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"Real Beauty" Campaigns in the Media: *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*

When was the last day you went without seeing a woman sexualized in the mass media? We are bombarded with these images constantly: on billboards, in magazines, on television shows, on ads on the side of our web browsers, and in numerous other ways, whether we are necessarily aware of it or not. The images are especially problematic in the case of women because of the media's narrow representation of them, which is unrepresentative of what the actual population of those affected by the media look like. Women often negatively compare themselves to the ideal woman portrayed in media; if media representation of women included more "real" women, there would be less negative comparison.

Media negatively affects women's self-image, because many of them believe their lives would be better if they looked like the media ideal. Examining expectations and rewards that women associate with looking like a media ideal, Renee Engeln-Maddon and researchers from Northwestern University conducted a study in which women were asked to consider how different their lives would be if they looked like a media ideal. Engeln-Maddon did not provide a specific model for a media ideal, allowing for the participants to define what characterizes the media ideal themselves. Participants were asked to describe in writing the appearance of the ideal woman and then to rate on a numerical scale, how positively their life would change if they looked like their imagined ideal woman. The participants were also asked to describe the ways in which they expected their lives would change. Every participant's response to the imagined ideal

woman included thinness or body shape; however, responses varied in terms of other physical attributes. Participants also identified "a wide array of psychological benefits associated with looking like a media ideal, including increased confidence, assertiveness, self-esteem, happiness, and decreased body hatred" (Engeln-Maddox 263). Engeln-Maddox's study displays how the media's portrayal of the ideal woman does influence the lives of women, because many women believe the quality of their lives would increase if they looked like the ideal woman.

Whether or not the quality of life would *actually* increase if a woman's appearance reflected the female media ideal, Engeln-Maddox's study reveals that media representation of the woman's beauty ideal is a complex cultural issue. Feminist scholar Susan Bordo, in her book *Unbearable Weight*, points out that consumption of such images of beauty ideals often leads to what she calls body disciplining. Body disciplining can range anywhere from body image issues to eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, all of which can have serious, sometimes life-threatening health risks (Kilbourne). Bordo asserts that it does not matter even if women are aware that the media beauty ideals they are consuming are digitally altered, because these images are still dictating the way women perceive and judge their bodies (xvii). Thus, the images that media presents of unrealistic beauty standards is unavoidably internalized, posing a threat to the well-being and health of girls and women.

American society is beginning to realize the negative effects of unrealistic beauty standards, which is apparent in the recent trend of "real beauty" campaigns. I define "real beauty" campaigns as campaigns that attempt or claim to use "real" women in their advertising. "Real beauty" campaigns are widely celebrated as challenging female beauty standards, often overshadowing the corporate marketing strategy behind the ad campaign.

In "Branding 'Real' Social Change," Dara Persis Murray argues that cause branding merges messages of corporate concern and commitment for a cause. Persis Murray particularly identifies the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* as a cause-branding effort, "which associates corporate identities with social problems to benefit the corporate image." Following Dara Persis Murray, I will use her terminology of cause branding as the disguised hypocrisy in "real beauty" campaigns. Popular media, like the *Dove Real Beauty Campaign*, has used the idea of "real beauty" marketing strategies to please and increase their consumers, ultimately disguising corporate strategy as a selfless cause. National Public Radio journalist Karen Grigsby Bates highlights the effectiveness of cause-branding strategy when she personally asks a woman buying Dove body wash if it is "good stuff;" the woman admits, "I don't know, I almost don't care. I just wanted to support them because of their ads. Have you seen them? They're using real, grown-up women—and they are gorgeous!" Many people believe that if a large corporation with a huge audience can champion a "good cause," then what is not to love? Dove has to market somehow, so if they market using "real women," this could only really be beneficial to women, right? While on the surface, the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* appears to have women's interests in mind, I argue that the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* may be doing more harm for women's beauty standards.

Deconstructing the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*

Throughout my analysis of real beauty campaigns and the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* in particular, I will be selective with my terminology. Using the terms such as *beautiful* and *real beauty* has various consequences, as these terms are subjective and have no single definition. When I use these terms, I will parenthesize them in order to emphasize that the respective definition is the societal standard for these terms and are not my own definition.

Dove, manufactured by Unilever, is the No. 1 personal wash brand nationwide, with one in every three households using a Dove product, including beauty bars, body washes, face care, antiperspirant/deodorants, body mists, hair care, and styling aids (unileverusa.com). In an attempt to "further the global understanding of women, beauty and well-being—and the relationship between them," Dove commissioned "The Truth About Real Beauty" study in 2004. The study was carried out by survey in which women were asked a question regarding self-image and chose an answer based on a list provided. For example, women were given a list of words—natural, average, attractive, feminine, good-looking, cute, pretty, beautiful, sophisticated, sexy, stunning, gorgeous—and were asked to choose which word best reflected their view of their own looks (10). The study included 32,000 women aged 18-64 in ten different countries. The most notable statistic from the study, according to Dove, was that only "2% of women around the world would describe themselves as beautiful" (dove.us); however all of the words provided to the women were relatively positive, so the fact that only 2% described themselves as beautiful only really means that they may have used "pretty" or "good-looking" instead. "Natural" and "average" are the only less-positive words provided, and identifying as "natural" or "average" only becomes problematic when the specific woman finds it problematic. Regardless, Dove launched the *Campaign for Real Beauty* in September 2004 based on the findings in "The Truth About Real Beauty" study. According to Dove's website, "the campaign started a global conversation about the need for a wider definition of beauty after the study proved the hypothesis that the definition of beauty had become limiting and unattainable" (dove.us).

