

# Empowerment without Equality? Corporate Self-Esteem Campaigns and the Cultural Politics of Opportunity Structures

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Publication Date: 2026/03/25

**Abstract:** This study examines how audiences interpret corporate-led empowerment initiatives within contemporary digital culture. Drawing on capability theory, opportunity structure analysis, cultural sociology, and scholarship on neoliberal governance, this study analyzes 175 extended written responses to Dove's Self-Esteem initiative. Findings reveal that empowerment is framed as morally necessary yet structural contingent. Although participants praise symbolic inclusion and emotional resonance, they consistently invoke institutional mediators—parents, schools, and communities—as prerequisites for impact. Structural inequality thus emerges not as explicit denunciation but as background architecture shaping empowerment's reach. A subset of respondents further critiques the campaign for individualizing systemic harms, reflecting tensions between recognition and redistribution. The study reconceptualizes corporate empowerment as a form of market-mediated development embedded in unequal cultural and institutional fields.

**Keywords:** *Opportunity Structures; Cultural Sociology; Symbolic Recognition; Structural Inequality; Youth Self-Esteem.*

**How to Cite:** Francis Kim (2026) Empowerment without Equality? Corporate Self-Esteem Campaigns and the Cultural Politics of Opportunity Structures. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(3), 2085-2094. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26mar716>

## I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary capitalism, corporations increasingly position themselves not only as producers of goods but also as moral agents intervening in domains historically governed by public institutions. Youth well-being, body image, and psychological resilience have become sites of corporate engagement, signaling a broader transformation in how social problems are framed and governed. Rather than remaining confined to commercial exchange, firms now claim authority in shaping subjectivities, norms, and developmental trajectories through corporate social responsibility initiatives, brand activism, and empowerment-oriented campaigns (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of governance in which private actors assume quasi-public roles in the regulation of culture and identity within neoliberal societies (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1990).

Digital media environments intensify these dynamics. Social media platforms expose adolescents and young adults to idealized and often unattainable beauty standards, amplifying processes of social comparison linked to body dissatisfaction and diminished self-esteem (Ando et al., 2021; Derenne & Beresin, 2018; Fioravanti et al., 2022; Seekis & Barker, 2022).

Sociological research on digital culture further suggests that platform-mediated visibility intensifies normative pressures around self-presentation and bodily appearance (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Within these highly visual environments, individuals are encouraged to engage in continuous self-evaluation and identity management through images, metrics, and algorithmically curated content (Abidin, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

In response, corporations increasingly introduce empowerment initiatives aimed at mitigating these harms. Among the most prominent is Dove's Self-Esteem initiative, which frames itself not as product advertising but as a sustained intervention into harmful beauty norms. Through educational toolkits, workshops, and digital storytelling, the campaign seeks to cultivate resilience, confidence, and positive self-recognition among youth. Such initiatives reflect what scholars have described as the growing entanglement of consumer culture and social activism, where corporations mobilize empowerment discourse to address cultural anxieties surrounding identity and inequality (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Existing scholarship has primarily evaluated these initiatives through marketing and branding frameworks, emphasizing brand authenticity, consumer engagement, and integrated marketing communication effectiveness (Gómez

et al., 2019; Hainneville et al., 2023; Laurie & Mortimer, 2019). While valuable, these perspectives often treat empowerment as a strategic asset or reputational mechanism. A sociological approach shifts the analytic focus from brand outcomes to governance implications. Rather than asking whether corporate empowerment “works,” this study asks how empowerment is socially constructed, mediated, and contested within unequal cultural and institutional fields.

Drawing on capability theory (Sen, 1999), opportunity structure analysis (Blau, 1977; Tilly, 1998), cultural recognition scholarship (Fraser, 2020), and critiques of neoliberal responsabilization (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1990), this study conceptualizes corporate empowerment as a form of market-mediated development. Empowerment initiatives may expand psychological resources, yet their realization depends on institutional infrastructures and structural conditions that remain unevenly distributed. Furthermore, empowerment discourse may individualize systemic harms by reframing structural inequalities as deficits in personal resilience.

To investigate these dynamics, this study employs computational text analysis on 175 extended audience responses concerning Dove’s Self-Esteem initiative. Rather than treating computational tools as predictive analytics, they are used here as structure-detection instruments for identifying patterned interpretive repertoires within audience discourse. By integrating sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and network analysis with sociological theory, the study advances an interpretive computational approach to examining how corporate empowerment is embedded within stratified opportunity structures.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### ➤ *Corporate Empowerment and Capability Expansion*

Capability theory conceptualizes development as the expansion of substantive freedoms—the real opportunities individuals possess to pursue valued ways of being and acting (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Unlike resource-based approaches, capability theory distinguishes between the possession of goods and the capacity to convert them into meaningful functionings.

Development, in this framework, concerns not simply access to tools but the enlargement of genuine life chances.

