

With Great Product Comes Great Responsibility: Marketing Gender and Eco-Responsibility

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ABSTRACT

US-American mass media was revolutionized when, at the turn of the twentieth century, mass printing of illustrations enabled the visual advertisement of lifestyles – the American Dream was now sellable at a faster rate than ever before. Today’s mass media has refashioned itself by adapting to a rapid technological evolution, yet remains a space which enables monetization of identity. Women’s purchasing power has resulted in a culture of advertisement developed to specifically target women. Whether it is overpriced and elaborate female hygiene products or universal items re-branded specifically for women, capitalism continues to thrive off of a gendered narrative of consumption. In recent years, it has merged with the rise of eco-friendly consumption. Many companies that engage in greenwashing strategies manufacture women’s hygiene and skin care products. Additionally, due to a persistent sexual division of labor, household products turned green disproportionately target the female consumer. While there is a tendency for women to be more environmentally aware (Brough et al.; Capecchi; Zelezny), the urgency of this response is the result of a structure which has historically excluded women from positions of executive decision-making and production, while also perpetuating the exploitation of their gender-based identity. I argue that, as a consequence of this perpetuation, a narrative was established which ties responsibility of eco-awareness and ethical consumption to gender, manifesting in an “eco-gender gap” (Capecchi).

KEYWORDS

Eco gender gap, gender roles, gender capitalism, eco-capitalism

Introduction

We have reached a culminating point in our relationship to planet Earth. We are increasingly aware of our environment's steady destruction, which has triggered a plethora of narratives regarding our collective and individual involvement and responsibility. The (over)consumption habits of developed countries are a primary concern, yearly highlighted by an Earth Overshoot Day that has been worryingly approaching its first half-year mark. As these concerns progressively penetrate public discourse, corporations have been prompted to turn to more "eco-friendly" selling points in order to avoid backlash and sustain their profit. The problem is that today's consumer culture is ultimately the effect of past and present efforts to tie products to identity. This process of monetizing identity has been significantly marked by gender for over a century. Even as we deepen our collective understanding of the concept today, gendered marketing persists and now occurs alongside corporations' other attempts at forms of "woke capitalism." This essay highlights the bridge between mass marketing and gender identity that in the context of eco-consciousness inherently shifts a majority of responsibility toward eco-conscious purchasing to women. The exclusive form of language I use in this essay is necessitated by the gender binary that is perpetuated by marketers and not the language I personally consider would open up new ways of thinking about the world in relation to gender. For that, a complete dismantlement of the gender binary is necessary.

Advertising Identity

The Industrial Revolution of the 1900s marks a turning point for mass media production. While the bridge between assets and identity predates the nineteenth century, it was in the mid-1800s that Western advertising took off in the form of illustrations, enabling companies to attract consumers with visual displays of products. Roland Marchand explores the progression of visual advertisements during its golden era which "now regularly portrayed the lives of 'typical' consumers as enhanced by the use of the product" (xv). Carolyn Kitch traces this process by considering gender, establishing that the monetization of the American Dream was gendered from the early beginnings of visual advertising. While Kitch considers images of manhood and the nuclear family, most of her research in this publication is dedicated to pinpointing how mass illustrations contributed to maintaining specific ideas and ideals about womanhood while demonizing any attempts to transgress the norm. The dichotomy of "good woman" vs. "bad woman" was eventually translated into advertisements, inherently giving certain products, such as creams and pantyhose, the power to make someone more, or less, of a woman.

In 1941, NBC (at the time, New York station WNBT) enabled visual advertising to enter televisions. In 1994, AT&T was the first company to purchase an online banner ad. Today, marketing has become significantly more influential. EMarketer calculated worldwide digital ad spending at 567.49 billion US dollars in 2022, projecting an even bigger number for upcoming years (“[Digital Advertising Spending Worldwide](#)”). Advertising today functions on multiple levels due to its introduction to social media. More traditionally, platforms like Meta (Facebook, Instagram), YouTube, and TikTok make use of regular ad interruptions to earn profit from personalized ads based on retrieved user data. The more recently emerging economy of influencers and content creators has additionally provided brands with a way to advertise their products through sponsorships, placing advertisements directly within the content on social media and right in front of the desired target audience. While the employment of icons is not a new practice in advertising, social media fosters an often misleading sense of connection amongst its users which fabricates a sense of authenticity that traditional forms of advertisement have not yet achieved. The allure cultivates a consumer culture in which users are continuously persuaded to make purchasing decisions based on aspirational lifestyles and identities. This complicates efforts of sustainability and eco-conscious buying by glamorizing excessive consumption patterns.

