

A Corporation in Feminist Clothing? Young Women Discuss the Dove 'Real Beauty' Campaign

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Abstract

The Dove campaign for 'real beauty' has been exceptionally successful, generating public attention and increased sales. This article uses focus group analysis to investigate how young, feminist-identified women understand the campaign, and how they respond when a corporation encourages them to exercise their politics through consumption. We ask whether the campaign is seen as compatible with their vision of feminism, and whether corporations are potential vehicles for feminist change. To conceptualize critical consciousness, we suggest that classical critical theory, particularly Herbert Marcuse, can be fruitfully connected with contemporary critical and feminist theories of capitalist cooptation. Participants varied in their critiques, but relished the opportunity for deliberation, and displayed a clear capacity to disentangle 'opposites' like feminism and corporate profiteering. Most women saw the campaign as 'better than nothing' and supported some notion of ethical consumption – a kind of pragmatism that suggests the difficulty of imagining alternatives to consumer capitalism.

Keywords

consumerism, capitalism, feminism, social movements, feminist sociology, Marcuse

Introduction

Capitalist Rebellion through Consumption

Capitalist enterprise has been subjected to numerous critiques from disgruntled citizens and activists. While free market ideals retain a canonical presence in contemporary culture (McKinnon,

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2013), progressive social ideas have been readily incorporated into capitalist marketing and promotional campaigns (Barkay, 2013; Frank, 1997; Heath and Potter, 2004), and even into business school pedagogy (Cabrera and Williams, 2012). The phenomenon of 'commodifying dissent' is not unusual, but has been argued to constitute a key feature of contemporary capitalist culture (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Frank and Weiland, 1997; Gordon, 1995; Newfield, 1995; Vogel, 2005). Whole Foods Market trades on images of ethical consumption, Nike sells women's empowerment via lycra shorts, and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign sell products by critiquing dominant media-constructions of beauty and promoting body acceptance. Scholars have analyzed various aspects of this trend and its implications (e.g. Cabrera and Williams, 2012; Johnston, 2008; Johnston and Taylor, 2008; Messner, 2002), but less studied is how individuals think and feel when they see their politics appropriated by corporations. In other words, critiques of corporate cooptation have focused primarily on the production, rather than the reception of these messages.

This research gap is significant since it is not clear to what extent social movement adherents support or disapprove of the corporate appropriation of their ideals. Do people appreciate seeing their grass-roots views amplified on a large scale, or do they see these corporate incarnations as crass, manipulative, and politically harmful? Do those committed to social change resent that personal ideals are being peddled to sell products, or do they think that corporations can play a positive role in the dissemination of social movement ideals? The answers to these questions can help clarify how corporate appropriation of movement ideals affects movement adherents' political consciousness. In this article, we focus on Unilever Corporation's use of feminism to sell Dove brand products, and draw from focus groups with young, feminist-identified women to analyze their understandings of this campaign.

Previous research on the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty (Johnston and Taylor, 2008) identified the phenomenon of *feminist consumerism*, a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women. The Dove initiative – a multi-million dollar, global advertising campaign with innumerable print ads and billboards, and viral videos – has been exceptionally successful. In this study, we focus on:

1. whether the Dove campaign is seen as compatible with their vision of feminism, and
2. whether these women see corporations as potential vehicles for achieving feminist change.

If social movements involve the cultural processes of knowledge creation and identity formation (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991), it seems important to clarify how corporate appropriation of ideals affects the self-identity of movement supporters.

We launch our analysis around a key concern of the Frankfurt school theorist, Herbert Marcuse (1964): the foreclosure of critique, which he termed the 'convergence of opposites'. Although Marcuse's writing had a totalizing tendency, his ideas were seminal in a line of scholarly inquiry about the dialectical tension between social critique and capitalist incorporation, and can be applied to identify key ways in which critical opportunities are foreclosed. Frankfurt school scholars like Marcuse encouraged analyses that acknowledge processes of capitalist exploitation and commodification, while also identifying space for struggle and resistance (Kellner, 1983; Scheurman, 2007). We argue that contemporary scholars can productively build on Marcusean insights, while integrating more recent critical and feminist understandings of capitalist cooptation processes. With such a theoretical integration in mind, we conducted focus groups to analyze how one set of movement adherents – feminists – perceived the coupling of movement critiques and corporate marketing. Our analysis incorporates the possibility of multiple interpretations of capitalist exploitation that allow for rooted agency and embodied practices of resistance, as well as instances where social critique appears to be foreclosed or at least sharply diminished.

From One-Dimensional Man to Cool Capitalists and Post-Feminists

In 1964, Herbert Marcuse published his highly influential critique of consumer capitalism, *One Dimensional Man*. Like other Frankfurt School scholars, Marcuse was concerned about the diminishing radical potential of subjects living in advanced capitalist societies. Marx gave little attention to how the working class might identify with capitalist culture, and Marcuse's influential work was one of the first neo-Marxist theories to link declining levels of critical consciousness to the exponential growth of consumer society (Kellner, 1983: 67, 69). Marcuse (1964: 5) argued that the creation of 'false needs' that are 'superimposed on the individual ... and perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice' was making people less able to dissent from the broader capitalist system, and was transmogrifying them into uncritical 'one-dimensional' subjects. Put simply, consumer capitalism disrupts the potential for critical thought.

Marcuse (1964: 19) attributed the decline of social critique in large part to the 'convergence of opposites' that he argued should remain distinct, such as capitalism and labor, warfare and welfare. When these institutions are in opposition, they exemplify contrasting worldviews and enable people to imagine alternatives to the status quo. When they are collapsed, alternative visions become harder to see and articulate. During this process, a two-dimensional culture becomes one-dimensional:

This liquidation of two-dimensional culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the 'cultural values', but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale. (Marcuse, 1964: 57)

Thus, when conflict is suppressed through these couplings, people are less likely to develop analyses of power and an oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge and Morris, 2001).

Marcuse's analysis of consumer capitalism has been correctly criticized for its totalizing quality (Kellner, 1983; McGuigan, 2009; MacIntyre, 1970; McLaughlin, 1999). Although his analyses sometimes allowed for the possibility of resistance (e.g. Marcuse, 1972), *One Dimensional Man* includes totalizing phrases such as 'liquidating the oppositional' (1964: 56) and 'mass production and consumption claim the *entire* individual' (1964: 10). Marcuse (1964: 11, 12) saw consumer capitalism as selling products that 'indoctrinate and manipulate' and promote a 'false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood' and thereby encourages conformity to the capitalist system because 'the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence.' The totalizing character of Marcuse's argument was recognized by Erich Fromm, another Frankfurt School theorist, who wondered how social transformation could occur in a one-dimensional society where an unequivocal rejection of market society seemed unlikely (see McLaughlin, 1999).

