

Dove Doesn't Redefine Beauty, It Reinforces It



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One of the things we hate most in this world is when companies try to commodify self-esteem to sell products to girls and women. And this time it's hitting really close to home. Dove just debuted their latest viral video at Sundance named "Selfie," which repeatedly asks girls to "redefine beauty" by taking selfies and realizing how beautiful they are. The take-home message: "The power is in your hands. Redefine beauty."

[3]

At Beauty Redefined®, we believe this whole-heartedly! (Duh). We even

trademarked it in our name! But Dove is a beauty-peddling wolf in female empowerment clothing. Dove doesn't so much "redefine" beauty as much as it merely re-centralizes beauty as the foremost priority in a girl or woman's life. It's not revolutionary to re-encourage females to fixate on their looks, or document their looks at any given moment through their cell phone cameras, and then discuss what they see. This is for-profit advertising that sells anti-aging creams, skin firming solutions, and underarm beautifiers under the guise of promoting life-changing self-acceptance through feel-good videos. **This tactic allows a company to cash in on women's insecurities by being a false ally in the fight for positive body image.***

Our nonprofit's premise of "redefining beauty" is about expanding the definition of "beauty" in a truly empowering way: we're not just expanding the definition from "thin, young, white" to "less thin, slightly older, and any skin tone with Eurocentric features;" we're expanding it from "thin, young, white" to "you are so much more than just a body to be looked at." **We don't want girls and women to feel good about their appearances; we want them to feel good about themselves.**

One of the feel-good messages at the end of Dove's video is a girl saying, "I was looking through my selfies last night and I realized I am beautiful. I'm pretty cute." Now she can go face the world and excel at everything she sets her mind to, right? She finally sees her beauty! Isn't that all we ladies need to succeed? No, because perpetual concern for appearance will still dominate her thoughts and impair her performance at literally every skill or task she tries to accomplish. Dove's marketing depends on us believing our self-worth comes from the belief that we're beautiful, *but we want you to know that it doesn't*. Regardless of what you look like, or what you *think* you look like, you can feel good about yourself, **because you are not your appearance**. Positive body image is the cornerstone of our work, and it is founded in the life-changing understanding that your body is an instrument to be used[5] and not

just an object to be adorned. We teach people how to recognize and resist harmful messages about bodies that keep us fixated on our appearances through the power of body image resilience. (We'll get there in a minute.)

6]Elena Rossini at The Illusionists[7] put it perfectly: *"The people at Dove have actually exploited a void in the marketplace. By introducing so-called women with 'real' bodies, they distinguished themselves from their competitors. According to the New Yorker, after the introduction of their 'Real Beauty' campaign, Dove's sales shot up 700% in the U.K."* Dove, whose parent company also owns Axe and Lynx (with the notoriously pornographic, sexist ads) and Fair & Lovely (the skin bleaching cream for women of color), also employs the world's highest paid photo retoucher, Pascal Dangin, for their Real Beauty ads. In a *New Yorker* profile, he was asked about his work with Dove's ad campaign and said: *'Do you know how much retouching was on that? But it was great to do, a challenge, to keep everyone's skin and faces showing the mileage but not looking unattractive.'*"

Dove is not the only for-profit company using this same faux empowerment-based marketing tactic to drive profits. As Charlotte Alter[8] said, "Pantene had an ad late last year that equated shiny hair with respect at work... And American Eagle's Aerie brand recently debuted a lingerie campaign featuring 'real un-Photoshopped girls' to encourage customers to 'embrace their own beauty,' as a brand representative described it on Good Morning America. After years of marketing outer beauty, it looks like inner beauty is the hot new thing."

While we love a non-Photoshopped[9] image or feel-good ad as much as anyone, any campaign featuring women with shiny hair at work or models in their underwear is still just convincing us to buy more stuff at the end of the day. It's still putting the never-ending focus on women's appearances, begging us to spend our money on appearance-"enhancing" products, and distracting

us from our potential to focus on anything else more important than that.
[Read: everything. Everything is more important than worrying about your appearance.]

[10]

We've called out lots of other big-name brands for co-opting "empowerment" to sell sexist products over the years. One of the most successful swindlers of our time is Victoria's Secret[12], whose "secret" is telling the masses their marketing "empowers women" and "helps customers to feel sexy, bold and powerful." In the case of VS, a push-up bra and thong that says "best kisser" are made to stand for "empowerment" in a way that basically slaps us in the face. And Special K[13] has also jumped on the bandwagon of selling diet food in the name of self-esteem and empowerment. Their "what will you gain when you lose?" campaign and their latest commercials encouraging women to end "fat talk" are still about convincing women that replacing two meals a day with a tiny serving of magic lady cereal will help them drop weight every single week. Because weight loss and beauty are our jobs, right? Full-time, life-long, unfulfilling jobs.

