Packing Political Action: The Hyper Individualism of Commodity Feminism

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Commodity feminism is often seen as an unpleasant but predictable attempt to tap a market with increasing mainstream presence, and as a phenomenon which exists in isolation from authentic feminist discussion and action. This essay posits that authentic feminism is in fact eroded by commodity feminism, through the latter's hyper-individualising effects. By exaggerating the power of the individual, commodity feminism turns political action into an internal psychological process. This harms not only feminist movements but the women who occupy them, who may be left feeling increasingly impotent, and therefore more dependent on reclaiming power in a consumer context.

"Capitalism can certainly afford to allow women to join an army, allow women to join a police force. Capitalism is certainly intelligent enough to let more women join the government. But to change the whole value system of society, to destroy the concept of motherhood: that is revolutionary."

-Simone de Beauvoir

"Dior will donate a percentage of proceeds from each sale of the "We Should All Be Feminists" T-shirts to the Clara Lionel Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by singer and songwriter Rihanna. Price: €612.25"

- Saks Fifth Avenue

Commodity feminism entered the public vernacular thanks to a 1991 Deborah Heath, Sharon L. Smith, and Robert Goldman article.[1] It refers to the appropriation of feminist principles and rhetoric by corporate interests in an effort to produce marketable versions of atomised feminism. The writers note that, "rather than fight the legitimacy of feminist discourse," and how this discourse could impact on their bottom line, advertisers "have attempted to channel key aspects of that discourse into semiotic markers that can be attached to commodity brand names."

When we talk about commodity feminism, we typically consider it a response to the growing penetration of feminist ideals. We talk of the corporate opportunism inherent in co-opting these ideals, identifying a chance to turn a profit by tapping the emancipatory movement, but not necessarily damaging the movement itself. The reality is more insidious: commodity feminism, propagated by the very market forces that oppress women the world over, seeks to both subdue and misrepresent the movement it imitates. The capitalist patriarchy, although seemingly indomitable, is unable to fully sedate those subject to its power. It is not potent enough to fully subdue our sense that something is wrong, but can convince us that we are fighting against that oppression, rather than facilitating it. It inhibits our capacity for real feminist conversation and, thus, any meaningful action.

Commodity feminism forms a symbiotic relationship with choice feminism, which it reinforces and on which it relies. Choice feminism is characterised by the belief that a feminist life is lived when a woman makes decisions in line with her own desires, even if that involves harm to other women or falling in line with her patriarchal hazing. It refuses to acknowledge the adverse socialisation women endure, the effects of which generations of feminists tirelessly fought to bring to public consciousness. As Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler wrote, "there can be no freedom, no liberation, when the available choices are only constructed on the basis of gross inequity. More 'choice', or even a greater ability to choose, does not necessarily mean greater freedom."[2]

Choice feminism dresses the old myth in new clothes. No longer do magazines instruct women to make their decisions in order to please men. Should, however, their decisions consistently align with gendered expectations, well— what a happy coincidence. In Selling Feminism,

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1 Deborah Heath, Sharon L. Smith, and Robert Goldman, 'Commodity Feminism' (1991) 8 Critical Studies in Mass Communication 333

2 Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler (eds) *Freedom Fallacy: the limits of liberal feminism* (Connor Court Publishing 2015)

Consuming Femininity, Amanda M. Gengler takes specific issue with how products advertised as feminist ultimately serve to uphold constructs of femininity, citing an "ad for a depilatory cream" telling girls that since they are "unique, determined, and unstoppable" they should not "settle… for sandpaper skin."[3]

Choice feminism is an unsustainable belief system, because it removes women from the environment in which they are making their choices—but only in certain contexts. Feminists, even those who otherwise subscribe to choice feminism, reject the argument that women who acquiesced to sexual acts, having been subjected to physical or psychological pressure, simply made a choice. Likewise they reject the suggestion that women who miss out on promotions to less qualified male co-workers simply made a choice to pursue the opportunity less aggressively than their male counterparts. These are situations where most would agree: women's choices are not made in a vacuum, neatly separated from social systems of coercion and deterrence.

It is unclear, then, what logic choice feminism employs in deciding which of women's choices ought not to be scrutinised. Commodity feminism places this incoherence in sharper relief. Fashion magazines are one of the most forceful proponents of commodity feminism,[4] and the negative effects they have on women's body image and satisfaction is long-noted.[5] Why, then, should women's choices under commodity feminism be divorced from such adverse forces? Commodity feminism tells women they can do what they want, and then tells them what to want.

