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Femininity: Is it the Pubic Hair or the Woman behind It?

In “The City that Never Sleeps”, lethargic New Yorkers wake up early to commute to work. After stopping by a Starbucks for a caffeine boost or a Dunkin’ Donuts for a sugar rush, the pedestrians glide down the slippery frost covered sidewalks that are characteristic of January. As these individuals pass by store fronts, their weary eyes glance at the merchandise to examine if anything is of interest. Just before another sip of coffee or bite of donut, their eyes become animated as they catch the sight of the store display of the American retailer American Apparel. While many may stare at mannequins clothed in sheer lingerie out of sheer apathy or pleasure, these mannequins have an added “accessory”: pubic hair. The reactions of passersby to this uncanny display is mixed – a melting pot of discomfort and delight – that have further led bystanders to question the purpose of this provocative adornment. While a substantial number of observers have commented on how the merkin-adorned mannequins are simply part of a publicity stunt by American Apparel’s CEO Dov Charney, one should take into consideration the advertisement’s less evident function as a concealed cry to the complicated concept of what is “true” feminine beauty.

American Apparel demonstrates how a simple concept – mannequins within a store display – can act as a catalyst for a more complicated discussion: is American Apparel trying to attract attention to itself or to the personal hygienic habits of female shoppers? In regards to this question,

there are two “characters” to take into consideration: the retailer and its mannequins. The former has “always [been considered a] controversial retailer” (Adams). Besides supposed mistreatment of employees within the company, it has received additional negative publicity for its lingerie advertisements with “underage” women and the “Period Power” t-shirt of a menstruating vagina enveloped by pubic hair. Although these situations call attention to the lack of ethos of American Apparel, the media – and subsequently media followers - nevertheless focuses on the drama and grants the vendor its wish: more publicity. One might argue that the store’s display is another version of these attention-attracting occurrences or, on the other hand, it may be drawing to America’s attention the issue of how women are perceived. American Apparel has stimulated a discussion on women and their personal hygiene via the second character, mannequins – do they exhibit “grooming issues” (Stampler) or a “return to a more natural state” (Stampler)? This highly-debated question received an answer every time a pedestrian unconsciously reacted – positively or negatively – to the merkin-adorned mannequins. By appealing to pathos, they prompted women and men to reflect on the commonplace that women without pubic hair are more desirable than those with it.

The strong responses from onlookers serve as evidence that American Apparel accomplished its purpose of attracting attention – for whatever reason – through pathos. Reactions on Twitter ranged from positive – “LOVE these American Apparel mannequins” (Sevilla) – to ambivalent – “big bushy pubes [are kinda] brave, [but] still kinda pervy” (Sevilla) – to outright negative: “Full bush on a mannequin? Has the world gone completely batshit?” (Sevilla). However, how the seasons and time of year play a role in its success should be further examined and not underestimated. As an effective use of logos, American Apparel’s store display was coordinated with Valentine’s Day to, according to their visual merchandiser Dee Myles, “bring

rawness and newness to a holiday thought of as a romantic Hallmark holiday” (Sevilla). As mentioned before, the pubic hair is extremely provocative since it is associated with genitalia and therefore sexual intercourse. If the mission of American Apparel was to “show off” an inhibited feminine quality via pathos, it has been successful in arousing a yearning in women and men to be loved (in American Apparel undergarments) and to love (through sexual intercourse). In addition, the location of American Apparel on East Houston Street in New York City enhanced the store’s chance of “success” by taking advantage of the multitude of passersby and therefore temporarily becoming an immense hub of attention. As if Manhattan did not already have enough traffic, American Apparel created a pedestrian rush hour - as more individuals passed the store, social media turned its attention to what was happening in front of the American Apparel storefront in New York City.

The American Apparel mannequins easily grabbed the attention of bystanders but American Apparel representatives had the more difficult task of shifting attention away from the *literal* demonstration of pubic hair to the *figurative* demonstration of speaking up for the natural state of women’s genitalia. According to the retailer’s employees – and therefore the ethos of American Apparel - the purpose of the American Apparel mannequins was to convey the “rawness and realness of sexuality” (Adams) and to “spark up curiosity and conversation about what we deem beautiful and sexy” (Sevilla). The so-called “structure” of the advertisement is directly affiliated with the “style” designed by representatives Dee Myles and Ryan Holiday – a direct example of an appeal to ethos to promote their cause. If one goes along with their statements, then the relatively recently accepted notion or commonplace of “hairless” women is put in the spotlight for all the world to see. There are Twitterers who agree with American Apparel’s justification –

“American Apparel’s new mannequins are giving me so much life” (Sevilla) – while others agree to disagree: “This is America home of the free land of the cleanly shaven!” (Sevilla).

American Apparel’s store display effectively stopped people in their tracks to attract attention to themselves and to the disputed concept of feminine beauty. While the retailer claims that the window display “celebrates natural beauty” (Luter), the mannequins are reminiscent of previous publicity stunts – sexual harassment allegations, dubious hiring policies, previous advertisement controversies, the “Period Power” t-shirt – and therefore question the motive behind the un-groomed mannequins. Hence, the “delivery” of the advertisement was probably negatively impacted as a result of past experiences. However, American Apparel has potentially begun to pave the way for the positive future experiences of women with pubic hair *au naturel*. Perhaps those wide-eyed pedestrians on that January morning would not even bat an eyelash if these mannequins were displayed in a decade or two. Although one will probably never fully understand what is the “real” motive behind American Apparel’s store display mannequins decorated with merkin, the controversy has provided motivation for one to pursue understanding what makes a “real” woman – is it the hair or the individual behind it?

Works Cited

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