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## Feminism: I'm Lovin' It

### The Implications and Challenges of Feminist Rhetoric in Advertising

#### Introduction:

Since the women's movement, feminism has gradually been adopted by advertisers as a tool with which they can garner attention and sell products. The long history of gender in advertising has raised the question: can advertisers utilize feminism in a way that is equally beneficial to their interests and the movement itself?

As ideologies and social structures are rarely black and white, the answer to that question cannot be answered conclusively. To say, that the merger of these two seemingly conflicting ideologies engenders a positive trajectory for the image of women in media, is to ignore the tendency of capitalism to coopt ideology for its own benefit.

However, to say the overall effect of this merger has resulted in a negative net effect for feminism and women at large, is to ignore the massive strides feminist media has taken in the last 50 years. The territory that has been won for feminist ideology in media is undeniably impressive and must not be relinquished.

Consumerism and advertising has an unwavering objective. That objective is the sale of products. Feminism must tailor itself to this objective if it wants to keep the space it has won within the current media framework. This will result in the compromise of some ideals, however, it may also result in a positive net effect for the feminist movement. Feminists must demand,

with use of their buying power, that the ideologies being sold are not the cooptation of feminism for the sole benefit of profit, but instead that they are a merger of equal benefit and compromise.

This paper will draw from several areas of study such as, commodity feminism, post-feminist ideology, and the political economy of feminism, and will analyze several historical instances of popular feminism as well as contemporary examples of feminist advertising campaigns. It will use established theory and recent events to decipher the complex relationship between capitalism and women's liberation and the tug-of-war between cooptation and adaptation.

## II. Literature Review:

The literature on the subject of feminist advertising mostly supports one of two conclusions. The first being that while feminism's debut in popular media is not perfect it has had a positive net effect for women and feminism as a whole. The second view that is supported by the literature is that feminism has been coopted to sell products, and has been diluted and manipulated which ultimately harms women. These two conflicting views represent the raging debate over the instrumentalization of feminism by popular media.

Erving Goffman's work analyzes gender displays in advertisements finding that men and women are portrayed differently in advertisements. He found that the differences were not based in biology but instead in gender stereotypes. He found that women were far more likely to be portrayed in ways that reinforced their subordination to men and masculinity. He argues that these unnatural poses have become naturalized, and that we have stop questioning the dynamic they represent. He argues that advertisers use this ignorance to their advantage, as gender is one of the easiest and most effective visuals to display in ads (Goffman 1979).

Robert Goldman argues that ads serve to maintain and produce the images that perpetuate the relationship between consumption and ideology. He argues that deconstructing ads can serve as a method of deciphering the cultural hegemonies that exist in consumer culture. His article claims that we don't only consume products, but that we also consume signs. Goldman shows that the signs are more valuable to capitalism in the long run than are the products it sells (Goldman 1992).

Goldman introduced the notion of commodity feminism in 1992. He explains that this was the attempt by advertisers to reconcile their brand with the demands of the feminist movement. To do this the advertisers must marry the consumption of their products with the ideals of feminism (Goldman 1992). If you take this argument further, it has been argued that commodity feminism is merely a guise to hide a neo-liberal economic agenda while presenting advertisers as champions of women's rights. This brand of feminism has no real power in subverting patriarchy. It instead compels women to internalize oppressive ideals in order to fuel consumerism (McRobbie 2008). Female depiction in advertisements has shifted in recent years from being passive objects to independent sexual subjects. However, these sexual subjects are still acting for the benefit of male sexual pleasure. Women have been taught to internalize their own objectification (Gill 2007, Gill 2009, Gill 2012).

The previous arguments attribute the acceptance of this change to the post-feminist ideology that prevails. However, it can also be attributed to a new ideology called, "enlightened sexism" (Douglas 2010). Douglas argues that, "Enlightened sexism is a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism — indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved — so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women" (Douglas: 2010: 10).

