Korean makeup, Japanese cosmetics relied on the same triad of white, red and black pigments. White face powder was commonly applied to the face and was often made from lead carbonate. Red pigment derived from safflower was used on the lips and cheeks, while black pigments were used for eyebrow definition and other decorative features (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023). An important Japanese cosmetic practice was the

removal of eyebrows and the painting of substitute ones, with various shapes according to gender, age and social rank (Yamada, 2025).

Although some practices were derived from other countries' traditions, Japanese cosmetics also developed unique customs that distinguished them from others. One of the most distinctive ones was *o-haguro*, the blackening of teeth. This process involved applying a solution made from iron filings, vinegar and tannins to the teeth as a marker of adulthood and social status. In the Edo period (1615-1868), teeth blackening also became associated with married women (McMullen and Dell'Acqua, 2023; Yamada, 2025). During this period, political stability and economic growth led to the flourishing of the urban consumer culture. Cosmetic products were relatively affordable and therefore accessible to women from different social classes, allowing them to express aspects of their identity such as age, marital status and social rank (Yamada, 2025). Knowledge of cosmetic practices spread widely through printed manuals and educational texts, many of which were written by male authors and shaped by Confucian ideals of feminine virtue. These publications presented personal grooming as a moral duty and guided appropriate beauty practices for women (Yamada, 2025).

The entertainment industry also played a significant role in shaping beauty trends. *Kabuki* actors and courtesans, despite being officially marginalised by the political authorities, became influential cultural figures whose styles were widely imitated. In particular, *onnagata*, male actors specialising in female roles, helped popularise specific standards of feminine beauty and influenced fashion and cosmetics practices among urban women (Yamada, 2025).

Before the emergence of mass media, *geisha* were often regarded as influential trendsetters in matters of fashion and appearance. Initially, *geisha* were exclusively male performers who entertained guests through music, conversation and artistic performance. Over time, the profession became associated with women, who later came to dominate the role. The profession of *geisha* had already emerged by the middle of the An'ei period (1772-1781), while the *hanamachi*, the districts in which *geisha* lived and worked, reached their peak during the Kasei Bunka era (1804-1830). Their extensive training in performing arts, refined manners and graceful behaviour required by their profession established them as the ideal of beauty and elegance in Japanese society (Yoshikawa, 2021).

While makeup flourished in Japan, Chinese beauty standards changed into a more restrained aesthetic shaped by conservative moral expectations during the Qing dynasty (1644-1919). Among the elites, a woman's appearance could be interpreted as a reflection of her moral character and excessive ornamentation was sometimes associated with moral decline. Artistic depictions of women from this period portray delicately curved eyebrows and small, delicate lips. Women sometimes applied rouge in a small circular dot at the centre of the lower lip, producing the appearance of 'cherry lips' (Ji, 2025).

A similar trend can be observed in Korea during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), a period strongly shaped by Confucian ethics. Social values such as modesty and moral virtue became central to women's roles within the family and society. Numerous educational texts and moral guidelines were produced to instruct women on maintaining appropriate feminine conduct, which included a restrained appearance and a calm composed demeanour. Subtle makeup that enhanced natural beauty was regarded as a marker of ideal femininity. Beauty standards during the Joseon period were often described in terms of *sambaek*, *samheuk*, and *samhong*. *Sambaek*, meaning 'three whites', referred to the whiteness of the skin, teeth, and the whites of the eyes. *Samheuk*, or the 'three blacks', described deep black pupils, eyebrows, and hair. Finally, *samhong*, 'three reds', referred to the redness of the cheeks, the lips, and peach-toned fingernails. These aesthetic principles directly shaped women's cosmetic practices during the period (Asia Society, 2021c).

Although these historical beauty practices developed within specific cultural and social contexts, many of their aesthetic principles continue to influence contemporary beauty industries in East Asia. In particular, ideals such as clear and luminous skin, pale complexion and delicate facial features are still central in modern cosmetic cultures in both South Korea and Japan.

In Japan, the expansion of television and mass media during the post-war decades played a central role in shaping beauty ideals. The mainstream beauty standard was particularly influenced by Japanese idol culture, whose aesthetic was centred around the concept of *kawaii*, which in Japanese means 'cute'. Makeup styles used by these idols typically recreated an innocent and youthful appearance, with light foundations, soft eyebrows, glossy lips and large, round-shaped eyes. Yoshikawa

(2021) points out that because those idol groups had a predominantly male fanbase, the aesthetic they portrayed was strictly designed to appeal to the male gaze. Those makeup styles created an aesthetic that was considered attractive to men at the time, making the mainstream beauty standard something created by men for men. Alternative beauty subcultures created by women emerged as a form of resistance to mainstream norms. One example was the *gyaru* culture, born during the 80s in Tokyo, and whose name is the transliteration of the English slang word ‘gal’. These styles deliberately challenged traditional beauty standards such as pale skin, natural makeup and black hair by embracing heavily tanned skin, colourful eyeshadow, false lashes and unconventional fashion (Yoshikawa, 2021).

A similar appreciation for a youthful look can be observed in South Korea during the 2000s and 2010s, with the appearance of an aesthetic called *dong-an*, or ‘baby-face’. The main point of this look was soft facial features, with a round face and smooth skin. Subtle base makeup was preferred, and straight eyebrows became widely adopted (O, 2023).

While in the past Korea influenced Japan’s mainstream makeup practices, the latter strongly influenced the development of Korean male beauty standards in the last decades. In 1998, the South Korean government lifted the ban on importing Japanese popular culture, which had been imposed following the liberation in 1945 from the Japanese colonial rule. As a result, Japanese media, including manga and television dramas, became popular in Korea and began to influence Korean beauty ideals by introducing alternative representations of masculinity that differed from the militarised, rigid male archetypes that had dominated earlier decades. In particular, the Korean television adaptation of the Japanese drama *Boys Over Flowers*, popularised the concept of the *kkonminam*, which can be translated as ‘flower boy’. The protagonists of the series, four wealthy young men, embodied a new form of masculinity characterised by emotional openness and attention to physical appearance (Butterfield, 2024). The figure of the flower boy provided an alternative to hegemonic masculinity by embracing traits traditionally associated with femininity, recalling the figure of the *Hwarang*. This softer model of masculinity became even more visible in the rise of K-pop during the early twenty-first century. Male K-pop idols frequently present a carefully curated combination of masculine and feminine traits through

styling, performance and makeup in order to enhance stage concepts and support the visual narratives associated with new album releases. In recent years, it is not a rarity to see male K-pop groups with at least one member showcasing androgynous looks through the use of makeup, hair extensions, nail art and genderless clothing. Moreover, in 2025 the new concept of genderless group emerged, with XLOV as its creator. The group is composed of four members who do not adhere to a defined gendered style, but experiment with visual elements traditionally associated with both masculinity and femininity (KTimes, 2025).

Beauty influencers have also contributed to spreading and normalising makeup for all genders. One example is the makeup artist Risabae, who is mostly known for her transformation-based makeup content on YouTube (O, 2023). Risabae frequently collaborates with both male and female K-pop artists on her channel, where they create sophisticated makeup looks while discussing beauty practices, further contributing to the visibility of gender inclusive cosmetic culture.

The popularity of male idols has also influenced consumer behaviour in South Korea. Cosmetic brands frequently employ male actors and K-pop stars in advertising campaigns, not only to promote products specifically for men but also to appeal to female consumers who admire these celebrities. As a result, many cosmetic products are marketed as gender neutral. In recent years, South Korean men have become some of the most active consumers of cosmetic products worldwide, with routines that often extend beyond skincare to include makeup items such as BB creams, brow pencils and base products (Jairath and Daima, 2021; O, 2023).

While South Korea and Japan have played particularly visible roles in shaping contemporary beauty culture, it is important to note that Chinese beauty traditions also continue to influence modern cosmetics, although the diversity of regional practices makes it difficult to define a single unified style of Chinese makeup (Wu, 2023).

In the digital era, social media platforms have significantly accelerated the global circulation of beauty practices, exposing users to a wide range of aesthetics from different cultural contexts. This circulation affects not only the types of cosmetic products that gain popularity but also the ways in which identity and gender are constructed. While makeup in many Western contexts is still primarily associated with women and LGBTQ+ expression, East Asian beauty cultures, particularly those from

South Korea and Japan, have introduced more fluid approaches to male cosmetic use. East Asian beauty standards have the potential to reshape global perceptions of masculinity and appearance, making cosmetics a powerful tool for transforming cultural constructions of gender.

CHAPTER TWO

Gender Identity and Representation

2.1 Gender

Gender is defined as “the behavioural, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While sex and gender are typically believed to have the same meaning, the two refer to different concepts. Biological sex refers to the classification of individuals based on physiological characteristics such as reproductive organs, chromosomes and hormones. Gender is a multidimensional construct that describes the roles of masculinity and femininity based on social and cultural norms and stereotypes (Ritz et al., 2025; Matsuno and Budge, 2017). While sex is typically assigned at birth based on biological criteria, gender develops over time through socialisation and cultural expectations. Gender is not a fixed trait but generates from socially constructed norms.

The conceptualisation of gender as a social construct entered the academic discourse in the late twentieth century through the works of West and Zimmerman (1987) and Judith Butler (1990). These scholars challenged essentialist understandings of gender by arguing that it is not an innate or biologically determined category, but rather a socially produced and maintained phenomenon. West and Zimmerman (1987: 126) conceptualised gender as a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment”, something that is created through daily behaviour and actions in social contexts. In their work, West and Zimmerman (1987) distinguish between sex, sex category and gender. While sex refers to the biological classification of individuals based on physical characteristics, sex category is a categorical status achieved through identificatory displays, such as clothing or hairstyle, that allow individuals to be identified as part of a certain category within a binary system. Gender is understood as the activity of managing one’s conduct in accordance with normative expectations associated with that category. “Doing Gender” does not simply imply conformity to established masculine or feminine ideals, but it involves social accountability, therefore the acknowledgement to be subject of evaluation and risk gender assignment based on those ideals. Gender is thus not something one possesses, but something one is continually held accountable for performing. Building on these ideas, Judith Butler

(1990) introduced the notion of gender performativity. In the book 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', she argues that gender is not an internal essence or a stable identity, but rather a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990: 179). Through repeated performances such as gestures or speech, gender comes to appear natural, even though it is socially constructed. Butler (1990) argues that there is no original or 'true' gender behind these performances, but it is the repetition itself that produces the illusion of stability. Gender is thus understood as an ongoing, socially regulated practice rather than a fixed attribute. To illustrate her argument, Butler (1990) discusses drag, which she argues does not just imitate an original gender but reveals that all gender is an imitation without an origin. Drag exposes the "imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler, 1990: 175) by highlighting the gap between anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance and destabilises the assumption that gender is naturally linked to biological sex. From these perspectives, gender is not something one is, but something one does.

Given that gender is viewed as a performance of socially constructed norms of masculinity and femininity, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of gender identity and gender expression. Gender identity refers to an individual's internal and personal sense of their own gender, whereas gender expression involves the external presentation of gender through appearance, behaviour, clothing and other forms of self-presentation (Eisend and Rößner, 2022). Gender expression plays a central role in social categorisation processes, as individuals are frequently classified based on visible cues, which are interpreted through culturally shared stereotypes. These stereotypes are generalised beliefs about characteristics and behaviours of social groups and function as cognitive shortcuts that facilitate social perception but also reinforce normative expectations and biases (Hilton and Von Hippel, 1996). In fact, although gender identity and expression are often aligned, they do not necessarily correspond. For example, an individual may identify as a woman while expressing themselves through forms culturally coded as masculine and vice versa. Both gender identity and expression are dynamic and context-dependent, varying across cultures and historical periods (Eisend, 2019).

Contemporary gender theory has moved beyond binary understandings of gender, recognising it as a spectrum rather than a fixed dichotomy. The development

of Queer Theory has further challenged fixed and normative notions of identity. Focusing on the study of any identity that distances itself from mainstream categories, Queer Theory is based on the idea that identities are fluid and multiple (Zottola, 2018). Gender identity is not only restricted to categories of male and female, but includes a wide range of experiences, such as transgender and non-binary identities.

The term ‘transgender’ is commonly used in its inclusive sense to describe individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex assigned at birth, such as transsexual, trans, male-to-female (MtF), female-to-male (FtM). The term ‘non-binary’ is a more recent umbrella term referring to those whose identity falls outside of or between the male-female binary. Although some non-binary people might as well identify themselves as transgender, this is not the universal case. The association of the term ‘transgender’ with the act of transitioning from one gender identity to another might not reflect non-binary people’s experience of their own gender. Equally, the prefix ‘trans’ does not require an individual to have undergone any form of physical transitions, which are often difficult to access (Butterfield, 2024). The existence of intersex individuals, born with sex traits (genitals, reproductive organs or chromosomes) that do not fit typical definitions of male and female, further complicates rigid binary distinctions and stresses the understanding of both sex and gender as spectra rather than fixed categories (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Language is a fundamental tool in the definition of gender identity. In fact, gender is not only constructed through visual cues, but also linguistically. Specific vocabulary and labels describing various gender experiences enable individuals to understand themselves better and represent themselves within a community (Thorne et al., 2023). However, labels can also be restrictive, as they may not fully capture the complexities and nuances of anyone’s experience of identity. For this reason, umbrella terms are used to provide more inclusive forms of identification. In this work, the umbrella term ‘queer’ is used to refer to individuals whose gender identity does not align with cisgender and heteronormative norms. Although some individuals reject the use of the word for its historical implications of being employed as a derogatory term for people who were not heterosexual, ‘queer’ has been reclaimed by many LGBTQ+ people to describe their identities (Butterfield, 2024). Because assigning labels such as ‘transgender’ or ‘non-binary’ to gender non-conforming individuals is limiting and

might not reflect their true gender identity, this thesis uses the term ‘queer’ to refer to those identities that fall outside the female-male binary, unless their self-defined gender identities are explicitly stated.

Media representations play a crucial role in shaping and disseminating concepts of gender, as they not only replicate reality but also actively participate in constructing how gender is performed. Peñaloza (1994) explains this idea by distinguishing between gender consumption and gender production. Gender consumption is the way individuals enact gender in daily life through behaviours, roles, occupations, or dress; gender production is how gender is inscribed into commodities, advertisements, and marketing communications. Marketers draw on existing gender norms to design and promote products, while consumers use these products to construct and express their identity. This idea further stresses how gender distinctions are not natural or inherent to human cognition but are learned over time and legitimised through cultural practices, representations and discourse.

Historically, media portrayals have often reinforced binary and stereotypical gender representations. Goffman (1976) was one of the first scholars to investigate how advertisements contribute to the reinforcement of gender roles. The author argued that marketing images do not reflect how people actually behave but rather provide commercialised displays that teach consumers how masculinity and femininity should be performed. In particular, he observed that women are frequently portrayed in subordinate or infantilised positions and depicted in ways that suggest that they are not fully responsible for or oriented toward the social reality at hand. Such representations contribute to the normalisation of unequal gender relations and reinforce power structures.

Research has shown that exposure to gender stereotypes in advertising can limit individuals’ aspirations, self-perception and opportunities, especially among women (Eisend, 2019). At the same time, rigid gender norms also affect men, particularly when the hegemonic masculinity ideal is the only option represented. Hegemonic masculinity is an idealised form of masculine character that legitimises men’s collective dominance over women and marginalised groups of men and describes them as strong, assertive, stoic and autonomous (Connell, 2005). This ideal imposes

restrictive expectations for men related to strength, emotional restraint and dominance, limiting the range of acceptable identities and behaviours (Gentry and Harrison, 2010).

In response to these concerns, advertising has gradually shifted towards more inclusive representations of gender. Practices such as ‘femvertising’ emerged, a form of advertising that seeks to challenge traditional stereotypes by portraying women as empowered and independent. However, such approaches may also be subject to critique when empowerment is commodified and framed as a product of consumption.

As hegemonic masculinity seems to be declining, inclusive masculinity also makes its way into advertisements. Inclusive masculinity is characterised by an acceptance of behaviours and aesthetics traditionally associated with women such as emotional openness, physical affection, as well as interest in cosmetics. Moreover, Inclusive Masculinity Theory argues that multiple forms of masculinity can coexist without one necessarily dominating the others (Anderson and McCormack, 2018). The inclusion and representation of men in cosmetic advertisement reflects a shift towards this type of masculinity.

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need to move beyond binary frameworks in both research and representation. Media representations of transgender identities, for example, have evolved from reductive ‘wrong body’ narratives to more diverse and nuanced depictions of identity (Capuzza and Spencer, 2016). Furthermore, the inclusion of non-binary perspectives provides more nuanced and accurate insights into gender diversity, while also promoting inclusivity and reducing the reinforcement of stereotypes (Eisend and Rößner, 2022).

2.2 Gendered and inclusive signs in advertising

Advertising is a multimodal form of communication that relies on a wide range of visual and linguistic strategies to shape audience perceptions and influence consumer behaviour. Through the combination of visual and textual elements, advertisers can construct and promote ideals that reflect culturally dominant norms and expectations.

While the visual mode is essential in advertising to showcase the product and to draw the consumer’s attention, language is equally important for advertisers to communicate their message and build a relationship with the audience. One of the most commonly used strategies for establishing a connection between the textual content of

the advertisement and the audience is deixis. Deixis are linguistic expressions that refer to contextually available discourse entities or properties. There are four types of deixis: temporal deixis is used to indicate a specific time, spatial deixis refers to a spatial location, personal deixis points to people whose identity is available only with reference to the context and discourse deixis refers to specific parts of the discourse or text (Birner, 2012). Personal deixis is particularly important in advertisements to build a connection with the consumer. Despite the indeterminate nature of the audience, advertisers have to direct an appeal to individual audience members, as it is the individual who reads the advertisement and buys the product. Fairclough (2001: 62) named this strategy ‘synthetic personalization’ and defined it as a “compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people ‘handled’ *en masse* as an individual”. Usually, the second-person pronoun ‘you’ is used to refer to the customer, creating an illusion of intimacy and direct address, encouraging them to feel individually engaged. Consumer-friendly companies might use the deictic ‘we’ more frequently to render a friendly and personal image of themselves (Christopher, 2012).

Apart from establishing a relationship with the audience, many advertisements’ selling power depends on their ability to evoke positive emotions. To achieve this goal, advertisers use a narrative or storytelling style. This is a technique used by brands to connect emotionally with consumers by transforming simple advertisements into engaging stories. Rather than relying solely on the description of the product features, narrative advertising enables people to envision themselves using the promoted product or service. Recent research has shown that these advertisement styles are particularly powerful for younger generations, who often tend to gravitate towards brands that align with their values (Grad and Fusea, 2025). Narration in videos of modern campaigns shows an understanding by the company that consumers are purchasing brands, not merely products. By sharing stories, a special identity and character are formed that set them apart in the market. Moreover, personal stories and audience-character similarity play a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviours, as the audience identifies with the protagonist (Igartua and Guerrero-Martín, 2022). Narrative discourse enables people to communicate and remember, so that the experience can become a memory.

Gender representation in beauty advertising has been extensively studied, especially with respect to women. Because male-targeted makeup brands and product lines do not exist in the market yet, research on cosmetics advertisements for men has largely focused on skincare products. Although makeup and skincare are two distinct grooming practices, one visible while the other more discreet, studies on the visuals and language of skincare advertisements nonetheless reveal how traditionally feminine practices are promoted and legitimised for male consumers.

Cosmetics advertisements are particularly interesting to examine how narratives are constructed and how gender is represented. Narratives in cosmetic advertising often centre on the transformation of the self through consumption, implicitly suggesting that identity is something that can be shaped or enhanced through products. The narratives associated with cosmetic products often reinforce binary gender distinctions by relying on stereotypical representations. For instance, women are typically depicted as primarily concerned with beauty and appearance, both placing pressure on women to conform to unrealistic beauty standards and reinforcing the notion that a woman's value lies in her appearance rather than her intellect, skills or character. In contrast, men are often represented as strong, rational and assertive, thus reinforcing traditional masculinity stereotypes (Purba et al., 2025). This distinction is given by the fact that masculinity is often renegotiated in cosmetic advertisements. Male grooming practices are not framed in terms traditionally associated with femininity, but rather as functional and practical needs. In this way, such practices are made acceptable without fundamentally challenging dominant ideals of masculinity (Cheong and Kaur, 2015).

Through the interplay of language and imagery, cosmetic advertising communicates implicit messages about gender roles, expectations and identities. By analysing these multimodal strategies, it becomes possible to better understand how gender identities are represented and negotiated within contemporary consumer culture.

2.2.1 Gendered signs in advertising

The beauty industry has traditionally positioned women as its primary target audience, however in recent years, companies have expanded their market also toward male

consumers. Although this shift may appear as an attempt to move towards a more inclusive market, the contrast in how products for women and men are advertised reveals that gender stereotypes remain deeply rooted.

Visual elements play a central role in the construction of gender in cosmetic advertising, as they often communicate meaning more implicitly and immediately than verbal language. Colours, product design, images and symbols constitute key sources through which gender norms and stereotypes are reproduced and reinforced. These visual signs do not merely contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the product but encode gendered meanings, shaping how femininity and masculinity are perceived and performed.

Colour constitutes one of the most recognisable visual markers of gender differentiation in advertising. Campaigns targeting women typically employ soft and light colour palettes, such as pink and white, which are culturally associated with femininity, purity and innocence (Purba et al., 2025). In particular, white conveys notions of ‘spotless’ perfection, reinforcing ideals of flawless beauty. In contrast, advertisements aimed at male consumers predominantly use darker tones, including black, blue and grey (Islentyeva, 2024; Purba et al., 2025). Cheong and Kaur (2015) note that the use of these colours serves to downplay associations with femininity, positioning male grooming products as distinct from traditionally feminine beauty practices.

Packaging design similarly reflects and reinforces gendered distinctions. Studies comparing the packaging design of products marketed to female and male consumers found differences in both colour and shape. Products aimed at women are typically characterised by softer and more delicate aesthetics, featuring rounded shapes and lighter colours. These design choices aim to evoke emotional responses from the female consumer and reflect ideals of beauty and luxury. In contrast, male-targeted products often adopt angular shapes, geometric patterns and minimalist designs, signalling functionality, efficiency and strength (Lieven et al., 2015, Cheong and Kaur, 2015).

In addition to colour and design, most cosmetic advertisements include either models who showcase the product in use or celebrities endorsing the brand. The representation of men and women in cosmetic advertisements typically follows gender

stereotypes, making their analysis particularly relevant for understanding how gender is constructed.

The portrayal of women in cosmetic advertising has been extensively analysed, particularly in relation to the reproduction of stereotypical and sexualised representations. One fundamental contribution to the analysis of women in advertisements was given by Goffman (1976). In his work 'Gender Advertisements', the scholar identifies several recurring patterns that characterise these portrayals. Among them are Feminine Touch, the Ritualisation of Subordination and Licensed Withdrawal. Feminine Touch refers to a pattern in which women are shown lightly tracing or caressing objects, suggesting delicacy and a lack of control over their environment. The Ritualisation of Subordination positions women as vulnerable and submissive through body postures such as head tilting, reclining positions or bent knees. Finally, Licensed Withdrawal depicts women as psychologically disengaged, gazing away, covering their faces or appearing absorbed in thought, implying dependence on others.