Marcuse's writings have virtually vanished from contemporary critical theorizing, partly because of the totalizing nature of his critiques. Still, Marcuse's insights on consumer culture and the 'convergence of opposites' were incredibly prescient. His initial critique of consumer capitalism sparked an important line of intellectual inquiry about capitalist cooptation.¹ This inquiry has been taken up – directly and indirectly – by other commentaries on consumer culture's capacity to incorporate critics and commodify dissent (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Frank and Weiland, 1997). Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) used a history of marketing and advertising to document how the countercultural rebels of the 1960s reinvigorated American capitalism, bringing a rebellious countercultural ethos to Madison Avenue. This is not simply a historical argument. Frank (1997: 4) stressed its contemporary relevance, arguing that:

Rebel youth culture remains the cultural mode of the corporate moment, used to promote not only the specific products but the general idea of life ... fantasies of rebellion, liberation, and outright 'revolution' against the stultifying demands of mass society are commonplace almost to the point of invisibility.

When rebellion against the 'system' is understood as rebellious *consumption* and disavowals of conformity, consumers are able to purchase commodities that express their critiques, even as they remain deeply entrenched within capitalist systems. According to Frank (1997: 31), this new variety of 'hip consumerism' is one where 'disgust with falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption.'

McGuigan (2009) expanded on Frank's work, tracing the tension between 'resistance' and 'capitalist profiteering' back to the art world and bohemian culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. Marcuse himself identified transformative possibilities in the Romantic artist – what he called the 'Great Refusal' – whereby artists would critique the one-dimensionality of industrial capitalism, and offer the 'promise of a better future' (McGuigan, 2009: 45–46). McGuigan's (2009: 47) analysis demonstrates, however, that a Romantic ideal of resistance always existed in precarious tension with capitalist commodification: a 'dialectical process of refusal and incorporation' repeated throughout modern history. Drawing from the contemporary cultural valuation of 'cool' as ironic, hedonistic rebellion, McGuigan (2009: 1) uses the term 'cool capitalism' to refer to the contemporary 'incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself'. Similarly, Heath and Potter (2004) have suggested that countercultural resistance to conformity has successfully and productively merged with entrepreneurial culture.² Other scholars have also analyzed the confluence of profit motivation with 'alternative' or 'countercultural' belief systems: Cabrera and Williams (2012) look at citizen-consumers in business school textbooks; Miller (2007) focused on book-sellers as 'reluctant capitalists', Turner (2006) on cyber-culture, Biskind (1998) on the invigorating rebels of Hollywood cinema, Banet-Weiser (2012) and Johnston and Taylor (2008) on the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, and Johnston (2008) on Whole Foods Market as a corporate embodiment of counter-cuisine.

This scholarly line of inquiry has made many important insights, but it has paid minimal attention to how the confluence of capitalist profit-making and subversive-alternative-seeking has been received (exceptions include Halnon, 2004; Johnston and Szabo, 2011; Millard, 2009). This neglect of reception is significant, since it avoids asking questions that loom in the public consciousness: how can cultural rebellion happen *via* capitalist consumption (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012)? How can exploitative commodities be distinguished from useful commodities? More generally, we might ask, has critique effectively been silenced, and have 'opposites' effectively converged in the public imagination?

To address these questions, we must first recognize that critique does not exist in a social vacuum, nor can it be understood solely by employing an individualized analytic lens. Collective action and social movements are critical for understanding and clarifying resistance to capitalist structures. These movements differ greatly and are motivated by various grievances, visions, and approaches to social change. Some, such as the Women's Movement, have been characterized as more 'expressive' than instrumental, focused centrally on cultural transformation through building alternative institutions (Banaszak et al., 2003). Many Women's Movement supporters helped construct a rebellious counterculture, carving out space for feminist agency in their daily lives. North American feminist activists have developed alternative theories, communities, services, celebrations, and daily individual practices with marked political implications, even if they do not directly challenge the state or dismantle capitalism (Ferree and Hess, 1994; Reger, 2012; Staggenborg, 2001; Taylor, 1996; Taylor and Whittier, 1995; Whittier, 1995).

Drawing on the experiences of the women's movement, feminist theorists have shed light on the dynamic of capitalist critique, cooptation, and resistance. While the commodification of feminist ideals has been a topic of critical importance (e.g. McRobbie, 2009; Messner, 2002), it is also important to investigate how lifestyles and consumption can serve as meaningful channels for women's activism (Micheletti, 2003: 17). This is especially the case given women's historical oppression (and resistance) within the private realm of home, family, and social reproduction (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006; Laslett and Brenner, 1989; Wilson, 2003). A key insight of both feminist and new social movement theory is that political inequalities are not abstract entities, but are intimately constituted through personal relationships, corporeal practices, and affect. A focus on internalized feelings of inferiority should not necessarily be dismissed as apolitical or narcissistic. Individually scaled changes can challenge broader power relationships if they connect personal problems with political institutions (see Taylor, 1996). Feminist scholars have productively drawn from Foucault's insights on power relationships, emphasizing how 'a society's imposition of discipline upon bodies depends on those bodies learning to *regulate themselves*' (Hartley, 2001: 63). As such, resisting the corporeal regulation of dominant beauty ideology, and questioning the negative emotions linked to deviant physical forms (e.g. fatness, aging) may be a way to resist dominant power relationships, even if such resistance does not offer a full-scale rejection of capitalism. These tendencies have been contentious, and third wave feminism in particular has been criticized as myopically focused on a politics of the self (Faludi, 2010; Gilmore, 2005; Heath and Potter, 2005; for defenses, see Harris, 2008; Orr, 1997; Redfern and Aune, 2010; Reger, 2012).

One particularly sympathetic and sophisticated critique comes from British sociologist Angela McRobbie (2009). Looking at current popular culture, McRobbie identifies a 'post-feminist' backlash where feminist ideas are undermined at the same time as women are sold ideas of empowerment, choice and individualism – ideas that take particular hold in a neoliberal consumer culture. Because feminist ideals are thought to have been 'taken into account', serious contemporary concerns about gender inequality and exploitation can be minimized, or even forgotten. In McRobbie's (2009: 12) words: 'post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force.' In a post-feminist context, it is possible for women to see themselves (and be seen as) empowered agentic beings when they *choose* to buy painful and expensive high-heel shoes (e.g. *Sex and the City*), spend tremendous effort radically transforming their appearance (e.g. reality shows featuring cosmetic surgery make-overs), or publicly show off their breasts (e.g. *Girls Gone Wild*). McRobbie (2009: 3) brings us to the following question: does capitalism just 'give women what they want', or does 'this mean a suspension of the critique of capitalism'?

