Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists: A Comparative Study of Grassroots Activism and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign

Corporations have a long history of incorporating emancipatory ideals into marketing campaigns, often with limited transformative outcomes (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2004). Virginia Slims, for instance, promotes an image of feminist independence in the “You’ve come a long way, baby” marketing campaign, and yet it sells women a highly addictive, cancer-causing product. While “feminist tobacco” contains obvious contradictions, today’s transnational corporations employ a panoply of socially responsible wares ranging from fair-trade coffee to biodegradable yoga mats and organic frozen dinners (Johnston 2001). Because in some instances such corporate strategies appear both well intentioned and well received, we move beyond cynical dismissal to empirically investigate and analyze corporate discourse to identify its transformative possibilities and contradictions. In this article, we question whether transformative visions are exclusively linked with grassroots models for social change—models at the heart of feminist consciousness-raising.1 Our primary goal is to compare the discursive contributions of Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty”—a corporate project that claims to oppose restrictive feminine beauty standards and promote a more democratic vision of beauty—with those made by a Toronto-based grassroots fat-activist organization that also targets feminine beauty ideals: Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off (PPPO).2 We use a comparative approach to evaluate how each case challenges feminine beauty ideology while also considering the scale

1 While national organizations and feminist campaigns define feminism in the national public consciousness, collective identities are arguably forged at the local level (Reger 2002). Movement scholars have long understood the centrality of grassroots organizing to feminist (and other) social change initiatives, even though the political is often narrowly defined as a national-level occurrence targeting the state (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Naples 1998).

2 Dove is a beauty products company owned by international Dutch corporation Unilever.

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of its activism. Our analysis of the PPPO case relies on interviews with PPPO members, archival documentation of their events provided by activists, and media profiles and reviews of their shows. The Dove case draws primarily on the company’s Web site, multimedia advertisements, trade magazines and journals, and participant observation at Dove Real Beauty events. We also collected and analyzed mainstream news coverage of PPPO activities and the Dove campaign. This research enabled us to understand and compare these parallel but very different campaigns and pay particular attention to questions of scale and their different cultural contexts, ideologies, tactics, intended audiences, and goals.

At the same political moment when scholars bemoaned the constant assertion that feminism is dead (see Hawkesworth 2004; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005), Dove launched its Campaign for Real Beauty in 2004 using feminist critiques and concerns about beauty ideals to revitalize the Dove brand. Billboard, television, and magazine ads depicted women who were wrinkled, freckled, pregnant, had stretch marks, or might be seen as fat (at least compared with the average media representation of women). The campaign has generated commercial success (e.g., sales of firming lotion, the campaign’s flagship product, far exceeded forecasts), media sensation (see, e.g., People 2005), and endorsements from celebrities (e.g., Oprah Winfrey), gender scholars (e.g., Susie Orbach), and professional associations (e.g., American Women in Radio and Television). The campaign, which started in the United Kingdom and quickly spread to North America, is now a major feature of Dove’s global marketing.

While Dove uses a multimillion dollar, multimedia marketing campaign, PPPO employed radically different tactics to challenge hegemonic beauty standards. Frustrated with ill-fitting clothing options for plus-size women, a group of artists and activists from women’s studies and queer activist communities formed PPPO in 1996. Their first event was a street protest in a trendy shopping district in which members handed out candy and questioned passersby about their attitudes toward fat. Members moved from street protest to creating cabaret shows with which they could more fully explore and enact their burgeoning politics. Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off went on to become one of Toronto’s most popular queer cabaret acts, using song and dance to challenge misogynist attitudes about fat women and sexuality.

Despite the belief that the beauty industry articulates and reproduces
gendered beauty norms, PPPO’s grassroots activism and Dove’s corporate campaign appear to be countervailing forces pulling beauty ideology in opposite directions (Black 2004; Jeffreys 2005). The tendency is to summarily dismiss Dove’s efforts to broaden beauty ideals, yet as feminist scholars, our hope is to better understand the nuances, possibilities, and contradictions of Dove’s seemingly transformative aspirations, particularly when juxtaposed with the beauty critiques of grassroots activists. The Dove Real Beauty Campaign promotes itself as a progressive force for women, aligns itself with certain feminist ideals and scholars, engages in “grassroots” partnering to raise millions of dollars for eating disorder organizations and Girl Scouts programs to build self-esteem, has engaged with prominent gender scholars, and has been widely praised in the popular media. To make sense of its impact, our comparison of the Dove campaign with grassroots feminist activism aims to document Dove’s campaign discourse as an example of corporate appropriation of social movement ideals, thereby contributing to the important, but sparse, critical scholarship on this topic (Frank 1997; Messner 2002; Heath and Potter 2004). We examine the transformative potential of the corporate versus the grassroots, and speak to theoretical debates, suggesting the need for closer integration between political economic analysis and feminist scholarship of beauty ideology, cultural politics, and grassroots activisms. Thus, our comparative project combines political-economic scholarship with feminist understandings of social change, shedding light on prospects for counterhegemonic action against oppressive feminine beauty standards.

We use the term “feminist consumerism,” a phenomenon with the potential to partially disrupt gender norms, to emphasize the Dove campaign’s evolution alongside a broader culture-ideology of consumerism, understood as a way of life dedicated to the possession and use of consumer goods (Kellner 1983, 74) and rooted in the capitalist need to sell an ever-expanding roster of commodities in a globalized economy (Gotttdiener 2000, 281; Sklair 2001). In contrast, PPPO provides a counter-hege-

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4 This objective also responds to Avery Gordon’s decade-old assertion that corporate discourse is an important yet neglected element of cultural studies scholarship (1995).

5 In part, this echoes Nancy Fraser’s call for closer attention to how feminist struggles involve elements of symbolic recognition and material redistribution (Fraser and Naples 2004, 1113).

6 Analyses of Nike’s campaigns surrounding women and sports have inspired concepts similar to ours, and these are useful in explaining how corporations appropriate feminist ideas in marketing campaigns. Such analyses use terms such as “corporate feminism” (Messner 2002) and “celebrity feminism” (Cole and Hribar 1995). We are indebted to anonymous reviewers at Signs for flagging these parallel analyses. We use the term “feminist consumerism”
monic critique of beauty and its relationship to capitalist consumerism, but we caution against a reification and romanticization of the scale of grassroots social activism and suggest that the limitations of both actors help explain the continued salience of beauty ideology in women’s lives.

