



The visible that does not transform: simulated activism, digital aesthetics, and symbolic power in brand culture

Lo visible que no transforma: activismo simulado, estética digital y poder simbólico en la cultura de marca

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes brand activism in digital culture, using the lingerie brand Savage X Fenty, founded by Barbadian singer Robyn Rihanna Fenty, as a case study. The text studies the social inclusion promoted by this and other brands and how visibility does not necessarily imply structural transformation, but rather favors an aesthetic and symbolic strategy within digital capitalism. Through concepts such as simulacrum, aestheticization, aesthetic citizenship, and symbolic consumption, it examines how difference is represented in a spectacular way, but with its disruptive potential deactivated. The text draws on the theories of Baudrillard, Han, Butler, Zafra, Canclini, and Reguillo to show the impact of digital platforms, their algorithms, and transmedia narratives on the configuration of subjectivities, desires, and forms of effective participation. The paper warns that the visibility of diverse bodies, far from questioning the status quo, can reinforce power structures by turning difference into a commodity. In this case, brand activism is shown to be a form of symbolic management of dissent, where politics becomes spectacle. The authors propose rethinking digital communication not only as a channel of representation, but as a space for symbolic contestation with high transformative potential.

Keywords: Digital Communication; Social Inclusion; Body Positive; Aestheticization; Social Networks.

RESUMEN

En este escrito se analiza de forma crítica el activismo de marca en la cultura digital, tomando como caso de estudio la marca de lencería Savage X Fenty, fundada por la cantante barbadense Robyn Rihanna Fenty. El texto estudia la inclusión social promovida por esta y otras marcas y cómo la visibilidad no necesariamente implica una transformación estructural, sino que favorece a una estrategia estética y simbólica dentro del capitalismo digital. A través de conceptos como simulacro, estetización, ciudadanía estética y consumo simbólico, se examina cómo la diferencia es representada de forma espectacular, pero desactivando su potencial disruptivo. El texto se apoya en las teorías de Baudrillard, Han, Butler, Zafra, Canclini y Reguillo con el propósito de mostrar el impacto de las plataformas digitales, sus algoritmos y las narrativas transmedia en la configuración de subjetividades, deseos y formas de participación efectiva. En el escrito se advierte que la visibilidad de los cuerpos diversos, lejos de cuestionar el statu quo, puede reforzar estructuras de poder al convertir la diferencia en mercancía. En este caso el activismo de marca se muestra como una forma de gestión simbólica del disenso, donde lo político se convierte en espectáculo. Los autores proponen repensar la comunicación digital no solo como canal de representación, sino como un espacio de contienda simbólica con alto potencial transformador.

Palabras clave: Comunicación Digital; Inclusión Social; Body Positive; Estetización; Redes Sociales.

INTRODUCTION

Female empowerment, self-love, the LGBT+ community, and other social movements have entered the world of fashion, entertainment, and consumption in general in an impactful and transformative way. Consequently, companies, in order to increase their visibility, impact, and sales, have begun to “aestheticize” diversity to simulate social transformation.

Cocaine chic and double zero size fall out of fashion, and a positive vision of the body that does not take appearance into account begins to be encouraged. Apparently, this openness is beneficial, especially for people in the plus-size group. However, many companies that join the so-called woke movement think only about the commercialization of their products and not about improving their customers' quality of life.

In this regard, Baudrillard (1) explained that aestheticization occurs when the distinction between the real and the simulated is lost, and image and representation become more important than reality itself. This leads to hyperreality, a state in which simulacra (copies without an original) replace the direct experience of the real, and in which seduction and simulation dominate culture. This phenomenon becomes more relevant in the “society of applause,” where people seek recognition through platforms, because algorithms condition both visibility and affectivity, as well as the reach of these discourses. Thus, inclusion is no longer only an editorial or creative decision: it is an algorithmic and symbolic strategy.

In the era of the image, digital communication no longer merely informs; it constructs identities, desires, and legitimacies. The study of these dynamics is key to understanding the new role of brands as symbolic political agents. Within this framework, this article aims to analyze the case of Savage X Fenty, the lingerie brand founded by the Barbadian artist Rihanna, as a paradigmatic example of how brand activism is configured as a typical simulacrum, dialectically contradictory and nuanced in contemporary digital culture.

