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## Pitching the Feminist Voice: A Critique of Contemporary Consumer Feminism

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Media Studies

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## Abstract

This dissertation's object of study is the contemporary trend of femvertising, where seemingly pro-women sentiments are used to sell products. I argue that this commodified version of feminism is highly curated, superficial, and docile, but also popular with advertisers and consumers alike. The core question at the centre of this research is how commercial feminism—epitomized by the trend of femvertising—influences the feminist discursive field. Initially, I situate femvertising within the wider trend of consumer feminism and consider the implications of a marketplace that speaks the language of feminism. Then, through detailed content analysis of advertising by brands like *Dove*, *Secret*, *CoverGirl*, and *Barbie*, examples of this trend are identified, defined, and analyzed. Theory rooted in feminist media studies such as Rosalind Gill's commodity feminism, Myra MacDonald's description of recuperation, and Johnston & Taylor's idea of consumer feminism are applied and extended in this analysis. Canonical media theory is also deployed, specifically the notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony set out by Antonio Gramsci and Zygmunt Bauman's understanding of contemporary consumer culture. Next, I apply the theoretical metaphor of ventriloquism to the concept of femvertising to access the deeper, rhetorical appeal of these commercials. This metaphor, described as a gendered dynamic by Helen Davies, illuminates how patriarchal consumer culture throws its voice to consumer feminism; in this way, the concept suggests that instances of femvertising are inherently patriarchal. Finally, the work explores other forms of marketable feminism, specifically the celebrity feminism of Beyoncé, Emma Watson, and Tina Fey. Here, I borrow Roxanne Gay's phrase, "the gateways" to feminism, to question whether a commodified feminism that is wielded for profit is an appropriate entrée to an inherently political social movement. In the final chapter, the discussion explores the wider historical commodification of feminism to argue that the freedom many North American women enjoy is rooted in their value as consumers. The dissertation concludes by calling out femvertising as a problematic trend, one that fetishizes and domesticates the feminist movement, and one that ultimately limits future feminist action if, as I argue, the marketplace continues to be a significant voice in feminist discourse.

## Keywords

Feminism; Feminist Discourse; Femvertising; Capitalism; Ventriloquism; Consumer Culture; Advertising; Hegemony

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A decade ago, I entered the Media, Information and Technoculture program and didn't look back. When applying to Ph.D. programs, I remember a conversation in which Tim Blackmore encouraged me to return to Western for my doctoral studies. "Your people are here, Kate." He was right.

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# Introduction: You've Come A Long Way, Baby?

## Prologue: The Inspiration

For the past ten years, I have enjoyed an academic education that has provided me the opportunity to think about media, communication, and gender. As a keen undergraduate, I started my post-secondary education in Media Studies at Western University and I became fascinated with questions of culture, political economy, meaning-making, and technology. My passion for women's and gender studies developed simultaneously, especially in a full-year first year women's studies class that I took in the 2007-2008 academic year. I remember a lot about that formative educational experience; it was in the women's studies classroom that I was empowered with the tools I needed to think critically about women's studies and feminist research. In most of my media studies and English literature classes (especially when it came to open-ended essay assignments) I would apply the lessons of the class to gender. It was in this setting that I first encountered corporate feminism. In a lecture, my professor displayed an image from the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*. I knew these women—those “real” bodies in white underwear gleefully smiling—because I had seen them on television, in magazines, on billboards, and online. I thought that *Dove* was doing something amazing; my developing feminist sensibilities were tickled by the idea of a major brand addressing themes in the mainstream global media that I was learning about in the classroom. I liked *Dove* for taking this approach and I was happy to see my professor bring a familiar ad campaign into lecture that day.

But it was not my professor's intention to celebrate this advertisement; she urged our class to be critical of this representation. She reminded us that *Dove* was still trying to sell us soap. I remember feeling taken aback—what's wrong with trying to sell soap? Quickly after, I felt defensive about the advertisement that I thought was doing important

feminist work. In my media studies classes, I was being exposed to ads that brutally objectified and sexualized women and their bodies and so I asked how my women's studies professor could be so quick to denigrate something that, surely, was the lesser of many evils.

While my professor moved onto other topics, this media moment stayed with me. There was something complicated about the *Dove* campaign that had captured my attention. These ads spoke to me as a feminist, and I liked it, but I had trouble reconciling that feminist feeling with my professor's comments.

Flash forward to 2013—Bachelors and Masters degrees in hand—and I was still thinking about *Dove*. Indeed, it was during a Masters Theatre Devising course, conducted by my then-thesis supervisor and Canadian playwright Judith Thompson, that my interest in this topic flared again. The class was focused on non-hierarchical theatre making; our class was devising a play using democratic techniques under Thompson's tutelage. As an exemplar, we read Thompson's *Body & Soul*, a devised piece of theatre that she put together with a group of fifteen women all over forty-five years old. In real and personal stories, these women share their triumphs and tragedies, addressing how society treats women as they age. As I finished reading the script, I caught something in print that Thompson had not divulged to the group. On the back of the script it reads: "*Body & Soul* was commissioned by *Dove* as a way to demonstrate that beauty has no age limit." Once again, I was struck, but this time, I was baffled by the notion of a feminist collective creation commissioned by a major corporation. I realized in that moment that I was being targeted by an advertisement—in a subtle and covert way, and in a university classroom. Was *this* our best model of non-hierarchical making? A play sponsored by *Dove*? It was in that moment that my first-year perspective on *Dove* dissolved; it became clear to me that *Dove* owned a specific depiction of women's empowerment. At the time, I did not have the tools to talk about the *Dove*-effect—I did not even know the word "femvertising" existed—but I knew I wanted to research it. In this thesis, I will explore the onslaught of femvertising, corporate feminism, and consumer activism that we in North America are

witnessing. I will question if these examples represent a newfound feminist sensibility, or on the contrary, if this trend points to a systemic attempt to domesticate feminism under neoliberal capitalism. My own socialist feminist understanding tells me that feminism and capitalism are fundamentally at odds; and yet femvertising reveals feminism and capitalism as strange bedfellows. Femvertising's meteoric rise has made me wonder why capitalism is eager to draw attention to a social movement that has, historically, challenged its omnipresence. At the same time, I question feminism's willingness to participate in capitalism when its patriarchal nature is the cause of widespread gendered and class oppression. In this exploration, I will situate femvertising in the context of capitalist patriarchy and help to re-invigorate the socialist feminist discussion regarding the incompatibility of feminism and capitalism.

## Chapter Overview

This dissertation comprises four main chapters, and, in its entirety, will analyze the trend of femvertising and some of its wider implications. The aim of this project is to identify a diversity of examples of femvertising and situate them within larger theoretical frames. Doing so showcases how the market uses a specific version of liberal feminism for profit. By drawing on interdisciplinary theories, I confirm that certain strands of feminism in North America have become deeply entrenched in neoliberal logic and, therefore, its revolutionary capacities are limited. I argue that femvertising is a powerful manifestation of “neo”liberal feminism; it is a trend that has the potential to undermine the political bedrock of feminism and, therefore, has consequences for the movement as a whole.

In the first chapter, I introduce femvertising in detail and contextualize it within the framework of corporate feminism. By outlining the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*—and positioning it as part of the “first wave” of femvertising—I present many of my concerns with the often-celebratory acceptance of this advertising trend. In this initial chapter, I showcase femvertising's pervasiveness and limitations, and build the foundation upon which subsequent chapters depend. In chapter two, I apply performance theory, specifically

the metaphor of ventriloquism, to the phenomenon of femvertising as an avenue to appreciate the rhetorical strategies of these advertisements. By drawing on the work of Helen Davies, I apply the ventriloquial dynamic, a gendered power dynamic that can help explain the recuperation of feminist ideals within these commercials. In chapter three, I extend concerns about femvertising to celebrity culture. Using the work of Roxanne Gay as a roadmap, I argue that the gateways through which people enter into feminist discourse set limits on it. This chapter is animated by the question: are commodified gateways appropriate for any version of feminism? Finally, chapter four briefly outlines the historical connection between women and shopping and showcases how today's North American capitalism exemplifies Zygmunt Bauman's notion of a society of consumers. By using the 2017 Women's March as an illustrative example, I show how the values of capitalism and neoliberalism permeate even the West's most public and political manifestations of feminist action. In doing so, I argue that feminism's marketability is one of its pre-eminent and contradictory features. Here, I extend Rosalind Gill's concept of "commodity feminism" to include contemporary brands that sell feminism to women through its acknowledgment that the movement has a long way to go. I conclude my thesis by communicating my concerns about a version of feminism that is bought, sold, and removed from its historical and political roots.

## Research Positioning and Methodology

This research is on the cusp of a topic that will populate academic discussions in the near future, but at present discussions of femvertising specifically are almost absent in academia. For this reason, my research relies on the application of existing theories that help to illuminate the fashionable trend of femvertising. As I address throughout this thesis, many feminist media theorists offer analytical approaches that are applicable to femvertising; these theorists were not writing about femvertising simply because the term, and in some instances, the phenomenon, did not exist. My research shows that trends move quickly. For example, Rosalind Gill's concept of commodity feminism is directly applicable to femvertising because her term describes how brands have used empowerment

to sell women commodities. As Gill discusses, in light of second-wave feminism's fervent critique of representations of women in the media, companies were forced to augment their approach and, as such, "developed new advertising strategies that partly appropriated the cultural power of feminism while often emptying it of its radical critique" (Gill, 74). However, in *Gender and the Media* (2007), Gill describes how a post-feminist backdrop informed the way brands were speaking to women. Rather than depict women as happy housewives or sex objects, advertisers moved "towards what might be understood as *postfeminist* representations in which confident, sexually assertive women dominate, irony is ubiquitous, and men's bodies are presented as erotic spectacles almost as much as women's" (74). Gill describes how women were encouraged to buy themselves diamond rings for their *right* hands because post-feminist ideology told women that they had come a long way. Companies were capitalizing on the workingwoman of the new millennium—she was now supposedly "liberated" and could be marketed to as such. As my research shows, Gill's analysis started a conversation that needs to be continued. There has been a very recent shift in how brands speak to women—one that departs from the post-feminist genre that Gill describes. Only a decade later, brands are not celebrating women's "completed" liberation, but are rather acknowledging the prematurity of the post-feminist celebration. Femvertising is different from the post-feminist advertising of the late 1990s and early 2000s because it speaks to women about how much more there is to do. Contemporary brands claim that gendered stereotypes still infiltrate modern-day North American culture. And yet, because femvertising ventriloquizes a narrow, liberal feminist perspective and superficially engages with feminist concerns, my analysis will show that these femvertisements are deeply *post-feminist*. While they may not tout the message that feminism is dead, femvertisements domesticate the feminist messages they communicate. Throughout this dissertation, I extend theories like Gill's to femvertising both because they offer pertinent insight and also because they situate my research within the wider discussion of women and consumer culture.

A large portion of my data collection involved identifying, gathering, and analyzing femvertisements, as well as surveying the burgeoning discussion about them. The method I

deployed throughout this research project was primarily content analysis. This dissertation considers a wide range of examples—including mainstream televised advertisements, live performances, clothing, and television shows. I dip into many different manifestations of femvertising to showcase the extensiveness of the trend. I also adopted a grounded theory approach and included examples that were evident in my daily consumption of media. Many of the examples captured in this project are from 2013-2017. As I have mentioned, I encountered few academic discussions of femvertising. Most published writing on this topic is journalistic or editorial in style, and confined to online news sources, blogs, and magazine articles. Journalists and cultural critics are certainly picking up on this trend and so my research includes many journalist and editorial voices. As I have noted above, I also extend applicable, academic theories to this cutting-edge and growing field.

When choosing which femvertisements to include in this project, I focused on ads that were current, mainstream, and those that fit the definition of femvertising outlined in chapter one. Most of the ads are still on television today, and speak to their audience in a way that stirs feminist sensibilities. As mentioned above, significant to this trend is that these ads are a departure from the post-feminist advertising that Gill describes. Indeed, femvertisements do not celebrate the end of feminism but instead communicate the idea that gender inequity is still a powerful injustice in today's world. Equally key is that many of these ads attempt to speak in an intersectional, third-wave feminist dialect, and aim to extend their branding and the so-called "feminist" conversation they spark on social media. As my analysis will show, what these selections actually communicate is a superficial commitment to the liberal feminism they communicate: whether their tone is educational, empowering, or alarmist, the wider category of femvertising dons a loose commitment to feminist political action because femvertisements ignore the very structures that undergird the problems they address. And while femvertising attempts to depict the diversity at the heart of third-wave feminism, their approach reinforces a neoliberal ideology rather than any kind of political commitment to feminism. Since femvertising connotes feminism only insofar as it will foster consumption, femvertising can be understood as post-feminist because it does not offer solutions to the gendered issues it touts. A good example of the

post-feminist nature of femvertising is that none of the campaigns I consider actually use the word feminism or feminist—“the f-word”—explicitly; rather, these texts fuel only enough feminist verve to connect their brand with female empowerment—the kind that empowers women to combat oppression through shopping. I think it is also important to note that by the time I complete this dissertation, there may be important examples of femvertising that are not included here; they could certainly be incorporated into future academic projects.

## Studying Culture and Self-Reflexivity

Throughout my post-secondary career, I have advocated for the study of culture. While some students undertake projects in cancer research, law, and environmental studies, I have chosen to spend years studying the relationships among various media and gender. Media studies students and scholars make significant contributions to scholarship, particularly because the discipline advocates for critical, self-reflexive, and often feminist research. Defining “media” can be a difficult task, especially because contemporary North American culture is saturated with technological communication and information devices that allow us to access a plethora of mediated message at unprecedented levels. Broadly speaking, I conceptualize “media” is any example of mass communication in which communities are reached, influenced, and impacted. These messages can be delivered through systems like publishing, broadcast, or the Internet. Media can both be the means of delivering a message as well as the message itself. At the same time, I also use “the media” to talk about the complex and multifaceted global web of communication which shapes social, cultural, and economic life. Often in Media Studies, scholars debate about what counts as media. David Hesmondhalgh’s *The Cultural Industries* asks the question: why study media at all? He addresses this at the outset of his book. “The importance of the cultural industries in modern societies rests on three related elements: their ability to make and circulate products that influence our knowledge, understanding and experience (texts); their role as systems for the management of creativity and knowledge; and their effects as

agents of economic, social and cultural change” (4). For Hesmondhalgh, the cultural industries matter a great deal, and are worthy of academic study.

Like Nick Couldry, who agrees that “cultural studies is a distinctive discipline” (9), Hesmondhalgh sets the groundwork for some of the significant landmarks for which media scholars—particularly those who adopt a critical political economic approach—should look. Significantly, self-reflexivity is recognized as a staple approach, especially in media studies, because those who study media often participate in the for-profit global media economy. Sometimes those who have access to media do so because they are attractive to advertisers. Couldry’s *Inside Culture* provides a succinct and clear outline of the benefits of this approach. “To reflect on the individual experience of culture does not mean turning our backs on the social; instead, thinking about the individual story plunges us immediately into the web of relationships out of which we are formed” (7). Self-reflexivity, for Couldry, offers the researcher a direct path into the study of culture. Moreover, the theoretical framework surrounding self-reflexivity is rooted in better results on fairer terms. In short, it is “an essential part of method in cultural studies in thinking systematically about how specific methods influence the results produced and shape our picture of the world” (12). As Couldry sets out, self-reflexivity embraces a more feminist approach to research, namely in that self-reflexivity “interrogat[es] the power relations which have historically affected who conducts research” (13). For Couldry, as well as feminist methodology scholars like Donna Haraway, this kind of thinking leads to research that is rooted in the material experience of culture.