Although Goffman's analysis was based on portraits of women from the 1970s, some of these patterns persist in contemporary advertisements. In a study of advertisements from the 2000s to 2010s, Del Saz-Rubio (2018) found that while some women were represented with direct and confident gazes towards the audience, others continued to have their eyes lowered and their heads tilted while playfully touching their hair or bodies. It is important to note that even when women were gazing directly at the audience, they often positioned themselves as inviting interaction, often in a seductive manner. As a result, even when framed as empowered, these representations remained tied to an implicit male gaze, limiting the extent to which they challenge traditional gender hierarchies. In addition, the scholar argued that women's bodies were often fragmented and sexualised in this type of advertisement. Close-ups of specific body parts, such as lips, legs or shoulders, draw attention not only to the products but also to the eroticisation of the female body. Beyond other parts of the body, women's faces are also emphasised in order to reveal their emotions, especially joy, capturing their smiles associated with using the product (Sharma, 2022). Finally, because beauty is frequently associated with youth, mature or ageing women are often

portrayed as less confident, while needing to be constantly reassured of their self-worth by others and combat age through products (Del-Saz Rubio, 2018).

While female representations are often characterised by relative passivity or limited movement, male representations in cosmetic advertising tend to emphasise activity, strength and control. Men are frequently depicted engaging in physically demanding or professional activities, such as sports or manual labour, reinforcing associations with productivity and power (Purba et al., 2025). These portrayals often feature muscular and fit bodies, which in some cases are exposed, suggesting a degree of sexualisation (Islentyeva, 2024). However, this is framed differently from female sexualisation, as the display of male skin is often linked to notions of virility and performance rather than objectification (Kenalemang-Palm, 2023). Moreover, Islentyeva (2024) found that in cosmetic advertisements, men tend to be depicted in ‘softer’ domestic roles, for example cooking or caring for children, but these images are still embedded within a framework of hegemonic masculinity. The domestic tasks were in fact recontextualised as images of strength and technical skill, comparing picking up children with “heavy lifting” or using the oven as “operating complex machinery” (Islentyeva, 2024: 435).

Linguistic signs are employed along with images to convey specific messages, and their use varies depending on the target audience of the advertising. Language choices are often based on gender stereotypes, not only related to how men and women speak and express themselves, but also to the emotional associations carried by each lexeme.

Because the target gender of the cosmetic industry is highly established among consumers, brands typically add the label “FOR MEN” to their product lines when extending their market to male consumers. However, this strategy does not make the brand gender neutral, as the extension itself becomes gendered. This linguistic marking reinforces the idea that the default consumer is female, while male consumers are treated as an exception that requires differentiation (Hämäläinen, 2019).

Female-targeted advertisements tend to use a more descriptive and emotive language, with an emphasis on the experiential benefits of the products. The semantic field used in these advertisements is centred on care and sensitivity, encouraging consumers to engage with the product on an affective level rather than a purely

functional one (Deng, 2024). This language is also typically characterised by adjectives that are associated to feminine traits such as ‘soft’, ‘delicate’, ‘tender’ or ‘graceful’ (Afreh and Atta-Asamoah, 2023). In contrast, advertisements targeting men are typically characterised by simplicity in vocabulary and syntactic structure. While female advertisements provide detailed product information and descriptions, those targeting men tend to be more concise, with fewer words and more straightforward language that focuses on the product’s practical aspects (Deng, 2024). This stylistic difference reflects stereotypes that associate masculinity with efficiency, rationality and practicality. Functionality is also communicated through the use of vocabulary from the semantic fields of sport and science. Cheong and Kaur (2015) identified various instances of this type of language in their analysis of L’Oréal Men Expert packaging, where the notion of ‘expertise’ is not only directly contained in its name, but it is also conveyed through the inclusion of pseudo-scientific terminology, often preceded by pre-modifiers such as ‘pro’ and ‘advanced’ to further stress the concept. These linguistic choices construct an image of the product as effective and technical, distancing it from associations with vanity. It is important to note that even makeup brands that try to show inclusivity by representing men in their ads, they tend to construct masculinity following a hegemonic pattern. Romero (2025) analysed a sample of 15 YouTube advertisements between 2013 and 2023 by major brands and found instances of a language that emphasises inconspicuousness and invisibility when advertising men’s makeup. Lexical choices such as ‘light’, ‘natural’ and ‘invisible’ are used to reassure men that the makeup will remain undetectable to others, alleviating the fear of exposure.

The language used in advertisements targeting women is not limited to describing experiences, but it also extends to defining beauty and highlighting its importance. Purba et al. (2025) note that carefully crafted slogans often equate beauty with personal value, such as “Because you’re worth it” by L’Oréal. These types of slogans seek to instil a sense of empowerment in women but subtly suggest that self-worth can only be achieved by maintaining a certain standard of physical beauty. Slogans from cosmetics lines targeted to men often emphasise attributes traditionally associated with masculinity, such as “Stay Cool, Stay Active” or “The Best a Man Can

Get". The word 'active' is not only associated with physical activity but also contrasts with passivity and objectification (Purba et al., 2025).

Cosmetics advertisements for women promote an ideal standard of beauty that is characterised by the absence of wrinkles, plump lips, and long, thick eyelashes. This beauty ideal is constructed linguistically through adjectives and verbs that imply correction or improvement, suggesting that the consumer's natural appearance is somehow wrong. Words such as 'replenished' for the lips or 'repaired' for the wrinkles suggest that the product is a solution to a problem and convey the idea that ageing or imperfection are issues that must be addressed (Tehseem and Kalsoom, 2015). In contrast, male-targeted advertisements tend to employ verbs such as 'reinforce' or 'boost' which communicate enhancement rather than correction. The use of these verbs rather than 'protect', further stresses the agentive role of men using the product, which positions them as resilient rather than vulnerable or needing protection (Cheong and Kaur, 2015). Kenalemang-Palm (2023) also notes that the recommended actions to work on and improve men's appearance are expressed through metaphors of war, such as 'target', 'action' and 'defence'. These metaphors frame grooming as a form of strategic intervention and minimises associations with vanity while maintaining normative ideals of masculinity.

Women's beauty ideals are further reinforced by the nouns given to cosmetics. Radzi and Musa (2017) analysed a sample of approximately 400 names of cosmetic products to study which ideologies were embedded in them. Their results demonstrated that adjectives were the most used linguistic element to name cosmetics and were typically used as intensifiers to describe the effect and the performance of the product. However, the use of emotive and evaluative adjectives that describe women in a negative manner were also found. Product names frequently draw on themes of playfulness, romance and desirability with an extensive use of verbs such as 'to party', 'to play' and 'to club', depicting women as immature, pleasure seekers, and constantly searching for love as a source of happiness (Radzi and Musa, 2017: 29). These names construct an image of women that reinforces stereotypes of immaturity and dependency and result in women being perceived as sex objects, passive and undignified. Addressing adult women with childlike reference and implying their immaturity and irresponsibility could justify the need to paternalize them. This is an

example of benevolent sexism, a tendency to treat women in a seemingly positive way while depriving them of an equal status (Formanowicz and Hansen, 2022).

Representations of masculinity in advertising are also tied to social perceptions and have changed over time. Historically, physical strength has not always been the main focus of men's representations in advertisements. In a diachronic investigation of the word 'man' in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), Baker (2015) found that nineteenth-century advertisements focused on men's moral qualities, with adjectives such as 'honest', 'good-hearted' and 'kind-hearted' being salient collocates in that period. In contrast, adjectives describing physically strong male bodies were identified as salient in the period 1960-2009. Building on Baker's analysis, Isentyeva (2024) analysed the collocates of the term 'REAL MAN' in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The concordance analysis revealed a strong connection between the term and concepts of sex appeal, strength and protection. The scholar notes that the concept of real men was sometimes contrasted with homosexuality, which is not considered a hegemonic masculine identity. This opposition reinforces rigid gender norms and limits the range of acceptable male identities.

A final characteristic of both female and male-targeted advertisement is the use of the second-person pronoun 'you' and the possessive 'yours' to address the viewers directly and personally to appeal to their emotions, fostering a sense of personal relevance. However, an element that was only found in female-targeted advertising is the use of personal deixis to draw comparisons and create an environment of 'us' versus 'them'. The 'us' is typically associated with beauty and desirability and 'them' with inadequacy and lack of beauty (Tehseem and Kalsoom, 2015).

These visual and linguistic strategies contribute to shaping how consumers perceive themselves and their bodies. By framing cosmetics as solutions to perceived flaws and linking appearance to personal value, advertisements encourage women to resort to cosmetics not as a tool for self-expression, but as necessary means to conform to social expectations of beauty and achieve self-worth. In the same way, framing a traditionally feminine practice in masculine terms preserves hegemonic masculinity ideals and limits acceptable masculine identities. In both cases, these multimodal strategies do not merely reflect gender norms but actively reproduce and stabilise them.

2.2.2 Inclusive signs in advertising

In recent years, advertising has begun to incorporate more inclusive visual and linguistic elements and to become more aware of stereotypes. One of the most common strategies used to challenge stereotypical representations of women is ‘femvertising’, which has become a growing trend within the beauty industry (Iyer and Dani, 2025; Sánchez-Labela Martín et al., 2024). This advertising approach seeks to challenge traditional female representations by showcasing more diverse and non-stereotypical models, while also delivering a message of empowerment. Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty” is often cited as one of the most representative cosmetic campaigns that started the transition to a more inclusive and less stereotyped way of making advertisements. Industry experts recognised Dove’s campaign for accurately representing women by showcasing a broader range of body types and ages and has been praised for moving away from traditional beauty ideals (Middleton and Turnbull, 2021). However, despite their progressive appearance, these forms of advertising have also been subject to substantial criticism for engaging in ‘commodity feminism’, where feminist messages are stripped of their political weight and commodified. In an analysis of award-winning global advertisements from 2013 to 2023, Iyer and Dani (2025) found that cosmetic advertisements tended to push ideals of empowerment by encouraging women to accept their bodies and flaws. However, the scholars argue that empowerment is framed as something that can be achieved only by purchasing specific cosmetics. This concept is also found in Sánchez-Labela Martín et al.’s (2024) analysis of the representation of mature women in advertising between 2009 and 2022. These scholars argue that while the ads give visibility to older women, they often uphold traditional beauty standards by focusing on ‘rejuvenation’ and ‘successful aging’ rather than accepting natural aging.

These forms of advertising appear to challenge traditional beauty standards, but they simultaneously reproduce them in more subtle ways. Women continue to be positioned as subjects who must engage with beauty practices, even if these are reframed as acts of self-care or empowerment rather than obligation (Iyer and Dani, 2025).

Research on inclusive masculinity in cosmetic advertisement remains scarce. Existing studies focusing on male-targeted advertising demonstrate that hegemonic

masculinity remains the dominant archetype and that brands continue to use traditional masculine markers such as strength, control and emotional restraint (Islentyeva, 2024; Romero, 2025). However, some scholars have identified a clear trend toward inclusive masculinity through the adoption of traits like emotional openness, caregiving and emotional intelligence as new forms of strength (Kumari et al., 2026). These representations often remain constrained within acceptable boundaries, as they do not fundamentally challenge dominant masculine ideals but rather expand them.

Studies on gender in cosmetic advertisements found patterns in approaches that brands use to blur traditional gender boundaries and present themselves as more gender-neutral. One common strategy is the labelling of brands and products as 'unisex' (Hämäläinen, 2019). Despite such labelling suggests inclusivity and accessibility across gender identities, unisex products typically seem to be privileging a more masculine aesthetic. Unisex branding frequently leans towards minimalist design and natural or dark colour palettes, which are primarily associated with masculinity. Rather than fully neutralising gender, unisex marketing seems to position masculinity as the default. Some unisex product advertisements choose not to portray people altogether, but to only include pictures of the product or a feature related to it. This strategy bypasses gender representation entirely and removes the possibility of visibly challenging gender norms through the showcase of diverse bodies and identities (Hämäläinen, 2019).

Another strategy involves shifting the focus away from the consumer's gender and toward the product itself or the values associated with it (Afreh and Atta-Asamoah, 2023). Hämäläinen (2019) further suggests that brands can move beyond gendered representations by foregrounding lifestyles. For example, brands with organic products might focus their advertising on sustainability and ethics, setting aside gendered associations. This strategy is useful to attract customers regardless of their gender identity.

Research on inclusivity in advertising has found that the beauty and hygiene sector is one of the most active in including LGBTQ+ individuals (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023). However, the presence of queer identities in advertising does not automatically equate to meaningful representation. In fact, inclusivity operates along a spectrum, ranging from superficial visibility to more complex and integrated forms

of representation. The representation of gender diversity in advertising requires more than simply including LGBTQ+ individuals in visual form. Eisend (2019: 76) argues that effective inclusive representation relies on “a mix of imagery, plots, iconography, and appeals that represent the diversity of gender concepts”. Gender inclusivity is constructed multimodally through the interaction of various visual cues and linguistic elements, rather than through queer models and endorsers alone.

Because stereotypes can also affect inclusive advertising, it is important to pay close attention to three main modes through which they can be conveyed. First, the storyline mode, which involves the representation of clichés about LGBTQ+ individuals; then, the visual mode, which includes clichés about their clothing, appearance and gestures. Finally, the sound mode, which relates to stereotypes about the way they speak and express themselves (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023).

Throughout history, the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in advertising has often been ambiguous. Advertisers frequently relied on indirect hints or iconography that could be easily detected by the queer consumer but that would remain unnoticed by heterosexual viewers. This strategy is referred to as ‘gay window advertising’ and allows brands to appeal to multiple audiences simultaneously. Puntoni, Vanhamme, and Visscher (2011: 27) described this method as being characterised by “(1) the absence of explicit heterosexual cues, and (2) the presence of ambiguous cues that could be construed as depicting gay relationships or culture”. Such campaigns usually make use of ‘purposeful polysemy’, that is, the encoding of multiple meanings into a single message, allowing for different interpretations. This ambiguity often highlights reluctance to fully commit to explicit representation.

The portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals has changed over time, and contemporary advertising features more explicit and diverse representations, though these remain somewhat limited. Grad and Fusea (2025) analysed LGBTQ+ representation in Cannes Lions-winning advertisements from 2020 to 2024 and found that while LGBTQ+ representation was present, it was limited. Many advertisements featured queer individuals in prominent roles, but many others positioned them as background characters, making their presence more symbolic rather than central. However, the scholars also found a decline in the use of overt symbols such as the rainbow flag, which was interpreted as a shift toward more integrated and narrative-based

representation. This change can be viewed as an attempt to normalise queer identities rather than marking them as exceptional, but it can also be interpreted as a strategy to maintain a cautious balance between inclusivity and market considerations.

It is important to note that most LGBTQ+ inclusive ads tend to be seasonal, with an increase in campaigns during events and festivities such as Valentine's Day and Pride Month (Jetubhai, 2024; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2023). Jetubhai (2024) argues that these substantial spikes in advertisement numbers could be seen as a shortcoming for companies that engage with and represent LGBTQ+ individuals predominantly during Pride Month while remaining relatively invisible during other months of the year. This phenomenon is known as 'rainbow-washing', which is the practice of incorporating queer symbols, identities and discourses into marketing strategies for profit purposes, rather as a genuine commitment to social change.

Even in inclusive advertising, certain identities remain less visible than others. Studies revealed that identities such as lesbians, gays and trans women are more frequently depicted, while bisexuals, trans men and non-binary individuals receive comparatively less attention (Jetubhai, 2024; Grad and Fusea, 2025). Nölke (2018) conducted an analysis of LGBTQ+ representation in advertisements from 2009 to 2015, focusing on various identities within the queer community. In particular, the scholar found a prevalence of femmes (queer women who adhere to heteronormative ideals of femininity) over butches (queer women whose gender expression is typically masculine). Femmes are typically depicted as young, slim and conventionally attractive, while butches are frequently represented as unattractive, reinforcing existing beauty ideals and contributing to intragroup marginalisation (Nölke, 2018). Furthermore, the representation of transgender individuals is often based on traditional gender norms. On the one hand, FtM characters are often represented based on a heteronormative image of maleness, characterised by muscularity and traditionally male leisure activities. On the other hand, the presence of trans women is overshadowed by the presence of drag queens. This was interpreted as positioning trans characters as artificial. Nölke's (2018) intersectional study also looked into the race and age of LGBTQ+ characters in advertisements. Her results identified a lack of racial diversity and a dominance of Caucasian representations. As for age, portrayals are "presented with an apparent gerontophobia within advertising that excludes them

from the sexual revolution and provides a harmful dichotomy of mature LGBTs as male, Caucasian, rich, and upper-class”, limiting the representation of the wide range of experiences within the queer community (Nölke, 2018: 243).

Diverse gender representation is not limited to including LGBTQ+ individuals in advertisements, but it also extends to how gender is represented. Wiid et al. (2023) conducted an analysis of the models used by genderless makeup brands in Instagram ads. In particular, the study focused on ‘not female’ representations and identified three groups: genderfluid, male and other. A major difference in the representation of these three groups was the amount of makeup used. Genderfluid individuals were more frequently represented wearing heavy makeup with accentuated lips and jewellery, creating a more feminine look and calling attention to their ‘play’ with binary gender identities. They are usually depicted with characteristics associated with the other gender or combining both feminine and masculine traits. For example, the heavy makeup is combined with traditionally male attributes, which are also made visible, such as facial hair. In contrast, the group classified as ‘other’ had no clear markers of binary gender, making the models difficult to classify in binary terms. Wiid et al. (2023: 14) argue that this category “opens the door for a possible ‘third’ gender”, which they label as “agender”. Because agender models move beyond the binary dichotomy, they use fewer salient features that are tied to male or female identities. In addition, Wiid et al.’s (2023) results on the age of the genderfluid and agender characters reproduced Nölke’s (2018) results, noticing that the models were predominantly young. The scholars’ interpretation of this finding is, however, different as they recognise that the prevalence of young models is a reflection of the increased acceptance of non-binary definitions among younger audiences and the predominance of non-binary identities in that age group.

Including diverse gender identities in advertising and representing them less stereotypically can have a strong positive impact on the perception of both binary and non-binary gender identities. By taking a stand featuring more diverse gender identities in their advertising, companies can signal their support for the queer community and promote a message of inclusion and acceptance (Grad and Fusea, 2025).

Inclusive advertising should extend beyond the visual mode and give indications of gender inclusivity through linguistic cues such as narratives, slogans or explicit

statements by the endorser (Eisend and Roßner, 2022). While visual representation plays a crucial role in increasing visibility, language is equally important in shaping how identities are constructed and addressed.

There are various strategies for avoiding gender stereotypes and promoting inclusivity through language, for example, by not referring to any gender at all and by using gender-neutral terms. Gender neutralisation in advertising is often achieved through impersonal sentences and indefinite pronouns, allowing advertisers to address a broad and diverse audience without assigning a specific gender identity (Monakhova et al., 2023). By removing gender markers brands make their products universally accessible and challenge the traditional segmentation of the cosmetic market. Afreh and Atta-Asamoah (2023) note that naming products without gender connotations is another useful strategy to make products accessible to a broader audience.

Gender inclusivity in language is not limited to the absence of gendered references, but it can also be constructed through the combination linguistic features associated with both masculinity and femininity. For example, this may involve combining emotional and expressive language, such as metaphors, with a more masculine style of advertising by including scientific terms and simple syntactic constructions (Monakhova et al., 2023). An example of this approach is provided by Dendo and Hikmah's (2025) study of five skincare brands advertisements featuring Korean male actors and idols. The scholars identified instances of 'women's language', such as empty adjectives, intensifiers and expressive vocabulary. When combined with male endorsers, these linguistic features contribute to the construction of a form of 'soft masculinity', which can be considered a form of inclusive masculinity.

Representing gender identities outside the binary remains challenging, particularly within a linguistic system that is predominantly binary. Research in this area has predominately focused on the linguistic strategies employed by queer individuals themselves, leaving the application of such strategies in inclusive advertising relatively unexplored.

Zlámálová's (2024) work on non-binary life-writing narratives is useful to understand how the community manipulates a language that does not fully accommodate them, demonstrating that language is not a fixed system but a flexible

resource that can be reshaped to better reflect diverse gender experiences. These insights can be used as a starting point to effectively represent queer identities in advertising texts.

One important aspect that emerges from Zlámalová's (2024) work is the correct use of pronouns. Non-binary people report "the dehumanising experience of misgendering through incorrect pronoun use as a source of stress, frustration, and fear" (Zlámalová, 2024: 357). The careful selection of pronouns is not merely a grammatical marker but a matter of recognition and identity validation. The singular 'they' is the most well-known gender-inclusive pronoun in English and it is commonly used both as a generic reference and as a specific marker of non-binary identity. The use of gender-inclusive pronouns has thus a double function: they not only act as a neutralisation tool when used generically to refer to anyone, but they also function as a multi-gendering tool when referring to non-binary individuals. In addition to 'they', some individuals adopt neopronouns such as 'ze' or 'xe' which are explicitly intended for individuals with non-binary identities; however, their usage is relatively scarce (Renström, 2025).

Along with pronouns, it is also important to adopt the appropriate vocabulary to describe or address a specific gender identity. This includes recognising the fluid and evolving nature of gender-related language and adopting terms that reflect how individuals self-identify (Zlámalová, 2024).

Inclusivity in advertising is constructed through the interaction of various elements. By combining diverse and non-stereotypical visual representations with adequate linguistic choices, syntax and narratives, advertisers can challenge existing gender norms. By analysing the interaction between visual and linguistic elements, it becomes possible to understand how diverse gender identities are represented in contemporary advertisements and how more inclusive forms of representation may be developed.

CHAPTER THREE

Data and Methodology

3.1 Data

3.1.1 History of Sephora

Sephora is one of the most famous and influential beauty retailers in the contemporary global beauty industry and constitutes a particularly relevant case study for the analysis of gender representation and inclusivity in gender advertising (PR Newswire, 2024).

Sephora was founded in Limoges, France, in 1969 by Dominique Mandonnaud, who was the first to introduce the ‘assisted self-service’ retail model in his store ten years later. This model consisted in an open-sell environment that encouraged consumers to freely test and interact with the products before purchase, which proved successful and revolutionised cosmetic retail (Inside Sephora, n.d.).

Following its acquisition by the French conglomerate LVMH in 1997, Sephora expanded internationally and established itself as one of the leading prestige beauty retailers worldwide. According to Sephora and LVMH corporate data, the company currently operates over 2,700 stores in 35 countries worldwide, offering cosmetics, skincare, fragrance and haircare products from almost 500 luxury and mass-market brands, as well as from its own private-label Sephora Collection. In 2016, Sephora became the number one Prestige Beauty Retailer in the U.S., and in 2021 it joined the Interbrand ranking of the 100 most Valuable Brands worldwide, reflecting its growing cultural and commercial influence within the beauty industry (Interbrand, 2025).