The Eco-Gender Gap

In a multi-study paper focused on gendered attitudes toward environmental action, Janet K. Swim and her team conducted three separate studies looking at attitudes toward gender-bending (performing actions which are not associated with one’s gender) as tied to Pro-Environmental Behaviors (PEBs). Not only did their studies show that PEBs are strongly linked to femininity, but they also suggested an aversion to gender-bending behaviors (conclusively on both sides). Both men and women viewed gender-bending PEBs (e.g. men utilizing reusable shopping bags or women taking part in protest) as off-putting. Aaron R. Brough et al. published an article encompassing six studies, which offered similar results. Their research concluded that gender identity played a big role in preventing men from engaging in environmentally friendly behavior. Not only is caring for the planet and devoting oneself to preventing climate change linked to femininity, but this factor negatively impacts people’s determination to engage in such activities if they do not wish to identify or be identified as feminine. This bias is, however, sustained by problematic yet popular understandings of gender, which, as I argue in this essay, are perpetuated by mass media marketing for profit. Brough et al. suggest “masculine affirmation and masculine branding” as a step forward to transgressing the gendered boundary of ethical and sustainable behavior (580), marking gender as a crucial component to be closely considered in

public discourses surrounding climate change, and critically considered in mass-media depictions of eco-responsibility.

Gendered Responsibility

Roland Marchand and Carolyn Kitch are primarily concerned with early twentieth-century marketing strategies, but their research is not irrelevant today. The foundational methods of early advertisements persist in today's marketing strategies and, while the concept of gender has been destabilized by feminist efforts, the same gender roles that dictate household responsibilities are still perpetuated today (Kamp Dush et al.). CivicScience (2021) surveyed over 80,000 US-American adults and identified seventy percent of women as the primary shoppers in the household. Because of this discrepancy in domestic responsibility, women are more likely to act as decision-makers when purchasing household items such as cleaning, hygiene, and food products. These sectors already engage in greenwashing strategies and "eco-friendly" marketing by overwhelming consumers with labels claiming "recycled packaging" or CO2 neutrality. They task the consumer with the responsibility of choosing between cheaper, more environmentally harmful options, such as chemical cleaning agents sold in plastic bottles, and expensive, longer-lasting alternatives, such as cleaning tabs sold in paper sachets. When purchasing groceries, consumers are faced with the responsibility of opting for a plant-based diet or supporting the meat industry, which has been a focal point in debates about eco-consciousness. Because women remain to a large extent responsible for domestic labor, they are inherently more likely to be exposed to such "eco-friendly" marketing efforts and thereby also more likely to be tasked with eco-responsibility when making purchase decisions.

A micro-narrative of early 2000s climate activism highly prioritized alternative menstrual products in sustainability discourses. Menstrual cups and period panties continue to be heavily commercialized as environmentally friendly replacements for menstrual hygiene products. While it is undeniable that these replacements protect the environment by reducing waste, they often appear advertised in contexts that denigrate the usage of tampons or pads, marking users of disposable hygiene products as the culprits of pollution. For example, a 2019 Sirona Hygiene ad for menstrual cups begins with a close-up of a woman positioned in a landfill beside a pile of discarded menstrual pads. She states: "I hate the environment. Just hate it. And that's why I love pads," before tossing a pad onto the pile ("[#UncomfortablePads - Not Anymore!](#)"). The video, which has amassed 1.4 million views as of spring 2024, suggests that women who use menstrual pads lack concern for the environment. Despite this claim, the company continues to sell disposable sanitary pads on its website. This narrative contributes to shifting environmental responsibility onto women who

continue to use tampons or other disposable means of menstrual protection, instead of criticizing the companies that commercialize and popularize those products in the context of hygiene and discreetness.

Menstrual products have a complex history. For millennia, women have used innovative and sustainable *bricoleur* approaches to menstrual protection, such as washable linen cloths, customizing them to their own needs and individual bodies (Strasser 162). Even though the menstrual cup has more recently gained popularity as a sustainable solution to wasteful tampons, it was first introduced by Leona Chalmers already in 1937. However, it failed to gain popularity because, around the same time, Earl Haas (Tampax) and Kimberly-Clark (Kotex) began marketing disposable pads. To make the products more appealing to consumers, advertisers chose to reinforce “[n]ew concerns about sanitation and germs, long-standing taboos about menstrual blood, and the privacy of mail order [to make] these pads attractive” (Strasser 162). Today, the disposable menstrual hygiene industry remains largely unchanged, and companies continue to gain profit through the perpetuation of similar gender-biased narratives. This is especially problematic because the menstrual hygiene industry, like other sectors, was founded and built without including women in executive decision-making in the first place. Because of this, the signal for women to be eco-conscious when purchasing menstrual products comes with an illusive agency while problematically shifting a majority of eco-responsibility onto women.