Self-reflexivity is particularly important—and difficult—when you research a facet of consumer society of which you are a part. The study of femvertising is compelling because this kind of advertising goes further than describing the features of a product. Rather, it points to contemporary gender relations, thus eliciting the sympathies of an avowedly feminist researcher. While lots of today’s advertising uses various appeals to communicate more than just the features of the product being sold, femvertising is significant because these ads participate in the feminist discursive field. Femvertising’s



viral, “buzz worthy” nature makes them shareable; even taking the time to write about them in an academic setting makes me part of an unpaid labour force that circulates these concerning ads. Moreover, femvertising has resonance for me; as a consumer, I am part of the sought-after demographic that femvertising aims to influence. As a researcher, it is important for me to adopt a self-reflexive approach in order to reconcile how these ads—and the liberal feminism they peddle—is reified by my very engagement in this topic. I am also interpellated by a capitalist system that privileges wanton consumption and a neoliberal ideology; even as I write this thesis, I have to catch myself using language that stems from the capitalist patriarchy. Even after years of research into this topic, I find a femvertisement can still be exciting, refreshing, and relevant. Since I am intrigued by the allure of this advertising trend, my goal is to draw back the curtain and expose the ventriloquial workings of these advertisements. I do not want to become a ventriloquist myself and dictate how these ads should be read, but rather I offer a critical lens that might help consumers of media understand the power of corporate culture.

## Feminist Positioning

One of the greatest challenges in my academic life is how to position myself as a feminist. In almost every academic setting in which I present my research, I am questioned about my feminism and where I fit into the many feminism(s) that exist in this cultural moment. For this reason, it is essential for me to outline more about my understanding of feminism and acknowledge my privilege before delving further into my findings. Growing up, I learned about feminism from an historical perspective rather than from a political one. In school, I was taught that feminists were women who fought for women’s rights—my rights—in the past. It was not until my final year of high school that I met an influential teacher who gave me a glimpse into women’s studies and feminist research. She was the first person who suggested to me that feminism was alive and important. After writing a senior English thesis on Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*, I went to this teacher and asked her what *this kind* of analysis was in university. She knew I was not referring to analyzing novels; she responded with “women’s studies.”

It was not until first year university that I was formally introduced to the idea of feminism. Like many of my peers, at age eighteen in 2007, I was not comfortable being a feminist. In the ten years since then, my feminism has blossomed, but it has been defined and formed by the academy. It has been through hearing lectures, reading, researching, and writing that I have come to understand feminism. I acknowledge that my privilege affords me the opportunity to engage with feminism in historical, theoretical and safe ways. My white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, Canadian privilege has informed my attitude; I am not forced to engage in militant, radical, or dangerous feminist action because many of the structures that oppress others bolster me. I do not have to fight for my basic rights and have been fortunate enough to have the time, skills, and economic support to undertake research such as this at a Canadian university. That being said, I still feel the tremors of an unequal gendered landscape and experience the ramifications of being a woman in a patriarchal culture. I outline these details because, as my research argues, the gateways of feminism matter. I acknowledge that other women have different gateways than me and, therefore, experience feminism differently.

While I would not limit my feminist understanding to Marxist or socialist feminism, I certainly adopt this approach in this project. I believe that class oppression and patriarchal oppression are in cahoots; the possibilities for feminism are significantly limited when they are asked to operate within a capitalist patriarchy. Zillah R. Eisenstein argues that socialist feminism is a response to a “mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring” (193). In Nancy Fraser’s book *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, she writes, “male dominance is intrinsic rather than accidental to classical capitalism” (38). Throughout this dissertation, I cast capitalism *and* patriarchy as equal culprits in women’s oppression and, therefore, tend to lean away from a purely Marxist perspective that suggests women’s equality will manifest as an organic byproduct of the socialist revolution (Marx). Returning once more to first-year women’s studies, I remember my professor flipping to a slide that depicted an optical illusion. The image, depending on how you looked at it, was either a

vase or two faces in profile. Summoning the work of Cathy Bray, my professor said: *you can't separate the faces of patriarchy from the vessel of capitalism*. Dubbed *Rubin's Vase*, the image shows that it is impossible to separate a product from the conditions that created it. In this thesis, I consider whether feminism and capitalism are at odds if capitalism and patriarchy are inherently connected. While some contemporary, successful liberal feminists—such as Sheryl Sandberg—may stand in as proof that “leaning in” helps women reach equality, other feminist voices have asked who is eligible to even reach for the *Forbes 500*.

Therefore, a socialist feminist approach to femvertising is best because one of the criticisms at the heart of my analysis is how femvertising perpetuates a neoliberal feminism. This kind of individualistic feminism—often enacted by shopping—is not sufficient to advance the rights and freedoms of women and, in fact, enables capitalist patriarchy. In chapter one, I outline research by Nancy Fraser in which she explains how second wave feminism helped usher in the very neoliberal feminism that femvertising boasts. Her analysis not only helps to trace the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism but also attempts to reinvigorate a political, feminist agenda. I want to be clear that, while I argue that a literal and ideological “buying into” femvertising is a flaccid engagement with feminism, I agree with Fraser that political engagement with feminism is still possible within capitalist patriarchy. History shows that significant advances have been made in advancing the rights of oppressed peoples—there is room to set new limits within hegemony—“hegemony does not mean domination...it is as active, ongoing process which is always temporary and contested” (Gill, 55).

Throughout this thesis, I refer to “feminism” as a unitary concept; however, I want to clarify that by talking about “feminism,” I am not trying to cast feminism as a singularity. On the contrary, feminism has many facets and formations and can be experienced by people in a multitude of ways<sup>1</sup>. A person’s feminism is informed by his, her

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that conceptualizing feminism in this way—that feminism is for everyone—echoes the neoliberal approach that I critique throughout this thesis. In chapter four, I nuance this approach and ask if making feminism accessible and approachable is part of the same problematic trend to make it marketable.

or their social, cultural, and economic positioning. The triumph of third-wave feminism—its intersectionality—reminds us that gender cannot be singled out as a single axis of identity but, rather, is part of a matrix of identity. Third-wave feminism also celebrates that the category of “women” is diverse and so it follows that the category of “feminism” is as well. I recognize feminism as a movement that has grappled with solidarity and has aimed to collect a front—unified or not—in order to battle oppression, patriarchy, and inequality of all sorts. In this manuscript, I will refer to feminism in the singular both for the sake of simplicity and legibility but also because I understand feminism as both diverse and coherent. Like a diamond that has thousands of facets but is still a diamond, feminism can be experienced in countless ways, at the same time that it is still a political movement. I understand feminism as a discursive field in which gender equality is negotiated, but at its best, feminism is inherently public (it is both open to everyone and operates separately from private enterprise), political (it fights for change that can be realized by law and felt in the real experiences of people), and powerful (it is feared because its potential is unlimited). Therefore, throughout this dissertation, I push against the foundations of liberal feminism. I think it is important for feminists to question whether the goals of feminism should be based on equality with men. The more I think about feminism’s place in the world, the more I wonder about its ability to completely re-imagine contemporary life, especially in feminism’s potential to rethink and then, perhaps, replace capitalism altogether. In a world that is suffering under the weight of human consumption and exploitation, I do not think the endgame of feminism should be the equal opportunity to pillage the planet for resources. While capitalism and feminism may be at odds, it is still possible for feminists to push against the boundaries of the system and create new capacities for economic, social, and political change.

## Research Significance

As my research has progressed, I feel I know less and less about what feminism is/means/should be and more about what feminism is not. Given the criteria I outline above,

I do not think it is possible to consider corporate feminism or femvertising as feminism. Rather than be public, political, and powerful, corporate feminism is private, consumer-based, and docile.

While capital has always had a say in the feminist discursive field and has used women's empowerment to sell women products, the current manifestation of femvertising to me represents an apex in neoliberal, capitalist ideology in which companies are not only allowed to borrow (certain) feminist sentiments to sell but, that corporations are becoming some of North America's most visible feminist "activists." Unlike research that celebrates "progressive" representations of women in the media, my work suggests that media can provide critical insights into the far-reaching nature of consumer ideology, and its impact on the future iterations of feminist activism. Specifically, by bringing femvertising into the academic dialogue—in conversation with other, prominent feminist media theorists—my research helps to advance the discussion regarding feminism's relationship with neoliberalism and capitalist patriarchy. My use of the ventriloquial metaphor adds an additional interdisciplinary layer to this project and contributes to the discussion surrounding women, voice, and silence.

# Chapter 1

## Claiming Feminist Credentials: An Introduction to Femvertising

### Introduction

In this first chapter, I will begin by offering a description of central femvertisments that will be referenced throughout this dissertation. Examples of femvertising from mainstream brands like *Cheerios*, *CoverGirl*, *Barbie*, and *Secret* will help set the stage for a chapter that will introduce the concept of femvertising. I hope to show here that contemporary companies are embracing feminist concerns across diverse product markets. Next, I outline key research questions and theoretical underpinnings that undergird my research. A vital question arises in this section: I ask why femvertising has emerged at this period of time and in what ways the trend impacts feminist discourse. Having laid this foundation, I will then outline my understanding of femvertising and trace its root to *Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty*. By identifying *Dove's* approach as the start of modern femvertising, I will offer an introductory critique of this advertising trend and raise important questions that will carry throughout this dissertation.

### Setting the Scene: Four Tableaus of Femvertising

In 2013, *Cheerios*—a staple in *General Mills*' breakfast empire—released a televised advertisement to the Canadian marketplace replacing its traditional advertising spokes-mascot, Buzz Bee, with a different focal point: *Cheerios' World Without Dieting Campaign*. The advertisement—one of two notable anti-dieting commercials from *Cheerios* in 2013—offers a series of vignettes showing young girls and teens consuming mediated, body-shaming messages about “getting ready for bikini season,” “celebrity secrets to a hot body,” and “how to get skinny in just one week.” Each vignette is carefully designed to alert the viewer to a problematic, gender-based issue: wide-eyed, young, pre-

teen girls are devouring sexist, fat-shaming messages to their detriment. Read together, these vignettes depict the ubiquity of dieting appeals and North American culture's obsession with female thinness. The advert then continues to define "dietainment" as "unhealthy diet messages disguised as entertainment" that, according to this text, is a disturbing trend that "we need to stop from reaching our girls" (0:24). The commercial closes with an appeal to sign a petition to "help Multi-Grain *Cheerios* create a world without dieting" (0:28). In this advert, *Cheerios* casts itself as an ally to women and girls by creating awareness about a North-American dieting epidemic that specifically targets young women. The advertisement pairs with the social media tag #worldwithoutdieting.

In the same year, *CoverGirl's* "#girlscan: Women Empowerment" advertisement, featuring globally recognized celebrities Ellen DeGeneres, P!nk, Sofia Vergara, Natalie Wiebe, Becky G, Queen Latifa, Katy Perry, and Janelle Monae went viral. The commercial, a highly edited series of interviews, starts off by lamenting the phrase "Girls Can't..." is an ubiquitous social attitude that women systemically hear and feel. Narrated by Ellen DeGeneres, the commercial acknowledges the limiting social perception of women. The advertisement continues with each celebrity filling in the phrase "Girls Can't..." with the trait she is most known for—girls can't *rock* (P!nk), girls can't *be strong* (Katy Perry), girls can't *check* (Natalie Wiebe), girls can't *be funny* (Ellen DeGeneres) etc.— suggesting that each celebrity was told, either directly or indirectly, that she would not succeed in the very trait for which she is now famous. The highly edited cuts become faster until the barrage of "girls can'ts" builds to a climax, and then, in the silence, comes the turning point: "Girls Can!" The ad goes on to tell viewers that they can be whatever they want to be as long as they are "courageous" (0:31), that they "challenge everything" (0:37), all the while "being themselves" (0:47). The advertisement calls on women to lean in, in the style of Sheryl Sandberg's infamous "how to" guide for women in business, and "rap, be funny, be off-the-wall, rock, be strong, and run the show." The advertisement pairs with the social media tag #girlscan.

In 2015, *Barbie* debuted its *Imagine the Possibilities* campaign with an advertisement that uses hidden camera footage to reveal “what happens when girls are free to imagine they can be anything.” In the spirit of “playing house”, young girls are placed in high-profile jobs to the surprise of their real life clients: a 6 year-old professor begins a lecture on the brain to her incredulous class of sleepy twenty-something students; a pig-tailed veterinarian welcomes her confused client; a feisty coach greets her team of fully-grown soccer brutes; a curly-haired girl chats on her cellphone about her “great day at the office” as she wheels her carry-on around the airport; another young lady leads a tour through a natural history museum. After tickling the audience with scenes of these determined and precocious girls, the scene cuts back to the professor who is in the middle of telling her class the difference between the human brain and the dog brain. Suddenly, the scene transforms from her at the front of a lecture hall to her maneuvering a *Barbie* professor in front of a *Barbie* class in her sunlit playroom. A pink filter glosses over the screen: “When a girl plays with *Barbie*, she imagines everything she can become.” The advertisement pairs with the social media tag #youcanbeanything.

In 2016, *Secret* released two advertisements to market its deodorant to women as the only deodorant that could handle the “stress test”. In the first commercial, a young woman practices a speech to her boss in the office bathroom mirror—her efforts interrupted by her own nerves, tongue-tied attempts at words and desperation to get her message out: “Mr. Kendall, I need to ask you a favour—it’s not really a favour—Mr. Kendall, I worked on the Padstow team actually and we won the business...I mean, I just helped...” Another attempt: “Bob...Bobby...how’s it going? You’re looking great, that tie is super sick.” Too casual—another try: “You know, Todd makes more than I do and he’s only worked here for two years. You know, I’m also a really great leader.” Suddenly, just as our protagonist has hit her stride, a toilet flushes: she realizes she has not been alone during her self-talk, pump-up session. Embarrassed, she looks down at the sink while another—noticeably older—female colleague approaches the hand-washing station. As she washes her hands, this colleague looks at the protagonist and says with vigor: “Do it.” Bolstered by a show of solidarity and support, our protagonist looks back in the mirror and prepares herself for



battle. On the screen appears “Stress test #4528: At 3 o’clock—Lucy does her part—to close the wage gap. *Secret*: Stress Tested for Women.”

*Secret*’s second commercial opens on a young, heterosexual, African-American couple holding hands at a restaurant. The young woman at the table looks nervous when the server brings over a fortune cookie for her partner. The man cracks open his cookie while he asks his girlfriend where her cookie is. She shrugs off his concern. The man pulls out his fortune, which reads, “Andy I want to ask you something.” Confused, the man says, “This message is addressed to me.” The young woman implores, “Yes” hoping that he—like the audience—will clue into the proposal that’s about to happen. Instead, the man asks, “Who do you think sent this? What would they want to ask me? Okay, this is really freaking me out. I don’t get it. This is weird—this is like a scary movie almost. Like, my name is on this fortune. *Inside* of a fortune cookie.” Finally, the young woman moves out of the booth and onto her knee and the text on the screen reads “Stress test #5182” as she pulls out a gold ring she says, “Andy, shut up”. The text continues: “Claire’s act of romance—flips the script—on a centuries old tradition. *Secret*: Stress Tested for Women.” The advertisement pairs with the social media tag #stresstest.