A central aspect of Sephora’s brand identity is its emphasis on self-expression and inclusivity. As stated on the company About Us page, Sephora’s mission is to “create a welcoming beauty shopping experience for all and inspire fearlessness in our community” (Sephora, n.d.). Rather than marketing cosmetics solely as tools to achieve conventional beauty ideals, Sephora frequently frames beauty as a form of creativity and personal identity construction.

The company’s commitment to inclusivity extends to gender, racial and disability representation in advertising, as well as institutional initiatives and corporate actions. In 2020, Sephora became one of the first major retailers to sign the “15 Percent Pledge”, a movement urging companies to dedicate at least 15% of their shelf space to

Black-owned business (Inside Sephora, n.d.). As part of this initiative, Sephora committed to increasing the visibility and support of Black-owned beauty brands within its stores and online platforms. The company also implemented inclusivity training initiatives within its retail spaces. In 2019, the company temporarily closed all U.S. stores, distribution centres and corporate offices for diversity and inclusion training after allegations of racial profiling involving singer SZA in a Sephora store. The training programme focused on unconscious bias, inclusive customer service and anti-discrimination practices (BBC, 2019).

The company's commitment to diversity and inclusion has recently become a central aspect of its corporate identity and advertising discourse. In 2019, Sephora introduced for the first time its "We Belong to Something Beautiful" tagline in conjunction with a campaign for Pride Month focusing on non-binary and transgender visibility, paving the way for gender inclusivity in its corporate identity. The tagline then became the company's brand signature in 2024, which Sephora launched with a video posted on all its social media platforms from all over the world. Because the slogan had become a central element of Sephora's brand positioning following the 2019 Pride campaign, the company decided to expand it into a global brand signature, arguing that "inclusion is a global concept" (PR Newswire, 2024). The new brand signature and manifesto communicate their dedication to promoting a sense of belonging among all clients and employees and to publicly strive for a more inclusive vision.

The company's marketing relies heavily on multimodal advertising strategies, combining visual imagery and personal narratives that encourage consumers to identify with the people represented in the advertisements (PR Newswire, 2024). The company's commitment to inclusivity is also evident in the gender representation in its advertisements. While the beauty industry has historically relied on highly gendered portrayals that associated cosmetics primarily with femininity, Sephora increasingly incorporates male makeup users, queer creators and non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals into its campaigns and social media content. Such representations contribute to the gradual normalisation of cosmetics beyond the binary constructions of masculinity and femininity (Dooley, 2019).

As a highly visual and digitally oriented company, Sephora provides a valuable case study for examining how gender and inclusivity are constructed through multimodal advertising strategies. Through the interaction of visual representation, linguistic choices and narrative discourse, Sephora both reflects and shapes contemporary concepts of beauty, identity and diversity within the global cosmetic industry (PR Newswire, 2024).

3.1.2 Data analysed

The dataset analysed for the present dissertation is composed of three advertising campaign videos published on Sephora's official YouTube channels. The selected campaigns all contain explicit examples of diverse gender representation and foreground issues related to gender identity, inclusivity and self-expression within the context of cosmetic advertising.

As for the criteria of collection and selection of data, the dataset to be investigated was collected manually through a thorough search of Sephora's main and secondary YouTube channels. The use of YouTube as data source was considered appropriate because the platform constitutes one of the company's main digital advertising spaces and it is used especially for launching major campaigns. Other multimodal social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are mainly used by the company to advertise specific products or to publish collaborations with influencers and makeup artists and for this reason were not taken into consideration for this study.

A specific timeframe was chosen for the dataset, covering the period from 2019 to 2025. The year 2019 was selected as a significant turning point in Sephora's branding, as in that year the company introduced the manifesto and tagline "We Belong to Something Beautiful" for the first time. From this period onward, Sephora increasingly incorporated transgender, queer and gender non-conforming individuals into its campaigns and social media communication, making 2019 an appropriate starting point for the analysis of inclusive gender representation. The end point of 2025 was selected in order to include the company's most recent advertising practices.

The campaigns included in the dataset were selected according to several criteria. First, the videos needed to contain explicit references to gender diversity,

whether through the presence of queer, transgender or gender non-conforming individuals, or narratives that challenge traditional gender norms associated with cosmetics and beauty practices, including men wearing makeup and non-stereotyped images of women. Second, the campaigns had to focus solely on Sephora and not be associated with external cosmetic brands distributed by the retailer. For this reason, campaigns promoting individual brands sold at Sephora were excluded from the dataset, as the purpose is to analyse Sephora's own corporate discourse rather than those of affiliated companies. Finally, preference was given to campaigns that combined both verbal and visual elements related to identity and self-expression, since these provided richer material for multimodal analysis. The selected campaigns were not intended to be statistically representative of all Sephora advertisements, but instead to provide meaningful examples of how inclusivity and gender diversity are constructed within contemporary cosmetic advertising discourse.

The first video analysed is titled "We Belong To Something Beautiful" and was published on Sephora's official YouTube channel on June 5th, 2019. The campaign represents a significant moment in Sephora's corporate branding and inclusivity discourse, as it marked the introduction of the company's future brand signature. The release of the campaign coincided with Pride Month and formed part of a broader campaign titled "Identify as We", which was specifically dedicated to celebrating transgender, non-binary and queer identities within the beauty community. On the same day the video was released, Sephora temporarily shut down all of its stores in the U.S. in order to conduct diversity training for employees following allegations of racial profiling made by singer SZA. Alongside the campaign, Sephora launched the "SEPHORAHeartPRIDE" collection, which consisted of ten limited-edition branded products created in support of Pride Month. The company also announced that one dollar from each product would be donated to LGBTQ+ organisations (Dooley, 2019).

The video itself foregrounds diversity through the inclusion of ten queer individuals from different backgrounds. Among the featured individuals are Hunter Schafer, Fatima Jamal, Aariana Rose Philip and Kate Bornstein. Hunter Schafer is a transgender actress, model and activist widely recognised for her advocacy of transgender rights and later for her role in the television series *Euphoria*. Fatima Jamal is a transgender filmmaker, writer and model whose work focuses on Black trans

representation and identity. Aariana Rose Philip is recognised as one of the first Black, transgender and disabled models to gain prominence within mainstream fashion campaigns, while Kate Bornstein is a non-binary author and theorist known for their work on gender identity and queer theory (Prinzivalli, 2019). The inclusion of these individuals is particularly important because the “Identify as We” campaign also foregrounds personal narratives and storytelling. The video analysed is in fact accompanied by other video-interviews posted on other social media channels where the participants speak of self-acceptance, belonging and identity.

The video campaign was chosen for the present dissertation because it combines linguistic and visual strategies to construct inclusivity and because it was the first campaign created by Sephora directly addressing gender inclusivity.

The second video included in the dataset is titled “Sephora Celebrates All Moms” and was published on the official Sephora Canada YouTube channel. Unlike the first campaign, which functioned as a large-scale global Pride campaign, this video was produced within a more localised Canadian context and specifically released for Mother’s Day. Following the publication of the main campaign video, Sephora Canada also released three additional spotlight videos dedicated to each participant.

The video adopts an interview-style format in which the three participants speak to the audience about their personal experiences of being mothers, positioning motherhood as a diverse and multifaceted experience rather than a fixed role. The campaign features three mother-daughter pairs, including figures such as Xtacy Love, Talli Osbourne and Catherine Tamaro. Xtacy Love is a Toronto-based drag queen who leads the House of Love and serves as a drag mother to Canada’s Drag Race winner, Priyanka. Her inclusion in the campaign expands the concept of motherhood by highlighting the role of chosen families and queer kinship structures within LGBTQ+ communities. Talli Osbourne is an all-abilities spokesperson who was adopted into a large family of twenty-one children. Her participation contributes to the representation of disability and adoption within the discourse of motherhood and family. Finally, Catherine Tamaro is a Wyandot artist and elder who works with the City of Toronto and other organisations as an elder in residence, mentor and teacher, connecting motherhood to community, heritage and knowledge transmission (Crann, 2022).

The campaign was selected for the present thesis because it showcases various forms of motherhood in ways that move beyond stereotypical representations traditionally associated with women in advertising. The video broadens representations of mothers by including different identities, appearances and forms of motherhood beyond biological, such as adoptive moms or drag moms. Given that motherhood constitutes a highly gendered social category and it is often shaped by social expectations and roles, the representation of different kinds of mothers is considered gender inclusive. The campaign represents a relevant example of how inclusivity can be constructed not only through explicit references to LGBTQ+ identities, but also through the redefinition and expansion of traditionally gendered roles such as motherhood.

The third video selected for this thesis is also titled “We Belong to Something Beautiful” and was published on March 6th, 2024, across all Sephora’s official YouTube channels to launch the company’s new brand signature. The slogan previously appeared in Sephora’s 2019 Pride campaign centred on transgender and non-binary representation and was reintroduced to reposition the brand’s identity and values. The worldwide adoption of the phrase “We Belong to Something Beautiful” reflects Sephora’s attempt to establish inclusivity and belonging as core values of its corporate identity.

The video was considered relevant for the present thesis because, other than representing an important moment in Sephora’s brand repositioning, it also contains themes of diversity and inclusivity through both visual and linguistic strategies.

3.2 Methods of Analysis

The present thesis adopts a qualitative multimodal approach to analyse how gender inclusivity is constructed in Sephora’s advertising campaigns. This approach was chosen because the dataset consists of audiovisual promotional videos that combine several semiotic resources. Through multimodal analysis it is possible to move beyond the immediately perceived image and examine how verbal and non-verbal elements interact to produce complex meanings and representations.

For each of the three videos in the dataset, the analysis is conducted through Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2020) social semiotic framework. The authors argue that

meanings are realised differently across semiotic modes and that visual communication possesses its own ‘grammar’ through which meanings are constructed. Semiotic modes are shaped both by the characteristics and potentialities of the medium and by the requirements, histories and values associated to each society and culture. While the word ‘grammar’ may suggest universality, the authors clarify that the universality is given by the principles and processes, while meanings themselves remain culturally and historically variable. Rather than treating images as neutral reflections of reality, Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) analyse how visual structures actively communicate ideological and interpersonal meanings.

Their framework is grounded in Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics and identifies three metafunctions operating within visual communication: the ideational metafunction, which concerns the representation of the world and social relations; the interpersonal metafunction, which concerns the relationship between the image and the viewer and the textual metafunction, which concerns composition and organisation of meaning within the text or image. Each analysis is organised on the base of these three metafunctions and observes how the investigated videos make use of the three dimensions to construct inclusivity.

The first stage of the analysis examines the ideational metafunction through narrative and conceptual structures, which are useful for analysing the representation of the participants and processes within the campaigns. Narrative structures represent aspects of reality in terms of unfolding actions and are identified through presence of a vector that realises a dynamic process between the participants. Vectors can realise two types of processes: action processes determine how represented participants interact with one another, while reactional processes determine emotions, intimacy and identification through gaze and eyelines. Vectors can also occur in Settings, with neatly unrightly parallels suggesting a static and orderly world and a Setting with oblique uprights suggesting a more dynamic and chaotic world. The analysis of narrative structures is applied to the dataset to investigate whether participants are represented actively or passively, individually or collectively, and whether certain gender identities are associated with specific forms of action or emotional expression. Particular attention is also paid to moments of interaction between participants, such as gestures of intimacy or self-expression.

Conceptual structures relate participants in terms of classification, part-whole structures or symbolic attribution. In this type of structures, the vector is absent and the relation between the participants is shown by means of spatial configuration. Advertising frequently constructs identity symbolically rather than through action alone, therefore these types of structures are particularly relevant. Symbolic Structures are a type of conceptual structures that are frequently used in advertising images and represent what a participant means or is. Symbolic Attributive structures represent meaning and identity as being conferred to the participant by means of another participant in a salient position, while Symbolic Suggestive structures represent meaning and identity as elements deriving from the participant. In the context of the dataset, Symbolic structures can be analysed to identify how particular objects, clothing, makeup styles, colours or settings function as Symbolic Attributes associated with femininity, masculinity, queerness or inclusivity. Moreover, they can also be examined in scenes where atmosphere, lightning and colour create generalised meanings of belonging, empowerment or authenticity rather than representing concrete actions. This aspect of the framework is particularly useful for analysing how Sephora constructs inclusivity emotionally and aesthetically rather than only explicitly.

The interpersonal metafunction of the three advertisements is analysed through Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) concepts of gaze, social distance, perspective and modality. Gaze can be either direct or indirect towards the viewer; each associated to different functions. Gaze directed at the viewer creates a visual form of direct address, acknowledging them explicitly and addressing them with a visual you. It also constitutes an 'image act', similar to a speech act, where the producer uses the image to do something to the viewer. Direct gaze creates what Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) define as 'demand', in which represented participants establish an imaginary relationship with viewers. The image wants something from the viewers, wants them to do something and in doing so, it also defines who the viewer is or should be. Indirect gaze, by contrast, produces an 'offer' image, where participants are presented as objects of contemplation. The present analysis examines how Sephora utilises demand and offer structures to construct intimacy and identification. Particular attention is given to how different gender identities are positioned in relation to the audience and

whether they directly address the viewers or are instead positioned as observational figures.

Social distance is examined through shot types and camera angles. Close-ups and medium close shots are interpreted as strategies for constructing intimacy and emotional connection and are used especially in testimonial or interview-style sequences, where participants are portrayed as though they were friends with respect to the viewer. Longer shots signal a greater social distance and are portrayed as though they were strangers. Perspective and camera angle are also considered in order to analyse involvement and relations of power. Frontal angles are interpreted as signs of involvement and identification with the represented image, whereas oblique angles may suggest detachment and encourage the viewer to see the represented world as something different from them. Similarly, low angles make the subject look imposing and awesome, positioning the participants as powerful over the viewer. By contrast, high angles make the subject look small and insignificant, positioning the viewer in a state of power towards them. Finally, eye-level angles, generally suggest equality between viewer and participant. These aspects are particularly relevant when examining how marginalised identities are represented and whether the campaigns position them as empowered subjects or passive objects of representation.

The analysis also investigates visual modality and validity markers. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), the modality of images is understood not as objective truth but as the credibility of a representation depending by the social context and it is better defined as ‘validity’. The campaigns are analysed according to validity markers such as colour saturation, contextualisation, depth, illumination and representation of detail. Sephora’s advertisements frequently employ what Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) define as sensory coding orientation, where a high modality is given by saturated colours, soft lightning and carefully stylised aesthetics. The study therefore explores how sensory modality contributes to emotional appeal and how realism and stylisation interact in the representation of inclusivity. Particular attention is paid to colour palettes and lighting techniques, especially in pride campaigns where rainbow colours are typically used symbolically to signify diversity, celebration and belonging.

The textual metafunction of the advertisements constitutes the last aspect of the analysis. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) translated this metafunction to images with

composition, arguing that the organisation of the elements in an image provides meaning. Composition is analysed through information value, salience and framing. Information value concerns the placement of participants and visual elements within the frame and it is tied to notions of Given and New, Real and Ideal and Centrality and Marginality. Given and New are examined through left-right composition and involves representing something already known in the left margin of the image, while the New is positioned on the right margin. The New is something not yet known or not yet agreed upon by the viewer, hence something to which the viewer has to pay special attention. Real and Ideal structures are realised through top-bottom organisation. The Ideal is used to make some kind of emotive appeal and show something that is presented as the idealised essence of the information, while the Real presents more specific and practical information. Centrality and Marginality are also considered in order to determine which participants or values are visually prioritised. For something to be presented as the Centre means that is presented as the core element to which all the other elements belong and from which they draw meaning and coherence. This is particularly important in advertisements featuring multiple individuals, as the positioning of queer and gender diverse participants may reveal whether inclusivity is central to the campaign or merely supplementary.

Salience is analysed through size, focus, colour contrast, lightning and foregrounding. The study investigates which participants attract the viewer's attention most strongly and how visual emphasis contributes to the constriction of identity and inclusivity. Framing devices and editing transitions are also examined to determine whether participants are visually integrated into a collective group or separated as distinct identities. In moving images, framing is additionally realised temporally through editing rhythm, pauses and shot transitions, all of which contribute to the coherence and emotional pacing of the campaigns.

Because the dataset consists of audiovisual advertisements, the analysis also incorporates auditory and linguistic elements. Spoken narratives, slogans, interviews and taglines are analysed alongside visual structures in order to understand how inclusivity is verbally articulated. Particular attention is given to gender-neutral language, pronoun use, emotional vocabulary and self-expression narratives.

Music is similarly analysed for its emotional and organisational function, particularly in establishing atmosphere and rhythm. Beyond simple background, music is often used as a ‘guide rhythm’ that organises the structure of multimodal texts, allowing other elements to synchronise with its tempo. Music also evokes instant emotions through pitch contours: for example, ascending melodies suggest active or outgoing emotions, while descending melodies signal more passive or incoming states (Van Leeuwen, 2025). The study of the lyrics is also important as they add their own autonomous layer of meaning that can either reinforce or contrast that of the music. Lyrics play a crucial role in setting the tone and emotional resonance of the campaign, enhancing the storytelling and connecting with the audience on a deeper level. The analysis of linguistic and auditory cues allows to understand how Sephora constructs inclusivity multimodally rather than relying solely on visual diversity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Multimodal Analysis of Three Sephora Campaigns

4.1 Analysis of “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2019 Campaign

The “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2019 campaign analysed in this study focuses on non-binary and transgender visibility. The video features ten participants, four of whom are publicly known transgender or non-binary figures, while the remaining participants also identify as transgender or non-binary. Given that gender identity cannot be reliably inferred from visual appearance alone (Eisend, 2019) and in order to avoid imposing binary assumptions on participants whose identities are not explicitly specified, the singular pronoun ‘they’ will be used throughout the analysis to refer to those identities whenever appropriate.

The campaign follows participants across a range of settings, including clubs, beaches or urban streets, offering brief glimpses into their daily lives. Participants are initially shown in moments of self-reflection or self-styling, but as the video progresses these intimate moments gradually transform into scenes characterised by celebration and collective joy.

4.1.1 Visual Analysis of “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2019 Campaign

The first participant who appears in the campaign is the model Aariana Rose Philip (Figure 1). She is introduced through a medium close-up that immediately establishes her as a highly salient participant within the frame. The participant wears a sparkling silver top, whose reflective texture attracts the viewers’ attention, making the participant’s clothing highly salient. Combined with her large silver earrings and a bold red lipstick, the elements of her attire are considered what Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) describe as Symbolic Attributes. These elements communicate glamour, confidence and femininity. Aariana Rose Philip is also shown using an electric wheelchair, a feature that, although not as salient as other elements, remains visible within the composition and contributes to the campaign’s broader commitment to representing forms of diversity that are often marginalised in mainstream beauty advertising.



Figure 1. *Aariana Rose Philip enters the nightclub*. Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

With respect to the interpersonal meaning of the image, Aariana looks directly towards the viewer, creating what Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) define as a demand image. Through this direct gaze, she is not positioned as an object to be observed but as an active and self-aware subject who establishes an imaginary relationship with the audience. The participant's facial expression is neutral yet confident, reinforcing this sense of agency. Her direct gaze is particularly important, as Figure 1 constitutes the first frame of the campaign and invites the viewer to enter the world of the advertisement. The frontal perspective further encourages involvement, suggesting that the represented world is connected to the viewer's own reality. The eye-level angle establishes a relation of equality between participant and viewer, avoiding any visual hierarchy that might position the participant as either subordinate or superior.

The intense red neon lighting saturating the background creates an atmosphere associated with nightlife and leans toward a sensory coding orientation, favouring emotional and aesthetic impact over naturalistic representation. The strong saturation of red conveys passion and energy, transforming the scene into a highly stylised environment that celebrates self-expression and visibility.

A later close-up presents Aariana within the same nightlife setting (Figure 2). In this frame, her wide-eyed gaze forms a clear vector across the image, creating what Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) describe as a non-projected reactional process, as the

object of her gaze remains inaccessible to the viewer. Unlike the previous image, this frame is described as an offer image. The participant does not establish eye contact with the audience but is instead presented as an object of contemplation, inviting viewers to observe her emotional engagement with the surrounding environment. This is further shaped both by the oblique perspective, which positions viewers as observers, and close-up, which directs attention to her facial expression and creates a sense of emotional connection with the participant. The eye-level angle continues to establish equality between the participant and the audience.



Figure 2. *Aariana Rose Philip in the nightclub*. Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>

The second participant represented in the campaign is a teenager whose portrayal revolves around themes of identity exploration and resistance to normative expectation. The participant is first introduced through a medium shot filmed from behind. The teenager is shown walking through a school bathroom while carrying a backpack on their right shoulder and wearing a black school uniform. Their long hair is tied in a low ponytail. Because the participant is represented within a school setting, it is expected that their gender presentation is regulated through a dress code associated to their sex assigned at birth. The participant is shown looking around the bathroom, as if checking whether anyone else is present. This action suggests anxiety or uncertainty regarding the actions they are about to perform.



Figure 3. *Teenager applies lip tint*. Source:
 <<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

A second frame shows the participant in a close-up shot while applying lip tint in front of a mirror (Figure 3). The frame contains a transactional action process, realised through the movement of the cosmetic product towards and across the lips. The participant is simultaneously both Actor and Goal of the action process. In Figure 3, the interpersonal meaning of the frame is shaped by an offer gaze. The participant does not look directly at the viewer but remains focused on their own reflection, inviting the audience to observe a private moment rather than participate in it. While the close-up creates an intimate social distance, allowing viewers access to the participant's emotional experience, the oblique angle maintains a degree of detachment, positioning viewers as observers of the participant's personal world. The frame employs a relatively sensory modality, characterised by muted colours and a largely desaturated palette, contributing to the impression of introspection and uncertainty.

In the following two frames, the teenager appears dancing within the same institutional environment (Figure 4). The first frame represents the participant engaged in a narrative action process realised through their extended arms, tilted torso and dynamic posture. Movement becomes central to the representation, transforming the participant from an introspective figure to an active performer. The large pink flower attached to the participant's clothing is the most visually salient element within the composition, achieved through vivid colour and exaggerated size. The participant also

wears the same uniform as in Figure 3, creating a visual tension between masculine and feminine signifiers.



Figure 4. *Teenager dances*. Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

In the second frame, the participant is dressed differently: the teenager wears a red tulle skirt, a pink top and a big pink bow at their waist. Their hair is no longer tied, but it is left down loose and adorned with a headband. These Symbolic Attributes contrast with the masculine-coded clothing from the previous frames, highlighting the fluidity of the participant's gender expression.

In contrast with the previous frames, in Figure 4 the participant establishes direct eye-contact with the viewer, creating a demand image. At first, their facial expression is assertive and projecting confidence, and later they smile widely, creating a sense of joy. The low-angle perspective is particularly significant in positioning the teenager as an empowered subject. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), low angles represent participants as powerful in relation to viewers, therefore the participant appears in a position of superiority despite their young age.

The two frames of Figure 4 are characterised by a contrast in their sensory coding orientation. While the first image maintains the desaturated palette of the previous frames, the second image contains theatrical lighting and saturated colours, creating a sense of celebration.

