

As the oldest of four girls, I have heard my fair share of discussions about body image and beauty. My sisters and I are each built differently, none of us taller than 5' 3," which can sometimes lead to frustration and comparison. One thing we have all found incredibly refreshing in a world that bombards young girls with flawless skin, tiny waistlines, and shiny hair, is Aerie's "Real Beauty" campaign: "the real you is beautiful." It's nice, we all agree, to see a few stretch marks on a model that is still a very pretty girl, maybe even a stomach roll or less than flawless skin, because we can identify with these "imperfections." By normalizing untouched models, my sisters and I felt more beautiful in our own un-retouched bodies. Aerie's campaign is not an isolated one. In fact, it is part of a movement which has been embraced not only within the advertising community, but by entertainment industry as well. Musicians John Legend and Colbie Callait are among artists who have recently produced music videos with body-positive messages. However, as part of the body positive movement, both of these videos present a faulty "quick-fix" solution to a much deeper issue in our modern society.

Before proceeding further, it is helpful to employ a clear definition of this problem. For this I turn to Dr. Renee Engeln, a professor at Northwestern University, who has studied issues around body positivity as her topic of research. In 2013, she presented a TEDx Talk entitled "An Epidemic of Beauty Sickness," in which she defined beauty sickness as a "failure of information processing." This definition is helpful, because it gives a diagnosis to the issue we see in society: women live in a world which bombards them with an impossible standard of beauty everywhere from commercials on television to billboards on the roadside. Dr. Engeln observed that though women realize the models they see portray unrealistic or oftentimes unhealthy standards of beauty, they still strive to achieve these standards. Therefore, the epidemic the body positive movement is fighting against is the underlying message of these ads, that "beautiful is the most

important, most powerful thing a girl or woman can be.” It is helpful to use this definition of beauty sickness when examining the music videos produced in response.

One such body positive video is John Legend’s “You and I,” which released online in July of 2014. The ethos of this song is more that of a romantic love song, a lover singing to his beloved, opening with lines such as, *“out of all of the girls / you’re my one and only girl / ain’t nobody in the world tonight / all of the stars / you make them shine like they were ours...”* Interestingly, the lyrics of “You and I” emphasize body positivity much less than “Try,” with fewer lines that seem to allude to positivity, such as, *“you fix your makeup just so / guess you don’t know that you’re beautiful”* and at the end of the song, *“you don’t have to try / don’t try / don’t try / you don’t have to try.”* However, the images of the music video speak loudly of a cure to the beauty sickness epidemic.

The video is composed of short shots of daily life from women of a diverse range of ethnicities, occupations, ages, and economic statuses: a Caucasian runner pauses to adjust her ponytail, an African-American business woman rehearses a speech, a Hispanic female artist faces the camera mid-painting. Legend’s video feels more colorful, more real, somehow more human than Callait’s headshots of models removing their makeup in front of a white wall. It’s almost as if Legend, by showing women in their everyday lives, has fleshed out an idea Callait only dances around. Legend’s video seems to take the time to examine the impact this issue has on our everyday lives, while Callait’s stays safely on the surface.

Interestingly, “Try” was released a month before “You and I” in June of 2014. The ethos of this song begins with a quiet and reflective tone, as the video opens with the lyrics: “*put your make-up on / get your nails done / curl your hair / run the extra mile / keep it slim / so they like you...*” By the second verse the ethos has switched to an upbeat anthem, with Callait declaring, “*you don’t have to try so hard / you don’t have to give it all away / you just have to get up, get up / you don’t have to change a single thing...*” While the lyrics of Callait’s ballad sound empowering, the artist has done little to present any sort of viable solution to the issue she is discussing.

The video opens with shots of downcast women in front of a white wall with fully made-up faces, and when the sound turns from downcast to upbeat, they remove their makeup. However, they are still just faces against a white background. The only change we see occur in the video is the removal of makeup inspired by a pop song chorus. Because Callait shows the women in her video in such an impersonal way: headshots against a white wall either wearing makeup or not, she is contributing to the societal problem she is singing against. While Legend took his audience into the daily routines of the women he was singing to- the kind of mothers, daughters, wives, sisters they may be- Calliat leaves her viewers with no choice but to relate to them only on a surface level.

Both videos make a statement about body positivity, both echo the sentiments that women should not care what the world tells them, that they are beautiful as they are. One deals with the topic in a more concrete way than the other, and yet, both leave the listener asking a question; what is the solution? How do we get women to believe this in their day to day life? As a woman, I know how hard it is to believe these messages. Both John Legend and Colbie

Callait's less than 5 minute videos portray girls who begin the song with downcast faces and by the end appear smiling, happy and confident. From my own experience, the fight to believe I am beautiful is a daily one, one that cannot be solved by one ad campaign or music video. And so I ask too: is there a solution?

Some have said the solution may be to omit the phrase "you are beautiful" from our vocabularies all together. One supporter of this ideology is Sharon Holbrook, a mother of two daughters under the age of 10 and a writer for The Washington Post. In her article, "Little Girls Don't Need to be Told they're Beautiful," she writes, "we might think we're building our daughters up by reassuring them that they are beautiful to us no matter what, but what we're also doing is bringing the beauty pressure home to our littlest girls" (Holbrook, "Little Girls Don't Need to be Told They're Beautiful, WashingtonPost.com). Instead, she encourages her girls to find their own style and voice, discouraging them to strive for what the world labels as beauty: an impossible mirage.

This rule sounds extreme and harsh, though the mother's heart behind it means well. Personally, I don't believe I would have such a rule myself, because I believe and know from my own experience that I as a woman long to hear the words "you are beautiful." But I also believe these words mean so much more when they are paired with "not only because of how you look, but because of your courage, your compassion, your ability to stay soft when the world tries its best to cause your heart to callous." By broadening our definition of beauty to value the invisible qualities over the visible, perhaps we are on our way to a solution.

The problem of beauty sickness is not one that can be solved overnight. But it can be helped by consistent effort, a movement that has already begun. If we really want to change the

way women view themselves, we as a culture have to commit to enforcing the message that beauty and worth is not just determined by physical appearance every day. We as women must encourage one another, learn to admire someone else's beauty without condemning or negating our own. To remind one another, in the words of author Amy Bloom, "You are imperfect, permanently and inevitably flawed, and you are beautiful."

Works Cited:

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