That the perhaps apocryphal adage attributed to Henry Ford, "[i]f I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses," became one of the 20th century's biggest marketing clichés attests to its fundamental truth: that advertisement and commerce is based on telling the consumer what they want. This practice does particular harm when utilised by commodity feminism, as it not only takes women's money, it redirects our energy. Commodity feminism does not exists in tense parallel with feminism, it subsumes feminism. The feminist statements and iconography that

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3 Amanda M. Gengler, 'Selling Feminism, Consuming Femininity' (2011) 10 Contexts 68

4 Miglena Sternadori and Mandy Hagseth, 'Fashionable Feminism or Feminist Fash ion?' (2014) 42 Media Report to Women 4

5 See for example, Marika Tiggemann and Belinda McGill, 'The Role of Social Com parison In the Effect of Magazine Advertisements on Women's Mood and Body Dissatisfaction' (2004) 23 Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology 23; Paulina Swiat kowski, 'Magazine influence on body dissatisfaction: fashion vs health?' (2016) 2 Co gent Social Sciences

permeate popular culture are, increasingly, limited to those being sold to us. Debate is dictated by our brand loyalties, and many now consider it anti-feminist, and anti-solidarity, to critique the hyper-capitalist makeup industry. It has, perversely, come to be considered an act of feminist resistance to laud images of prescriptive femininity.

If commodity feminism's end is to sterilise feminist conversation, the promotion of hyper-individualism—and its celebration of the individual's independence and self-interest even to the detriment of their community—is its means. Commodity feminism tells us we can be feminist without even interacting with other women: just choose to enter a shop and choose to buy the slogan t-shirt with a suitably feminist maxim—a feminist act bereft of actual engagement with our sisters.

That commodity feminism both upholds and is upheld by hyper-individualism can be seen in the dilution (or destruction) of the notion of empowerment. Today, becoming empowered is a process women can undergo alone in their room, just by changing their mindset. As society understands a woman's mindset to be inextricably linked with her appearance, it's no surprise that empowerment has become associated with shoes, perfume, makeup, and hair, what we change when we change our surface level. It has been rewritten as an internal state of being, rather than the process of the marginalised reclaiming political power.

We now rarely talk of empowerment when considering community-based movements, public interest litigation, or policy change. Capitalist feminism's archetype of the empowered woman is most often defined by her independence and even selfishness. While this is an understandably appealing response to the patriarchy's traditional demands of dependency and unlimited empathy from women, it is also incompatible with pursuing any real social change, which is necessarily a collective effort. Empowerment is now not to be achieved through pursuing change in our collective reality, but through pursuing change in our individual perception of that reality. Commodity feminism preaches empowerment and promotes hyper-individualism. As these concepts are inherently irreconcilable, it has had to redefine empowerment.

Empowerment now dissuades the subject from organised political action by convincing her that she has enough power to accomplish any desired change by herself. Naomi Klein has talked about her time in South-East Asia living with people working in and organising against sweatshops, outlining their shock and confusion at the idea of people attempting political action through personal behaviours, such as boycotting particularly

unethical brands.[6] Klein identified a western worship of the individual, leading to the belief that we can change the world by changing our habits, or outfits: "[i]n wealthy countries, we are told how powerful we are as individuals all the time. As consumers. Even individual activists. And the result is that, despite our power and privilege, we often end up acting on canvases that are unnecessarily small[.]"[7] This process can be considered cyclical, with our celebrated individualism and consumer power leading to a lack of political action; the resulting political powerlessness creating a reliance on asserting power as an individual consumer.[8]

This is not just bad news for our society, but the selves that comprise society. Perhaps counter-intuitively, hyper-individualism damages the individual as much as the collective. The western myth of the individual's immense power, and the manner in which it is sold to the individual, ultimately causes harm when the power to change one's reality does not materialise.

A study reviewing 164 pieces of research in the UK, US, and Canada has directly linked the rise in perfectionism and accompanying mental health issues to neoliberalism.[9] We may paint over our advertisements with a feminist patina, but this does little to curb the pullulation of eating disorders.[10] Furthermore, this glorification of the power of individual consumers poses a serious threat to women and girls of the Global South, particularly those on the opposite end of the production process, working in inhumane conditions to make the clothing and accessories lauded by commodity feminism. Their plight is necessarily sidelined and obscured in the propagation of commodity feminism.

