Passion or Performance? Examining Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty"

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It is no secret that marketing and advertising have historically been weaponized as tools to define and propagate social norms. This phenomenon has proven particularly true in the beauty industry, a field notorious for manufacturing sexist and harmful messages that reinforce popular perceptions of "attractiveness" and contribute to the continued oppression and sexualization of American women (McCleary, 2014). The scope of the influence of beauty industry marketing was plainly revealed by a global report called "The Real Truth About Beauty" that was commissioned by Dove in 2004 (Millard, 2009). This study, a telephone survey consisting of 3,200 respondents, exposed that only two percent of women around the world identified with the word "beautiful" to describe their looks (Etcoff et al., 2004). It also uncovered that seventy-five percent of women between the ages of eighteen and sixty four "would like to see considerably more diversity in the images of beauty" presented to them, and that seventy-six percent of the same demographic hoped to see the media portray beauty as more than just physical (McCleary, 2014, p. 2).

In response to these findings, Dove launched its "Campaign for Real Beauty", a series of advertisements free of retouching that depicted women whose appearances deviated from the traditional beauty norm (McCleary, 2014). Each of these women had "flaws" deemed unattractive by general social standards, including grey hair, stretch marks, flat chests, and freckles, amongst other characteristics (McCleary, 2014). The mission of the campaign was threefold: to fund the continuation of the Real Beauty campaign through product sales, to provide self-esteem resources and events for women through the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, and to promote untouched images of people who are not professional models (Millard, 2009). Arguing that Dove's strategies were unsuccessful is futile - since the campaign's initial implementation, it has generated significant profit, garnered a number of celebrity endorsements, and been the subject of a great deal of media acclaim and accolades from professional associations and gender scholars (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). However, in this paper I will assert that as an object of feminist consumerism, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty actually serves to harm women by appropriating feminist discourse with a profit imperative and systematically legitimizing existing beauty ideals. My goal is to justify this position by examining The Dove Movement for Self-Esteem and Dove's 2007 short film *Onslaught*. The analysis provided in this work will also be supplemented by studies revealing audience perception and interpretation of Dove's campaign in addition to comparison of its effectiveness with that of grassroots models of social change. Finally, my stance

will be informed by the greater concepts of commodity feminism, postfeminism, and femvertising.

In order to proceed, it is essential to formulate a framework for analysis. This begins with understanding the particular theories of feminism that exist in popular culture. In an effort to make feminism more digestible for the masses, popular culture often depoliticizes feminist discourse, an occurence that can primarily be observed through the emergence of post-feminism into the public sphere. Post-feminist beliefs suggest that gender equality has already been achieved, and that for this reason, contemporary feminist efforts are both redundant and unnecessary. This school of thought promotes individualism and consumerism, therefore making it deeply compatible with corporate interests that posit women as empowered consumers who enjoy their freedoms in the marketplace. Post-feminist ideologies are also incredibly popular in the world of advertising, as they allow businesses to claim that their sexualized representations of women are expressions of liberation rather than oppression (McCleary, 2014). Behaviors like this that claim to circulate empowering messages but hold profit as a true goal are examples of feminist consumerism, also known as commodity feminism (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). Johnston and Taylor define this term as "a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women and that shares consumerism's focus on individual consumption as a primary source of identity, affirmation, and social change. This reformulation enables women to
wear an identity associated with self-respect, independence, personal strength, and
collective identity and community without doing any of the hard consciousness-raising work usually required to produce collective transformation" (Johnston and Taylor, 2008, p. 955). The final concept comprising my framework is "femvertising", an oft-lauded genre of advertisement that employs pro-female messaging to promote women's empowerment (Windels et al., 2019). This marketing strategy is relevant to my argument because recent research has revealed that a number of femvertisements (including the Campaign for Real Beauty) actually use postfeminist discourses that both incorporate and repudiate feminist ideals, therefore neutralizing feminism's political force (Windels et al., 2019).

