Commodity Feminism and the Unilever Corporation: Or, How the Corporate Imagination Appropriates Feminism

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Abstract

Commodity feminism (the reduction of feminism to a commodity that can be bought and sold on the capitalist market) poses new challenges for mobilizing the feminist radical imagination and resisting appropriation. Unilever provides a good example of the strategies and rhetoric of commodity feminism and the workings of the corporate imagination.

What are the barriers to the feminist radical imagination today? This intervention considers seemingly “feminist” representations of femininity at a time in which multinational corporations are assumed to be the rightful agents of social and political change. In the global north, the late 1980s and 1990s saw an expansion of “pro-girl” or “pro-woman” rhetoric in advertising, the corporate media and popular culture more generally, as capital colluded with liberal feminism, primarily to sell commodities to girls and women. Strong athletic women wore Nike shoes, women who knew “I’m Worth It” used L’Oréal makeup, and women requiring deodorant “Strong Enough For A Man” put on Secret. Young girls got their first introduction to “feminism” with the Spice Girls’ “girl power” message; teenage girls could turn into a female action hero by playing the video game Lara Croft; teenage girls and women watched Buffy the Vampire Slayer and her friends save the world then purchased comic books, video games, trading cards, novels and action figures representing their favourite characters; and women watched the female protagonists of Sex and the City participate in conspicuous consumption as a “feminist” act. Today this phenomenon, which I term “commodity feminism,” has gained ascendancy in the global north, both as a predominant way in which women are sold commodities, and as the way feminism is imagined in the corporate media and popular culture. Commodity feminism poses new challenges for mobilizing the feminist radical imagination and resisting appropriation.

Commodity feminism is a play on Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism. For Marx, commodity fetishism imbibes commodities (objects bought and sold in a
capitalist economy) with a value that has little or nothing to do with the actual physical form of the commodity or the material relations through which the commodity was produced. We come to “fetishize” the thing itself, rather than seeing the commodity as the product of social relations. In a similar way, commodity feminism has little or nothing to do with the actual politics of feminism or the material circumstances of women’s lives. Not only does it distract and distance women from underlying social and political problems, it also produces particular forms of female subjectivity that are necessitated by commodity production and masculinist capitalist social relations. As such, commodity feminism marks both a broad cultural tendency and neoliberal form of subjectivity. Embedded as it is in capitalist relations, commodity feminism operates to limit radical imagination and actively suppress feminist activists’ ability to raise consciousness of and challenge these relations. Imagination plays a key role in the construction of shared meanings and under neoliberal dominance, the corporate-driven imagination of consumerism represents a dangerous force that is redefining feminism towards its own ends.

Today, commodity feminism is particularly pervasive in representations of femininity in popular culture. Feminists have long discussed the unrealistic representations of femininity embodied by the beauty and fashion industries, and have linked these representations to several forms of psychological and physical harm to girls and women including low self-esteem and eating disorders. What is often lost in these discussions is a more general critique of commodities and capitalism. Without such a critique, advertisers who represent femininity in ways that deviate even slightly from beauty industry norms are celebrated as groundbreaking. A particularly good example of such a representation is Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty.” Since 2004 Dove (a subsidiary of the Unilever Corporation) has used “real” women—that is, women with no previous modelling experience whose bodies are larger than the supermodel average and not always white—to sell Dove products. Women in the global north are encouraged to endorse this seemingly “feminist” campaign by purchasing Dove products.

The Campaign began in the United Kingdom and spread to various countries in North, South and Central America, Europe and Southeast Asia, although it remains concentrated in the global North. Ostensibly designed to challenge unrealistic and harmful images of femininity in the media and advertising, the goal of the campaign is clearly to sell Dove products. The campaign uses traditional promotional strategies, such as advertisements on television, in magazines, on billboards, and on public transit. But it also branches out into new, interactive media with an expensive website.

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(www.campaignforrealbeauty.com). The website encourages women to engage in “democratic” activities such as casting votes on the site (to somehow dispel beauty myths) and attending local “consciousness-raising” events sponsored by Dove. To support the brand, Dove has produced several short films which originally aired as trailers before major films in North American cinemas but have received the widest circulation by word of mouth on the video-streaming website YouTube. The film “Evolution,” released in 2006 when YouTube was relatively new, demonstrates how photographs are manipulated in conventional cosmetics advertisements to create unrealistic and unachievable beauty ideals. Subsequent videos include “Onslaught,” which examines how girls are bombarded with unhealthy images of femininity, and “True Colors,” which shows how girls internalize fat-phobic and racist constructions of beauty. Dove also commissioned a stage play in Canada titled “Body & Soul,” which challenged conceptions about women and aging to promote their Pro-Age products for older women. They have produced three “global studies,” all of which come to the (fairly obvious) conclusion that women have body image issues. Finally, Dove has a “Self-Esteem Fund” that focuses on the body image of girls. The Fund offers free online educational tools to promote girls’ self-esteem (and of course, help them learn about Dove’s benevolence and products) and also funds charitable organizations that foster positive body image in women and girls. In Canada and the United States, the Campaign for Real Beauty has received almost exclusively positive publicity, and an exceptional amount of it. The Campaign was featured on the cover of People magazine in 2005, and has been featured on popular American televisions shows such as The Today Show, The Ellen DeGeneres Show, The Oprah Winfrey Show, The View and Good Morning America.

