

3 We Belong to Something Beautiful

Expanding Aesthetic Citizenship

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Introduction

In recent years, the notoriously exclusive beauty industry has moved to incorporate more diverse images and representations of appearance in its commercial advertisements and campaign images. This includes advertising campaigns and images pushed out through social media channels like, for example, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Among them, the industry giant Sephora has invested in a campaign titled, “We Belong to Something Beautiful.” Initially launched in the spring of 2019, the campaign celebrates beauty along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, age, and disability. It features a range of models with diverse figures and faces across campaign assets and media platforms, persuading consumers to invest in an ostensibly empowering vision of beauty. Having had significant success in North America, the brand—one of the world’s most competitive retailers—recently expanded its signature campaign to all 35 global markets, affirming Sephora’s commitment to a “unique vision of beauty—one that transcends borders and barriers” (Sephora, 2024). On this decision, Deborah Yeh, the brand’s Global Chief Marketing Officer, announced, “While every culture has nuances, we believe inclusion is a global concept. We now challenge ourselves to commit to this ambition worldwide” (Sephora, 2024).

Sephora’s commitments reflect a broader movement in the industry toward more democratic and inclusive beauty messaging for women (Banet-Weiser 2012; Orgad & Gill, 2022). Intersectional feminist and media scholars have questioned the nature of this shift, pointing to the contradictory and competing injunctions that women face to “empower” themselves through cosmetic products, procedures, and beauty practices designed to enhance once’s appearance (Gill, 2009; Johnston & Foster, 2025; Taylor et al., 2016). Women are, as Piazzesi (2023, p. 17) points out:

[E]ncouraged to be beautiful, yet also sanctioned if they’re too interested in beauty and beautification. They are enjoined to do *enough*—not too little, and not too much—to stay beautiful, sexy, young, and attractive, and yet enough never seems to be enough.

Still, as corporate messaging expands to include a greater range of figures and faces, and new media and digital marketing help to bypass traditional industry norms, the boundaries surrounding who is (and isn't) considered normatively attractive may shift, producing a site for resistance and change within the notoriously exclusive beauty industry. How do we make sense of these shifts in contemporary beauty messaging and their democratic and inclusive potentials for marginalized people? Extending intersectional feminist and media scholarship, we draw attention to the opportunities and challenges that contemporary beauty messaging poses for women and to the shifting boundaries that underscore this messaging.

In what follows, we offer the concept of *aesthetic citizenship* as a heuristic tool to make sense of the boundaries and boundary-making processes surrounding what it means to be beautiful and to belong or be excluded. First, this chapter unpacks the concept of aesthetic citizenship. Aesthetic citizenship grants access to rights and privileges as well as individual-level benefits we often take for granted, securing a sense of belonging for those who are perceived to lie within its boundaries. Its perceived absence may provoke shame and ridicule and makes some individuals and groups more likely to experience violence or exclusion based on their appearance. We argue that it is a useful conceptual bridge for explaining the various privileges and rewards that beauty offers and, importantly, for thinking more broadly about the ways in which beauty relates to belonging.

Second, this chapter explores the potential ways in which digital media has parceled and sold more inclusive representations of beauty, expanding what it means to be an aesthetic citizen. At the same time, we discuss the limitations of digital media and corporate advertising in expanding social inclusion vis-à-vis challenging and, at times, contradictory beauty messaging. To illustrate, we apply the concept of aesthetic citizenship to Sephora's recent advertising campaign, "We Belong to Something Beautiful." We analyze how this highly publicized campaign defines the boundaries that surround beauty and belonging and comment on the challenging and sometimes contradictory messages that accompany the brand's widely celebrated efforts toward diversity and inclusion.

Aesthetic citizenship

Aesthetic citizenship is a conceptual heuristic underscored by boundary work in cultural sociology and by classical socio-legal definitions of citizenship. This tool provides a framework for understanding the cultural, social, political, and economic significance of beauty. Extant accounts of citizenship rarely, if ever, address beauty, which is often tossed aside as trivial or somehow unimportant (Menon, 2023). But as Cottom (2019, p. 44) reminds us, beauty is deeply powerful; it is an avenue through which social hierarchies are reproduced, through which we assert belonging or succumb to feelings of inferiority (see also Craig 2021, p. 3).