Something is going on in the world of advertising—mainstream, North American brands are explicitly addressing issues of dietainment, lack of female empowerment, limited roles for women in high-level jobs, the wage gap, and antiquated marriage traditions. This smattering of feminist concerns (which can be traced back to first-wave feminism) is a sudden and noticeable departure from how brands have traditionally appealed to women. Not long ago, the advertising landscape was defined by post-feminism; being a “feminist” or saying something “feminist” was not only taboo, but it also seemed to undermine the successes of the women’s movements of the last century. At that time, feminist theorists—critical of the backlash against feminism—grappled with the idea that the social movement was “at once passé and monstrously triumphant” (Thornham in Gamble, 42). My research shows that this is still the case but it appears as if feminism’s so-called passé qualities—its open discussion of women’s oppression—are being resuscitated

by big brands. Further, rather than be “monstrously triumphant” in a post-feminist sense (i.e. feminism has completed her mission), certain forms of feminism have now become monstrously profitable. At the turn of the new millennium, many feminists were concerned that the movement would not survive the backlash often associated with post-feminism, especially as young women actively rejected the feminist label as too political and out of fashion (Gamble, 43-54). Feminism needed a makeover if it was going to appeal to a burgeoning, label-averse, Millennial demographic and feminists nostalgic for a broad-based women’s movement called for a quick resuscitation (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 5). For many feminist political activists, this was a matter of life and death. My research has shown that feminists were eager to pass the torch to the next generation and avoid the paradigm that feminism was dead: “Whatever we call it, and whatever form it takes, it is essential that women continue to advance their cause into the next millennium” (Gamble, 54). At the heart of my analysis lies the assertion that feminism’s form matters. The above quotation is a desperate plea to advance the feminist cause; however, I am not sure that is possible in “whatever form [feminism] takes”, particularly if that form is femvertising.

My research into femvertising has led me to question liberal feminism’s current entanglement with capitalism. While I am very much welcomed into a liberal feminism defined by equality, individual choice, personal liberty, and freedom of expression, I want to critique neoliberal feminism in this analysis. I know my privilege makes me eligible for this specific feminist outlook but my goal is to step outside of this comfort zone in order to question whether feminism and capitalism are compatible. Scholarship by Nancy Fraser in *Fortunes of Feminism* entertains the notion that feminism’s contemporary relationship with capitalism was formed, in part, by the aims of second-wave feminism. Fraser writes, “In a cruel twist of fate, I fear that the movement for women’s liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society. That would explain how it came to pass that feminist ideas that once formed part of a radical worldview are increasingly expressed in individualist terms” (Fraser). Fraser traces—with the benefit of hindsight—how some of the priorities of the second wave such as the family wage, careerism and social solidarity have fueled individualism in feminism. In many ways, Fraser argues that some feminist ideas have been recuperated by neoliberalism. Fraser’s

argument is significant; she offers a backdrop that helps to explain phenomena like femvertising.

Further, I think Fraser's most valuable insight is that she problematizes the neoliberal nature of identity politics by saying, "Worse still, the feminist turn to identity politics dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality." (Fraser). Fraser's recent work helps to contextualize femvertising because she clearly explains—and owns—how ideals pioneered by feminists now serve different ends. Fraser reminds me of the second-wave's vibrant criticism of capitalism and neoliberalism and points to the disturbing lack of such criticisms in some iterations of third-wave feminism. She argues that second-wave feminism's acceptance of "a new form of liberalism, able to grant women as well as men the goods of individual autonomy, increased choice, and meritocratic advancement" *contributed* to the development of the contemporary feminist moment. Fraser urges feminists not to divorce their second-wave goals but, rather, to reclaim them from neoliberalism. Her call to action includes "strengthening the public powers needed to constrain capital for the sake of justice." I agree with Fraser's analysis and argue in this thesis that femvertising does not constrain capital to help advance feminist ideals. Rather, capitalism constrains feminism in this scenario, which pulls feminists further away from resisting neoliberalism.

I see corporate feminism—of which femvertising is a cogent, tangible example—as a manifestation of Fraser's critique. Defined by feminism's deployment through the market, corporate feminism keeps feminist concerns alive but at a great expense. Rooted in a superficial commitment to advance the role of women in North American society, corporate feminism is committed to maintaining the economic status quo in order to profit from a group of consumers who are eager to exercise their feminism. Moreover, corporate feminism has allowed many "precarious feminists"—those who believe in feminist aims but dislike the label of "feminist"—to practice their feminism again (Buschman & Lenart). My concern with this iteration of feminism—itself a mutation of post-feminism—is that, while the marketplace may offer feminism the soapbox it so desperately needs; it has also contained feminism in ways that, I think, limits its possibilities. In particular, femvertising

sells a very specific kind of neoliberal feminism that bolsters faith in capitalism and ignores the real intersectional character at the heart of contemporary feminism.

One of the best ways to witness corporate feminism at work is to observe the contemporary advertising landscape. Since 2013, a surge of advertisements that adopt feminist concerns have flooded mainstream television and social media platforms. It appears that being on-trend in the advertising world is to have a seat on the feminist bandwagon. The companies outlined at the outset of this chapter—*Cheerios*, *Cover Girl*, *Barbie*, and *Secret*—are just some of the brands espousing feminist concerns. The emergence of femvertising has not been a slow, steady increase. On the contrary, femvertising is a very recent trend that has dominated the advertising landscape suddenly and with force. Writing in 2015 for *The Telegraph*, Clair Cohen argues that ads featuring feminist concerns emerged within the span of a year: “Over the last year, we’ve seen women in ad campaigns dispel negative stereotypes (#LikeAGirl by *Always*); sweat it out at the gym (This Girl Can—*Sport England*); stop being self-critical (*Dove* again); talk about periods (Hello Flo) and quit saying “sorry” (*Pantene*)”. While many corporations target their advertising to women—still the Chief Purchasing Officers of the home—femVERTISEMENTS appear to use an intrepid rhetorical strategy that specifically adopts a feminist tone to appeal to consumers. Rather than show their product being enjoyed in their commercials (or sometimes even used!), advertisers who deploy femvertising are instead addressing prevalent, gendered inequities that linger in North American society. Some of these companies are even trying to do something about certain kinds of widespread gender inequity. In her article, Cohen interviews *Mediacom* CEO Karen Blackett, who confirms a shift away from the aspirational and toward the experiential in the advertising industry. Cohen writes, “There’s been a groundswell towards brands telling the truth and getting behind a cause...once upon a time ads were aspirational. But now they have to tell real stories, based on what we all experience.” Blackett shows that femvertising is part of a wider trend in the advertising realm, one in which brands are trying to craft and communicate a social conscience. Care and interest in women’s rights have been a noticeable subsidiary of this effort. Rudimentary market research will show that North

American women still experience pervasive inequality despite generations of feminist activism. Rowe-Finkbeiner argues that the freedoms won by the feminist movement are not an antidote to contemporary struggles. She states,

Yes, advances have been made. But in spite of these advances, many barriers to women's equality still stand: some, like earning disparities between men and women, recede only to reappear later in life; others, like the 'second shift' working mothers face at home, come hand in hand with newly minted modern lifestyles; and women—especially minority and working-class women, who were the hardest hit by gender and economic inequality a generation ago—have gained the least. Today's young women aren't free and clear of the binding ties of inequality. And those ties could get downright restricting without the voices of young women in electoral politics. (3)

Rowe-Finkbeiner shows that an argument about achieved gender equality is futile for two reasons; first, women and those oppressed by patriarchy have never achieved real equality in patriarchal society and second, because rights awarded can also be stripped away at any point. She reminds young feminists “those rights haven't been around for all that long. And all can be taken away” (3). Since many women struggle with gendered oppression (some more than others depending on their racial, social, and economic positioning), it follows that corporations would use those feelings and experiences to relate to their customers in a more sophisticated, “female-friendly” way. For example, perhaps this paradigm shift prompted *Special K* to retire its ads promoting dieting (“What will you gain when you lose?”) in favour of their 2015 #ownit campaign that reveals the fact that “97% of women have an “*I hate my body*” moment every single day.” Rather than encourage women to eat *Special K* to help them achieve their weight loss goals, the company now stands behind the message that “100% of women can change something more important than the size of our butt...we can change our perspective...what if we're nicer to ourselves and put good things in our bodies?” Other than ask the consumer to classify *Special K* as a “good thing” to put in our bodies, this particular appeal does little to advertise cereal, and rather devotes its expensive ad time to empowering individual women to see their bodies differently and opt out of the yo-yo weight loss rat race. What happened to the *Special K Challenge* where consumers were encouraged to replace two meals a day with *Special K* products for two weeks to lose one jeans size? It might seem like *Special K's* shift in focus is a giant step forward for an industry that has traditionally benefitted from the control and objectification

of women. Those that celebrate “pro-female” representations of women in the media might say that this is an example of feminism. It might appear that dozens of corporations care more about the advancement and health of women than about dollars in their bank account.

There’s the rub: these advertisements, with all their simmering so-called “feminist” punch, are just that—advertisements. While they may promote their products in a different way, companies that employ femvertising do so to use feminism for profit. And while femvertising may appear to be a game changer in the industry, I argue that it is a game changer for one significant reason: femvertising’s existence proves that, in a capitalist patriarchy, even feminism is for sale. Rather than continue to challenge the oppressive system of capitalism, feminism has become capital’s ally. To use Nancy Fraser’s terms, feminism has become the “handmaiden” of capitalism.

## Behind the Scenes: Background, Research Questions, and Theoretical Underpinnings

### Background: Dangerous Liaisons

Baking feminism into advertising has become a widespread trend where “the hard sell has been ‘pinkwashed<sup>2</sup>’ and replaced by something resembling a social conscience” (Cohen). The aim of my analysis is to discover how and with what effect femvertising communicates “a social conscience” to consumers and how femvertising differs from previous appeals to the historically valuable female consumer. Femvertising is part of a wider movement toward cause marketing in which “corporations...incorporate emancipatory ideals into marketing campaigns, often with limited transformative outcomes” (Johnston and Taylor, 941). I contend that femvertising is in particular need of evaluation because it is a specific object of study that exemplifies the troubling marriage between feminism and capitalist consumer culture. It is outside the scope of this project to

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen’s article deploys the portmanteau “pinkwashing” to allude to how companies use a pro-female rhetoric in their cause marketing. However, the term “pinkwashing” can also more specifically describe a variety of marketing products through an appeal of LGBTQ friendliness. In both cases, pinkwashing can be understood as a company’s effort to be perceived as tolerant and progressive.

compare and contrast femvertising with other forms of cause marketing—greenwashing is one such example—however, I do want to acknowledge that femvertising can be correlated to other so-called “progressive” marketing campaigns. In the case of femvertising, I think the priority task is to define and understand femvertising before juxtaposing it to other cause marketing tactics. While my research focuses on femvertising, I am also interested in how my research on this topic informs wider questions about feminism’s current status in capitalism. In this section, I will outline some background information on my topic of study as well as address some key research questions that have guided my work.

The relationship between feminism and capitalism is far from new; the women’s movement has always had to negotiate with the forces of capitalism. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will go deeper into the history of this dynamic; however, for the purposes of this chapter, I will consider some terms that directly relate to femvertising. Femvertising is not yet a well-documented phenomenon in academia and so my research has relied on interdisciplinary scholarship for both context and theory; often, I apply established concepts to femvertising to illuminate it. Some scholars and media critics have tried to name the relationship at the heart of femvertising without using femvertising as an object of study. For example, in their study of the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*, Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor talk about “feminist consumerism.” Myra MacDonald refers to “recuperation” when it comes to the act of borrowing social causes for the sake of big business. Rosalind Gill refers to “commodity feminism” when she describes the ways in which businesses tried to capitalize on female freedom in the 1980s and 1990s.

Johnston and Taylor’s analysis of *Dove*, which I outline in a later section of this chapter, helps to start the discussion about the problems with what they call “feminist consumerism.” Their use of this term is important in understanding the implications of blurred lines between capitalism and feminism. For Myra MacDonald, pairing social justice causes and advertising is an established and savvy approach to business. MacDonald writes, “borrowing from an alternative discourse to add zest to your creativity is a regular trick in advertising and other forms of popular culture. Known in cultural studies as a process of

‘recuperation’...this manoeuver pretends to respond to the competing ideology but ignores its ideological challenge” (MacDonald, 56). To use MacDonald’s terms, femvertising is recuperation at its best. By adopting the tone, language, and attitudes of feminism to speak to consumers, femvertising broadcasts an over-generalized, proxy-feminism that is jarring enough to excite customers, but safe enough to maintain capitalist structure. Likewise, Rosalind Gill, describes “commodity feminism” as “a bid to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism while simultaneously ‘domesticating’ its critique of advertising and the media” (84). Together, Johnston & Taylor, MacDonald, and Gill offer theoretical frames that can be brought into a discussion of femvertising. I use these useful terms throughout this thesis but offer an original contribution in that my work focuses on contemporary advertising (2004-2017), I deploy performance theory to illuminate the rhetorical strategies of femvertising, and I locate “femvertising” in diverse media examples to show its pervasive nature. Indeed, feminist scholars offer preliminary clues as to the impacts of consumerist ploys masked as feminist. I hope to join their discussion and make a scholarly contribution by bringing femvertising into the mix. I hope this work is just the start of the conversation.

Femvertising must be scrutinized through the lens of feminist media studies scholarship. Feminist media scholars and critics have historically been powerful voices in discussions around media representations of women. Feminists of the 1960s and 1970s were exposed to an unprecedented number of media representations; it follows that media became a major site of feminist research, criticism, and activism. Academics in fields like cultural and communication studies started to hone in on the ever-growing landscape of media representations. A 1978 article by Gaye Tuchman considers “the symbolic annihilation of women in the mass media.” In it, Tuchman argues how a mixture of “absence”, “trivialization”, and “condemnation” was destroying women. In 1973, Laura Mulvey first presented “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” in which she presented the idea of the male gaze and the characterization of women’s “to-be-looked-at-ness.” At the same time, women working in media and broadcasting were speaking out about limited and limiting opportunities for women in the media industry. Meanwhile, consumers of media were concerned about the patronizing and objectifying representations of women in the



popular media. In 1979, Jean Kilborne released *Killing Us Softly*, a groundbreaking documentary film that has helped to inspire discussions about gender representation and advertising. *Killing Us Softly* now has four iterations (1979, 1987, 2000, 2010); these films have helped to pave the way for contemporary discussions of how advertising represents gender.

One of most significant shifts in feminist media studies from the 1960s and 1970s to now is how perspectives on media representations have diversified. According to Rosalind Gill, “compared with the certainty and confidence of early critique, today’s feminist media scholar is more tentative, less certain. Looking across the field there is no one single type of critical practice but a diversity, with very different perspectives” (38). For example, in the early 2000s, increased sexualization of female bodies in mainstream media content was—and still is—a subject of debate. In 2004, Feona Attwood argued that sexual displays had developed a positive connotation. She points to an advertisement for Opium perfume and argues that image can signal sexual autonomy and assertiveness. On the other hand, critics (Merskin, 2003; McRobbie, 2004) also show concern regarding the normalization of sexualized images of women, particularly in the “mainstreaming” of pornography (Gill, 38). In feminist media studies, critiques can be diametrically opposed to one another and yet all points of view help to enrich the feminist discussion of media.

Other theorists such as Tania Modleski (1982), Janice Radway (1984), Christine Geraghty (1991) Susan J. Douglas (1994) Amanda Lotz (2007), and Merri Lisa Johnson (2007) have considered how pleasure plays into media consumption. Theorists like these have helped to advance discussions around female media consumption—particularly when it comes to media that women enjoy consuming. Continued engagement with mediated texts by feminist media critics widened the field of feminist media studies but, in turn, this engagement can also reinforce essentialist notions of gender. Feminist media theorists who consider “women’s culture” can display insensitivity to the wide array of differences *between* women. Such an approach can also assume gender as the leading facet of identity for all women. Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of a “matrix of domination” has usefully complicated this idea and addresses the intimate link between all forms of oppression.