Enlightened sexism she argues is responsible for the emergence of anti-feminist images on TV, and in ads, being portrayed as acceptable (Douglas 2010).

However, the other side of this debate is quite different. Many scholars argue that the presence of feminism in advertising and mainstream media is beneficial to the movement as a whole. In her article about the financial viability of feminist magazines, Enbeau argues that the “sex sells” marketing staple can be utilized for women’s benefit. Her article tracks instances when sex has been used to sell or attract a feminist audience. She argues that sex can sell not only products but also feminist ideals. The article offers evidence that sexual images of women are not inherently anti-feminist, as they can in some instances serve the greater cause and promote gender equality (Enbeau 2010). Other scholars argue that the presence of a feminist message no matter how watered down can bring mass audiences of listeners back to the original feminist message and can be a positive force for the movement (Hains 2013).

Some of the main platforms that are used to support the idea that feminism can be mainstream without compromising its values is Ms. Magazine. The magazine showed that as long as there was an audience of consumers who united around feminism, there was a market for advertisers, and they were willing to tailor their message to a feminist media platform (Farrell 1998). However, Farrell concedes that while Ms. Magazine was an important step for feminism, it was a type of feminism that was based in individual, self-realization, and ultimately, consumerism (Farrell 1998: 197).

While Ms. Magazine espoused disdain for sexism, it could be found within its pages. Ferguson, Hicks, Kreshel, and Tinkham (1990) found that the magazine promoted many images that were considered harmful to women. In particular, they found that women were portrayed as sex objects. This article serves to refute the claim that Ms. Magazine was a simple example of

successful popular consumer feminism as it promotes anti-feminist messages (Ferguson et al. 1990).

One area of the debate focuses on the reaction of women to commodity feminism. Several studies show that women are not passive consumers of media, but in fact bring feminist critique to their viewing of commodity feminism. These studies show that women appreciate the attempt by companies to expand definition of beauty and promote feminist ideals. However, they understand that these ideas are not subversive because they perpetuate the idea that women's value is based on appearance (Scott and Cloud 2008, Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2014).

### III. Cooptation and Compromise

The emergence of feminism as a mode of product promotion has come with obstacles. Reform ideologies often conflict with established economic and political structures. The advertising and consumer ideology is dependent on the implementation of desires in order to sell products. This means that a human at peace with himself is not going to buy products to correct his current situation. Therefore, insecurities must be created and dreams must be instilled in him that then products can help him mediate and achieve. Historically, these desires are founded in the perpetuation of gender norms (Goffman 1979, Goldman 1992). As feminism works to abolish such gender roles it seems to be at odds with consumerism. Feminists and advertisers have had to implement strategies to circumnavigate this impasse. They do this in one of two ways. The first is a compromise. They sacrifice some of their goals as feminists in order to survive in this form of media. The second method is a manipulation of feminist goals. The following sections will explore these two strategies in order to determine if either is better for women as a whole, or if both compromise the integrity of the women's movement.

## *Compromise*

As feminist ideology attempts to find a mode of transportation into mainstream culture it faces numerous obstacles. The popular mediums are at best incompatible with pure feminist ideology, and at worst extremely hostile to feminist ideals. The conflict has to be reconciled in both production, and for the viewer at the time of consumption. Feminists often choose to compromise some of their goals in order to get their larger message out into popular media channels. This conundrum and compromise is seen with many feminist magazines. *Bust Magazine* was started in the mid-1990s, and promoted itself as a progressive women's magazine. It was eager to set itself apart from the women's magazines of its time. *Bust* describes itself as, "Hip, humorous, and honest, *BUST* is a cheeky celebration of all things female and a trusted authority on up-and-coming trends among discerning, educated, and culturally aware women" (*Bust* 2016). *Bust* is an excellent example of a magazine that is dependent on generating revenue from popular advertisers. Enbeau tells how, "[*Bust*] uses sex appeals in advertising to stay financially solvent. These sex-positive and sex-radical ads present one example of feminism using sex to resist hegemonic powers and establish itself through popular culture" (Enbeau 2010: 65). Ads like these that incorporate traditionally non-feminist ideals like sex appeal often work to equate it with choice and empowerment narrative. They portray women as sexual subjects with agency. They also seek to make sex appeal politically revolutionary. "In the case of *Bust* ads, menstrual activism, fair labor practices, animal rights, reproductive rights, and antiwar agendas are made sexy" (Enbeau 2010: 64). *Bust* ads also attempt to be subversive by being more inclusive of non-traditional sex appeal. "This strategy is revealed through sex appeals for plus-size clothing and provocative personal ads that promote diverse sexual identities" (Enbeau 2010: 64). So while sex is often seen by many feminists to exist in a patriarchal power structure that