These are just a few of many examples, but at the end of the day, these examples are a perfect lesson in media literacy. We need to feel an obligation to put media under closer inspection for the influence it has in our lives. Next time you are flipping through a magazine or watching the latest ad telling you you're beautiful the way you are (with the help of their product), train yourself to ask important questions about what you see. If you don't like the answers you find, you can turn away from the messages that hurt you!

Who is advertising in these pages or on this screen?

Who owns the TV show, movie, magazine, video, etc. you are viewing?

(Find out who the powerful decision makers are behind the scenes.)

Is the media you read and view promoting real health (which is measured internally[14]) or beauty ideals meant to make you spend money?

Who are those messages promoting impossible ideals speaking to?

What would it look like if this message were directed at males (or females)?

How are women and girls presented here? What are they being valued for?

Almost 3/4 of the women in both of our doctoral studies (Kite, 2013 & Kite, 2013) described themselves in self-objectifying terms, meaning they viewed themselves from an outsider's perspective[15]. Looking through your selfies to remind yourself of your value is the *perfect* illustration we'd use to describe self-objectification. Living a life of self-objectification is debilitating, and here's why: **Living a life for others' viewing pleasure is not fully living.** When girls and women live their lives in this perpetual state of body-monitoring, they are forfeiting some of their own humanity. They are living as passive objects whose primary purpose is to be judged and consumed by others, and not as humans actively making choices and experiencing life for themselves. This constant preoccupation with appearance comes at the expense of every other mental and physical capacity you can think of.

Our nonprofit version of "redefining beauty" here at Beauty Redefined is all about helping girls and women recognize their power and their worth outside the confines of the lies sold to us by media. While media and cultural ideals would have us believe we are only worthy of value when we meet (or believe we meet) cultural beauty ideals, we teach girls and women to understand their

reflections do not define their worth. *Whole industries preying on our insecurities would crumble if we just believed that.* Friends, Dove has one thing right: “The power is in your hands. Redefine beauty.” You **do** have that power, but it won’t come by taking selfies and letting someone convince you that you fit some arbitrary definition of “beautiful.” It won’t come by buying magic lady cereal, new underwear, anti-aging products, or anything else. **Redefining beauty is a continuous process of learning to see yourself for who you really are, and for-profit media and products for what they really are.** You are capable of more than looking hot, and when you realize it, your whole life opens up.

We help people “redefine beauty” by harnessing their power for body image resilience in four areas. If you’re up for *really* taking your power into your own hands, skip the endless stream of selfies and start here:

Mental Power:

Increasing our media literacy (understanding how and why media is engineered the way it is – see our entire “recognize[16]” category of blog posts)

Critical thinking about beauty and health ideals (skin color[17], body size[18], age[19], BMI[20], fitspiration[21])

Critical self-reflection[22] about our own beliefs and choices

Making conscious choices about media and cutting out what hurts (try a media fast[23])

Physical Power:

Using our bodies as instruments rather than objects (setting and achieving fitness goals[24])

Redefining health for ourselves by internal indicators and how we feel – not how we look[25]

Spiritual Power:

Understanding you are more than a body[26] and tapping into that higher-level thinking in whatever way suits you[27]

“There exists a positive relationship between spirituality, mental and physical health, and wellness. ...If a woman draws her sense of meaning from a spiritual force that goes beyond herself and that provides coherence and purpose to the universe, she will find less need to focus on her weight, shape, and appearance in an attempt to find happiness or life satisfaction” (Choate, 2007, p. 323).

Social Power:

Considering your influence in the ways you speak about your body and others'[28]

Understanding the social implications of how you treat your body (physically Photoshopping[29])

Using your influence to promote positive body image in conversation, social media, etc[30].

[31]

One of our empowering sticky note slogans!

The power is in your hands to redefine beauty in empowering ways. See more. Be more. THAT is Beauty Redefined.

****Disclaimer:** We fully recognize that many people see Dove’s marketing as a “step in the right direction.” We can concede on that point. Though they do airbrush their models and sell anti-aging, anti-cellulite, and other female-specific “flaw fixers,” they don’t reinforcing the same stereotypes of*

supermodel bodies selling everything, and that's cool. We're glad their videos get people talking about body image and beauty ideals. Some people may perceive our response to Dove's videos as too nit-picky or critical, but the whole idea of "redefining beauty" is very, VERY close to our hearts, and we want as much as anyone to help girls and women feel good about their bodies. That's why Dove's videos are so frustrating to us – they fall so short of actually assisting people in achieving positive body image when they could so easily do so. Instead of asking girls to take selfies and post them online, and thus invite input from others about what they look like, they could ask girls to step away from the selfies and the constant, debilitating focus on appearance that is epidemic among females and focus on using their bodies for good. Studies show using your body as an instrument, rather than focusing on its appearance, improves the way we feel about our bodies. No studies show that posting selfies and asking for public comment on them helps anyone to feel better about their bodies. We want Dove to do so much better, especially if they're using the phrase "redefine beauty" to do it.