Other feminist media scholars like Rosalind Gill, whose work I deploy throughout this analysis, have made significant contributions to the field. Particularly, Gill's work has developed from a broad analysis of representation of gender across news, advertising, talk shows, magazines and contemporary screen and paperback romances (2007) to how beauty politics operate in contemporary neoliberal culture (2017). Likewise, Angela McRobbie has considered feminism and youth culture (2000) as well as how neoliberalism and feminism intersect in contemporary Western democracies (2010). While feminist media studies scholarship has laid a foundation for the discussion of femvertising, the attention to neoliberalism and capitalism that I pay in this analysis leads me back to foundational Marxist theory. At the core of Marx's intellectual quest is to understand why the working class acquiesces to a system in which they are exploited. The media's ideological role in organizing society points to one significant possibility that Marx and Engels assert in *The German Ideology*: "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (60). It is from this perspective that I will consider femvertising.

## Research Questions

Whatever the reason for deploying femvertising—whether it be genuine good-intentions or a commitment to feminist pursuits through a corporate responsibility portfolio—corporations that do so aid in the commodification of everyday life in which it appears nothing is immune from a neoliberal leaning. When I refer to neoliberalism, I am not only talking about the political-right, pro-market approach reawakened in the 1980s by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan. I mean to summon neoliberalism as a widespread, ideological perspective in which social reality is made up of individuals. Reordering social reality in such a way has significant implications; especially in the way neoliberalism organizes society into winners and losers:

We are now urged to think of ourselves as proprietors of our own talents and initiative, how glibly we are told to compete and adapt. You see the extent to which a language formerly confined to chalkboard simplifications describing

commodity markets (competition, perfect information, rational behaviour) has been applied to all of society, until it has invaded the grit of our personal lives, and how the attitude of the salesman has become enmeshed in all modes of self-expression. In short, “neoliberalism” is not simply a name for pro-market policies, or for the compromises with finance capitalism made by failing social democratic parties. It is a name for a premise that, quietly, has come to regulate all we practise and believe: that competition is the only legitimate organising principle for human activity. (Metcalf)

Stephen Metcalf poetically draws attention to ways neoliberalism re-organizes life, particularly in its insistence on competition. Competition is neoliberalism’s unrealistic expectation because not all individuals are on an equal playing field in which to compete; it takes much more than tenacious, tunnel-visioned initiative to achieve capitalism’s idea of success. As such, Angela McRobbie cautions, “feminism has entered a dangerous liaison with neoliberalism” (9). As described above, Nancy Fraser issues a similar warning when she writes, “I fear that the movement for women’s liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society” (Fraser). This dissertation considers femvertising as a clear manifestation of the “dangerous liaison” that McRobbie and Fraser identify.

In this analysis, the term capitalism describes an economic and political system based on private ownership. As I have outlined, my socialist feminist approach sees hegemonic patriarchy as part of capitalism. In this document, when I refer to “capitalism”, I do mean to evoke “patriarchal capitalism” and often say so explicitly. Sometimes, I refer to late or contemporary capitalism too, a term that specifically captures our present capitalist system and not the early capitalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Late-capitalism, especially when discussed in conjunction with Bauman’s work, reflects the “society of consumers” that Bauman defines as “the kind of society that promotes, encourages or enforces the choice of a consumerist lifestyle and life strategy and dislikes all alternative cultural options” (Bauman, 53).

In this analysis I aim to better understand the rhetoric, reception, and hazards of femvertising by asking questions such as: Why is feminism the hot advertising trend in this

contemporary moment? How does this arm of corporate feminism both contribute to feminist discourse, and in the same instant, contain certain facets of feminism's discursive field within patriarchal capitalism? Is femvertising changing how feminism is enacted in capitalist patriarchy and in what ways should feminist discourse be protected from corporate contributors? Are feminist messages that stem from a profit imperative helpful in the feminist discursive field? Asking and proposing answers to some of these questions will contribute to the ongoing discussion in feminist research circles regarding the affordances and restrictions placed upon feminist voices, specifically in mediated, corporate environments. If corporations have become a leader in communicating feminism<sup>3</sup>, how are people to exercise their feminism in a capitalist patriarchy? What happens when the market is afforded so much room in the conversation? My analysis will take aim at these questions in subsequent chapters.

## Theoretical Underpinnings I: Feminism/Post-Feminism, Feminist/Non-Feminist

Feminism is a contested, discursive field. According to feminist theatre scholar Kim Solga, "'Feminism' remains a contentious term...but for me it is the best and most accurate term to use when thinking about gendered experience from a human rights perspective" (1). Like Solga, when I refer to feminism, I am speaking of a political, human rights movement that, broadly speaking, strives to combat patriarchal oppression, challenge gendered ideology, and improve the lives of those who suffer under patriarchy—with an emphasis on women and girls—on a global scale. Despite these prominent and noble goals, the meaning of feminism is not permanently fixed: "meanings are discursively created and are constantly in flux, as reality is an arena of contestation for particular ways of constructing how we see the world" (Sandlin & Maudlin, 189). Often reductively depicted by the metaphor of waves, feminism has never been a unified front; rather, the movement struggles—as it always has—with internal and external criticisms. Gill writes, "Feminist work over the last two decades has had to reshape itself and has done so largely by

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<sup>3</sup> Albeit a slim facet of feminism.

engaging with new ideas about identity, location and difference and by increasingly paying attention to the history and politics of postcoloniality and imperialism... The urgency of the task was driven by vocal critique of feminism's exclusions by black and Third World women" (26). Early feminism—dominated by privileged, First World, heterosexual, white women—was charged with false universalism. One of the most famous critiques of second-wave feminism's universalism is bell hooks' critique of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. hooks rightly pointed out that "the problem with no name" affected a very select group of upper middle-class, married white women and, certainly not *all* American women. While feminist dialogue is often preoccupied with the significant characteristics of each wave (i.e. first wave feminism is often associated with liberal feminism and suffrage), it is vital to consider the movement as a whole and how each wave of feminism has supported and informed the next. When it comes to the word "feminist", I value the fruitful feminist discussion around terminology—particularly in determining what feminism is nowadays. At the same time, I tend to agree with feminist scholar Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner when she urges feminists to "move beyond the word—because while we're preoccupied debating the limitations of the term, our sexual and social landscape, our rights and freedoms, are being shaped... and not by women" (7). Identifying feminism as a field that is always under consideration and re-consideration is important because this characterization helps feminists deploy feminism in spite of its fraught terrain.

Feminism has become, necessarily, more diversified and intersectional since the third wave crashed ashore; historically, feminism has excluded more than it has included in the political fight for gender equality. Since the 1960s, the feminist movement has become a richer and more representational movement due to the inclusion of women of colour, members of the LGBTQ community, male allies, and women of differing abilities, to name a few. Feminism can mean different things to everyone; it is—theoretically—*for* everyone. However, feminism's inclusivity has its limitations. For example, many young people are not exposed to gender studies in grade school and, therefore, learning feminist theory can be considered a privilege of those in the middle-upper class who attend university. Likewise, as my research will show, more popular forms of feminism—of which

femvertising is a part—is still largely rooted in a liberal feminist ideology. Radical, political feminism is still significantly marginalized. When it comes the workplace, not all women are able to “lean in” in the boardroom because structural inequality prevents them from earning more than minimum wage. Significantly, white supremacy is still a dominant ideology, especially since the election of Donald Trump; women of colour are still combatting overt, violent racial oppression as well as the more subtle and insidious “taken for grantedness” of white supremacy. Finally, while men continue to be invited into feminism, many resent the movement, and instead have lobbied for “men’s rights” groups that are, often, deeply misogynistic. Therefore, too soon after the progress of intersectional, third wave feminism—perhaps because of its commitment to individualism—post-feminist attitudes washed ashore.

Post-feminism is a widely-debated term. Indeed, finding a consensus around its definition is almost impossible. For Sarah Gamble, “even the most cursory reading of texts tagged with the ‘postfeminist’ label reveals that there is little agreement among those with whom it is popularly associated as to a central canon or agenda” (43). I think post-feminism is so confusing because it is at once both celebratory and pejorative. Rosalind Gill expresses this dichotomy well when she says, “everywhere, it seems, feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated” (Gill, 1). Post-feminism (from my perspective) argues that feminism writ-large has achieved what it set out to do, and therefore, has become unnecessary in contemporary life. I think the post-feminist, premature celebration of the women’s movement is indicative of how privilege can allow for some women to feel free from gendered oppression. This, coupled with contemporary capitalism’s commitment to individualism, made it “easy to be too optimistic and to take one’s own privileged position as representative, which can lead to the conclusion that the time for feminism is past, and that those who still cling to activist principles are deluded and fanatical” (Gamble, 53). I see post-feminism as the byproduct of the shift from second-wave feminism to third-wave feminism. When broad-based, so-called “cohesive” second wave feminism expanded into third-wave feminism, post-feminism was also born. Therefore, contemporary feminism, I think, is characterized by the simultaneity

of third-wave feminism *and* post-feminism; for that reason, sometimes, it can be hard to tease the two apart. As I will show in this thesis, femvertising depicts a so-called “diverse” disguise; however, because it operates in the service of capitalism, is really post-feminist at its core.

Many scholars (see Gamble 43-54) rejected post-feminism as a premature categorization for a movement that still had much to accomplish. As a result, feminism under this paradigm became taboo, redundant, and indulgent for women, especially those in Westernized capitalist societies who benefitted from the triumphs of prior feminist efforts. Arguably, “many women feel very safe on the streets alone; many women feel able to move through the world as they please. These gains, these freedoms, are what feminism has, for over a hundred years now, been fighting for. This is the bright, cheerful, front-of-house view. If [we] glance backstage for a moment, however, the picture darkens” (Solga, 6). For Solga, understanding post-feminism depends on perspective. Third-wave feminists are still asking the tough questions: who gets to feel “safe” walking down the street at night? Which women get the cheerful “front of house” view? How is women’s so-called “freedom” still plagued by toxic masculinity? Even the assumption that the most privileged women in North American society—white, rich, heterosexual, beautiful, able-bodied celebrities—enjoy unbridled freedom is unfounded. Predatory men like Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, and Louis C.K.—and Jian Ghomeshi here in Canada—are finally being called out for their violence against women. It becomes clear that neoliberal thinking is the root of the problem when it comes to contemporary feminism; the insistence on the individual should be the target of scrutiny<sup>4</sup> because this ideology soaks through contemporary feminism (both third-

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<sup>4</sup> A good example of post-feminist rhetoric is Joss Whedon’s 2013 keynote speech at Equality Now’s *Make Equality Reality* benefit in Beverly Hills, California. In his speech, Whedon publically expressed his “hate” for the word “feminist.” The significance of his denouncement of the word “feminist” at an event chaired by Gloria Steinem with the goal of “advancing legal and system change to make equality a reality for every woman and every girl, everywhere” is surprising. Not only is Whedon a man, his pitch to replace the word feminist with “genderist” is, quite literally, post-feminist and echoes, for example, the pervasive and premature exchange of “Women’s Studies” for “Gender Studies” programs in the academy. Regardless, Whedon “would like this word [genderist] to become the new racist. [He] would like a word that recognizes [that] there was a shameful past before we realized that all people were created equal and we are past that and every evolved human being who is intelligent and educated and compassionate is past that.” Whedon’s speech is laden with neo-liberal, post-feminist rhetoric: as he justifies this new word, he gestures upstage to “the

wave and post). The issues with this neoliberal flavour are plentiful, but for now, it should be made clear that neoliberalism fosters a feminism that operates at the level of the individual. As I will show throughout this dissertation, neoliberal ideology makes room for consumer feminism—in which feminists can buy their way into a very commodified movement. While this phenomenon might appear harmless—especially if that consumer really is passionate about political, feminist gains—my concern is that neoliberal thinking encourages all of us to forget about those around us. If both third-wave feminism and post-feminism are infested with neoliberal ideology, I wonder if those that still believe in the feminist cause fall into the trap of post-feminism. To return to Solga’s example, a post-feminist might argue that all people can walk down the street alone at night. A third-wave feminist might only worry about her own ability to walk down the street alone at night. I think both of these perspectives lose sight of the feminist commitment to solidarity and intersectionality. Additionally, privileging the individual also enables a capitalist economic system, which Marxist and socialist feminist have already proven to be incompatible with feminist aims. Continuing this discussion leads to questions about the kinds of choices women have in contemporary North America. As I will discuss later in chapter four, it becomes important to consider how freedom and choice are exercised through the marketplace when neoliberalism is the dominant paradigm.

According to Susan J. Douglas, the term “post-feminism” is now outdated. Writing in 2010, Douglas argues that “post-feminism” is no longer sufficient to describe contemporary gender relations. For Douglas, “[post-feminism] has gotten gummed up by too many conflicting definitions. And besides, this term suggests that somehow feminism is at the root of this when it isn’t—it’s good, old-fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy” (10). Douglas argues that the term “post-feminism” did not originate by virtue of feminist pursuits being achieved, but by the *perceived* success of the movement by a largely patriarchal media. Gamble agrees with this origination when she traces post-feminism “from within the media in the early 1980s, [the

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past” thus symbolically pushing feminism out of the present moment. Even at an event specifically dedicated to the feminist aim of improving the lives of women and girls everywhere, post-feminism rears its ugly head.



term] has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement” (44). Myra MacDonald goes further to suggest that the root of post-feminism rests in advertising. She writes, “by the later 1980s and 1990s, consumer discourses [took] a new approach to feminism. Believing that feminism’s battles had been won, and that its ideology was now harmless by being out of date, advertisers *created*<sup>5</sup> “postfeminism” as a utopia where women could do whatever they pleased, provided they had sufficient will and enthusiasm” (italics added, 560). When read together, Douglas, Gamble, and MacDonald’s definitions point to patriarchal capitalism as the birthplace of post-feminist ideology, and yet somehow, the muddiness of the term limits critical interaction with its heritage. I think it is important to remember that while post-feminism was being debated, feminists were (and still are) debating the future of feminism—particularly in how to “rebrand” feminism for younger generations. While I will discuss the problematic implications of “branding” feminism more in chapter three, it is important to state here that debates about feminism’s future were happening in third-wave circles and the movement as a whole was dealing with the anxiety of losing the tried-and-true methods of the first and second-wave feminist fronts. This anxiety is not unfounded, particularly because, as Gill notes, “what is striking is the degree of fit between the autonomous post-feminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism” (260). While early waves of feminism showed a commitment to solidarity, individualism is the contemporary structure of feeling. Even when dealing with feminist issues, “a grammar of individualism underpins all these notions—such that even experiences of racism or homophobia or domestic violence are framed in exclusively personal terms in a way that turns the idea of the personal is political on its head” (259). Throughout her work, Gill continually reframes post-feminism as a sensibility (as opposed to just an epistemological perspective, a historical shift, or a backlash) and that post-feminist media culture should be “our critical object” (254).