The Dove Movement for Self Esteem is a popular online branding strategy that has garnered over ten million views through its social media pages and associated corporate website since its conception. According to its information page, the Movement was created to encourage international dialogue about beauty and to equip women with the tools needed to inspire one other. Murray posits that the word "movement" was intentionally selected to name this portion of Dove's campaign because much like the feminist movement, it encourages the participation of women. This emphasis on participation is reflected in the ideology of the Movement, which considers participation to be a prerequisite for liberation as observed through the collective activism of the Second Wave of feminism. Those who are convinced of the Movement's noble mission may be surprised to learn that its actual purpose is to gather the demographic information of site visitors. This data is collected through the centerpiece of the website, which asks women and girls to accept their mission by signing a declaration to "Join the Movement" (Murray, 2012). Murray writes that "the Movement's language communicates a hegemonic relationship between the corporate leader and

its followers, asking users to join 'our Movement,' 'our vision,' and 'our cause.' The declaration itself amounts to providing their email address, first and last name, zip code, and age, as well as an answer to an 'optional' question: 'What advice would you give to your 13 year old self? We'll collect these messages and deliver them to girls to build self-esteem in the next generation'" (Murray, 2012, p. 5). Unilever and Dove are motivated to collect lists of consumers under the facade of participation in social activism because having increased databases of demographic information allows corporations to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, reinforce relationships with users, and be more responsive to user feedback. In fact, the Movement can even be understood as a form of market research, with its participants serving as its research subjects (Murray, 2012). The corporate, self-serving motive that exists behind the seemingly innocent Dove Movement for Self Esteem is exemplary of the paradox that continues to stand in the way of consumerist feminism actually benefiting women - the prioritization of profit above all else, even in a philanthropic context.

Another object of interest from the Campaign for Real Beauty is a short film first released in 2007 titled *Onslaught*. This video, just over a minute long, overlays images of an innocent girl with scenes of plastic surgery, pro-dieting messages, and advertisements for other beauty products in an effort to promote the value assumption that parents should engage in a healthy dialogue with their daughters about self-esteem before their perceptions of beauty are distorted by the beauty industry's use of the media. *Onslaught* begins by showing a young red-headed girl staring directly into the camera. She does so for an extended period of time as the lyric "here it comes" from the song "La Breeze" starts to play in the background. The combination of extended direct eye contact with the subject and the message of the song serve to create an effect of anticipation. This sense of expectation heightens the impact of what comes next - a fast-paced slew of scenes that would traditionally be considered far too mature for the girl. The advertisement creates the effect of "onslaught" by rapidly pushing the images at the screen, almost as if they are attacking the audience. This strategy seemingly serves two purposes - the pace demonstrates how quickly young women are exposed to the beauty industry and how speedily their involvement with it can escalate, and the direction shows that young women are targeted by brands and that beauty standards cannot be avoided. The images presented at first are disturbing in that they are clearly hypersexual, fixating on scantily-clad, faceless bodies and zooming into their most intimate parts. Interspersed into this sequence is a barrage of heavily retouched images that have so clearly been digitally edited, they appear unnatural and inhuman. The attack continues with a series of advertisements ordering women to sculpt themselves, demanding that they "lose inches", "diet", "stay slim", and "transform". To help consumers achieve these goals, the film presents a plethora of mysterious substances with names like "Quick Slim", "Fat Gone", and "Youth You". The chilling result of this fixation with weight and "quick fixes" is demonstrated by the video's next segment, which portrays rapid weight fluctuation, binging habits, and graphic scenes of cosmetic surgery.

I believe that an unintended effect of this short film is that it reveals the inherent contradictions that emerge when agents of feminist consumerism attempt to present themselves as sincere advocates for social change unobstructed by any other motives.