In 2016 and 2017, we saw international surges in support for reactionary neo-nationalist causes, and an accompanying rise in reported anxiety and depression. This in itself challenges what Laurie Penny

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6 Naomi Klein, 'Climate Change is a Crisis We Can Only Solve Together' *The Nation* (17 June 2015)

7 ibid

8 Michael Maniates, 'Individualization: plant a tree, buy a bike, save the world?' in Martin Reynolds, Chris Blackmore, Mark J Smith (eds) *The Environmental Responsibility Reader* (Zed Books, 2009)

9 Thomas Curran and Andrew P Hill, 'Perfectionism Is Increasing Over Time: A Meta-Analysis of Birth Cohort Differences From 1989 to 2016' (2017) Psychological Bulletin

10 Denis Campbell, 'Stark rise in eating disorders blamed on overexposure to celebrities' bodies' *The Guardian* (25 June 2015)

describes as the "wellness ideology,"[11] which, while dictating much of modern therapy and psychiatry, completely severs mental health from its social environment. Mental illness is therefore an entirely internal problem with entirely internal solutions. Penny writes:

"The wellbeing ideology is a symptom of a broader political disease. We are supposed to believe that we can only work to improve our lives on that same individual level. [...] The isolating ideology of wellness works against this sort of social change [...]There is no structural imbalance, according to this view—there is only individual maladaptation, requiring an individual response."[12]

In reality, in an article interviewing therapists in cities characterised by support for right wing populism, Oliver Burkeman identified the most effective solution to societally induced stress: political activism, even if only as a weekend hobby.[13] "You've got to stop being passive and start being active," Van Deurzen, an interviewed therapist, said: "[t]he people who are having the hardest time right now are those who feel they can only be passive. But the moment you say: 'I'm going to get hold of some information, organise, make a plan and connect with other people,' then you start to feel you're preparing for the future, rather than being doomed."

Signing petitions and retweeting political news were cited examples of cultural passivity. Both are broadly comparable to commodity feminism and its ability to disguise inaction as action. The suggested remedies require real action, through which real connection occurs. The dearth of opportunities for action and connection are the core failings of commodity feminism, which turns us into receptacles, objects to which feminism can happen.

This depositing of feminism onto us is most often accomplished through commodity feminism's femvertising: advertising espousing pseudo-feminist slogans and targeted at women.

In one example, Microsoft challenged the low rates of female STEM participation through an advertisement featuring young girls who had aspirations to cure cancer and go to space being shown the statistic that only 6.7% women graduate with STEM degrees. Their emotional reaction plays out for the sake of our entertainment. The tagline is 'Change the world. Stay in STEM.' Microsoft's insinuation that the low rate of graduation is women's fault, the result of their incuriosity or lack of ambition, leaves

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11 Laurie Penny, 'Life Hacks of the Poor and Aimless' *The Baffler* (8 July 2016)

12 ibid

13 Oliver Burkeman, ''Every day brings some new trauma': keeping calm in an anxious world' *The Guardian* (4 November 2017)

unaddressed the concerns of women who either work in STEM or have done so previously, and who have shared accounts of sexual violence, discrimination, and constant devaluation of their work. We are yet to see a campaign where male STEM professors are asked to stop looking at their students' breasts.[14]

Femvertising never does focus on male responsibility. So it is, too, with advertisements for aspirational products aimed at men: where are the cologne ads telling men to stop viewing women as objects; the Rolex ads telling businessmen to stop underpaying their female staff? This betrays femvertising as motivated solely by a desire to capitalise on feminism's growing popularity, rather than to raise necessary, even if uncomfortable, questions, as it would have us believe.