From this perspective, corporate self-esteem initiatives appear to operate as capability-enhancing interventions. By cultivating confidence, media literacy, and critical self-awareness, such campaigns may expand internal resources that enable youth to navigate environments saturated with evaluative pressures. Psychological resilience, in this sense, can be interpreted as a developmental resource—an internal capability facilitating agency within contemporary digital cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Yet capability expansion is never purely internal. Sen (1999) emphasizes that conversion factors—social, institutional, and environmental conditions—mediate whether resources become actionable

freedoms. Sociological critiques similarly caution against equating empowerment with psychological enhancement alone (Nussbaum, 2011). The distinction between resources and functionings reveals that the provision of workshops, toolkits, or educational messaging does not automatically translate into expanded life trajectories. Family stability, educational infrastructure, digital access, and community support shape whether empowerment initiatives generate durable change.

When corporations intervene in youth development, they enter terrain traditionally occupied by public institutions such as schools, welfare systems, and civic organizations. In doing so, they function as non-state developmental actors within neoliberal governance regimes (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1990). This repositioning raises a central analytical tension: Do corporate empowerment initiatives expand opportunity structures, or do they primarily cultivate adaptive capacities within existing inequalities? Capability expansion may coexist with structural stasis. Empowerment may enhance resilience without altering the conditions that necessitate resilience in the first place.

### ➤ *Opportunity Structures and Institutional Mediation*

Opportunity structure theory foregrounds the patterned distribution of life chances across institutional fields (Blau, 1977; Tilly, 1998). Access to education, network ties, community resources, and institutional supports structures the range of feasible actions available to individuals. Agency, in this framework, is not an abstract capacity but a socially situated possibility. Applied to corporate empowerment initiatives, this perspective suggests that campaign materials do not circulate within a neutral environment. Educational toolkits require school adoption; workshops require teacher facilitation; digital messaging presupposes platform literacy and technological access. Parents, educators, and community institutions serve as mediating actors through whom empowerment resources are filtered.

Importantly, structural inequality does not always appear as overt denunciation. Instead, it often manifests through conditionality. Empowerment becomes effective “if parents engage,” “if schools participate,” or “if youth have access.” Such conditional language reveals the infrastructural dependencies embedded within empowerment discourse. Institutional mediation becomes visible not as explicit critique but as prerequisite architecture. From an opportunity structure perspective, corporate empowerment is necessarily uneven in its realization. Its reach depends upon stratified institutional fields. This insight complicates celebratory interpretations of empowerment by highlighting the structural conditions under which psychological resources can—or cannot—be activated (Tilly, 1998).

### ➤ *Cultural Recognition and Symbolic Redistribution*

While opportunity structure theory emphasizes material distribution, cultural sociology foregrounds the symbolic dimensions of inequality. Recognition theory

argues that injustice operates not only through economic deprivation but through status hierarchies that shape visibility, legitimacy, and worth (Fraser, 2020; Lamont, 2012). Beauty norms, body standards, and aesthetic hierarchies constitute powerful regimes of recognition that confer differential legitimacy upon bodies and identities (Bordo, 2023). Corporate campaigns that foreground diversity and representation intervene within this symbolic field. By expanding the range of bodies deemed worthy of visibility, such initiatives may enact forms of symbolic redistribution. Recognition itself becomes a cultural resource. To be seen, affirmed, and validated can constitute a meaningful shift in symbolic standing.

However, Fraser (2020) distinguishes recognition from redistribution. Symbolic inclusion does not necessarily transform the material structures that sustain inequality. Representation may broaden aesthetic legitimacy while leaving income disparities, educational inequities, and healthcare access untouched. The politics of recognition may coexist with persistent economic stratification. Corporate empowerment thus occupies an ambivalent position within cultural politics. It may disrupt narrow aesthetic hierarchies while leaving broader political-economic arrangements intact. The key question is whether recognition operates as complement to redistribution—or as substitute for it.

#### ➤ *Neoliberal Responsibilization*

Contemporary governance increasingly operates through responsibilization—the cultivation of self-managing subjects who internalize responsibility for navigating structural risk (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1990). Rather than directly restructuring institutions, neoliberal governance often reframes systemic problems as matters of individual adaptation. Within digitally mediated beauty economies, structural risks include algorithmic amplification of idealized bodies, commercialized self-surveillance, and market incentives tied to appearance (Abidin, 2016;

Banet-Weiser, 2018). Empowerment discourse may respond to these conditions not by challenging platform logics or advertising infrastructures but by equipping individuals with resilience and confidence.

This dynamic produces an inherent tension. On the one hand, empowerment affirms agency and psychological strength. On the other, it risks individualizing systemic harm.

Structural pressures become reframed as personal challenges to be overcome through self-improvement. Corporate actors, embedded within profit-driven markets that often generate aesthetic pressures, occupy a paradoxical position when advocating empowerment. Audience interpretation becomes central in resolving this tension. Empowerment may be received as structural intervention, symbolic recognition, adaptive resilience, or some combination thereof. Rather than assuming ideological capture or emancipatory success, analysis must examine how audiences negotiate these competing frames.

#### ➤ *Toward an Integrated Framework*

Taken together, capability theory, opportunity structure analysis, cultural recognition scholarship, and neoliberal governance critique do not merely complement one another; they illuminate the tensions embedded within empowerment discourse itself. Capability theory carries a normative commitment to expanding substantive freedoms (Sen, 1999), while opportunity structure theory underscores that such freedoms are differentially realizable within stratified institutional fields (Blau, 1977; Tilly, 1998). Recognition theory foregrounds symbolic redistribution (Fraser, 1995), yet neoliberal governance critiques caution that empowerment discourse may simultaneously individualize structural risk (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1990).