**Ideological context: Feminine beauty and feminist praxis**

Ideology is a useful tool for feminists interested in understanding how ideas enable and preclude possibilities for transformative change. Recent theorizing sees ideology as organized around a set of ideas, normative claims, and value structures that have an emotional component influencing their usage and appeal (see Fegan 1996; Ferree and Merrill 2000; Thompson 2001). Building on neo-Gramscian theories of hegemony, we argue that ideologies express degrees of hegemony depending on their ability to reinforce and naturalize power hierarchies and material inequality. With David McLellan (1995) and Eileen Fegan (1996), we argue that a critical perspective on ideology remains essential to understanding domination and inequality within capitalist culture. This can be retained by employing the complementary neo-Gramscian concepts of hegemony and counterhegemony, which avoid economic determinist accounts of social change and recognize the importance of cultural politics and everyday beliefs in struggles for social justice (Carroll 1992, 8).

Feminist scholarship and activism since the 1970s have critiqued oppressive beauty standards that repress women’s freedom, inhibit personal power and self-acceptance, and promote a destructive relationship with to emphasize its origins in consumerism’s focus on commodity purchase and acquisition as a primary means to assert an identity, achieve a common good, express ethical (feminist) principles, and seek personal pleasure and social approval. Feminist consumerism is an effective marketing tool because it is part of a hegemonic common sense of consumerism that allows Dove to credibly present itself as the vanguard of a consumer movement facilitating women’s agitation and channeling resistance into commodity purchases. This involves a degree of agency, but as Messner notes, it is a “reproductive agency” that channels “women’s actions and bodies within the power relations of the current gender order” (2002, 87).

7 With David McLellan (1995) and Eileen Fegan (1996), we argue that a critical perspective on ideology remains essential to understanding domination and inequality within capitalist culture. This can be retained by employing the complementary neo-Gramscian concepts of hegemony and counterhegemony, which avoid economic determinist accounts of social change and recognize the importance of cultural politics and everyday beliefs in struggles for social justice (Carroll 1992, 8).
the body. Drawing on these critiques, in 1991 Naomi Wolf published *The Beauty Myth*, a feminist analysis of beauty standards that became one of the best-selling feminist books of all time and that suggested that women’s gains from the second wave of the feminist movement were stymied by the existence of a beauty myth that disabled women from achieving full equality with men. While Wolf’s work was a timely piece of public scholarship, exposing countless women to the idea of a hegemonic beauty regimen, more recent feminist scholarship on beauty draws from poststructuralism’s emphasis on agency, focusing on the meaning embedded in beauty rituals. Scholars have observed women’s collusion with, and participation in, the social construction of beauty, suggesting that women’s body work, whether through exercise, cosmetics, or plastic surgery, can function as a meaningful source of empowerment (Davis 1995; Frost 2001).

The cultural turn has similarly influenced feminist scholars to problematize the aesthetic ideals surrounding thin and fat bodies. Corpulence studies, for instance, draws on queer theory to question whether beauty standards surrounding body weight are straightforwardly oppressive, and it deconstructs dualisms of thin/successful versus fat/oppressed. Corpulence studies has developed significant insights into food, gender, sexuality, and the body, specifically in relationship to fat bodies reviled as asexual, out of control, or morally repugnant (Braziel 2001; Hartley 2001; LeBesco 2001). Significantly, this scholarship has identified agency in fat bodies previously assumed to be monolithically oppressed, depressed, and psychologically traumatized. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (2001) and Marilyn Wann (1999) suggest that not every fat girl wants to be thin and that fatness is experienced in a variety of ways betwixt stereotypes of the asexual obese woman and the fat femme (Braziel 2001; Mazer 2001). Corpulence studies identifies agency, everyday forms of resistance, and the varied ways gender is constructed in bodies that defy idealized feminine beauty.

Problematising the existence of a singular, oppressive beauty standard has been a useful corrective to monochromatic understandings of gender inequality and oppression. However, the emphasis on feminine beauty and the body as a site of individual meaning and empowering play is prone to a naive self-determinism that assumes that women act completely voluntarily, thus minimizing corporate domination and the “normalizing power of cultural images” (Bordo 1993, 21, 275; see also Jeffreys 2005, 5). Even scholars who emphasize the agency present in beauty practices

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* See Dworkin 1974; Chernin 1981; Banner 1983; Brownmiller 1984; Bartky 1990; Bovey 1994.
have produced evidence suggesting that internalized hatred of fat bodies persists despite willful individual resistance, and this is documented within the fat-acceptance movement (Gimlin 2002, 136). The persistence of domination in the realm of beauty ideals raises serious questions for our two cases of beauty rebellion, as well as for the cultural turn in beauty analysis. Can resistance to beauty ideals rely on therapeutic, individually focused strategies, or must activists also target the institutions and material structures that support hegemonic beauty standards? How can individual transgression and resistance be reincorporated into corporate structures—say, in a jar of woman-affirming firming cream?

The theoretically sophisticated conception of ideology employed here can clarify how hegemonic beauty standards dominate and oppress, while simultaneously recognizing the agency present in beauty practices. Using ideology, feminist analyses of beauty standards can move away from a voluntaristic and idealistic approach that either suggests that women can readily eschew internalized beauty ideals and embrace their nonconforming bodies or sanctions gender conformity through fashion, makeup, and plastic surgery. Ideology also helps pinpoint the institutional and material processes that dialectically interact with beauty ideals through discourse (e.g., medical discourse perpetuates associations between thinness, health, and beauty).

While LeBesco uses queer theory to deconstruct the discourse of fatness as revolting, her suggestion that fat bodies are necessarily in revolt obscures the link between discursive constructions and material institutions. Using Judith Butler as her reference point, LeBesco suggests that “we just might be able to talk our way out of anything, even seemingly entrenched fat oppression, because speaking builds subjects” (2001, 77).

These questions are posed to the progressive Left and feminists by critics who question the assumption that countercultural actions and nonconformist play necessarily subvert capitalist institutions and material structures (Frank 1997; Heath and Potter 2005, 21; Jeffreys 2005).

