

**Consuming Constructions:
A Critique of Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty**

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ABSTRACT

According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, approximately 11.7 million surgical and nonsurgical procedures were performed in the United States in 2007; of these surgeries 91% were executed on women. While contemporary conceptions of beauty are limited to say the least, Dove's campaign to counter such ideas are similarly limited. In attempting to appeal to what they call "real" women, Dove markets itself as an esteem-building brand based on enhancing women's natural beauty; however, what Dove sells are nevertheless beauty products. I will argue that the message of Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty is not only contradicted by its product-line, but that Dove exploits women's desire for such an inclusive message. The appeal of the campaign works to create a deep brand loyalty that covers up its own inherent flaw: that Dove itself upholds the beauty myths and expectations it claims to aim to reverse, expectations that are both consuming and consumed.

The standard of beauty today, at least as many women perceive this standard via the mass media in general and advertising in particular, is unnatural, unhealthy, and unrealistic. A survey conducted by Dove revealed that out of 3,000 women in ten different countries, only 2% described themselves as beautiful (Etcoff et al. 9). These results are not surprising considering many of the countries included in the survey – the United Kingdom, Japan, France, Italy, Canada, and the United States – are Westernized countries, where the dominant culture's conception of beauty tends to be shaped by Western ideals, including but not limited to, whiteness, tallness, and thinness. In its attempt to uproot the unrealistic standard of beauty that damages women's self-esteem and self-image, Dove launched its Campaign for Real Beauty in 2003. Given that it seeks

to challenge the status quo of beauty and the way young girls are socialized to perceive themselves, Dove's campaign can be considered a political act. More specifically, the Dove campaign could be considered what Nancy Fraser refers to as a subaltern counter-public: a discursive arena where members of subordinate groups invent and circulate ideas that counter hegemonic values and practices (123). In "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Fraser argues that a healthy public sphere requires an array of competing publics that express individual interests in addition to issues concerning the "common good." A healthy public sphere must also avoid the bracketing of social differences, and instead acknowledge and accept diversity (Fraser 127). Although Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty provides an alternative definition of beauty and seeks to unite women through this shared concept of "real beauty," it also promotes individualism over collectivity, operates on certain exclusions rather than pluralism, and encourages identity construction through material goods in place of human relationships. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty does not function as a subaltern counter-public, but is a product of corporate instrumentalism that works to fragment and commodify that public.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Endorsing Vanity and Rivalry

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty promotes fragmentation by appealing to women as individuals and by providing arenas for women to compete with each other. For example, in 2007, Dove's magazine, *Shine*, held a contest to find the most "unique" hairstyle, marketing it with an appeal to privatization: "Hair is a unique way of expressing a woman's individual beauty." Accordingly, women are continuously invited to create their own *Shine* online magazine profile, explaining how their hair expresses their individuality. While these contests seek to celebrate and honour each individual

woman's uniqueness, it also separates women by encouraging them to focus solely on personal traits that entitle only them to the prize. Rather than encouraging acceptance and collectivity against beauty ideals, Dove promotes competition among private individuals to determine whose looks are more unique than others.

Author Benjamin Barber suggests that such cultural emphasis on individualism forces people to choose between private desires and the common good, a decision in which individual consumerist wants tend to outweigh the desire for public discourse (128). Although Fraser contends that a healthy public sphere should not be restricted to deliberating matters of the "common good," the focus on individual concerns and experiences within the Dove campaign overshadows the notion of collective resistance to Western beauty standards. Accordingly, Barber argues, "Privatization turns the private, impulsive me lurking inside myself into an inadvertent enemy of the public" (128). By encouraging participation in such contests as that offered by *Shine*, Dove's campaign appears to serve as a public space for women to express their individuality; on the other hand, by privatizing needs and desires, social consideration and discussion becomes limited and secondary.

For example, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty website provides a blog forum for mothers, mentors, and girls to discuss body issues in general, as well as their own experiences and fears about their image. Although most of the submissions to the blog begin in the first-person, focusing on personal stories and experiences, many submissions are written in response to previous ones. In contrast to Jürgen Habermas' concept of the liberal-individualistic public sphere, Fraser argues a civic-republican view of the public sphere serves a greater purpose for subaltern groups. In this view, private individuals are

capable of collective action because private interests function as a starting point for greater social debate (Fraser 130). The Dove campaign's focus on the individual as a combatant against Western beauty ideals encourages collectivity and group discussion; on the other hand, since these forums are categorized as "Mothers and Mentors," "Girls Only," and "Ageless Beauties," participation in social discussion is limited by their individualism.

While Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty aims to create "a forum for women to participate in a dialogue and debate about the definition and standards of beauty in society," (2007) it does so by replacing considerations for the greater public with the tasks of narcissistic self-promotion and image-construction – as demonstrated by *Shine*'s unique hair contest and the categorical nature of Dove's blog forum. Dove's endorsement of individualism and competition enhances fragmentation between women and other women, thereby delegitimizing Dove's goals to change society's *collective* perception of beauty. Moreover, since much of the debate about body image takes place on Dove's website, participation – to some extent – requires physical fragmentation through the isolated nature of computer use.

Internet historian Steven G. Jones argues computer-mediated communication allows fragmented communities to acquire, organize, and maintain social contacts. Conversely, Jones suggests that that "we simply seek community by whatever means is available," which holds true "insofar as we seek community in other places as it dissolves in the spaces we physically inhabit" (11). Bringing women together to participate as active citizens via the Internet is itself a reflection of a community lost in the physical

world as a result of social fragmentation. While many people turn to a virtual world for comfort and support, participating in these digital communities eliminates the necessity for physical nearness when in conversation. In searching for belonging in a simulated world, civic skills are degenerated, becoming both cause and consequence of physical isolation and social apathy:

As the public sphere has become increasingly fragmented and less gratifying, individuals have become more likely to withdraw into their own private realms to seek self-confirmation, gratification, and even express counter-hegemonic practices...But this withdrawal lets the social order become more powerful with an ever more enfeebled privatized self less likely to contest major issues. (Boggs, 81)

Although the Internet is arguably a viable tool for cultural criticism and marginalized forms of expression, it can also be considered a cause for social disintegration; while beginning to form online communities, “our actual connections to actual publics are obliterated” (Barber 228). Additionally, as a medium for the circulation of subaltern views, the Internet lacks the physical connectedness that compels people to act.

David S. Allen provides a distinction between an informed public and an active public: “The citizen in an informed public achieves his or her goals in relative isolation, requiring only the aid of information-providing institutions...members of society have substituted ‘knowledge about’ a situation for action” (34). While Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty provides knowledge and platforms to discuss society’s conception of beauty, it also promotes narcissistic competition among individual women to be heard and recognized. Likewise, Dove’s online “real beauty” community, as well as the language used to convey its message, fragments women from other members of the greater public the Dove campaign neglects to address.

No Men Allowed: Upholding Gender Codes

Dove's campaign encourages the acceptance of diversity and difference in what society considers "beautiful" while at the same time excluding certain groups from participating in its cause. For instance, Dove's interactive Real Beauty website and its television advertisements exclude men. While the issue of beauty standards is especially relevant to women since women's experiences, views, and socialization differs from that of men and thus, deserves a space of its own, women's beauty standards are also internalized by men. The comments of Chicago Sun Times columnist Richard Roeper illustrate the ways men are also influenced by unrealistic and unhealthy images of women that dominate advertisements and the mass media:

I find these Dove ads a little unsettling. If I want to see plump gals baring too much skin, I'll go to Taste of Chicago... When we're talking women in their underwear on billboards outside my living room windows, give me the fantasy babes, please. If that makes me sound superficial, shallow and sexist -- well yes, I'm a man. (Posner 1)

By emphasizing *women's* experience with unrealistic beauty ideals, Dove's campaign ignores the notion that men's conception of beauty also has a direct effect on the way women perceive themselves.

Social psychologist Carol Tavris suggests "the fact that the large majority of women who have breast implants for cosmetic reasons are in their thirties and forties, and married, reveals a more likely motive than vanity" (Tavris 217). One woman interviewed by Tavris, said her father used to joke that "he couldn't tell her front from her back," and that her husband often joined in on the laugh (Tavris 218). According to Tavris' findings and Roeper's comments, men's conception of female beauty is also shaped by the same

advertising that has a negative effect on women, which then adds to the pressure on women to try to meet such standards.

