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Commodity Feminism and Its Body: The Appropriation and Capitalization of Body Positivity through Advertising

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Abstract: The world of marketing has stumbled upon body positivity as a tool of feminist activism and now attempts to use its messages of empowerment to sell products. This is especially true when it comes to selling products specifically targeted toward women: beauty and personal care products, weight loss supplements, and more. Various aspects of body positivity have been appropriated by advertisers not only because they have the potential to make women feel better about themselves—feelings that they then associate with the product—but also for their ability to make women feel engaged in activism, even if the products themselves are controversial in feminist circles. In such a highly commercialized, neoliberal society, the idea that social change can be enacted through consumerism is pervasive. However, although advertisements position corporations as catalysts for a revolution in the way we see women’s bodies, they ultimately serve the same beauty standard that they attempt to resist, and the very nature of advertising—as a tool of capitalism—makes it incompatible with the goals of activism.

Keywords: body positivity; feminism; commodity feminism; advertising; feminist advertising; capitalism; commodity activism

The body positive movement has its origins in feminist communities online (Sastre 929). More recently, however, the world of marketing has stumbled upon body positivity as a tool of feminist activism and now attempts to use its messages of empowerment to market products, even if the message being promoted significantly differs (or even directly contradicts) from the purpose of the product being sold. This is especially true when it comes to selling products specifically targeted toward women: beauty and personal care products, fashion items, weight loss supplements, et cetera. In particular, various aspects of body positivity have been appropriated by advertisers not only because they have the potential to make women feel better about themselves—feelings that they then associate with the product—but also for their ability to make women feel engaged in activism, even if the products themselves are controversial in feminist circles. In such a highly commercialized, neoliberal society, the idea that social change can be enacted through consumerism is pervasive. However, I will argue that although advertisements (as well as the news articles that endorse them) position corporations as catalysts for a revolution in the way we see women’s bodies, as endorsers and promoters of body positivity, ultimately they serve the same beauty standard that they attempt to resist, and that the very nature of advertising—as a tool of capitalism—makes it incompatible with the goals of activism. For the purposes of this paper, I will analyze three
advertisements—two print, one video—that co-opt a feminist, body positive message in order to sell products, both by attempting to tear down conventional beauty standards (while still working within a framework of hegemonic beauty ideals) and also by fostering a sense of activism in consumers.

In 2014, Aerie—the lingerie company owned by American Eagle, marketed to girls and women aged fifteen to twenty-one (Krupnik)—launched a new advertising campaign they called “Aerie Real”, in which the brand pledged to stop digitally retouching its models’ images in ad campaigns, and also to use “real girls”, rather than supermodels, as their models (see fig. 1).

While Aerie claims that all of their new models are regular girls and not supermodels, it is immediately apparent that their selection is not as random as that claim may suggest. The model in the ad, if not supermodel-thin, is still well below the size of the average woman. She is also Caucasian, and despite Aerie’s promise of no retouching, the model has no visible blemishes, such as scars, stretch marks, or birth marks. In short, the model embodies the female beauty ideal of the white, conventionally attractive woman. While the photo may indeed have not been retouched, it is clear that this photo, like the model selection, is not merely a shot taken at random; rather, there is bright lighting to highlight the model’s body at a flattering angle, and she is carefully posed. All of this considered, Aerie’s assertion that it’s “time to think real, time to get real” falls flat, because the selection of the model, combined with the precise composition of the photo itself, indicates that it is every bit as carefully cultivated and contrived as any other advertisement, even without digital retouching. Further, the first thing that draws attention in the ad is the centred image of the model’s buttocks. It is clear that Aerie is purposefully drawing attention to this singular body part, judging by the fact that most of
the text is light grey on a light, overexposed background, thus making it not immediately visible. Contrast this with the model’s bright pink underwear on this same white background, and the intent to draw attention becomes clear. The woman’s face is not shown, and most of her body is not visible because she faces away from the camera. She therefore becomes her pink-pantied buttocks, dismembered from the rest of her body, and made into a sex object. It is important to note that the mere presence of a sexualized image of a woman does not necessarily constitute objectification; however, the presentation of a single, sexualized body part, combined with the idealized depiction of the female form, reduces the woman to an object (Kilbourne and Jhally, qtd in Erchull 33). She is not so much wearing the underwear, as the underwear is wearing her—she functions as a sexy hanger for the garment.

