



I am living my life, not buying a lifestyle.

Every August this profound statement by American conceptual artist, Barbara Kruger runs like a refrain through my mind. Why during August and why this phrase? Because August is Women's Month and because, instead of using this time around Women's Day to celebrate the lives of women, we have turned it into a lifestyle promotion campaign.

With each post on social media promoting another Women's Day / Month sale, another spoil-yourself special offer, another discount on beauty treatments, break-away weekends, wine tastings or dazzling deal on diamonds, dinners and days at the spa, I want to scream:

We are women of worth not a consumers curating lifestyles!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

In our consumer society, Women's Month has become a time to market and sell a notion of womanhood that is aspirational, self-improving and in need of many, many products, services and experiences to validate our being.

We have, in the grip of consumerism, turned Women's Day into a self(ie)-indulgent, feel-good festival fit only for furthering our meticulously curated personas on Facebook and Instagram.

Instead of challenging stereotypical gender roles, inequality and violence against women, this commemorative month has become a way to reinforce an idealised feminine icon – the one to be pampered, the one that loves shopping and shoes, the one that defines herself through what she wears, the one for whom the meaning of life lies in what she and her family accomplish, own, drive and who they socialise with.

Thanks to the commercialisation of Women's Month, we are disregarding not only its origins but also the real-life, daily struggle, the depth of disparity and the diversity of the majority of South African women's lived experiences. And here am not only referring to the destitute and defeated among us.

From women in leadership roles in public and private organisations to teachers to healthcare workers to shop

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assistants to entrepreneurs in malls and on the street; from married to divorced and single mothers of all ages, we all find ourselves in a political, social and economic system that presents women with many challenges.

Despite the fact that these deeply entrenched gender and social inequalities and its devastating societal consequences are discussed during every Women's Month, no real change seems to happen.

One reason is the ability of the market and the media to hi-jack and 'domesticate' ideas and circumstances that expose the underbelly of society.

And that is what lies at the heart of Barbara Kruger's art.

Most of her works are made up of black-and-white photographs, overlaid with white-on-red catchphrases that reference cultural constructions of power, identity, consumerism, and sexuality. Her works examine gender stereotypes with phrases like *I shop therefore I am*, *Money can buy you love* and pasted over an image of American socialite Paris Hilton, *Just be yourself. 100% Natural*.

Kruger emphasises the images and words we use every day but which according to [Ron Rosenbaum](#) of the Smithsonian Magazine, have "(i)n a virtual world, (become) virtually weightless, dematerialised". "The more words wash over us, the less we understand them. And the less we are able to recognise which ones are influencing us—manipulating us subtly, invisibly, insidiously". Kruger's art, he says, "rematerialises words, so that we can read them closely, deeply."

And this for me, is the link with self-care. Being keenly aware of who we are and what the world we live in looks like, is where our path to social wellbeing starts.

When we, like the artist, evaluate the words and images we consume and create, in this case around Women's Month, we can identify the subtle, self-serving and subversive influences from outside that do not serve who we truly are in relation to other people. When next we, women and men alike, are confronted with a Facebook ad for a Women's Day discount, pause and let's ask ourselves:

- What values are expressed in the way I think about Women's Month /Day?
- Am I celebrating Women's Day like a Valentine's Day, or Mother's Day or Christmas?
- Is my focus on individual self-care, personal development and empowerment only or do I also take a stand in solidarity with women in my inner circle, in my community, in my country?
- Am I honouring women who juggle family, work and community or am I buying into an image of the 'ideal', ever-consuming woman as dictated by the marketplace?
- Am I spellbound by celebrity social media posts or inspired by women that struggle to survive life in ways that do not make for scintillating selfies?
- Am I living my life or buying a lifestyle?

To all the women who, by doing ordinary things every day, achieve extraordinary things, thank you! Without you the rest of us would not be able to survive and thrive. And here I am speaking of teachers in particular.

Keep well and keep in touch

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