

Dove and the Beauty Double Bind

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Women in Western societies are expected to be beautiful. Indeed, women are expected to achieve or at least aspire to attain a beauty so great that it is, in reality, unobtainable. As with everyone in Western societies, women are also expected to present an authentic self – that is, an unconsciously, spontaneously communicated self (Guignon, 2004). Of course, it is impossible to attain an unnaturally high standard of beauty while being authentic, or *natural* (cf. Kwan & Trautner, 2009, p. 59). Thus, women are placed in a double bind – a situation in which someone is required to meet two conflicting goals at the same time.

The Expectation of Ideal Beauty

There are many manifestations of the social insistence that women attain an unrealistic beauty. The Barbie doll is a prime example of this. Barbie is treated as an icon of beauty in American culture, but, as many have noted, her beauty is truly unobtainable; if a real woman was proportioned as Barbie is, that woman would not be able to stand up (Lord, 1994). The popularity of makeover television shows, in which someone's looks are altered, often surgically, to attain a social standard of beauty also bears witness to the social expectation of an unnatural. So, too, does the phenomenon of bulimia, anorexia and other eating disorders that afflict today's girls.

The Importance of Being Natural

The importance of a natural appearance is emphasized by the Western cultural discourse of the self and its proper communication to others. Among other things, this discourse holds that people have a true self that they should allow to “shine” without alteration – i.e., naturally – and that those who literally or figuratively *mask* their true self are immorally manipulative. In

addition, women are derided if they are deemed to pay too much attention to their body – e.g., women body builders.

Breaching the Beauty Double Bind

Though women find themselves in a double bind regarding their appearance, they can extricate themselves from the situation in a number of ways. For instance, they can actively reject the expectation of unnatural beauty, just as the protagonist did in the 2002 movie *Real Women have Curves* – a movie much celebrated by members of the women’s movement. Alternatively, women can reject the dictate to appear natural; however, the cultural mandate to be natural is so strong that even women who agree they should age naturally– i.e., “age gracefully,” nonetheless avail themselves of a variety of beauty treatments and procedures, including surgical procedures (Clark & Griffin, 2007).

Dove’s (Dis)Solution (of)/to the Double Bind

Dove delivered women from the beauty double bind, and thus gained their gratitude and consumer allegiance, through its Campaign for Real Beauty – an example of cause marketing produced for Dove’s maker, Lever, by Ogilvy and Mather. Wedded to this Campaign was Dove’s Movement for Self Esteem. Through their Campaign, Dove challenges the traditional standard of beauty, calling instead for “real beauty” – a standard of beauty that is meant to be within the reach of most if not all women and thus allows women to appear natural, or authentic. Further, Dove attacks the insistence on the beauty industry’s standard of beauty by graphically indicating that it destroys girls’ self-esteem and leads to all manner of horrible dieting practices and appearance altering procedures. Dove also *unmasks* what it terms *the beauty industry*, by showing how the appearance of beauty industry models is produced through an immense amount of beauty work and intensive Photoshopping. Thereby, Dove not only shows how the beauty

industry's ads are phony, but also indicates that these companies knowingly produce a truly impossibly high standard of beauty.

Conclusion

Through Dove's marketing campaign – the Campaign for Real Beauty and the Movement for Self Esteem, Dove challenged and delivered women from the Western beauty double bind, in the eyes of many women. In doing so, Dove evoked women's gratitude and consumer allegiance, and thereby, due to the fundamental nature of society's expectation of beauty and authenticity, transformed its brand from one of many in the beauty industry to one with as much growth as Apple's iPod, according to the marketing research firm Landor Associates (Deighton, 2008).

References

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