Consequently, there has been some controversy regarding Dove's parent company Unilever; Unilever also owns Axe, a distinctly male line of hygiene products. In a stark contrast to the women featured in the Dove campaign, the women featured in Axe ads embody the contemporary beauty ideal: long hair, small waists, and large breasts. However, the issue is not that Unilever is marketing two contradictory image campaigns, but that these marketing campaigns are contradictory because they are gendered. While Dove encourages "real beauty" in ads directed towards women, ads directed toward men continue to construct "fantasy babes." Although Dove ads provide an alternative to the mainstream standards of beauty as portrayed in Axe commercials, it does so by neglecting to challenge men's advertising that also influences how women conceive their own beauty. Rather than circulating a collective notion of "real beauty" to all members of society, the gendered nature of Dove and Axe advertising sets up a dichotomy of "real women" versus "fantasy babes."

Moreover, by encouraging images of "real women," Dove implies that women who do fit the ideal are not real women, and that "real women" are not the ideal. As a result, the Dove campaign even excludes women from participation. The slogan "Real women have real curves" shows how Dove's campaign for diversity negates itself; some bloggers on Dove's website argued that because of the stigma against the un-real ideal, many naturally thin girls are accused of having an eating disorder, and consequently, suffer from a negative body image and low self-esteem. Instead of bracketing the concept of beauty as "real" or "fantasy," Nancy Fraser argues "the possibilities expand once we

acknowledge the complexity of...identities” (127). However, because of the exclusions placed against both men and women within the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, recognition and tolerance of diversity goes unrealized, reinforcing people’s reliance on commodities for acceptance in an increasingly fragmented society of private individuals.

Learn it, Love it, Live it: Constructing Women’s Wants

While Dove’s campaign encourages adopting a positive self-image, it also encourages image construction through material goods in place of human relationships; that is, the Dove campaign exemplifies “commodity fetishism.” Commodity fetishism represents the illusory view that a material object (that can be purchased) has the ability to provide meanings that have little or nothing to do with the object itself: “people prospectively value commodities not in terms of the skills, sweat, and time employed in their creation but, instead, in terms of the socially constructed meanings associated with them” (Comor 77).

On one hand, while Dove promotes being real and authentic, they also advertise beauty and hair products, skin firming creams, tanning lotion, and “pro-age” ointments. On the other hand, through its Campaign for Real Beauty, the company itself becomes linked to the notion of “real beauty” – an illusory association with the Dove brand that has little or nothing to do with the products it sells. According to the Dove Global Study, 88% of participants said “being loved” is the most important factor in making them feel beautiful (29). By associating “loving your hair” – the slogan for the Dove/*Shine* hair contest – with the Dove brand, Dove products become material forms of the concept “love,” or at least products to help women love themselves. As Otto Riewoldt notes, “The primary objective [of “brandscaping”] is not to sell the product but to generate a

fascination with the brand; to get the customer to identify with the world of the brand, creating a brand awareness and providing it with a deep set emotional core” (10).

Riewoldt’s description of “brandscaping” can be seen in Dove’s new short film, *Onslaught*. The video begins with the image of a young pre-teen girl followed by an onslaught of sexualized women in ads and commercials that encourage women to look “younger, firmer, tighter, softer.” To counter such messages, Dove promotes a curvier body, but as one Dove forum participant suggests, Dove is simply cashing out on a clever euphemism for obesity (Dove 2008). Although Dove encourages “pro-age” ointments to reduce the look of aging, “natural glow” tanning lotions to reveal healthy-looking skin, and firming creams to “care for your great curves,” it has created a brand loyalty that override such marketing contradictions. Instead, the Dove brand itself becomes linked to notions of beauty, self-esteem, and self-empowerment; however, the concept of self-empowerment that Dove promotes is heavily rooted in the laissez-faire mindset of individualism and the freedom to construct ones identity within the perimeters of the marketplace.

According to Fraser, a healthy public sphere does not necessarily require a strict separation between society and the state since such detachment allows laissez-faire capitalism to proliferate (133). Despite the potential of Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty, it works by replacing civic empowerment through social discussion with the acquisition of private rewards. For instance, one of Dove’s latest campaigns, Sleepover for Self-Esteem, held mass sleepovers all across Canada for girls aged 8-14 to discuss issues surrounding contemporary beauty standards. Although such an event provided participants with a forum for face-to-face reciprocal discussion about social concerns,

their participation is encouraged with incentives in the form of prizes. Beneath the sign-up form on Dove's Sleepover for Self-Esteem webpage is a box to indicate whether guests would also like to sign up to win a free trip to Jamaica, family movie packages, and free song downloads; also, with the purchase of two Dove products, customers can receive a free pair of pajamas – presumably to be worn at the sleepover party. Such contests sustain the capitalist mentality by encouraging competition and individual material gain. These personal values only enhance social fragmentation and facilitate the erosion of greater (yet immaterial) social values.