can't be subversive without first dismantling that structure, this illustration shows that, "Sex can also be tied to ideological commitments of social change media, complicating the use of sex, and considering how feminists can appropriate sex to reinforce feminist ideology" (Enbeau 2010: 64). Third-wave feminism can be characterized by a celebration of individual choice, included in which is the the celebration of female sexuality. Waters calls this celebration the, "Third wave's emphatic valorization of female sexual pleasure" (Waters 2007: 252). From a third wave lens the portrayal of women as sexual subjects for the consumption of other women in these magazines is in itself subversive of patriarchal norms. In traditional patriarchy women are objects for the consumption of men. This article claims that by using the advertising power of sex appeal magazines with a feminism ideology can not only generate revenue, but also harness sex appeal into a feminist tool.

While many argue that this is detrimental to the feminist project, others argue that it is not only necessary to ensure a place in capitalistic media but also that it does not compromise the movement with the severity that was predicted. Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead found through a focus group that even young women raised on this compromise feminism brought to their consumption of it a feminist critique. They state that, "Young women positively predisposed to feminism exhibit notable critical capacities and political consciousness, even in a culture marked by post-feminist individualism" (Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2014: 17). This argument makes the point that resistance to this "compulsory beauty" (Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2014: 6) can occur without total boycott of images that promote this idea. They contend, "That resistance to the notion of 'compulsory beauty' can occur at the level of feelings, ideas, and practices, while still involving awareness of how resistance to a dominant beauty ideology is cycled back into marketing campaigns" (Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2014: 6). Scholars of

this school of thought agree that in order to fully understand the message and its effects we have to examine the reaction to it. Women are not passive viewers but instead they bring critical thought to their analysis of these images. It is important, argues Malson, that we not forgo this lens of analysis. Malson argues that, “By focusing analysis on women’s interpretations of and relationships to these images (where women are thus understood as active readers/viewers), the possibilities... of feminist resistance and critical othering of (post-feminist) media images of women (rather than only identification/aspiration and ‘effect’)” (Malson et al. 2010).

An argument in favor of what is sometimes call coopted feminism is that a pro-woman narrative, even if it is not subversive, introduces viewers to feminist ideas and leads them to real feminism. In her article Hains shows us that just because the feminist ideals of Riot Grrrls was coopted into the mainstream by Spice girls, it had positive effects for the feminist movement on a large scale. She argues that, “The co-opted version of the Riot Grrrls’ philosophy filled an unexpected function, bringing feminist rhetoric— however tempered down—to a new audience, one younger than the Riot Grrrls with their edgy and difficult content could reach” (Hains 2014: 44). She states that, “Even though we may resent commodity feminism’s commercial imperative, this study indicates that alongside the problematic content found everywhere in mass media...it can also introduce basic feminist ideas at an early age...Some commodity feminist texts may even leave a genealogical trail that some children can later follow back to its source” (Hains 2014: 45). This article argues that introducing a sort of imperfect feminism to younger women via commercial means can act as a hook to get these women to join the feminist movement later in life. Therefore, these imperfect images serve the feminist movement even though they are not themselves subversive.