The examples of a bastardised, or to be kind, incoherent, feminism on the high street are manifest: Bershka and their womanist shirt—modelled, of course, by a white woman, despite the term referring to a school of Black feminism[15]—and their parent company's use of child labour;[16] H&M's feminist shirt, and use of slave labour and child labour;[17] Dove's relentless churn of a narrow school of body positivity, while in South-East Asia, their parent company, Unilever, sell women skin -lightening creams.[18] Commodity feminism is evidently profit rather than progress-motivated. This should, of course, be acknowledged alongside the acceptance that an ethically produced t-shirt or moisturiser would not set us free, either. I will not suggest the ideal feminist process of personal consumption, as, in our current

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14 Veronica V. 'Talk to my Face, Not to my Breasts: The Experiences of Women in STEM' *Science in Color* (17 July 2017)

15 Womanism takes its name from Alice Walker's 'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose' (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1983)

16 Nora Crotty, 'Zara Is Being Accused of Unfair Labor Practices Again' Fashionista (3 April 2013); Cheryl Wischhover, 'Another Bangladesh Garment Factory Fire Prompts International Outcry for Manufacturing Reform' Fashionista (29 January 2013); 'Another Fire in Bangladesh: Seven Women Killed at Smart Fashion, Saturday Jan 26' Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights (26 January 2013); Leah Chirnikoff, 'Zara's Brazilian Factories Accused of Child Labor and Unfair Labor Practices' Fashionista (18 August 2011)

17 Patrick Winn, 'The slave labor behind your favourite clothing brands: Gap, H&M, and more' Salon (22 March 2015); Gethin Chamberlain, 'How highstreet clothes were made by children in Myanmar for 13p an hour' The Guardian (5 February 2017); 'Child refugees in Turkey making clothes for UK shops' BBC (24 October 2016)

18 Liz Conor, 'Dove, real beauty and the racist history of skin whitening' T*he Conversation* (10 October 2017)

society, I doubt its existence.

Identifying incoherent examples of supposedly feminist advertising campaigns and products is depressingly easy. Those that espouse genuine feminist messages are far more insidious. Pantene's #shinestronger campaign, a development of their short film Sorry, Not Sorry, challenged how the instinct to apologise has been conditioned into women. It went viral, sparking debate among feminists and women-considering-feminism, which seemed to miss an obvious question: whether it's best that we're introduced to this debate by a shampoo company.

Advertisement demands we look at the billboard, the screen, the model, the product, the person looking at us. It does not ask us to turn our gaze inward, in case we realise that the cord tying our identity to our possessions is fictional. While Debord's warning against "the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing"[19]may not have been cautioned in a feminist context, it is incumbent on us to heed it nonetheless.

Considering commodity feminism as a phenomena through which social change or education can be accomplished introduces systems of hierarchy into such processes. Feminist education cannot be handed to us by a faceless corporation, and certainly not for a fee. It is essential that it be grounded in equality, collaboration, and mutual recognition. Radical educator Paulo Fréire instructed us to, "[...] not go to the people in order to bring them a message of 'salvation,' but in order to come to know through dialogue with them both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation."[20] Feminism fed to us by actors and inanimate objects is feminism absent of dialogue, which is hard to consider feminism at all. In order to gain our subjectivity, freedom, and autonomy, all women must come to our own understanding of feminism, which recognises and validates our experiences, answers our questions, and reflects our priorities. This does not require an abandonment of the concerns of other women, but merely an ability to apply feminism to our lived experiences. Hildegard von Bingen told us that "we cannot live in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a home. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening."[21]

Commodity feminism will allow us to call ourselves feminist, so long as it sets the criteria for what that means, and so long as calling ourselves

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19 Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (Black & Red, 1970)

20 Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (trans Myra Ramos, 1970)

21 Hildegard von Bingen, *Selected Works* (Penguin, 2001)

feminist, rather than being or acting feminist, is enough. Women are denied our subjectivity under commodity feminism as much as under traditional patriarchy, while simultaneously being convinced that this hyper-individualised life style is the realisation of feminist goals.

The second wave feminist slogan *the personal is political* acknowledged for the first time that institutions such as the patriarchy affect their subjects in the private spheres of society as much as in political contexts. Demonstrative of how feminism ought to be a collective effort, the term has no clear origin—or rather is not attributed to a particular individual,[22] but instead the movement as a whole. Unfortunately, as we saw with empowerment, the meaning of the personal is political has been corrupted. Rather than a call for struggle against the injustices women endure in their personal lives, it is now used to imply that feminist political aims can be accomplished through personal actions. Under this new definition, the phrase is more accurate in reverse: 'the political is personal.'

22 Kerry Burch, *Democratic transformations: Eight conflicts in the negotiation of American identity* (London: Continuum, 2012)

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