The cosmetic industry is another culprit of pollution and global warming which is allotted to the female sphere. Make-up companies have greatly benefitted from the rise of beauty influencers on social media such as James Charles, NikkieTutorials or Huda Kattan. The average makeup and skincare routines that are depicted online encompass a multitude of different products. In 2020, the average American woman spent up to 350 euros on cosmetic products per year (Petruzzi, “Average Annual Spend on Cosmetic Products”). That same year, skincare and makeup products purchased primarily by women made up 58% of the cosmetic market worldwide (Petruzzi, “Breakdown of the Cosmetic Market Worldwide”). From primer, foundation, blush, and contour to eyeshadow, eyeliner, eyelashes, and mascara; from oils, balms, gels, and masks to serums, creams, sprays, and toners; a mid-range makeup and skincare collection has the potential to cost up to thousands of dollars and, because of the bridge between feminine gender identity and cosmetic products, women are to a certain extent expected to own at least some of those products. Gender socialization, empowered by mass media marketing, continues to encourage women to maintain a polished image of health and beauty, and exhibit femininity through trendy fashion, multi-step makeup regimes, as well as elaborate skincare routines. This social conditioning continues to be supported by beauty influencers on social media, even as

attempts at restructuring concepts of gender see young men begin to use makeup and skin care as well. These products are, in turn, problematic within climate change discourse, because their production and distribution have a significant impact on our environment. The majority of multinational beauty companies still sell their products in countries that require animal testing, ship their products internationally, and use plastic containers instead of opting for alternative packaging. By association, women become the primary victims of narratives of individual responsibility and the direct targets of greenwashing campaigns for cosmetics. This makes women responsible for both a culturally curated image of womanhood, as well as the impacts of its production and distribution on our environment.

The fashion industry has received the most backlash from climate activists due to its complicity in water waste, chemical pollution, and emission of greenhouse gases, in addition to its exploitation of, primarily, female factory workers in developing countries. Like most sectors dominated by female consumers, the fashion industry is also gender-biased: “[A]part from a few men at the top, including manufacturers and retailers, celebrity designers and magazine publishers, it is and has been a female sphere of production and consumption” (McRobbie 84). Fashion companies actively capitalize both on gender identity, as well as eco-campaigning. Mariko Takedomi Karlsson and Vasna Ramasar look at ad campaigns by Swedish fast fashion brands H&M, Monki, and Gina Tricot, which promote the brands’ commitment to sustainability. They analyzed six recurrent themes, which included “gender and sexuality,” “individual responsibility,” and “greenwashing.” Their article does not carry out an in-depth analysis of how those themes interact, but it successfully identifies a connection. All three themes occur at the same time and in connection with one another. They promote individual eco-responsibility in the context of gender and sexual empowerment. While the study does not consider an eco-critical perspective, Angela McRobbie’s paper highlights that women’s absence in executive decision-making allows it “to remain a space of exploited production and guilty consumption” (87). Women have agency in the context of purchase power, but when it comes to the executive decisions which have the potential to make a difference globally, they are often overshadowed by an androgenic structure.

Multi-Level Solutions

The bridge between mass media marketing and consumer identity originated over a century ago, yet it remains a defining contributor to today’s consumer culture. As I explored here, this bridge is distinctly marked by gender, and it has begun to foster the development of an eco-gender gap that tips responsibility for eco-responsible decision-making onto women. The foundational issues of this development in recent

years occur on multiple levels, but consumer responsibility is often an overlooked one. Overproduction and overconsumption, and their impact on the planet's atmosphere, have been foundational in the discourse on environmental action. But within this discourse, it has usually re-focused eco-responsibility from those who produce to those who consume. Sirona Hygiene's previously-mentioned advert practices this error by condemning users of the very disposable pads that the company itself produces and distributes. Even if eco-branded products did significantly decrease our output of greenhouse gases, they remain band-aid solutions. Instead, initiatives such as "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" encourage consumers to buy less and instead get more life and use out of products and resources already available to them. However, due to their need for profit for survival, companies blatantly ignore these initiatives and encourage the continuous expansion of our economy by creating "better alternatives." The aspiration of maintaining an infinitely expansive economy is absurd when the resources are finite. But in a globalized society that continues to be dependent on profit and defined by consumption, overcoming this habit requires a systematic restructuring.

This systematic restructuring requires a careful consideration of our dualistic understanding of gender. Marie Mies points out that the division of labor did not naturally occur but was instead "a violent [process] by which first certain categories of men, later certain peoples, were able mainly by virtue of arms and warfare to establish an exploitative relationship between themselves and women, and other peoples and classes" (74). The issue is that perpetuating gender roles perpetuates gender inequality, including unequal distribution of eco-responsibility. The sexual division of labor that prompted marketing firms in the mid-twentieth century to place women at the center of household product placements also contributed to women's present-day purchase power when shopping for household items, leading to a gender discrepancy in consumer decision-making. On a different level, "female industries" such as cosmetics, fashion, and even menstrual hygiene products were mostly founded and developed by men, in a way that made women's identities and bodies profitable to them. Women have only recently begun to occupy those executive roles but have been mostly excluded from the opportunity to make the decisions that have ultimately contributed to our current environmental crisis. Eco-responsibility would not be gendered in climate change discourses if our reconsideration of systems of operation and oppression included the deconstruction and dismantlement of the gender binary. We must consider how outdated gender narratives influence discourses about climate change in order to begin searching for solutions in this climate crisis.

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