From an interdisciplinary approach, this article articulates a critical analysis of the visual and narrative discourse deployed by Savage X Fenty, taking as reference theoretical frameworks from aesthetics, the sociology of consumption, gender theory, strategic communication, and digital culture. The study draws on the perspectives of various authors such as Jean Baudrillard, Byung-Chul Han, Judith Butler, Remedios Zafra, Néstor García Canclini, and Rossana Reguillo, among others, with the aim of integrating situated perspectives that broaden understanding of the phenomenon beyond hegemonic frameworks.

DEVELOPMENT

Visual culture, desire, and aestheticization of otherness

The link among communication, aesthetics, and politics in contemporary digital study requires a critical view of the ways in which the visible becomes a tool of symbolic control. Visual culture functions as a device for the production of meaning that shapes desire, regulates otherness, and administers citizen participation through the aestheticization of the political.

Over the years, the Western philosophical tradition has posed a tension between appearance and truth that continues to resonate in the digital era. From classical thinkers such as Plato (2), in his allegory of the cave, comes a warning about the confusion between image and reality, a risk intensified today by algorithmic dynamics that privilege the visible and the spectacular. Baumgarten (3), by founding aesthetics as a discipline of sensory knowledge, opened the field to thinking about the epistemic power of images, but also their instrumentalization.

As Debord (4) had already anticipated in *The Society of the Spectacle*, social life becomes an accumulation of images in which “everything that was directly lived moves away into a representation.” This spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation between people mediated by those images. From this perspective, the spectacle is not a deviation from life but its dominant form in the era of late capitalism, in which appearance replaces conflict and participation is displaced by contemplation and passive flow.

Incorporating dissident bodies into brand visibility—as Savage X Fenty does—does not necessarily imply a symbolic rupture but rather a reorganization of difference within the spectacle. The dissident is aestheticized and celebrated, but only insofar as it does not interrupt the flow of spectacular representation that is functional to the system.

Pardo (5) argues that cultural consumption has ceased to be a form of emancipation and has become a strategy of distraction and critical trivialization. For his part, Han (6,7) maintains that

visual overexploitation, far from revealing the other, neutralizes it: difference becomes a digestible commodity, a domesticated otherness, a diversity compatible with the market. In this framework, the aestheticization of inclusion appears as a miracle of transformation that reinforces the logics of the system by offering it an illusion of change.

The South Korean philosopher explains that neoliberalism turns affects, positivity, and empowerment into subtle forms of control. Transparency, visibility, and positivity are not emancipatory conditions today but normative demands that empty any gesture of symbolic resistance of content. In this context, brands such as Savage X Fenty configure a discourse that celebrates aesthetic inclusion, but they do so from a logic of mandatory visibility that cancels the subversive power of diverse bodies.

The narrative presented by Savage X Fenty, especially in its show broadcast on Amazon Prime Video, can be understood as an extreme example of the aestheticization of the political.⁽⁸⁾ Although the agenda of the Barbadian artist has a greater impact than that of many other artists, an approach still persists in which diversity, inclusion, representation, and empowerment are reconfigured as scenographic elements—signs available for visual montage but whose transformative potential is deactivated.

Each show acts as a node within a broader narrative network that extends to social media, campaigns, collaborations with influencers and personalities within Black culture and the LGBT+ community, viral clips, and physical products.⁽⁸⁾ From a transmedia logic, this narrative universe creates the illusion of a committed, diverse, and revolutionary brand. Nevertheless, what is actually activated is a strategy of aesthetic simulation of change, in which otherness is displayed but does not question the center, and the political is thematized but does not confront power.

The spectacularization of inclusion functions as a strategy of aesthetic reorganization of power, whereby the political becomes a set, storytelling, a choreographic montage. In this sense, Debord (4) warns that the spectacle is not a mere visual resource but the way in which power reproduces itself in societies where capital turns the visible into the sole criterion of legitimacy.

The brand becomes a sort of cultural device that aestheticizes dissent, rendering it spectacular, visually profitable, and emotionally moving, yet structurally innocuous. What is produced is not a rupture but a visual reorganization of difference within the limits of the market. Transgression is permitted as long as it remains photogenic, quantifiable, and monetizable.^(4,6,9)

Thus, Savage X Fenty becomes a transmedia narrative of democratic illusion, where everyone is seen, yet not everyone can decide; where participation is replaced by representative visibility, and the struggle for the redistribution of symbolic power is replaced by the spectacle of the diverse body.