Extending the concept of citizenship beyond its traditional legal focus on membership in a nation-state is not new. TH Marshall (1987) outlined different kinds of citizenship beyond the legal sense, including social and economic citizenship. These typologies of citizenship were not necessarily treated as mutually inclusive but rather mutually informative. For instance, the anthropologist Rosaldo (1994) argued that cultural expressions, an important dimension of “belonging,” intersect with citizenship rights in the classic sense because cultural recognition and inclusion are inextricably linked to individuals’ lived experience as citizens. In a similar fashion, Beaman (2016) takes on the cultural dimensions of citizenship, treating citizenship as a much broader axis of inclusion and exclusion. Consistent with this approach, we think about beauty as an important site on which inclusion and belonging are brokered. Those who embody the beauty standard enjoy a form of status akin to citizenship. Aesthetic citizens are afforded privileges. Alternatively, non-citizens are often denied privileges and penalized for not possessing the correct entry requirements (Anderson et al., 2010; Schneickert et al., 2020).

This understanding of citizenship rests, at least in part, on symbolic boundaries. Symbolic boundaries refer to categorical distinctions drawn between individuals and groups (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). They are intimately connected to notions of belonging and exclusion whereby some are afforded access to social, political, and economic resources while others are not (Foster et al., 2023; Lamont, 1994; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). As Bloemraad et al. (2019) outline, material aspects of citizenship overlap with symbolic qualities to inform *who* deserves what and exactly how much. These qualities may include moral virtues (Lamont 1994, 2019; Pugh, 2011; Sherman, 2018), but they may also extend to appearance qualities individuals may possess. Appearance qualities surrounding the “able” body, for example, are used to distinguish between “what is normal and desirable” and to critique “particular bodily conjugations”, including and especially the disabled body (Heiss, 2011, p. 2; see also Garland-Thomson, 1996).

Drawing from the literature on boundaries and boundary work, the concept of aesthetic citizenship foregrounds beauty within a broader discussion on belonging and exclusion, as well as the privileges and penalties that follow from each (Anderson et al., 2010). Like other types of social statuses (Bloemraad et al., 2019), aesthetic citizenship grants access to privileges that are often taken for granted. These include benign enjoyments like, for example, buying makeup and clothes that fit well, to more significant benefits such as using public spaces without fear of inaccessibility, discrimination, or racial bias (Pittman, 2020). Those excluded from being aesthetic citizens may be stigmatized or mocked. Some may even face higher risks of violence due to their appearance (Craig, 2002; Strings, 2019).

As a conceptual heuristic, aesthetic citizenship also sheds light on the relationship between beauty and politics (Craig, 2021), in that is attuned to how beauty can play a role in fostering resistance and a sense of empowerment.

Put differently, it offers a means of thinking about beauty as a tool to instigate change within our collective cultural landscape. For instance, Ford (2017) illustrated how Black women use their personal style and appearance as tools for defiance. Disability aesthetics can also be leveraged to foster resistance and change, combatting “the ways in which the disabled body traditionally has been either highly stigmatized, or completely erased” in traditional media (Fox, 2021, p. 152). In our framework, these endeavors push the boundaries of aesthetic citizenship.