While McRobbie's writing renders transparent the gendered nature of the dialectic between rebellion and capitalist incorporation, the spaces for moving forward are not self-evident. Arnot (2011: 701) acknowledges how McRobbie 'makes us suspicious of gender mainstreaming, of third wave feminism, of feminist affirmation', but she questions whether it is possible to entirely discount the feelings of empowerment and self-care enabled by some of these practices. McRobbie (2009: 90) is critical of her earlier, more optimistic interpretations of feminist incorporation into popular culture, and argues that the current post-feminist moment is de-politicizing, creating 'spaces of attention' for women's issues which 'supplant and substitute for the various forms of political mobilization which were associated with feminism as a social movement'. This is a powerful critique, but it seems important to investigate whether it is overgeneralized (Walkerdine, 2011). **Do we have empirical data to show exactly how specific groups of women, and especially young women, experience the shift to a post-feminist moment emphasizing individual choice, lifestyle, and empowerment through consumption? How might young women still identify**

political struggles, and critique power struggles within their daily lives (Jeleniewski Seidler, 2011: 706)? We use our focus group data to examine precisely these questions.

Before moving to our focus group data, we must briefly address the specific nature of beauty ideologies – ideologies that illustrate the complexity and intimacy of the intersection of feminism, agency, and capitalist incorporation. Beauty ideology is embedded in political economic systems of capital accumulation, but it is also deeply and literally embodied in the feelings and material practices of women's lived experience (e.g. Weitz, 2004; Wolf, 1990). Analysis of feminist resistance and incorporation in the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty (Johnston and Taylor, 2008) suggests that while feminist analyses must remain critical of corporate interests and the political-economy of the beauty industries, it must also take seriously transformative potential occurring at the scale of personal ideas, practices, and emotions. This research also highlighted the importance of identifying change at the level of individual thoughts, feelings, and actions. This is especially significant with regard to beauty ideology, in which capitalist exploitation intersects with race and gender inequality in daily practices, ideals, and self-esteem (Banet-Weiser, 1999, 2012; Banner, 1983; Gimlin, 2002; Jeffreys, 2005). At the same time, since the Dove campaign specifically targets women's insecurities about their physical form, it is clear that individual resistance to dominant beauty ideologies can be channelled back into new beauty products (with a subversive feel), rather than challenging the dominant nature of beauty ideology and the accompanying commodities.

This brings us to the following question: how might critical scholars assess transformative opportunities, while not underestimating processes of capitalist incorporation of feminist ideals? We argue that a nuanced understanding of the dialectic relationships between cultural resistance and capitalist incorporation can be realized by integrating Marcusean ideas on critical consciousness with critical theories of capitalist cooptation and feminist insights on the personal and embodied nature of resistance. While it is important to identify a Marcusean 'convergence of opposites' that shuts down critical thinking, it is equally important to identify how individuals resist relations of capitalist and patriarchal exploitation through daily rituals and critical conversations. Even if such resistance poses no imminent threat to capitalism, these acts, thoughts, and feelings can disturb power relationships that reproduce and naturalize gender inequality and exploitation. They can also be part of a 'critical and evaluative' stance towards consumer capitalism which works to determine which commodities are life-enhancing and which are exploitative, instead of dismissing or praising all capitalist commodities unequivocally (Kellner, 1983). Similar to Adrienne Rich's (1980) idea of 'compulsory heterosexuality', contemporary beauty ideology can be seen as promoting a kind of 'compulsory beauty' – the idea that all women (regardless of age or actual physical appearance) should *strive* to be beautiful. We contend that resistance to the notion of 'compulsory beauty' can occur at the level of feelings, ideas, and practices, while still involving awareness of how resistance to a dominant beauty ideology is cycled back into marketing campaigns. To demonstrate the potential and range of this resistance, as well as the theoretical integration we advocate above, we now turn to the analytic target of this article: the thoughts, feelings, and ideas of young women as they reflect on the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty.

Data and Methods

Despite its potential to explore thoughts and feelings, focus group methodology has been greatly underutilized in social movement research (Johnston, 2002). Our approach combines standard approaches to focus group methodology, such as having a facilitator and a list of questions to guide discussion (Morgan, 1996), with newer approaches that have emerged out of research on social movements (Gamson, 1992), such as encouraging political discussions among pre-existing groups

of friends. We employed Alan Tourraine's (1982) method of 'sociological intervention' (Hamel, 2001), convening groups of 5–15 people with similar political predispositions to focus on a particular problem and come to a sociological understanding of the problem, potentially enabling them to act politically and collectively on their observations (Hamel, 2001; Tourraine, 1982). However, unlike Tourraine, we allowed for the possibility that our theoretical assumptions, based on our prior research, might not resonate in discussion groups; if so, this finding would be empirically significant and help us learn more about political consciousness.

Our focus group structure was also informed by the renewed interest in Millsean themes in public sociology. Turning 'private concerns into public issues' (Burawoy, 2002; Mills, 1959) and 'consciousness-raising research' (Nebraska Sociological Feminist Collective, 1988) can generate conversations that connect the personal to the political, an enduring feminist theme (Hercus, 2005; Kaplan, 1997). Nina Eliasoph's (1998: 260) argument that 'citizens have to *learn* how to connect their personal lives to political issues' has been a central, public project of feminism; this was reflected in the ease and skill with which all of our participants made connections between their lives, media images and prescriptions for social change.

We conducted six focus groups, stopping when the data became saturated and little new discussion emerged (Morgan, 1996). Each group consisted of a pre-existing network of close friends or members of a community-based organization who identified as feminist or were concerned with women's empowerment. Rather than parachute into an unknown group as an 'official outside expert' we first facilitated a discussion with a group of friends who were familiar with one of the authors. We used a snowball-sampling technique with this first group, asking members to suggest people outside their racial-ethnic group and occupation if possible, to obtain a theoretically broader sample. Groups included 5–15 participants, for a total of 40 participants in the study. Four of the groups consisted of women in their 20s working in professions such as teaching, the arts, social work, human resources, and media. Two groups consisted of adolescents and teens in school and community centre girls' clubs. Following Tourraine's methodology, we sought participants under the age of 30, reasoning that participants from this demographic grew up in a post-consciousness-raising era and therefore would not likely have focused on social questions and issues in a group setting as older cohorts might have. Also following Tourraine's methodology, we only used pre-existing groups of friends, increasing the likelihood they would continue the political dialogue after the completion of the focus group.³

Our focus group questions explored corporate use of social movement ideals – specifically, feminist ideals used to sell Dove products. We facilitated discussion about how participants understood this corporate undertaking, pointing out tensions and contradictions without stopping participants from arguing for their compatibility. Each focus group lasted from one to three hours. To initiate discussion, we showed participants a 10-minute slide show of Dove Campaign for Real Beauty advertisements to refresh their memory and give them a common set of images to discuss. We presented each image for several minutes, much longer than one would see it when driving past a billboard. In some sessions, participants tailored their discussion closely to the various images, keeping the slide show on for reference. We provided participants with a focus group guide, but they tended to select images or problems most relevant to their lives and political approaches, for a more organic discussion.