Rather than talk about post-feminism, Douglas suggests that Western society’s relationship to feminism is best depicted by the complementary terms *enlightened sexism*

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<sup>5</sup> The roots of post-feminism can be traced in other sites beyond media and advertising.

and *embedded feminism*. Douglas argues that the crowded dialogue surrounding post-feminism, particularly its contested nature, makes it necessary to deploy more specific and nuanced terms. For Douglas, enlightened sexism is a useful starting place:

...[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. After all, these images (think Pussycat Dolls, *The Bachelor*, *Are You Hot?* the hour-and-a-half catfight on *Bride Wars*) can’t possibly undermine women’s equality at this late date, right? More to the point, enlightened sexism sells the line that it is precisely through women’s calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and indeed will embrace. (9-10)

While Douglas does not address femvertising—*The Rise of Enlightened Sexism* came out in 2010 before the term entered the cultural discourse—her analysis helps to make my discussion and criticism of femvertising possible. In her book, she proves the existence of enlightened sexism across many media platforms and illuminates that post-feminism is too vague a term to describe the resurrection of safe, “wink-wink,” sexism in Western culture<sup>6</sup>. Enlightened sexism is made possible by its sister-term *embedded feminism*: “the way in which women’s achievements, or their desire for achievement, are simply part of the cultural landscape. Feminism is no longer “outside” of the media as it was in 1970, when women staged a sit-in at the stereotype-perpetuating *Ladies’ Home Journal* or gave awards for the most sexist, offensive ads... Today, feminist gains, attitudes, and achievements are woven into our cultural fabric” (9). Douglas is right: feminism is embedded in our cultural life and manifests in many forms. Femvertising is an apt example of embedded feminism because this genre of advertising relies on widespread audience’s understanding of gender dynamics. At the same time, femvertising appears to be a departure from enlightened sexism. While femvertising also relies on tropes like girl power, it does so in a different way. For example, Always’ ad campaign #LikeAGirl tries to showcase the power, strength, and determination of girls in order to dispel the idea that doing something “like a girl” means that you do a task in a silly, ineffective, or flippant way. The campaign is a departure

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<sup>6</sup> Imelda Whelehan’s discussion of retro-sexism also relates to Douglas’ “enlightened sexism.”

from the kind of “Spice Girls power” that Douglas mentions: “it claims you can have independence, power, and respect *and* male love and approval and girly, consumerist indulgences all at once, all without costs” (16). #LikeAGirl moves away from girls’ self-objectification and toward girls’ desire to showcase their so-called “real” power. In both cases, consumer culture is part of the equation. Therefore, I think the most interesting and timely discussions in contemporary feminist discourse rest in how feminist messages are ventriloquized by corporations and how femvertising appears to be a departure from enlightened sexism but is, on the contrary, another manifestation of, as Douglas calls it, “grade-A patriarchy.”

Rosalind Gill’s later work offers, I think, the most accurate portrait of contemporary post-feminism. As mentioned above, rather than understand post-feminism as an optional identity (i.e. *being* a post-feminist), Gill argues that post-feminism should be an object of study for contemporary feminists. She writes that this approach “highlights the patterned nature of the postfeminist sensibility—a sensibility that is simultaneously discursive, ideological, affective and psychological” (Elias et al, 25). Consequently, her most exciting development is her understanding of post-feminism and neoliberalism. “Increasingly, however, postfeminism seems to have ‘cut loose’ from a particular relationship to feminism and can be understood as a semi-autonomous ‘mood’, ‘structure of feeling’ or ‘sensibility’ whose primary relationships are less to feminism than to global consumer capitalism and neoliberalism” (Elias et al, 24). In a 2016 article in *Feminist Media Studies*, Gill asks if we are now “post-postfeminism” (611). Surely the surge in popular feminism must represent a shift away from post-feminist ideology. However, Gill is quick to dispel the myth that these representations point to post-postfeminism: she argues that corporate feminism is “feminism-weightless” and is, certainly, nothing more than neoliberalism at work (618). Gill argues that post-feminism is still as useful tool for feminists because “One of the strengths of postfeminism as a critical concept is that it attends to and makes visible contradictions. Critical uses of the notion neither fall into a celebratory trap of seeing all instances of mediated feminism as indications that the media have somehow ‘become feminist,’ but nor do they fail to see how entangled feminist ideas can be with pre-feminist, anti-feminist, and backlash ones” (622). Post-feminism is still a useful critical frame in

which to view manifestations of “cool” feminism and, like Gill, I am a critic of post-feminism in this project.

Just as Douglas and Gill offer more precise and clear terms for discussions of post-feminism, it is also important to describe feminist identity in more detail. For feminist theatre scholar and practitioner Elaine Aston, the crisis in the transition from second-wave feminism to a new feminist generation—the problem of the “post”—lies in succession. Aston clarifies, “previously, it was feminism’s task to make visible the violence done to women...it is now the damage done to feminism that is being exposed: revealing the contemporary myths of girl power...and, overall, the consequent alienation of feminism from the future generations of women with whom it had hoped to connect” (85). As mentioned earlier, the Millennial generation is categorized by their rejection of labels, and as Rowe-Finkbeiner argues, a laissez faire attitude when it comes to political engagement (viii). For Douglas too, the women with whom feminism had hoped to connect were busy watching *Beverly Hills 90201* and flashing their breasts on *Girls Gone Wild*. She writes, “Feminism must be emphatically rejected because it prohibits women from having any fun...As this logic goes, feminism is so 1970s—grim, dowdy, aggrieved, and passé—that it is now an impediment to female happiness and fulfillment. Thus, an amnesia about the women’s movement, and the rampant, now illegal discrimination that produced it, is essential, so we’ll forget that politics matters” (12). For Aston and Douglas, as well as other feminist scholars, it appears that women—specifically young women—are fleeing from feminism: “young women have moved toward a greater individualism and away from identity politics, disliking labels and seeing no need to organize” (Reinelt, 19). While this characterization of women as either feminists or non-feminists might usefully sound alarm bells, an accurate representation of feminist identity is more complex.

While there are certainly those who openly embrace *or* denounce a feminist identity, many women, especially young women, *are* feminists, but because they do not want to be associated with the patriarchal, mainstream media’s debauched image of the bra-burning, ball-busting, lesbian feminazi, they sometimes choose to say “‘feminist’ things prefaced by ‘I’m not a feminist, but...’” (Heywood & Drake, 4). This kind of tentative

feminist attitude showcases that feminism—particularly *being a feminist*—is a commitment that some North American women are not willing to make. Research conducted by Buschman and Lenart depicts most young feminists as embodying an in-between category of feminist identity. For Buschman and Lenart, the “precarious feminist” should be a category of feminist identity of its own accord<sup>7</sup>. Defined as a young woman who lives a complex contradiction, the precarious feminist enjoys both the freedoms made possible by feminist activism as well as palpable inequality. The precarious feminist is disillusioned by capitalism’s insistence on individuality and the discourse of post-feminism perpetuated by patriarchy all the while not fully grasping the systemic nature of her own oppression. This term—the precarious feminist—usefully complicates how some young women—particularly women of privilege— feel about feminism; it becomes clear that, just as with feminist and post-feminism, there is not a tidy line that divides feminists from non-feminists. Indeed, on the contrary, many women have feminist principles that are displaced, vagrant, or diasporic; their feminism is present but their civic life does not offer them the time, space, or expertise to exercise or even form their oppositional values.

If the contemporary climate leaves citizens—primarily female—with limited feminist outlets or resources, then it follows that many women may look to the media—even advertising—for satisfaction (see Lotz, 2006; Johnson, 2007). Early market research into the impacts of femvertising suggests that femvertising effectively captures consumers; feminist consumers enjoy being interpellated by feminist messaging. In her article in *AdWeek*, Michelle Castillo shows that the empowerment women feel when consuming femvertising has a direct influence on the products they choose to purchase: “fifty-two percent of women admitted to buying a product because they liked how the marketer and its ads presented women.” Femvertising is effective, and as Castillo’s article suggests, it works because consumers believe the advertising is contributing to better representations of women. Some female consumers feel that the contemporary media landscape leaves much to be desired when it comes to depictions of women, and as a result, they choose to support brands that appear to be making strides in that regard. In this climate, it becomes clear why femvertising originated as a celebratory term for adverts that better represent women. These

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that Buschman and Lenart’s survey was administered within a university environment and, therefore, their analysis excludes many women by virtue of their limited distribution setting.

advertisements, like television shows that adopt a feminist perspective, can be a breath of fresh air when they pop up on the television. Even feminist media scholars like Merri Lisa Johnson are rendered jubilant by feminist representations in the mainstream media<sup>8</sup>. Despite her position as media critic, Johnson cannot help but be pleased: “I was being hailed as a feminist—by my television!” (2). In fact, *SheKnows Media*—a liberal feminist ad agency—started the Femvertising<sup>9</sup> Awards, “honoring excellence in pro-female advertising”, in order to celebrate brands that deployed these tactics<sup>10</sup>. However, while femvertising might act as a satisfying feminist outlet, the implications of a capitalist-dominated feminism are vast. If a post-feminist climate set limits on feminist discussion and bullied women to silence their dissidence, then the phase of corporate feminism that exists now liberates them to participate in safe, apolitical “feminism” made cool by brand and celebrity endorsements. Enacted through consumption, corporate feminism allows companies to capitalize on feminist sentiments. And so I ask how these kinds of representations—those that appear to tout feminism but do so tentatively/superficially/just enough to be deemed “progressive”—transform the feminist landscape and perhaps help to render the precarious feminist a docile consumer of feminism.

## Theoretical Underpinnings II: Hegemony/Counter-Hegemony

To be clear, advertising that appeals to women through their social and political empowerment is not a new industry practice; as long as women have had rights, advertisers have tried to use their enfranchisement to sell them products (MacDonald). The advertising industry is part of patriarchal capitalism, a hegemonic system that negotiates and absorbs certain counter-hegemonic voices. Companies are always looking for new ways to engage their current and potential consumers. To accomplish this goal, advertisers can be flexible and fickle in their approaches. Gill traces how advertisers shift their approach when necessary. She writes, “whilst an earlier generation of feminist media activists put stickers

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<sup>8</sup> Similar strides can also be seen in advertising that broadens LGTBQ representations. Some brands are also broadening their depictions of heterosexual couples by showcasing mixed-race couples in their ads.

<sup>9</sup> My research has illuminated *SheKnows Media* as the source of the term “femvertising”.

<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly, 2016 winners include *Bud Light*, *Under Armour*, *Pantene*, and *General Mills*, to name a few.

or daubed graffiti on advertising images deemed to insult or trivialize women, today, as often as not, advertisers already orientate to potential critique within the adverts themselves—whether from feminists or simply from media-savvy and ‘sign fatigued’ consumers, weary of the relentless bombardment by consumer images” (Gill, 3).

Femvertising is a good example of what Gill describes; this trend takes the first step in addressing gender inequity. This is a response given that the entire industry was being held accountable by organizations like The Representation Project (TRP). TRP is well known for its #NotBuyingIt campaign in which they called out “companies for their stereotypical advertising and merchandising.” The goal of the campaign is to “inspire people to join together in celebrating good representation and calling out the bad.” #NotBuyingIt is aptly named; the campaign tells brands that, not only are they not trading their dollars for limiting representations, they are resisting an ideological framework that relies on stereotypes and objectification. The malleability of advertiser strategy can be understood by considering the behaviours of a hegemonic system. One way to theorize hegemony is based on the idea that those in power do not force their control upon others but, rather, citizens consent to their own oppression. MacDonald clarifies, “Gramsci argues that dominant ideologies do not impose themselves coercively on our consciousness: instead, they dovetail into ways of thinking that we are comfortable with, that make sense to us and may even seem to acknowledge important truths about our lives” (MacDonald, 51). One of the ways dominant ideologies “dovetail” their way into our consciousness is to respond to instances of dissent. Hegemony, therefore, is always negotiated at the same time that dominant structures remain intact. At the core of a hegemonic system is the idea that counter-hegemony—alternative ideas, rebellion, counter-culture, and culture jamming—is required to regenerate power relations. TRP’s #NotBuyingIt campaign is a good example of this dynamic. #NotBuyingIt, while it does address representation in advertising and, perhaps, has spurred the “better” representations present in femvertising, does not address the problems with enacting so-called “change” through consumption. This campaign still supports the idea that, as citizens, our best chance to foster change is to shift our shopping habits. This is hegemony at work: hashtag activism like this might help to shift representations but the overall system remains intact.

Given this framework, counter-hegemonic voices do not overhaul the system; on the contrary, they support it. Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's revealing text *The Rebel Sell* brings Gramsci's theory to a contemporary context. Heath and Potter debunk the myth that capitalism relies on conformity. Rather, they argue that capitalism thrives on the counter-culture trendsetters and, in fact, relishes in the opportunity to sell so-called "rebellion" to consumers. They argue, "the market obviously does an extremely good job at responding to consumer demand for anticonsumerist products and literature" (98). Heath and Potter argue that sites of anticonsumerism or rebellion are embedded in the capitalism framework that they supposedly push against; even though the demand for media that offer "indictments of modern consumer society," North Americans have never been better as shopping:

What we see in films like *American Beauty* or books like *No Logo* is not actually a critique of consumerism; it's merely a restatement of the critique of mass society. The two are not the same. In fact, the critique of mass society has been one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism for the past forty years... This isn't because the authors, editors or directors are hypocrites. It's because they've failed to understand the true nature of consumer society. They identify consumerism with conformity. As a result, they fail to notice that it is rebellion, not conformity, that has for decades been the driving force of the marketplace. (99)

Heath and Potter show that consumer culture thrives off rebellion, and so for them, the culture cannot be jammed. Heath and Potter's framework is useful when considering femvertising; their work helps to form a bridge between femvertising and other cultural products that appear to tout an alternative, feminist proclivity. According to their logic, while some cultural products appear immune to critique because of the cultural criticism they provide, citizens should attend more closely to objects that resonate with their alternative or counter-hegemonic ideas—for me, this is particularly true of femvertising. When counter-hegemony is embraced by the mainstream, hegemony is (re)born and, with it, our society's norms and limitations. Raymond Williams states that "it can be persuasively argued that all or nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic: that the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture" (114). Williams' succinct and profound statement shows that femvertising is a



product of capitalist patriarchy and, therefore, is not feminist at all. In this way, resistance—in the form an advertisement that “better represents women”—is far from a revolutionary force. On the contrary, hegemonic systems set capacities for the kinds of resistance that the scheme can tolerate. To that end, “consumer revolt” is inert: “‘fair trade’ and ‘ethical marketing’... certainly represent no threat to the capitalist system. If consumers are willing to pay more for shows made by happy workers—of for eggs laid by happy chickens—then there is money to be made” (Heath & Potter, 2). If women and feminist consumers are willing to depart with their money more easily by virtue of better representations of women, then it is no wonder femvertising is on our doorstep. Femvertisements are applauded for being better<sup>11</sup> and, yet feminism’s long-standing criticism of capitalism is nowhere in sight. Consumers who adopt femvertising as *actual* feminism participate in a “faux-feminism,” one that is deeply post-feminism and caters to capitalist patriarchy. Femvertising is just another attempt by dominant structures to profit from oppositional ideas.

## Defining a Femvertisement: *The Campaign for Real Beauty*

Since women’s rights have been sought and, to some extent, actualized in North America, advertisers have targeted the lucrative female shopper by using pro-female representations to capture their attention. While femvertising is not a new industry practice, its recent coinage is indicative of late-capitalism’s contemporary relationship to feminism. Femvertising is vaguely defined as pro-female messaging in advertising. However, I would argue the term femvertising is specific to a distinct category of “pro-female” advertising. It represents a contemporary wave of advertisements that speak to consumers in a distinctly feminist dialect. To borrow Myra MacDonald’s term, femvertising “claim[s] feminist credentials” (56).

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<sup>11</sup> It is apt to question the benchmark in which “better representations of women” are measured. Femvertising goes further than “better” representing women because they try to proactively anticipate feminist commentary. Rather than simple show women alive, clothed, whole, and active—as opposed to advertising that represents women as dead, partially nude or naked, objectified, and docile—femvertising tries to advocate for women in a new way.