Ironically and revealingly, however, as Unilever sells women “empowerment” in the global North with the message that different sizes and colours of bodies are beautiful, they also sell women skin lightening cream in the global South with the message that lighter-coloured skin is more beautiful and desirable. Although the Campaign for Real Beauty is not associated with the skin lightening cream Fair & Lovely, both are Unilever products and the marketing of the latter uses language and strategies strikingly similar to the former. Fair & Lovely was originally sold in the 1970s in India, which remains its primary market, and is currently sold in forty countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The product’s advertising consistently links happiness, attractiveness and upward mobility with lighter skin. Today the reach of Fair & Lovely extends even to poor rural villagers in India; it is widely available in 5 rupee (approximately 20 U.S. cents) sachets.

Unlike Dove, Fair & Lovely has not enjoyed consistently positive publicity. In the early 2000s, a variety of Indian feminists were vocally critical of Fair & Lovely’s

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television advertisements, particularly the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), the women’s wing of the Communist Party of India. After their concerns received no reply from Unilever, AIDWA launched a year-long campaign against Fair & Lovely in 2002, including a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission. After the Commission passed the complaint on to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the federal government issued notice of the complaints to Unilever and the company pulled off the air two of the advertisements named in the complaint.

In order to recover from the bad publicity, Unilever launched the Fair & Lovely Foundation in 2003. The Foundation uses similar language to Dove’s Self-Esteem Fund. However, while the Fund focuses on the body image of girls, the Foundation’s main focus is higher education scholarships for economically marginalized Indian women. The Foundation (until 2005) funded other projects including career guidance fairs for women across India, the development of women’s athletics programs, as well as a thirteen-episode television series titled Fair & Lovely Shikhar. Each episode focused on a different Indian woman, including a domestic violence activist and a photojournalist, who overcame adversity to “change her destiny.”

In addition to the Foundation, Unilever’s marketing strategies for Fair & Lovely products bear the hallmarks of commodity feminism. While earlier commercials tended to show women acquiring a husband or boyfriend through lighter skin, more recent commodity feminist twists on the narrative show women acquiring employment in professions normally held by men, such as cricket match announcers. One recent marketing slogan, “The Power of Beauty,” rehearses the myth that consumer practices can reconcile the contradictory demands of sexist culture on women. The commodity feminism of Fair & Lovely, in a similar manner to the Dove Real Beauty Campaign, works to justify the dominance of the corporation and the commodity in society, to enhance Unilever’s public image (including mollifying critiques of racism in the case of Fair & Lovely), and, of course, to increase sales of their products by linking women’s empowerment to consumption. Reading Fair & Lovely as commodity feminism encourages us to move beyond critiques that focus on Unilever’s (fairly predictable) hypocrisy and consider the broader relationships between racism, sexism and capitalism in our neoliberal moment.

In order to find out more about the strategies and rhetoric of commodity feminism and the workings of the corporate imagination I attended two public lectures given by marketers from the Campaign for Real Beauty. The first lecture was to a group of marketing students on January 25, 2007 at York University in...
Toronto\textsuperscript{4} and the second was at a luncheon supporting an abused women's shelter on June 10, 2008 in Mississauga, Ontario.\textsuperscript{5} Both of these lectures were given by women working for Dove who presented themselves as playing an important role in a feminist struggle: the first as a lone agent for change in a culture that is hostile to women's self-esteem, and the second as a feminist hero in a male-dominated advertising world. Despite their rhetoric of women's empowerment and their appropriation of feminist themes, the word feminism was never mentioned by either presenter, and there was no acknowledgement of the existence of women's movements either historically or in the current moment. Indeed, an uncritical observer of the lectures might come to the conclusion that no research on women's body image had been done before Dove funded their global studies, and no activism around representations of femininity existed before the Campaign. In constructing meaning, the corporate imagination forgets what is inconvenient and encourages that forgetting through its advertising and corporate narratives. Through this forgetting, it can situate Dove as bringing out women's "real beauty" and its competitors as promoting inauthentic, oppressive beauty standards.

I began this intervention by questioning what barriers exist to finding the feminist radical imagination. A clear barrier is the ascendancy of commodity feminism. Neoliberal capitalism has proven a remarkable ability to commodify resistance and dissent, which explains in part why multinational corporations such as Unilever are able to accumulate capital relatively undisturbed. This is particularly the case in the global north where the corporate imagination creatively mobilizes both old and new media to suggest that we can consume our way to social change. Yet the "empowered" women presented by the Campaign for Real Beauty do not deviate dramatically from beauty industry norms: Unilever does little to disrupt hegemonic constructions of femininity that are racist, heteronormative, fat-phobic and ableist. Moreover, they continue to be an organization committed first and foremost to ever-increasing profit margins, not social justice. In the global south, Unilever was not able to operate unchallenged, at least insofar as organizations such as AIDWA in India have called attention to the racism of their products. Unilever's response to this activism was to deploy commodity feminism. Clearly, corporations cannot be allowed to control the terms of the public debate, least of all to present themselves as the liberator of girls and women. Any project of the radical imagination must involve critiques of capitalism and must also be feminist.
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The term “commodity feminism” has been previously used by to explore the appropriation of feminist critique within advertising in Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon L. Smith, “Commodity feminism,” Critical studies in mass communication, 8, no. 3 (1991): 333-351 and Robert Goldman, Reading ads socially (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). It has also been used to describe the institutionalization of feminist theory in academia in Donna Landry, “Commodity feminism,” in The profession of eighteenth-century literature: Reflections on an institution, ed. Leopold Damrosch (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 154-174 and Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, Materialist feminisms (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).


ix Heather Timmons, “Telling India’s modern women they have power, even over their skin tone,” New York Times, May 30, 2007, Business section.

x This was given by Sharon MacLeod, the Dove Brand Director.

xi This was given by Janet Kestin, the Chief Creative Officer of Ogilvy and Mather Ad Toronto. Dove outsources much of its advertising to Ogilvy and Mather.
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