In many respects, the Aerie Real campaign is subject to the same pitfalls as Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty. For instance, the objectification and gratuitous sexualisation of the model is only cemented by the tagline of the ad, “The Real You is Sexy”, which seems to claim that all women, in their natural and unretouched forms, are sexy. In a similar vein, the Dove campaign claims that all women are beautiful, despite their “flaws”. Both campaigns contest the idea that there is one absolute type of beauty or sex appeal; however, noticeably absent is a critique of beauty or sex appeal as central and integral to a woman’s life and personhood (Johnston and Taylor 954). Indeed, Aerie commands women to feel sexy in the same way that Dove commands them to feel beautiful, but both companies do so without any awareness or acknowledgement of the complex emotions, sexual politics, and social and media pressures that contribute to the difficulty of women embracing their bodies in the first place (Johnston and Taylor 954).

Furthermore, Aerie opts for a postfeminist message in their advertisement, with the emphasis being on agency and choice, while disregarding the extraordinarily powerful influence that media images have on young women. The message to female consumers is that if they purchase Aerie products, they are choosing to buy into a brand that supports the idea of body positivity. Essentially, Aerie attempts to make its consumers believe that by purchasing Aerie products, they are engaging with feminist values and participating in activism, and this postfeminist message of women as powerful through their consumption allows Aerie to position their brand as an advocate for women (Murray 86). However, as this analysis has demonstrated, Aerie’s campaign reinforces emphasized femininity by selecting conventionally attractive models (mostly thin, mostly white) and then objectifying them, and by continuing to stress the importance of sex appeal to women’s identities.

If Aerie’s anti-airbrushing campaign misses the mark, in part due to their exclusive selection of thin models, then one could be forgiven for assuming that Swimsuits For All—a company that sells plus-size swimwear, and uses plus-size models in their ad campaigns—would be more legitimately concerned with issues of body positivity. However, upon perusing the ad in question, I will contest the idea that simply
using a plus-size model in an advertisement qualifies as a promotion of body positivity (see fig. 2).

![Figure 2](swimsuitsforall.com)

Swimsuits for All features a plus-size model and the hashtag #CurvesinBikinis, seeming to endorse a body positive message, yet it also seems that that did not prevent them from airbrushing the model in question. Even as Swimsuits for All asserts its message of body positivity, it alters the body of its plus-size model. Inherent in the decision to digitally alter the model’s body is the implication that her body is in some way deficient, and can only be enhanced through the use of retouching (Allyn 77). According to Sastre, photographs of women exposing their imperfect bodies are “meant to ‘inspire bravery’, and we, as viewers, gawkers, fans, or potential participants in this so-called revolution, are meant to recognize this body as true, and to see its presentation herein as an act of catharsis” (929). In the same way, this ad Preaches a message of bravery and inclusiveness, even as it promotes that message with an image that is inauthentic. The mixed message is clear: women should flaunt their plus-size, curvy bodies, but those bodies are still fundamentally flawed in a way that only digital editing can fix.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that Swimsuits for All thought it necessary to include a thin, conventionally attractive man in the ad, picturing him staring at the model’s plus-size form while falling into a swimming pool, as if he were falling over himself at her beauty. He validates her presence in the ad as a plus-size woman in a swimsuit, as a person who has traditionally been excluded from the male gaze. His gaze equally validates and reinforces her beauty and sex appeal to the ad’s audience, making it acceptable for others to also view her as beautiful and sexy. The male gaze makes her
desirable, and her desirability negates the fact that she is a plus-size woman, and suppresses the urge of audience to ridicule her, rather than admire her.

Further, in Adweek’s article about the advertisement, the model in question, Ashley Graham, said, “I know my curves are sexy, and I want everyone else to know that theirs are too. There is no reason to hide and every reason to flaunt” (Ciambriello). To quote Sastre once more, “the body in question is no longer buried beneath layers of concealing clothing, but finally exposed, facing a viewing public in defiance of the pressures and anxieties that had once kept it hidden. Yet it is not only the iterative nature of this sort of corporeal performance [...] that problematically positions body positivity as an echo of, rather than a radical break from, the contemporary makeover and celebrity culture it ostensibly positions itself against” (936). Graham’s comments reveal the assumptions made by herself and Swimsuits for All—that to be positive about the “flawed” body, it must be exposed, flaunted, branded as a weapon against that old prejudice. However, as Sastre writes, this exposure of the flawed body is not a radical stand against the thin-worshipping, celebrity obsessed culture in which it originates. In the case of this advertisement in particular, it is not a radical move because of the male gaze, which only serves to sexualize and objectify the plus-size model in the way that so many other conventional models already are. Rather than being a part of cultural backlash, it is simply a reaffirmation of emphasized femininity—as a sex object—slightly expanded to allow for a larger body type. Ultimately, Swimsuits for All attempts to empower women by validating “plus-size” as a legitimate form of existence, but it does so through the lens of objectification. The company uses this postfeminist sense of empowerment through consumerism as a way to make consumers feel as though, by purchasing this brand’s products, they are engaged in a counterculture, in activism. In turn, this sense of engagement will encourage them to continue purchasing from Swimsuits for All, and the company can continue to capitalize on the appropriation of body positivity as a feminist message.