Inclusion in the beauty industry

Mainstream media, including video advertisements and static images, tend to promote a narrow standard of beauty, focusing on a limited number of individuals who are conventionally slender, tall, heterosexual, non-disabled, and typically White, reflecting widely accepted norms surrounding appearance and attractiveness (Bordo, 2003; Mears, 2010; Murray, 2013; Wolf, 1990). In recent years however, media messaging surrounding beauty has shifted to include a wider range of figures and faces including models of color, trans models, and models with disabilities (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2021). Aside from this shift, beauty messaging has also been transformed to include what some have called post-feminist sensibilities and sociopolitical issues dressed in appeals toward “feeling good as well as looking good” (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dagalp & Södergren, 2024; Gill, 2009, p. 9; Johnston & Foster, 2025; Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Lazar, 2011; Murray, 2013; Orgad & Gill, 2022). Recent inclusion efforts, including Dove’s much talked about campaign for “Real Beauty” illustrate as much, with exhortations for all women to “celebrate” their appearance and embrace their bodies (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This transformation in contemporary beauty messaging provides an opportunity to map how the boundaries of aesthetic citizenship flex and fold, for whom, and with what effect. Heiss (2011) analyzed Dove’s campaign incorporating marginalized women and women with disabilities in their beauty advertising. Heiss (2011) also showed that these corporate advertisements, however novel, are naïve and often reinforce rather than challenge traditional notions of beauty.

While inclusive beauty messaging and feminist critiques can be incorporated to expand the boundaries of aesthetic citizenship and to empower women, this messaging has been a boon for corporate growth and capitalist exploitation (Johnston & Foster, 2025; Taylor et al., 2016). Sometimes referred to as a form of social aesthetics or cause marketing (Dagalp & Södergren, 2024), advertising incorporating diversity can help to target marginalized consumer segments and expand market reach (Banks, 2022). Paradoxically, as more women are encouraged to “celebrate” and embrace their appearance, they are simultaneously required to work on and perfect their features and to discipline their bodies (Johnston & Foster, 2025;

Piazzesi, 2023). Women with disabilities often challenge these injunctions to discipline the body as, to borrow from Heiss (2011, p. 16), “many physical disabilities cannot be, and arguably should not be, as easily ‘disciplined,’ or ‘covered’.” Yet, in recent years, even models with disabilities have become more focused in mainstream representations of beauty (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2021), creating new aesthetic opportunities within and beyond the disability community (Deuze, 2016).

For their part, scholars have noted that beauty brands have successfully “commodified dissent” by incorporating or co-opting feminist ideals in their advertisements and images (McRobbie, 2008; Murray, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016). Lazar (2011, p. 37) described beauty brands as “adroit” in their ability to “read a society’s pulse” and “respond by selectively appropriating social discourse”, including feminist sensibilities, sociopolitical issues, and emancipatory messages targeting women. Described as a kind of “femvertising,” beauty brands that invest in a more socially conscious and emancipatory messaging have generated significant debate among scholars, including and especially around the transformative potential of what some have called their faux-feminist market orientations (Becker-Herby, 2013). Debate in this vein centers around questions concerning corporate power and profit-making, as inclusive beauty messaging broadens to capture a greater range of consumers (Varghese & Kumar, 2022).

Others warn that the broadening of bodies in mainstream images and advertisements seems to be contradictorily accompanied by new, more rigorous appearance standards and expectations. As Gill (2009, p. 9) writes, “the diversification of mainstream beauty ideals to include bigger, older, and disabled models as well as women of color, queer, and non-binary models across media” has been accompanied by an “intensification and extensification of beauty pressures, and their institutionalization as a compulsory form of labor.” By extensification, Gill (2009) suggests that beauty pressures now spread across a greater range of bodily features and temporalities (or moments in the life course). Increasingly, women are told that they ought to be “beautiful at every age.” All the while, they are asked to work on and refine everything from the height and fullness of their brows to the appearance of the forearm and the size of the gap between their thighs. As beauty messaging expands outward, it also intensifies to become more “forensic” in its gaze with mainstream media images and advertisements encouraging women to scrutinize their bodies and work to maintain, manage, and correct them (Gill, 2009). As this messaging intensifies and extensifies, beauty work becomes more compulsory, especially for women who report a “duty to be beautiful” (Widdows, 2018, p. 19).