Rather than forming a seamless framework, these perspectives expose empowerment as a site of contradiction. It is at once developmental and adaptive, redistributive and market-compatible, structurally mediated and individually internalized. Corporate empowerment initiatives thus occupy an analytically unstable terrain. They may expand psychological resources while leaving opportunity structures intact; they may broaden symbolic visibility without altering material hierarchies; and they may cultivate agency in ways that align with, rather than disrupt, neoliberal forms of governance.

This tension allows us to conceptualize corporate self-esteem campaigns as instances of market-mediated development—private interventions into domains of social welfare operating within unequal cultural and institutional fields. The relevant sociological question is therefore not whether such initiatives are authentic or effective, but how empowerment is discursively constructed, institutionally conditioned, and morally negotiated under conditions of structural inequality.

### III. METHODS

#### ➤ *Data Corpus*

The corpus consists of 175 extended written responses collected through social media recruitment. A researcher posted a public prompt on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and LinkedIn) inviting users to reflect on Dove's Self-Esteem initiative after viewing the campaign's official website and associated video materials. Participants voluntarily submitted written responses to the prompt, and no financial incentives were provided.

Because participation was self-selected and digitally mediated, the sample reflects individuals already engaged in online discursive environments. Although detailed demographic information was not systematically collected, the responses appear to represent digitally active adults familiar with contemporary social media cultures in which beauty norms, self-presentation, and identity work are actively negotiated. Accordingly, the goal of the analysis is not population-level generalization but the identification of patterned interpretations within public discourse. The dataset is therefore treated as a corpus of discursive constructions capturing how audiences articulate and

negotiate meanings surrounding corporate empowerment initiatives within digitally mediated cultural contexts.

All responses were de-identified prior to analysis. Only voluntarily submitted texts were included, and no private messages or restricted content were accessed. The study analyzes publicly shared discourse in accordance with ethical guidelines for digital research.

➤ *Computational Text Analysis Strategy*

Computational techniques were employed as structure-detection tools rather than predictive instruments. The analytic objective was to identify patterned discursive configurations within audience interpretation. To enhance methodological transparency and reproducibility, key preprocessing and modeling parameters are specified here (Jeong et al., 2019; Reisenbichler & Reutterer, 2019). Text preprocessing was conducted using Python (version 3.12.0) with the spaCy and scikit-learn libraries. Standard English stopwords were removed, and lemmatization was applied using spaCy’s default English language model. All text was lowercased and stripped of punctuation and non-alphabetic tokens (Kastrati et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2022).

• *Preprocessing*

Texts were lowercased and stripped of punctuation and non-semantic tokens. Lemmatization was applied to standardize word forms. Bigrams and trigrams were constructed to preserve semantically meaningful phrases such as “social media” and “self-esteem.” For TF-IDF vectorization, specifically, the following parameters were used (Reisenbichler & Reutterer, 2019):

- ✓ ngram\_range = (1, 2) to preserve meaningful bigrams (e.g., “social media”)
- ✓ min\_df = 2 to exclude rare terms
- ✓ max\_df = 0.85 to reduce overly frequent terms
- ✓ max\_features = 5,000

• *Sentiment Analysis*

Sentiment polarity scores were calculated using the TextBlob library (PatternAnalyzer), producing values in the

range of -1 (negative) to +1 (positive). The corpus exhibited a predominantly positive evaluative orientation (M = .159, SD = .065). Rather than treating positivity as evidence of campaign success, it is interpreted here as a moral positioning signal within audience discourse (Kastrati et al., 2021; Mogaji et al., 2021).

• *Topic Modeling*

Non-negative matrix factorization (NMF) was applied to TF-IDF vectorized text to identify latent thematic clusters. Multiple topic solutions (k = 5–10) were evaluated for coherence and interpretability. The selected model yielded distinct thematic domains corresponding to digital toxicity, authenticity, institutional mediation, emotional narrative, and structural skepticism. Topics are interpreted as patterned interpretive repertoires rather than discrete attitudinal categories. Specifically, topic modeling was performed using NMF with (Jeong et al., 2019; Reisenbichler & Reutterer, 2019):

- ✓ n\_components = 5 (selected based on coherence and interpretability)
- ✓ random\_state = 42
- ✓ max\_iter = 400
- ✓ init = ‘nndsvd’

• *Word Co-occurrence Network Analysis.*

Word co-occurrence networks were constructed using a sliding window approach (window size = 4). Specifically, edges were retained if co-occurrence frequency exceeded the 75th percentile of observed pairwise frequencies to reduce noise and enhance structural clarity. Network visualization was conducted using NetworkX with spring layout optimization (Asif et al., 2020).

Nodes represent lexical items; edges represent co-occurrence frequency. Threshold filtering was applied to retain high-weight associations. Network visualization revealed tightly clustered associations around “social media,” “self-esteem,” and “beauty standards,” suggesting that participants consistently situate empowerment within a digitally mediated risk environment (see Figure 1).