Dove is not wrong to claim that its campaign started a "global conversation," as it has quickly become the most influential and widely consumed "real beauty" campaign. When it first

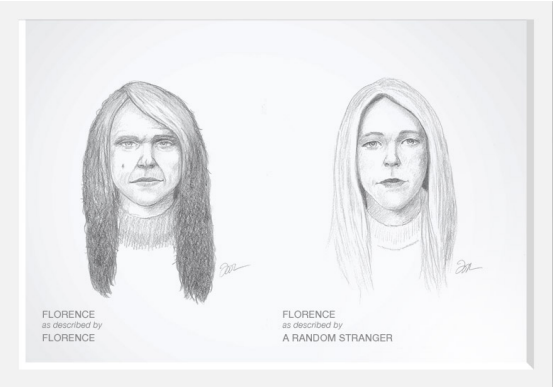
launched, the media seemingly went wild for it, with its "real women" models featured on *Oprah*, *The View*, *The Today Show*, and numerous other media outlets (Joni). The campaign launched its first viral (and award-winning) video in 2006 called *Evolution*, which displays a "real" woman who undergoes an extreme makeover and Photoshop job. In just its beginning years, with ads featuring a variety of women of different sizes, skin colors, and ages and with its *Evolution* video, the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* sparked worldwide discussion about the pressures from the media to be beautiful. The campaign's enormous impact is evident in the trend of "real beauty" campaigns afterward, reflected in Verily Magazine's total ban on all airbrushing in 2012, *Seventeen* Magazine's pledge to only feature "real" models in 2012, and lingerie company aerie's launching of *aerie Real* this year, an ad campaign featuring all unairbrushed models (Krupnick). It is clear that the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* has been exceedingly influential, causing a ripple effect in which we now see the launching of similar "real beauty" campaigns. Since its launching, the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* has included print ads in magazines, on billboards, in YouTube videos, and in commercials.

I will use a specific form of media to analyze the effectiveness of the overall campaign—the most viewed *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* video, "Dove Real Beauty Sketches." The sketch became the most watched video ad and the third most shared video ad of all time just one month after its launching in 2013 (Toure). The video made a first day appearance on *Today* and in two *Huffington Post* stories on the same day (Neff). I have chosen to analyze this specific video because it is a recent media sensation, and I believe it is representative of the overall message of the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*.

The video features "real women" describing their facial features to a forensic artist who cannot see his subjects; the artist then creates a sketch out of the description. Strangers who had

met the women only a day prior also describe the same women's features to the forensic artist. All of the self-descriptions—"fat, rounder face," "big forehead," "the older I've gotten the more freckles I've gotten"—juxtapose the strangers' descriptions—"she was so thin you could see her cheekbones…and her chin…it was a nice, thin chin," "cute nose," "blue eyes, very nice eyes." The two sketches are then compared, with the self-description sketch intending to represent unattractiveness and the stranger's description sketch to show something more "beautiful" (see Image 1 & 2). Dove's goal for the *Real Beauty Sketches* is to show that women are their own worst beauty critics and to argue that women should not be so hard on themselves, all promoting a message of self-acceptance.

Image 1



However, while attempting to be altruistic, the *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* instead reify beauty standards. The video ad subtly suggests that all of the self-descriptions (a mole, shadows under the eyes, wrinkles, etc.) are less attractive or less beautiful and that all the strangers' descriptions (thinness, blue eyes, etc.) are indeed beautiful. Rather than challenging hegemonic beauty ideals, the video actually reemphasizes the association between certain physical characteristics and beauty.

The ad also associates positive emotions with the more attractive sketches and negative emotions with the less attractive sketches. While looking at the two sketches of herself side by

side, one woman comments on the self-described sketch as, "she looks closed off and fatter…sadder too"; at the same time, she finds that the stranger-described sketch "looks more open, friendly and happy." In this way, the ad equates fatness with being closed off and sad, and beauty with friendliness and happiness. Regardless of any positive or negative associations with appearances, the problem lies in Dove's blame on the individual woman rather than on a society that enforces rigid beauty standards. The ad targets the women's individualistic rhetoric at the end when the forensic artist asks the women, "Do you think you are more beautiful than you think?" and when the closing words on the screen explicitly say, yes, "you are more beautiful than you think." Bordo articulates how "the body as a site of individual meaning and empowering play is prone to a naïve self-determinism that assumes that women act completely voluntarily, thus minimizing corporate domination" (275). Thus, low self-esteem is constructed as the individual woman's problem, which works in Dove's favor, as it is a corporation part of the larger society that reinforces beauty ideals.