The phrase “beauty work” was developed by Kwan and Trautner (2009) to capture the beauty practices that people engage in to enhance their appearance. Analogous terms like “body work” or “body labor” have also been used to refer to unpaid work done by oneself as well as the paid work of

others (e.g., nail technicians, hairdressers) focused on improvements to bodily appearance (Kang, 2010; Mears, 2010). Beauty and body work take on a special resonance under the ideological dominance of neoliberalism, with its valuation on personal efforts to reshape and transform the body and self to be ever more responsible, attractive, and appealing (Gill, 2009). Indeed, body work has itself become more intensive, with everyday women, including and especially young women, entertaining cosmetic interventions like facial fillers and liposuction as routine practices of bodily maintenance and beautification (Berkowitz, 2017). Mirroring these changes, beauty products are increasingly marketed using the language of intensive procedures, with cosmetics that promise to “lift,” “sculpt,” and “fill” the face and body (Hermans, 2022).

And so, the rise in diversity and body-positive messaging in the mainstream media and in fashion and beauty advertisements is accompanied by beauty pressures. On the one hand, shifts in the media space expand the boundaries of aesthetic citizenship by showcasing a wider range of figures and appearances, while on the other, they shore up a multi-billion-dollar beauty industry predicated on imperfections that can be erased, modified, or re-touched with purchases made online or in-store (Orgad & Gill, 2022).

Research approach

Contemporary media, including images and advertisements, provide an ideal starting point for analyzing beauty messaging. For this chapter, we turn to an assemblage of images, texts, and videos created by the beauty brand, Sephora. Specifically, we focus on a collection of advertisements and images from the brand’s “We Belong to Something Beautiful Campaign”, including YouTube videos and television advertisements, Instagram “Reels,” and static images posted on publicly available social media platforms and on the brand’s Canadian webpage. Sephora makes for an exemplary case study of the beauty industry and its messaging. The brand is the sixth highest grossing beauty retailer worldwide, with over \$15 billion in global sales (Statista, 2023). It is the most shopped beauty retailer in the United States among Generation Z and the second most shopped beauty retailer overall (Statista, 2023). Consistent with existing analyses of beauty advertisements and corporate messaging, we approach images, videos, and texts as cultural objects that encode and communicate social meaning (Gill, 2009; Goffman, 1979; Heiss, 2011). Throughout, we provide a critical reading of these objects and their meanings focused on how Sephora’s advertisements and images construct and interpret beauty, diversity, and inclusion. Using the concept of aesthetic citizenship, we interrogate and assess how Sephora’s recent beauty messaging might empower previously excluded groups while also pointing to the pressures and burdens associated with inclusion in the beauty industry.

Findings

We belong to something beautiful

Sephora's "We Belong to Something Beautiful" campaign was introduced in the spring of 2019, shortly after the brand had made headlines for a high-profile case of racial profiling in-store (Estrada, 2019). And it was high-profile, indeed, when the widely followed R&B artist, SZA, accused an employee of being followed and surveilled in-store (Estrada, 2019). Against a backdrop of criticism, Sephora announced to consumers that the brand would be closing all its stores to "host inclusion workshops" (Sephora, 2019). Their public-facing messaging exclaimed, "We will never stop building a community where diversity is expected, self-expression is honored, all are welcome, and you are included." In the weeks and months that followed, Sephora invested in a cross-platform messaging strategy featuring a range of diverse models, micro-celebrities, and influencers, alongside empowering pronouncements assuaging consumers that "all are welcome" to worship at beauty's altar. This message is reinforced through images, videos, texts, and training courses, all extolling the importance of empowerment and expression vis-à-vis the purchase and use of cosmetic products.

Consider, for example, the brand's global launch video. This 45-second video has been shared on platforms like YouTube and Instagram. It begins with a focus on a group of young girls (and some boys) applying makeup in a crimson-colored washroom. Among them are racialized women, older women, Queer people, Drag Queens, and people with a disability. All look directly into the camera—a mirror for their beauty work—as they apply mascara, lipstick, and powder to their eyes, lips, and faces. As they smile and emote, music plays, with lyrics exclaiming, "real human being and a real hero," on repeat. Images shared on the brand's Instagram page and virtual storefront are fashioned similarly. These images expand the boundaries of aesthetic citizenship, centering a range of figures and faces from across diverse backgrounds including Queer models and viral creators, women of color, older women, and people with disabilities. The inclusion of people with disabilities is particularly noteworthy in the beauty industry, an industry that has historically neglected the disability community (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2021; Pettinicchio 2024). Throughout Sephora's launch video, models sample and swatch cosmetic products, including skin care products and enriching masks, eyeshadows and foundations, as well as cheek and brow products. Throughout, they appear smiling and visibly elated.