Symbolic consumption and aesthetic citizenship

According to García Canclini^(10,11), consumption should not be reduced to a merely economic practice but should be understood as a form of symbolic production and citizen inscription. This is because, according to the researcher, cultural industries mediate access to the social imaginary and reconfigure forms of political participation in aesthetic and commodified terms.

The aesthetic citizenship proposed by García Canclini is enacted through visual choices, exhibited identities, and causes that are consumed more than lived. In this sense, the brand Savage X Fenty operates as a platform of symbolic inclusion that allows “participating” in discourses of diversity without questioning the structures that sustain exclusion, such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, xenophobia, etc. However, its work somehow supports the Black community, the LGBT+ collective, and body positivity. The visual becomes legitimization: whoever appears, exists; whoever does not appear, disappears from the framework of the representable.

In an attempt to prove its commitment to society through brand activism, Savage X Fenty joins forces with representative figures from Black culture, the queer community, and recognized plus-size models, as well as artists from various parts of the world. Among its guests are personalities such as Lizzo, GloRilla, Gigi Goode, Aaron Rose Phillip, Precious Lee, and Symone, among others. The collaborators, references within contemporary popular culture, made possible the reinforcement of the narrative of inclusion and diversity that the brand seeks to promote.⁽⁸⁾

In this regard, Monsiváis (12) addresses the role of popular culture in the construction of subjectivities by analyzing kitsch as a form of emotional administration of the social, an aesthetic of the excessive and the spectacular that acquires meaning through an excess of image. In this sense, Savage X Fenty—with its choreographed shows, its hyperdiverse cast, and its rhetoric of empowerment—can be understood as a contemporary expression of this political kitsch, where the popular merges with the spectacular to consolidate a symbolic citizenship without friction.

Adding elements along this line, Butler's theory of performativity (13) sees gender as a performance regulated by social norms and reinforced by the cultural apparatus. In the case of Savage X Fenty, this performativity translates into an aesthetic representation of dissent that, while it makes difference visible, also runs the risk of fixing it within symbolic frameworks that neutralize, as has been mentioned, its disruptive power.

Cultural narratives not only represent reality but also produce it, delimiting who can speak, appear, or be desired. From this perspective, the performative inclusion promoted by brands is not innocent: it redefines the margins of what is acceptable and profitable.⁽¹⁴⁾ The phenomenon becomes more evident with other lingerie brands such as Victoria's Secret, which in the years 2000, with its famous fashion shows and "Angel" models, contributed to the dissemination of a very specific and often unattainable ideal of female beauty, which generated body image problems and eating disorders in many women. The pressure to achieve "size 0" and maintain an extremely thin body, promoted by the brand and the popular culture of the time, affected adolescents and young women, generating insecurities and mental health problems.⁽¹⁵⁾

In this new narrative, although those biases are dialectically negated, the problem is still perceived: the body becomes a vehicle for commodified discourses, in which diversity is celebrated as long as it does not question hegemonic structures. The visual fetishism of otherness—racialized bodies, plus-size bodies, trans people, and people with disabilities—is a means of managing difference according to the logic of spectacle, in which dissidence becomes a trend but poses no threat ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Transmedia narratives

This contemporary subjectivity, described according to Broncano (17), is technomediated, since human identity is increasingly defined by the devices and platforms it inhabits. In this context, narrative is not limited to a medium or to linearity; it disperses, adapts, and reconfigures itself across each of the platforms, devices, and languages. This phenomenon, called transmedia narrative, has been co-opted precisely by brands such as Savage X Fenty, which expand their aesthetic-emotional story beyond the runway, colonizing the digital ecosystem with a fragmented yet coherent story related to inclusion, power, and desire.

Robyn Rihanna Fenty already has experience in making an impact on inclusion culture, as her makeup company Fenty Beauty achieved a milestone in the cosmetics industry with the so-called "Fenty Effect": after its launch in 2017 with a line of 40 foundation shades, this range became the new standard for major cosmetics brands by addressing skin tone diversity (18), something unheard of at the time. In fact, to date, it has 50 shades, while traditional brands usually have about half that amount (19).

Savage X Fenty exploits this technomediated configuration by presenting fashion as a visual language of symbolic resistance, in which each body, each garment, and each choreography communicates an emotional narrative. However, this narrative unfolds within the framework of emotional capitalism, where the "self" becomes a product that must be constantly visible, desirable, and likeable (9,20). Here, the problem is especially evident: the political becomes a trend; the intimate becomes storytelling; and the diverse becomes merchandise.