Possibly most problematic about the *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* is that it maintains the notion that beauty is supreme when it comes to evaluating ourselves and other women. It might be more constructive to champion personal qualities, such as intelligence or kindness, rather than surface-level physical attributes. The "Dove Real Beauty Sketches" only connect beauty with physical attributes, but the way we view "beauty" has the potential to be powerful if we (and ad campaigns like Dove) start associating "beauty" with positive personality qualities. The ad immediately becomes more constructive if the phrase "more beautiful" in the line "you are more beautiful than you think" is replaced with "smarter." Some might argue that associating beauty with personal qualities just replaces the standard for physical beauty with competitive personalities; however, striving to be "the smartest" is a far more constructive goal than is

striving to have the prettiest face. Even if attempting to challenge beauty ideals, the *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* reiterates the idea that looking and feeling beautiful should be a priority for women.

The Opposition

Despite the fact that the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* contributes to the pressures of female beauty standards, millions around the world continue to applaud the campaign for its effort. Some evidence suggests that "real women" marketing campaigns are beneficial to women's self-esteem. In an effort to understand whether or not Dove's more inclusive marketing campaign actually had an effect on consumers, Jennifer Millard interviewed sixteen women aged 15 to 59 about whether they believed the campaign had a positive effect on their self-image. Millard concluded that the participants' "statements indicate that variety is appreciated while cookie-cutter images are not, and that the latter have been dominant in the beauty industry for too long" (158). In other words, the participants all agreed that they appreciated the diversity of models in the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*. Celebration of the campaign is also evidenced by consumer loyalty, as sales went up almost 20% in 2005, one year after the campaign was launched (Joni). Many consumers do find the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* effective in challenging female beauty standards, and they commend that even if it is a small step, it is still a step in the right direction.

Nevertheless, the *Dove Campaign For Real Beauty* is an extraordinarily hypocritical marketing scheme. While the campaign problematizes the fact that "only 2% of women around the world consider themselves beautiful" and "72% of girls feel tremendous pressure to be beautiful," Dove itself sells beauty products, increasing the pressure to be beautiful (Dove Research: The Real Truth About Beauty: Revisited). By calling its soap 'beauty bars,' Dove

suggests that women should use Dove's soaps in order to feel or look 'beautiful.' Most of the soaps have scents, such as 'shea butter,' 'jasmine petals,' and 'soothing cucumber and green tea,' which implies that women should smell nice as well as be clean and moisturized. All of this adds more pressure for women to maintain certain beauty standards. In fact, if the pressure to be "beautiful" were alleviated, Dove would most likely lose business, because shiny hair or smooth skin (goals that its products claim to meet) would be considered less important. The campaign puts forth a "natural" beauty standard, with one of the women in "Dove Real Beauty Sketches" asserting that she should "be more grateful of her natural beauty." However, is using beauty products necessarily considered embracing one's "natural" beauty? Rather than actually challenging beauty standards, Dove simply redefines "natural" beauty, which is arguably harder, because a woman would be expected to hide the fact that she uses beauty products). Worst of all, Dove then criticizes women if they cannot accept their "natural beauty."

Moving Forward

The *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* allows us to explore the recent trend of "real beauty" campaigns. Using "real women" as models, "real beauty" campaigns attempt to combat the unrealistic beauty ideals seen in mainstream media. The campaigns work under the assumption that, if women consume media images of "real women" who look more similar to them, they will be less critical of their own appearance and in turn have healthier self-esteem. However, though Dove challenges beauty ideals in some ways, it also emphasizes them in others, contributing to the larger societal problem of unrealistic beauty standards. Dove encourages women to celebrate their "natural beauty" through the purchase of Dove beauty products, which is a rather hypocritical message. Thus, while Dove celebrates self-acceptance of appearance and fights for all women against unrealistic beauty standards, it employs a self-

interested marketing scheme with the goal of increasing consumer loyalty and yielding higher profit.

An alternate, and possibly more productive, way to combat beauty ideology can be seen through grassroots organization efforts. Johnston and Taylor, in "Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists: A Comparative Study of Grassroots Activism and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign," compare the corporate *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* with the non-corporate organization, Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off, which also targets feminine beauty ideals. Johnston and Taylor discuss Dove's marketing strategy, in which consumerism is key and "shopping is the ideal form of participation in struggles for social change." Dove's marketing counters the resistance of consumerism advocated by Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off (947). In this way, Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off's more radical approach to the struggle against unrealistic beauty standards attempts to challenge the exact institutions, like beauty product corporations, that are a part of the problem. Further, a constructive goal would be to move away from a society that stresses beauty when evaluating women and toward a society that instead values women's personal qualities, such as intelligence.

Lastly, I would like to highlight the importance of demonstrating agency through conscious consumerism. As it is almost impossible to avoid the media and the act of consuming, we can do our best to be aware of, and critical of, the messages that certain media send. While we can continue to buy and enjoy Dove products and celebrate the *Dove Real Beauty Campaign* for its strengths, we can simultaneously be conscious of and critique the ways in which we find it problematic.

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