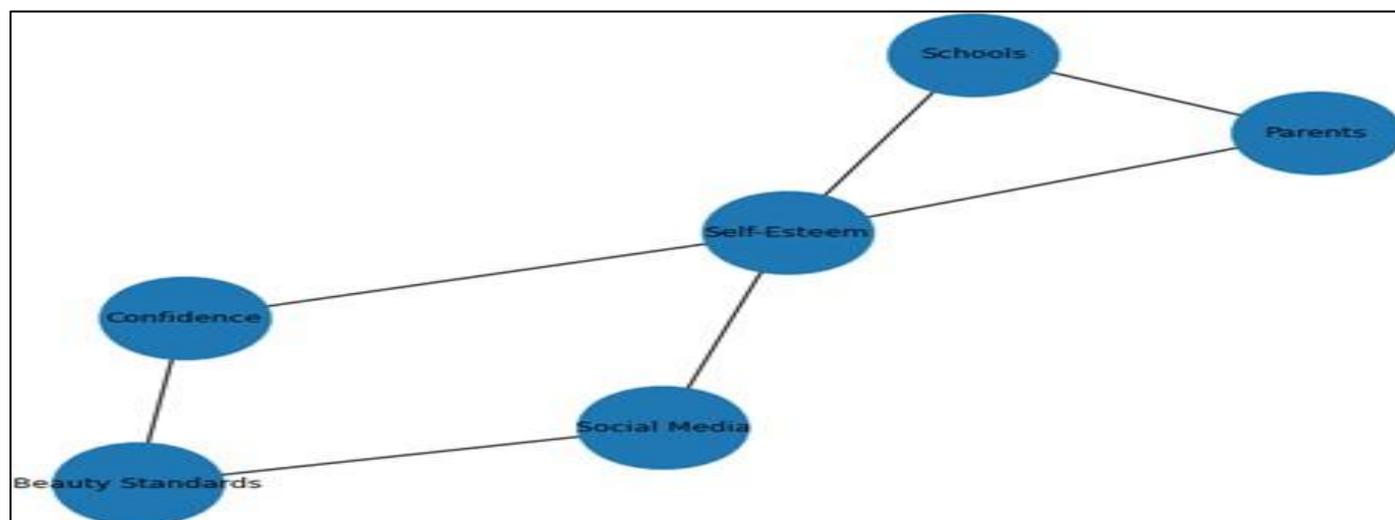


Fig 1 Word Co-occurrence Network in Empowerment Discourse

➤ *Interpretive Integration*

Computational outputs were subjected to iterative close reading to ensure that thematic clusters corresponded to coherent discursive patterns. This integrative approach combines quantitative structure detection with qualitative interpretation, consistent with computational sociology methodologies.

**IV. RESULTS**

➤ *Discursive Structure of Corporate Empowerment*

Computational analysis indicates that audience interpretations of Dove’s Self-Esteem initiative cluster around five patterned interpretive domains. These clusters do not represent isolated attitudes but structured ways of situating corporate empowerment within broader cultural and institutional contexts. Topic modeling reveals five dominant interpretive domains corresponding to digital toxicity, institutional mediation, symbolic recognition, structural skepticism, and relational narratives of empowerment. As illustrated in Figure 2, empowerment is broadly endorsed within the corpus but consistently interpreted through institutional and cultural constraints.