Discussions were tape-recorded and then transcribed by the moderator, and we assigned participants pseudonyms. Next, two authors coded the transcripts for emergent observational, analytical, and conceptual themes. We gave particular attention to sustained conversation about a particular question or issue, and to the collective development of ideas, arguments, emerging consensus, or disagreements. Focusing attention on these collective moments treats interactions between participants as a source of data (Morgan, 1996). We also focused closely on the transformation and

transition of emotions among participants; these transitions often clarified a sustained analysis of a specific issue or question for participants.

Findings

This section outlines answers to two central questions asked in the focus group discussions:

1. Is the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty ‘feminist?’ and
2. Should corporations engage in the cause of feminism?

The discussions generated by these questions helped participants gain a deeper understanding of the scope of feminism as a movement and set of ideas, the multiple axes of their identities that informed their personal responses to the campaign, and the structure, work, and purpose of corporations. Before addressing these questions, we describe the general tone of focus group conversations, the evolving nature of the conversations, and how participants moved from surface impressions to more critical discussion.

Discussions usually began with participants’ recounting their initial observations or feelings upon first seeing the Dove campaign. Many were very good at recalling and describing the first thing they felt when they saw a Dove billboard or subway advertisement. A minority of participants were straightforwardly positive, such as Julie (FG 4), who said, ‘Phew, it was a breath of fresh air. Something new, more realistic, that represented like, how people actually are.’ A few participants reacted immediately with suspicions about corporate cooptation of feminist ideals, which rejected the conflation of opposites between corporate marketing and feminist ideals:

Annie (FG1): The first time I saw it I was livid. It’s a gimmick. It creates the notion that we don’t have to worry about this stuff anymore because Dove is taking care of it. It made me nervous.

Melinda (FG1): I saw the white underwear and I was so worried. My reaction to anything that is remotely trying to use feminism is great caution.

More commonly, participants were initially happy to see less stereotypical images of women in mainstream media, and to see their politics amplified on such a large scale. However, these initially positive impressions generally gave way to concerns about the larger meaning of the campaign, and the disingenuous or rhetorical use of feminist concerns. In other words, one-dimensional support for the campaign may have characterized their initial thoughts, but further reflection and dialogue led to a more critical appraisal of the conflation between corporate and feminist objectives. For example:

Mindy (FG2): I was torn, I was like, okay, this is a step in the right direction, but they didn’t give you a lot of information so I was kind of like, hmm, I’m not sure if I like this or not.

Anika (FG3): At first I thought it was great, you know, celebrating women, but then I felt there was something really forced about it, something artificial.

Sadia (FG6): I think it’s good that they’re trying to advertise different sizes, but really, *that* is not real beauty either.

Because most participants had mixed opinions, focus group discussions often involved identifying the different registers through which a response was possible: as a woman, a consumer, and a

feminist. Opinions wove through understandings of one's own physical appearances, feelings about the business of advertising, personal consumption habits, and overall understandings of feminist politics and feminist change. Typical of participants' contributions, Maya gave varying responses to the campaign in the space of a 15-minute discussion. She initially complimented the campaign's potential positive impact on women's self-esteem and self-image, and talked about her own emotional response to its images, using examples related to her own physical appearance, and self-image. However, Maya later tempered her initial reaction by saying, 'There is nothing radical about saying bigger women can be clean too.' This later comment signals Maya's cognizance of the Dove campaign's primary goal – selling products – and her critical assessment of its limited transformative agenda.

Through group discussions, Maya and others worked to express and disentangle their own conflicting responses, as well as the need to distinguish the message from the messenger and to evaluate critically how each is transformed by their coupling. This process revealed that a Marcusean 'disentangling of opposites' may best be considered a cognitive and emotional process, rather than a singular, binary state where subjects are either critical or one-dimensional. Marcuse acknowledged the challenges inherent to this kind of intellectual work, arguing that in merchandizing, objects are advertised as their opposite. He used the example of a bomb shelter extolled for its 'coziness' (Marcuse, 1964: 90), comparable in this case to the beauty product necessary to legitimize 'real', or 'natural' beauty. However, Marcuse did not investigate how subjects could use products while simultaneously critiquing these commodities, nor did he pay attention to the emotional dimension of critique. Unlike bomb-shelters, many beauty products are deeply tied to daily rituals, routines, and feelings of self-worth. For most women, it is not easy to unequivocally reject being clean, attractive, and svelte, and they must negotiate these ideals in the larger context of consumer culture on a daily basis. The following section illustrates how in the process of trying to assess their varied cognitive and emotional responses, participants identified what they perceived to be contradictions and insufficiencies in the Dove campaign and in their own political approaches.

Question 1. Is the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty Feminist?

Focus group participants found this question challenging. Many commented that there are many different kinds of feminism so they were hesitant to say definitively whether or not the Dove Campaign was *truly* feminist. Half of the groups began by discussing two challenges: *first*, feminists are an unwieldy group with little consensus among them; and *second*, movements cannot control what happens to the ideas they produce. Participants identified a challenge inherent to the popularization of feminism, appreciating its wider reach but worrying about the watering down of ideas.

- Mindy (FG1): Part of the problem is that feminism is so disjointed and not united. Some will see [the campaign] as good and others won't.
- Myera (FG1): It's also awkward because you want feminism to take off, when you create a movement you want it to take off, and then it becomes more accessible and then you're angry about it. I don't know how to feel about that.

Despite the challenge of defining feminism in a way all adherents would subscribe to, most participants found the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty to be a kind of faux feminism, or inauthentic engagement with feminist ideas. This judgment required them to articulate the campaign's insufficiencies: that unlike feminism, the campaign is not transgressive, nor does it encourage women to see beyond the confines of their own appearance and self-interest. Rather than accepting the

conflation of ‘feminism’ with ‘corporation,’ our participants actively resisted this conflation and used discussion to clarify the points of distinction.

1a. Feminism Promotes Transgression

Participants in all focus groups argued that feminism should ‘shake things up,’ shock people out of complacency, and transgress accepted norms – much like the Marcusean idea of the artistic outsider’s critical consciousness, or ‘Great Refusal’ (McGuigan, 2009). Feminism should push boundaries, forcing people to think about the taken-for-granted aspects of their lives and thought processes. Most participants found Dove’s central message – that women should prioritize being beautiful – incompatible with this objective. The campaign does not challenge the imperative of what we call ‘compulsory beauty’ – the ideology that beauty is not only a priority for women, but is a necessary component of a woman’s self-worth and social value. Our participants, however, *did* challenge this idea, and said if the campaign asked women to let go of the beauty imperative, it would be more transformative. Others noted that while the campaign may have been intended to subvert dominant notions of beauty, it actually reinforced the significance of being ‘beautiful’ in mainstream society. One participant said that the campaign ‘reiterates the surface level focus of our culture’ (Ella FG2).

