

Dove Devolution

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Although standards of beauty have been changing constantly with history and culture from plate-sized African lip rings to robust and pale models of the Renaissance, recently the beauty industry has developed a global ideal of thinness and abnormal model attractiveness. Dove, on the other hand, has tried to change this superficial and unrealistic body image of women into the celebration of “natural,” “real,” and “athletic” bodies. By campaigning for real beauty Dove aims to help diminish “universal” standards of beauty and help women with poor mental and physical images of themselves. But, even though recent Dove ads attempt to present an end to all female standards of beauty by using the rhetoric of authenticity, in fact these ads assimilate the typical standards of beauty that privilege whiteness, youth, and body size, while placing guilt on other products and subordinating inner beauty to outer perfection.

The foundation of Dove’s false message through ads, commercials, and funds is “The Real Truth about Beauty: A Global Report.” Although the report purports to be neutral, it uses the authority of science to establish a universal obsession with beauty. By using the authority of science and scientific terminologies such as “results,” “data,” “study,” and “report” Dove is rhetorically making this universal obsession acceptable and seemingly educational. By traveling to ten countries and speaking to thousands of women Dove intends to make its standard of beauty outwardly universal (Flynn, Waterman, and Garrelts). However, the sample ignores all other altering standards of beauty and other standards not linked to beauty at all. But because of Dove’s company background and ownership women all around the world receive the implication that the western standard of beauty is the universal standard. This can be defined as

ethnocentrism, the tendency to assume that one's own culture of life represents the norm and/or is superior to others (Benokraitis 50-52). It is not surprising only two percent of interviewees in the report found themselves beautiful and nearly fifty percent of the girls found themselves overweight comparing themselves with this standard (Flynn, Waterman, and Garrelts). These women are experiencing culture shock and feeling disorientated, uncertain, out of place, or even fearful when immersed in an unfamiliar culture (Benokraitis 50-52). Yet rather than diminishing all standards of beauty worldwide, Dove's interpretation of the global report is actually reiterating these standards and cementing them into society.

Dove's attack is on all physical levels: skin color (race), skin (youth), hair, and body size (weight). According to Bad Subjects, "the primary models chosen for the ad campaign were six 'average' American women of varying body types and races who ranged in pant size from 4 to 12." With the average pant size being 12 to 14, the average American woman is being ostracized (Flynn, Waterman, and Garrelts). These ads are allegedly supposed to remind women how healthy and beautiful they are in their own skin. However, these models don't even represent the average American woman and don't promote a healthy lifestyle. Not only that, but these ads do not stand on their own; there is always a product being sold or a logo being advertised. What Dove is really trying to promote is that healthiness and confidence are achievable with the help of Dove products, rather than promoting working out and eating right. It is a complete contradiction to fix an internal self-esteem/physical issue with an external product.

In one Dove ad, one woman is pictured with sleek, smooth hair. In this specific ad the "Campaign for Real Beauty" is trying to promote Frizz Control Therapy System with repairing system, to get rid of unwanted frizz. This is an inconsistency with everything that Dove's self-esteem fund and beauty campaign stand for, which is "building a positive self-esteem and body

image” (Dove). This ad and message disregard this statement completely by subtly letting society know that frizzy haired girls aren’t included in Dove’s universal standards of beauty. Just purchase Dove’s Frizz Control Therapy System, the ad seems to say, and the deformity of frizzy hair will soon be taken care of. Dove is supposed to accept all women and their physical entities. However, Dove is using beauty to profit rather than accepting physical differences.

In another ad, Dove shows six older women naked, revealing their bodies. This ad is altered by using the rhetoric of authenticity with statements such as “beauty has no age limit,” “too old to be in an anti-aging ad,” and “too many age spots to be in an anti-aging ad,” in bold across the women (Dove). These are all great messages; however, at the corner of all these ads Dove is selling anti-aging lotion, a direct contradiction. Dove is throwing all these inspirational messages through advertisements with a paradox. Dove doesn’t really see old age as beautiful; Dove sees old age as another product opportunity and moneymaker.

Along with the misinterpretation of hair and youth, these ads don’t represent diversity at all. In the anti-aging ad, there are five white women and one black woman being represented. This doesn’t embody the majorities or minorities of world population and society. According to the World Diversity Patterns, 56.4% of the world population is Asian, 13.5% is African, 12.9% is European, and 8.7% is Latin American, leaving the United States last at 5.1% of the world’s population (O’Neil). It would be assumed that after doing a global study of ten different countries around the world Dove would understand which people in the world need to be represented. However, Dove’s ads are favoring the white race rather than embracing the rest of the races that dominate the world. Dove makes this same mistake in a commercial, “True Colors.” Throughout the commercial, thirteen girls are shown, while Dove lists flaws the girls see about themselves. Out of these thirteen girls, ten are white, two are Asian, and one is black—

again, giving the world and market to which Dove sells its products and runs its advertisements and commercials a false perception of beauty, that white girls and western beauty are superior. Not only that, but other races such as Latin Americans aren't even shown in the commercial. Again this subtly reiterates to the public that there is always a standard of beauty and westernized self-image. Even if Dove claims to be breaking through these standards and helping "all" women of "all" shapes and sizes, Dove is creating its own standard of what's beautiful while tricking audiences to buy its products, helping them fall back into the current image/standard of beauty.