By associating its brand with notions of youth, love, and empowerment, Dove's campaign actually robs such notions of their authenticity. Barber argues that by associating Cheerios with notion of "Mom" and "family love," real notions of motherhood become as un-real as its brand use (195). Relating notions of natural beauty and self-esteem with Dove makes real notions of authenticity and self-esteem as unfulfilling as an empty brand; such meaningless associations keep people buying, continuously searching for real emotional belonging and support through the un-real promises of the brand.

Cultural studies scholars Sut Jhally, William Leiss, and Steven Kline argue that the erosion of greater social supporters is a consequence of individualism and fragmentation, where "the generation and maintenance of self-hood became a lifetime task for individuals: an endless series of exercises in self-improvement, personal development, self-expression... 'selling oneself'" (222). Rather than challenging contemporary beauty standards, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty reinforces them not only by selling products that contradict its message, but by encouraging girls and women

to continue to view beauty – whether “real or “fantasy – as a life-long pursuit that requires constant construction:

Many teenage cosmetic surgeries emanate from self-aversion, camouflaged as an emblem of self-esteem...the girl that chooses cosmetic surgery chooses obsession with the body and mastery over it rather than an attempt at transcendence that means forgetting the body. (Barber 196)

“Real beauty” is thus no different from beauty enhanced by cosmetics and cosmetic surgical procedures. Although the Dove campaign challenges beauty standards, it does not challenge women’s obsession with altering their bodies in order to enhance their self-esteem.

Rather, by marketing its “real beauty” products as emblems for “self-esteem,” Dove is able to commodify it, constructing “self-esteem” as a fetishized object that can be purchased in the form of make-up and firming creams. By buying their products, women become advertisement for Dove’s promotion of “self-esteem” and as a result, they relate to others as objects that also promote a particular brand. Celebrities such as Michael Jordan, Bill Gates, and Oprah have *become* the brands they endorse. Those who purchase Nike are meant to think they are acquiring – or in other words, becoming – Michael Jordan (Barber 182). In seeing others as the embodiment of a particular brand, and out of a constructed desire to associate oneself with a person or type of person who embodies that brand, those who purchase Dove products are also branded with its logo and fetishisms. Thus, the Dove campaign is not comprised of a collective group of women working together to realize similar subaltern goals, but of individual objects that embody the branded notions of “real beauty” and “self esteem.”

Conclusion

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty does not function as a subaltern counter-public, but is a product of corporate instrumentalism that works to fragment and commodify that public. By positioning itself as a form of resistance to the conformity and unrealistic nature of contemporary Western beauty standards, Dove presents itself as the brand with the solution; however, its solution tends to play into the hands of corporate reason by promoting individualism over collectivity, operating on certain exclusions rather than pluralism, and encouraging identity construction through branding and commodity fetishism. While Dove markets "real beauty" it also advertises beauty products, thereby circulating dominant expectations of the female image. Likewise, the absence of collective forms of action that transcend "me" and "us" oppositions allows the ideal to remain as it is. Furthermore, since self-esteem is best achieved through personal relationships and genuine systems of support – such as friends, family, and community – the selling and buying of commodities only widens the emotional gap that advertising constantly attempts to fill. Stuart Ewen writes, "As we are confronted by the mass culture, we are offered the idiom of our own criticism as well as its negation – corporate solutions to corporate problems" (219). Taking into account the continuous growth of niche markets comprised of marginalized groups – such as goths, gays, blacks, and women – can such alternative publics really be considered *counter*-hegemonic? Fraser argues social efforts that benefit the economic prosperity of one group at the expense of another, and "the postulation of a common good shared by exploiters and exploited...should be regarded with suspicion" (131). Accordingly, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty should not be considered a shining beacon of social change, but another

product of corporate aims that is itself implicit in the social problems it seeks to transform.

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