The above studies introduce the idea that commodity feminism is not a zero sum game. The effects of commercial feminism are not black and white. While many of the images are not subversive, the argument goes that, they are not necessarily anti-feminist. They can serve the movement in various ways. It also argues that we must not view women as passive consumers of these images. Women, we have seen, bring their own brand of feminist critical thought to these images. Therefore, they are able to separate the good intentions of these images from actual feminist progress. They are able understand that these images are the best that can be offered in the current framework of media and that establishing a place in the area of media is important, even if the feminist images that can be offered are imperfect.

### *Cooptation*

What Goldman describes as “commodity feminism” (Goldman 1992) is according to Rosalind Gill, “an attempt to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism whilst simultaneously domesticating its critique of advertising and the media ... It is found in adverts that attempt to articulate a rapprochement between traditional femininity and characteristics which are coded as feminist goals; independence, career success, financial autonomy” (Gill 2007: 4). Advertisers seek to reframe the gender roles that feminists rejected as empowering. According to Gill, crop tops not only represent femininity but also sexual power. Sex sells, but apparently so does feminism so why not combine the two? McRobbie argues that consumer culture has coopted feminism by replacing traditional female needs like a man and a family with product needs thus promoting consumption as a means of self-fulfillment. She warns against what she see as the, “Instrumentalization of feminism as a source of innovation and dynamism for consumer culture” (McRobbie 2008: 548). Gill agrees that this has happened, and expands on

the idea by connecting it to the sexualization of young women. She states that, “The major contemporary shift in the sexual representation of women: the construction of a young, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is forever ‘up for it’: the midriff... operating playfully in a sexual marketplace that is presented as egalitarian or actually favorable to women” (Gill 2007: 5). The cooptation of the movement changed the lens through which gender inequality, and the oppression of women was viewed. As Gill says, “Not only are women objectified, as they were before, but through sexual subjectification they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen” (Gill 2007: 11). Sexual objectification has been reframed in the same way that lipstick and crop tops have. To make this work the discourse has to be focused on the notion of choice. The idea being that when one chooses to perform gender and play into traditional gender dynamics they lose their negative implications. The goal was to liberate women from the patriarchy but instead women have gone from private to public property. All it took was deciding that sexual objectification is empowering and reframing the oppression faced by women as a positive product of choice.

The reality looks very different than the message of empowerment promoted in advertisements. While the women in the ads might find power in self-sexualization real women certainly do not. Infanger, Rudman, and Sczesny found that women are penalized for self-sexualization. They state that, “Just as agentic women vying for leadership roles are penalized with a dominance penalty without displaying overt signs of dominance, so, too, are women who enjoy self-sexualization” (Infanger, Rudman, Sczesny 2016: 121). The root of these sanctions is power based. It was found that, “Women who use their sexuality as a means of power suffer backlash because they are perceived as a threat to the gender status quo” (Infanger, Rudman,

Sczesny 2016: 121). Not only are ads that promote sexualization false advertising, they are actively encouraging women to behave in ways that will disadvantage them in order to sell products.

Another problem with the empowerment idea that is promoted through ads is that it takes the focus of feminism away from the societal level and focuses it on the individual. Gill says, “It ties us back into an individualistic framing of the issues around gender, sex and power – as if it is something that is assessed at the individual level rather than discussed as a social good” (Gill 2012: 743). Feminism and female empowerment become an individual accessory that women can purchase and not a social movement that results in a positive net effect for women of all backgrounds. Bust Magazine is an excellent example of this. While, Bust Magazine has been praised by many as welcome relief from the onslaught of negative images in other women’s magazines, it has received criticism on many occasions for being anti-feminist. In a controversial 2006 issue, Bust featured “fashionable feminists.” The article bemoaned the proliferation of Birkenstocks within the feminist movement. It went so far as to compare them to burqas. The argument being that the forced denial of fashion that feminists were demanding was in the same vein of oppression as burqas. (Bust, 2006). This is a classic example of third wave, commodity feminism in action. Groeneveld argues that, “BUST readers are constructed as hip feminist women whose consumption of fashion may be read as a symbol of their status as ‘liberated’” (Groeneveld, 2009: 181). Groeneveld goes on to argue that lifestyle or individual feminism while, “Friendly and accessible... does not offer an analysis of collective injustice and cannot serve as a basis for activism beyond individual acts of consumption. In a sense, lifestyle feminism buys into, rather than challenges, stereotypical versions of feminism perpetuated through the backlash” (Groeneveld, 2009: 189). Not only does this article traffic in weak