Continuing this trend of mixed messages of both empowerment and degradation, Special K is a brand of cereal products marketed to women that are intended to aid in weight loss and weight management. In 2013, they released an advertising campaign that they called More Than a Number, which included an eponymous television commercial. The commercial depicts a social experiment conducted by Special K, in which they open a new boutique that sells jeans; however, the jeans that they sell have no sizes printed on them. When women enter the store and attempt to try on the jeans, employees at the store offer to measure them with tape printed with complimentary words and phrases, such as “radiant” and “confident” (0:38). The women proceed to try on the jeans happily, while one of them remarks, “Not seeing the number is so freeing” (0:47). Special K then imposes a heading over the picture that reads, “let’s rethink what defines us” and at the same time, a woman says, “to feel amazing—I think that’s what makes a woman
beautiful” (1:01). The ad ends with a tag from the jeans that says, “You’re so much more than a number.”

Finally, Special K is implying that even as the women in its advertisement are more significant than what size they wear, they are still deficient, because they need to use Special K cereal in order to manage their weight. Special K tries to promote a body positive message, but fails to see that feminist values of body positivity and acceptance fundamentally contradict the intended purpose for their products. They adopt what Moore identifies as a gendered approach to the healthy body; that is, even as society recognizes that the body is essentially uncontrollable (a fatal internal injury can happen in an instant, for example), it is necessary to attempt to control it as a matter of virtue (Moore 95). Moreover, the body is synonymous with the self (Moore 95). Weight loss and weight management are frequently seen through this lens of virtue, and those who manage to lose weight and maintain that loss are congratulated, rewarded, and even seen as righteous. Those who do not or cannot lose weight are seen as lazy, insecure, defective, and even morally questionable. Special K claims that women are “more than just a number” and suggests that they re-evaluate what defines them, but they also “[label] this individualized solution as one of empowerment and choice,” which “may dismiss a need for a feminism that is capable of combating structural inequalities” (D’Enbeau 61). Once again, as with the previous companies discussed, Special K emphasises the element of postfeminist choice—the choice to purchase and consume their products—as empowerment, while failing to address the larger structural forces at play, such as the incredible social and media pressure to lose weight. It is obvious that Special K sees the choice to purchase their product as evoking feelings of empowerment, because one woman in the ad remarks that not seeing the number is freeing. She is speaking to the feelings of seemingly feminist empowerment that Special K is trying to create in its consumers. After all, if the consumers feel empowered to lose weight, then they will probably purchase more Special K products, especially since they associate these feelings of empowerment with the brand itself. In the end, as the last woman in the video comments on the fact that feeling amazing is what makes a woman beautiful, it is further demonstrated that even as Special K tries to emphasize multiple iterations of beauty, the expectation that women should aspire to be beautiful as a cultural imperative is still enforced (similarly to Aerie and Dove).

Ultimately, advertising is a tool of capitalism. In a post-Fordist society, it convinces consumers to identify with the product as a way of compelling them to purchase it (Johnston and Taylor 947). When it comes to feminist messages, advertising appropriates body positivity as a means of empowering women to buy products. Paradoxically, these ads work to empower women by sending the message that they are beautiful, sexy, and more than their appearance, while also telling them that they are in some way deficient, so that they know that they still need the product in question. Additionally, these advertisements serve to stir up these feelings of empowerment so that
consumers feel engaged in feminist activism, and identify the brand as an advocate for feminist values. In the end, however, the advertisements offer a superficial look into the body positivity movement and into feminist values; in fact, it offers up a much more postfeminist view, in which women are powerful through their ability to choose products. While feminism attempts to combat structural oppression against women—in this case, against beauty standards and body policing—corporations have an interest in maintaining it, because ultimately, in a fundamentally patriarchal society and marketplace, it sells their products. This pursuit of capital is the driving force behind advertisers’ attempts to harness and exploit women’s experiences of subjugation for the purposes of marketing (and not, as I have discussed, to alleviate that subjugation). Therefore, advertising is fundamentally incompatible with the goals of activism, and it is not a medium through which meaningful social change can be enacted.
Works Cited


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