Following McLellan’s writings on ideology, we suggest that a theoretically sophisticated conception of ideology would retain, first, a self-reflexive “hermeneutic subtlety” rejecting the Archimedean standpoint toward ideology (versus science); and, second, an interest in ideology’s role in domination and social control (1995, 83).

For a thoughtful discussion of the connection between ideology and discourse, see Fegan (1996, 181). For a critical analysis of the relationship between corpulence and discourse, especially medical discourse, see Braziel and LeBesco (2001).
practices (e.g., labiaplasty and breast augmentation) (Jeffreys 2005). Feminist political economy (Katz 2001; Mitchell, Marston, and Katz 2003) suggests the importance of investigating the centralization of cultural power in transnational corporations, arguably the most significant actor in globalized political economies (Korten 1995; Bakan 2004) but curiously neglected in cultural studies (Gordon 1995). Particularly relevant here is how the corporate and grassroots cases frame beauty ideology in relation to the capitalist ideology of consumerism. Consumerism puts forward a worldview in which consumption is “at the center of meaningful existence” (Sklaire 2001, 5) and shopping is the ideal form of participation in struggles for social change. For instance, Thomas Frank’s seminal work, The Conquest of Cool (1997), describes the ability of corporations to appropriate countercultural disenchantment with industrial society and transform it into marketing opportunities (see also Frank and Weiland 1997; Heath and Potter 2004). Post-Fordist consumer culture, therefore, is not a mass market of uniform products and cultural conformity but a realm of niche markets where consumers achieve distinction through specialized identities and lifestyles (Turow 2000). This discredits the countercultural thesis dominant in the 1960s (Roszak 1969) but still with us today (Heath and Potter 2004), which suggests that nonconformist acts are inherently transformative. These strategies are based on the outdated assumption that capitalist culture requires conformity and overlook the ubiquity of social critique and alienation in contemporary marketing campaigns, especially those targeting children and youth (Lindstrom 2003; Schor 2004).

The ability of corporations to accommodate and capitalize on social dissent and alienation suggests the need to be skeptical of consumer-based strategies for social change. However, to understand women’s relationships with beauty ideology and the beauty industry, we need first to connect feminine beauty ideology to feminist social action. We have suggested that feminist scholarship should refocus attention on ideology and a political-economic understanding of corporate interests; yet as feminist scholars, we emphasize the analytic and political importance of personal transformation (contra Heath and Potter 2005). A key insight of feminist politics and social change projects is that political inequalities and oppression are personalized and internalized at the level of individual subjects. Because of this, addressing internalized feelings of inferiority is politically significant and can profoundly challenge the gender order (see Taylor 1996). Feminist scholars drawing on Michel Foucault have emphasized how “a society’s imposition of discipline upon bodies depends on those bodies learning to regulate themselves,” making the hatred of fat,
nonconforming bodies a deeply internalized phenomenon (Hartley 2001, 62; emphasis added). In terms of beauty ideology, this suggests that a necessary (albeit insufficient) criterion for transformative social change is transformative individual change. These counterhegemonic strategies challenge the ideological salience of consumerism and feminine beauty at the level of feelings, thoughts, and the lifeworld.

Feminist politics has been a central site for connecting personal and political battles, yet today the popular consensus is that the women’s movement is dead and that counterhegemonic feminist ideologies have lost their critical edge (see Hawkesworth 2004; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). Indeed, Dove’s public campaign for a woman’s right to feel beautiful might suggest that feminist ideals have become socially mainstream rather than socially marginalized. This begs the question of how to differentiate between the gender ideals used by Dove to promote women’s self-esteem through brand-building and those promoted by grassroots fat activists like those in PPPO. Not all gender ideals are equally feminist, or equally committed to women’s equality and empowerment in the face of institutionalized gender inequality; nor do they equally challenge the naturalization of women’s subordinate status as it intersects with inequalities of class, race, and ethnicity. To explore the counterhegemonic challenge to beauty ideologies and their relationship to feminist activism, we turn to our case studies.

The cases: Fat activists and a corporate campaign for real beauty
Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off (PPPO)

Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off emerged the way many primary movement groups (Rosenthal and Schwartz 1989) do: based on friendship and characterized by informality. The idea arose from a 1996 conversation between Allyson Mitchell and Ruby Rowan, both of whom were artists and women’s studies students. While attending a conference on subcultures, they lamented the absence of attention to lesbian feminists active in the queer arts scene—women writing, playing in bands, making films and art that expressed feminist politics in varied and nuanced ways. The conversation turned to mundane matters: not being able to find cool pants that fit. Mitchell recalled of this conversation, “It was so familiar and so yuck, and so a known story for fat girls. Ruby was really pivotal in saying ‘Let’s

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13 Pronouncements on the death of feminism are themselves ideological, naturalizing the end of an era of feminist activism and suggesting that women’s concerns have been addressed and are not worth fighting for (see Hawkesworth 2004).
do something about it instead of bitching about it. We should start a fat girl group.”

Mitchell, Rowan, and many of their friends who had already explored body issues in their artistic work hoped the idea of a more formal group would resonate. However, friends needed to be out as fat, comfortable enough to perform the role of fat activist, and able to both confront strangers’ phobias and endure curious or contemptuous stares. They planned an action for the following weekend in a trendy shopping district, in which Mitchell, Rowan, and ten friends dressed in campy polyester dresses and feather boas, danced to electronic music, and passed out “fat facts,” such as the average size of North American women. As shoppers passed by, the activists gave them stickers or flyers, and asked, “Do you think I’m fat?”

Participants found the event successful because they reached a large number of people and the event received significant media attention. Besides feeling that they had effectively communicated with the public, they gained an understanding of who they were and what they could do for and with one another. Characterizing participants as a “dyke network” of artists, performers, feminists, friends, and exes, Mitchell says the event solidified their identities as fat activists: “It was consciousness-raising among ourselves for us all to be there. It was borrowing from that feminist power in numbers, feeding off each other’s affirmations and then trying to bleed that out to the crowd.”

