



The Commodification of Black Culture and Feminism in Black Media



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Abstract

Commodity feminism is the use of feminism in consumer culture in order to sell products and maximize profits; this often results in capitalism's appropriation and even erosion of feminism as a socio-political movement, specifically during the past several decades. Recently, feminism has gained as much traction in the corporate world as it has within popular culture: as feminism becomes more popular, so does the amount of "feminist" merchandise readily available to the public. This study focuses on commodity feminism as it pertains to black women, a demographic that is under covered within this field.

This research examines the trends in advertising in *Ebony* and *Essence* magazines, two traditionally black publications, in order to analyze the ways in which blackness and feminism have been turned into a marketing strategy by various brands and companies.

Introduction

Historically, mainstream commodity feminism has largely neglected black women. Yet a recent surge in the body positivity, natural hair, and intersectional feminism movements have called for a more inclusive market, one which corporations are now strategically embracing. At surface value, it is simple to critique the motivation for such actions yet, in some ways, this inclusivity has direct beneficiaries: black women. This new-found inclusivity and representation is important and has made stark changes in today's socio-political climate by allowing black women to see themselves within media representations of feminism. Nevertheless, the danger of engaging with commodity popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019) is that it risks commodifying the experiences of women of color and, in the case of this study, the unique experiences of black women.

This study examines the commodification of black culture and feminism and the ways in which it has specifically affected black women both historically and within today's neoliberal market: to do so, the research delves into the advertising strategies that target black women and their identities while simultaneously stripping black culture and feminism of their social and political importance and portraying them as nothing more than a means to profit.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Dr. Catherine Atwell and Marlborough School for their guidance and support through this research process.

Methods

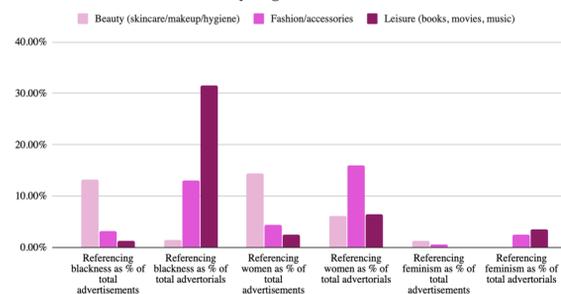
- Magazine issues used in this study: *Ebony* and *Essence*'s February, July, and December issues from every third year between 1995 and 2013, as well as *Ebony*'s 2018 July and December issues and their 2019 Spring Issue. Additionally, *Essence*'s 2019 July and December issues and their January/February 2020 issue.
- Advertisements and advertorials were counted, coded into 17 categories (based on what product they were advertising) and tallied by their references to blackness, women, and feminism.
- Additionally, five advertisements/advertorials were visually analyzed as specific examples of commodity blackness/feminism.



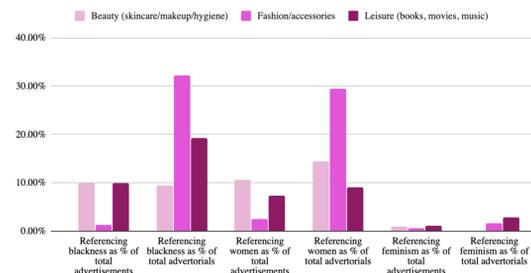
Left: "Ebony Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 3 (January, 1995). Janet Jackson, Rev Dr Henry J. Lyons, John H. Johnson; Amazon.com Books; Amazon.com Online Shopping for Electronics, Apparel, Computers, Books, DVDs & More; Accessed May 8, 2020.
Right: "CYNTHIA BAILEY | ESSENCE MAGAZINE JUNE, 1995 COVER | Cynthia Bailey, Essence Magazine; Pinterest; Accessed May 8, 2020.

Results

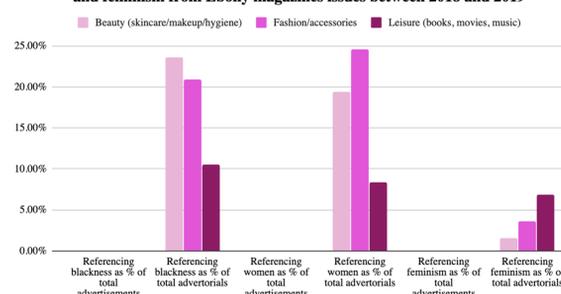
Percentage of beauty, fashion, and leisure advertisements and advertorials out of total number of advertisements and advertorials that reference blackness, women, and feminism from *Ebony* magazines issues between 1995 and 2013



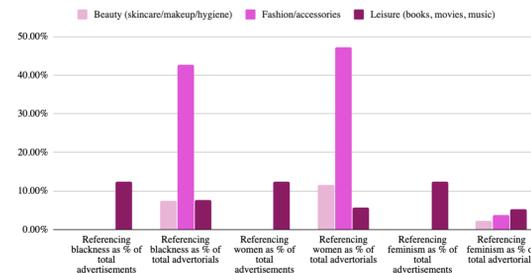
Percentage of beauty, fashion, and leisure advertisements and advertorials out of total number of advertisements and advertorials that reference blackness, women, and feminism from *Essence* magazines issues between 1995 and 2013



Percentage of beauty, fashion, and leisure advertisements and advertorials out of total number of advertisements and advertorials that reference blackness, women, and feminism from *Ebony* magazines issues between 2018 and 2019



Percentage of beauty, fashion, and leisure advertisements and advertorials out of total number of advertisements and advertorials that reference blackness, women, and feminism from *Essence* magazines issues between 2019 and 2020



General Ad - Essence, 12, 1995, 1. <http://expoxy.lip.org/login?url=https://research.proquest.com/expoxy/lip.org/docview/23210128?accountid=148>.

This Virginia Slims cigarette advertisement, found in *Essence*'s December 1995 issue, is a prime example of commodity blackness and commodity feminism. By depicting the black female model in animal print clothing with the caption "Tame and timid? That goes against my instincts," the advertisement draws the comparison between a black woman and an exotic animal (likely of African origin given the leopard print); the ad exoticizes and commodifies her identity as a black woman by using her image to sell the cigarettes which are otherwise unrelated to the model. Furthermore, sentiments of female strength and confidence implied by the caption tend to be in line with traditional feminist beliefs, demonstrating the intersection between blackness and feminism in advertising.

Discussion

The oldest magazine issues used in this study coincide with the beginnings of third-wave feminism, and the advertisements and advertorials in more recent issues have better reflected the sociopolitical movements of the times. For example, the elections of Barack Obama, the U.S.' first black president (in 2008), and President Donald Trump (in 2016) both occurred during the period under analysis. The editorial content of magazine issues from both *Ebony* and *Essence* during this era promoted a heightened sentiment of racial and gender equality which seems to have influenced the products that were advertised and the ways those products were advertised.

Advertisements and advertorials that fell under the beauty, fashion, haircare, and leisure categories differed the most between older and more recent issues, since the natural hair movement and body positivity movement are a recent phenomenon. Additionally, a growing variety in shade range for makeup products and a more inclusive modeling industry have allowed for an increase in products that reference blackness and, more specifically, black women. Furthermore, compared to older issues, newer issues of both magazines included more advertorials referencing feminism (as a result of movements like #MeToo and the Women's March) through book and film recommendations, both of which fall under the leisure category.

When discussing commodity feminism, it is critical to consider what the trends recorded in this study imply about future advertising strategies. Commodity feminism has become increasingly prevalent in media, including editorial, advertorial and advertisements, demonstrating the beginning stages of a shift in advertising strategies as brands begin to realize the profit potential in feminism, and more precisely, black feminism.

References

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