Additionally, most participants found the women featured in the campaign to be conventionally attractive, thereby confirming an ideology of compulsory beauty for women. Focus group participants said that while models might catch viewers’ eyes for being slightly less typical, they were still far from unattractive, with conventionally beautiful skin, hair, and eyes. Others were offended because images presented by the campaign as ‘boundary-breaking’ resembled themselves. Mindy (FG1) said, ‘My first experience [of it] was on the subway and it was all women who looked like me, like my body type, and so I thought, ‘OK I’m the new fat, and they [Dove] really think they are going out there.’ Other women did not see images resembling themselves, and were equally affronted by this absence. Using their own bodies as examples, they mapped aspects of embodiment that would have been more shocking to viewers. Selena (FG3) noted, ‘Those women are still much more fit than the average and no one has rolls. I have rolls. No one has cellulite. I am full of cellulite.’ Many participants listed imperfections they believed made up the non-airbrushed reality of women’s bodies and were lacking from the advertisements: cellulite, rolls, body hair, dreadlocks, tattoos, bumps, scars, blemishes, prostheses, and stretch marks. Others noted that the images of women in white bras and underwear conformed to numerous gender expectations, such as the linking of idealized femininity with cleanliness and purity, or the idea that women’s bodies should be used to sell products.

Ella (FG2): They were missing messy people, like messy dirty, greasy, spunky people – they were all in these pristine white underwear.

Cece (FG6): [sarcastically] Real beauty is using your buttocks.

Cece’s comment reflected a concern especially among the younger participants, who critiqued the idea of using women’s bodies to sell products, as well as the notion that women must be comfortable revealing their bodies publicly. Five of the six groups contended that there was nothing terribly feminist or norm-busting about using women dancing in their underwear to sell products – a comment which reveals these young women’s critical consciousness of post-feminist norms (Gill, 2003). Several women pointed out images of women hugging and posing for the camera with seeming delight, asking rhetorically whether they were celebrating the fact that thanks to Dove, they could delight in their own objectification. These focus group participants clearly rejected the conflation of ‘feminism’ with Dove’s corporate interests.

Some participants went further, suggesting what a truly transgressive campaign might look like if it applied the aesthetics of their feminist politics, and moved beyond Dove's images of women deriving pleasure from fitting in to dominant beauty ideals.

Melissa (FG2): [Dove] is not pushing the envelope, it's not making you uncomfortable. As a feminist, there's a lot of other things that I could give them that I know they would not do. You know, like have someone with their chest bound, or maybe someone who is really large and happy with her body. [Dove is] still pretty palatable to the mainstream audience, and it silences all of these people who still don't fit. Maybe there should be two women in their underwear making out.

For Melissa, a feminist advertisement would be aimed at questioning the aspiration to be thin and conventionally pretty, would acknowledge the very real battles women have with their bodies such as chronic pain or disliking having breasts, and would contest the imperative to be found attractive by men. In other words, 'compulsory beauty' could be challenged by a campaign that didn't glamorize or domesticate gender conformity.

The politics of size was a central feature in focus group discussions; so were other axes of inclusion such as religion, race and ethnicity. One group of teens, some of whom were black, Latina, and Muslim, criticized Dove's implicit colorism and limited presentation of diversity:

Joy (FG5): They look more real because they are in different shapes and colours.

Uli (FG5): Most of the models are light skinned people, not really dark-skinned.

Cam (FG5): There is a wider range of skin colours, but not types of religion. No magazine that I have ever seen has a girl with a hijab on.

Joy (FG5): Hair sells products. That's why they can't show girls in hijab.

Uli (FG5): Our hair isn't there either, nothing puffy or nappy.

These participants acknowledged that the campaign made some effort to represent diversity, but that it did not significantly upset hegemonic understandings of compulsory beauty. Their impression was that women of colour were lighter-skinned, and appeared to have had their features 'computerized' to look more European (Lani FG5). They also noted the absence of images that might challenge Western notions of beauty, like unstraightened black hair, or images that challenge the expectation that women should display their beauty for others, such as the hijab. Many non-white participants noted that Dove's version of diversity did not challenge hegemonic beauty norms based on white ideals, nor did it address the racism that underpins myriad beauty practices and expectations. These participants distinguished a corporate cosmetic approach from a feminist approach; the latter would challenge beauty norms, include women across the colour spectrum, enable women to resist using skin lighteners, affirm diversity in skin tone, and honor the range of embodied existence.

In sum, focus group participants challenged a corporate feminism 'pasteurized' for mass consumption, as well as the corporate promotion of beauty using a selective display of women's bodies. We see this as involving complex intellectual and emotional work. Such work is required not simply to disentangle corporate goals from movement ideals, but to envision more meaningful feminist ideals and their potential for social transformation. Social movement scholarship suggests the importance of this kind of ideological work when movements are in abeyance (Taylor, 1989); movement supporters do not simply wait for mobilization opportunities, but are cognitively doing the work required to maintain a critical consciousness. As shown in the following section, participants were aware of the work required to disinvest in mainstream gendered priorities, and the emotional rewards of doing so.

1b. Feminism Moves beyond the Self

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty focuses on improving the self-esteem of girls and women by affirming their beauty. Rather than reject beauty, it positions beauty as a democratic good, fundamental to the self-esteem and self-worth of women everywhere (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). Many of its advertisements involve young girls who are unhappy with their appearance, and Dove developed a think tank about women's self-esteem and curricula for use in schools and community-based organizations (see Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Participants considered this pairing of beauty and self-esteem, and concluded that a feminist approach to self-esteem should aim to decouple appearance and feelings of self-worth, rejecting the idea of compulsory female beauty. Many argued that self-esteem is inherently apolitical, and that feminist causes should be oriented away from an isolated self, and toward a broader sense of social justice. Even if Dove's campaign broadened the social definition of beauty, thereby improving women's self-esteem, they argued that without a broader political analysis of gender inequality, such a shift would not significantly change the balance of power in society. In other words, some participants felt that resistance to conformist notions of beauty was insufficient to bring about political or economic change.

- Tara (FG2): It kind of bugs me, reminds me of when we were in grade seven or eight and we had self-esteem talks, and I just don't feel like it's critical of anything else, self-esteem is such an easy thing to focus on, it's not very political.
- Mindy (FG2): It's pretty palatable to a mainstream audience. They might make fun of it, they might not love it, but it's not like whoa, this is different.
- Tara (FG2): I guess it could be very empowering for women, which is fine. But that doesn't make a difference, not enough.