The group continued general interventions, like putting stickers and fliers in public spaces, but subsequent activism also focused on performance pieces within the queer arts community. Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off officially came together as a troupe of three (gradually expanding to eight) at a benefit show for Pussy Palace, a women’s bathhouse in Toronto facing legal challenges after a police raid. While two troupe members sang a rewritten version of the reggae song “Wide Load,” the third passed out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to onlookers. Later performances evolved along with the group’s political consciousness and everyday lived experiences. Planning meetings, for instance, were as much concerned with processing feelings and experiences of fat phobia as they were with choreography; some pieces evolved organically out of these discussions and reflected the group’s growing camaraderie. For example, one PPPO member was one day rendered speechless when told, “Move it, fatty,” by

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a man getting off a streetcar. This experience was catalyst for a piece called “Move It Fatty,” in which the girl-gang comes to the rescue, throwing the significance of female friendship into sharp relief. In addition to building solidarity and community, PPPO also experimented with importing a feminist politic and a therapeutic effect into spaces in which queer camp predominated, and it introduced increasingly complex political analyses of fat and consumerism. In one show titled “Big Judy,” each member introduced her performance by talking about the personal politics and experiences that led her to become a fat activist, while another show titled “Chubway” attempted to reckon with the political economy of fat by critiquing the food industry and its promotion of unhealthy diets. Thus, PPPO brought a complex feminist analysis into a queer arts space in which neither hegemonic beauty standards nor corporate capitalism were previously much critiqued.

In addition to cabaret-style shows, PPPO members held fundraisers for fat activism causes, such as Nomy Lamm’s Phat Camp camp for kids, which focuses on positive body image rather than weight loss. These included clothing swaps in working-class neighborhoods, where women paid five dollars for a bag of clothing that fit them. For PPPO activists, this kind of work exemplified their politics: it was not simply that they wanted corporations to produce larger sizes; they also wanted to create opportunities to resist consumerism, while recognizing the gender and class implications of fat bodies.

The PPPO activists primarily performed in countercultural arts spaces, but they also performed in more mainstream venues and traveled outside Toronto, with mixed results. Some women did not understand the camp genre and complained that the show lampooned fat women. Arts-oriented audiences critiqued the group for not memorizing their lines or for having simplistic choreography, missing the fact that performance for PPPO was a vehicle for political and cultural expression. Wearing tennis shoes with bottle caps nailed to the bottom enabled tap dancing, and black body suits were used to critique, rather than compete within, an ultra-thin and competitive women’s dance world. Another site of contention was the media: eager to communicate a message of health and bodily acceptance to large-bodied women and girls, PPPO activists regularly granted interviews, although members found it challenging to be cast opposite public health officials and represented as the voices denying the health risks of obesity.

At a meeting in 2003 to discuss a show that would require travel, arts grants, and significant time and resources, the group realized they did not want to take their activism to this new level, and PPPO disbanded. Ex-
Expanding PPPO’s reach would have required members to give up other activist, artistic, and employment commitments. Members celebrated the decision, however, proud of their accomplishments and committed to carrying on their fat activism. Members of PPPO hoped another group would pick up where it left off, and in 2005, one did: the Fat Femme Mafia, a fat activist performance group that performs and organizes fat events in the Toronto area, explicitly drew inspiration from PPPO’s trailblazing work. Thus far, Fat Femme Mafia is not the community PPPO once was, having only two members, but its intention to work within the public schools suggests a less insular approach to social change than that taken by its predecessors.

The Dove campaign: Real women, real beauty, real feminism?

Just as PPPO’s grassroots activism was winding down, Dove, a subsidiary of Unilever, and the largest skin care brand in the world, launched the “Real Women” Campaign in Britain. The campaign hinged on selecting real women—rather than professional models—for television and print advertisements featuring its new line of firming products. The women appeared to be in their twenties and thirties, were multiracial, and posed together smiling and frolicking, all while wearing white cotton bras and underwear. Conventionally attractive, they radiated happiness and friendship. The success of this effort led to a significantly more complex and multitiered, multinational “Campaign for Real Beauty” launched in September 2004. The campaign was orchestrated by some of the most powerful advertising, research, and public relations firms in the world, including Ogilvy and Mather, the Downing Street Group, and others, in conjunction with creative teams within Unilever and Dove. Additionally, along with networking with university researchers and nonprofit agencies, Dove commissioned a large-scale, multinational survey of women’s conceptions and practices, hiring scholars like Nancy Etcoff, Susie Orbach, and Naomi Wolf to contribute to “The Real Truth about Beauty: A Global Report” (Etcoff et al. 2004). While some marketing gurus advised against such unusual strategies, others found such corporate sponsored research and engagement with ideas a good way to garner media attention and revitalize a fifty-year-old brand.

Dove’s fluid, multipronged marketing approach made use of diverse organizational fields, including billboards, television, interactive Web sites, and tie-ins with the mass media, for example, The Oprah Winfrey Show.

15 In an interview, Fat Femme Mafia activist Liz Brokest said, “My dream is to be half as fundamental to fat folks as PPPO was and still is” (in Foad 2006, 25).
Initially, Dove focused on provocative, conversational billboards with images of women in which the public was asked to adjudicate women’s attractiveness (e.g., “fat or fabulous?”). This format provided a space to debate feminine beauty ideals and was a win-win situation for Dove: it could promote its products as beauty solutions and at the same time express concern with narrow beauty ideals. Dove soon moved toward a more explicitly normative position critiquing conventional beauty ideals. The Dove Real Beauty Campaign Web site launched with the following text floating over the Dove insignia: “For too long, beauty has been defined by narrow, stifling stereotypes. You’ve told us it’s time to change all that. Doves agrees. We believe real beauty comes in many shapes, sizes, and ages. That is why Dove is launching the Campaign for Real Beauty” (Dove 2005b). Thus, while responding to real women with cellulite and wrinkles (rather than unattainable air-brushed features), Dove diagnoses the problem as one caused by unrealistic media and advertising images, communicating its intention to make women feel more beautiful.

