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A Feminist Pedagogical Approach to Disrupting Students' Digital Self-Representational Strategies

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Overview

In this lesson plan and assignment, I pose and respond to the question: “What types of pedagogical strategies can be employed to address students’ discomfort about the ways in which they engage in self-policing their appearance through their digital practices?”

As discussed by Meredith A. Love and Brenda M. Helmbrecht in their 2007 *Feminist Teacher* article, “Teaching the Conflicts: (Re)Engaging Students with Feminism in a Postfeminist World,” helping students decode texts that ostensibly communicate meanings of female empowerment is complicated by practices and definitions of feminism that are communicated in popular culture. Over the past decade, these slippages have become additionally knotted by the rapid proliferation and use of media technologies. Taken together, challenges to curriculum design and analysis of postfeminist texts are manifold for both the professor and the student of media studies.

Media studies courses offer ideal spaces for communication about and demonstration of themes that infuse a meaningful understanding and practice of feminism and female empowerment. Notably, discussions about digital culture have consistently been animated by students’ desire to talk about how they create their “perfect images.” The classroom offers a sharing space where students can describe their process for the production of these images: what filters they use, where they crop their bodies and why, what angles they use and why. Though the guiding texts for analysis (Mulvey’s notion of “the male gaze” and Kilbourne’s film *Killing Us Softly 4*) resonate with students, a noticeable shift occurs: students are reluctant to apply these ideas to their own digital media practices. Thorny discussions may emerge with students, especially women, about how their own acts of media production – such as employing certain angles to present themselves as “skinny” and self-sexualizing via their facial expressions and body positioning, themes which are so prevalent in postfeminist media culture – connect to self-policing of their own bodies.

How then can we facilitate productive conversations with students about their self-representational digital practices in a way that generates discussion about feminism and female empowerment at the same time as it takes their discomfort seriously? Exemplifying a promising answer to this question is the use of technology, especially apps, as experiential educational tools for generating interest, ensuring classroom participation, and aiding self-awareness. An example of this is my assignment on selfies. This pedagogical approach leads students to cultivate awareness about themselves as image-creators and reflect upon what this means for their own empowerment or disempowerment. As such, feminist pedagogy and technology together can aid in students’ critique of, and even resistance to, postfeminist digital images.

While this assignment was due after the mid-point of the semester, I also believe that it could be part of a unit (going across multiple class periods) that addresses social constructions of gender in advertising/media texts more broadly, as well as postfeminism and social media. This class

focuses on issues of representation in advertisements, particularly related to gender, race, class, sexuality, age, and ability. This activity would be well-suited to a course that takes an interdisciplinary, cultural studies approach to media culture.

Rationale

This assignment was created and executed in my course, “Advertising and Popular Culture.” Its purpose is to generate awareness about students’ self-representational digital practices. Central to this activity is asking students to reflect on the following: “How and why do you present and represent yourself in certain ways in your selfies?” We began the course with an overview of the history of advertising images via Roland Marchand’s “Advertisements as Social Tableaux” (1985). We decoded advertisements and connected them to the construction of social norms and values, as well as personal identity. Important theorists guiding these modules were Judith Williamson (1994) and Erving Goffman (1979).

We then moved on to discuss postfeminism, beginning the conversation with Laura Mulvey’s (2003) concept of the “male gaze” and its relationship to postfeminist ways of looking. After discussing Mulvey, we watched Jean Kilbourne’s *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising’s Image of Women* (2010); while this film does not specifically employ the term postfeminism, it does provide a solid foundation for students to understand the mediascape, how women’s bodies have been represented, and how attitudes about them have been shaped. We drew on Rosalind Gill’s “Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising” (2008) and discussed it in relation to my article, “Branding ‘Real’ Social Change in Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty” (2013). These readings highlighted various representational tropes of postfeminism and tied them to corporate marketing strategies of social responsibility and the continued commodification of feminism. We then addressed representations of hegemonic masculinity and if/how these representations relate to metrosexuality and toxic masculinity. Finally, we discussed culture jamming and brainstormed in class what it would be like to reconfigure consumer culture images and apply different interpretations to them.

As part of the above conversations, we discussed how Photoshop and digital manipulation of ads have been problematic in normalizing flawless and idealized images. This assignment extends these topics and asks students to be problem-solvers: How can digital tools (Photoshop, Facetune, etc) be used to create self-awareness about our personal digital practices of self-representation?

Timeline

This assignment is appropriate for undergraduate students who are in their third or fourth year of study. The course met, in person, once a week for a two-and-a-half-hour block. The class size was 25 students. The assignment was explained to the students after we covered the history of modern advertising and how to decode advertising images of gender.