In Sephora's Instagram images and in-store advertisements, a similar image of elation in the face of beauty products is up for display. In one advertisement for example—a collaboration between Sephora and the widely followed social media influencer, @glow_bymonica—Monica shares her "favourite Huda beauty color correctors," a product designed to hide blemishes, brighten, and even skin tone. She begins by telling viewers that, "if

you're not color correcting, you're seriously missing out." As she continues, viewers follow Monica as she applies a corrector, concealer, setting powder, and foundation. When all is said and done, Monica looks out toward the camera, smiling as she exclaims, "just look at the final result, I feel like my skin looks so even so, if you're not color correcting, this is your time to try it." "Correcting" minor blemishes and marks along her naturally brown skin renders Monica, a beautiful young woman, more "perfect" and more joyful for it.

While practices of beautification can, to borrow from Craig (2021, p. 3), be "a source of sensual pleasure, a practice or care, a foothold in the economy, or just an accessible way to feel good," practices of beautification can also be a site of struggle, of discipline, oppression, and scrutiny. These more challenging dimensions of beauty's cultural commandments and beauty messaging are missing from Sephora's advertisements and images, which center feelings of joy and empowerment in their vision. Indeed, smiling faces worn by women standing arm in arm with one another obfuscate around more critical conversations surrounding beauty, femininity, and empowerment, and empty Sephora's messaging of its transformative potentials (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020). Rather than encourage women to reject the compulsory nature of beauty practices or intensive body work, Sephora persuades women to find power and liberation within these practices.

Women are therefore invited to find power through increasingly intensive beauty practices and to monitor and correct an ever-greater number of bodily and facial features. For Sephora, women make use of everything from mundane lip-balms and fragrances to high-tech LED eye and face masks. Costly beauty tools, including three- and four-figure facial sculpting wands, personal microdermabrasion sets, and "supersonic" hair wands and curlers, are also available for purchase and promise to provide a more "precise" and, in some cases, "clinically informed" approach to beautification. Taken together, these tools speak to the "intensification" of beauty pressures or to the various ways through which women are asked to monitor and correct their appearance at "ever-finer grained levels" (Gill, 2009, p. 13).

That women are asked to monitor and correct their appearance is not at issue in Sephora's images and advertisements. Like other, somewhat more progressive media campaigns before it, Sephora "diagnoses the problem" as lying outside of commandments to work on and perfect one's appearance (Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Murray, 2013). Put differently, the problem is not that women are being asked to correct and modify their appearance but rather that not *all* women have been encouraged to do so. As Sephora expands the boundaries surrounding who is (and isn't) beautiful, it does very little to challenge the compulsory nature of beauty and body work or contemporary practices of beautification. This is evidenced by the brand's repeated allusions towards an inclusive "we" designed to capture figures and faces previously rebuffed by the beauty industry, including people with disabilities, racialized

people, and sexual minorities (Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2022). In effect then, Sephora's campaign reinforces social imperatives surrounding women's beauty—that women ought “to be and feel beautiful is not up for negotiation” (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 954).

The inclusion of marginalized bodies including disabled and plus-sized people is by no means insignificant. Indeed, Sephora's recent images and advertisements represent a shift toward a more diverse image of beauty and may provide a site on which to engage with, debate, and re-imagine conventional, relatively narrow, beauty and body ideals. For instance, Fatima Jamal, was featured in Sephora's “Identify As We” Instagram post. Jamal is a plus-sized, Queer woman of color and in Sephora's campaign, emphasized the power of makeup as a tool for self-expression and confidence. Like other women featured in the brand's campaign posts and videos, Jamal's visible markers of difference are paired alongside messaging that reinforces the importance of maintaining appearance standards among women including women who, for decades, have gone without representation in the beauty industry. Indeed, women of color have long been underrepresented in appearance-based industries. When included, they are exotified or maligned (Craig, 2002; Strings, 2019). They have not been cast as aesthetic citizens.