On the Dove Web site, women can post their pictures, donate to one of Dove’s campaigns, read Dove-commissioned research on beauty, or participate in Web conversations in multiple nations and languages. Seamlessly connecting Dove’s politics to its products, the Web site also includes sections like “Let’s Dare to Love Our Hair,” which is followed by a list of Dove shampoos, conditioners, and styling aids. In another section, a list of Dove antiperspirants and lotions is prefaced by “Let’s Make Peace with Our Bodies.” This pairing is explicit, and corporate spokespersons speak plainly and consistently about their dual goals: to make women feel more beautiful and to sell more Dove beauty products (see People 2005). On the latter score, Dove attributes the success of its new product lines, such as the Dove Firming Range (exceeding expectations by 120 percent), to the Campaign for Real Beauty. Advertising trade magazines and business schools alike have applauded Dove for its marked financial success.

The Dove campaign also forged alliances, using what it termed grass-roots partnering: for instance, the Dove Self-Esteem Fund was formed to educate and inspire girls on a wider definition of beauty in partnership with the American Girl Scouts. By 2005, Dove claimed to have already reached over 138,000 eight- to fourteen-year-old girls with programs like “Uniquely ME!” and “Body Talk.” The campaign also expanded into the arts with an international photography exhibition, Beyond Compare, featuring the work of sixty female photographers from twenty-two countries. The exhibition featured images of women of various races and nationalities, including those portraying obesity, aging, dwarfism, eating disorders, lesbians, and female body builders. Dove asked photographers to donate
pictures they took depicting real beauty as they saw it, and in exchange, Dove made a contribution to the National Eating Disorders Information Centre, a Toronto-based nonprofit agency whose Web site now features a prominent Dove hotlink.

**Analytic comparison: Beauty ideologies, feminist consumerism, and grassroots activism**

**Beauty ideology: Dove makes peace while PPPO wages war**

Both the Dove Real Beauty Campaign and PPPO claim to challenge hegemonic beauty codes that articulate a virtually unachievable conception of physical beauty. Even defenders of beauty norms as socially and biologically inevitable, like evolutionary psychologist Nancy Etcoff, acknowledge that the top models exemplifying contemporary Western beauty are “genetic freaks” (1999, 12). Given the extent to which these images of models affect women’s self-perceptions, it may come as little surprise that Dove’s own multinational beauty survey, for instance, found that only two percent of women describe themselves as beautiful (Etcoff et al. 2004, 11). In response, Dove has committed itself to changing this statistic through its provocative billboard campaign, which partially disrupts the ideology of feminine beauty by publicly portraying women not conventionally seen as beautiful and hence not normally depicted on billboards advertising beauty products. By doing so, the campaign drew both criticism and compliments from men. *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Richard Roeper criticized the campaign for depicting average women and suggested that if he wanted to see “plump gals baring too much skin,” he would have simply gone to Taste of Chicago (*People* 2005, 17). Yet *Slate* advertising columnist Seth Stevenson said that the Dove models on giant billboards challenged his gendered beauty ideals in a positive way: “When I first saw one of these smiley, husky gals on the side of a building, my brain hiccupped. . . . Here I was, staring at a ‘big-boned’ woman in her underwear, but this wasn’t an Adam Sandler movie, and I wasn’t supposed to laugh at her. It felt almost revolutionary” (Stevenson 2005).

While the Dove campaign challenges the key element of narrow beauty ideals within beauty ideology, theorists remind us that ideology is a complex creature; women are not simply tricked into seeking beauty. Beauty ideals operate ideologically when they are internalized, rationalized, and socially legitimized: to compensate for the hierarchical nature of beauty ideals, the ideology of beauty suggests that every woman can, and should, feel beautiful, presenting beauty as a democratic gender good, akin to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet beauty codes make clear that
most women do not measure up aesthetically. Women are penalized for not being beautiful and at the same time are stigmatized, even pathologized, for not feeling beautiful, for having low self-esteem, for engaging in behaviors like dieting and excessive exercising, or for having eating disorders.

The Dove campaign, while it contests narrow beauty codes, works within a hegemonic ideology of gendered beauty by refusing to challenge the idea that beauty is an essential part of a woman’s identity, personhood, and social success and by legitimizing the notion that every woman should feel beautiful. For example, a television advertisement promoting Dove’s Self-Esteem Fund for young girls features girls confessing their physical anxieties (e.g., they hate their freckles, feel fat, or want to be blonde), followed by a voice-over that issues the following commands projected over their faces: “Let’s tell her she’s wrong. Let’s tell her to be real. And brave. And true. And she’ll be beautiful. Beautiful. Beautiful. [Dove logo appears on screen.] Let’s make peace with beauty” (Dove Real Beauty Campaign 2005a). In another advertisement, hundreds of women are seen converging at a city center in identical blonde wigs. They simultaneously tear off their wigs, thereby symbolically repudiating notions of attractive hair and embracing their locks. Reminiscent of Eve Ensler’s Vagina Monologues, the accompanying video on Dove’s Web site features women talking about learning to love their hair. Three women are featured: one is blonde, white, and attractive, with a slightly protruding stomach; the second has the appearance of a supermodel, being extremely thin and white, with lustrous long brown hair; and the third is an attractive, petite, light-skinned minority woman with blonde-frosted curly hair.

At the end of both commercials, and within the Dove campaign more generally, the social imperative for women to be and feel beautiful is not up for negotiation. Even though the social understanding of beauty is contested, the importance of beauty as a paramount value for women is reproduced and legitimized by the campaign’s explicit and unceasing focus on beauty. Women’s acceptance of their bodies as beautiful is demanded, rather than recognized as an inherently complex, fraught, and contradictory endeavor—particularly in the context of the mass media, the beauty industry, the weight-loss industry, and the industrial food complex—or in relation to what women accomplish apart from looking pretty.¹⁶ Further.

¹⁶ A long-standing marketing strategy is to superficially acknowledge women’s problematic and conflicted relationship with food (e.g., emphasizing themes of obsession, danger, and loss of control) while denying or minimizing the darker realities of these relationships. Susan Bordo’s deconstruction of advertisements suggests that even ads that destabilize gender expectations can work to reify inequitable gender norms (1993, 105–10, 131–34).
thermore, the command to feel beautiful irrespective of one’s physical attributes assumes a mind/body separation, thus reproducing a “paradigm of plasticity” that disdains material limitations and suggests the mind has complete freedom to manipulate the physical body (Bordo 1993, 246).