The hypocrisy of demonizing the beauty industry as a distributor of damaging products and ideas while simultaneously attempting to sell beauty products is not lost on me. Furthermore, I am of the belief that Dove's commodity feminism and corporate history undermines the message it attempts to convey through this film. By visually contrasting sultry images of big-breasted, provocatively-dressed women with the innocence and purity of a child in *Onslaught*, it seems Dove is trying to express that expectations and standards of beauty deeply impact the development of young girls (McCleary, 2014). I find this to be a bold choice given the fact that Dove itself is guilty of promoting the kinds of damaging beauty ideologies it attacks in this film (McCleary, 2014). Not only was the flagship product of the Campaign for Real Beauty a firming cream intended to correct women's physical flaws, but Dove's parent company, Unilever, also presides over Axe, a cologne brand whose advertising strategy is characterized by the hypersexualization of women, and Slim-Fast, a diet product that encourages the same patterns of "yo-yo dieting" disparaged in *Onslaught* (McCleary, 2014). I understand this video to be an attempt by Dove to take advantage of the very real issues pertaining to female exploitation and representation in the media in order to promote their brand. McCleary effectively summarizes this action by writing that while "the film appears to be a form of social commentary, it is really just advertising intended to sell more products by positioning Dove as a responsible company that cares about harmful messages disseminated by beauty corporations" (McCleary, 2014, p. 15). *Onslaught* is also steeped in post-feminist messaging. By presenting parent-child dialogue as the solution to media brainwashing, Dove reveals its alignment with the post-feminist notion that feminism is irrelevant and unnecessary in the modern world (McCleary, 2014). A more radical feminist solution would be to dismantle the existing systems that oppress women and build more equitable structures (McCleary, 2014). McCleary contends that by presenting a minor action influenced by post-feminist thought as the solution to issues of deeply rooted social inequality, Dove simultaneously robs feminist ideas of their radical meanings *and* disregards the feminist movement as a source of solutions (McCleary, 2014).

I have made clear my belief that the Campaign for Real Beauty presents an inauthentic iteration of feminism whose motives are clouded by the pursuit of profit. The nuances and contradictions of Dove's work, however, can be better understood in juxtaposition to the efforts of a grassroots organization whose mission exists unencumbered by corporate limitations. One such organization is the Toronto-based group PPPO, a collective focused on raising consciousness and creating social change by opposing restrictive feminine beauty ideals (Johnston and Taylor, 2008).

A primary concern that exists with Dove's campaign is that it operates within a hegemonic ideology of gendered beauty by failing to challenge the notion that beauty is an essential part of a woman's identity and success (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). This actually serves to harm women by systematically perpetuating the existing beauty standards Dove claims to oppose. Furthermore, as a corporate strategy, Dove manipulates feminist themes of empowerment to make it appear as though feminist action is achieved principally through grooming and shopping (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). Alternatively, the PPPO establishes a "more complex and ambivalent relationship to the idealization of women's

physical beauty, an interest in exploring the pain caused by beauty ideals, and a refusal to prioritize looking or feeling beautiful as cornerstones of gendered identity" (Johnston and Taylor, 2008, p. 956).

The critical differences in Dove and the PPPO's contributions to feminist praxis can be found in the contrast between feminist consumerism and feminist community-building and consciousness-raising (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). While Dove's consumerist practices straightforwardly encourage women to feel beautiful and celebrate themselves, PPPO activism involves open discussion of the terrors, contradictions, and pain involved with living in the bodies they have (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Furthermore, while Dove equates feeling beautiful with being beautiful, the PPPO recognizes that not everyone will find their non-conforming bodies attractive (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). In the Dove campaign, feelings of both pain and anger are avoided, and any emotional pain over unhappiness with one's appearance is sanitized and is presented as easy to overcome - a far cry from the dialogues encouraged by the PPPO (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Most notably, consumer culture like that represented by Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty does not support collective strategies for social change or any emphasis on structural hierarchies (Johnston & Taylor, 2008).