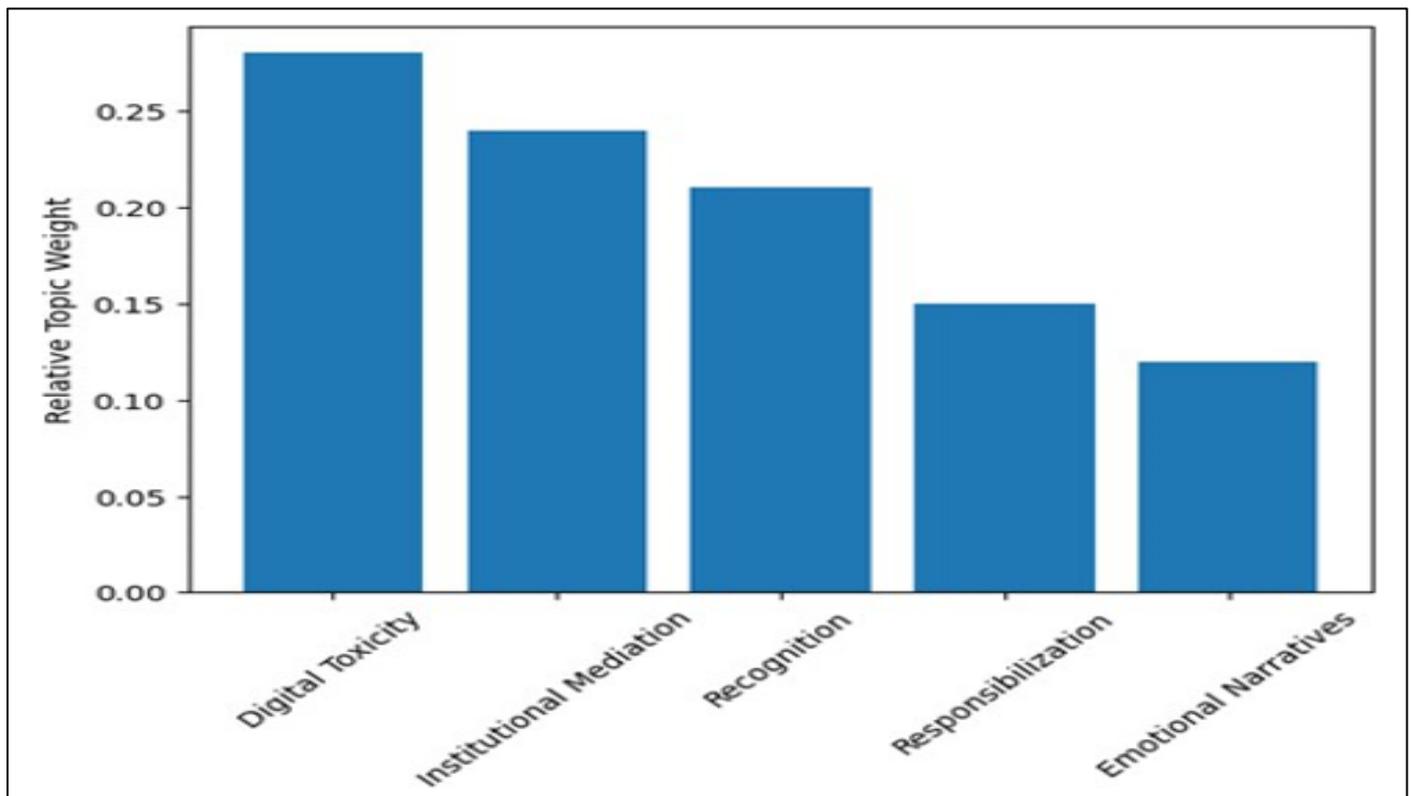


Fig 2 Relative Prevalence of Discursive Topics (NMF)

➤ *Empowerment as Moral Intervention in a Toxic Digital Field*

Across the corpus, the densest lexical cluster centers on “social media,” “toxic,” “beauty standards,” “self-esteem,” and “confidence.” High-frequency lexical items also include “pressure,” “unrealistic,” “comparison,” and “influence,” suggesting that respondents consistently frame empowerment within digitally mediated appearance evaluation. Participants overwhelmingly interpret empowerment as a corrective intervention within a harmful digital environment. For example:

“Social media has become a central part of teenagers’ lives, and the pressures they face whether through ‘thinspiration,’ extreme fitness ideals, or cosmetic procedure trends are often overwhelming.”

“The Toxic Influence film shows moms repeating the same harmful beauty messages their daughters hear online... It forces adults to see what teens are actually consuming.” The repeated use of terms such as “toxic,” “harmful,” “overwhelming,” and “dangerous” constructs social media not merely as a communication platform but as a risk environment. Empowerment, in turn, is positioned as ethical counteraction to digitally amplified appearance pressures.

Sentiment analysis further supports this interpretation. The corpus exhibits a predominantly positive evaluative orientation ( $M = .159$ ,  $SD = .065$ ). However, positivity is not expressed as brand enthusiasm but as moral endorsement. Participants frequently describe the campaign as “necessary,” “long overdue,” or “important for young people.”