Femvertising overtly addresses injustices toward the modern woman, and in some cases, offers its products as a solution to said injustice or takes up action in social or political ways to curb the injustice depicted. Many pop culture critics associate femvertising with *Dove*, the *Unilever* subsidiary, that challenged the beauty industry on its limiting representations of women in its 2004 *Campaign for Real Beauty*. For British culture writer Claire Cohen, one of the few cultural critics to write about femvertising specifically, it all started with *Dove*. “A decade ago, in 2004, the soap brand launched its ‘real women’ campaign. For many, myself included, it was the first time we had seen a group of recognisable women, of varying shapes, sizes, and ethnicities, in advertising. Here was something different—not without its flaws—but much better than another ad showing mum serving up the Sunday roast or exclaiming how white her whites were.” *Dove* shook up the advertising and beauty industries with those so-called “real” women and, while the term femvertising was not floating around in the peak of the campaign, in hindsight, it can be considered the first femvertisement, and thus is a useful pathway in defining femvertising’s key characteristics. My research shows that femvertisements have three core characteristics: first, they address gender inequity from a liberal feminist perspective and use neoliberal, feminist language in their appeals to consumers; second, femvertisements aim to show their commitment—superficial at best—to contemporary third-wave feminism by depicting women of many shapes, sizes, abilities, sexual orientations, and ethnicities in their messaging; finally, femvertisements rely on the social media engagement of their consumers to continue the conversation online about both the gendered issues raised as well as their product. Often accompanied by a campaign of some form, femvertising capitalizes on social media engagement and often uses a customized, slogan-based hashtag. All three of these components are central to the success of the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*.

Launched in 2004, the *Campaign for Real Beauty* is one of the most successful advertising operations in history; the campaign revived *Dove*’s ailing brand and made significant strides in updating the craft of advertising. These advancements can mostly be attributed to good timing as the *Real Beauty* campaign “arrived at a time when digital media allowed consumers to interact and share the campaign’s messages in a way that

allowed it to go viral on a global scale” (Neff). Even in 2017, Dove’s “pro-female” campaign occupies the coveted top spot on the *AdAge* “Top Ad Campaigns of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” list, beating out other famous campaigns like *Apple’s* “Get a Mac” and *Dos Equis’* “Most Interesting Man in the World.” Created with the intent to “change the status quo and offer in its place a broader, healthier, more democratic view of beauty,” *Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty* is the preeminent femvertisement—the mothership of advertising that speaks feminism. *The Campaign for Real Beauty* was more than just a series of commercials. According to *Dove’s* website, from its inception, the campaign included a list of initiatives that went beyond traditional advertising: *Dove* was trying to start a conversation about beauty standards and used academic research studies, fundraising initiatives, self-esteem workshops, a touring photography exhibit, and, of course, thought-provoking advertising to do so. *Dove’s* commitment to expand society’s notions of beauty deployed multifaceted tactics; however, most consumers will recall their strategic and provocative ads: “The campaign that had its origins in London and Canada with a billboard asking motorists to vote on whether the women pictured were “fat or fit?” or “wrinkled or wonderful?” kicked off a conversation about society’s notions of female standards of beauty” (*AdWeek*). *Dove* broke ground by problematizing the Westernized ideal of female beauty. The campaign excluded supermodels and attempted to act as a mirror for its “real” consumers. One print ad boasted: “for the price of 1 supermodel, we got 7 real women.” The campaign famously started an international<sup>12</sup> discussion about beauty, unrealistic expectations of thinness, photoshopping, and self-esteem.

Dove used many different strategies to fulfill its campaign mandate—most famous for depicting “real” women of various, shapes, sizes, and ethnicities gleefully posing together in crisp, white undergarments—and still releases ads that keep the spirit of the campaign alive. In her 2013 article in *The New York Times*, Tanzina Vega unpacks Dove’s latest offering—an online video that shows a forensic sketch artist drawing women as they

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<sup>12</sup> The *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* focused most of its advertising in North America and the United Kingdom; however, the campaign did have international/global reach via the Internet. It is also important to note that the campaign was inspired by a major global study—The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report. This 2004 study by Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D’Agostino found that only 2% of women around the world would describe themselves as beautiful (Celebre & Denton).

describe themselves:

Seated at a drafting table with his back to his subject, the artist, Gil Zamora, asks the women a series of questions about their features. “Tell me about your chin,” he says in the soft voice reminiscent of a therapist’s. Crow’s feet, big jaws, protruding chins and dark circles are just some of the many physical features that women criticized about themselves. After he finishes a drawing of a woman, he then draws another sketch of the same woman, only this time it is based on how someone else describes her. The sketches are then hung side by side and the women are asked to compare them. In every instance, the second sketch is more flattering than the first.

Just like Dove’s earlier outputs, the *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* went viral. Vega’s analysis leads her back to the original intentions of Dove’s 2004 campaign, which was preceded by vigorous market research that illuminated that “only 2 percent of women consider themselves beautiful.” Logic follows that to market to the other 98 percent of women—to whom you want to sell soap, shampoo, body wash, and firming creams—Dove needed to speak in a different language to its desired customers, and first and foremost, address the problem of limiting beauty standards. According to Vega, “Dove was trying to create a sense of trust with the consumer by tapping into deep-seated emotions that many women feel about themselves and their appearance”. Indeed, this is a tried and true trick of advertising; relating to customers on a personal or emotional platform can yield big returns. While openly discussing self-esteem and beauty standards may have stirred uncomfortable feelings for some viewers, *Dove*’s market research had identified a widespread issue facing the female population—low self-esteem was an important truth for many consumers. According to Johnston and Taylor, *Dove*’s approach “was a win-win situation...[the brand] could promote its products as beauty solutions and at the same time express concern with narrow beauty ideals” (952). This two-pronged approach worked; *Dove* is still applauded for its marked financial success with its *Campaign for Real Beauty*. Subsequently, many brands that have followed in *Dove*’s footsteps have seen similar results: “In this climate, ‘femvertising’ ads are well-received: 51 percent of women polled like pro-female ads because they believe they break down gender-equality barriers, and 71 percent of respondents think brands should be responsible for using advertising to promote positive messages to women and girls” (Bahadur). Thus, popular opinion suggests that femvertising is appealing because it takes responsibility for exposing limiting representations of women

in the media. Women are not only empowered by more so-called “realistic” representations but also by the perceived cultural work that these ads are allegedly doing.

Throughout this campaign, Dove overtly took to task the beauty industry and its limited definition of beauty, a feminist concern indeed: “feminist scholarship<sup>13</sup> and activism since the 1970s have critiqued oppressive beauty standards that repress women’s freedom, inhibit personal power and self-acceptance, and promote a destructive relationship with the body” (Johnston and Taylor, 944-945). Perhaps most famous is Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, in which she argues that “affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women before, do not feel as free as they want to” because they have to strive for unrealistic standards of beauty (9). However, as Elias, Gill, and Scharff stress, feminist scholarship on beauty is not confined to the liberal feminist tradition. Rather, “decades of research, writing and activism by feminists have largely centred on beauty as a tool of patriarchal domination, seen to entrap women in narrow and restrictive norms of femininity, contribute to their subjugation” (10). Their 2017 book *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* capture some of these intersectional arguments and the authors celebrate that “it is clear that much of the most exciting new work on beauty has an attentiveness to questions of race, class, nation, region, and to colonial and imperial dynamics, with an interest not simply in challenging the sexism of beauty norms but also in decolonising and transnationalising beauty studies” (14). By drawing attention to media responsibility, and questioning beauty standards in an international campaign, *Dove* appeared to have the same concerns about beauty standards and the cosmetic industrial complex as some feminist scholars and activists. In this way, *The Campaign for Real Beauty* is an example of femvertising; *Dove* took up a traditionally feminist concern with the goal of starting a conversation about a specific aspect of gender inequity, and for many consumers in 2004, this was a game-changer.

Likewise, *Dove*’s campaign can be characterized as femvertising because it aims to represent a wide range of body types, sizes, and ethnicities. “The ads showed women’s C-

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<sup>13</sup> Most feminist scholarship that has considered beauty standards is of the liberal feminist tradition.

section scars, tattoos, wrinkles and freckles. In an industry dominated by convoys of mostly white, size-zero models, *Dove* ads included women with varied body types, ethnicities and ages” (Krashinski Robertson). In fact, just as *Dove* aimed to include a diversity of female bodies in their advertising, it also—perhaps more vigorously—excluded the bodies of models. In one memorable print ad, *Dove* juxtaposed its *Campaign for Real Beauty* with *Victoria’s Secret’s Love Your Body* campaign. The image compares the “real” women of *Dove* to their super-model counterparts, a comparison that is meant to stoke bewilderment in the consumer—how can *Victoria’s Secret* use runway models to encourage self-esteem in its customers? The subtext of the advertisement was to chastise brands like *Victoria’s Secret* for being part of a media that is guilty of only representing sexualized, thin bodies that are idolized by Western culture. By comparing its models with those of *Victoria’s Secret*, *Dove* offers itself as the alternative. *Dove* claims to use models whose bodies resemble those of the women who buy their products: women with curves, tattoos, piercings, thighs that touch and few visible bones. *Dove’s* kaleidoscope of women is celebrated as “America’s next Not models” as documented in another print ad for *Dove* that shows four women of different colours smiling happily at their emancipation from traditional beauty standards—of course, in their lily-white undergarments.

Finally, part of the enormous success of *Dove’s* Real Beauty Campaign is the way in which its commercials go viral. Many of *Dove’s* femvertisements are designed for social media sharing and often include a hashtag to continue the conversation on social media platforms. *Dove’s* current hashtag to engage customers in the Real Beauty Campaign is #MyBeautyMySay—a tag that will link customers to stories about “real” women and how they expand the definition of beauty. However, *Dove’s* online success is not solely tied to snappy hashtags; it is also deeply rooted in the viral success of its online ads, especially those that read like public service announcements. For example, having been viewed millions of times on YouTube alone, *Dove’s* 2006 *Evolution* Commercial sheds light on how Western women’s view of beauty gets distorted by after-the-photoshoot programs like Photoshop. The commercial, which is labeled a “film”, follows one model from sitting to billboard. After her face is lit and covered with makeup and her hair is curled, she poses for

the camera. An image is then chosen and the magic of Photoshop is revealed as a cursor dances over her image: her lips are plumped, her neck is lengthened, her face is slimmed, her eyes are made bigger and her face is contoured. The result on the billboard bears little resemblance to the model who sat for the camera. The ad promotes *Dove*'s Self Esteem Fund and encourages viewers to take part in one of *Dove*'s Real Beauty Workshops for Girls. While this viral video was released in 2006, it still features prominently on *Dove*'s website accompanied by an article that discusses the media's distortion of beauty and how "75% of women globally told us they wanted to see a more accurate portrayal of beauty in the media" (*Dove*: Evolution).

In these ways, *Dove* is the mother of femvertising. The brand's strategic Real Beauty Campaign spoke to consumers, particularly women, in a new way. By taking the media to task on its limiting ideas about beauty, and tossing other advertising approaches under the bus, *Dove* emerged as the discerning, caring, feminist friend whom women should choose when it comes to their beauty needs. By ditching the models and opting for "real" representation of women, *Dove* started a conversation about a feminist concern and raised awareness about how the media mutates our understanding of ourselves. *Dove* figured out that the best way to sell products to women with chronically low self-esteem is to address the pervasiveness of how much they dislike their bodies. If 98% of *Dove*'s market do not consider themselves beautiful, it seems logical to sell them just enough feminist empowerment to convince them that *Dove*, with its awareness-raising mandate and skin-firming lotions, is the answer to their unhappiness. A splash of feminism will make the body wash sell.

## Analysis: What's the Matter with Femvertising?

Just as describing *Dove*'s campaign is useful for sketching out a preliminary definition of femvertising, an analysis of its campaign reveals the major limitations of femvertising and introduces key concepts that will be discussed throughout my dissertation. While femvertising may excite consumers with its progressive stance on women and

beauty, a closer look reveals that femvertising's superficial take on issues of gender—indeed, its refusal to address the systemic nature of gendered oppression—has the potential to undermine the feminist project as a whole. In their study of *The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*, Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor illuminate the limitations of Dove's efforts by generously describing the feminist potential of *Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty* as “partial” (953). In their useful analysis, Johnston and Taylor point to some of the assumptions that the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* makes, namely that more positive representations of women are enough to make female consumers feel more beautiful: “theorists remind us that ideology is a complex creature; women are not simply tricked into seeking beauty. Beauty ideals operate ideologically when they are internalized, rationalized, and socially legitimized” (953). By failing to address the ideological nature of low self-esteem in women and girls, *Dove's* efforts to help their consumers feel more beautiful<sup>14</sup> falls short according to Johnston and Taylor. To think that an advertising campaign is enough to dispel the ingrained ideological trappings of patriarchal ideas about women's beauty and women's bodies is pitifully short-sighted: discovering that a stranger describes you in a more flattering light than you see yourself cannot possibly undo the internalized, ideological expectations that women place upon themselves.

By omitting the notion of ideology in its *Real Beauty Campaign*, *Dove* puts the onus on individual consumers to be responsible for their own self-esteem and feelings of beauty. While *Dove* does loosely blame “the media” for distorting images of women in advertising, the conversation consistently comes back to how women can feel more beautiful despite all the noise from the mass media: “the ideology of beauty suggests that every woman can, and should, feel beautiful, presenting beauty as a democratic gender good, akin to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... Women are penalized for not being beautiful and at the same time are stigmatized, even pathologized, for not feeling beautiful” (954). *Dove's* effort to make more women feel beautiful contributes to the double-edged sword that Johnston and Taylor illuminate—not being beautiful and not feeling beautiful are both problematic for the modern woman. It is her responsibility, despite the ideological structures that facilitate

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<sup>14</sup> While making women feel more beautiful is the goal projected by Dove, it is clear that capitalizing on the anxieties and low self-esteem of women are integral to their approach.



her sense of worthlessness, to feel and be beautiful. According to this logic, *Dove* contributes to the pressures that women face when it comes to the ideology of beauty, and in turn, spur the cycle of shopping even more. Rather than question the social structures that impact their feelings, *Dove* individualizes women and blames them for their inability to see beauty in themselves. *Dove*'s rhetoric places the pursuit of beauty as the most important factor in female happiness. While the campaign pushes back against narrow beauty codes, it also operates "within a hegemonic ideology of gendered beauty by refusing to challenge the idea that beauty is an essential part of a woman's identity, personhood, and social success and by legitimizing the notion that every woman should feel beautiful" (954). It is in this way that the *Dove Real Beauty Campaign* reifies the very attitudes that it attempts to challenge—the campaign is not satisfied with its own critical approach, but rather offers women "real" alternatives (who are also traditionally beautiful themselves) to super-model beauty with the goal of making more women feel beautiful—or at least recognize some aspect of themselves in *Dove*'s models. *Dove* attempts to make *all* women eligible in the game of beauty—a short-sighted, liberal feminist idea. Johnston and Taylor suggest that this insistence on beauty is deeply problematic because "the social imperative for women to be and feel beautiful is not up for negotiation. Even though the social understanding of beauty is contested, the importance of beauty as a paramount value for women is reproduced and legitimized by the campaign's explicit and unceasing focus on beauty" (954). *Dove*'s effort to change the conversation about beauty is still, first and foremost, about beauty and therefore does little to combat the structural scaffolding of the beauty myth—a logic that asks modern women to conform to aesthetic ideals and inhibits them in their pursuit for social and political equality (Gamble, 194). While *Dove* may challenge the impossible aesthetic ideals perpetuated by brands like *Victoria's Secret*, the company does reinforce the connection between womanhood and the body—a facet of gendered culture that even the earliest feminists contested<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> In *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*: Elias, Gill, and Scharff confirm that "decades of research, writing and activism by feminists have largely centred on beauty as a tool of patriarchal domination, seen to entrap women in narrow and restrictive norms of femininity, contribute to their subjugation" (6). Even Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* "attacks the 'feathered birds' that were her female contemporaries" (Gamble, 194).