Inclusion, in this case, does not appear as the result of a structural transformation, but rather as a strategy of narrative positioning. Non-normative bodies are welcome and respond to a specific aesthetic if they produce engagement and can be measured in clicks, reactions, and purchases. The "I" shown in the Savage X Fenty narrative is an edited, filtered, and spectacularized "I," whose political legitimacy is conditioned by its capacity to function as profitable visual content.

Public Opinion on Social Media: Between Slacktivism and Parasocial Influence

As noted above, digital platforms not only host content but also shape subjectivities, affect social relations, and reconfigure the conditions of possibility for activism. Currently, public opinion no longer resides exclusively in the traditional deliberative space; instead, it circulates, fragments, and takes shape on Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc. These platforms are the new tools for staging the political, where the visible replaces the debated and the aesthetic substitutes for the structural (21,22,23,24).

The brand Savage X Fenty—with its shows streamed by Amazon, its visual strategy on Instagram, and its presence on TikTok through racialized creators, non-normative bodies, and Afrodiasporic aesthetics—continues to consolidate its position as a symbolic actor in the public sphere. This company does not constitute a traditional institution; nevertheless, it fulfills a discursive function: it narrates, celebrates, and even legitimizes a certain type of inclusion. However, this inclusion is conditioned by the frameworks of consumption, algorithms, and profitable visibility that govern

these platforms.

The digital environment entails a form of pseudo-activism known as slacktivism or couch activism: a kind of symbolic commitment that does not require real action but instead consists in the public display of affective adherence.⁽²⁵⁾ Savage X Fenty embodies this logic by allowing its audiences to “participate” in the cause of inclusion through likes, comments, shares, or the purchase of garments associated with dissident bodies. This dynamic can be read as a democratization of participation, and it also constitutes an algorithmic translation of political desire in which the act of consuming replaces the act of transforming.

According to Zafra (24), subjects symbolically exploit themselves in networks through the constant position of their identity as a visual commodity. Culture turns the desire for recognition into a form of affective precariousness. Thus, when a racialized, trans or plus-size person is celebrated on the Savage X Fenty platforms, what is produced is not a structural transformation, but an affective fetishization of difference within a system that rewards what it can monetize.

For his part, Han (7) has pointed out that this dynamic responds to a logic of positivity and transparency that empties the political of conflictuality. In *The Transparency Society*, the author reinforces that an excess of visibility turns every difference into spectacle. Instead of confronting the structures of exclusion, the system aestheticizes them, turning dissent into an Instagram frame, an inspirational TikTok narrative, or an inclusive parade on Amazon Prime.

The bond that Savage X Fenty establishes with its audience is not merely commercial: it is emotional, symbolic, and based on parasocial relationships, which are unidirectional affective bonds, in this case with a public figure or brand, that allow the subject to feel closeness, identification, and even gratitude toward an entity that does not know them or actually interact with them.⁽²⁶⁾ In this sense, the brand's creator behaves as a figure of symbolic authority who uses a communication model that appears horizontal, facilitating a relationship of trust that reinforces consumption in such a way that empathy is economized to a certain degree.

These interactions are strengthened through campaigns in which the brand “listens” to its consumers, responds to comments, shares customer stories, or includes testimonials from non-normative individuals in its campaigns. This apparent bidirectionality corresponds, as Grunig et al.⁽²⁷⁾ point out, to an asymmetric model, in which the organization retains control of messages under the simulation of dialogue. This is ultimately reproduced in an affective management of dissent: brands “see you,” “celebrate you,” but they do so within an aesthetic framework that does not jeopardize the status quo.

The case of Savage X Fenty is an example of how social media and digital media are arenas where the meanings of inclusion, beauty, empowerment, and difference are negotiated. However, this negotiation does not occur under conditions of symbolic equality because brands start with both structural and financial and algorithmic advantages that allow them to frame the debate in terms favorable to their narrative.⁽²⁸⁾

Digital public opinion becomes an extension of the logic of consumption in that sense, making social causes function as symbolic capital and brands as emotional managers of the political.⁽²⁹⁾ The circulation of diverse bodies, therefore, does not guarantee their integration, but can reinforce their exoticization if it is not accompanied by material transformations. Visibility can become a simulacrum of participation, and symbolic consumption an emotional palliative that alleviates guilt, but does not modify the system.

