Drawing on a cultural text or project of your choice, provide a critical discussion of how representation may reinforce or subvert harmful depictions of a marginalised group. In your answer you should include a discussion on how representation works and critically engage with what 'harmful' might mean.

Evaluating the representation of a marginalised group today requires us to pay close attention to media contexts, where representation has great power in shaping attitudes toward those groups (BBC, 2018). This essay will analyse female representation in #MyBeautyMysay, an advertisement produced by Dove in 2016, which follows a group of females who have all been judged because of their appearances. It will explore how media representation could combat gender misrepresentation, stereotypes and violence whereas through underrepresentation and predetermined representation, stereotypes of women are reinforced. It will also discuss the significance of self-representation in the form of advertising.

Representation can make meanings instead of merely reflecting the marginalised groups (Wearing, 2012). But this requires considering that what often has been represented is an image constructed by dominant thought (Williams, 1988), in turn, the sense of representation is deemed to be correlated with ‘symbolization’ and multiple inequalities of ‘regimes of representation’ (Wearing, 2012, p.194). This form of regime can be felt from the intersectional discrimination of the ‘mannish’ model in this text. She points out that ‘when they were talking about females, they weren’t talking about me’ (Dove, 2016), complaining about the poor acceptability on masculine women under heterosexual rules and ideals of femininity (Butler, 1999). Wearing also notes that this stereotype constructs a form of brutal depiction known as ‘symbolic violence’ against women (Hall, 2007, p.259). Whether it is the female lawyer who was questioned about her competence or the clinical psychologist who was told to ‘dress your age’ (Dove, 2016), this type of violence restrains women from demonstrating personal abilities or pursuing life choice (OHCHR, 2013, p.18).

However, representation also brings possibilities to challenge such ‘common sense’ and fight against narrow gender misrepresentations attached to political sense (Wearing, 2012, p.194). Quantitative content analysis of advertising representations has empirically demonstrated that the media strategically portrays easily acceptable representations of women, and gender hierarchy is therefore maintained (Luyt, 2011). As a key cultural tool, the media provides a new luminosity (ibid). The boxer refutes criticisms about her appearance and occupation, ‘but my face is nothing to do with my box’ (Dove, 2016), which has no longer gazed on the female’ body, in particular, men’s dominance over women. Similarly, in the 1970s, advertising portray traditional social division of labor, depicting women as household functionaries in private-domestic spaces, or ‘decorative objects’ and ‘unintelligent’ (Hennessee&Nicholson, 1972, p.12). Again, in Dove (2016), differing representations subvert stereotypes from routines by showing highly-achieving women, who see themselves as being independent and do not depend on men. These ‘counter’ narratives are crucial to progressive politics and resistance of misrepresentation (Wearing, 2012, p.197).

This new course of representation is also problematic, since underrepresentation and privilege may be continuously regenerated through those ‘counter’ narratives (Carter&Steiner, 2003, p.33). It questions the sphere of representational practice, ‘which “women” can stand in for other women?’ (Wearing, 2012, p.193). Underlining identity labels in #MyBeautyMySay include the boxing champion, fashion blogger, law firm partner, etc. Its omissions remain articulate: advertising concerns itself only with upper-/middle-class females, while lower-/working-class women are removed from the mainstream. This reveals that a new ‘representational privilege’ of social class is created (ibid) and the hierarchy of classes are reproduced by representation in gender relations again (Luyt, 2011). In responding to commercialism, Dove inevitably sells their brand only to target audiences rather than every member from the marginalized group (Bhasin, 2018). Diversity here is not to increase representation of minorities, instead, is considered as a stunt to cater to popularities (Saha, 2018).

Media texts never mirror the simple truth (Carter&Steiner, 2004), representation will also be re-shaped by the power of cultural forms (Dyer, 1993, in Wearing, 2012). As Dove’s campaign unfolds, it offers a variety of postfeminist sensibility options that advocate individualism and confidences (Gill, 2017, pp.606-607). Through women’s declarations, like ‘I don’t dress my age, I dress myself’ (Dove, 2016), these options take shape representations around post-feminism for surviving in neoliberal society.

Yet, that does not mean all senses of representation are predetermined, it can be decoded more than one way (Hall, 1980), and readers often interpret those images in their ideal contents (Baldnado, 1996). In this way, re-presence in Dove may not be delivered precisely, but it still highlights a great effect that audiences could somehow find their own echoes in this text.

Nonetheless, to destabilise unequal representations generated by dominant power, the female group itself needs to understand the role of identification and desire to represent their differences rather than countering the ‘harmful’ depiction with the honest one (Wearing, 2013, p.197). The best solution for this could be self-representation, suggested by Baldonado (1996). She mobilises increasing individuals join in the act of representing. Saha (2018; in Bailes, 2018) makes a related point that minorities should be given a maximum of independence and liberty for self-definition and self-representation. From the highlighted slogan ‘My beauty my say’ to celebrities’ declarations ‘you are not me, I am me’ and ‘I defined by myself, not by anyone’s expectation’ (Dove, 2016), female groups empower their self-worth, and self-branding becomes a key method today to raise female’s visibilities (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 55).

However, in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’, Spivak (1988, p.306) emphasises a fact, that is: as a type of speech act, a representation needs both a speaker and a listener. Drawing on this, Baldonado (1996) argued that representations of marginalised groups cannot be ‘heard,’ because it seems not fit in listeners’ expectancy and would not be accepted by them. But Shohat (1995, pp.166-178) notes, what is needed, is to examine ‘who is being represented for what purpose.’ To ensure brand awareness and interaction, representations always stand in the same group with target audiences (Percy& Rossiter, 1992). In this way, listeners are speakers, means that females’ self-representations could work in this approach.

In conclusion, representations in the media text of #MyBeautyMySay subvert harmful depictions of female groups. By delivering counter-narratives and self-representation, it has challenged and destabilised conventional gender stereotypes, political misrepresentation and symbolic violence over female. However, as representations in #MyBeautyMySay display, underrepresentation is inevitably regenerated by the commercialism of advertising and cultural forms, including the representational privilege of social class and the predetermined representation under popular forms of feminism in media contexts. Nevertheless, female representation of #MyBeautyMySay can create value for the female group, the audience and the progressive politics.

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