However, Johnston & Taylor's analysis of *Dove* ends with what they call the most "insidious" aspects of *Dove*'s "appropriation of feminist themes" through the Real Beauty Campaign. For these scholars, *Dove*'s most significant offense is that its appropriation of feminism reformulates it as achievable through the banal and stereotypically feminine acts of "grooming and shopping" (955). It is here that Johnston & Taylor define the crucial paradigm that allows for the modern influx of femvertising. For them, "feminist consumerism" is the culprit: "a corporate strategy that employs feminist themes of empowerment to market products to women and that shares consumerism's focus on individual consumption as a primary source of identity, affirmation, and social change" (956). As I will discuss in the next chapter, feminist consumerism is the underlying attitude that is manifested in femvertising. It is the idea that feminist action is best exercised through consumer activism and that shopping is the best avenue to self-actualization. For Johnston & Taylor, *Dove*'s campaign enables women to "wear an identity associated with self-respect, independence, personal strength, and collective identity and community without doing any of the hard consciousness-raising work usually required to produce collective...transformation" (956). The *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* allows women to purchase their feminism or align themselves with a brand that "better" represents women. However, by adopting this approach, consumers only achieve *Dove*'s superficial goals and become part of a commercial exchange that reproduces the very social limits that they recognize to be problematic. Feminist consumerism, therefore, avoids the pain and anger of the feminist movement in favour of brand loyalty and consumption (958). Campaigns such as these render social change as a "painless, simple achievement—as simple as shopping itself" (959). Johnston and Taylor conclude that, while the *Dove* campaign may incite some partial disruption of narrow, Western beauty codes, the campaign actually does more harm than good because it "reproduces and legitimizes the hegemony of beauty ideology in women's personal lives in the service of expanding sales and corporate growth" (961).

Returning briefly to Heath and Potter and *The Rebel Sell*, corporate growth does not only rely on conformity. On the contrary, it relies on counterhegemonic forces that both reinforce the capitalist system, and at the same time, provide the market with more niche

segments to target: “Thanks to the myth of counterculture, many of the people who are most opposed to consumerism nevertheless actively participate in the sort of behaviour that drives it” (132). *Dove*, described here to help pave the way for a more detailed understanding of femvertising, is part of the cycle that Heath & Potter describe and, therefore, is a reliable example to start the conversation about the traits, temptations, and pitfalls of femvertising. The campaign helps to clarify the main pillars of femvertising, and at the same time, reveals some of the central issues—the omission of ideological underpinnings, neoliberal insistence on the individual, focus on shopping and consumption, and refusal to address the structures of power, capitalism, and patriarchy that impact the lives of women – that will be discussed in more detail throughout this analysis.

It is worth noting that this analysis will ultimately expose femvertising as more complex and multifaceted than a discussion of *Dove* allows; things have changed significantly since 2004. Cohen claims, “in the intervening years [since 2004], nothing much else had come along to give Dove any serious competition. Until now. Because in the last 12 months, everything has changed.” Cohen is right—modern femvertising has evolved and operates in even more insidious ways. I would argue that among the most significant developments are brands that do not overtly offer their products as a solution to the gendered dynamic that they explain and instead devote their advertising time to teaching their viewers about feminist notions—like the wage gap and dietainment—to create even stronger associations between their brand and feminist empowerment. *Dove*, however, remains the catalyst that helps us to access the world of femvertising and understand the limitations of feminist consumerism.

## Conclusion

I do not mean to suggest in this project that it is the primary role of advertisers to solve the problem of gender inequality or sacrifice their clients’ companies to combat capitalism. However, it is important to notice the negative space in these adverts: what is missing from these commercials is as important as their content. Omitting questions of patriarchal capitalist structures clarifies the intention of these messages. In a social and

cultural landscape that includes post-feminist, anti-feminist, racist, and fear-of-Other ideas, femvertisements are being shared and consumed *for their feminist content*. I worry that, for some women, femvertising is already a stand-in for feminism. It is not the role of advertisers to teach citizens about feminism and it is not realistic to expect them to offer comment on cultural structures. However, it is reasonable to expect feminist analysis of oppressive structures in our social, cultural, and political life. For this kind of commentary, feminists should seek information that is not motivated by profit.

Relying on recuperation to communicate feminist messages through advertising can render the “feminism” within femvertising uncanny. It is the second cousin of Sarah Palin’s “pit bull feminism,” described in detail by Susan J. Douglas:

You have the appearance of feminism [in Palin]—alleged superwoman, top executive, and the mother of five—with a repudiation for everything feminism stands for and has fought for...here was a woman who was anti-choice, anti-sex education (that worked out well), anti-day care, using the gains of the women’s movement to run for office, and to silence those who might have a few questions about her qualifications. Pit bull feminism was about exploiting forty years of activism, lawsuits, legislative changes, and the consciousness-raising—all of which Palin benefited from—in the hope of undoing them all if she managed to get into office. (271)

Just as pit bull feminism exploits the feminist movement so too does femvertising. While pit bull feminism and femvertising may operate differently, they both showcase what happens to feminism when it is brought into the mainstream and asked to operate in tandem with its adversary. Whether it is votes for the Republican Party via Palin or dollars for Unilever, a selective and specific kind of feminism is being offered by patriarchal capitalism. Meredith Fineman urges caution when it comes to this kind of partial commitment because ramifications for the entire feminist movement are made possible: “Inauthentic support cheapens the idea of women’s equality” (Bahadur). Therefore, femvertising’s female-friendly, albeit often empowering and accessible, messaging claims feminist credentials at a significant cost; femvertising’s use of feminist language, tropes, concerns, and slang make these commercials appear as nodes of political, feminist action. As I have outlined in this chapter, femvertising makes achieving political gains as simple as shopping—all the fear, shame, anger and pain that, in part, has fueled and continues to fuel

feminist action is stripped away and replaced with positive images of “real” women smiling and admiring each other’s curves. In a landscape that often accuses feminist action of being unnecessary, redundant, or hysterical, femvertising occupies valuable space in the fraught feminist discursive field and thus has the potential to undermine feminism’s commitment to challenging patriarchal consumer capitalism. Indeed, femvertising campaigns—as with most representations of feminism on mainstream platforms<sup>16</sup>—fail to associate the experiences of contemporary womanhood to any form of structural oppression. Because femVERTISEMENTS appear to offer information about feminism (albeit in small doses), but are in fact far-reaching limbs of patriarchal consumer culture, femvertising and the broader paradigm of feminist consumerism require careful consideration. While adverts such as these might solicit an energetic, power fist-pump from feminist consumers—myself included—their place within corporate culture should not be taken for granted.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Amanda Lotz’s book *Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era* looks at how “feminist” television shows, while they may expose gender discrimination, divorce the conversation about said discrimination from systems of power, patriarchy, and oppression.

# Chapter 2

## (Fem)triloquism: Domestication Through Animation

### Introduction

In this chapter, I borrow the concept of ventriloquism and apply it to femvertising. The ventriloquial metaphor can be used to understand the nuanced ways femvertising speaks to its audience; it is an apt metaphor because it foregrounds important questions about agency, particularly how speech is manipulated to yield attention and profit. In particular, the metaphor of ventriloquism helps to illuminate three important facets of femvertising: the dynamics of self-representation—especially the harm of being spoken *for*; the tyranny of feigned dialogue; and the complexities of audience response. These three aspects are essential to understanding the influence of femvertising because they help to contextualize it within scholarly research that problematizes dominating discourses. Ventriloquism is a theoretical lens that foregrounds femvertising’s problematic nature; far from a benign sales tactic, femvertising relies on the maneuvers of trickery. Rather than help feminism, the phenomenon hinders the feminist agenda.

As discussed extensively throughout chapter one of this dissertation, femvertising is insidious because of its superficial interest in the contemporary harms of gender inequity. It is noncommittal in that it brushes the surfaces of some feminist concerns but does little to consider the structures that undergird and form oppression. Even campaigns that have offshoot projects like workshops or exhibits do little to discuss the structural reasons for the issue they have adopted. This shallowness demands a deeper engagement with femvertising because the trend’s superficiality is incongruous with the weight of the topics brought forward. It becomes appropriate to ask whose concerns are really being brought to the table in instances of corporate feminism. It is through such advertising that capitalist patriarchy is caught speaking the language of feminism—as a ventriloquist might throw his voice to a dummy—to appeal to a female audience. But pulling apart the power/discourse dynamics

of a femvertisement is not a simple task. Rather, femVERTISEMENTS are a tangled web of communication; a bewildering set of specific parameters must be in place for these ads to have clout. In this chapter, I will apply the metaphor of ventriloquism to this advertising trend to help illuminate why it is so powerful.

## The Tyranny of Artificial Dialogue

The ventriloquial metaphor illuminates concerns about many aspects of femvertising; however, it is important to preface my discussion of ventriloquism with a short discussion about why pretend dialogue—of which ventriloquism is an excellent example—is particularly dangerous. This concern has previously been discussed by communications theorist John Durham Peters. In *Speaking Into the Air* Durham Peters observes, “dialogue can be tyrannical” particularly when a dialogue is controlled or one-sided (35). Durham, like theorist Mladen Dolar, looks more specifically at the philosophical implications of the voice as an object and offers some compelling discussion on the acousmatic, or dissociated, voice and the dichotomous feeling that stems from a voice that does not match its maker (Dolar). Durham Peters unpacks this by breaking down the binary of dialogue/dissemination; he argues that dialogue is widely understood as the privileged communicative method despite the fact that dialogue can be a corrupt form of communication. In this way, Durham Peters cautions against privileging dialogue by describing dissemination as an “open scatter” that has the potential to offer agency to the individuals who listen (62). Durham Peters wants to show the best dialogues should be disseminated and ideal dissemination should spur fruitful dialogue. His text warns that corrupted communication, particularly dialogue that is not genuine or mutual, can be detrimental to communication. I can think of no better example of corrupted dialogue than the ventriloquial exchange.

While he does not address ventriloquism in significant detail, Durham Peters does bring up concerns around so-called dialogue in his analysis of the *Phaedrus* and the notion of detached voices. Here, “this remarkable rhetoric reproduces the queer scenario of Phaedrus reading Lysia’s speech: the erotic possession of one body by a remote one. What

is preserved is not the soul but the body, in all its strength, soft modulation, and emphasis” (163). Durham Peters draws attention to the dangers of feigned dialogue, just as theorists of ventriloquism do. As mentioned earlier, the very appeal of the ventriloquist act is that a ventriloquist engages in “dialogue” with his dummy. It is important to note that Durham Peters, while he does not offer a thorough feminist critique of speech, does recognize that women have been most associated with mediumship. “The history of communication via mediums, unlike that via media, has been dominated by women” (96). Like Davies’s conception of the gendered nature of ventriloquism, Durham Peters acknowledges that it is important to look for examples in which women are spoken through and for. For these reasons, ventriloquism, and by extension the wider realm of Spiritualism that Durham Peters outlines, is an appropriate lens through which to consider femvertising.

Ventriloquism complicates Durham Peter’s argument because of the blended nature of the performance: at its core, the ventriloquial exchange is a dissemination of ideas—a masculinized approach to communication in which ideas are spread like seed over a field. However, the entire purpose of the ventriloquists’ performance is that of dialogue: it is an artificial conversation that might appear to be mutual, but is, in fact, tyrannical in nature. Durham Peter’s argument suggests that this kind of dialogue—that of a dissemination that appears like dialogue—is the most dangerous and devious. I argue that femvertising is one such example. Rather than speak overtly, advertising manipulates consumers into buying products, and at its core, is interested in neither genuine dialogue nor clear dissemination.

## Ventriloquism: Domestication Through Animation

Scholars in cultural and performance studies have successfully deployed ventriloquism to explore the effects of control, power, and representational violence. According to C.B. Davis, ventriloquism operates as “a general term for any variety of speaking for and through a represented Other” (Davies 18). Given this broad definition, ventriloquism has many interesting applications. One such example is the work of feminist Victorian scholar Helen Davies. Davies’ work suggests the ventriloquial metaphor can be superimposed upon many cultural formations to illuminate power dynamics (19).



Significantly, Davies identifies ventriloquism as an inherently gendered situation. She writes, “it is women who have generally fulfilled the role of ‘dummy’ in ventriloquial exchanges” (20). Drawing on Elizabeth Harvey, Davies argues that ventriloquism is an appropriation of the feminine voice and “contributes to a larger cultural silencing of women” that speaks to women’s historical susceptibility to possession, penetration, and mediumship (Harvey in Davies, 19-20). Harvey’s original analysis suggests that, not only is the feminized dummy physically penetrated by the hand of the ventriloquist, but she is also possessed and penetrated by the male voice from above. Davies’ exploration of ventriloquism, specifically its gendered nature, makes this metaphor particularly applicable to the study of femvertising. This metaphor helps to elucidate how the specificities of ventriloquial performance—the way a seemingly feminist voice is really that of patriarchal consumer capitalism—help to craft a better understanding and acute suspiciousness of commodified feminism.

The ventriloquial exchange is most apt in this case because it involves a ventriloquist undoubtedly speaking under the illusion that he is not speaking at all. The key to a skilled ventriloquist is speaking without moving his mouth, ideally in different accents and inflections depending on the personality of his dummy. This interaction is what people pay for when they go to see a show; even though the audience knows that the ventriloquist is speaking at all times, its members become entertained by the relationship between the Master and his dummy. The performance appears to be a dialogue when in fact no dialogue is taking place at all: “from the early nineteenth century onwards the origin of ventriloquial voice was not in dispute. It is increasingly located in the skill and talent of an individual performer, a performer whose prowess had the potential to make a ‘dummy’ ...out of any unfortunate subject he might encounter” (Connor, 39). For those in the audience, the pleasure in watching this kind of performance stems from the ventriloquist convincing them that the dummy is self-animated. Most importantly, however, is how ventriloquism animates a character in order to keep it docile. Giving voice to another—the cornerstone of the ventriloquist’s performance—is feigned animation with the intent to domesticate.

To illustrate the power of a skilled ventriloquial performance and how animation becomes domestication, it is apt to briefly consider a contemporary example in detail. Jeff Dunham is one of the most famous and widely recognized ventriloquists performing today. Dunham, an American ventriloquist and comedian, has built a career on the complexities of ventriloquism. He also serves as a good example in this context because his performances have been widely criticized for relying on stereotypes and racism. Despite these concerns, Dunham enjoys enormous fame; he fills theatres with fans eager to see him animate his eclectic range of dummies. “Recently, *Forbes* listed him as the third-highest-earning comedian in America, after Jerry Seinfeld and Chris Rock, both of whom make their piles largely on television syndication and film royalties. Dunham has neither... In the past year, he has played 150 shows and grossed \$38 million in ticket sales, far more than any other comic” (Mooallem). Dunham’s current act features six staple dummies including Peanut, Walter, Jose, Bubba J, and Achmed The Dead Terrorist. Achmed, arguably Dunham’s most famous and controversial dummy, is billed as “the world’s only beloved dead terrorist” (About, Jeff Dunham). While ventriloquism might seem harmless in the world of performance—these are puppets after all—Dunham’s animation, specifically of Achmed, suggests that ventriloquism consists of a problematic dynamic. Achmed is gendered male; he represents a minority group that experiences widespread racial and cultural oppression. Having a dead Muslim “terrorist” animated by a white American man sheds light on ventriloquism’s dark side.

In a clip from Dunham’s 2007 *Spark of Insanity*, audiences are introduced to Achmed, a skeletal dummy with bulging eyes, expressive eyebrows, a braided black beard, and a white turban. Watched millions of times on YouTube, “Meet Achmed The Dead Terrorist” offers a brief yet vital glimpse into the ventriloquial performance. As Dunham is a ventriloquist-comedian, it is apt to judge his performance by laughs, which to the jubilation of the audience, Achmed does not enjoy. He tries to silence the laughter in the room; his catch phrase “Silence! I Kill You” is repeated many times throughout the five-minute introduction, and every time, the audience roars more. The crowd loves Achmed; its members laugh at his experience in the auditorium and his interactions with Dunham. It is

clear from this clip that Dunham's impressive skill at bringing Achmed to life "introduces" us to Achmed as his own, unique, personality. The audience derives pleasure from forgetting, however briefly, that the dummy is not self-animated and thus viewers enjoy an opportunity to suspend our disbelief.