feminism, but it actively berates women who do not conform to traditional definition of beauty and fashion.

Feminism, while not always used by name, is present in a relatively large segment of advertisements. Women are being sold “empowerment” in the form of makeup, hair treatments, clothes, and of course high heels. Goldman argued this by saying that, “In the model of the commodity self, the negation of authenticity take place when the named commodity (the means of self-satisfaction) displaces or pushes aside the ego- it decenters the self since fetishized self-identity becomes lodged in its many subdivided object-parts” (Goldman1992: 220). The literature argues that this is not only a lie and an insult to feminism but in fact it harms feminism and women. It argues that when a movement is diluted to the point that it can be easily manipulated into helping its own enemy then it cannot be a force for good. These scholars unlike the ones mentioned in the previous section disagree that the mere presence of feminism is positive. They argue that the presence of an imperfect feminism is a form of cooptation that benefits corporations and harms women.

### *Feminist Media in Action*

While the debate in academia is ongoing, there are several instances of feminist media that exist not on a theoretical level but on a real world level. It is impossible to agree on a perfect feminism or a perfect feminist message. However, we can analyze instances of feminist media and their successes and failures.

Ms. Magazine was a critical moment for women. It was the first magazine to fight for decriminalizing abortions, to rate candidates on their positions related to women’s issues, to

expose domestic violence on their cover, to protest pornography from a feminist perspective, and to critique the influence of advertising in media (Farrell 1998).

The debatable quality and implications of their feminism aside, Ms. Magazine was a milestone for women. Ms. Magazine showed that feminism could be popular. Ms. Magazine was not without problems. They found themselves having to compromise some of their ideals in order to stay financially viable. Farrell concedes that, "Only feminism based solely on individual upward mobility can coexist with a commercial magazine, and even then, advertisers will strive to find sites less political and more amenable to their purpose of selling consumer goods and, equally important, a consumer ideology" (Farrell 1998: 197). Moreover, studies have found that Ms. was not true to its promise to avoid sexist advertisements. It's been found that, "Even with an explicit commitment to non-stereotypical portrayals of women, substantial levels of 'sex-ism' ...increased dramatically over Ms.'s fifteen-year publication history. The portrayal of women as "Alluring" demonstrated an even greater increase" (Ferguson et al. 1990). The success of Ms. Magazine depends on the lens through which it is viewed. It is undeniable though that Ms. Magazine was a milestone for women and provided evidence that a form of feminism could find a place within the media.

Feminist ideals are easy to find in advertisements that target women. The Dove "Real Beauty" campaign began in 2004, as an effort to listen to the wants of women (Dove 2016). Their mission, as stated on their website, was rooted in, "The need for a wider definition of beauty after the study proved the hypothesis that the definition of beauty had become limiting and unattainable" (Dove 2016). Dove released a study on global perceptions of female beauty, finding that only 2% of women described themselves as beautiful and that, "Almost three-quarters of women (72%) rate their beauty 'average'" (Dove, 2004). In an effort to expand the