Additionally, such gendered beauty depictions are significant because they allow the campaign to associate youth, slenderness, and conventional beauty (like beautiful hair) with the Dove brand, while simultaneously opening the door to a handful of deviations (like the slightly protruding stomach) that help to construct brand loyalty. This is part of a gender-specific marketing strategy that cultivates brand loyalty using models and imagery that women can identify with, while conveying an appearance of corporate philanthropy (Corbett 2006). The occasional image of an aging wrinkled face or a protruding stomach fits within consumer capitalism’s need to continually incorporate deviant images (Bordo 1993, 25; Frank 1997; Frank and Weiland 1997). Thus, Dove channels women’s dissent to rebuild its brand, while also deflecting attention away from the conventional depictions of feminine beauty relied upon in Dove marketing. By acknowledging that most women do not possess conventional beauty, the Dove campaign also allows them to participate in a critique of narrow beauty norms while encouraging women to “make peace with beauty” by channeling negative energy into self-acceptance, self-worth, and self-care via Dove products. In this sense, Dove’s attempt to democratize beauty is deeply disingenuous. It is illogical in that it denies the hierarchical nature of beauty standards, and it is ideological in that it obscures the multiple sites where hegemonic beauty ideals tend to cluster (with thin, white, privileged women finding it easier to achieve hegemonic beauty ideals). Furthermore, the democratic ethos underlying the campaign (e.g., voting on whether a woman is fat or fabulous) suggests that challenging unhealthy, Eurocentric beauty norms is optional, a consumer choice—not an urgent necessity for social change in a world where beauty ideals and social respect are linked to inequalities based on sex, race, class, and body size.

One of the more insidious aspects of Dove’s appropriation of feminist themes of empowerment and self-care is its reformulation of feminism as achieved principally through grooming and shopping. This association is ironic because many women have shied away from feminism precisely because they do not want to burn their bras or discontinue shaving, wearing makeup, and using deodorant. The radical feminism that might require them to be critical of gendered grooming and beauty ideology is absent in feminist consumerism, a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women and that shares
consumerism’s focus on individual consumption as a primary source of identity, affirmation, and social change. This reformulation enables women to wear an identity associated with self-respect, independence, personal strength, and collective identity and community without doing any of the hard consciousness-raising work usually required to produce collective (rather than simply individual) transformation.17

In addition, psychological and philosophical research on perceptions of beauty suggest that the male gaze is a strong determinant of the extent to which beauty ideals are prioritized; both straight women and gay men experience the comparative pressure of narrow beauty ideals more profoundly (Bordo 1993, 102; Etcoff 1999, 61). The Dove Campaign itself relies on the heteronormative foundations of gendered beauty ideals, as presence of the male gaze is an assumption running through the Dove campaign. One of the inspirational articles featured on the Dove Real Beauty Web site is a faux-blog titled “A Day without Makeup.” When the fictitious blogger is challenged by the prospect of meeting her friends for drinks after work, after a moment of self-doubt, she thinks of her husband: “I remember my husband’s look at lunch, and hear his words again: ‘You look pretty.’” By replaying and internalizing these words, she is able to face the situation with confidence: “I stand a little straighter and toss my hair back. I look at my friends, smiling and laughing, all gorgeous in their own way. . . . Just like me” (Dove Real Beauty Campaign 2007). The male gaze assuages the woman’s doubts; she gains an inner confidence that acknowledges and legitimizes her physical appearance as an important prelude to her social confidence in the public sphere.

Like the Dove campaign, the PPPO critique did not reject the idea of physical feminine beauty altogether. Yet a closer examination of PPPO’s approach to beauty reveals important differences between the two campaigns, namely, PPPO’s more complex and ambivalent relationship to the idealization of women’s physical beauty, an interest in exploring the pain caused by beauty ideals, and a refusal to prioritize looking or feeling beautiful as cornerstones of gendered identity. Rather than take on the lofty concept of beauty, the activists in PPPO appropriated a more accessible moniker, “pretty,” and immediately and alliteratively knocked the gender ideal of “pretty” off its social pedestal by linking it to “porky”

17 Cogent analyses of Nike’s advertisements in the mid-1990s indicate a strikingly similar and successful precedent for selling feminism to women who need only wear Nike clothing to be “empowered,” thereby channeling dissent into individual consumption rather than collective organizing around the concept of “women” (Cole and Hribar 1995; Messner 2002, 88).
and “pissed off.” In so doing, PPPO members embraced their nonconforming fat bodies and waged war with hegemonic beauty standards—actions far removed from Dove’s reformist peacemaking.

Unlike Dove’s demand that women feel beautiful and love their curves, PPPO activists did not straightforwardly celebrate fat as fabulous. Instead, PPPO activism involved open discussion of the terrors, contradictions, and pain involved with living in a fat body: as one PPPO activist, speaking on a local radio program, commented, “I am a fat activist with an eating disorder.” PPPO performances presented large bodies as sexually attractive and confident, but fat was not uncritically or automatically linked to beauty. Instead, the whole complex politics of judging women based on their physical appearance—and the kinds of gendered obsessions this creates—were themselves challenged through PPPO’s activist performances. In “Big Judy,” for instance, PPPO activists explored how obsession with their nonconforming bodies caused physical discomfort, emotional suffering, and enduring pain.

Although the pain of physical obsessions was acknowledged by PPPO, aesthetics and self-care were not denied. However, PPPO activism contained a reconstructive program for self-worth and esteem that played with nonconventional fashion and beauty imagery. Like Dove, PPPO targeted women’s feelings of inadequacy in relation to beauty, but unlike Dove’s equation of feeling beautiful with being beautiful, PPPO recognized that not everyone would perceive their dancing, performing, nonconforming bodies as attractive. While the Dove campaign implicitly relied on images of attractive women, PPPO activist-performances explicitly constructed dissonant images of beauty (e.g., dressing in body-hugging black leotards and dancing with iced cakes); these images engaged the obesophobia (e.g., the performance, “Move It Fatty”) underlying harmful body practices such as eating disorders and other contortions (Bordo 1993, 141). In addition, PPPO’s radical disruption of hegemonic beauty ideology worked to destabilize the heteronormative gaze. Strongly linked to a lesbian arts community, PPPO activists did not prioritize the approval of men socially or performatively, and this may have allowed a more radical rejection of beauty as feminine aspiration. Whether a radical rejection of both beauty ideology and the male gaze is a likely strategy for a corporate...