A final frame featuring this participant represents a reactional process (Figure 5). The teenager is shown in a close-up, gazing towards the right side of the frame. The facial expression appears thoughtful and contemplative, and because the participant does not look at the viewer, they are offered as an object to observe. The

close-up once again establishes intimacy and emotional closeness, but it also allows the viewer to observe the elements that form the participant's appearance: a vibrant pink fur, smoky eye makeup and backcombed hair. These elements strongly contrast with the participant's appearance in the first frames, leaning towards a more feminine stylisation. Finally, the overexposed background and prominent lens flare form a dreamlike atmosphere that conveys a sense of self-discovery.



Figure 5. *Teenager looks outside of the frame*. Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

The third participant represented in the campaign is first introduced through a medium shot which shows the subject sitting in a richly decorated bedroom (Figure 6). The medium shot allows viewers to observe the setting. The bedroom is decorated with fairy lights on an ornate headboard, religious figurines and pictures, as well as personal belongings that create an environment both intimate and symbolic. The lighting is realised through deep amber tones and golden illumination, which create a warm and intimate atmosphere that resembles those of sacred spaces. The combination of religious iconography and warm lighting are visual codes associated with devotion, framing the participant as a figure worthy of admiration and contemplation (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002). This interpretation is further supported by the non-projected reactional process which creates an offer image and invites viewers to observe the participant's world, as well as the oblique perspective which positions viewers as

observers who are allowed access to the participant's private world without fully entering it. The eye-level angle establishes a relationship of equality, avoiding hierarchical power relations between the participant and the audience.



Figure 6. *Participant sits in a richly decorated bedroom.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

The participant sits on the bed at the centre of the frame and under the fairy lights, making them strongly salient. The subject wears a feathered dress and silver hoop earrings, while their black hair is long and loose. These elements can be interpreted as Symbolic Attributes, which evoke glamour and femininity. Rather than simply reproducing conventional feminine stereotypes, they may be interpreted in the context of the campaign as markers of gender affirmation, visual signs through which the participant actively constructs and validates their own identity.

The following sequence of frames shifts the focus towards the participant's beauty practices (Figure 7). The participant leans towards a mirror, creating a transactional action process, with their gaze directed towards their own reflection. Afterwards, the participant is shown applying makeup directly to their eye with an eye pencil. The frame contains both a transactional action process in which the subject actively shapes their own appearance, and a reactional process created through their gaze towards their reflection. The offer gaze positions viewers as observers of a personal ritual, inviting them to witness the process of transformation. The eye-level

angle continues to establish equality between participant and audience. The close-up shot substantially reduces the social distance, encouraging emotional identification and empathy. The circular mirror is a framing device that encloses the participant's reflection and separates it from the surrounding environment. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), circular forms are frequently associated with warmth, protection, endlessness and organic qualities and are typically associated with people who value the emotive and the sensual, which are typical feminine qualities.

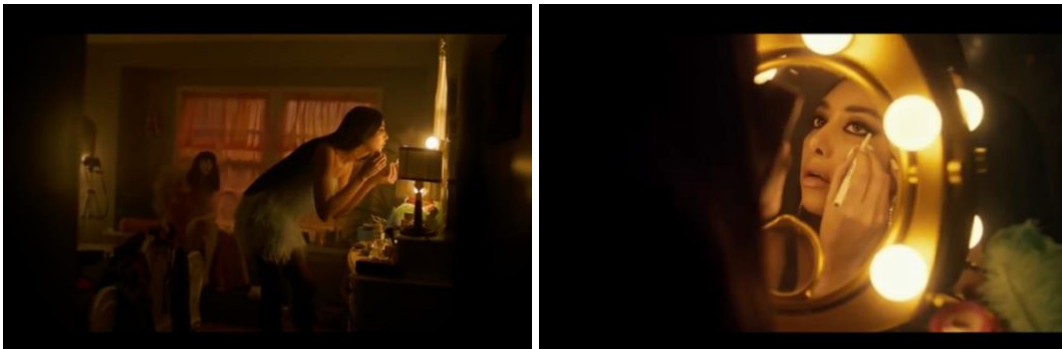


Figure 7. *Participant applies makeup.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

In Figure 8, the participant's narrative changes from introspection to movement and performance. In a dynamic medium shot, their body twists dramatically while their hair sweeps across the frame, creating a non-transactional action process. Unlike the earlier scenes of quiet preparation, this frame presents the participant as fully immersed in action. Their gaze is not directed towards anything, but remains absorbed within the movement itself, maintaining the characteristics of an offer image. While previous frames represented the participant through an eye-level perspective, Figure 8 presents the subject through a low angle. This positions the participant above the viewer, communicating strength and confidence. Moreover, the image is characterised by a high sensory modality, realised through saturated warm colours, dramatic lighting and motion blur (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). The information value further supports the interpretation of transformation: the left side of the image contains darker and cooler tones, while the right side opens into a bright haze towards which the participant's movement is directed.



Figure 8. *Participant dances in their room.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

The next participant introduced into the campaign is the actress Hunter Schafer, who is shown bathed in sunlight (Figure 9). The frames are structured around a non-projected reactional process, as her gaze is directed beyond the boundaries of the image towards an unseen phenomenon. As an offer image, the viewer is invited to observe a moment of contemplation. The close-up shot creates an intimate social distance, encouraging emotional closeness, while the oblique angle maintains a degree of detachment as observers. The participant is represented through Symbolic Attributes associated with conventional femininity, such as a pink top, large silver earrings and long blonde hair. The low-angle perspective subtly elevates her status within the image, positioning her as confident and self-assured (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020).



Figure 9. *Hunter Schafer is introduced.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

Although the vivid blue sky and bright sunlight provide a degree of naturalistic modality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002), the lens flare and sun glare create an atmosphere that also feels idealised. While the sky and surrounding environment retain a high degree of naturalistic detail, the treatment of Hunter's skin and facial features appears softened and luminous, producing a stylised aesthetic that enhances the emotional quality of the scene in both frames (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002).



Figure 10. *Hunter with a tear on her face.* Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>

The final frame in which Hunter Schafer appears alone is once again a close-up. Her hair is blown dramatically backwards by the wind, creating a powerful vector of movement across the frame. At the same time, a non-projected reactional process is realised through her gaze directed beyond the boundaries of the image. A tear is visible on her face, introducing a complex emotional dimension. The close-up creates emotional proximity, while the oblique angle preserves the participant's autonomy (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020): the viewer is invited to witness the moment but not fully enter it. Similarly to Figure 9, the low-angle perspective subtly elevates the participant, suggesting resilience and strength.

A blonde individual is introduced through a medium shot while removing their T-shirt (Figure 11). Like Hunter Schafer, the participant is represented through an offer image. Their attention is directed downwards rather than towards the audience,

inviting viewers to observe their actions. The removal of the participant's T-shirt is particularly important as their body shows scars of a top surgery, which are Symbolic Attributes of their gender non-conforming identity. The low-angle perspective conveys confidence to the participant.

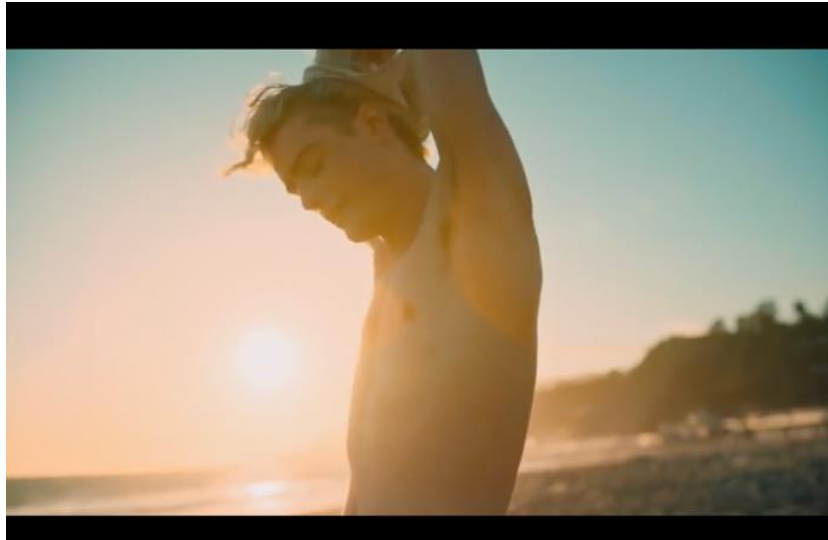


Figure 11. *Participant takes T-shirt off.* Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>

The medium shot allows viewers to observe both the participant and the setting. The participant stands on a beach, with both the sea and the seashore behind them. The setting sun is also visible beside the subject, which emanates golden tones and the soft haze that make the image more sensory than naturalistic. The same sensory modality orientation continues in Figure 12 through the intense amber, gold and brown tones poured by the sunlight from the background, transforming the image into an emotionally charged representation.

Figure 12 shows the last two participants lying together in a moment of physical closeness. Their intertwined bodies create a transactional action process realised through touch. Hunter Schafer's arm wraps around the other's torso, forming a tactile vector that visually represents affection and intimacy. Both participants simultaneously function as Actor and Goal of the interaction, highlighting the reciprocity of their relationship. A non-projected reactional process is also present. Their gazes are directed upwards rather than towards a visible object, creating a sense

of emotional absorption. The offer image once again presents the participants as objects of contemplation. The frontal angle and eye-level perspective establish equality both between the participant themselves and between the participants and the viewers.



Figure 12. *Hunter and the other participant embrace each other.* Source:

<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>

The sense of connection between the two individuals is further developed in the following frames (Figure 13). The participants are first depicted running hand in hand towards the sea. Unlike the close-ups and medium shots from the previous frame, the image shows the participants from behind through a long shot, which reduces their individual specificity and shift the focus towards the experience of connection itself.

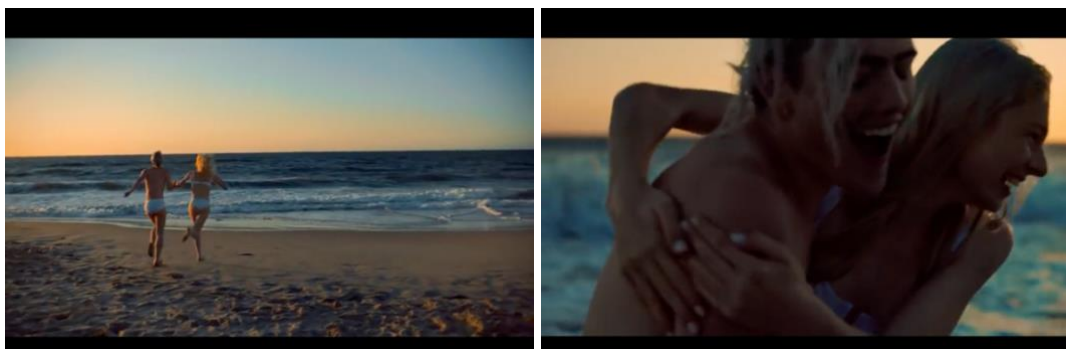


Figure 13. *Hunter and other participant forming an emotional connection.* Source:

<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>

The emotional dimension of the relationship is intensified through a later close-up embrace. The participants hold one another while smiling and laughing, creating a bidirectional transactional action process. Their arms form multiple vectors that physically connect their bodies and reinforce the reciprocity of their interaction. Although their expression suggests a reaction, no specific Phenomenon is visible within the frame. Their joy appears to emerge from their shared experience itself. The close-up significantly reduces social distance and encourages emotional identification with the participants (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020). The eye-level perspective continues to establish equality, while the absence of strong framing devices visually reinforces unity between the characters. The image's coding orientation combines naturalistic and sensory coding elements, as the realistic outdoor lighting and believable colour saturation ground the image in reality, while saturated oranges and blues of the sunset sky contribute to an atmosphere of intimacy and nostalgia (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002).



Figure 14. *Fatima Jamal in the nightclub*. Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

The sixth participant represented in the campaign is Fatima Jamal, a transgender filmmaker, writer and model (Figure 14). She is introduced through a close-up shot that centres attention almost entirely on her face and jewellery. Her eyeshadow and her rhinestone necklace reflect the light emanated from the neon lights behind her,

making those two elements highly salient. In particular, the rhinestone necklace is more than a simple marker of femininity but can be interpreted as a Symbolic Attribute of status and self-worth, as it not only adorns the participant, but it also confers her strength and visibility (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020).

The participant's gaze is directed outside the frame, producing a non-projected reactional process and creating an offer image. While the close-up draws viewers into the participant's immediate space, the oblique angle reminds them that they are only invited to observe and not interact with the participant. The low-angle perspective elevates Fatima's position, making her appear powerful and imposing. This effect is further intensified by the image's high sensory modality. Deep reds and purples dominate the composition, producing a rich and emotionally charged atmosphere (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002).



Figure 15. *Fatima Jamal dances in the nightclub*. Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>

The second and last frame showing Fatima Jamal presents her in a moment of energetic self-expression (Figure 15). The image is structured around a non-transactional action process in which her body twists dynamically while one arm extends outwards. The participant is represented as fully immersed in the act of dancing, as her gaze is not directed towards anything. This absence of direct address encourages viewers to observe the scene without intervening in it. The medium shot allows the audience to

perceive both the participant's body and the surrounding environment, highlighting movement and atmosphere. Although the participant's body is partially blurred by movement, she remains the most salient element of the composition.

Similarly to Figure 14, the frame is characterised by a high sensory modality, achieved through low lighting and dense magenta and pink tones. The visual style prioritises emotion over realism, suggesting that the image does not seek to document an event objectively, but to communicate the feeling of being present within that moment.



Figure 16. *Kate Bornstein looks into a mirror.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

Figure 16 presents the seventh participant of the campaign, namely Kate Bornstein, a non-binary author and theorist. They are introduced through a close-up shot in which they are looking at themselves in the mirror. This creates a reactional process in which the participant simultaneously occupies the roles of both Reactor and Phenomenon. Because their gaze is not directed towards the audience, this image invites viewers to witness a private moment of the participant.

The close-up allows for a close observation of Kate Bornstein's face and shoulders and their centrality make them the most salient element within the composition. Visual markers such as red lipstick and bare shoulders are accompanied by another highly significant attribute: Kate's silver-streaked hair. Importantly, signs

of ageing are neither concealed nor visually minimised. Their hair is carefully styled, yet its natural colour remains fully visible. Age therefore appears not as something to be corrected or hidden but as a valued and acknowledged component of identity. The eye-level perspective creates a relationship of equality between participant and audience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020).

The frame is characterised by a predominantly naturalistic modality. Greens, natural skin tones and soft daylight entering from the right side of the frame create a realistic visual environment. The texture of the participant's skin and hair remains visible rather than being excessively softened or retouched, further stressing the concept of age as a valued feature.



Figure 17. *Kate Bornstein smiles*. Source:

<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>

Kate also appears in a second frame where they look upwards smiling, creating a contrast with the previous frame (Figure 17). Because the Phenomenon towards which they direct their gaze remains invisible, viewers are encouraged to focus on the emotional significance of the act of looking itself. The participant's expression conveys joy, with the close-up shot encouraging empathy and emotional connection. The oblique angle introduces a slight degree of detachment, letting the participant stay immersed within their own emotional world. Figure 17 shows the participant through a low-angle perspective, elevating their position. Rather than presenting them as

vulnerable or passive the image constructs their image as a figure worthy of admiration and respect.

The visual style remains largely naturalistic, although some sensory elements are also present. The warm sunlight, lens flare and cyan tones of the sky create an atmosphere that is both realistic and emotionally evocative, as these elements contribute to a nostalgic and uplifting mood (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002).

The eighth participant is a dancer who is shown engaged in a non-transactional action process generating from their own movement (Figure 18). The participant is placed in a dark and industrial setting, resembling a rehearsal room or backstage area. The near-monochromatic dark palette and low lighting create a restrained visual style that focuses attention on the illuminated body rather than on other elements. Moreover, the participant's black clothing almost blends with the dark background and attributes more salience to the dancer's movement rather than their appearance, further stressing the importance of the action performed.

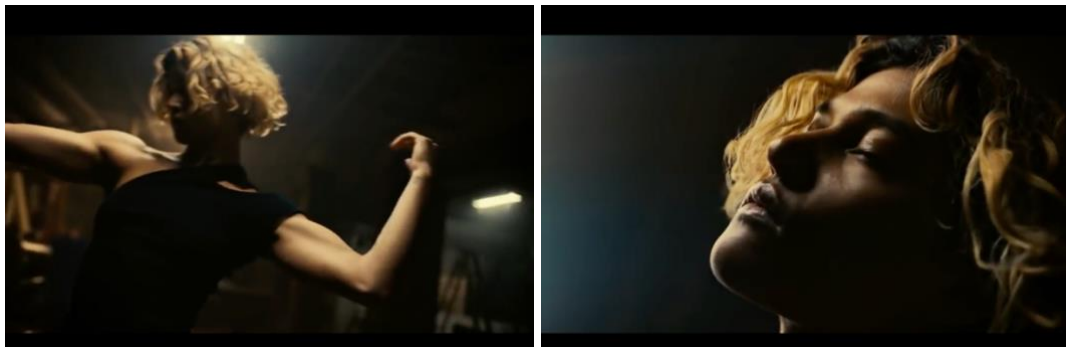


Figure 18. *Participant dances*. Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

The dancer is first presented through oblique angles, which position the audience as witnesses to the participant's experience, observing it from quite close distance. The low-angle perspective subtly elevates the dancer, granting authority and presence of their movements (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020).

Figure 19 continues to present the participant through offer images, inviting once again viewers to contemplate them. The images are organised around a series of action processes generated by the participant's body. The bent arm and the hand positioned near the chest form the strongest vectors within the composition, creating a line that

directs attention towards the participant's face. The low-angle perspective once again positions the participant as powerful and visually dominant.



Figure 19. *Dancer is covered in body paint.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

The intense cyan and magenta lighting, combined with the participant's body paint, transforms the dancer's body into a symbolic site of meaning. The contrast between the two colours may also be interpreted as symbolising tension between different aspects of gender identity (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002). Information value also contributes to this interpretation. The participant occupies the right side of the frame corresponding to the New. This positioning suggests that the identity being represented is something innovative, emerging or not yet fully established within dominant cultural narratives.

The two last participants are represented together throughout the whole campaign. Figure 20 depicts the two subjects kissing, structuring the image as a symmetrical transactional action process, as both participants turn towards one another, and their bodies create a reciprocal vector through the embrace and kiss. Their closed eyes indicate mutual absorption in the interaction and reinforce the intimate nature of the moment. Because of the absence of gaze directed towards the audience, this is considered an offer image that invites the viewer to observe the actions of the two participants. The medium shot creates a social distance comparable to that maintained between acquaintances, while the frontal, eye-level perspective positions the participants as equals to the viewer and as part of the viewer's social world.



Figure 20. *Two people kiss*. Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

The subsequent close-up on the participant's faces draws attention to their style which blends masculine and feminine elements. Both participants have their hair cut short, but they are wearing makeup and large hoop earrings, which are typically associated to femininity.

The image displays a high degree of naturalistic modality. Natural daylight, realistic colour reproduction and visible environmental details contribute to the impression that the scene represents a credible moment from everyday life. This is further enhanced by the setting. The participants occupy an ordinary urban space, characterised by a barbershop, parked cars and a public street.



Figure 21. *The couple dances on a rooftop*. Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

Another frame shows the couple dancing on a rooftop (Figure 21). The image is organised around a bidirectional action process, as their raised arms create diagonal vectors that connect them visually and physically. The frame also contains a projected reactional process, generated by the Black individual towards the other participant. The offer image, combined with the frontal perspective, positions viewers as observers of something that is also part of their world. The image combines naturalistic and sensory coding orientations, as the golden hour lighting appears realistic while simultaneously creating an emotionally heightened atmosphere.

The final frame depicts the couple riding together in a shopping cart through a public street (Figure 22). The scene is organised around an action process created by the implied movement of the cart. Once again, the image functions as an offer image, inviting viewers to observe the moment without directly engaging with the participants. The eye-level perspective maintains equality between representing participants and viewers. Rather than focusing on individual identities, the image foregrounds collective enjoyment and shared experience.



Figure 22. *The couple rides a cart.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=HoZeiQRWfR4>>

Although the scene takes place in a recognisable urban environment, elements such as lens flares, rainbow refractions and warm sunset lighting introduce a sensory dimension that transforms an ordinary activity into an emotionally resonant

experience. Particularly noteworthy is the large rainbow lens flare that dominates the composition. Through its brightness, colour contrast and size, it becomes the most salient element within the frame. Beyond its aesthetic function, the rainbow imagery evokes broader association with LGBTQ+ visibility and pride (Wolowic et al., 2017; Grad and Fusea, 2025).

4.1.2 Linguistic Analysis of “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2019

Campaign

Although the linguistic content of the advertisement is quite restricted, it is nonetheless highly meaningful. As can partly be seen in Figure 19, a sequence of pronouns appears on the screen at the beginning and at the end of the video: they, she, ze, he, xe, and we. The inclusion of both traditional pronouns (she, he) and gender-inclusive pronouns (they, ze, xe) is considered an explicit linguistic strategy of gender inclusivity and their presence immediately foregrounds gender diversity as a central theme of the campaign. The inclusion of neopronouns such as ze and xe is especially significant, as these forms remain relatively uncommon in mainstream media (Renström, 2025). Their appearance signals an effort to recognise identities that are often excluded from commercial discourse.

Visually, the pronouns are all presented at the centre of the screen, written in the same font and size. Centrality makes the text the most salient element within the frame, while the equality in font and size creates a classificational structure in which all pronouns are represented as equal. No pronoun stands out more than the others, implying that all pronouns are important and valid at the same level.

The progression from individual pronouns to the collective pronoun ‘we’ symbolically unites all the previously presented diverse identities within a shared community. This allows the campaign to move from difference to collective belonging without erasing individual identities. Instead of using the first-person plural pronoun to create an exclusionary ‘us versus them’ narrative typical of traditional beauty advertising, ‘we’ is paired with the verb ‘belong’ in the campaign slogan “We Belong to Something Beautiful”. The use of the verb ‘belong’ centres the message of the campaign on inclusion. The noun phrase ‘something beautiful’ remains deliberately open and undefined as well. The indefinite pronoun ‘something’ stresses that beauty

does not have a fixed definition associated with specific physical characteristics and instead accommodates diverse identities. In this way, the slogan avoids imposing a singular beauty ideal and instead frames beauty as plural.

The soundtrack of the campaign employs Shirley Bassey's "This is My Life", a dramatic orchestral ballad whose lyrics closely mirror the visual content. The song takes the role of a guide rhythm, providing a temporal structure that unifies the different visual sequences (van Leeuwen, 2025). As the music gradually increases in volume and instrumental density, the visual narrative similarly progresses from intimate moments of self-reflection to collective scenes of celebration.