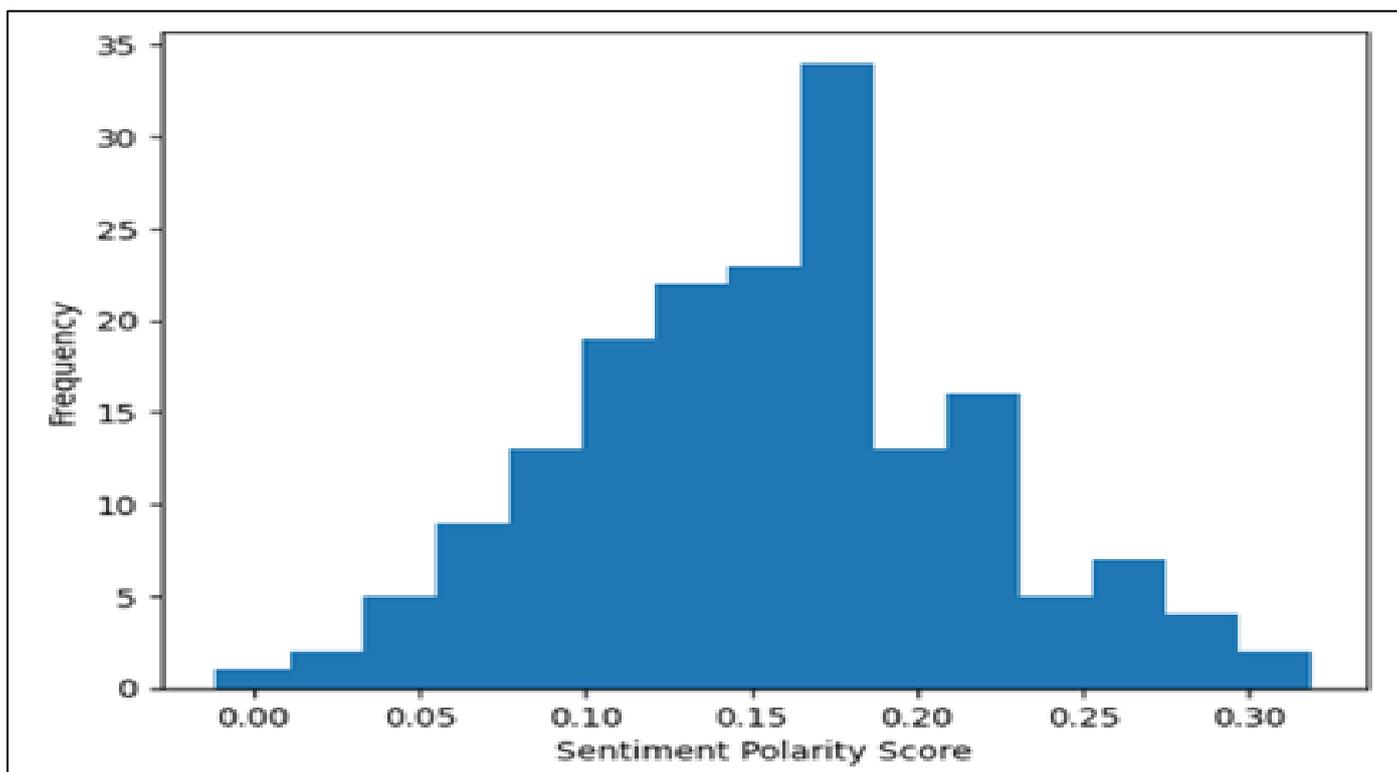


Fig 3 Distribution of Sentiment Polarity Scores

As shown in Figure 3, sentiment scores cluster within a moderately positive range without strong polarization. Importantly, this positivity reflects normative approval of intervention rather than uncritical support for the brand. Participants interpret the campaign primarily as social correction rather than commercial communication. Yet this intervention is framed as inward facing. Rather than advocating structural reform of platform algorithms or advertising infrastructures, respondents emphasize psychological fortification. One participant explains that the campaign encourages teens to “unfollow anything that makes you feel bad about yourself.” Empowerment thus appears as resilience-building within, rather than restructuring of, the digital field.

➤ *Conditional Capability and Institutional Mediation*

A second thematic domain centers on institutional mediators, including “parents,” “schools,” “teachers,” “educators,” and “community.” In this cluster, empowerment is rarely described as self-sufficient. Instead, its effectiveness is consistently framed as contingent upon institutional support. For example:

“This would really work if schools actually integrate it into their curriculum.” “Parents have to reinforce these messages at home, otherwise it won’t stick.”

These responses illustrate a recurring grammar of conditionality within the corpus. Terms such as “if schools,” “if parents,” and “if the program is used in classrooms” appear repeatedly across responses, indicating that empowerment is imagined as dependent upon institutional infrastructures. Structural inequality is rarely articulated

explicitly. Instead, it surfaces through conditional constructions that embed empowerment within broader social arrangements.

Participants implicitly acknowledge that confidence alone cannot produce transformation without supportive educational and familial environments. This discursive pattern reflects what may be termed a capability paradox. While internal confidence is valorized, respondents simultaneously recognize that resources do not automatically translate into outcomes. The promise of empowerment remains contingent upon institutional scaffolding. Inequality therefore operates as background architecture—structurally present yet rhetorically understated.

➤ *Recognition and Symbolic Inclusion*

Topic modeling also identifies a cluster centered on representational themes, including “real beauty,” “diversity,” “authentic,” and “different body types.” In this domain, empowerment is interpreted primarily through symbolic inclusion and representational visibility. Participants frequently emphasize the importance of seeing diverse bodies in media imagery. For example:

“It’s refreshing to see girls who actually look like people I know.”

“A brand that listens and advocates for change rather than contributing to the problem.”

In these responses, empowerment is closely tied to representational legitimacy. Being visible within cultural

imagery is interpreted as a form of recognition and validation. The repeated use of terms such as “real,” “authentic,” and “inclusive” suggests that audiences experience representation as a meaningful corrective to narrow aesthetic norms. At the same time, references to material redistribution are strikingly absent. Discussions of economic inequality, healthcare access, or educational disparities do not appear across the corpus. This absence is analytically significant. Representation itself is interpreted as sufficient corrective. Empowerment in this interpretive domain therefore operates primarily through symbolic inclusion rather than institutional restructuring.

#### ➤ *Skepticism and Responsibilization*

Although less prevalent, a distinct interpretive cluster expresses ambivalence toward corporate involvement. Lexical associations linking “corporate,” “profit,” “marketing,” and “industry” signal awareness of the commercial context surrounding empowerment messaging.

For example:

“It’s good messaging, but the beauty industry is still part of the problem.”

“Teaching confidence is helpful, but it doesn’t change the pressure girls face every day.”

These responses reflect awareness of structural production of aesthetic risk. Participants recognize that empowerment messaging addresses the psychological effects of beauty norms without necessarily altering the institutional systems that produce them. Rather than rejecting the initiative outright, respondents position it as partial intervention within a broader commercial ecosystem. Empowerment becomes adaptive buffering within a market environment that continues to generate appearance pressures. The presence of this cluster demonstrates interpretive reflexivity among audiences. Empowerment is simultaneously morally endorsed and politically scrutinized.