For these participants, a campaign focused on self-esteem misses the larger goal of feminism, to effect change within the self as well as *beyond the self*. Consciousness-raising, they argued, should be the starting but not the ending point. In contrast to analyses that critique third-wave feminists as myopically focused on the self (e.g. Heath and Potter, 2005), our participants suggested that women could begin with social awareness about the injustices or insecurities of their lives, but optimally make larger connections between their own marginality and larger structural problems. Taya (FG3) compared Dove with another company, The Body Shop, whose campaigns focus on free-trade, fair labour, and environmental sustainability:

You have this company [Dove] advocating positive self-image, it's a personal concept, whereas The Body Shop is preaching huge social issues. Dove is saying feel good about you, and the Body Shop is saying look at the Earth, the people around the world, look at these huge global issues.

Taya's comment reflects how participants did not immediately criticize Dove simply because it was a corporation engaging with feminist ideals; they used a different company to highlight what they perceived as Dove's comparative superficiality. These women found Dove's focus on the self encouraged preoccupation with the achievement of social affirmation and self-acceptance to the exclusion of broader social objectives.

- Lena (FG4): I don't mind companies focusing on issues of the environment, fair labour – but self-esteem, it seems more superficial. Self-esteem is such a hard thing, I don't know if I trust a big company to focus on this question.

- Ellery (FG3): Yeah, you can pat yourself on the back for feeling beautiful, but what you are doing is contributing to global warming. That is the huge problem with our whole culture and society.
- Annie (FG3): Dove is saying ‘Celebrate you,’ and that seems to me kind of backward. If you are a conscious person who cares about the world and what happens as a result of your choices then you would be in the long run, more secure, you know, you’ll have higher self-esteem and you’ll be happier. The other way just seems sort of more myopic – focus on you and you and you.

For Annie and most participants in her group, feminism was about larger problems like social inequality and global warming, rather than democratizing access to beauty. They felt that self-esteem is accrued not through feeling beautiful, but through awareness of, and conscientious behaviour in relation to larger social issues. Believing that feminism is about ‘moving past yourself’ leads these women to critique Dove’s focus on the self as myopic. For these participants, looking outside oneself is not simply a way to generate social change; it is also a recipe for happiness and personal growth.

- Sheila (FG3): Being happy with you, that’s when you realize there’s more to you than just how you look and there’s more to everything than just you, it’s a perspective thing. If you get outside yourself more you don’t care as much about looking in the mirror and you’re not as self-indulgent.
- Maya (FG3): Ideally, when you turn 20, 21, self-awareness should kind of transition to social awareness.

These participants suggested that beauty-dependent self-esteem is life-course specific and should diminish after young adulthood. Thus, they were puzzled by Dove’s campaign because they reasoned that the average Dove consumer is middle-aged and should no longer rely on beauty to maintain a basic sense of emotional equilibrium.⁴

Participants in both focus groups involving younger women also wondered why Dove had developed curricula for girls to focus on self-esteem, rather than for boys, whom they believed contribute to women’s anxieties about their appearance. Uli (FG6) noted:

You know, what I think is that they should have [a campaign] for men because if the women go through [groups] with other women, they’re going to walk out and there’s going to be a man that’s going to bring them down at the end of the day.

Participants like Uli criticized Dove’s approach as promoting an apolitical notion: that an individual can improve her self-esteem by doing her own emotion-work, regardless of the people, norms, and culture around her. Others said that therapeutic groups for girls encouraged them to look inward, while men are encouraged to engage with the world around them and eventually to assume positions of power.

In sum, many participants argued that Dove’s version of feminism lacked transformational potential because it encouraged a solipsistic focus on the self, rather than making connections between personal problems and the social organization of society. Sociological analyses of the absence of political dialogue and mobilization have emphasized the reticence of average citizens to think critically about political connections (e.g. Eliasoph, 1998), but we observed many participants making political connections and identifying perspectives that foreclose critique and demonstrating critical consciousness. Women analyzed Dove’s use of a seemingly innocuous social good

– self-esteem – to explore how it encouraged an inward turn rather than observations of and contributions to the larger world, echoing the concern that a focus on individual happiness decreases the likelihood of social action (Ehrenreich, 2010). The next section presents the second discussion question: to what extent should corporations promote feminist goals?

Question 2. Should Corporations Do Feminism?

Focus group discussions about whether and how corporations should be involved in social change initiatives were more contentious than discussions about the Dove campaign's feminist status. Debates about the role of corporations in society were often unresolved, and participants were left to think about these issues after they left the focus groups. Each group produced a series of questions about the purview of corporations that led them to reflect critically on their own responsibilities as feminists, consumers and citizens. Even with the dissenting views, we observed a significant degree of critical consciousness about the extent to which corporate and feminist interests could be conflated. However, we also heard pessimistic accounts of how a ubiquitous world of corporate capitalism made such a conjoining inevitable.

Questions were wide-ranging and related to the mission of corporations, how social change occurs in practice, whether feminists should strive to be ethical consumers, what it means to hate corporations and love consumption, and whether it is legitimate to criticize corporate activism if one is not engaging in activist causes. Participants also struggled with the enormity and constancy of capitalism. Cynicism about capitalism appeared to temper their initial criticisms of the Dove campaign, as most participants found it difficult or impossible to imagine non-market possibilities for social change. Failing a new economic and social order, the overwhelming majority of participants agreed that the Dove campaign, with its flaws and contradictions, is 'better than nothing' – possibly justifying Marcuse's (1964) pessimism about imagining alternatives to capitalism.

2a. Anti-Capitalist Feminism

While participants found it difficult to imagine alternatives to capitalism, many agreed that feminism should at least *resist* capitalism. These participants argued that when a corporation engages in feminist politics, it dilutes feminists' criticisms of capitalism and their ability to envision non-commodified alternatives. They saw feminism as a daily practice reminding them that the central goal of a corporation (and its marketing) is to generate insecurities that drive consumption.

- Pauline (FG1): Every time you see advertising, people are trying to make money. Is it a bunch of guys sitting around in suits [thinking] oh, how are we going to get 40-year-old women to buy our products?
- Sue (FG1): You're coming at it as a feminist, they are selling it to you as a feminist campaign, but the campaign is steeped in capitalism. It doesn't make sense, how can you mix those two?

As shown by this exchange, some participants were committed to the separation of capitalism and feminism and objected to corporate blurring of these boundaries. This was perhaps the most obvious affirmation of Marcuse's (1964) theory that converging opposites forecloses critique, but also a clear example where young women resisted this convergence. From the perspective of critical young women, the profit motive negates the possibility of feminist political credibility, and makes the corporation an untrustworthy, and hence unworthy feminist ally. Some openly doubted Dove's claim to show un-airbrushed images of women, and perceived the campaign images as both

idealized and digitally enhanced.⁵ Participants also commented that the use of feminist ideals in advertising might influence people to trust corporations erroneously, and to assume that corporations will do the political work for them, liberating them from the need to formulate their own critiques and modes of resistance. Women in all groups commented that even if some people who work in corporations sincerely care about forwarding feminist ideals, they care most about selling products, and that the profit motive will ultimately trump other ideals. Shale (FG2) said, ‘Is it a corporation’s job to be political? ... do I want Dove Corporation to show me politics? I want a more grassroots analysis.’ For women like Shale, corporate advocacy is inevitably influenced by the profit-motive, and usurps grassroots actors and ideas. While the groups did not develop a grand vision of post-capitalist life, there was still normative space to imagine grassroots ideals as important alternatives to capitalist commodification and corporate solutions.