The song begins in a slow tempo supported by heavy percussion and sustained orchestral strings. This restrained musical opening establishes a reflective atmosphere that accompanies the first appearances of the participants, many of whom are shown alone while engaging in acts of self-styling or contemplation. As the advertisement progresses, the orchestration becomes increasingly dense, and the strings perform dramatic ascending movements. Similarly, Bassey's vocal performance evolves from a warm and intimate lower register to a powerful and resonant voice, creating an auditory trajectory that parallels the visual movement towards empowerment. In fact, participants move from private acts of self-expression to scenes of celebration.

The lyrics add a further layer of meaning that reinforces the campaign's visual messages. Van Leeuwen (2025) argues that lyrics contribute their own autonomous semantic content, which may either support or contrast with the meaning conveyed by the music. In this case, the relationship is strongly reinforcing. The opening lyrics describe feelings of loneliness and self-doubt (1-2).

- (1) Funny how a lonely day, can
make a person say:
What good is my life
- (2) Funny how a breaking heart, can
Make me start to say:
What good is my life

These themes resonate with the campaign's representation of individuals who have historically been marginalised within society and dominant beauty discourses. The adjectives 'lonely' and 'breaking' are part of the semantic field of pain and suffering, evoking emotional isolation and self-doubt. The repetition of the interrogative construction 'what good is my life' further stresses the sense of insecurity and diminished self-worth. However, the lyrics subsequently move from isolation toward connection through a shift in perspective (3):

- (3) Till I look around and see,
 This great big world is
 Part of me

The verb phrase 'look around' signals a change from inward reflection to outward engagement. Linguistically, the speaker moves from focusing exclusively on the self to positioning herself within a wider collective context ('this great big world'). The relationship between her and the world is expressed through inclusion as it is described as 'part of me'.

- (4) And my life
 This is my life

The most prominent linguistic pattern throughout the song is the repetition of the phrase 'this is my life' (4-6) and 'this is me' (5). Syntactically, they are simple copular constructions consisting of the demonstrative pronoun 'this', the verb 'to be' and a complement ('my life', 'me'). The demonstrative and the present tense of the verb anchor identity in the present moment. The speaker is not describing who she wishes to become but affirming who she already is. This is a strong difference from the future-oriented language often found in beauty advertising, which encourages consumers to achieve a better version of themselves through a product use (Tehseem and Kalsoom, 2015).

- (5) But that's the way that I was born to be
This is me
This is me

The expression 'born to be' frames identity as innate and legitimate rather than chosen or artificial, challenging that assumption that identity must correspond to fixed biological categories (Butler, 1990). In the context of a campaign featuring gender diverse participants, this statement acquires additional significance because it challenges narratives that portray non-conforming identities as deviations from the norm.

- (6) This is my life
And I don't give a damn for lost emotions
I've such a lot of love I've got to give

The informal expression 'I don't give a damn' conveys resistance and defiance (6). In contrast with the vulnerability expressed earlier in the song, the shift in the speaker's stance can be interpreted as a rejection of self-doubt. Linguistically, the statement is a declaration of independence from the negative emotions expressed in lines 1 and 2. The semantic field changes toward love and generosity ('I've such a lot of love to give'). Rather than framing the self as deficient, the speaker is represented as possessing something valuable, namely 'love'.

- (7) Let me live
Let me live

The song culminates with an imperative phrase demanding recognition and freedom (7). The phrase implies the existence of social constraints while simultaneously rejecting them. In the context of the campaign, the imperative can be interpreted as a demand for visibility, acceptance and the right to exist authentically regardless of gender identity, age, ethnicity or appearance.

The extensive use of first-person pronouns makes the lyrics highly personal and autobiographical, foregrounding individual experience and self-definition. The repeated references to the self establish the speaker as an active subject. The speaker's agency is also supported by the fact that she consistently occupies the grammatical subject position (3-5-6). This pattern constructs the speaker as an active participant in her own life rather than a passive object shaped by external forces.

Unlike traditional gendered beauty advertising, which often employs corrective vocabulary and links self-worth to appearance, the song celebrates self-definition and authenticity.

4.2 Analysis of “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” 2022 Campaign

The “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” campaign adopts an interview-style format in which three mother-daughter pairs reflect on their experiences of motherhood and family. The testimonial segments are integrated with scenes depicting participants within domestic and personal environments, where they engage in interactions with one another. Since the participants are presented as mother-daughter pairs, the visual analysis will be organised accordingly.

The campaign includes a drag mother-daughter pair, for whom the feminine pronoun ‘she’ is used throughout this analysis. The choice reflects common linguistic practices within drag culture, where performers frequently adopt feminine pronouns while in drag, regardless of their gender identity outside of performance (Mann, 2011). The use of ‘she’ in this context therefore refers to the participants’ drag personas and performance identities rather than making assumptions about their personal gender identities.

Throughout the video, subtitles are displayed at the bottom of the screen to transcribe the participants’ spoken statements. As these subtitles reproduce the verbal content of the interviews, they will not be considered in the visual analysis. Instead, they will be examined as part of the linguistic analysis.

4.2.1 Visual Analysis of “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” 2022 Campaign

The first two participants of this campaign are Catherine Tammaro, a Wyandot mentor and teacher, and one of her mentees, whose name remains unknown. Even though their

relationship is not that of traditional mother and daughter, it is one based on mentorship and mutual affection.

The figure of Catherine Tamarro is first introduced through medium shot while speaking to a person outside the frame (Figure 23). Because the frame follows the structure of an interview, her gaze is directed towards the hypothetical interviewer, not interacting with the audience. However, the frontal, eye-level perspective establishes a sense of equality and involvement, positioning viewers as part of her world. The high naturalistic modality reinforces the sense of realism of the image (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020).

The medium shot allows viewers to see the abstract paintings in the softly blurred background, which can be interpreted as Symbolic Attributes that frame her as a creative professional. Rather than being defined primarily through her appearance, she is introduced through her artistic identity. Saliency is concentrated on her face through the contrast between her black-rimmed glasses, white hair and burgundy shawl against the softer pastel tones of the background, drawing attention to her.



Figure 23. *Catherine Tamarro is introduced.* Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>

Her artistic identity is further highlighted in Figure 24, where Catherine is shown painting, with her extended arm and paintbrush forming a clear vector connecting her to the canvas. The oblique perspective positions viewers as observers of her creative

process, while the eye-level angle maintains equality between participant and viewer. The composition places the artist on the left and the canvas on the right, creating a Given-New structure in which the established identity of the artist leads toward the creation of new meaning through her art. Naturalistic lighting and muted colours reinforce the authenticity of the scene, while the easel and window frames act as subtle framing devices that visually contain and organise her creative space.

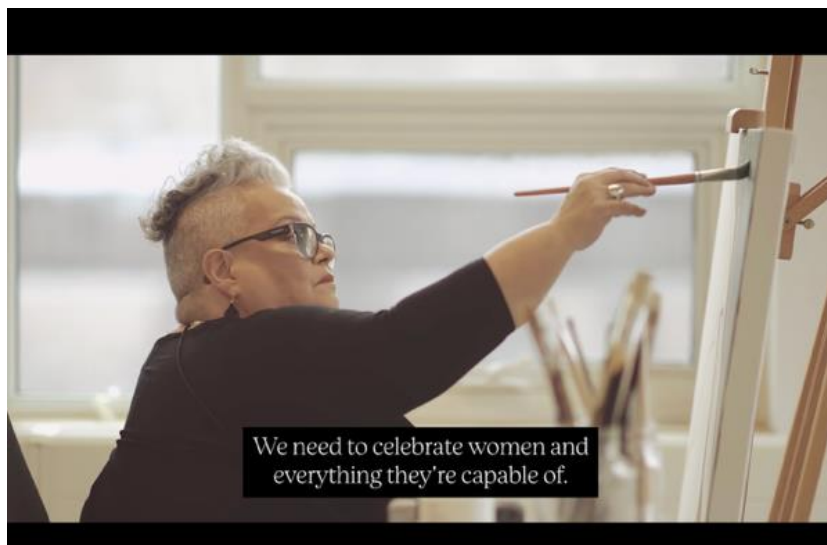


Figure 24. *Catherine Tammaro paints*. Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>

Catherine Tammaro's mentee is first introduced through a close-up that shows her gently smiling at an object outside the frame. The participant does not establish direct eye contact with the viewer, producing an offer image that encourages contemplation of the subject. The image adopts a more sensory coding orientation through warm lighting and soft focus, generating an atmosphere of tenderness and emotional warmth (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002).

The mentee is later shown in a frame with another woman who is putting makeup on her (Figure 25). The scene is organised around a transactional action process in which the makeup tool creates a vector linking Actor and Goal. The most salience is concentrated at the point where the makeup brush touches the face, making the action highly important. The transactional action creates a similitude to the previous frames where Catherine is painting, forming a connection between the creativity of makeup

and art. Reactional processes are also present in the image as the makeup artist directs her gaze towards the mentee focusing on the task and the mentee looks downwards to allow the makeup artist to put the cosmetic products on her. The realistic lighting and muted colour palette contribute to the scene's authenticity and realism.

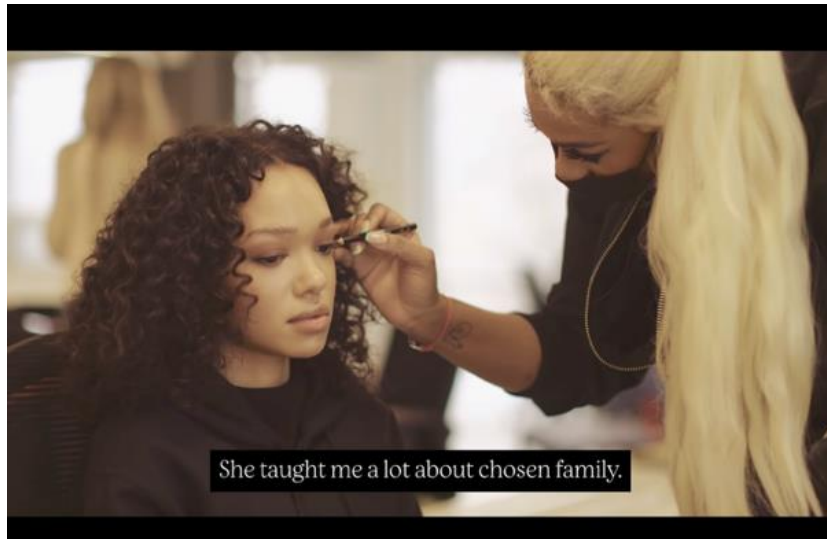


Figure 25. *Catherine Tammaro's mentee with a makeup artist.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>>

The relationship between the two participants becomes most explicit in a later scene where they are shown working together at a table (Figure 26). Both an action process and a reactional process are present. Through a transactional action process, the younger woman reaches toward a bowl of jewellery-making materials, while the older woman smiles while directing her warm gaze toward her. Catherine, who was first presented as a creative individual, is likely teaching and transmitting her artistic knowledge to her mentee, associating their relationship with broader ideas of heritage, continuity, and mentorship. The long shot allows the viewer to observe the relationship rather than focusing on a single participant and the eye-level angle perspective positions both women as equals to the viewer.

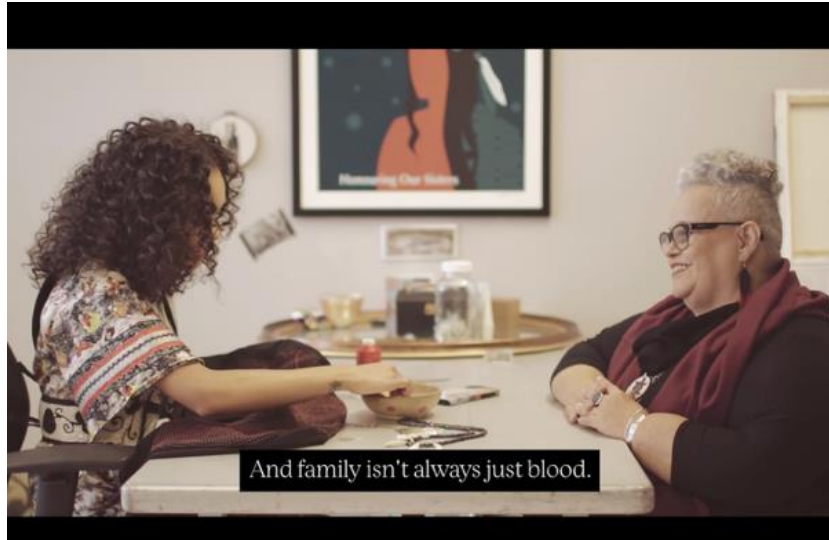


Figure 26. *The women engage in beadwork.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>>

The second pair represented in the campaign is formed by drag performers Xtacy Love and Priyanka. Similarly to the previous pair, their relationship is constructed through creativity and care, while also introducing themes of drag culture and chosen family within queer communities.



Figure 27. *Xtacy Love is introduced.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>>

Xtacy Love is introduced through a medium shot where she is talking to an interviewer outside the frame, similarly to Catherine Tammaro in Figure 24 (Figure 27). The participant herself is the Carrier of numerous Symbolic Attributes associated to drag performance, including an elaborate blonde hairstyle, dramatic makeup and a black leather outfit with leopard print details. The surrounding environment contains neon lights and a vintage automobile, recalling a retro glamour. Modality combines realistic textures with highly stylised lighting and colour saturation that enhance the atmosphere of spectacle and celebration (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002). The frontal, eye-level perspective positions viewers as equals and part of her world, while the offer gaze encourages observation and appreciation.

Xtacy Love later appears in two close-ups which allow the viewer to resonate with her emotionally (Figure 28). Both frames are offer images and the oblique angle invites the audience to observe the participant's private world without entering it. In one of the frames, Xtacy is shown speaking on a retro telephone, another element that evokes nostalgia and references to classic Hollywood glamour. Similarly to the previous frame, Figure 28 blends naturalistic and sensory modalities, producing an aesthetic that feels both realistic and stylised.



Figure 28. *Close-ups of Xtacy Love*. Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>>

Priyanka is first introduced through a close-up depicting the application of makeup, representing beauty as an active process of transformation. Similarly to Xtacy, Priyanka is herself a Carrier of a series of Symbolic Attributes, such as her elaborate hairstyle, dramatic makeup, oversized geometric earrings and an orange dress covered in rhinestones, which are visible in Figure 29. These attributes communicate creativity,

performance, and self-expression and reference the aesthetic traditions of drag culture (Mann, 2011).

Figure 29 presents Priyanka directly addressing the audience, making the frame the only demand image of the campaign. Positioned centrally within the composition, the participant looks directly at viewers, establishing an imaginary relationship with them and actively inviting engagement. The frontal angle enhances involvement, while the eye-level perspective reinforces equality between participant and viewer.



Figure 29. *Priyanka looks directly at the audience.* Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>

The relationship between Xtacy and Priyanka becomes most explicit in the final scene, when both participants appear together (Figure 30). The image shows a speech action process and a reaction process. Xtacy appears to be speaking, while Priyanka's gaze is directed towards her, establishing a strong eyeline vector that visually connects them. The visual similarities in their drag aesthetics position them as members of the same chosen family and artistic lineage. The frontal angle represents the image as part of the viewers' world, but the offer gazes highlight the role of the viewer as an observer. The eye-level perspective reinforces equality between the participants and the audience.



Figure 30. *Xtacy Love and Priyanka together*. Source:
<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>

The final pair featured in the campaign is formed by Talli Osborne, an all-abilities spokesperson, and her adoptive mother. This relationship validates another form of motherhood beyond the biologic one.

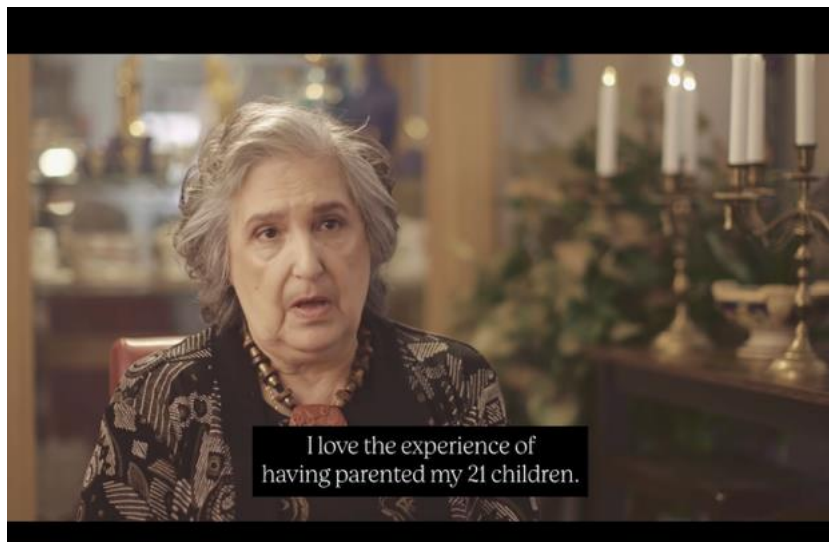


Figure 31. *Talli Osborne's adoptive mother*. Source:
<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>

Talli Osborne's mother is introduced through a medium shot in which she is engaged in a speech action process, with her gaze directed outside the frame towards an

interviewer (Figure 31). The offer gaze invites viewers to observe her personal narrative without directly addressing them, while the frontal, eye-level perspective creates a sense of involvement and equality. In the background, decorative furnishings and household ornaments are visible, which can be interpreted as Symbolic Attributes associated with heritage and tradition. These elements place the participant into a space of stability and continuity. The naturalistic modality provides a sense of realism.

The concepts of heritage and continuity also appear in another frame showing Talli Osborne's mother flipping through the pages of a photograph album. In the image, her silver hair is the most salient element, foregrounding age and associating it with notions of experience and memory. Through this representation, the campaign represents older womanhood as valuable and meaningful.



Figure 32. *Mother looks into a mirror.* Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>

This interpretation is further confirmed by a later scene depicting the mother adjusting her hair while looking into a mirror (Figure 32). The image combines a non-transactional action process with a reaction process. Her raised hands create vectors towards her hair, while her gaze is directed toward her own reflection. As her silver hair and face is highly salient due to focus, lighting and centrality, this image once again foregrounds ageing as a visible and accepted aspect of identity. The naturalistic modality highlights the textures of her skin, hair, and clothing, while the earthy colour

palette reinforces the authenticity of the representation. The scene suggests that practices of self-expression remain meaningful throughout the life course.

Talli Osborne is introduced through a series of medium shots in which her expression is animated and smiling (Figure 33). Salience is strongly directed towards her face and hot pink hair, which become Symbolic Attributes of her alternative personality and self-expression. Her style visually juxtaposes the symbols traditionally associated with domestic heritage that surround her. Rather than positioning these elements in opposition, however, the image integrates them harmoniously. The warm lighting and relaxed expression communicate comfort and emotional security (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002), while the high naturalistic modality maintains a sense of realism and authenticity.



Figure 33. *Talli Osborne is introduced.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>>

The relationship between the two participants becomes visible in the following scenes, where the mother and daughter appear talking and laughing together. In the last frame, they are presented gathered around a dining table (Figure 34). The scene is organised through a transactional action process in which the mother pours a drink for Talli Osborne. The scene also contains subtle reaction processes, as both participants direct their attention toward the task at hand. The offer image and the oblique angle position the viewer as an observer of this private moment, while the eye-level perspective continues to maintain equality between audience and participants. Similarly to the previous frames, the visible house furnishings, such as the fireplace, the lamp and the dining table, can be interpreted as Symbolic Attributes associated with familiarity and

warmth. These elements transform the ordinary act of sharing a meal into a visual representation of nurturing and belonging.



Figure 34. *Talli Osborne and her mother together*. Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>

The final frame of the advertisement brings together the three mothers featured throughout the campaign in a single image through a conceptual classificational structure (Figure 35). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), classificational structures group participants into a common category, emphasising their similarities. In this case, the three women are visually aligned within a triptych composition that places them on the same representational level. Although they come from different cultural, generational and familial background, the composition classifies them as members of a single social group, arguing that diverse experiences of motherhood are equally valid and deserving of recognition.

Once again, the participants engage the viewer through an offer gaze. None of them look directly at the audience, instead, they are represented as figures to be observed and contemplated. The viewer is invited to recognise and appreciate their presence. The use of close social distance creates a sense of emotional proximity, while the frontal, eye-level angle positions the participants as equals to the viewer.

The Sephora logo is displayed across the middle of the triptych in wide capital letters. The logo visually bridges the three portraits, cutting across the dividing lines

that separate them. As a result, Sephora functions as the unifying element that symbolically connects these diverse experiences and identities. The brand also occupies the centre of the composition and therefore becomes the element from which the surrounding participants derive coherence and meaning. Rather than positioning inclusivity as peripheral, the image places diversity and multiple forms of motherhood at the core of the brand identity.

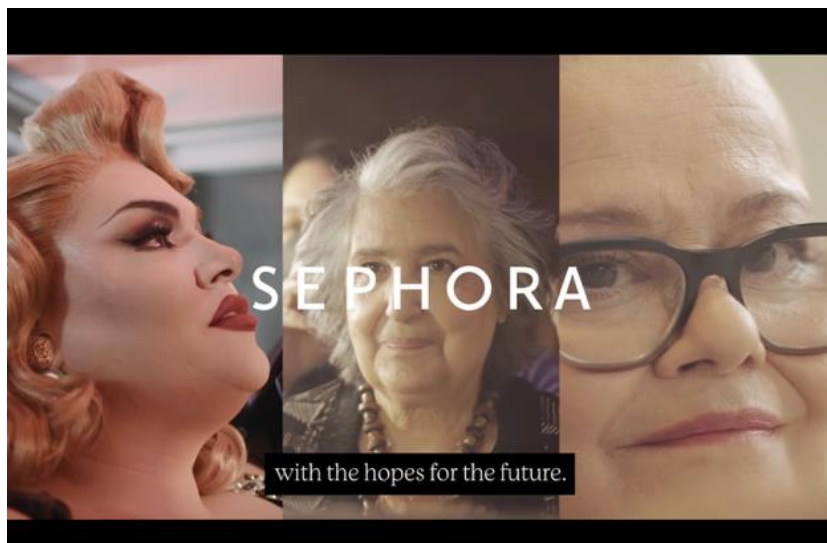


Figure 35. *Triptych of the three women*. Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BQ6K-PN0X-U>>

4.2.2 Linguistic Analysis of “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” 2022 Campaign

The message of the campaign is established immediately through the linguistic mode through the slogan “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms”, an explicit statement that constructs motherhood as diverse and extended beyond biology. The quantifier ‘all’ is the most important linguistic item within the statement because it broadens the category of motherhood beyond a single normative model and prepares viewers for the representation of adoptive mothers, drag mothers and chosen families throughout the advertisement. The slogan is visually centred with respect to the whole frame, making it the most salient element. The word ‘SEPHORA’, written with the brand distinctive capital letter font, is smaller than the rest of the statement, making the message of the campaign more salient than the brand itself.

Throughout the advertisement, the voices of the participants alternate to narrate their experiences of motherhood and of being daughters. The opening statement immediately challenges conventional definitions of motherhood.

- (1) Motherhood comes in many, many forms. It's not only about biological children.