#### ➤ *Emotional Narratives and Intergenerational Repair*

A final thematic domain centers on emotional storytelling and intergenerational relationships, particularly mother–daughter dialogue. Respondents frequently reference scenes in which “mothers repeat the same toxic advice daughters hear online.” For example:

“Emotional, uncomfortable, and honest... It creates a powerful wake-up call.” “It gives the individual a sense of comfort and makes them feel heard.”

In this cluster, empowerment is framed less as structural intervention and more as relational repair. Change occurs through dialogue, empathy, and recognition within family contexts. However, such relational repair presupposes communicative intimacy and familial stability—conditions unevenly distributed across households. Even emotional transformation therefore remains socially situated.

## V. DISCUSSION

### ➤ *Linking Discursive Patterns to Sociological Interpretation*

The computational analyses reveal that audience interpretations cluster around several patterned discursive configurations, including digital toxicity, conditional institutional mediation, representational recognition, structural skepticism, and relational narratives of empowerment.

These clusters do not represent discrete attitudes but recurring interpretive repertoires through which participants make sense of corporate empowerment initiatives within digitally mediated beauty cultures. Rather than evaluating the campaign solely in terms of marketing effectiveness, respondents situate empowerment within broader institutional and cultural contexts, linking individual confidence to social infrastructures, symbolic visibility, and structural pressures associated with contemporary digital media environments.

Importantly, these interpretive patterns map closely onto the theoretical tensions outlined in the preceding literature review. Participants simultaneously frame empowerment as capability expansion, institutional mediation, symbolic recognition, and adaptive resilience. In doing so, their responses implicitly reproduce the structural contradictions embedded in empowerment discourse itself. Confidence is celebrated as personal resource, yet its effectiveness is repeatedly described as contingent upon schools, families, and community infrastructures. Representation is interpreted as meaningful cultural inclusion, yet references to structural redistribution remain largely absent. These patterns suggest that audience interpretations of corporate empowerment are neither purely celebratory nor wholly skeptical but negotiated within the intersection of cultural recognition, institutional opportunity structures, and neoliberal responsabilization.

The following discussion interprets these discursive configurations through a sociological lens, examining how corporate empowerment initiatives function as forms of market-mediated development operating within unequal cultural and institutional fields.

### ➤ *Corporate Empowerment as Market-Mediated Development*

This study reconceptualizes corporate self-esteem campaigns as instances of market-mediated development—private interventions into domains historically associated with public governance. Rather than functioning merely as marketing strategies, such initiatives operate within the terrain of youth welfare, media literacy, and psychological development. In doing so, corporations assume quasi-public authority in shaping subjectivities and normative frameworks of self-worth within consumer culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012).

The empirical findings demonstrate that audiences themselves interpret Dove’s initiative through this

governance lens. Empowerment is not framed as product promotion but as necessary intervention in what participants describe as a “toxic” and “overwhelming” digital environment.

Prior research has shown that exposure to idealized beauty norms on social media can intensify body dissatisfaction and self-comparison processes among young audiences (Ando et al., 2021; Derenne & Beresin, 2018; Fioravanti et al., 2022; Seekis & Barker, 2022). In this context, corporate empowerment initiatives are interpreted as corrective interventions within a digitally mediated culture of appearance evaluation.

The firm is symbolically repositioned as a developmental actor tasked with counteracting the harms of digital beauty culture. Such positioning reflects broader transformations in contemporary capitalism, where corporations increasingly claim moral authority within domains of identity, representation, and social well-being (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Corporate empowerment thus exemplifies a shift from state-centered governance toward market-mediated modes of developmental intervention. Yet this expansion of corporate authority unfolds within, rather than beyond, existing institutional inequalities.

#### ➤ *Conditional Capability Expansion*

Audience discourse reveals that empowerment is rarely imagined as autonomous or self-activating. Instead, it is consistently framed as institutionally mediated. The recurrent conditional constructions—“if schools integrate it,” “if parents reinforce it”—signal that capability expansion depends upon infrastructural scaffolding. This pattern empirically substantiates opportunity structure theory (Blau, 1977; Tilly, 1998) by demonstrating how agency is discursively tethered to institutional arrangements. Participants implicitly acknowledge that confidence alone does not guarantee transformation; rather, its realization requires stable educational, familial, and community infrastructures.

Crucially, inequality surfaces not through overt denunciation but through conditional dependency. Structural constraint becomes embedded in the grammar of possibility.

Empowerment becomes effective only under certain social conditions, rendering inequality visible as prerequisite absence. Computational analysis enables the detection of these patterned contingencies across the corpus through topic modeling and network-based textual analysis (Jeong et al., 2019; Reisenbichler & Reutterer, 2019). Empowerment, in this sense, is expansionary but filtered. Capabilities may be cultivated, yet their conversion remains stratified.