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18 Celebrating fat as fabulous is a theme of many fat acceptance organizations and activists (see, e.g., Wann 1999).


20 Interview, Mitchell and Tamaki, 2005.
campaign is an important question for feminist praxis, one to which we now turn.

**Feminist praxis: Consciousness, community, and consumerism**

Feminist counterhegemonic activism is marginalized on multiple fronts: as the media hails the death of feminism (Hawkesworth 2004), scholarly investigations of social movements omit multiple and varied feminist actions on the basis that only actions targeting the state count as contentious (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). For example, Verta Taylor’s (1996, 175–77) study of postpartum depression self-help groups implicitly maps criteria for thinking about what can be considered feminist and transformational—such as converting shame and fear into anger and pride, asserting the legitimacy of “deviant” behavior, embracing diversity as healthy and normal, and trying to change not just women’s but also men’s practices. These criteria help identify critical differences between Dove’s and PPPO’s contributions to feminist praxis—differences centering on the contrast between feminist consumerism and feminist community building and consciousness-raising.

The goal of facilitating women’s emotional transformation and creating therapeutic spaces for women to process their feelings about hegemonic beauty standards is central to both campaigns; however, the emotion cultures and emotion work of each are constitutively distinct. In its performances and discourse, PPPO modeled therapeutic consciousness-raising: members narrated painful stories, while song and dance segments were built around accessible stories of rejection, social exclusion, self-loathing, and reclaiming painful epithets (e.g., “fatty,” “porky”). Actors modeled an emotional trajectory of pain and isolation giving way to anger and eventually ending in either a bold assertion of self-worth or a collective assertion of burlesque sensuality.

Conversely, in the Dove campaign, both pain and anger are avoided, suggesting a more limited model of consciousness-raising, a greater focus on building positive associations that can be converted to brand loyalty, and an explicit connection between self-love and self-care through commodity consumption. Women featured on the Dove Web site and the advertisements convey that they have been unhappy with different aspects of their bodies and appearances, but any emotional pain such self reflection caused is sanitized and appears easy to overcome. Consciousness-raising in the Dove campaign is presented as a happy awakening by casting off limited notions of attractiveness and working with what one has to accentuate inner and outer beauty. For Dove, social acceptance and beauty should not be uncoupled; rather, beauty should be reconceived and made
accessible—a process that occurs through self-care via Dove beauty products. Because the central importance of feminine beauty is not questioned by the Dove campaign, its architects need not include anger as an emotional stage. Anger would be required only if women were rejecting, rather than coming to terms with, this basic social tenet. Dove’s emotional register erases shame, fear, and anger, making personal pride and social change appear painless, simple achievements—as simple as shopping itself.

Furthermore, Dove and PPPO had very different ideas concerning deviance and challenging gendered beauty norms. On a basic level, PPPO did not prescribe changes in women’s appearance but instead advocated female solidarity to alleviate the psychological toll of nonconformity. In stark contrast, Dove uses a smattering of deviant images to suggest a feeling of solidarity with real women, followed by product promotion framed as a way to express self-care. While both Dove and PPPO ask women to embrace their nonconforming bodies, Dove advocates feminist consumerism as a primary form of social critique. Most significantly, this critique obscures the contradictory desires underlying the Dove campaign: to condemn beauty standards while promoting conformity to these same standards—like, for example, promoting firming and antiaging creams. While Dove legitimizes conformity, PPPO asserts the coolness of feminine deviance in their performances, such as their mock West Side Story featuring a protagonist rejected from the gang for not being fat enough.21 Perhaps because PPPO emerged from a queer feminist friendship and activist network, deviance was already a central mode of operation and criterion for membership. Conversely, the Dove campaign enables more people to feel successful in achieving (heterosexual) mainstream social acceptance. Even the “uniform” of the two groups conveys this different approach to deviance: while the Dove campaign dresses models in white cotton bras and underwear, signifying cleanliness and purity, PPPO activists wore fat drag, donning black leotards and feather boas.

Dove’s and PPPO’s approaches to diversity and inequality reflect the differing goals of feminist consumerism versus grassroots community building. Consumer culture allows for, and encourages, individual difference but does not emphasize structural hierarchies or collective strategies for social change. In Dove’s approach, multicultural diversity is embraced through visual images of women of different races, but the structural

21 Fat deviance is cool, yet unhealthy eating encouraged by the contemporary industrial-food system is also acknowledged. Performances mounted by PPPO demonstrated a complex attraction/repulsion to food (e.g., performers sit on cakes and then eat the mashed remnants off their own bodies).
inequalities facing citizens (e.g., injustice, racism, inequality) and the disparate, racialized effects of beauty standards are not openly discussed. Interracial harmony is performed but is never part of the written text, or, to state it another way, is seen but not heard. The Dove Web site similarly represents the problem of hegemonic beauty standards as global and as universally experienced. Dove’s message, “Women of the World—Unite!” reflects a simplistic understanding of how women across different national contexts may share a common interest in beauty, while it disregards the significant barriers dividing women along lines of class, citizenship, race, ethnicity, religion, and language. In this way, feminist consumerism is a politically problematic strategy that resists naming structural inequality, classism, or institutionalized racism and presents “an undifferentiated pastiche of differences, a grab bag in which no items are assigned any more importance or centrality than others” (Bordo 1993, 258).

In contrast to Dove’s consumerist recognition of diversity without inequality, PPPO employed what it conceived of as a third-wave feminist approach to fat activism and community building that explicitly recognized multiple axes of inequality. As a group, PPPO spent considerable time discussing intersectionality and providing community opportunities to address social inequality but was less concerned with representing racial difference through its performances. While PPPO was somewhat ethnically diverse, the group’s commitment to antiracism did not make its way into its activism. The issue of class featured more prominently in PPPO’s actions, such as in fundraisers for low-income children to attend fat-positive camps and clothing swaps in low-income neighborhoods. In addition, both PPPO and Dove gendered (Ferree and Gamson 1995) the problem of hegemonic beauty standards to the extent that men’s practices were largely ignored by both campaigns. This reflects both a shared understanding of women’s engagement with feminine beauty ideology as unique and a similar focus on recruiting only women’s participation, albeit for different ends. The absence of men in each campaign is also notable given the importance of the male gaze in the reproduction of beauty ideology. In particular, PPPO’s lack of attention to men and complex gender identities is striking given its members’ preexisting alliances with gay men and transgender activists.

