Now Open:
The Re-packaging of Sexual Commodification in Advertising

Through a visual medium, advertisements engage the public in articulating want, need, and desire. In the context of women’s advertisements, the image demonstrates an individual need that can be fulfilled through the woman’s participation in commodity culture. By shifting her desire onto an object, the woman herself becomes a commodity, while also preserving a culture defined by the transformation of the “relations of subjects into relations between objects” (Goldsman, et al, 336). Furthermore, commodity culture renders women’s bodies as objects of desire and objects to be desired, limiting a woman’s full humanity and laying claim to her body as a form of property. While feminist discourse aims to challenge the sexual commodification of women, commodity culture has adopted feminist language as an effective marketing strategy in the buying and selling of goods. Re-packaged and reproduced as “commodity feminism,” this feminism operates within a system of capitalist relations where women are sexually objectified under the guise of empowerment and liberation.

In the essay, Commodity Feminism, Goldman et al deconstructs the capitalist production of the feminist consumer and the positioning of women’s sexual objectification in advertising as a marker of women’s emancipation. As the irony of the term suggests, Goldman et al argues that punning is also at work in sexist advertisements that profess to exude liberation, autonomy, and empowerment while also capitalizing on
femininity and the “visual dissections of the female body” (Goldman et al, 337). Thus, this coupling of femininity with feminism creates the illusion that a woman’s control over her sexualized and objectified body is a symbol of feminist progress rather than one of oppression:

“Meanings of choice and individual freedom become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their liberated interests. The female body has been reframed as the locus of freedom as well as sexual pleasure. A tacit theoretical concept of individual choice lies at the center of commodity feminism. (Goldman et al, 338)

However, while challenging this assertion that there is a sense of liberation located within an advertisement that presents women as sexual commodities, Goldman et al also explore the nuanced role of liberal feminism and “possessive individualism” in the formation of commodity feminism.

The relations of commodity feminism depend on both preserving the entrenched conflict between femininity and feminism and resolving this ideological contradiction by presenting resolution in the form of a consumer good. This fetishization of feminism, in effect, channels and re-articulates feminist discourse into the exchange of goods by grounding itself in a liberal feminist framework. Goldman et al states that liberal feminism “argues that the tenets of possessive individualism must be applied regardless of gender” and with this personal freedom, one has the “right to alienate her body” (Goldman et al, 348). As a result, the notion of “possessive individualism” as the great equalizer justifies the subjugation of women’s bodies to patriarchal control through a voyeuristic lens that systematically reduces the subjectivity of the woman to simply an
object of the male gaze. This re-packaging of feminist aims further the agenda of a patriarchal and capital driven society so as to posit the sexual commodification of women in advertisements as egalitarian and empowering. While Goldman et al acknowledges the potential to subvert the male gaze and reclaim representations of the female body, they also recognize the limitations of an advertising strategy that both “hails” women to visualize themselves as the objects of desire and normalizes portrayals of women through the male gaze.

American Apparel, a clothing company touted for its “corporate responsibility,” ethical manufacturing, and employee benefits draws heavily on commodity feminism in their women’s advertisements (E. Cain). Notorious for depicting scantily clad, semi-pornographic images of women to sell their product, American Apparel relies on images of female objectification in order to advertise a lifestyle hinging on women interpreting the exploitation of their sexualized body as an act of liberation and sexual empowerment (“Banning the Amateurish American Apparel Ads”). One advertisement in particular draws attention to the sexual exploitation and objectification of women under the thin guise of the sexually liberated woman. In this candid photo ad, the woman, fresh-faced and non-airbrushed, is laying on a bed with her legs spread wide open in a black leotard. Not only is she portrayed as meek, docile, submissive, and sexually available, but the text to the right of the image reading “Now Open” also positions her as a sex object, seemingly in control of her sexuality from the perspective of the male gaze. While the advertisement perhaps to some degree implies the opening of a new American Apparel store in the Netherlands, the eye is drawn downwards to her spread open legs revealing the advertisement as selling the woman’s sexuality as well as associating a particular
lifestyle of sexual willingness along with its product (“Banning the Amateurish American Apparel Ads”).

However, beyond this blatant commodification of female sexuality, the voyeuristic quality of the images is defended through its representation of “real” non-Photoshopped women captured with unsophisticated technology (“Banning the Amateurish American Apparel Ads”). The fresh-faced woman in a sexually suggestive pose becomes a form of the modern woman who embraces her sexuality and locates power and capitalist value in the sexualized female body. While, this illustrates the manner in which “commodity feminism seizes upon this aspect of possessive individualism and turns it to fit the logic of consumption,” the ‘everyday’ woman becomes a pawn in a marketing strategy that hails the viewer into this image of women’s willing sexual availability constructed from patriarchal manipulations and the ensuing male gaze (Goldman et al, 314, 349). Even though, this American Apparel advertisement has the potential to be viewed in light of women’s sexual liberation, the image exemplifies the dangerous capacity of commodity feminism in perpetuating a damaging culture deeply entrenched in the sexual objectification of women. Personal autonomy over one’s body re-packaged as feminist in the context of sexual commodification does not reduce the antagonism of femininity and feminism, but rather epitomizes the exploitation of women in capitalist production. Thus, commodity feminism is a false and deceitful variant of feminism that obscures the woman consumer from detecting the male voyeurism and patriarchal control at work in the arrangement of women in the world of advertising.
“Now Open” American Apparel Ad:


