

# The Performative Politics of Branding: Reconstructing Gender Norms in Commercial Discourse

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how brands performatively construct and commodify gender norms in commercial discourse, using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Through critical discourse analysis of a Chinese brand—Ubras, the study reveals how brands appropriate feminist discourse to reinforce neoliberal values, transforming resistance into marketable commodities. Key findings include the entanglement of corporate feminism with state agendas, the commodification of empowerment, and the exclusionary effects of performative branding. The study concludes that brands act as agents of neoliberal governance, obscuring systemic inequalities through performative feminism.

**Keywords:** Gender Performativity; Brand Marketing; Critical Discourse Analysis

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## 1 Introduction

In an era where consumer culture permeates nearly every facet of social life, brand marketing has emerged as a critical site for the production and negotiation of gender norms. From cosmetics campaigns that redefine feminine beauty to athletic wear advertisements reconfiguring masculine ideals, commercial entities increasingly weaponize gender as both a symbolic resource and a strategic tool. While scholars in critical marketing and gender studies have long documented the pervasive stereotyping of gender roles in advertising (Gill, 2008), contemporary brands now engage in more nuanced—and potentially more insidious—practices. They appropriate feminist discourses, repackage progressive values, and performatively align themselves with movements for gender equality, all while anchoring these narratives within neoliberal frameworks that prioritize individual choice over systemic change. This paradox demands rigorous theoretical scrutiny: How do brands strategically deploy gender performativity to reinforce commercial interests, and what are the broader implications for feminist critiques of capitalist culture?

This paper interrogates these questions through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990, 1993), arguing that brands act as active agents in (re)producing hegemonic gender norms. By treating gender not as a fixed identity but as a set of socially constructed acts—repeated, cited, and materialized through symbolic systems—Butler's framework offers a powerful tool for dissecting the mechanisms through which marketing discourse naturalizes gendered consumption. While prior research has examined gender representations in advertising (Holt, 2002; Thompson & Arsel, 2004), few studies have systematically applied performativity theory to unpack the process by which brands transform abstract feminist ideals into marketable commodities. This gap is particularly urgent in an age of "woke washing," where brands co-opt language of empowerment to obscure structural inequalities (McRobbie, 2009).

The study's objectives are threefold: first, to map how brands performatively construct and commodify gender norms through linguistic and visual rhetoric; second, to evaluate the tensions between commercial appropriation and feminist critique within these narratives; and third, to assess the broader socio-political effects of such performative strategies on public discourse around gender. By analyzing campaigns from globally recognized brands, this paper demonstrates that performativity in marketing operates as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it enables brands to subtly challenge traditional gender binaries; on the other, it entrenches neoliberal logic by framing social change as a consumable choice.

Theoretically, this work extends Butler's performativity thesis beyond its origins demonstrating its explanatory power in analyzing commercial culture. Methodologically, it contributes to critical marketing scholarship by integrating discourse analysis with performativity theory, offering a replicable framework for evaluating gendered brand

communication. Practically, the findings hold implications for consumers navigating commercialized feminism, policymakers regulating deceptive advertising, and brands seeking ethical engagement with gender issues. Ultimately, this paper contends that understanding performativity in marketing is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary step toward dismantling the intersectional oppressions perpetuated by neoliberal capitalism.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Judith Butler's Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990, 1993) revolutionized feminist scholarship by positing that gender is not an inherent identity but a set of socially constructed acts. Central to this framework is the concept of iterability—the repetition of cultural scripts that naturalize gender as "real." For instance, Butler argues that the binary division of gender into "male" and "female" is perpetuated through repeated performances (e.g., clothing, speech, behavior) that cite and recite dominant norms. This process, termed citationality, ensures that gender appears as a coherent, biological fact rather than a historical construct.