Along with the artificial presentation of beauty, Dove places guilt on other products for their "sexy" ads and images. This can be represented in a commercial called "Under Pressure." In "Under Pressure," a little girl is standing on the street with "provocative" images flashing before her eyes, finally ending with a statement across the screen, "girls are under more pressure than ever" (Dove). Yet again, such an encouraging message, but Dove's ads are contributing to this pressure. Its entire campaign for beauty and self-esteem is filled with images of the same kind: nudity and sexual poses. Just because the women are older and have a larger body size doesn't make the message of these images any more constructive or less sexual in terms of self-esteem and body image. In "Onslaught," a modification of "Under Pressure," Dove shows the same commercial, but with music and a different message at the end, "talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does" (Dove). By using the rhetoric of family, Dove seemingly hits another home run. However, throughout Dove's campaigns and funds, as mentioned before, Dove uses ads of nudity and provocation just as much as any other company, but using a higher age group and larger body sizes. Therefore, the moms "warning" and "protecting" their daughters about the beauty industry are the actual women being portrayed in the ads. These women are the young girls' sisters, mothers, and grandmothers. Dove is just creating and

furthering acceptability for all generations to be provocative and revealing. Therefore, by using such a different age group these images are, in a sense, being pushed harder, because for young girls, their role models are their families. According to the theory of agents of socialization, how we learn culture and how society socializes us into society, family is considered to be the most influential and important agent (Benokraitis 61-62). Given the new images Dove is sending out, young girls are in more danger than ever to be influenced.

While Dove is promoting these “new” provocative images, it is also suggesting other companies have given girls this inadequacy at the same time. In “Onslaught,” when all these images are passing by the young girl’s face, it is clear that other companies in the beauty industry are to blame for these false perceptions of beauty. However, Dove is just criticizing the beauty industry to maximize its own profit because it is its own worst enemy. Unilever, which can be considered the parent company of Dove, is the largest manufacturer of cosmetics, skin lighteners, and diet products (Hanson). That is a complete negation in itself. The company that runs Dove and is supposedly “widening their standard of beauty” clearly isn’t accepting women for who they are and are at the same time is degrading them. Unilever owns other companies such as Lynx and Axe (Hanson). In both companies’ advertisements and commercials, the degradation of women is all too familiar. In a Lynx commercial for body spray, hundreds of unrealistically beautiful women are all chasing after a man because he smells good thanks to Lynx deodorant, and the commercial ends with the message of “Spray more. Get more.” In an Axe commercial titled “Mix Them,” women are thrown into each other and “mixed” in order to become more “sexy” and “voluptuous” for a man’s pleasure. These horrible, debasing messages are all coming from the same company as Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty,” Unilever. It seems as though Unilever has a different global vision for women’s image and aiming each gendered product to a

specific audience to maximize profit makes it clear they really don't have a message at all. It is time Dove should be talking to its own parent (Hanson).

Regardless of the images being presented by Dove, the messages give the wrong perceptions. Through every ad, commercial, and picture Dove hasn't stopped reminding us about beauty. This isn't healthy whatsoever. Dove is creating a magic act where we don't see the obsession of all ages furthering their obsession with beauty rather than being strong and successful. Dove's rhetoric is so lucrative that it is even more disturbing than any other ads from other companies, making it even easier to forget what makes a person beautiful. Healthy people don't have to love everything about themselves to be healthy, and self-respect doesn't demand perfection (Lezama, Henry, and Dangelmaier 8-8). Judgment shouldn't be put on a girl who wants to get ready "just because," and an anti-aging lotion and bar of soap will never give anyone exceptional health (Lezama, Henry, and Dangelmaier 8-8). It is not a crime for women to celebrate the bodies they have, because with celebration comes confidence for women of all ages, helping them recognize that a product is not needed to fix body image. "Any active woman can agree that the more you care about your body and the more active you stay, the more your body begins to shift from rail-thin or chunky to developed and muscular"(Flynn, Waterman, and Garrelts). Being muscular and healthy will always be "in," and the reason why so many women are unhappy is that companies like Dove are constantly trying to fix their imperfections.

With a society so filled with false perceptions of beauty and happiness, the real goal shouldn't be to diminish standards that are largely present, but to promote awareness and healthy lifestyles for young girls. Nike, too, has campaigned for "real" women in its ads. But, rather than putting out an image to sell a product, its message is to create an active lifestyle and embrace the

body that has been developed out of it. If all companies could promote healthiness and activeness while advertising a product, it would be a win-win situation for both the company and society. There is a big difference between promoting natural beauty that can be fixed by a product and promoting beauty that a woman has successfully created through exercise. There's an even bigger difference between promoting beauty in the first place and not promoting it at all. Therefore, it's time to follow Nike's lead and replace unhealthy beauty obsessions with athleticism and health. It's time to take a stand that's pro-woman rather than falling for these subtle media images that present normal women as imperfect and needing to be fixed.

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