The repetition of the indefinite adjective 'many' intensifies the idea of multiplicity, while the negation 'not only' explicitly rejects the notion that biological parenthood should be considered the sole legitimate form of motherhood. In this way, the campaign expands the semantic boundaries of the concept of motherhood itself.

The concept is first expanded by presenting drag motherhood as one of the possible forms that motherhood can take. In the world of drag, queens usually belong to a house headed by a 'mother' (Passa, 2021). This is the case with the two drag participants of this campaign, as Priyanka is part of the House of Love, headed by Xtacy Love.

- (1) The best thing about being a drag mom is that I'm a cool mom. Hello! Gorge!
- (1) The importance of a drag mother is feeling like you belong.

Lines 2 and 3 introduce forms of kinship that are frequently absent from mainstream advertising. Line 2 is obviously pronounced by Xtacy Love, who uses the noun 'drag mom' without explanation, presenting it as a valid and self-evident form of motherhood. She also defines herself as a 'cool mom' and 'gorge', colloquial expressions that humanise the speaker and redefine motherhood as both caring and joyful. In particular, the term 'gorge' is an abbreviation of the word 'gorgeous', and draws on the expressive vocabulary associated with drag culture. The term can thus be interpreted as an in-group linguistic marker of queer identity (Passa, 2023).

Line 3 contains the most important verb of Sephora's campaigns: belong. The statement further supports the legitimisation of drag motherhood, emphasising its role in creating community and acceptance. This concept is reinforced in a later statement uttered by Priyanka:

- (1) She taught me a lot about chosen family. And family isn't always just about blood.

The noun phrase 'chosen family' is particularly associated with LGBTQ+ communities, where support networks are often formed outside biological kinship structures (Weston, 1991; Passa, 2021). The negation 'family isn't always just about blood' once again rejects the biological essentialism and legitimises alternative forms of familial connection. In this way, family is redefined as an emotional and social relationship rather than a purely biological one.

The lexical field of teaching and guidance appears repeatedly throughout the testimonies (4-5-6-7):

- (1) She's my number one **inspiration**. She's amazing.
- (1) I think the best thing my mom **taught** me is to always stay true to myself to fight for what I believe.
- (1) We need to celebrate women and everything they're capable of. Women are tremendous providers of life. They are tremendous **inspirations**. They're tremendous **role models, teachers**.

These linguistic choices once again shift attention away from biological reproduction and towards emotional relationships. Motherhood is represented not as a biological status but as a practice of nurturing, teaching, protecting and supporting others. Line 7 is particularly relevant as it frames motherhood as a source of empowerment. Womanhood and motherhood are seen as strengths that need to be celebrated and recognised, rather than roles to be idealised and constrained. The repeated adjective 'tremendous' is a positive evaluative term that highlights women's roles as 'providers of life', 'inspirations', 'role models' and 'teachers'. These lexical choices foreground capability, leadership and influence.

- (1) I love the experience of having parented my 21 children.
- (1) To love myself fully. And be fearless and believe in yourself.

A recurring linguistic strategy is the use of first-person narratives (6-8-9). They position participants as authoritative narrators of their own experiences. Unlike traditional advertising discourse, where brands often speak on behalf of consumers, the campaign foregrounds personal testimony and lived experience. The testimonial style increases authenticity and allows participants to define motherhood in their own terms.

- (1) Mother's Day, to me, is a time to reconcile the treatment of the past with the hopes for the future.

The final testimony introduces a more reflective and complex perspective. The verb 'reconcile' suggests that celebration of motherhood also includes negotiation and healing, acknowledging that family relationships can be difficult and multifaceted. The lexical contrast between 'past' and 'future' constructs Mother's Day as both a moment of reflection and a source of hope.

The soundtrack of the video campaign is centred around a gentle piano melody accompanied by light percussion. The music remains restrained, a choice that allows the participants' voices to remain the primary carriers of meaning. The moderate and steady tempo creates a sense of continuity and forward movement. Rather than generating tension or excitement, the rhythm establishes stability and reassurance. The music therefore is not included to create meaning but to build an emotional environment in which stories of diverse types of motherhood can coexist within a unified discourse of belonging.

4.3 Analysis of "We Belong to Something Beautiful" 2024 Campaign

The "We Belong to Something Beautiful" 2024 campaign represents participants with diverse identities, appearances and forms of self-expression within a shared setting. In fact, the action unfolds entirely in the same restroom space. This setting visually connects individuals who differ in terms of age, ethnicity, gender expression and style. The campaign predominantly depicts participants in front of mirrors engaging in acts of self-styling, grooming and cosmetic application.

Similarly to the other analysed campaigns, the pronoun ‘they’ is used to refer to those participants whose gender identity is not inferable from their appearance, while the pronoun ‘she’ is used for drag queens to refer to their drag personas.

4.3.1 Visual Analysis of “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2024 Campaign

The large public restroom where all the action of the campaign unfolds is visible from one of the first frames (Figure 36). The high angle perspective allows the viewers to observe the space where the subsequent actions will take place. The space is characterised by highly stylised red tiles on the walls where three mirrors are hung. The black and white checkered floor creates a contrast with the walls’ tiles.



Figure 36. *High-level angle of the restroom.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The first participant introduced in the campaign is a young blonde woman who initially appears alone before gradually being joined by a larger group of friends. The first frame presents just her silhouette, a dark shadow walking through a narrow corridor saturated in deep crimson tones. The participant’s body creates a forward moving vector directed towards the depth of the corridor. The viewers’ field of vision is aligned with that of the participant, and they are invited to accompany her and experience the environment through her perspective.

A subsequent close-up focuses on the participant's face as she looks into a mirror (Figure 37). The camera is positioned frontally with respect to the participant, adopting the perspective of the mirror itself. In this way, the participant's gaze appears directed towards the viewer, creating a demand image. By looking directly at viewers, she establishes an imaginary relationship with them and invites engagement. The participant appears adjusting her hair tied in two braided ponytails, a transactional action process in which she functions simultaneously as Actor and Goal, performing an act of self-styling upon her own body. The close social distance creates intimacy, making the beauty ritual appear accessible and relatable. Her lime green clothing contrasts sharply with the red environment, producing a visual opposition that prevents her from blending into the background. Rather than signalling conformity, her styling communicates individuality and willingness to stand out. Although the colour palette is highly stylised, the realistic rendering of her facial features and skin tones preserves a degree of naturalistic modality, balancing aesthetic experimentation with authenticity (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020).



Figure 37. *The blonde girl adjusts her hair.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The next shots include a larger group of friends gathered within the same restroom (Figure 38). The group frames are characterised by multiple simultaneous action processes. Participants are seen applying fragrance, holding other cosmetic products,

fixing their hair or applying lip-gloss. No single action dominates the composition, creating instead a sense of collective participation. The difference in ethnicity, style, gender and gender expression allows the image to be analysed through a classificational structure. Despite their differences, the participants are united through their shared engagement in beauty practices. This sense of unity is further supported by the absence of framing devices, which visually integrates the group. The frontal eye-level perspective positions all participants as equals and invites the viewers to observe them as part of their world.



Figure 38. *The group of friend stands in the restroom.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The participants' gazes are balanced between direct and indirect, making Figure 38 both a demand and offer image. It is important to point out that the participants addressing the audience are essentially women or feminine individuals, while men or masculine individuals are placed on the background of the image and do not engage with viewers.

One of the most significant moments in the advertisement occurs when the group gathers to take a photograph together (Figure 39). The participants lean toward one another through multiple action vectors and position themselves for a collective portrait. The blonde woman from Figure 37 is the one holding the camera, an object that can be interpreted as a Symbolic Attribute associated with memory and self-documentation. The photograph being taken is more than a casual snapshot, but it is a record of community and shared experience.

Because the participants' gazes are all directed towards the mirror and the camera adopts a frontal perspective, the image functions as a demand. The medium social distance and frontal perspective reinforce the sense of participation.



Figure 39. *The group takes a picture.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The sequence culminates in a celebratory group scene in which participants dance and raise their arms (Figure 40). The participants are shown through a long, high-level shot that allows viewers to appreciate the collective nature of the gathering. The elevated angle is used primarily to capture the group instead of establishing hierarchical relationships.

Information value is organised around the campaign slogan positioned at the centre of the frame, which will be analysed in Section 4.3.2. The text communicates the message of belonging linguistically, while the participants visually embody the message through their interactions. The mirrors on the walls further support the concept of inclusion, as they multiply the group through reflection, extending the sense of community beyond the immediate frame.

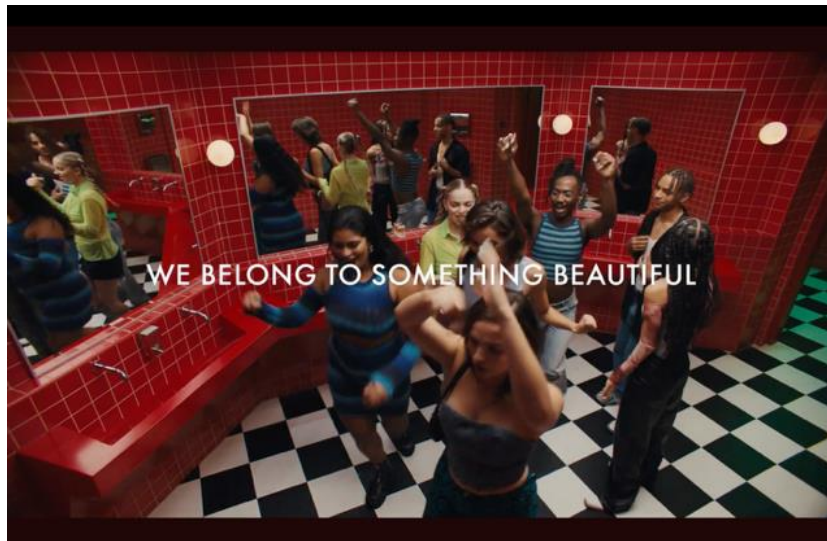


Figure 40. *The group celebrates.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The next participants are two girls who are presented in a highly stylised environment dominated by pink and purple lighting. Even though the space is the same red tiled restroom as the previous frames, the intense neon lighting transforms it into a visually expressive space characterised by a high sensory modality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002). Similarly to the previous group of participants, the image is organised through a conceptual classificational structure that visually groups the participants together while also showing their differences. Distinctive hairstyles, makeup techniques, jewellery and clothing are Symbolic Attributes that communicate individuality and personal identity. Two close-ups allow the viewer to observe the details of the participants' styling.

The participant represented in Figure 41 is a Black woman whose style is characterised by a turquoise eyeliner, silver earrings and layered chain necklaces above a lilac top. Her hair is braided with geometric precision and embellished with rhinestones. These elements operate not merely as decorative accessories but as signs of artistic self-fashioning and aesthetic competence.

A reaction process is established as her gaze forms a vector directed towards something outside the frame, likely a mirror. The oblique angle positions the viewer as an observer rather than a participant, allowing them to appreciate the constructed

nature of her appearance as a deliberate artistic practice through which visibility and individuality are asserted.

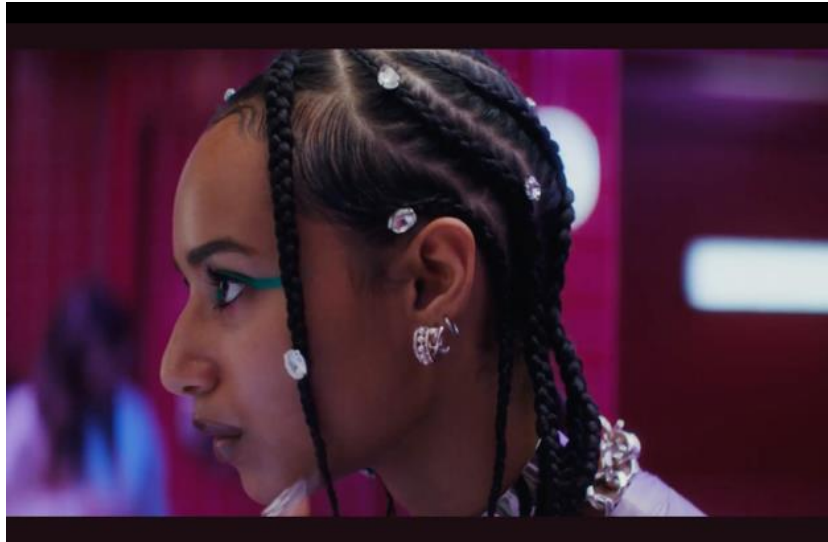


Figure 41. *Close-up of the Black woman.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The participant represented in Figure 42 is an Asian woman whose style combines dramatic pink eye makeup with decorative pearls beneath her eyes, long and colourful acrylic nails and a patterned high neck garment. Her hair, more visible in Figure 43, is tied in two braided ponytails and decorated with white pearls. These Symbolic Attributes are interpreted as signs of creativity and experimentation, treating the body as a canvas for aesthetic expression. The close-up framing intensifies the viewer's attention to these details, while the oblique perspective maintains a degree of observational distance.

The image combines action and reactional processes. Her raised hands create vectors directly toward her own face, positioning her simultaneously as Actor and Goal in a process of self-styling. At the same time, her glance forms a reactional vector directed toward the Black woman, making the latter the Phenomenon of her gaze. Her lips are slightly parted and her expression is attentive.



Figure 42. *Close-up of the Asian woman.* Source:
 <<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

Despite their differences, the participants share the same environment, and the composition visually unites them within the same social category. After sharing glances, the participants smile with their gaze turned downward, suggesting a process of mutual awareness. This paves the way for the culmination of the sequence with a frame foregrounding the interpersonal dimension of beauty practices. The participants appear engaged in a playful interaction in which one leans toward the other and gestures toward her face, creating a transactional action process (Figure 43). Simultaneously, a reaction process emerges from the gaze of the Black woman, who looks directly at the other participant. Their smiles and body orientation communicate affection, familiarity, and mutual recognition.

The oblique perspective positions the viewer as a witness of this intimate interaction, while the medium social distance maintains emotional proximity. The eye-level angle maintains equality between the audience and the participants. The elaborate aesthetic elements visible throughout the sequence operate as Symbolic Attributes that openly display their own artificiality, celebrating beauty as something consciously created. The image suggests that such aesthetic choices are considered social semiotic resources directed toward a community capable of recognising and interpreting them. The participants' shared smiles imply a mutual understanding of these visual codes, transforming beauty into a language of belonging.



Figure 43. *The two women interact with each other.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The next group of participants consists of four older women (Figure 44). They are represented through a complex combination of transactional action processes, as the women are captured laughing together and physically interacting. Their facial expressions communicate joy and emotional engagement, while their hands establish a physical vector of connection with one another. At the same time, overlapping eyeline vectors generate reaction processes that circulate internally between the participants, producing a self-contained conversational space. The participants thus establish an offer image as none directly addresses the viewer, inviting observation. The medium shot creates a social distance that balances intimacy with observation, allowing viewers to witness their interaction without intruding upon it. The frontal perspective and eye-level angle position the women as equals to the viewer and situate their world as part of the viewer's own social reality.

As for conceptual structures, the women function as Carriers of Symbolic Attributes such as distinctive hairstyles, clothing, and cosmetic choices. Unlike conventional beauty advertising, where older women are frequently associated with anti-aging narratives centred on correction and concealment (Sánchez-Labela Martín et al., 2024), the participants are represented through a high naturalistic modality which clearly shows skin textures and hair details. The contrast between the vibrant clothing and the uniform red environment further contributes to the participants' visual

prominence. Once again, the individuals seem to come from different cultural backgrounds but are united through the conceptual and textual structures within the image. Framing plays a significant role as the women are positioned in close physical proximity creating a unified social formation whose cohesion is emphasised by their overlapping bodies and shared gestures. The frame reinforces the campaign's broader argument that beauty, friendships and self-expression are not restricted by age. Instead, ageing is represented as fully compatible with glamour, happiness and belonging.



Figure 44. *Women laugh*. Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

Figure 45 isolates one participant from the group and shows her engaged in a transactional action process applying a cosmetic product to her face with a cushion. The cosmetic applicator creates an action vector directed towards her own body making her simultaneously Actor and Goal. Centrality and colour contrast between the vibrant clothing and the cosmetic applicator draws the attention to the participant's face, making it the most salient element of the composition. A reaction process is also present, as her gaze is directed towards an offscreen mirror, creating an offer image.

The close-up allows to observe more closely the details of her styling choices, such as her winged eyeliner, stacked gold earrings, colourful striped top and rings. These elements reject stereotypes of older women as passive consumers of beauty products designed solely to conceal age. Instead, they frame cosmetics as tools of creativity, used throughout an individual's lifespan. The oblique perspective positions viewers as observers of a private moment, while the eye-level angle maintains equality. Once again, a high naturalistic modality makes the textures, colours and material details visible.

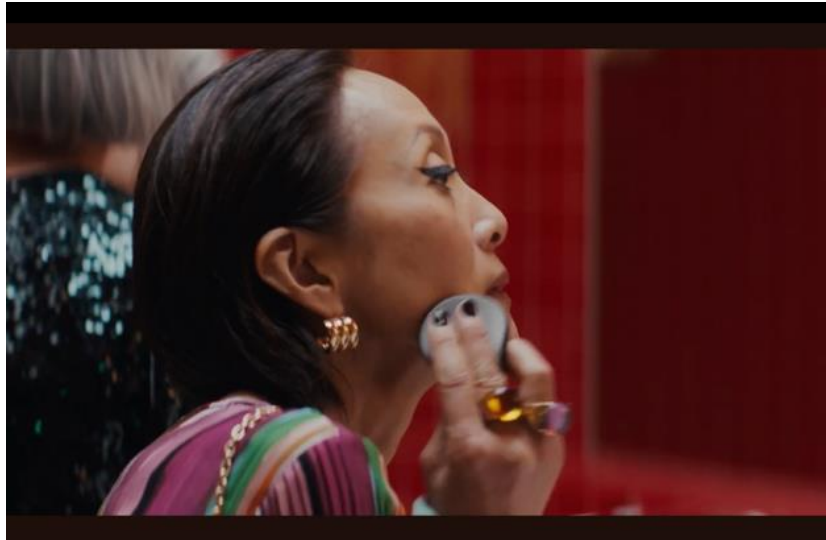


Figure 45. *Woman applies makeup.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The next group of participants is first introduced through a frontal shot in which several action processes unfold at the same time: one participant is adjusting their bag, another is adjusting their collar, and another one is leaning forward towards the mirror. A subsequent frame focuses on only one participant from the group, making them the protagonist of the sequence. The participant is shown from an oblique angle, looking towards the right side of the frame, where the mirror is located. The Phenomenon of the reactional process is therefore the participant themselves. The close-up on their face allows the viewer to focus on the details of their alternative style: short blonde hair, no eyebrows and a dark eye makeup.

The following frame develops the participant's narrative through a powerful action process centred on the removal of the blonde wig (Figure 46). The participant's hands pull the wig sideways, creating a vector of movement that directs attention toward the right side of the image. A reactional vector is also present as the participant's gaze remains fixed on the mirror in front of them. Salience is given to the participant's wig and bald scalp through illumination and contrast, directing attention to the act of removal. Through the information value structure, the uncovered head occupies the position of the New, presenting viewers with an alternative understanding of beauty that challenges dominant norms. The close-up framing intensifies the

emotional significance of the moment, while the frontal eye-level angle maximises involvement and equality between the participant and the audience.



Figure 46. *Participant takes off their wig.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

In the following shot, the participant is placed at the centre of the frame in between their two friends (Figure 47). Their raised arms and hands touching their head create a transactional action process, while their friend's hand reaches forward to touch their scalp, producing a transactional action process that physically links the group members together. In addition, reactional processes are visible from the two friends through expressions of laughter and celebration directed towards the central participant. In contrast, the central participant looks directly towards the camera, creating a demand image and engaging the audience. The frontal eye-level perspective continues to convey involvement and equality.

Other than through their actions, the participants are also unified through their dark clothing which creates a collective visual mass that strongly contrasts with the surrounding red environment. Their clothing and styling composed of chunky gold necklaces, graphic t-shirts and a black jacket, create a visual discourse of alternative beauty, combining masculine and feminine coded elements in a way that resists clear categorisation.



Figure 47. *Participant and friends after removal of wig.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

Another group formed by ballet dancers is introduced through a medium shot characterised by a dense network of simultaneous action processes that depict the dancers preparing for performance (Figure 48). The participant stretching her leg holds the most salience within the composition, as she creates a vertical vector that disrupts the horizontal structure of the tiled walls and lights on the background. Additional dancers occupy the space in different stages of preparation, stretching, adjusting clothing and interacting with one another. Together, these multiple transactional actions create an image of constant movement and activity. The image also shows a classificational structure by grouping together dancers who differ in physical appearance but are united through their shared practice and styling. The contrast between the blue dancewear and the red environment makes the participants visually emerge as a cohesive group. The participants do not engage with viewers, creating an offer image that invites the audience to observe the scene.



Figure 48. *Ballerinas appear in the restroom.* Source:
 <<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

Two subsequent frames focus on the preparation of the dancers (Figure 49). First, a ballerina is shown applying mascara in a self-directed transactional action process, as the mascara wand creates a vector extending towards her eyelashes. At the same time, her focused gaze establishes a reactional process directly towards an unseen mirror, making her reflection the Phenomenon of the reaction. The close social distance encourages viewers to focus on the details of her face and movements, while the oblique perspective maintains a degree of detachment positioning viewers as observers of a private moment.

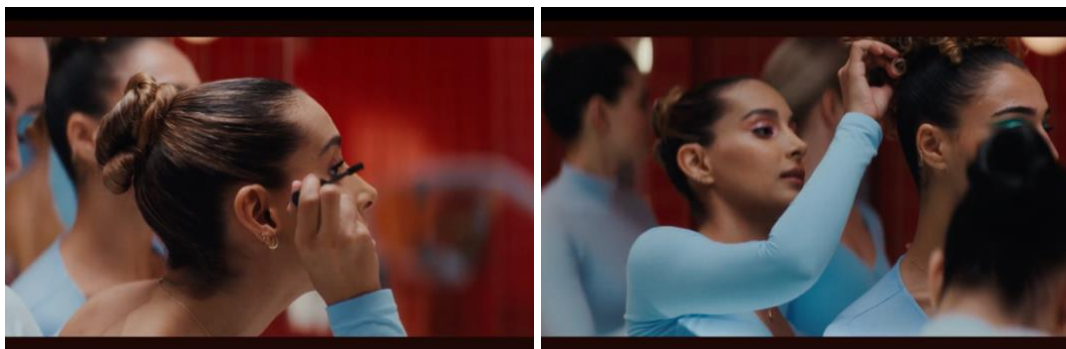


Figure 49. *Ballerinas get ready.* Source:
 <<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The following frame shifts attention towards a transactional action process, produced by one ballerina extending her arm to adjust another dancer's hairstyle. Her gaze is focused on her companion, establishing a reactional process that reinforces the connection between the two dancers. The image suggests that beauty practices are not exclusively solitary acts but also function as social interaction through which relationships are maintained. The close social distance highlights the intimacy of the exchange, while the oblique perspective positions viewers as witnesses to a private moment shared between the participants.