In sum, while each case displays a concern with feminine beauty ideology, the two represent very different approaches to feminist praxis—a difference we would characterize as a disjuncture between feminist consumerism and a grassroots feminist focus on community building and consciousness-raising. As with consumerism more generally (Sklair 2001, 5), feminist consumerism prioritizes commodity purchases above more
ambitious goals such as decentering the role of beauty in women’s lives, processing negative emotions, or challenging men’s relationship with feminine beauty. As such, feminist consumerism tends to obscure and minimize both structural and institutionalized gender inequalities that are difficult to resolve and that might cause negative emotional associations with brands. Thus, from a marketing perspective, feminist consumerism makes business sense, operating as it does within a larger pattern of consumer culture that markets dissent to build brand loyalty and increase sales.22

The fact that the Dove campaign reached a wide audience cannot be denied, yet we question whether corporate channels enable counterhegemonic critique, particularly given the campaign’s complicity with beauty ideology outlined above. In contrast, PPPO’s ability to incorporate negative emotions and build spaces for deviant behavior allowed it to construct a counterhegemonic feminist project of community building and consciousness-raising. This grassroots activism included a radical intersectional critique focused on women’s personal relationships with food and fat but also critiqued corporate capitalism and its role in promoting unhealthy eating habits and destructive body image. Although the scale on which these activities occurred was clearly limited when compared to Dove’s multinational campaign, PPPO provided more room to process the negative emotions generated by gender inequality and beauty ideology and raised awareness and solidarity among fat activists at the local scale.

Conclusion

Our objective has been to assess how the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty and the grassroots group Pretty, Porky, and Pissed Off did and did not challenge beauty ideology and how their relative successes either circumscribe or enable possibilities for feminist transformation. We conclude that while the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty provides a critique that partially disrupts the narrowness of Western contemporary beauty codes, at the same time it systematically reproduces and legitimizes the hegemony of beauty ideology in women’s personal lives in the service of expanding sales and corporate growth. Dove’s approach, which we term feminist consumerism, encourages women to channel dissent and practice self-care by engaging with corporate marketing campaigns and purchasing beauty

22 Dove is not the only corporation to use the marketing strategy of feminist consumerism. Nike also uses this strategy in various girl-power campaigns; the most recent features disaggregated women’s body parts that reappropriates derogatory labels (e.g., “thunder thighs”) to sell athletic wear featured on well-toned (but not anorexic) body parts.
products. Although broadly accessible, Dove’s critique of beauty ideology is diluted by its contradictory imperative to promote self-acceptance and at the same time increase sales by promoting women’s consumption of products that encourage conformity to feminine beauty ideology. The Dove campaign does not decenter the role of beauty in women’s lives but rather suggests that beauty and self-acceptance can be accessed through the purchase of Dove beauty products. Dove’s profit imperative helps explain the campaign’s reproduction of hegemonic beauty ideologies and its place within a larger hegemonic culture-ideology of consumerism. A more radical critique might negatively affect sales by alienating women who are emotionally invested in beauty ideology and/or promote a kind of self-acceptance not contingent on beautification and commodification. Because the Dove campaign was framed in a market context that prioritizes profits and corporate growth, the critique of hegemonic beauty standards could not incorporate a critique of consumerism as an avenue to self-acceptance or meaningfully address the class and racial inequalities linked with beauty ideals in late capitalist societies.

In the case of grassroots fat activists PPPO, we identified a more substantive counterhegemonic attack on beauty standards that mocked these norms and offered a radical, intersectional critique identifying the role of political-economic variables underlying women’s unhealthy relationships to food, beauty, and the body. While offering a therapeutic venue for processing pain caused by the failure to conform to ideological beauty codes, the PPPO case suggests that countercultural activism is not necessarily solipsistic navel-gazing; its performances challenged the capitalist ideology of consumerism, offered a critique of hegemonic standards by attacking market institutions like corporations, and occurred within the more democratic context of civil society organizing, public sphere interventions, and the local spaces of queer theater. These are significant achievements, but what should not be forgotten are the limits of the local: these grassroots actors were unable to connect with the scores of women and girls reached through the Dove campaign. While narrow in its reach, the impact of PPPO’s counterhegemonic critique of the beauty industry appears deep in terms of community building and identity construction for the women involved. Corporate entities were not transformed in such a grassroots project, but a critical consciousness was fostered and developed. This is no small accomplishment; as Bordo writes: “In our present culture of mystification—a culture which continually pulls us away from systemic understanding and inclines us toward constructions that emphasize individual freedom, choice, power, ability—simply becoming more conscious is a tremendous achievement” (1993, 30; emphasis added).
Our analysis offers insights about how social actors “do” gender at different scales of organization and at different locations within the civil-society/market nexus, while the limitations of both the corporate and grassroots actors help explain the continued salience of beauty ideology in contemporary women’s lives. While both corporations and grassroots feminists challenge hegemonic notions of feminine beauty, the scale and market location of the Dove case allow it to have considerably greater influence through the mass market. Meanwhile, beauty ideology works to reproduce and legitimate gender inequality that generates billions of dollars in profit for the diet, cosmetic, and plastic surgery industries. This conclusion has implications for feminist praxis and method. Our case comparison speaks to the pressing need for collective action that can raise critical consciousness about beauty ideology among women and girls over a long time frame; our cases suggest that such a critique will not emerge from a corporate market context but is nonetheless required at a scale that transcends grassroots resistance projects. Methodologically, our cases suggest the importance of feminist analyses that do not simply track micro-instances of cultural resistance, transgression, or fat bodies in revolt (LeBesco 2001, 77) but that also analyze the contemporary centralization of cultural power in key political-economic actors such as transnational corporations—actors that retain a tremendous potential to shape, normalize, and constrain the mind/body relationship in late capitalist culture.

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