#### ➤ *Recognition without Redistribution*

The prominence of representational discourse underscores the cultural salience of symbolic inclusion. Participants repeatedly equate visibility—“real women,” “different body types,” “authentic representation”—with empowerment. Recognition functions as experiential justice: to see oneself reflected in cultural imagery is interpreted as

transformative. Research on body image and feminist media scholarship has similarly emphasized the role of representation in shaping cultural perceptions of legitimacy and belonging (Bordo, 2023; Banet-Weiser, 2018). By expanding the visibility of diverse bodies, corporate campaigns may challenge narrow aesthetic hierarchies embedded in media culture.

However, the near absence of material redistribution discourse is analytically striking. Economic inequality, educational disparities, and healthcare access do not emerge as salient themes within the corpus. This silence is sociologically meaningful. Recognition is discursively sufficient; redistribution remains outside the interpretive frame. This decoupling aligns with Fraser’s (2020) argument that the politics of recognition can coexist with durable economic inequality. Corporate empowerment may expand aesthetic legitimacy and symbolic belonging while leaving institutional hierarchies intact. The findings therefore suggest that audiences largely interpret empowerment within the symbolic register of cultural inclusion rather than within frameworks of structural redistribution.

#### ➤ *Responsibilization and Adaptive Agency*

The skepticism cluster introduces interpretive tension into the corpus. Participants who note that “the beauty industry is still part of the problem” or that “confidence doesn’t change the pressure girls face” articulate awareness of structural production of aesthetic risk. These responses reflect dynamics associated with neoliberal responsabilization, in which systemic pressures are reframed as matters of individual adaptation and self-management (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1990). Within digitally mediated beauty economies, structural pressures include algorithmic amplification of idealized images, commodified self-surveillance, and market incentives tied to appearance.

Rather than transforming these systems, empowerment discourse may equip individuals with psychological resilience to endure them.

Yet the data do not support a simple ideological capture thesis. Audience members demonstrate reflexivity regarding corporate positioning. Empowerment is neither uncritically embraced nor fully dismissed. Instead, it is negotiated as a partial remedy within a structurally constrained field. This negotiated interpretation complicates binary accounts of corporate activism as either emancipatory or purely instrumental. Corporate governance of subjectivity appears as culturally contested terrain where moral endorsement coexists with structural skepticism.

#### ➤ *Theoretical Contributions*

This study advances sociological scholarship in four interrelated ways. First, it reconceptualizes corporate empowerment initiatives as forms of market-mediated development embedded within consumer culture and neoliberal governance regimes (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Second, it demonstrates how inequality may operate implicitly through discursive

conditionality. Structural constraint emerges through the language of prerequisites rather than explicit denunciation, extending sociological insights into opportunity structures (Blau, 1977; Tilly, 1998).

Third, the study empirically documents the decoupling of recognition from redistribution within audience interpretation, supporting theoretical arguments that symbolic inclusion can coexist with persistent material inequality (Fraser, 2020; Lamont, 2012). Fourth, the study advances computational sociology by integrating topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and word co-occurrence network analysis as interpretive tools for identifying patterned moral reasoning within public discourse (Jeong et al., 2019; Reisenbichler & Reutterer, 2019; Asif et al., 2020).

One theoretical implication emerging from this analysis concerns the role of discursive conditionality in revealing structural inequality. Across the corpus, participants frequently frame empowerment through conditional constructions—“if schools adopt the program,” “if parents reinforce the message,” or “if young people engage with the materials.” These formulations implicitly acknowledge that psychological empowerment alone cannot generate transformation without supportive institutional infrastructures. Rather than explicitly denouncing inequality, respondents articulate structural constraints through the language of prerequisites. This pattern suggests that inequality may operate discursively as background architecture shaping the perceived reach of empowerment initiatives. By identifying these recurring grammatical structures, the analysis demonstrates how structural mediation becomes visible within everyday interpretive discourse, even when explicit references to inequality remain absent.

## VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the study examines discursive interpretation rather than behavioral or institutional outcomes. While audience narratives illuminate meaning-making processes, they do not measure whether empowerment initiatives produce measurable psychological or structural change. Second, the corpus consists of English-language responses within a particular cultural context. Empowerment may be interpreted differently within alternative welfare regimes or cultural recognition systems. Comparative cross-national research could illuminate how corporate developmental interventions are received across divergent institutional landscapes.

Third, the study captures interpretation at a single temporal moment. Longitudinal research could assess whether corporate empowerment initiatives sustain interpretive legitimacy over time or whether skepticism intensifies as campaigns persist. Future research might also investigate the interaction between corporate empowerment discourse and platform governance structures, examining whether private developmental initiatives influence or

merely coexist with digital regulatory frameworks.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Corporate self-esteem campaigns occupy an ambivalent yet consequential position within contemporary governance. They generate symbolic recognition and psychological resources while operating within stratified opportunity structures. Computational analysis reveals that audiences interpret empowerment as morally necessary yet structurally contingent. Inequality persists not as foregrounded denunciation but as background architecture shaping the imagined reach of intervention.

Empowerment, therefore, is neither purely emancipatory nor merely ideological. It is a contested cultural resource embedded in unequal institutional fields. By situating corporate empowerment within the framework of market-mediated development, this study underscores the need to analyze private interventions not only in terms of authenticity or effectiveness, but in relation to the structural conditions that filter, mediate, and delimit their transformative potential.

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