

Analysis of Feminism in Consumerism Research

Yujia Zhu

*School of Media, Communication and Sociology, University of Leicester, Leicester, United Kingdom, LE1 7RH,
yz585@student.le.ac.uk*

Abstract: On June 12, 2020, a self-made talent show featuring women was shown for the first time on Mango TV. Thirty female performers who were born before 1990 were cast in the program. *Sisters Who Make Waves* is one of several internet variety programs dominated by youthful superstars that create a portrayal of numerous successful sister identities. From a feminist standpoint, these internet films and television series now portray more mature and autonomous female characters. It was found that women who write and make art use their own voices more and more. The independent pictures of the sisters have a lot of cultural symbolism, and these new pictures help the audience imagine a community. But people need to be aware of how the commercialization of new media affects women. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the evolution of the relationship between consumerism and feminism, as well as how feminist research influences and promotes consumer and marketing research in practice. Therefore, the most recent literature review will be used to cover the history. The results show that in terms of marketing, feminist consumerism makes commercial sense. It builds brand loyalty and increases sales by promoting a broader consumer culture model of dissent.

Keywords: Feminism, Consumerism, Marketing Research, Critiques.

1. Introduction

An article on CNN.com called “Women: Saviors of the World Economy?” talked about how people are paying more attention to what women can buy and how much they can earn, which comes at a time when popular culture is filled with discourses that relate women's independence to consumerism [1]. Women's new roles in society are being shaped by the feminization of consumerism. Especially in recent years, the rise of feminism has influenced consumerism in many ways.

But there hasn't been a lot of research that combines what we already know to point us in a new direction of how feminism has an effect on the research of consumerism. Because of this, a thorough study is needed to look at how the relationship between feminism and consumerism has changed over time. A literature review of past studies is used to combine it with the most recent research on consumerism, like comparing a case study on the Dove Real Beauty Campaign to Grassroots Activism, to update the feminist analysis in the current research on consumerism. This paper presents the understanding that feminist perspectives play a prominent role in consumerism research and have given people many insights into critical marketing studies. Firstly, it will analyze the development of the connection between consumerism and feminism. After that, feminism and

feminist research's effect and promotion of consumer and marketing research in practice will be clarified. In particular, how new research approaches for transformative research in consumer behavior have been created. Finally, it will emphasize the role of feminist consumerism in marketing and consumer research. Therefore, the paper provides a strong reference for future related research. It will be of great help to people who currently study feminism in consumerism.

2. The Evolution of the Relationship Between Consumerism and Feminism

2.1. Concept of Consumerism and Feminism

As Scott reiterates, consumerism can be defined as a way of thinking about the economy and society that encourages people to keep buying and using goods and services. Consumerism encourages people to buy and use goods and services that go beyond what they need[2].

Feminism is an approach to gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex, and sexuality that looks at issues of equality and fairness from different perspectives[3]. There are four waves of feminism. The first emerged as a powerful force in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The iterations of feminism were respectively represented by the women's 1960s and 90s rights movement, mid-90s post-colonial and post-modern thinking, while the fourth wave is in the air due to the changing times [4].

As can be seen, the consumerism and feminism discussed in this paper lie in consumerism's focus on buying and collecting goods as a way to show identity, work toward the common good, express feminist ideas, and seek personal pleasure and social praise.

2.2. The Evolution of the Relationship Between Consumerism and Feminism

As Mejia reveals, consumption is one of the most appreciated social and economic orders in existence at present. In her statements, as a result of consumerism, a value system centered on purchasing power has emerged, favoring those with more money to spend over those with fewer resources[5]. Currently, the world of global consumerism, in which we participate, is at odds with feminist principles.

Women are powerful as consumers. It is reported that the majority of purchases are driven by women [6]. According to Silverstein and Sayre, women are in charge of 70-80 percent of all consumer purchasing decisions[7]. It is further reflected in Cole and Drossley's research that "feminism opposes consumerist practices"[1].

Advertising plays an extremely indispensable role in people's daily lives, which is more or less supposed to impact on them. However, Mantha points out that for years, advertisements have been the enemy of feminism and self-esteem [8]. As can be seen, there are many women who will bow their heads and be ashamed that they are not slender enough to throw their fried chicken and hamburgers in the trash because they see a model with a brightly dressed and good-looking body in an advertisement. For how many times, as if beauty in society has become a unified standard until feminists stand up to break people's stereotypes about women. Specifically, in Victoria's Secret commercial, a dozen slim, clear-skinned women in bras with the unironic phrase "I Love My Body" were the embodiment of the "fat positivity" movement, which was packaged into a more palatable "body positivity" [8]. Cole and Drossley identify the popular notion and the trend of expressing independence through consumption and increased depictions of women asserting their individuality via consumption [1].

3. Feminism and the Ways in Which Feminist Research Influences and Promotes Consumer and Marketing Research in Practice

3.1. How Feminist Theory and Practice Have Impacted Our Perception of Gendered Consumption

In the 1970s, Catterall, Maclaran, and Stevens' research on gender focused on two main topics: how gender is portrayed in advertising and how gender identification can be used to understand, predict, and understand customer behavior [9].