definition of beauty Dove launched a campaign that featured “real” women. In this instance real meant women of various weights, heights, races, hair textures, and body types. It featured women who would typically be portrayed as flawed and not beautiful by other forms of media. The problem with the campaign as an example of feminism in action is that it fails to deconstruct the idea of, “compulsory beauty” (Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2014: 6). It is highly likely that the women who described themselves as average were in fact quiet average looking. That’s how averages work. The issues that needs to be addresses is why women feel bad about themselves for looking average. The campaign does a good job of boosting women’s self-esteem. Unfortunately, that self esteem is rooted in compliance with patriarchal standards. If this campaign wasn’t operating within the framework of a double standard we would see Dove launching a “real handsome” campaign. If Dove’s campaign were feminist it would be advertising a cream that minimizes the appearance of the male gaze (Mulvey 1975), and not stretch marks. Dove hides behind third wave, personal choice feminism, in which the main goal is a personal sense of worth (Waters 2007), in order to sell products that prop up patriarchal double standards of female appearance.

There are several instances of positive feminist ad campaigns. Always’ “Like a Girl” campaign features teenage boys and girls in an audition scenario. The director asks them to do a series of tasks “like a girl”. The teenagers adopt silly poses and complete the tasks in an unskilled, degrading manner. When the director then asks very young girls to do things “like a girl” they complete the tasks with confidence and competence (Always 2014). They are seemingly unaffected by the stereotypes about women’s physical inadequacy. This suggests that the stereotypes about women’s incompetence are taught. The ad then says, “Let’s make #likeagirl mean amazing things” (Always 2014). This ad is a better example of feminist

advertising because, while it is still trying to sell a product, the product is not seen as the means of salvation. Always is not arguing that by buying Always over Kotex, a woman is freeing herself from oppression and crushing the patriarchy.

Similarly, Pantene's "Be Strong and Shine" ad juxtaposes men and women in the workplace. It shows the double standards that exists for working women. For example, the ad shows that when men are assertive they are the boss, but when women are assertive they are bossy. The ad also illustrates that fathers who work hard are perceived as dedicated, while mothers who work hard are considered selfish (Pantene 2013). The one minute ad has 2 seconds at the very end to promote its brand. This is different from the Dove ads because, while it is suggesting that you should be a powerful women *and* have shiny hair, it doesn't suggest that the shiny hair is what will make you powerful. They don't operate in a market of self-esteem like the Dove ads do.

Pantene and Always are simply attempting to associate their brand name with female empowerment and feminist ideals. This attempt to garner support through the use of pro-female ads offers more hope for the future of feminism than do adds that imply a product itself is feminist. They use the massive audience that multimillion dollar ads have to spread the message of feminism. While it is still an attempt to generate revenue, they are adhering more firmly to the beliefs of feminism. This is hopefully the future for commodity feminism. Power can not be bought for women in a patriarchy, but platforms that spread a message can. Instead of attempting to buy power women must use their buying power to support companies and advertisements that spread a strong feminist message.

#### IV. Conclusion

Feminism and advertising are two conflicting forces with goals that are at odds, but who are attempting to merge in order to sell products and an ideology. The debate about whether this is possible is still raging. Many argue that the promotion of feminism by mediums that operate in the sale of gender roles. Others argue that sacrificing of some ideals in order to establish place for feminism in the mainstream culture and push the image of women in the right direction, even if it is only baby steps, is worth it. It's too simple to argue that advertisers have coopted feminism. That argument, while supported by evidence and much of the literature, is not complete. It leaves out the history of feminist magazines and the reality of operating in a capitalist framework. If feminism wants to become a movement represented in popular media it needs to fully understand and be wary of cooptation as this is the easiest road for advertisers to take. However, the movement realistically can not write off popular media and hope to gain mass support for an ideology without operating within the framework of capitalistic media. As Sassy, Bust, and Ms. show us, this often means compromising portions of one's ideology in order to secure a platform. Dove shows us that while selling beauty products is not feminist it is possible to break down some of the barriers and expand some of the boxes that women face. The socially conscious consumption trend that exists today is not going away. If feminists want their ideas represented in this movement they must learn to compromise. This does not mean staying silent in the face of cooptation. As seen in the previous section, cooptation can often be worse than no representation at all. The key for the future of feminist advertising is critical evaluation and necessary compromise.



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