Butler's later work (1997, 2004) extends this analysis to the materialization of gender through bodily practices. She contends that even seemingly subversive acts (e.g., drag performance) ultimately reinforce the gender binary by relying on its symbolic vocabulary. This tension—between subversion and reinforcement—is particularly relevant to brand marketing, where "transgressive" imagery (e.g., androgynous models) often serves to reinvigorate, rather than dismantle, normative gender codes.

### 2.2 Gender and Branding: A Critical Overview

Scholarship on gender and branding has traditionally focused on stereotypical representations in advertising (e.g., Goffman, 1979; Killingsworth, 2004). Early studies documented the pervasive use of gendered tropes—such as associating women with domesticity and men with ambition—to sell products. While such analyses remain relevant, contemporary marketing has evolved to incorporate more progressive narratives, particularly under the banner of feminism.

Gill (2008) critiques this shift as a form of postfeminist sensibility, wherein brands appropriate feminist discourse to mask structural inequalities. For instance, Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, which celebrates diverse body types, has been criticized for reducing feminist critique to individual choice (Watson, 2013). Similarly, McRobbie (2009) argues that "postfeminist" marketing reframes gender equity as a personal achievement, diverting attention from systemic barriers like the gender pay gap.

These critiques highlight the paradox of commercial feminism: brands leverage feminist ideals to appeal to socially conscious consumers while avoiding accountability for perpetuating gendered labor divisions. This tension is further explored by Bettany and Kerrane (2010), who analyze how "ethical" brands performatively align with feminist causes to enhance their corporate image. Such studies underscore the need for a theoretical lens capable of dissecting the performative strategies underlying these narratives.

### 2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in Marketing Research

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a robust methodology for examining how language and symbolism reproduce power relations. Rooted in the work of Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1993), CDA emphasizes the interplay between text, discourse, and social practice. In marketing, CDA has been used to unpack ideological underpinnings of advertising (Williamson, 1978), brand positioning (Askegaard & Linnert, 2011), and consumer resistance (Holt, 2002).

Recent applications of CDA to gender studies reveal its utility in analyzing performative strategies. For example, Johnston and Taylor (2008) employ CDA to dissect how beauty magazines naturalize gender norms through linguistic devices (e.g., prescriptive language, metaphors of "war" on aging). Similarly, Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton (2016) use CDA to critique the gendered scripting of motherhood in baby product advertising.

Despite these contributions, few studies integrate CDA with performativity theory to analyze brands as active agents in (re)producing gender norms. This integration is critical, as it enables researchers to move beyond static representations and examine the dynamic, iterative processes through which brands materialize gender through discourse.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Butlerian Concepts Revisited

Butler's performativity theory posits that gender is not an innate identity but a set of socially constructed acts, performed and naturalized through iterative citation of cultural norms. This study recontextualizes two core concepts within the marketplace:

The first one is heteronormative resilience. Brands perpetuate gender binaries by deploying repetitive signifiers that become embedded in material culture. For instance, the color pink, frequently used in beauty product packaging and children's toys, operates as a performative anchor (Holt, 2002), materializing femininity as a visual norm that transcends individual consumer choices. The second one is abjection and desire. Brands strategically utilize transgressive imagery to disrupt normative frameworks while ultimately reinforcing them. Butler (1993) argues that such subversive gestures reignite desire for the very norms they challenge. In fashion marketing, for example, androgynous models or gender-neutral clothing lines may appear radical, yet they often serve to reinvigorate the gender binary by making it the subject of commercial spectacle, thereby preserving its cultural dominance.

#### 3.2 The Performative Circuit

Drawing on Butler's theory and Holt's (2002) work on cultural branding, this study conceptualizes the marketplace as a performative circuit comprising three stages:

The first stage is symbolic anchoring. Brands strategically associate products with mythologized cultural narratives to naturalize gender norms. For example, the "mermaid hair" trend, popularized by beauty brands, cites myths of feminine allure to anchor long, flowing hairstyles as symbols of femininity.

The second stage is material interpellation. Through purchase and use, consumers embody branded gender scripts, transforming abstract norms into tangible practices. Shapewear brands like SKIMS exemplify this by marketing "body positivity" while materializing disciplinary norms through compression technologies. Consumers, in turn, interpellate themselves into these norms by wearing such products, thereby performing gendered subjectivities.