Catterall, Maclaran, and Stevens claim that some viewpoints in consumer behavior research in the 1980s were influenced by the growth of feminist gender theory and the research methodologies used in other fields [9]. In the 1980s, there was a shift from production to consumption. Many of the papers that Finch assessed are included in the e-special, according to Dashper and Roth [10, 11]. Nevertheless, only those from the 1980s are included, and a more contemporary work exemplifies both continuity and change. The debate over whether or not to include women—or gender, as it was referred to—in class analysis and the sociology of the professions, as well as attempts to develop new theoretical frameworks and particular publications that assess the field's advancement.

3.2. Consumer Research is Critiqued by Feminists

Much of the criticism stems from the controversy over objectivity. Liberal feminism, which accepts current notions of objectivity, offers the most acceptable criticism. In agreement with liberal feminism, Harding argues that errors in objectivity indicate a correctable failure to fully adhere to proper scientific methodology [12].

The second criticism comes from individuals who feel that there are socially constructed differences between men and women. It is hard to believe that women could be subjects of knowledge but not objects of knowledge, that they could be known but not knowers, because objectivity has always been associated with men and subjectivity with women. Various feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science argue that dominant knowledge practices disadvantage women by excluding them from research, depriving them of epistemic authority, demeaning “feminine” cognitive styles, producing theories about women that portray them as inferior or significant only in the ways they serve male interests, producing theories about social phenomena that obscure the activities and interests of women or gendered power relations, and producing knowledge that is useless to those in subordinate positions are all examples of sexism [13].

3.3. How Feminist Perspectives Open up New Possibilities for Critique and New Avenues for Transformative Research in Consumer Behavior

Firat argues the definitions of masculinity and femininity have become so ambiguous that dividing people based on their gender identification is inefficient and merely helps to reify sex differences [14]. Feminist critiques focus on how marketers manipulate female consumers through advertising images that create stereotypes about women and foster unequal power relationships [9].

The postfeminist imagination is all about how consumerism and feminism come together and how feminism is turned into wants and identities that can be bought [9].

The relationship between gender and consumption is a major focus for consumer researchers. However, in our attempts to understand this link in a cultural framework, we neglect important interrelationships between production and reproduction. Hill and Kanwalroop have pointed out a dearth of studies on the gendered elements of consumer poverty [15]. Significant proportions of the poor are lone parents, primarily mothers, and lone parenting is the leading source of family poverty [16]. Reproductive labor (childbearing, childrearing, and child care) is no longer a legal foundation

for submitting welfare claims as a result of policies and efforts promoting employment in lieu of welfare [17]. The underlying notion is that reproductive labor is devoid of value, especially in certain 'family' structures. The inclination to emphasize paid work is one of the causes of the stigmatization of single mothers, which is well-documented. Single mothers have to deal with the problems that come with working hard on a small family budget, as well as the negative attitudes and actions of other people. The effect on how people see themselves, especially in relation to stigmatization, and the impact on family dynamics have yet to be thoroughly researched. Through diverse consumption techniques, for instance, low-income families can cover or camouflage their poverty from others, and parents can strive to conceal their limited money inside the family.

4. The Impact of Feminist Consumerism on Marketing and Consumer Research

George talks about consumer feminism in *The death of consumer feminism: will it ever happen?* Consumer feminism encourages women to put each other down in a race to the top because it is rigid, materialistic, and one-sided [18].

Meanwhile, Heller clarifies feminist consumerism as using language and imagery that our culture associates with feminist ideas and aspirations to market something that could be completely unrelated to those [19].

Take the case study of the Dove Real Beauty Campaign as an example, which is a corporate project that claims to fight constricting feminine beauty standards and advocates for a more democratic definition of beauty [21]. The campaign was launched in 2004, after Dove realized that an increasing number of individuals were unsatisfied with their appearance and body image. Real Beauty was inspired by a Dove poll of over 3,000 women in 10 countries. The findings of the poll revealed the disturbing fact that only 2% of women feel themselves are beautiful. Dove recognized an opportunity to encourage these ladies to view beauty in a new light and to address the widespread insecurity concerns that many women face [20]. Even though the Dove campaign challenges the most important parts of beauty ideology's narrow beauty ideals, as the theorists point out, ideology is complicated. Women shouldn't be tricked into chasing after beauty. Beauty norms work conceptually when they are internalized, justified, and given social legitimacy. In order to compensate for the hierarchical character of beauty ideals, the ideology of beauty maintains that any woman can and should feel pretty. This is accomplished by portraying beauty as a democratic gender good comparable to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness [21].

It was found that grassroots activity is a more substantial way to attack beauty standards in a way that goes against the mainstream [21]. The example of grassroots fat activists shows how PPPO criticizes the beauty market in a way that goes against what most people think has a big impact on building communities and helping women find their own identities, even though it doesn't reach many people.