The final frame returns to an individual dancer who is shown applying mascara while smiling broadly, creating both an action process and a reactional process (Figure 50). The mascara wand forms a vector directed towards her eyelashes and creates a transactional action process. Her gaze is fixed on the mirror and at the same time on the audience, creating a demand image which increases the viewers' involvement. Her smiling expression establishes an emotional connection with the audience and invites them to perceive the act of applying makeup as one of enjoyment rather than obligation. The frontal angle helps increase the viewers' involvement, while the eye-level angle maintains the participant's position as an equal with respect to the viewer.



Figure 50. *Ballerina applies mascara smiling.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The next sequence focuses on a group of drag performers engaging collaborative moment of makeup application (Figure 51). The central participant is the focus of the frame, holding the most salience through central placement, sharp focus and colour contrast. The participant can be interpreted as the Carrier of Symbolic Attributes that construct drag identity, such as dramatic eye makeup with glitter and false lashes, oversized floral earrings, layered gold jewellery, platinum blonde hair and a feathered green garment (Mann, 2011). Another participant occupies the background of the frame, similarly carrying drag symbols in their makeup and clothing style. The background participant produces a reactional process, as her gaze is directed towards the central participant. The central participant is the Goal of a transactional action process created by two hands entering from the left side of the frame and producing a vector towards the participant's face, holding her chin up. One of the hands is holding a small makeup brush, suggesting that the action is related to makeup application. The participant on the background also holds a makeup brush, suggesting that beauty practices are shared activities. The oblique angle and the absence of direct gazes position the viewer as an observer of the scene, while the eye-level perspective positions viewers as equals to the participants.

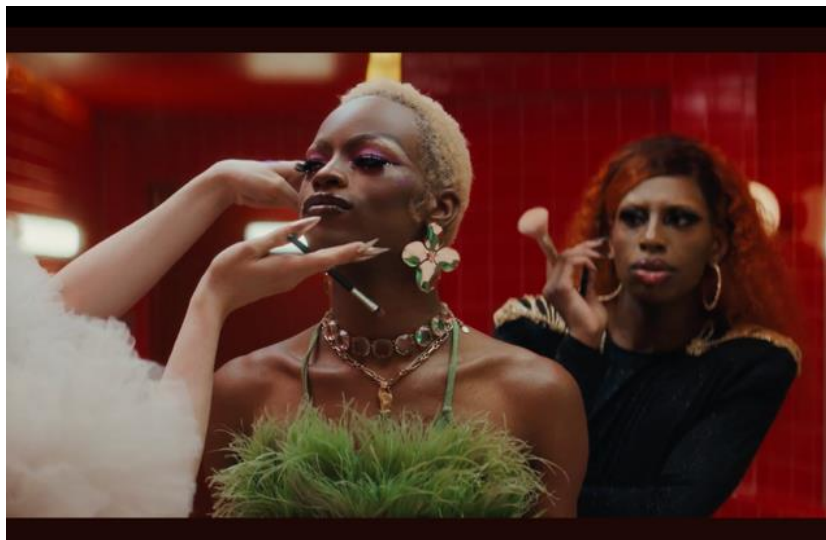


Figure 51. *Drag performers in the restroom.* Source:
<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

In Figure 52, the central participant remains the focal point of the composition, as the surrounding performers direct their attention towards them. Although no action process dominates the frame, the smiling expressions and bodily orientations of the two participants on either side create powerful reactional processes. Their gazes converge on the central figure, visually positioning her as the Phenomenon of admiration and validation. In this frame, the individual applying makeup in Figure 51 is entirely visible and she is equally characterised by drag symbols as the other two participants, with a voluminous blonde hairstyle, dramatic makeup and a white tulle garment (Mann, 2011). These drag beauty elements are elevated and celebrated within the frame.



Figure 52. *Drag performers look into the mirror.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The medium social distance allows viewers to observe all the three individuals, while the combination of offer and demand gazes creates a dynamic relationship with the audience. The two participants on the sides remain absorbed within the group, inviting contemplation, whereas the central participant establishes a more direct connection with viewers. The frontal angle further encourages the audience to interact with the participant, while the eye-level perspective continues to position the participants as equal to the viewer.

The final participant of this campaign is introduced standing alone in the red tiled restroom (Figure 53). Unlike the majority of the previous frames, which introduce the participants directly in the restroom, the final participant is first presented through a corridor view. The participant occupies the centre of the composition and is framed by the converging corridor walls, foregrounding the intense red colour palette established throughout the campaign associated with confidence and visibility (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002).



Figure 53. *Woman stands in the restroom.* Source: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>

A subsequent close-up focuses on the participant's face as she looks towards the mirror, producing a reactional process (Figure 54). The oblique angle and the indirect gaze positions viewers as observers of a private moment of self-assessment, while the close social distance both encourages identification with the participant and foregrounds the details of her skin texture. The sharp focus and lighting confer a high degree of naturalistic modality to the image, so that the participant remains tied to the real world (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020).

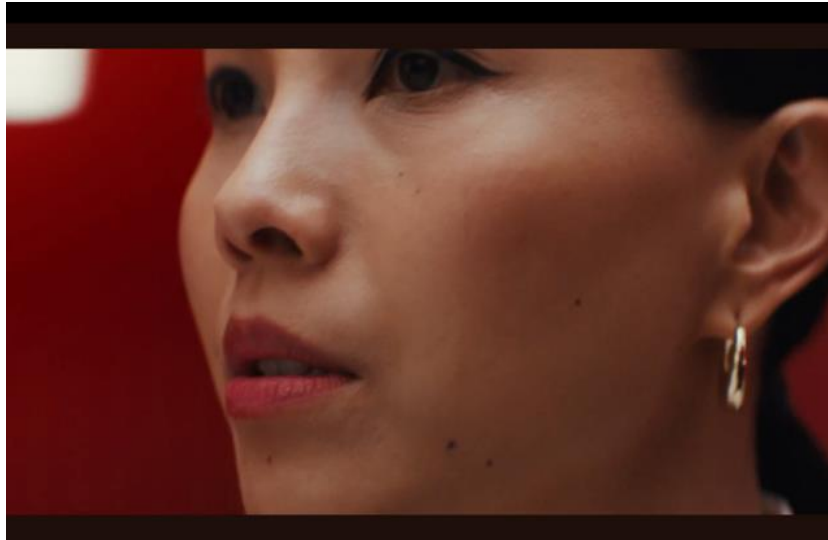


Figure 54. *Close-up of the participant.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

The next frames focus on the application of lipstick. Figure 55 follows a close-up showing the participant's hand holding a red lipstick and applying colour to her lips. By matching the colour of the lipstick to the surrounding red environment, the image visually links the participant to the space itself, so that she appears to be incorporating the confidence and visibility symbolised by the environment into her own appearance.



Figure 55. *Woman applies lipstick.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

In Figure 55, the participant continues holding the lipstick while looking directly forward. The reactional process produces a demand image that draws the viewers' attention and encourages them to interact with the participant. The frontal angle and the close social distance further reinforce the intimacy of the image.

The final frame represents the participant after the act of self-styling has been completed (Figure 56). Her gentle smile produces a reactional process that communicates satisfaction and self-confidence. The stark contrast between the white shirt and the deep red tiled background further enhances her visibility. The direct gaze produces a demand image, which invites viewers to empathise with her emotions. Her confidence constructs beauty not as a process of correction and transformation but as a means of affirming and expressing an already valid sense of self.



Figure 56. *Woman smiles at the mirror.* Source:

<<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=I7ycAjOqwAQ>>

4.3.2 Linguistic Analysis of “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2024 Campaign

Compared to the previous two campaigns, the third video relies on a much more minimal use of linguistic resources. The only written language that appears on screen is the Sephora logo at the beginning and the slogan “We Belong to Something Beautiful” at the end, whose meaning has been extensively described in Section 4.1.1.

The auditory dimension plays a particularly important role in this campaign because it is the primary carrier of meaning in the absence of spoken dialogue. The soundtrack consists of the song “A Real Hero” by College & Electric Youth, accompanied by occasional sounds of laughter that emerge throughout the video. The track is characterised by its synthesiser-driven arrangement, drawing on retro electronic aesthetics. The steady rhythmic foundation creates a sense of movement and continuity, supporting the dynamic sequence of participants applying makeup, interacting with friends, dancing and celebrating together. The lyrics is composed of a repetitive refrain:

(1) Real human being and a real hero

The adjective ‘real’ is the key lexical item and its repetition foregrounds authenticity and legitimacy. The expression ‘real human being’ validates the participants’ identities by emphasising their humanity before any social category, aesthetic style or gender identity. This is especially relevant given the campaign’s inclusion of drag performers, non-binary individuals, older women and participants whose appearances challenge conventional beauty norms. The phrase ‘real hero’ further elevates this validation. Heroes are often associated with courage and resilience and the repeated designation of participants as ‘real heroes’ can be interpreted as a celebration of self-expression as a courageous act. The song suggests that embracing one’s identity and existing visibly within society are themselves acts worthy of recognition.

In the context of beauty advertisement, the adjective ‘real’ also contrasts with historical beauty advertising discourses centred on artificiality, perfection and unattainable ideals. Here, authenticity becomes the central value.

The occasional sounds of laughter enrich the auditory landscape and conveys a sense of genuine social interaction. It introduces spontaneity and warmth to the soundtrack and reinforces the relationships presented visually. Viewers do not only witness participants applying cosmetics, but people enjoying each other’s company, sharing moments of connection and expressing themselves freely.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Makeup has historically been considered as a means of enhancing appearance and enabling consumers to achieve a beauty ideal prescribed by society (Tehseem and Kalsoom, 2015). However, the findings of this study suggest a different conceptualisation. Across the three Sephora campaigns, cosmetics seem to be presented as tools through which individuals actively construct and communicate their identities and are repeatedly associated with self-expression and creativity. This representation is consistent with West and Zimmerman's (1987) and Butler's (1990) conceptualisations of gender, according to which gender is not an innate characteristic, but it is continuously constructed through repeated behaviours and performances. Sephora's campaigns appear to represent the act of makeup application as one of these repeated performative practices.

The clearest illustration of Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity is provided through the representation of drag performers across the campaigns. Butler (1990) has identified drag as a practice that exposes the constructed nature of gender by demonstrating that the imitation of one gender reveals that all gender is an imitation without an origin. Sephora's campaigns appear to draw from this argument by visually featuring drag performers in two out of the three campaigns analysed in this study. The elaborate makeup, wigs, jewellery and clothing can be interpreted as having a double function. They are Symbolic Attributes through which femininity is consciously created and performed, but they may also function as symbols that celebrate creativity and self-expression.

The campaigns seem to consistently redefine cosmetics as creative tools through which identity is expressed. As Peñaloza (1994) argues, products allow individuals to communicate symbolic meanings about themselves and actively participate in the construction of identity. Sephora's campaigns appear to frame cosmetics in a way that strongly supports the scholar's argument. In the "SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms" campaign, makeup is constantly associated with creativity by creating visual similitudes between cosmetics and artistry. In the scenes showcasing the relationship between Catherine Tammaro and her mentee, the act of applying makeup is directly

associated with artistry through the shared use of the brush to perform the action. By equating artistic production and cosmetic application, the campaign seems to frame beauty practices as creative acts through which individuals express themselves.

Across the three campaigns, Sephora consequently appears to redefine cosmetics not as products that correct appearance, but as performative and creative resources through which individuals construct, negotiate and communicate their identities. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that although cosmetics remain present throughout the campaigns, they rarely are the primary focus of the narrative. Beauty products are not represented as objects of consumption, but they appear to be embedded within the participants' personal stories and identity performances, potentially shifting the focus from the product itself towards the individual using it. This interpretation is reinforced by the recurring presence of mirrors, which appear throughout the campaigns as instruments through which participants negotiate and affirm their identities. Mirrors can therefore be interpreted as spaces of self-recognition before the participants present themselves to others.

5.1 Visual and linguistic construction of binary gender representations

Across the three campaigns, Sephora appears to construct binary gender through a combination of visual and linguistic elements that both draw from and challenge conventional representations of women and men in beauty advertising identified in previous research.

In contrast to the differences in colour palettes and shapes identified by previous studies on gendered advertising (Cheong and Kaur, 2015; Lieven et al., 2015; Islentyeva, 2024; Purba et al., 2025), Sephora does not purely rely on pastel pinks and whites when representing feminine subjects, neither on darker colours when representing masculine ones. Pink as a visual marker of femininity only appears in selected scenes, for example in the colour of the flower the teenager has on their school uniform (Figure 4 Section 4.1.1) or in the colour of Hunter Schafer's top (Figure 9 Section 4.1.1). Both scenes are part of the first campaign among those analysed, which focused on transgender and non-binary visibility. The use of the colour pink to signify femininity can thus be interpreted as a conscious choice to represent the conflict between the binary genders in the case of the teenager and to affirm Hunter's gender

identity. A similar choice appears to have been adopted in the representation of a feminine-presenting participant in the same campaign, who appears enclosed in a circular mirror (Figure 7 Section 4.1.1), a shape typically linked to feminine attributes such as sensuality and emotion (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2020), which may visually support their process of gender affirmation. Dark colours are linked to both masculine and feminine participants in the first campaign, as well as to genderfluid participants in the third campaign, which does not appear to support any association with masculinity.

All three campaigns privilege earthy colours or saturated reds and purples. Earthy colours enriched with textures are used to provide a realistic coding orientation (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002), which keeps the participants grounded in reality and enhance the authenticity of their narratives. In contrast, saturated reds and purples are linked throughout the campaigns to a more sensory orientation (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002), potentially highlighting the emotional states of the participants. Red is especially prominent in the “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2024 campaign, as it is the main colour of the environment where the actions take place and may be linked to feelings of energy and confidence. Particularly significant is the action performed by the last participant in the campaign, who applies a lipstick of the same colour as her surroundings, visually incorporating its emotional meanings (Figure 56 Section 4.3.1). These findings suggest that femininity is not constructed through visual delicacy, nor is masculinity constructed through visual strength, but they are both constructed through the same colour palettes and the same emotional states.

The campaigns also appear to depart from stereotypical representations of women and men identified in previous research. Goffman (1976) and Del Saz-Rubio (2018) have discussed the passive position of women in advertisements characterised by psychological disengagement, body fragmentation and submissive body postures and gestures. None of these tendencies emerged across the analysed campaigns. Female and feminine-presenting participants are rarely fragmented and often engage with the audience through direct gazes which seem to communicate confidence rather than seduction. Women and feminine-presenting participants are consistently represented as active subjects through dynamic movement, self-styling or artistic production. The first and third campaign represent multiple feminine participants

dancing or engaged in acts of self-styling, presenting them as agents of their own identities rather than passive objects of visual consumption. Even though moments of cosmetic application could be linked to what Goffman (1976) describes as Feminine Touch, feminine participants are never shown gently caressing products or their own bodies. They actively apply cosmetics, simultaneously occupying the roles of Actor and Goal of the transactional action. Beauty practices are therefore interpreted in this analysis as purposeful acts of identity construction rather than performances of delicacy or submission. Moreover, in the “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” campaign, Catherine Tammaro is often represented while making art, further stressing the representation of femininity as active and empowered.

The active role of femininity is further supported by camera angles. Women and feminine-presenting participants are majorly shown through eye-level angles, positioning them as equals to the viewers. Occasionally, they are also represented through low-level angles, so that the subjects appear empowered.

An equally significant finding concerns the diversity of femininities represented throughout the campaigns. Previous studies noted that mainstream beauty advertising frequently privileges youthful, able-bodied and conventionally attractive women while marginalising older bodies and other forms of diversity (Sánchez-Labelle Martín, 2024; Iyer and Dani, 2025). In contrast the findings suggest that Sephora presents femininity as inherently plural within the analysed campaigns. This is particularly evident in the representation of older women, featured in both the second and the third campaign. Signs of ageing such as white or grey hair and wrinkles remain visible on Catherine Tammaro (Figure 23 Section 4.2.1) and Talli Osborne’s mother (Figure 32 Section 4.2.1), as well as on the group of older women featured in the third campaign (Figure 44 Section 4.3.1). This is made possible through the high degree of naturalistic modality, whose sharp focus and natural lighting further emphasises body textures. Although the women are represented within a beauty advertisement, their narratives never revolve around themes of rejuvenation or concealment of age signs. Instead, beauty practices are represented as forms of ongoing self-expression. Talli Osborne’s mother and one of the older women in the third campaign are both shown styling themselves in front of a mirror, without attempting to conceal their silver hair or aging skin. Moreover, Catherine Tammaro and Talli Osborne’s mother are characterised

through narratives centred on wisdom and heritage, expanding the representation of femininity beyond physical appearance alone. Within the analysed dataset, the realistic representation of older women can therefore be interpreted as challenging the association between femininity and youthfulness, and consequently to the expectations of the male gaze. Aging is not presented as a condition that cosmetics should correct, but older women are positioned as visible and confident subjects.

Compared to the extensive representation of femininity, masculinity occupies a less central position across the three campaigns. Nonetheless, Sephora appears to challenge conventional visual and linguistic codes traditionally associated with masculinity in beauty advertising.

Masculine-presenting individuals appear in the first and in the third campaign, while they are completely excluded in the Mother's Day campaign. In the "We Belong to Something Beautiful" 2019 campaign, the two masculine-presenting participants are both represented with their upper body exposed. This finding supports Kenalemang-Palm (2023) argument that in men's beauty advertisements male bodies are frequently displayed, often to communicate physical strength and virility. Sephora, however, seems to assign different meanings to bodily exposure. The blond participant is shown removing their shirt not to emphasise muscularity or sexual attractiveness, but to give visibility to their top surgery scars (Figure 11 Section 4.1.1), foregrounding the theme of gender affirmation. Similarly, the dancer's exposed upper body appears to function primarily to emphasise the movements through which they express their identity (Figure 19 Section 4.1.1). This is also the only physical activity performed by masculine-presenting individuals within the three campaigns. While previous research has associated masculine representation with physical activity and strength (Purba et al., 2025), such representations are notably absent from the analysed campaigns. No masculine participant is represented through sport, physical labour or traditionally masculine occupations. Instead, the dancer's bodily movement communicates creativity, emotion and personal expression, which may suggest that masculinity can be performed through artistic practices as well as physical ones.

The interpersonal meanings of the images further distinguish Sephora's representations from traditional masculine advertising. Masculine-presenting participants rarely establish direct eye contact with viewers. The dancer and the blond

participant featured in the first campaign, as well as the masculine individuals appearing in the first group of friends in the third campaign (Figure 38 Section 4.1.1) are predominantly represented through offer images, inviting viewers to observe rather than engage with them. In doing so, these representations avoid communicating typically masculine attributes such as dominance or authority, positioning masculine individuals as one expression of gender diversity rather than the normative standard against which all other identities are defined.

Nevertheless, the findings about masculinity representation also reveal a limitation in Sephora's approach to gender inclusivity. Although the campaigns include some masculine-presenting participants, the representation of masculinity is almost exclusively associated with queer identities, such as transgender men or gender non-conforming individuals. Canonically cisgender men are largely absent from the dataset. This selective representation may raise questions about the extent to which Sephora challenges gender norms across the full spectrum of masculinities. While the campaigns appear to decentre hegemonic masculinity, they do not offer alternative representations of cisgender masculinity that engages with beauty practices without relying on explicitly queer identities. This absence is particularly noteworthy considering that cosmetic advertising in several East Asian countries has increasingly normalised the presence of men engaging in beauty practices without necessarily questioning their gender identity (Jairath and Daima, 2021; O, 2023). Sephora's campaigns appear to redefine men's beauty primarily through queer masculinities, while leaving largely unexplored the possibility of representing more diverse forms of non-hegemonic cisgender masculinity. Although the campaigns significantly broaden the representation of gender diversity, the dataset analysed also suggests that the visual negotiation of masculinity within beauty advertising remains more limited than that of femininity.

The linguistic dimension seems to complement the visual representations by similarly redefining both femininity and masculinity beyond the conventions of traditional beauty advertising. Previous studies have shown that advertising targeted at women frequently relies on lexical fields centred on correction, self-improvement, romance or desirability (Tehseem and Kalsoom, 2015; Radzi and Musa, 2017), while advertisements aimed at men tend to foreground science, expertise and physical

activity (Cheong and Kaur, 2015). Neither of these patterns was found within the analysed dataset. Rather than lacking or requiring improvement, feminine identity appears to be presented as already valid, while cosmetics are simply tools of expressing the self. In addition, the semantic field of expertise has been found associated to women. In the “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” campaign, motherhood and womanhood are linguistically constructed through notions of guidance, inspiration, teaching and competence, attributing to femininity qualities that have traditionally been associated with masculinity. This redefinition is particularly important because it extends the concept of motherhood beyond biological relationships, presenting it as a relational and social practice grounded in competence and care rather than reproduction. This finding can be interpreted as supporting Butler’s (1990) and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) conceptualisation of gender as something enacted through repeated social practices rather than determined by biology. Moreover, the linguistic redefinition is reinforced visually in the campaign’s final triptych, where all three mothers are organised within the same classificational structure. The visual and linguistic modes suggest that there is no single valid model of motherhood and that it is not a biologically determined characteristic of feminine identity.

Finally, rather than opposing masculinity to femininity and vice versa, Sephora appears to employ linguistic resources traditionally associated with both gender categories and to expand the binary framework through a language centred on authenticity and emotional expression regardless of gender. Values such as emotional openness, self-reflection and interpersonal connection, which also appear in the soundtracks of the campaigns, are detached from femininity alone and are redefined as universal human qualities. Moreover, these values are reframed as sources of strength, courage and influence, rather than signs of vulnerability. This finding supports Kumari et al.’s (2026) argument that contemporary advertising challenges the traditional association between femininity and emotional intelligence, suggesting that these values can be characteristic of every human being regardless of gender.

The dataset analysed suggests that Sephora’s visual and linguistic strategies challenge normative ideals of femininity and masculinity, as well as the rigid boundaries between the two categories. The findings demonstrate that gender identity

is no longer constructed through conformity to prescribed masculine and feminine attributes but through authenticity and self-expression.

5.2 Visual and linguistic construction of non-binary gender representations

A particularly significant aspect of Sephora's approach to gender inclusivity lies in its recognition and validation of queer identities. This is confirmed by the present multimodal analysis, which demonstrates that gender non-conforming participants are not presented as marginal or symbolic figures, but they consistently occupy central narrative roles across all three campaigns.

Gender non-conforming individuals are assigned strong visual prominence throughout the three campaigns, supporting Grad and Fusea's (2024) argument that contemporary inclusive advertising tends to position queer individuals in central roles more consistently than it did in the past. Transgender women such as Aariana Rose Philip, Fatima Jamal and Hunter Schafer occupy highly salient positions within the composition through central placement, lighting and framing. In particular, Aariana Rose Philip opens the first campaign, immediately establishing diversity as the central principle of the narrative. All the remaining transgender and non-binary individuals represented in the same campaign occupy prominent positions, as do the participant removing their wig in the third campaign and the drag queens featured in the second and third campaign.