The third stage is institutional reinforcement. The market success of performative campaigns legitimizes and entrenches gender scripts. The "athleisure" category's dominance (NPD Group, 2023) illustrates how brands normalize postfeminist ideals of empowerment through commodification. By framing athletic wear as versatile and empowering, brands render resistance to gendered labor divisions increasingly difficult, as such norms become institutionalized within consumer culture.

#### 3.3 Theoretical Proposition: Brands as Performative Agents

This study advances the proposition that brands act as performative agents — organizations that codify and commercialize gender norms through strategic deployment of symbolic systems. Brands do not merely reflect existing gender ideologies but actively participate in their (re)production by codifying norms, commercializing contradiction and scaling resistance.

Brands transform abstract gender ideologies into marketable commodities, such as Fenty Beauty's "Beauty for All" campaign, which celebrates diversity while framing inclusivity as a unique selling proposition. Brands navigate tensions between radical rhetoric and market logic, often reducing feminist critique to consumable attributes. This performative contradiction enables brands to appropriate progressive discourse while avoiding systemic critique.

By reconceptualizing brands as performative agents, this framework extends Butler's theory into critical marketing studies, offering a toolkit to analyze how commercial discourse shapes—and is shaped by—the heteronormative regimes Butler identifies. Subsequent analysis will demonstrate this framework's explanatory power through empirical case studies, revealing the performative strategies through which brands reproduce gender norms in the contemporary marketplace.

### 4 Methodology

This study employs a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to examine the performative dimensions of gendered

brand communication, focusing on a Chinese brand: Ubras, a lingerie label known for its “size-free” innovations. By centering on linguistic and visual tropes in its campaigns, this methodology interrogates how commercial narratives reflect and reproduce gendered power dynamics within China’s unique cultural-political context.

The research design integrates CDA with theoretical sampling to capture the ideological tensions embedded in brand communication. Critical Discourse Analysis serves as the primary analytical tool, enabling a detailed examination of how Ubras constructs gendered identities through stylized repetition of symbols and narratives. This approach treats brand discourse as a site of ideological negotiation, where capitalist logic intersects with state-sanctioned gender norms.

Theoretical sampling ensures the selection of brands that explicitly engage with gender agendas while operating within China’s regulatory framework. Ubras was chosen for its pioneering role in the “body positivity” movement through products like “size-free” bras, coupled with campaigns such as “Body Positivity 2.0” that frame female empowerment through individual choice and comfort. This sampling strategy allows for a nuanced exploration of tensions between state-approved empowerment narratives and corporate pragmatism.

## **5 Analysis: Performing Gender, Performing Capital**

### **5.1 Ubras: Market-Driven Feminism and the Commodification of Body Politics**

Ubras’ rebranding of intimate wear as a tool for “self-expression” exemplifies the tensions between radical rhetoric and capitalist pragmatism. The brand’s “Body Positivity 2.0” campaign, for instance, transforms structural critiques of beauty norms into marketable narratives, while its alignment with state agendas reveals the entanglement of corporate feminism with neoliberal governance.

Ubras’ slogans, such as “My Body, My Rules,” deploy first-person agency to appeal to progressive consumers. However, this rhetoric subtly redirects systemic critique toward individualized choices, thereby individualizing broader structural issues. The phrase “size-free,” used to describe Ubras’ products, implies universality but erases bodily diversity, as the brand’s product range remains limited to conventional shapes and sizes. This linguistic strategy serves to individualize critique and normalize exclusionary practices. This rhetorical strategy transforms consumer choices into patriotic acts, thereby legitimizing the brand’s market position while obscuring its role in perpetuating gendered labor inequalities.