Political communication and the media: activism as a brand

Political communication ceased to be an exclusive terrain of parties, governments, or traditional leaders. Today, brands actively participate in the production of political meaning, positioning themselves as agents with ethical discourses, social causes, and ideological narratives. The boundary between consumption and citizenship, rating and militancy, is progressively blurred in this new symbolic ecosystem, giving rise to a form of brand activism where the political is managed through aesthetics, storytelling, and affectivity. This phenomenon not only redefines the role of the media but also problematizes the authenticity of discursive commitment in digital capitalism.

Savage X Fenty shows an adoption of strategies typical of charismatic political leadership to consolidate an emotional relationship with its audiences. Through the brand's association with Rihanna—a global, racialized, multimillionaire, and “transgressive” cultural figure—the brand is not only marketing products but also anthropomorphizing its identity, acquiring personality traits, values, and symbolic charisma that generate affective loyalty.

This relationship is an emotionally effective but strategically calculated communication. From the approach of Grunig et al.⁽²⁷⁾, we have been able to question whether this form of interaction

responds to a bidirectional symmetrical public relations model—based on genuine dialogue and mutual feedback—or whether it is an asymmetrical model, in which the organization simulates listening but in reality imposes a closed aesthetic and discursive framework. The brand, apparently, “speaks like you, dresses like you, fights like you,” but its listening is unidirectional: it appropriates collective narratives in order to reorganize them according to its market objectives.

In that sense, the apparent horizontality that Savage X Fenty promotes on its social media and runways is in reality a fiction of proximity with one strategy that, without ceding narrative control, seeks empathy to generate engagement. The anthropomorphization of the brand allows it to acquire symbolic agency and operability as a political-emotional subject that participates in public conversation without being interpellated.

The intervention of brands in the political field usually occurs through a subtle process: the deployment of soft power, which, according to Nye (30), is the power of symbolic seduction that legitimizes discourses, normalizes values, and guides conduct without the need for direct imposition. According to Foucault (31), power as a dispersed and productive relationship; according to Bourdieu (29), symbolic capital as the capacity to influence the social space based on prestige, visibility, and cultural recognition.

Savage X Fenty exercises this aesthetic symbolic power by appropriating social causes—body, racial, and gender diversity—and reorganizing them into a coherent social apparatus that makes them more profitable and desirable. Activism is not set aside; it is redesigned to be integrated into the consumption circuit. Struggles become collections; difference becomes trend; political demands become choreography.

This process ends up being effective because it appeals to the sensitivity of the contemporary viewer who is trained to respond emotionally to narratives of empowerment, representation, and justice. However, this emotion is channeled toward consumption, not toward action: the T-shirt with the slogan is bought, but the system that makes that slogan necessary is not questioned. The power of the brand therefore lies in the conversion of dissent into a style, in the administration of dissensus through aesthetics, and in the consolidation of a symbolic present that does not require rational justification, because it operates at the affective level.(32,33,34)

The brand activism that Savage X Fenty embodies is not a peripheral phenomenon; it constitutes a key manifestation of the new market-mediated political communication, in which brands replace institutions in the production of meaning and conflict is replaced by spectacle as a form of representing the political.

CONCLUSIONS

The critical exploration of the Savage X Fenty case within the framework of communication, technology, and digital culture allows us to observe how visual inclusion, far from being a single emancipatory gesture in itself, can operate as a sophisticated technology of aesthetic control within the parameters of contemporary capitalism, where showing what is diverse does not necessarily imply transforming what is unequal. Visibility can be employed as a tool of symbolic neutralization, where otherness is accepted only to the extent that it can be made profitable, sterilized, and aligned with the imaginaries of emotional consumption.

Digital space can no longer be thought of solely as a channel, because it has become a symbolic fabric that produces desires, identities, and forms of subjectivation. Platforms do not only monetize discourses: they modulate them. It is in this process that the political is transformed into content, the structural becomes aestheticized, and dissent becomes profitable.

Hence, it is relevant to think about other forms of cultural communication that are not limited to representing diversity as a visual product but instead commit to dialogic, ethical, and transformative processes. This implies going beyond the framework of decorative inclusion to think about communicative practices that redistribute voice, destabilize centers of attention, and challenge market logics. A truly critical communication goes beyond demonstrating difference: it works so that this difference is heard, valued, and structurally integrated.

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