A similar pattern of exclusion exists among people with disabilities who are often treated as incompatible with extant beauty ideals. As scholars note, the feminine and disabled body has long been derided as necessarily “flawed” or “deviant” when compared to normative standards of beauty and appearance (Foster & Pettinicchio, 2021; Garland-Thomson, 1996; Heiss, 2011). Sephora pushes past these historical constructions of disability, showcasing models like Aaron Philips. Philips is a young transgender model of color with cerebral palsy. They are postured in their wheelchair across several still images and appears also in a widely viewed video advertisement. Philips is wearing a shimmering tinsel top and has been made over with a bright red lip. Their representation in this way celebrates beauty and body diversity along several axes, including race, gender identity, and disability. In positioning Aaron within its video advertisements and images, Sephora moves to expand the boundaries of aesthetic citizenship, inviting consumers to imagine a more inclusive vision of beauty.

While hugely important in an industry that often neglects markers of diversity and visible difference, Aaron's representation is not without issue. Like other models discussed here, Aaron is postured alongside beauty messaging, asking women to work on and perfect their appearance through the purchase and use of cosmetics. Consistent with Monica and Fatima before her, Aaron's perceived “imperfections” are made more palatable through practices of body work and beautification, including the use of foundation, lipstick, eyeshadow, and blush. Sephora's campaign images and advertisements then parallel traditional “objectified and disembodied experiences of the [female] body” as a site for evaluation, scrutiny, and constant change (Heiss, 2011).

As these cases show, Sephora provides a space for consumers to imagine a relatively more diverse image of beauty, and an opportunity to contest and challenge existing beauty and body ideals. The brand offers this image while co-opting popular feminist critiques of the beauty industry. This messaging has, as Taylor et al. (2016) write of beauty campaigns more broadly, bent to incorporate popular feminist critiques of the beauty industry, “commodifying dissent” among consumers and activists concerned with existing beauty messages and their insidious qualities. Even as Sephora asserts that women “belong exactly the way [they] are,” they cast their gaze over women who are applying mascara to lengthen their lashes, blush to highlight their cheeks, and rouge to amplify and color their lips. Taken together, these practices of beautification and their position alongside emancipatory messages imply that women’s liberation and joy are necessarily wed to their commitment to work on and enhance their physical appearance (Lazar, 2011). In other words, practices of beautification are compulsory—a prerequisite for emancipation, perhaps especially for people once cut off from view. Rather than reject body work and practices of beautification, Sephora asks that consumers balance an age-old beauty standard that toggles between artifice and nature. Women, then, should not “relinquish beautification and self-transformation outright” and should instead “fashion their appearance so that they express” what is understood as a natural and necessarily empowering image of beauty (Piazzesi, 2023, p. 23).

Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, we critically examined Sephora’s recent efforts toward diversity and inclusion in the beauty industry. We do not intend to dismiss the brand’s campaign images and advertisements as summarily ineffective or insincere. Instead, we trace the transformative potentials and possible contradictions evinced in Sephora’s beauty messaging and global marketing campaign. To explain Sephora’s efforts toward inclusion and diversity and their consequences for marginalized people, we leverage the concept of aesthetic citizenship. As a heuristic tool, aesthetic citizenship provides a useful way for thinking about the boundaries that surround beauty as well as the penalties and privileges that appearance commands. These boundaries appear to be shifting, with mainstream beauty brands featuring figures and faces once excluded.