The two approaches to feminist practice, while both concerned with the notion of feminine beauty, are vastly different. Feminist consumerism is at odds with grassroots feminist efforts to develop community and raise awareness, and here is where the conflict lies. Commodity purchases take precedence over more ambitious aims, such as de-emphasizing the significance of beauty in women's lives, expressing unpleasant feelings, or confronting male attitudes toward female attractiveness, in feminist consumerism [22]. Because of this, feminist consumerism strives to hide and downplay systematic and institutionalized gender injustices, which are difficult to address but may also lead to unpleasant emotional links with companies. Feminist consumerism makes sense for marketing because it fits into a larger pattern of consumer culture that encourages disagreement to build brand loyalty and boost sales.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes by demonstrating the connection between feminism and consumerism and pointing out how feminist theory and practice have changed how gendered consumption is understood. Certain amounts of feminism may be met through consumerism, notwithstanding certain feminist critiques of consumer research. In the end, feminist viewpoints bring both fresh opportunities for criticism and new directions for transformational consumer behavior research. This essay serves as another example of the rise of feminist consumerism in the marketplace. The lack of adequate information in the resources already available affects the description of the text. Future research will require constant updating to keep pace with technological advancements.

References

- [1] Cole, N. L. and Drossley, A. D. (2009) *On Feminism in the Age of Consumption*. Available at: https://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu/newsletters/11-1/cole_crossley.htm (Accessed: 20 June 2022).
- [2] Scott, M. (2017) *What You Need To Know About Consumerism*. Available at: <https://swiftmoney.com/blog/what-you-need-to-know-about-consumerism/> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).
- [3] Day, L. (2016) *What Is Feminism?* Available at: <https://wgs.eku.edu/what-feminism-0> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).
- [4] Rampton, M. (2015) *Four Waves of Feminism*. Available at: <https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism> (Accessed: 22 June 2022).
- [5] Mejia, M. (2019) *MEJIA: Feminism in conflict with consumerism confronts our values*. Available at: <https://dailytargum.com/article/2019/03/feminism-in-conflict-with-consumerism-confronts-our-values> (Accessed: 24 June 2022).
- [6] Nelson, A. (2019) *Women Drive Majority of Consumer Purchasing and It's Time to Meet Their Needs*. Available at: <https://www.inc.com/amy-nelson/women-drive-majority-of-consumer-purchasing-its-time-to-meet-their-needs.html> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).
- [7] Silverstein, M. J. and Sayre, K. (2009) *The Female Economy*. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2009/09/the-female-economy> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).
- [8] Mantha, B. R. (2017) *PSA: Your Girl-Power Consumerism Isn't Feminism*. Available at: <https://thefinancialdiet.com/psa-girl-power-consumerism-isnt-feminism/> (Accessed: 24 June 2022).
- [9] Catterall M, Maclaran P, Stevens L. (2006) 'The Transformative Potential of Feminist Critique in Consumer Research', *Advances in consumer research*, 33, pp. 1-5.
- [10] Dashper, K. and Roth, S. (2016) 'Sociology in the 1980s: the rise of gender (and intersectionality)', *Sociology*, 50 (6), pp.1-15.
- [11] Finch, J. (1993) 'Conceptualising gender', in Morgan, D. and Stanley, L. (eds) *Debates in Sociology*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- [12] Harding, S. (1987) 'Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?', in *Feminism and Methodology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1-14.
- [13] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2020) *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-epistemology/> (Accessed: 24 June 2022).
- [14] Firat, A. F. (1994) 'Gender and Consumption: Transcending the Feminine?', in Costa, J. (ed.) *Gender Issues and Consumer Behavior*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 205-228.
- [15] Hill, R. P. and Kanwalroop, K. D. (1999) 'Gender Inequity and Quality of Life: A Macromarketing Perspective', *Journal of Macromarketing*, 19 (2), 40-152.
- [16] Field, F. (1996) *Stakeholder Welfare*. London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit.
- [17] Boyer, K. (2003) 'At Work, At Home? New Geographies of Work and Care-giving under Welfare Reform in the US', *Space and Polity*, 7 (1), 75-86.
- [18] George, K. (2019) *The death of consumer feminism: will it ever happen?* Available at: <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/the-death-of-consumer-feminism-will-it-ever-happen/> (Accessed: 30 June 2022).
- [19] Heller, M. (2016) *Feminist Consumerism is Goddamn Confusing*. Available at: <https://meredithheller.wordpress.com/2016/06/08/feminist-consumerism-is-goddamn-confusing/> (Accessed: 22 June 2022).
- [20] Rogers, E. (2021) *Why Dove's Real Beauty Campaign Was So Successful*. Available at: <https://www.liveonakcommunications.com/post/why-dove-s-real-beauty-campaign-was-so-successful>. (Accessed: 2 July 2022).

- [21] Johnston, J. and Taylor, J. (2008) 'Feminist Consumerism and Fat Activists: A Comparative Study of Grassroots Activism and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign', *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 33(4), pp. 941-966.
- [22] Sklair, L. (2001) *The Transnational Capitalist Class*. Oxford: Blackwell.