Others women objected to the commodification of feminism – the idea that feminist beliefs should be expressed through buying a product. Several found it insidious how Dove paired products with realms of life that had little to do with purchasing products, such as self-help therapy or the arts. For example, Dove sponsored a feminist photography exhibit at one of Toronto’s largest shopping malls, and gave free product samples to viewers as they exited the show. Other participants did not like the implication that one must purchase (corporate) products to support grassroots initiatives. Tanya (FG4) observed, ‘It’s like turning feminism into something you can buy, I don’t know if I like that. It’s an idea or a way of life, I don’t know if you can buy that. **I’m a feminist because I bought this hand cream? It’s the lazy way out.**’ As this quote shows, the proposed link between political action and consumption was not readily accepted, and each group spent considerable time identifying the inconsistencies, ironies, and contradictions of pairing a feminist message with the imperative to consume. The main contradiction identified was the coupling of a feminist message of empowerment, with the marketing of beauty products promising more buoyant hair, softer skin, and less cellulite. The marketing of Dove cellulite cream – the product that kick-started the Dove campaign – struck participants as a particularly egregious contradiction:

Shale (FG2): That is what I was thinking too, you know, they had the girls that were supposed to be big, you know, the curvy girls, and then they were trying to sell firming lotion.

Mindy (FG2): Yeah, accept your size, but buy our cellulite cream.

In sum, in the case of the Dove campaign, participants seemed unnerved and sceptical about the coupling of feminist ideas with corporate capitalism. They expressed wariness that Dove could really accomplish feminist goals since its first priority was to sell its products. Young women saw feminism as ideally operating as a force for critiquing corporate capitalism, rather than supporting its profit-making agenda.

2b. Accomplishing feminist change in a capitalist context

There was general agreement in focus groups that Dove’s parent company, Unilever, would profit from the campaign, but that aesthetic norms and women’s insecurities about their physical appearances would not be radically changed. In Taya’s words (FG6), ‘[i]n terms of making a difference in society, it’s not going to happen. They’re gonna make a bit of money off it and then when everybody realizes it’s bull then it’s time for a new idea.’ Scepticism about the efficacy of the Dove campaign raised the question of how feminist change might actually occur. At this point participants tempered their corporate critiques, and asked practical questions: how am I personally enacting feminism in the world? Should feminists partner with power holders to affect

society? Don't we want corporations to support movements? Isn't it useful for us as consumers to know which companies support our politics so we can buy from them? These questions reflected a mixed critical consciousness and conflicted emotions about personal contributions to feminist social change.

Teenaged participants tended to be self-critical about the extent to which they were promoting feminist social change, seeing themselves as not doing enough. Older participants expressed guilt about their complex relationship to capitalism, and debated whether it was hypocritical to criticize corporations and still enjoy consumer culture. Women in their 20s were also conflicted about the role of the corporation in the landscape of social change: some felt corporations should spearhead initiatives, others felt they should stay out of the realm of ideas and simply donate money to non-profit organizations.

- Anna (FG1): There are people whose job it is – and who genuinely want – to find good places for money to go. Would we really want to prevent a corporation from donating?
- Mena (FG1): Do we need to be partners with the bad guys in order to create change?
- Anna (FG1): You know — we like to spend money. We like clothing, we like a certain standard of living. We also need to learn how to work from within the corporation.
- Mena (FG1): But to what degree will feminism be compromised? Are corporations going to start shaping social justice movements?

In addition to imagining feminists who might work within or cooperate with corporations, in these pragmatic discussions participants evaluated their own complicity with capitalism as a way of life, and debated whether feminism is discrete from capitalism and should be protected from its influences. Others made useful comparisons with other industries to debate the role of corporations promulgating feminist ideals and social change:

- Sheila (FG2): Change has to come from inside the [beauty] industry.
- Astrid: (FG2): I totally disagree. I don't think change happens from inside an industry. It hasn't happened with food. Consumer demands led to changes. And with the beauty industry, it's got to be women who say I am not going to wear stilettos or makeup. It is dollars and cents that drive industry to change.

The idea of 'dollars and cents' driving social change was not unusual in our discussions. Most participants were ambivalent about feminism partnering with corporations, but interestingly, still generally supported some notion of ethical consumerism involving political expression through targeted consumption choices. Heather (FG1) said, 'I am still going to buy shampoo and soap, why not buy it from someplace that at least purports to have some good values?' Most participants, regardless of how pointedly they criticized Dove, found corporate engagement with movement ideals 'better than nothing' – a sentiment which sometimes reflected an underlying sense of powerlessness.

- Nella (FG6): I don't mean to be rude or anything, but we can't really dog on Dove because *we're not really doing anything about it either.*

Facilitator: What about our group and what's happening here?

Isa (FG6): Yeah, OK, but it's hard to make change, like, us, *we can't make a change, a group can't make a change.* (Emphasis added.)

Those who begrudgingly agreed with the sentiment the Dove campaign was 'better than nothing' were incredulous that corporations harm people through their business practices, but then participate in philanthropy, seemingly 'paying dues' for the social and environmental havoc they cause. Maya (FG1) said, 'Where is the line? Where do they stop being a corporation and start helping people?' Although capitalist structures seem relatively unshakeable, the Marcusean project of disentangling opposites appeared in our focus groups with participants like Maya struggling to disentangle the ideals of social change and corporate self-interest. Each focus group included varied approaches: some participants worked to disentangle the ideals of corporate self-interest and social change, while others accepted that these ideals could overlap in on-the-ground struggles. Those who were more optimistic about limited corporate engagement with feminist ideas noted that while Dove's message was politically tepid, it probably reached people they could not.

Shale (FG2): I guess it's a start to working towards more of the radical stuff, its tiny baby steps towards something more subversive.

Hanna (FG2): Could it be a gateway for people into feminism? Try to think of people who are totally not like you, or raised in a family not like yours.

The inherent struggle in many of these conversations was related to the inevitability of capitalism, the depth of capitalist entrenchment in every aspect of life, and a sense of powerlessness when it came to imagining alternatives. Some participants accepted this reality and promoted the idea of pragmatically working within these logics, while others held fast to the desire to preserve distinctions between their own feminist ideals and corporate marketing. While Jenine (FG4) insisted that 'you have to attach [social issues] to a company or a product' to get people to pay attention, Wanda (FG6) protested, 'I just don't see why there has to be a product that is being sold for these [feminist] messages to be up there.' Participants varied in their critiques of capitalism, but relished the opportunity for deliberation and evidenced powers of discernment that Marcuse's analyses rendered implausible. In the following section, we discuss the implications of such deliberation for our understanding of capitalism and critique, feminism, and focus group research.