Week 1: Introduction to the Course

Week 2: History of Modern Advertising

Marchand (1985), "Advertisements as Social Tableaux"

Week 3: Learning to "Read" Advertisements

Williamson (1994), "Decoding Advertisements" (selections)

Week 4: Representations of Gender in Advertising (Femininity)

Goffman (1979), *Gender Advertisements* (selections)

Week 5: Gazing, Postfeminism and Advertising

In-class viewing: Kilbourne's (2010) *Killing Us Softly 4: Advertising's Image of Women*

Gill (2008), "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising"

Murray (2013), "Branding 'Real' Social Change in Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty"

Mulvey (2003), "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

Week 6: Representations of Gender in Advertising (Masculinity)

Debriefing of Assignment

Vokey, Tefft, and Tysaiczny (2013), "An Analysis of Hyper-Masculinity in Magazine Advertisements"

Week 7: Culture Jamming, Social Media, and Self-Representation

Lasn (2000), *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge – And Why We Must* (selections)

Rettberg (2016), "Representation or Presentation?"

Week 8: Assignment Due

Remainder of the Semester: readings on Intersectionality and Consumer Culture, Branding, Self-Branding, and Globalization.

Key Terms

Media literacy, hegemonic femininity, hegemonic masculinity, gender norms, social construction, identity, representation, self-presentation, male gaze, objectification, performance, subjectification, sexuality, hypersexualization, self-monitoring, hyperconsumerism

Assignment Instructions

This assignment is worth 10% of the total course grade. What follows are the assignment instructions to give to students:

1. Take a selfie – it should be done by using the same angles you normally would use if you were going to post this image to one of your social media accounts. This is your “original” image:
2. Use a digital photo editing application (this can be Photoshop, Facetune, or any app that you normally use) to correct self-perceived imperfections in your selfies. This includes filters, cropping, retouching/airbrushing, and so forth. Importantly, you must make the same types of edits as you normally would before you would post the image to social media. This is your “edited” image;
3. Place both the original image and the edited image in a word document on page 1;
4. Write a 400-word essay about your process of self-creation (what you changed about yourself and why) and how your images reflect your sense of self. Be very specific about what you changed about your original photo and *why* you made these changes. How does your representation connect to the theories that we have covered thus far in the course? For the original image, Why did you take your picture using the angles that you did? For the edited image, Did you make these changes to be appear more “perfect”? What does “perfection” mean and look like for you? What is the relationship between self-monitoring (of bodies, of attitude) and perfection? How is the edited image that you construct of yourself similar to photoshopped images that we see in consumer culture? Is the edited image therefore “better”? And, if so, does this image correspond with a “better version” of who you are? Explain your answer. The essay should begin on page 2 of the word document.
5. After your essay, indicate on your document whether you are willing to present your essays and original/edited images to the class.

The majority of the students were willing to present their essays and images in the class following the due date for the assignment. I placed each student’s images on a PowerPoint slide. Then, each student explained her/his edits and analyses to the class. This generated a stimulating conversation about how and why they engage in self-representational strategies that align with – and/or resist – hegemonic femininity (self-beautification, body size and shape), postfeminism (self-sexualization, hyperconsumerism, etc), or hegemonic masculinity.

Students who generally do not post selfies and/or do not edit them are also instructed to do the exercise as it is outlined. Additionally, they are asked to add a few sentences of self-reflection on why they have not previously posted and/or edited selfies and how they felt about taking and editing these images: was this an uncomfortable process of image-making? Why/why not?

While this assignment does focus more on the practices of female students (which is the majority of my student population), I do include a week on representations of masculinity. The male students have utilized this reading in their essays and made connections between it and themes of postfeminism, as well as metrosexuality and toxic masculinity. The assignment thus opened up opportunities for students to discuss how they perform their sexual identities and if these performances support contemporary gender norms (as postfeminist or hypermasculine) or not.

After completing this activity, I continue to pose questions to the class that layer awareness of gendered self-construction in various contexts: identity (race, class, age, ability), branding, and globalization.

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Biography

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Dara Persis Murray is an Assistant Professor of Communication and Media, and Affiliated Faculty in the Women's and Gender Studies Program, at Manhattanville College. Her research and teaching interests include feminist media studies, consumer culture, visual culture, and digital culture. Her work has appeared in *Feminist Media Studies*, the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, and *Celebrity Studies*. She has also published chapters in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender* and *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, as well as pieces in the online academic collaborative *In Media Res*.