The interpersonal dimension of the images further reinforces this visual prominence and the equal status assigned to gender non-conforming individuals. Across the three campaigns, queer participants are consistently represented through eye-level or low-level angles, which either present them as equals to viewers or as empowered subjects. Although most of these participants do not establish direct eye contact with the audience, they are frequently portrayed through frontal perspectives and a high degree of naturalistic modality. Rather than distancing them from viewers, these representational choices invite audiences to observe their lived experiences and recognise their identities as an ordinary and legitimate part of the social world.

Although previous studies suggest that non-binary or agender individuals are often represented through the absence of gendered markers, while genderfluid individuals are typically represented through the combination and juxtaposition of

masculine and feminine traits (Wiid et al., 2023), Sephora adopts a different strategy. Rather than eliminating gendered signs altogether or juxtaposing them in a highly contrasting manner, feminine and masculine visual markers are seamlessly blended within the same participant. This coexistence is particularly evident in the teenager featured in the first campaign, whose masculine school uniform blends with the pink flower on their pocket (Figure 4 Section 4.1.1). Similar combinations emerge in the representation of the dancer, whose muscular body is combined with the cyan and magenta body paint and lighting (Figure 19 Section 4.1.1), in the styling of the couple, whose appearance merges feminine and masculine visual codes (Figure 20 Section 4.1.1), and in the participant removing their wig and their friends in the third campaign, whose aesthetics resist binary categorisation (Figure 47, Section 4.3.1).

Clearly defined gender markers are most prominently associated with the representation of drag performers. Across the second and third campaign, drag queens are represented through visual elements traditionally linked to femininity, such as elaborate makeup, wigs, jewellery and glamorous clothing. These Symbolic Attributes reproduce the aesthetic conventions of drag culture while associating them with creativity and artistic expression. Although viewers are encouraged to admire these participants through their offer gazes, the campaigns avoid positioning them as objects of voyeuristic curiosity or spectacle. Instead, eye-level perspectives establish equality between participants and audience, while frontal angles reinforce the sense that drag performers belong within the viewers' social world. The representation of Xtacy Love, Priyanka and the drag performers in the third campaign therefore supports Butler's (1990) discussion of drag as exposing the performative nature of gender, while potentially contributing to the normalisation of drag identities within mainstream beauty discourse. Furthermore, although Nölke (2018) noted that the representation of drag queens tends to overshadow the visibility of transgender women, this pattern is not supported by the present analysis. In the dataset, drag performers and transgender women appear to receive a balanced degree of visibility.

Another important finding concerns the balance of gender identities represented throughout the campaigns. Previous studies have observed that certain identities such as bisexuals, transgender men and non-binary individuals tend to receive less visibility than other identities in LGBTQ+ advertising (Jetubhai, 2024; Grad and Fusea, 2025).

This tendency is only partially confirmed by the analysis of Sephora's campaigns. While the first campaign places non-binary visibility at the centre of its narrative, it has been noted that transgender women receive comparatively greater representation than transgender men across the dataset. The presence of publicly known transgender women such as Aariana Rose Philip, Hunter Schafer and Fatima Jamal and the absence of publicly known transgender men may contribute to limiting the visibility of the latter. Moreover, feminine-presenting individuals substantially outnumber masculine-presenting ones, and transgender women are consistently represented through conventionally feminine aesthetics. These findings partly support Nölke's (2018) observation that hierarchies of visibility persist even within LGBTQ+ representation, with feminine identities often receiving greater prominence than more genderfluid and agender expressions. At the same time, Sephora's emphasis on feminine presentations may also be interpreted as a strategy of gender affirmation, allowing transgender women to visually assert their identities.

Unlike earlier forms of LGBTQ+ advertising, which frequently relied on recognisable visual symbols or isolated references to queer identities (Puntoni, Vanhamme and Visscher, 2011; Grad and Fusea, 2025), Sephora places greater emphasis on personal storytelling. This may allow participants to emerge as multidimensional individuals whose gender identity represents only one aspect of a broader lived experience. Across the three campaigns, only one explicit queer symbol was identified: the rainbow lens flare accompanying the couple featured in the first campaign (Figure 22 Section 4.1.1).

This narrative strategy is particularly evident in the "We Belong to Something Beautiful" 2019 campaign. The teenager sequence, for example, depicts an intimate journey of self-discovery that begins in the private space of a school bathroom before culminating in confident public self-expression. This transformation is reinforced through the interaction of colour and music. Muted, desaturated tones and the restrained opening of the soundtrack accompany moments of introspection, while saturated colours and the song's more powerful rhythm appears to parallel the participant's growing confidence. A similar narrative trajectory characterises the remaining participants, whose stories move from solitary moments of reflection and introspection towards collective scenes of celebration and belonging.

Storytelling occupies a central role also in the “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” campaign, where emotional bonds between the participants are narrated both visually and linguistically. The campaign foregrounds shared experiences of care, mentorship and affection. The bonds are visually represented through reciprocal gazes, interactional processes and highly naturalistic environments, which stress the authenticity of the participants’ lived experiences.

Although storytelling is not as prominent in the “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2024 campaign, it nevertheless remains an important meaning-making strategy. Despite the action unfolding in the same limited space, the participants’ appearances and interactions implicitly communicate their personal stories. The participant removing their wig, for instance, is represented through a brief yet emotionally charged sequence in which the act of unveiling can be interpreted as a powerful affirmation of identity (Figure 46 Section 4.3.1). Similarly, the drag performers follow a narrative in which makeup gradually becomes associated with confidence and self-expression. The sequence initially presents viewers with the process of makeup application, positioning them as observers through oblique angles and offer gazes (Figure 51 Section 4.3.1). Once the process is complete, the drag performer reappears fully styled and establishes eye contact with the audience, inviting viewers to witness her transformation and to acknowledge and validate her identity (Figure 52 Section 4.3.1).

The linguistic dimension further strengthens the visual inclusive representation by explicitly legitimising gender diversity. The clearest example is the sequence of pronouns displayed at the beginning and the end of the “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2019 campaign. Both binary pronouns and non-binary pronouns appear in random order, also including neopronouns such as ‘ze’ and ‘xe’. Previous research has shown that commercial advertising rarely includes neopronouns (Zlámálová, 2024; Renström, 2025), but Sephora seems to extend linguistic recognition beyond dominant gender categories. Importantly, inclusivity is communicated not only through language but also through visual design. Each pronoun occupies the same central position within the frame and is presented through identical typography and size, creating a classificational structure that can be interpreted as visually constructing all forms of self-identification as equally valid. The sequence culminates in the collective pronoun

‘we’, shifting attention from individual identities towards a shared community without necessarily erasing difference. Unlike the exclusionary opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ frequently identified in advertising discourse (Tehseem and Kalsoom, 2015), Sephora employs the pronoun ‘we’ as an inclusive linguistic resource that incorporates rather than excludes diverse identities.

Inclusivity also permeates the campaigns’ slogans. The slogan from the two “We Belong to Something Beautiful” campaigns contains the indefinite pronoun ‘something’, which leaves the concept of beauty open to multiple identities and experiences. This strategy reflects one of the gender-neutralisation techniques identified by Monakhova et al. (2023), who argue that the use of indefinite pronouns enables advertisers to address a broad and diverse audience without assigning specific gender identities. The first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ appears once again to construct a sense of community, as discussed previously. When combined with the verb ‘belong’, it further reinforces the sense of inclusion. The notion of belonging and community emerges as one of Sephora’s distinctive and recurring inclusive strategies and therefore will be discussed separately in the following section. The slogan from the “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” campaign also contains the inclusive adjective ‘all’ to expand the category of motherhood beyond normative definitions, linguistically validating the diverse identities represented throughout the campaign.

The campaigns’ soundtracks further communicate inclusivity through their linguistic content. The song accompanying the first “We Belong to Something Beautiful” campaign is particularly interesting because its lyrics centre on the acceptance and affirmation of personal identity. Expressions such as ‘born to be’ can be interpreted as constructing identity as innate and legitimate and potentially challenges discourses questioning the authenticity of non-binary identities. The repeated declarative statements ‘this is me’ and ‘this is my life’ anchor identity in the present, affirming participants as already valid rather than as individuals striving towards an idealised version of themselves.

Lyrics also play a crucial role in the “We Belong to Something Beautiful” 2024 campaign, whose recurring refrain ‘real human being and a real hero’ reinforces the campaigns’ discourse of inclusivity. The lyrics foreground the participants’ shared humanity before any specific gender identity and validate authenticity and self-

expression as acts of courage through the designation ‘real hero’. The repeated use of the noun ‘human being’ also avoids reference to any particular gender, reflecting the gender-neutralisation strategies identified by Monakhova et al. (2023). Within the analysed dataset, participants are not categorised according to binary gender identities but presented first and foremost as human beings.

Sephora’s campaigns incorporate several inclusive linguistic strategies previously identified in the literature, including the use of indefinite pronouns and gender-neutral expressions (Monakhova et al., 2023), as well as the explicit inclusion of non-binary pronouns and neopronouns (Zlámlová, 2024; Renström, 2025). However, the analysis suggests that the campaigns move beyond the sole adaptation of established inclusive practices. Through the multimodal interaction of visual and linguistic resources, Sephora appears to develop a distinctive inclusive strategy in which diversity is framed through the concept of belonging.

5.3 Sephora's inclusivity strategy: constructing a sense of belonging

Across the three campaigns, the recurring notion of belonging appears as the central organising principle of Sephora’s campaigns. Diversity is not treated merely as a marketing feature or a collection of diverse individual identities, but appears to be represented as inclusion and participation in a community in which different gender identities coexist without hierarchy or exclusion. The concept of ‘belonging’ has therefore emerged as the inclusive strategy that unifies the visual and linguistic resources analysed throughout this study.

This strategy is first realised through the visual organisation of the campaigns. Participants who differ in terms of gender identity, age, ethnicity, disability and cultural background repeatedly occupy equally prominent positions. Through the recurrent use of classificational structures, the participants are organised into shared categories that position them as socially equal and united despite their differences. The representation of racial and generational diversity is also comparatively balanced across women, men and gender non-conforming individuals. Sephora’s campaigns seem to uphold recent trends towards the inclusion of diverse ranges of body types and ages within beauty advertising (Sánchez-Labelle Martin et al., 2024; Iyer and Dani, 2025), extending this inclusivity across all gender identities represented in the

campaigns. This aspect contradicts Nölke's (2018) observation that queer representation often remains limited in terms of racial diversity and age.

Both the second and third campaign are particularly representative of this strategy. In the "SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms" campaign, the three mothers are brought together into a single classificational structure despite their different cultural, familial and generational backgrounds (Figure 35 Section 4.2.1). The Sephora logo, positioned across the centre of the triptych, functions as a visual bridge connecting the three portraits to the brand, framing it as the space within these diverse experiences coexist. The "We Belong to Something Beautiful" 2024 campaign similarly brings together participants with different identities within the same environment, uniting them through the shared practice of applying makeup.

Belonging is further constructed through the narrative dimension. Across the three campaigns, participants are rarely represented alone. Instead, they are repeatedly shown interacting through reciprocal gazes, mutual action processes and transactional action processes in which participants physically and emotionally engage with one another. Mutual action processes are visually communicated through embraces, kisses, shared laughter, dancing, conversations and sharing of meals, while transactional vectors depict participants caring for one another by applying makeup and assisting each other. These interactional processes transform cosmetic application from a private act of beautification into a collective practice through which relationships are established and maintained.

Interaction is particularly visible in the "We Belong to Something Beautiful" 2024 campaign, where almost every sequence represents beauty as a shared social experience. For example, the ballerinas are shown helping one another prepare before the performance (Figure 49 Section 4.3.1) and the drag queens are shown applying one another's makeup (Figure 51 Section 4.3.1). Other scenes show participants applying makeup while being together, sometimes using cosmetic products at the same time. These scenes can be interpreted as constructing beauty as a communal activity that strengthens interpersonal bonds and reinforces a shared sense of identity.

In contrast with traditional beauty advertising, where positive emotions are frequently associated with cosmetic consumption, Sephora links joy and laughter with lived experience. Sharma (2022) argued that smiles in beauty advertising frequently

function as indicators of satisfaction following product use. This argument is not supported by the present analysis, as across the three campaigns happiness is always tied to moments of self-expression and interpersonal connection. In the first campaign, the teenager smiles while dancing freely after negotiating their identity (Figure 4 Section 4.1.1), Hunter Schafer and the blond participant smile together in moments of mutual affection (Figure 12 Section 4.1.1), Kate Bornstein's joyful expressions emerge from their lived experience (Figure 17 Section 4.1.1), and the couple's happiness is generated by simply being together (Figure 21 Section 4.1.1). In the same way, participants in the second campaign are shown smiling while interacting with each other and sharing domestic moments of everyday life, such as crafting or sharing a meal. Finally, almost every participant in the third campaign is presented sharing moments of joy within a group. For example, the first group of friends laughs while taking pictures (Figure 38 Section 4.3.1), which are permanent memories of their moments together, the older women uproariously laugh together (Figure 44 Section 4.3.1), the Black and the Asian girls smile softly after recognising one other and the participant removing their wig smiles with their friends after being able to express themselves freely and being supported (Figure 47 Section 4.3.1). Importantly, in the third campaign, participants first reveal or affirm their identities through makeup before being embraced by their friends and community. The analysed dataset suggests that belonging is not achieved by adapting to external standards of beauty and gender but by expressing oneself, being recognised, validated and celebrated within a community. In each case, cosmetics remain present but are somewhat decentred from the emotional meaning. Makeup is not constructed as the participants' source of happiness but as a medium through which they can express themselves and connect with others. Joy therefore emerges from authenticity and belonging, supporting Sephora's repositioning of beauty to a collective experience of human connection.

The linguistic dimension makes the notions of community and belonging explicit. The clearest example is provided by the slogan "We Belong to Something Beautiful". The first-person plural pronoun 'we' constructs a collective identity that is connected to the verb 'belong', implying that inclusion is the defining characteristic of the community being addressed. As previously discussed, the collective 'we' incorporates multiple gender identities and forms of self-expression, so that belonging

ca be interpreted as an unconditional form of inclusion grounded in recognition and validation of diversity. The multimodal interaction between the slogan and the images further supports this interpretation. In the final frame of the third campaign, the slogan “We Belong to Something Beautiful” appears over an image of the participants dancing together (Figure 40 Section 4.3.1), visually embodying the linguistic message through the participants’ shared celebration and interaction.

The concept of belonging is further developed through the participants’ spoken narratives and campaigns’ soundtracks. In the “SEPHORA Celebrates All Moms” campaign, the references to ‘chosen family’ redefine kinship as a social and emotional relationship rather than one determined by biological ties. Care, guidance and support, traditionally associated with biological families, are presented as equally meaningful when they emerge from relationships built through shared experiences and mutual recognition. Belonging is therefore constructed through communities in which individuals find acceptance, mentorship and affirmation of their identities.

This interpretation is further supported by the lyrics of “This is my life”, featured in the first campaign. The song initially expresses feelings of sorrow and isolation derived from solitude, before shifting towards a more hopeful perspective when the speaker begins to ‘look around and see’, when they open themselves to the world. The lyrics suggest that authenticity is strengthened through recognition by others and participation in a wider community, supporting the campaigns’ general discourse of belonging.

Sephora’s inclusivity strategies appear to extend beyond representational diversity alone. The campaigns do not merely increase the visibility of marginalised identities but seem to construct a multimodal discourse in which difference itself becomes the foundation of community. Beauty is not defined by conformity to a single norm but by the possibility for every individual to belong without relinquishing their own identity. Belonging therefore emerges as the core value through which Sephora redefines both beauty and inclusivity within the analysed campaigns.

CONCLUSIONS

The present thesis has set out to examine how gender inclusivity is constructed in beauty advertising through a multimodal analysis of three campaign videos published by Sephora between 2019 and 2025. Sephora has established itself as an inclusive beauty brand through both its actions and public claims and further reinforced its commitment in 2024 when the brand changed its official slogan to “We Belong to Something Beautiful” (Sephora, n.d.; PR Newswire, 2024). The present analysis demonstrates that the brand’s commitment to inclusivity is also reflected in its advertising campaigns and that it largely involves the gender dimension. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2020) framework, the analysis considered the interaction of visual structures, linguistic choices and auditory elements in the construction of gender inclusivity.

The findings demonstrate that Sephora’s construction of gender inclusivity is characterised primarily by the challenging of established gender representations. With regard to binary gender, the campaigns present both women and men in ways that depart from conventionally established stereotypes. Women are represented as diverse in terms of age, ethnic and cultural background and physical characteristics. By representing femininity as diverse and plural, Sephora does not reduce feminine beauty to a single physical or social ideal. Men, although represented exclusively through queer masculinities, are similarly detached from conventional associations with strength, dominance and physical activity and are instead portrayed as emotionally open and caring. These representations are accompanied by a non-stereotypical use of colours, associating them to sensory or emotional states, rather than to specific gender identities. Linguistically, both women and men are associated with semantic fields traditionally linked to the opposite gender. This strategy is consistent with prior studies on the construction of linguistic inclusivity (Monakhova et al., 2023; Dendo and Hikmah, 2025), demonstrating that Sephora utilises both visual and linguistic resources to challenge existing binary gender stereotypes. The results of the analysis therefore have shown that femininity and masculinity are presented as diverse rather than fixed categories. However, non-hegemonic forms of cisgender masculinity remain largely unexplored.

The study has also identified that Sephora's challenge to established gender categories extends to the prominent representation of non-binary gender identities. The inclusion of non-binary and transgender individuals, as well as drag performers, contributes to the visibility and normalisation of diverse gender identities and expressions. The presence of inclusive language strategies such as non-binary pronouns and indefinite nouns further highlights Sephora's commitment to the representation queer identities. Unlike forms of LGBTQ+ advertising that have frequently relied on subtle symbols and isolated references (Puntoni, Vanhamme and Visscher, 2011), Sephora's campaigns place the focus on personal storytelling. The narratives and linguistic resources connected to non-binary gender identities construct those individuals primarily as human beings, rather than reducing them to their gender identities. Nevertheless, the analysis also identified limitations within Sephora's approach to non-binary gender inclusivity. While transgender women receive substantial visibility, transgender men are comparatively absent and feminine-presenting individuals outnumber masculine-presenting ones. Although Sephora challenges several gender norms, its representation of gender diversity is not entirely symmetrical.

One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that Sephora's inclusivity strategies extend to the construction of a broader discourse of belonging. Gender diversity is represented as participation in a community in which different gender identities can coexist without hierarchy or exclusion. Difference itself becomes the basis of the community, while beauty is reframed from conformity to a single ideal or standard to the possibility of belonging while embracing one's own identity. Inclusivity is therefore constructed not simply through who is represented, but through the ways in which individuals are positioned in relation to themselves and to others.

Finally, the analysis has found that makeup and beauty practices themselves are detached from an exclusively female identity. Cosmetics are in fact mainly presented as forms of self-expression that can be appropriated by individuals with different gender identities. This finding is further stressed by the association of positive emotions with moments of self-expression and interpersonal connection rather than product use. This recontextualisation of beauty practices is particularly significant in an industry shaped by gendered conceptualisations of appearance, as it extends the

meanings attached to makeup while retaining its potential to participate in the construction and communication of identity.

The findings reported shed new light on the construction of gender inclusivity in beauty advertising. This thesis contributes to the existing literature on gender representation by providing a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between visual and linguistic elements. Through its multimodal methodological framework, the study addresses a gap identified in the literature concerning the unexplored application of inclusive linguistic strategies within beauty advertising and expands the limited literature on visual representation of non-binary identities. The findings demonstrate the value of a multimodal approach to the study of inclusivity, showing that visual, linguistic and auditory resources interact to produce meanings that may remain invisible when individual modes are examined in isolation. The insights gained from this study may be of assistance to further research on the construction of inclusivity in the beauty advertising sector.

There are two potential limitations concerning the results of the present thesis. The first limitation concerns the size and composition of the dataset. The dataset was restricted according to the specific selection criteria established for the study and therefore represents only a collection of Sephora's advertising material. Campaigns focusing primarily on other forms of diversity but only partially displaying gender diversity were not considered. Similarly, multimodal content published on other social media platforms such as Instagram Reels and TikToks was excluded, despite the possibility that such content may provide further examples on the construction of gender inclusivity. The restricted number of the campaigns analysed has allowed for a detailed examination and has provided sufficient material to investigate how Sephora constructs gender inclusivity. However, the small size of the dataset does not allow the findings to be generalised to all of Sephora's advertising practices.

A second limitation lies in the exclusive focus on Sephora. Concentrating on a single beauty retailer prevents direct comparison with other beauty brands and limits the extent to which the findings can be considered representative of the beauty advertising sector more broadly.

These limitations indicate several possible directions for future research. Since the present thesis focused on Sephora's advertisements within a specific period, the

study could be expanded through a diachronic analysis investigating whether the brand's commitment to gender inclusivity emerges also in its earlier advertisements and how its representational strategies have evolved over time. Future studies could also extend the analysis to other multimodal content published on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, thus examining product-focused and influencer-driven content that characterises contemporary social media advertising.

More research examining and comparing other beauty brands is also needed to establish whether similar strategies for constructing gender inclusivity are adopted across the sector. Comparative studies across different countries and regions could provide further insight into the extent to which representations of gender inclusivity vary according to different social and cultural contexts. In particular, comparisons between Western and Eastern beauty markets would be a useful way to explore different approaches to gender and cosmetics, especially in relation to the limited representation of cisgender masculinity identified in the present study. This could be particularly relevant in East Asian beauty markets, where male engagements with cosmetics have become increasingly normalised without necessarily being associated with queer identities. Comparative studies could also be conducted between brands that explicitly identify as 'genderless' and more conservative brands to provide a better understanding of how inclusivity is constructed and communicated as part of brand identity. Finally, further research could focus more specifically on other dimensions of inclusivity, such as the representation of disability, age or race, and explore the intersectionality of those dimensions.

The results of the multimodal analysis displayed in the present study demonstrates that Sephora's advertising campaigns efficiently construct gender inclusivity through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) framework has revealed multiple strategies in which both binary and non-binary gender identities are visually represented in a non-stereotypical and inclusive way. At the same time, the linguistic and auditory analysis has provided insights into how inclusivity can be extended beyond visual representation alone.

In conclusion, Sephora's advertising demonstrates how contemporary beauty advertising can participate in the ongoing transformation of gender representation through inclusive visual and linguistic strategies. By adopting and further developing

such strategies, beauty advertisements can contribute to increasingly inclusive representations of gender and to shaping a society where diversity is normalised instead of marginalised. At the same time, the limitations identified throughout the analysis demonstrate that inclusivity remains an ongoing and incomplete process rather than a fixed achievement. The continued examination and development of inclusive strategies can therefore contribute to promoting a vision of beauty in which individuals are encouraged to discover their own true beauty without being constrained by gender norms.

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