Conclusion

One important conclusion from our focus group research is that young women positively predisposed to feminism exhibit notable critical capacities and political consciousness, even in a culture marked by post-feminist individualism (McRobbie, 2009). The sophisticated feminist consciousness we observed leads us to believe that one factor that keeps social movements alive in times of quiescence is not just organizations, but intellectual work. While social movement organizations preserve networks, goals, and collective identity (Taylor, 1989), our results suggest that critical consciousness can be active and vibrant in periods of movement abeyance, as supporters maintain the ability to think critically and generate analyses that sustain and justify political identities. Our focus groups clearly demonstrate how young women were skilled at unpacking power relations, using everyday observations to elaborate their critiques and identifying the contradictions and trespasses that oppose their visions for the future.

The critical analyses of young feminists also refute understandings of third wave feminists as unduly and narcissistically attuned to lifestyle and popular culture, to the exclusion of concerns about material inequality and structural obstacles (Faludi, 2010; Heath and Potter, 2005). While

our sample is neither exhaustive nor representative of the general population, our findings suggest that young women who respond positively to feminism are *inclined* to make political sense of personal obstacles, even if this is likely not true among the general populace (e.g. Eliasoph, 1998).

Our focus group participants also displayed an impressive ability to think critically about how feminist objectives were being used by corporate capitalism. We were struck by the contemporary relevance of a line of inquiry introduced by Marcuse (1964) more than 50 years ago. Put simply, Marcusean theory encourages us to study how critical thinking is both fostered and foreclosed through the avenues of consumer capitalism. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty exemplifies how social criticism is introduced into consumer capitalism through marketing campaigns. The Marcusean ‘convergence of opposites’ highlights the utility of investigating people’s capacity to identify and critique this process. While the young feminists in our focus group spoke about their scepticism of feminist consumerism, and identified instances of gender inequality at work in the Dove campaign, they found it challenging to imagine a diminution of capitalism and corporate power in the course of their lives, or to think of ways that social life could be organized *without* capitalism or corporations. Most participants, even those who were highly critical of the Dove campaign and saw feminism as anti-capitalist, saw the campaign as ‘better than nothing,’ and supported some notion of ethical consumption – making social or environmental change through targeted purchasing. While these views reflect a kind of pragmatism, they also suggest that Marcuse’s pessimism about the imagining of social alternatives to consumer capitalism was at least partially justified.

While a Marcusean framework sheds light on the discussions among our participants, the discussions also revealed how a Marcusean analytic framework could be complicated by feminist analytic insights. For example, focus group conversations revealed that critical awareness of capitalist consumerism eludes simple binary statements (e.g. one-dimensional versus critical thinking), and involves layers of contradictory thoughts *and feelings* (e.g. disliking the Dove campaign’s corporate form while feeling socially validated by the imagery of larger women in advertising). Unpacking the convergence of opposites is not a state of being or condition, but a cognitive, emotional, and dialogical *process* that is continually unfolding. This process occurs through interpersonal dialogue, as observed among our focus groups. Daily life rituals like grooming may be un-reflexively practiced, but their political content may be revealed when they are critically unpacked in a dialogical setting. **Most of these young women would agree that the need for a Dove firming cream is a ‘false need,’ but the emotions surrounding women’s bodies, self-worth, and beauty are an undeniable part of everyday lived experience, and must be continually negotiated within a capitalist consumer society.**

In terms of feminism’s relationship to political agency and corporate capitalism, our participants agreed the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty was not feminist because it preached conformity rather than transgression, and encouraged women to focus on their self-esteem to the neglect of the world around them. The majority argued that corporations should not ‘do the work’ of feminism, reasoning that feminism is intrinsically anti-capitalist, and that political expression through consumption is not a legitimate strategy for progressive movements. While not all groups were in agreement, most spent the session collectively disentangling feminist goals from corporate behaviour – although participants (even those who did not support the Dove campaign) were open to the idea that targeted shopping practices could achieve social benefits. Their discussions reveal that politically attuned young women can engage in a level of critique Marcuse likely believed was beyond their grasp, but their liberatory potential was perhaps less clear than he imagined. Participants left the sessions simultaneously aware of capitalism’s effects – and its durability.

Our research also demonstrates how focus groups can help clarify the reception of corporate social change projects; the findings will be useful for social movement research, especially projects trying to clarify how individuals engage with movement ideas. In all focus groups, the

majority of participants did not appreciate a corporation amplifying the ideals of the feminist movement, and they challenged the ‘feminist’ status of the ideals used in the Dove campaign. Participants discussed how feminist ideals were rendered politically ineffectual by their use in the Dove campaign, and the importance of separating feminist and corporate interests, and maintaining this boundary. Most participants rejected the idea that profit motive and social change engine could be effectively combined, but they were also pragmatic – they evaluated corporations’ forays into social change comparatively, and found some corporate projects more egregious than others.

Participants discredited the Dove campaign’s apparent goal to democratize beauty, by suggesting that genuine feminism (rather than feminist consumerism) rejects compulsory beauty and inspires empowerment by other means. Women talked about how the promise of beauty paired with products is not feminist, but involves the most basic consumer logic of commodification. Participants openly explored the numerous contradictory feelings the campaign inspired in them – for example, gratitude for seeing more women of colour represented on billboards, but irritation at the saturation of the cultural landscape with advertising. While most participants were pessimistic about the possibilities of decentering consumerism as a dominant social value and economic model, they still envisioned spaces of resistance, and doing so is constitutive of their political identities. Through dialogue, women honed their critiques and developed new understandings of feminism as a politics that goes beyond self-care, transgresses accepted norms, and is anti-capitalist. Theirs is not a particularly optimistic politics, but neither is it sedimented. Perhaps for movement adherents in this political juncture, it is not the absence of critique, but the presence of resignation, that deserves analytic attention.

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Notes

1. For a discussion of Marcusean theory in critical studies in the 1970s and early 80s, see Kellner (1983: 69–71).
2. Marcuse identified conformity as part of a problematic one-dimensional consciousness in consumer capitalism, but he would have rejected the 1960s countercultural ideal that conformity (and *not* capitalist exploitation) is the paramount social problem. Marcuse (1964: 4) rejected an idealist notion of freedom or liberation, and focused explicitly on its political and economic dimensions.
3. One methodological limitation to note is that our use of pre-existing networks limited participants’ opportunities to share their ideas outside their circle.
4. Note that these are the perspectives of young women reflecting, perhaps erroneously, on stages of life they have not yet reached. For older women’s perspectives on beauty and aging, see Clark (2011).
5. While Dove is adamant that the campaign images were not airbrushed, a profile of digital artist Pascal Dangin suggests otherwise (Collins, 2008).

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