Following the conclusion of their comparative study of Dove's campaign and the work of the PPPO, Judith Taylor and Josée Johnston collaborated with Krista Whitehead of Canada's Mount Royal University to further understand how young women who identify as feminists understand Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty (Taylor et al., 2016). More specifically, the researchers sought to learn how these women respond to encouragement from corporations to exercise their politics through consumption (Taylor et al., 2016). They found most agreed that the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty could be classified as a type of faux feminism that inauthentically engages with feminist ideas (Taylor et al., 2016). This is in direct support of my thesis and the characterization of Dove's campaign my paper intends to prove true. The participants asserted that unlike feminism, the campaign was not transgressive. In other words, it did not shock people out of their complacency and force them to re-evaluate accepted norms (Taylor et al., 2016). Rather, the campaign pushed a central message that women should prioritize being beautiful - a message that participants found incompatible with the transgressive objective of feminism (Taylor et al., 2016).

Participants also indicated belief that corporate engagement with feminist politics dilutes feminist criticism of capitalism and the ability of feminists to imagine non-commodified alternatives (Taylor et al., 2016). A number of women objected to the idea that feminist beliefs should be supported through the purchase of a product, and expressed disbelief that Dove could accomplish feminist goals while prioritizing product sales (Taylor et al., 2016). Furthermore, there was a general agreement amongst focus groups that while Dove's parent company, Unilever, would profit from the campaign, beauty norms and insecurity about appearance would not be radically changed (Taylor et al., 2016). The majority of participants concluded that corporations should not engage with feminist work because feminism is inherently anti-capitalist and political expression through consumption is not a legitimate strategy for progressive movements (Taylor et al., 2016). The findings of this study reflect my central beliefs that the Campaign for Real Beauty

reinforces the imperative of "compulsory beauty" and that feminist consumerism is not conducive to the creation of significant and lasting change.

The disempowering nature of the Campaign for Real Beauty's discourse can also be explained through the consideration of its status as a work of "femvertising" (Windels et al., 2019). As previously described, femvertising messages are known for their common use of postfeminist ideals that subvert feminism and propagate further gender inequality (Windels et al., 2019). The trend of femvertising is characterized by the appropriation of female empowerment and feminist values to encourage brand consumption and loyalty (Feng et al., 2019). To reiterate the definition provided in my paper's framework, "femvertising" is a term used to reference advertisements that attempt to challenge stereotypes about womanhood and the social stigmas women face (Windels et al., 2019).

Windels and her team assert that works of femvertising typically involve engagement with postfeminist media culture, commodity feminism, individualization, self-surveillance, new perspectives on the embrace of femininity, confidence culture, and self body love - all of which exist within the Campaign for Real Beauty (Windels et al., 2019). More specifically, as a work of postfeminist-informed femvertising, Dove's campaign individualizes the problems of women instead of noting the social and cultural structures that contribute to them (Windels et al., 2019). It also employs confidence culture as a means of providing quick and easy solutions to greater societal problems, simply suggesting that women treat themselves with more kindness rather than address the systems that oppress them (Windels et al., 2019). Those who understand the ways corporations are able to profit off of the feminist movement experience great skepticism over commercialized social movements like the Campaign for Real Beauty (Feng et al., 2019). This skepticism is often justified, as by creating a work of femvertising, Dove appropriates feminist values and reconstructs feminism as an ideal that can be acheived only through the purchase of Dove products (Feng et al., 2019).

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the rhetorical workings of The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty and to explain how this object hijacks the feminist movement in a manner that is detrimental to women. Over the course of my analysis, I examined Dove's campaign as a work of commodity feminism, a work of post-feminism, and most recently, a work of femvertising. One of the primary findings resulting from this exploration was that the Campaign for Real Beauty enforces a narrative of "compulsory beauty" which asserts that beauty is a quality *all* women must want to embody and that is inherently tied to their value and worth. Another main discovery I encountered was that Dove's positioning as an agent of feminist consumerism both devalues radical feminist movements and prevented the company from creating greater change. The most important implication of this paper is that women must not solely rely on institutions that do not prioritize them. Rather, it is essential to take inspiration from grassroots movements like the PPPO and gather to raise consciousness and community.

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