While Sephora’s “We Belong to Something Beautiful” campaign is making important strides in producing a more diverse and inclusive image of beauty, its corporate messaging alongside popular feminist critiques of the beauty industry is fraught with contradiction. Indeed, Sephora welcomes a wider range of figures and faces to worship at beauty’s altar but has done little to unseat deeply rooted messages surrounding the compulsory nature of body work and practices of beautification. In this way, Sephora has expanded the

boundaries of aesthetic citizenship while also “intensifying” and “extensifying” beauty pressures (Gill, 2009; Orgad & Gill, 2022).

Across their images, videos, and online advertisements, Sephora features a wider range of figures and faces, shifting the boundaries that surround beauty to include more diversity along the lines of gender, age, size, race, and sexuality. In doing so, Sephora has provided a space in which to expand aesthetic citizenship or a site on which to build a different vision of beauty; one that is more inclusive and, arguably, more democratic. Still, we should be critical of Sephora’s corporate messaging and its limitations, namely, whether and to what extent this messaging destabilizes or challenges the ways in which women are seen and understood. When Sephora’s “We Belong to Something Beautiful” campaign champions “all beauty” and “celebrates difference,” it simultaneously encourages women to monitor, refine, and correct their appearance using cosmetic products like foundation, concealer, blush, and lipstick. The brand also advises on a range of novel products designed to correct and refine appearance, including microcurrent toning tools and LED facial masks. Injunctions to celebrate a more inclusive or diverse image of beauty then have not “meant abandoning self-discipline and beauty work for women” (Piazzesi, 2023, p. 24). Rather, as women have been encouraged to celebrate their bodily diversity, they have also been asked to refine, enhance, or make more beautiful the markers that make them different.

In addition to these issues, it is worth pausing to consider whether and to what extent Sephora’s investments in diversity and inclusion represent a sincere or enduring shift away from the beauty industry’s relatively narrow ideals. For some critics, the brand’s campaign might be read as a strategic move through which to combat criticism and quiet dissent among consumers. Others might question whether Sephora, like other beauty brands (Banet-Weiser, 2012), has simply moved to capture a growing cultural ferment around diversity and inclusion. As Banks (2022) shows in her work on Black cultural patronage, brands and businesses appear increasingly interested in aligning themselves with matters related to diversity and inclusion, making highly public and generous donations to marginalized communities in recent years. Corporate investments in issues related to diversity and inclusion help to burnish brand reputations and create opportunities for business growth (Banks, 2022), and this may be the calculus Sephora is banking on.

While this chapter has provided a critical assessment of Sephora’s “We Belong to Something Beautiful Campaign,” it has not addressed how consumers respond to and understand the emancipatory and potentially transformative elements of the brand’s messaging. Previous scholarship reports that while consumers may, upon first inspection, be smitten with messages that incorporate “less stereotypical images of women in mainstream media,” most consumers remain critical of beauty messaging and express cynicism in response to the “disingenuous or rhetorical use of feminist concerns” (Taylor et al., 2016). It is possible that consumers may be similarly skeptical of

Sephora's global campaign even as the brand continues to invest in more progressive beauty messaging across its brick-and-mortar locations and in its online storefront. To be sure, brand messaging that is understood to be inauthentic and insincere can lead to backlash and upset among consumers, especially when this brand messaging moves to incorporate social issues and emancipatory messages (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Future work should investigate consumers' aesthetic judgments in response to advertising, namely (Dagalp & Södergren, 2024), how consumers understand and make sense of contemporary beauty messaging, especially as this messaging continues to co-opt more progressive social discourse. Work in this vein might follow women's willingness to act on more progressive beauty messaging, make purchases, and/or map variation in consumers' sense-making strategies. Future work should also consider how diverse and inclusive representations of women in beauty messaging shape our understanding of beauty and body ideals, broadly speaking. Drawing from the language of aesthetic citizenship, scholars might, for example, trace whether and how diverse and inclusive representations of beauty shift consumers' understanding of who is beautiful and what consequences these shifts may have for those who have previously been excluded from representations of beauty. This line of inquiry might also attend more closely to consumer activism in the beauty space, including the means through which consumers coalesce to challenge contemporary beauty messaging and the industry figures who insist on posturing air-brushed and memetic models in their campaign images.

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