Ubras monetizes empowerment by pricing “confidence” at ¥299 per bra, transforming feminist critiques into premium product attributes. The brand’s strategic partnerships with state-affiliated institutions, such as the Chinese Nutrition Society, legitimize Ubras as a contributor to national health agendas. Claims of “medical-grade support” and “ergonomic design” align with “Healthy China 2030” objectives, enabling Ubras to access public health campaigns and justify premium pricing. However, this alignment obscures the brand’s reliance on underpaid, predominantly female workers in Southeast Asia, highlighting the disconnect between brand rhetoric and material realities.

### **5.2 Cross-Cutting Themes: Performative Contradictions and Neoliberal Feminism**

Ubras navigate a delicate equilibrium between radical rhetoric and corporate pragmatism. Its claims to “redefine beauty standards” coexist with a lack of plus-size models and limited shade ranges. This contradiction reflects how performative feminism serves as a risk-mitigation strategy, enabling brands to capture progressive consumers without challenging structural inequities.

While Ubras celebrates consumer “empowerment,” agency remains tightly circumscribed by capitalist frameworks. Its premium products position empowerment as a luxury good, excluding low-income women. Consumers unknowingly support exploitative labor practices through purchases, highlighting the limits of individual choice in a system designed to prioritize profit over equity.

These cases demonstrate how performativity functions as a vector of neoliberal feminism. Brands align with state agendas to enhance legitimacy while advancing capitalist interests, thereby co-opting feminist critiques to sell products. This process transforms resistance into a site of accumulation, where even radical gestures are subsumed within capitalist frameworks when divorced from collective struggle.

## 6 Discussion: The Political Economy of Performative Branding

The analysis of Ubras reveals how contemporary brands weaponize feminist discourse as a strategic tool within the neoliberal political economy, where social movements are repurposed as sites of capital accumulation. It exemplifies a broader trend wherein corporate entities appropriate the rhetoric of resistance to obscure exploitative labor practices, environmental degradation, and systemic inequality. Ubras' rebranding of intimate wear as a vehicle for "self-expression" demonstrates how performative branding operates at the intersection of cultural production and capitalist logics. By aligning their campaigns with state-backed initiatives, brands leverage nationalist narratives to enhance their market legitimacy while diverting attention from their reliance on underpaid labor in Southeast Asia and Bangladesh. This symbiotic relationship between corporate and state power underscores the erosion of feminist critique's radical potential, as brands transform structural critiques of patriarchy and capitalism into premium-priced commodities. The erasure of bodily diversity in Ubras' "size-free" marketing reflects a deeper logic: performative feminism thrives on exclusion, reducing solidarity to individualized consumption choices. Meanwhile, the refusal of both brands to disclose supply chain details or labor conditions exposes the limits of consumer agency within a system designed to prioritize profit over equity. Thus, performative branding functions as a vector of neoliberal governance, co-opting feminist language to naturalize inequality and foreclose collective struggle.

## 7 Conclusion

This study of Ubras illuminates the paradoxical role of brands in shaping contemporary feminist discourse: they act as both architects and antagonists of gender equity, deploying radical rhetoric to mask capitalist exploitation. By examining linguistic, visual, and ideological strategies, we uncover how corporate feminism redistributes agency from collective action to individualized consumption, transforming resistance into a marketable commodity. Ubras' monetization of "confidence" and its pricing of "freedom" as luxury goods exemplify the conversion of feminist ideals into premium profit streams, while its alignment with state agendas reveals the entanglement of corporate and biopolitical interests. These findings challenge the notion that consumer choices alone can dismantle systemic oppression, as brands systematically obscure their complicity in labor exploitation and ecological harm. Ultimately, the performative contradictions inherent in Ubras' campaigns expose the limits of neoliberal feminism—a framework that privileges market logic over material redistribution and individual empowerment over collective liberation. To move beyond this impasse, feminist praxis must reject the co-optation of resistance by corporate and state actors, prioritizing solidarity-based models that center labor rights, environmental sustainability, and intersectional justice. Only by dismantling the performative scaffolding of corporate feminism can we reclaim the radical potential of gender critique.

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