

Sarah Heikkinen

Visual Culture

Gene Gort

10 May 2020

Appearances Aren't Everything:

The Dilemma of Commodity Fetishism in Dove's Real Beauty Campaign

Commodity Fetishism has been an integral part of advertisement campaigns for decades. While companies seek to reignite their image to consumers through various means, the core principle of commodity fetishism is still the same. In contemporary branding, companies have taken on social and political subjects to attach to their identity in order to connect with consumers. One such subject is Feminism. Commodity Feminism has been a term associated with feminist advertisements since the 1980's. The commodification of female empowerment uses ideas within such as interpellation to disestablish feminist praxis and align consumers with their brand. Using contemporary advertisements from the Dove Real Beauty Campaign, I will detail how contemporary advertising commodifies feminist ideology and nullifies the political and institutional importance that it originally pertains to, while also using interpellation to direct consumers to purchase brand goods that coincide with fetishized identities that brands perpetuate onto consumers.

In order to understand the commodification of contemporary feminist ideals, the history of advertisements and their effect on historical feminist movements needs to be considered. Advertisements have long played a part in building commodity-based narratives. These branding techniques focused on a Marxist theory called commodity fetishism. Referred to in his book

Capital, this theory is the practice of minimizing the use value of a commodity and replacing it with a broad range of exchange values (Marx 45)¹¹. Advertisements throughout the mid-20th century commonly focused on the identities of women within the context of a patriarchal society, consistently pushing exchange values relating to motherhood or to the desire to be surveyed as respectable. As second wave feminism began in the 1960's and spanned the following two decades, branding began to change, taking a rebranded image of the "new woman" and creating an identity equal to men yet still subjected to a reframed version of the "male gaze" (Goldman, Heath, Smith 334-335). These advertisements focused on the reclamation of the sexual desires of the female body, and ultimately were contradictory and further alienating due to the depiction of highly idealized bodies and facial features. By the late 20th century, a new practice of commodifying the ideology of feminism was imbedded in the practice of placing female confidence in the hands of the individual by embedding the capability of self-acceptance in their products or services with the knowledge that the bodies represented in ads were unattainable.

This placement on self-image through aligning with specific brands or consumption of products directly ignores the basic premise for the feminist movement: the societal structures that control and condition the lives of women. This practice of diminishing the societal construct that is the base for the political praxis of feminism is seen in contemporary advertisements like the Dove "Real Beauty Campaign." Started in 2006, Dove launched a platform identifying a key problem in advertising the female body: idealization through photo editing and manipulation.

¹ According to Karl Marx in his book *Das Kapital*, "There, the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities" (Marx 45).

One of the more prominent ads in the campaign features a group of women standing together in various poses (See Fig A). The group all wears a consistent attire of plain white undergarments, and this set of attire blends into the solid white background. To the right of the photo of women is text that states, “New Dove Firming. As Tested on Real Curves” and below is a small photo of Dove’s firming cream set. The selection of women in the ad are the first noticeable feature.

While still within a limited scope, these women are portrayed as “real women,” due to their seemingly unedited bodies. The selection varies in body weight, type, and skin tone to a certain extent. This pushes the idea of diversity and reality versus the stereotypical portrayal of women that is idolized. The text pushes this idea, by stating that their product is being tested, “on real curves” and therefore isn’t manipulated by photo editing software. It seems at first glance that this ad is a body positive campaign that is solving the issues that initially drove alienation from spectators in the late 20th century. However, the practice of commodity fetishism in the spectrum of feminism is still largely at play here. While these women are varied in body type and are unedited, the selection of body types is still within thin parameters. Age, weight, skin tone, and body proportion are limited in range, and still don’t show a massive amount of complexity. This signifies that there is still a standard to relate to. In addition to the limited spectrum of what diversity means in this ad, the women still don’t appear to have their own agency. Posing is staged, placing the women in stereotypical modelling poses that don’t emphasize their unique personalities. This sameness narrows the playing field into one single identity: a seemingly self-confident woman. The text to the right emphasizes this point by mentioning the product is tested on real curves. The product type itself also sends a signifier by being a product meant for firming skin, which is an area of concern for women who are focused on appearance. These signifiers all point to a common message: that you will gain self-confidence and look like these happy, still

somewhat idealized women if you align with this brand's products. Agency and the structure-based components of feminist praxis do not matter here, and thus the commodification of the movement relies on a stereotypical practice of placing the hardships of being a woman completely on the individual.

Another concept that these advertisements take advantage of is interpellation. A concept originating from Louis Althusser, interpellation is the internalization of ideas presented to us as our own. Author and Media and Audience Professor David Gauntlett writes about branding and interpellation when he states, "Interpellation occurs when a person connects with a media text: when we enjoy a magazine or TV show, for example, this uncritical consumption means that the text has interpellated us into a certain set of assumptions, and caused us to tacitly accept a particular approach to the world" (Gauntlett 27). This practice is emphasized through Dove's advertisements. In Figure A, the advertisement uses interpellation in a more subtle way, by associating the level of a woman's confidence with the use of their product. Brand alignment leads to a confident and, to a certain extent, still idealized individual. In figure B, Dove's Real Beauty Campaign sought a more participatory advertisement to push this concept onto spectators. This advertisement series features a headshot of a woman making eye contact with the viewer. The diversity of the subject changes from ad to ad, and a wider range is selected overall.² The example in Figure B shows a woman's portrait. The model is covered with a wide array of freckles across her face and shoulders. Next to the advertisement are two options that the viewer is confronted with: "Flawed? Flawless?" The viewer's interaction with the ad is to mentally check off the option that ultimately judges the appearance of the model in front of them. The participation portion of this ad guides viewers into selecting the option that celebrates

² For the purposes of this essay, one example from a body of ads was selected to explicate.

the diversity in the appearance of various women. This ad ultimately interpellated the viewer into accepting appearance-based confidence building for individuals. While no products are presented with the model, the Dove brand is still present at the bottom of the ad, signifying that the brand aligns with positive body image as a purely physical factor. Viewers will internalize the participation they mentally take when interacting with the advertisement and will accept the idea as a pro-feminist brand. The reality of this ad is that the shaping of the question places value in appearance alone. While this ad is more diverse than in figure A, Dove still commodifies the physical attributes of being a female, and places sole value in appearance alone. The accomplishments these women are not important, only the physical attributes, for which they have coinciding products available for consumption, are pertinent. This is just one of the many ads Dove has released that target women to persuade them subtly into brand loyalty via the desire to be a self-confident individual.

While having a confident body image is an important issue for women today, Dove's Real Beauty Campaign takes the body image alone as the reason for low confidence. These ads are a step further from the feminist commodification of the 1980's and 1990's, however they still minimize the feminist movement into a focus on the individual alone rather than a set of societal structures that won't necessarily be affected by these advertisements. Commodity fetishism and interpellation are both concepts that are stronger more than ever. Subjects may have changed slowly over the decades, but the principle is still the same. Dove's Real Beauty Campaign is just one example of the many "pro female" brands that are more toxic than helpful toward the political praxis of the 21st century feminist movement.

Images Explicated:



Figure A

Source: https://effie.org/case_database/case/5F50_2019_E-335-405



Figure B

Source: <http://isabelbastidaproie.blogspot.com/2015/12/unit-4-beauty.html>

Works Cited:

- Goldman, Robert & Heath, Deborah & Smith, Sharon. (1991). Commodity Feminism. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 8. 333-351. 10.1080/15295039109366801.
- Gauntlett, David. *Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2010.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1, Progress Publishers Moscow, 2015.