

# Feminist Consumerism and Conscious Consumption: Three Case Studies of “Empowerment through Cosmetics”

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## Introduction

“Beauty, women’s business in this society, is the theater of their enslavement.”

– Susan Sontag, “The Double Standard of Aging”

Is it possible to sell a cosmetic product in a feminist way? Is it possible to use a cosmetic product in a feminist way?

**Feminist consumerism** describes a marketing strategy that relates feminist ideologies to a product, capitalizing on the social currency of the political movement and neutralizing possible criticisms of the product.<sup>1</sup>

## Goals & Objectives

The purpose of this project is to

- evaluate the consistency of the brand values versus actual output of cosmetic companies
- identify the impact of such marketing and product design in contrast to the marketing messaging

## Relevant Literature

### 1970s: Second Wave Thought

- Andrea Dworkin:** the application of beauty standards to a natural body limits the freedom of the body and mind; beauty conventions must be thwarted<sup>2</sup>
- Susan Sontag:** women cannot overcome their oppression without ignoring the oppressive standards of beauty they are expected to uphold; women must stop continuing to uphold unrealistic standards<sup>3</sup>

### Past Scholarship

*Cosmetics as a social and transformative ritual*<sup>4</sup>

- Women habitually use cosmetics as a way to **negotiate more power** in society and **construct** their own **identity**
- Exposure to images of ideal beauty led to a **decrease in confidence** and self-esteem, but shared experiences with cosmetics led to bonds with other women

*“Empowerment femininity” in Asia*<sup>5</sup>

- An analysis of beauty advertisements in a Singapore English daily newspaper found that advertisements often **appropriated** feminist “empowering” **language**
- The advertising language included feminist wording in **unrelated contexts**

*Comparing feminist publicity campaigns:*<sup>6</sup>

- compared a grassroots feminist and fat activism collective with the Dove Real Beauty Campaign
- while the activist group focused on **redefining** and **criticizing** standards of beauty, the Dove campaign emphasized **profit-driven**, surface-level **diversity**

## Case Studies: Too Faced, Rare Beauty, and Urban Decay

### Too Faced



Advertising banner for the Too Faced Born This Way Collection<sup>7</sup>

other skin problems.

- Brand philosophy:** the Too Faced website consistently emphasizes “empowerment”: “We believe makeup is power, giving you the freedom to express yourself and the confidence to take on the world”
- Best-seller:** the “Born This Way” foundation is meant to emulate the look of perfect skin texture naturally, hiding blemishes, fine lines, and

- Brand philosophy:** Rare Beauty states that it is about “breaking down unrealistic standards of perfection,” and “not about being someone else, but being who you are.”
- Best-seller:** the True to Myself Tinted Pressed Finishing Powder is meant to “undetectably” blur imperfections and reduce shine.
- Social media post:** A product cannot simultaneously celebrate “being rare” while reproducing a beauty standard that can only be achieved, for most, with said product, reasserting the same expectation of beauty for all. Besides surface-level branding, Rare Beauty products do exactly what all other beauty products are intended to do.

### Rare Beauty



Rare Beauty in a post shared on Instagram, December 27 2023<sup>8</sup>

### Urban Decay



Urban Decay Advertisement: “Pretty Different”<sup>9</sup>

models outside conventional ideas of makeup usage, with bold, colorful makeup that encourages the consumer to think of makeup as a tool for artistic expression, and with possibilities outside typical beauty ideals.

- Brand philosophy:** Urban Decay states that it focuses on creativity, “inspiration in the unexpected,” and “reinvention over perfection.”
- Best-seller:** the 24/7 Glide-On Waterproof Eyeliner comes in 38 colors, including: black, lime green, gold, and sparkling pink.
- Advertisement:** the ad features

## Conclusions & Next Steps

### Conclusions

- The case studies that have been conducted conclude that it is not possible for a company to have a profit interest in selling cosmetic products (which benefit from and depend on women’s adherence to conventional beauty norms) without compromising the possible feminist values that a product could be marketed to offer.
- Urban Decay’s advertising strategy, featuring unconventional makeup application and models of various genders, reflects the sentiments of Dworkin and Sontag, who emphasized the importance of androgyny and the dissolution of unnecessary gendered norms to achieve gender equality in a genuine sense.

### What’s Next?

- Pushing to expand the definition of beauty to include more characteristics may not be the answer, but instead we should be pushing back the obligation to be beautiful.
- Neoliberal Beauty: feeling beautiful is growing to become an internal obligation, like feeling self-esteem.<sup>10</sup>

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