Achmed's perceived self-animation is the goal of the ventriloquial performance but further inspection shows that it is really his domestication that Dunham is seeking. Just as Dunham is working hard to breathe life into Achmed, he is also making him palatable to his audience. In a post-9/11 world in which Muslim terrorists are perceived as the greatest global threat to Western freedom, Achmed is a caricature of the men who are most feared. Rather than encounter Achmed with fear, Dunham's mostly American audiences welcome the puppet with thunderous applause. This is because Dunham makes Achmed safe: he is an oddly cute puppet who says somewhat adorable things because he is not savvy about the contemporary world around him. He is also dead—a fact that renders him as a non-threat even though the goal for many contemporary terrorists is to take innocent citizens with them when they commit suicide. And, of course, Achmed is mediated by Dunham, himself a safe, white "everyman" from Christian middle America. By bringing Achmed to the stage ogling the theatre and asking for the "72 virgins" he was promised, Dunham domesticates the terrorist. Like a circus animal who is forced to do charming tricks, Achmed's threat is neutralized because the way he is animated makes us feel entertained and, overall, okay about contemporary life. It is in this way more than any other that ventriloquism resembles femvertising: corporate patriarchy animates feminist discourse to domesticate it. By carefully controlling the speech used in the performance, capitalism makes femvertising look self-animated. Paradoxically, it is through animation that the dummy is rendered safe and inert.

In a successful femvertisement, the so-called feminism it communicates appears to be self-animated when in fact, as I have argued, the act of animation is really one of control. To successfully project an organic, genuine version feminism, femVERTISEMENTS use various rhetorical strategies to resonate with, or entertain, consumers. Even in the most

skilled and funny performances—or the most impactful and resonant femvertisements—there exist the reins of control. While comparing femvertising to an inert object, the dummy, might seem harsh, it helps to cast commercials such as these in their rightful place. The 60-second ad is a vessel that is empty until it is filled with the ideas and rhetoric of a campaign conceived by creative teams and executives. While the messages might be appealing, their form is a sales strategy.

In short, there is an ulterior motive; in advertising, that is always already the case. For example, as I detailed in chapter one, *Kellogg's Special K* has enthusiastically jumped on the femvertising bandwagon. While the cereal brand's advertising once focused on the *Special K Diet* and the low-fat content of its cereals, current offerings are appealing to feminist consumers (mostly women) by addressing feminist issues. *Special K's* new "Own It" campaign appears to offer women an alternative to fat-shaming, diet-focused messaging. Follow up ads to the "I Hate My Body Moment" advert encourage women to do the opposite of diet: *Special K* wants women to eat. A February 2017 advertisement from *Special K Canada* features snapshots of women eating fistfuls of food, chewing, and wiping their mouths with the back of their hands. The women in the ad are of different ethnicities, body shapes, and styles. The female voiceover is intentionally tough, deep, and strong: "We are made to eat. So eat. Feed the beast. Chew, crunch, devour, demolish. Eat real food with real ingredients. No second thoughts, just second bites. Question nothing, eat everything. Every real berry, chunks of dark chocolate, shreds of coconut, and multigrain like quinoa. Eat *Special K Nourish*. It looks good because it is good...Don't just eat it; Own It." Here we have *Special K* in 2017: no dieting, just raw, primal eating. Women shamelessly eat in this commercial. The subtext is that women are hungry: diets, a culture of thinness, and pressure to take up minimal space have starved us. Behold, here is *Special K* telling us that we can tuck in. Finally. This ad looks feminist: badass-looking women doing cool things and eating like guys; many of the women make eye-contact with the camera as they take a big bite of food. Not only are they thwarting the male gaze; they are eating while they stare back. A bold voiceover digs deep into each, poignant word; this could be feminist slam

poetry, *The Vagina Monologues*, or a protest. The musical backdrop is an anthem: strong, soulful, and unrelenting. How refreshing.

An investigation into the “Own It” campaign reveals the ventriloquist behind the act. In its coverage of *Special K*’s new campaign, *AdAge* celebrates the brand’s return to the high-profile Leo Burnett Agency, a move that corresponded to the start of the “Own It” Campaign. “The brand [*Special K*] has for the past few years emphasized women’s joy and overall wellness, distancing itself from the longtime diet-focused messages that originally helped make the brand a key part of *Kellogg Co.*’s portfolio. The more recent approach began with Publicist Group’s Leo Burnett in 2015, designed as a cure for slumping sales, and continued briefly with WPP’s JWT, which won the brand’s U.S. account shortly thereafter and did one campaign” (sic, Wohl). As it turns out, *Kellogg*’s *Special K* is back home with Leo Burnett to boost sales; “Own It” is an attempt to bring the brand back to life and, most importantly, to yield profits. While the dummy-ad depicts women “juggling parenthood, work, and personal time, with *Special K* cereals and snacks fueling their pursuits,” the ventriloquist is focused on recuperating business by lending its voice to feminism<sup>17</sup>. Analyzing the Own It campaign shows why femvertising is such tricky territory: corporations need to create the “beast” so they can tame it. Specifically deployed by *Special K* in this campaign are women cast as beasts—a role that brings them both an avenue to power and oppression. Beasts are powerful, and therefore need to be tamed to be safe. In the mainstream media, North Americans now get to enjoy images of healthy women eating food after decades of advertising that encouraged women to diet. Simultaneously, that empowerment consumers feel when watching the ad is transformed into more power for capitalist patriarchy. As made clear by ventriloquism, in the case of femvertising, *control is acquired through animation*. In order to profit, brands are forced to cast off the tactics of the past and speak to their customers in different ways. Thus, here is a great performance of feminism from *Special K*—the feminism within it appears bold and

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<sup>17</sup> Notably, at the same that Kellogg’s was getting back in with Leo Burnett, the Sydney branch of the global ad agency was highly criticized “after [it] trumpeted its hire of five new creatives who were all white men” (Hayes). Despite considerable backlash, the company refused to comment until months later when the company tweeted: “None of our latest hires were hired because of their specific gender, race or nationality; they were hired because they were the best” (Hayes).

unapologetic. And yet, the goal of this advertisement is to stir the feminist mind only insofar as it will take the consumer to the supermarket for some *Special K* quinoa bars. Femvertising writ large is making certain forms of feminism safe and docile, just like terrorism is deemed delightful and funny by Dunham's animation of Achmed. Perhaps the greatest violence that can be done to feminism is to make it do tricks, make jokes, and jump through hoops. Making any manifestation feminism safe robs it of its agency, potency and potential.

As I will discuss in the next section, representational control becomes very powerful in the situation of femvertising. Even when representations change and become more inclusive, power structures are often left intact. The question arises: Does the Own It campaign, or any example of femvertising, lose its feminist punch when it is conceived by men? Linked to this initial question is that a consideration of ventriloquism also prompts queries about who gets to speak versus who is spoken for/through in our contemporary culture. This examination suggests that femvertising, just like the ventriloquist's performance, is more a dissemination of capitalist ideals than a dialogue about gender dynamics.

## Femvertising and Self-Representation

My argument throughout this project is rooted in the idea that form matters: the ways in which political messages are communicated have an impact on their meaning. As will be illustrated in chapter three, the gateways to feminism are important; if corporate or celebrity mouths deliver messages of political, feminist importance, then limits are set upon that sentiment. Feminist consumerism domesticates feminist discourse by giving it a thrown voice. While feminist messages—of the liberal feminist ilk—might gain a mass audience through femvertising, celebrity feminism, and feminist products, the form that these messages take undercuts their capacity to challenge patriarchal consumer capitalism. Feminism, just another product in contemporary culture, is more and more being brought to light by capitalism. As a result, some feminist messages are not communicated by feminists themselves, but rather through corporate channels on the assembly line. When a product is

mass-produced, it often loses its authenticity, uniqueness, and identity; such products ultimately reinforce the inequitable system that bore them. In many ways, contemporary feminism has been taken to market: mass-produced for extraordinary profit.

One of the significant issues at the heart of corporate participation in feminist discourse is the ways in which feminist messages are removed from those who seek the political and cultural gains of self-representation. The ventriloquial dynamic shows that, of course, the dummy is not speaking her own mind—how can she represent herself when she does not even exist in her own right? It becomes important to review the politics of representation to understand more clearly what is at stake when we allow corporations to represent feminism on behalf of feminists. In *Orientalism*, a canonical text on cultural representations, Edward Said argues that being represented by another is a form of containment; “the point is that in each of these cases the Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks” (original italics, 40). Said describes this containment as a kind of “domestication” (60), in which the supposedly incapable, feminized, exotic Oriental is symbolically caged and controlled by the masculine, reasoning, Enlightened colonizer. While Said is largely credited for his contributions to discussions of race relations, particularly in the formation of the idea of “The East” or “The Orient”, his arguments are applicable to the study of gender and the ways in which patriarchy colonizes and controls ideas about women. Said’s understanding of representational containment is in line with my application of the ventriloquial metaphor; however, Said goes further and argues that representational containment is a form of violence. He writes that the ramifications of this kind of prolonged representational abuse are vast and real. Significantly, he argues that representations have the power to bring into material existence the very inaccuracies, stereotypes, and inexactitudes they name. “Most important, such texts can *create* not only knowledges but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it” (original italics, 94). It becomes clear in *Orientalism* that representational power has widespread material impacts.

Being “spoken for” (122) is not a benign action; rather, it is a form of robbery that can have real impact on those being contained. In fact, groups that have never had the power to represent themselves can fall into the trap of *becoming*, and thus validating, the stereotypes that have been inflicted upon them. In this way, the cycle of representational repression continues, allowing the colonizer to define the Other as it pleases.

Said reminds us that representations play an important role in hegemonic domination; they help to reproduce systemic norms. Femvertising complicates Said’s analysis because while it is clear patriarchal consumer capitalism takes the liberty of representing feminism, it is less clear what happens when the represented Other is comfortable with the representation formed by that power. The profitability and cultural power of femvertising suggest that many North American consumers enjoy the representations brought forward by capital. As I described in chapter one, many even believe that supporting female-friendly brands will benefit gendered culture. So, if the representations are “better” than they were before, do the power structures need to change? In my opinion, of course they do. Femvertising is just one kind of female representation in the media today, and while it might be better than the overt sexualization and objectification of women, it is still not the solution.

Men representing women, even in empowering femvertisements, is still problematic because North American society celebrates the progress of womankind while men *still* dominate the representational landscape. Combating negative stereotypes and depictions of women and seizing representational control has been a goal of feminism for decades, particularly as it relates to women and film; “feminists from Simone de Beauvoir onwards had seen cinema as a key carrier of contemporary cultural myths. It is through these myths—found in ‘religions, traditions, language, tales, songs, movies’ —argues Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), that we not only interpret but also experience our material existences as men and women” (Thornham in Gamble, 93). Like Said, Beauvoir recognizes that representations of gender have material impacts on the world, and in almost all cases (in 1949 and in 2017), such representations were created, controlled, and disseminated by



men; “[r]epresentation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth’, women, too, must inevitably see themselves through these representations” (Thornham in Gamble, 94). Beauvoir’s concerns for limiting depictions of women were picked up by others. Written in 1978, Gail Tuchman’s *Hearth and Home: Images of Women and the Media* addresses similar concerns regarding the “symbolic annihilation” of women by the mass media, which “was held deeply implicated in the patterns of discrimination operating against women in society” (Fenton in Gamble, 106). Feminism has long recognized self-representation as a political act, one that usurps power from male-dominated ideas and depictions of women. To represent oneself, particularly in the early days of feminism, was a daring move. For example, in the self-portraiture of Frida Kahlo, and later in the photography of performance artist Cindy Sherman (see Carter 1989), scholars have celebrated the deployment of “a subversive narcissism... which both appropriates and challenges the male gaze” (Gamble). Challenges like these that push back against a woman’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey), are powerful both because they actively thwart male domination, and because they take up the task of representing women in the cultural landscape. That being said, I am not so sure Laura Mulvey would be satisfied by *Special K’s Own It* commercial; I do not think the male gaze can be challenged seriously in such a context. To really challenge “to-be-looked-at-ness” is to control your own representation.

Giving women adequate tools to represent themselves, their experiences, and those of their communities is still a pervasive problem in contemporary culture. According to Jacqueline Rose, “raising a voice in the world would of course be one definition of feminism—speaking out, protesting, clamouring loudly for equality, making oneself heard... An outspoken woman is a threat, not just because of the content of what she says, the demands she is making, but because, in the very act of speaking, her presence as a woman is too strongly felt” (4-5). In the North American culture industries, women continue to be vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts. Even as recently as the 2017 JUNO awards, female artists were speaking out against the systemic lack of representation; #JunosSoMale (a play on 2016’s #OscarsSoWhite) was the political hashtag of choice. For

some, the deficiency in balance was not surprising, but rather business as usual. For example,

Alysha Brilla wasn't surprised by the lack of female representation when this year's Juno Awards nominees were announced. Years ago, the Waterloo, Ont.-based musician and producer decided to conduct an experiment. She carefully tabulated the gender diversity among Juno nominees and found there wasn't much at all, particularly in the technical categories, which were completely dominated by men. After scrolling through this year's list of contenders...she concluded little has changed. (Friend)

As expected, inequality is not confined to the Canadian music industry. The Centre for the Study of Women in Television & Film's latest study focused on Women in Independent Film. Researchers found a widespread gender disparity across roles in filmmaking:

This study provides employment figures for women working in key behind-the-scenes roles on independently and domestically produced feature-length documentaries and narrative films screening at 23 high profile film festivals in the United States including AFI Fest, Sundance Film Festival, and SXSW Film Festival. In 2016-17, the festivals considered screened three times as many narrative films, and almost twice as many documentaries, directed by men as by women. Overall, the films employed more than twice as many men as women (72% vs. 28%) as directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers.

Citing The Centre for the Study of Women in Television & Film's research, a January 2017 article in *Variety* reported, "despite all the editorials and the speeches and the handwringing, things aren't getting better for women in Hollywood. They're getting worse" (Lang). Notwithstanding widespread attention to the discrepancy between male and female cultural storytellers, it appears that self-representation is still discouraged, off-limits, and unattainable for many women and minorities. The advertising industry fails women as well. A 2016 article in *The Guardian* states that, "In the advertising industry...there are very few female creative directors making the adverts that women see. In 2008, just 3.6% of the world's creative directors were female. Since then it has tripled to 11%; in London, my research shows, the figure is about 14% – still shockingly low" (Hanan). Just as it is disillusioning to justify President Trump's successful bid for The White House with the recent popularity of feminism (as evidenced by an influx in commodified feminism), so too is it difficult to understand the almost non-existent progress of equal representation in the

arts, advertising and beyond. How is it that things appear to be the worst and the best for feminism all at once? I argue corporate feminism's control through animation is to blame. Just like the ventriloquist's performance, feminism is defined by an other to the detriment of actual progress. While feminism has never been so visible and popular, some forms of it has also never been more lifeless. Without a dramatic shift in representation control, I fear that this dynamic will only continue until *corporate feminism is feminism*—mere simulacra that points to a non-existent cause.

While some scholars question the importance of representation, I value the political power that is at stake when representation is up for grabs. While femvertising may appear to be a genuine pitch, closer inspection reveals that, on the contrary, it is a limited liberal feminism voiced by patriarchal consumer capitalism. The voice behind the act—the wizard behind the curtain—is the corporate machine eager to exploit feminism for as much profit as possible. In a late-capitalism communicated by screens, images, and pictures, representation is one of the ways our hegemonic system regenerates. By offering feminist-minded consumers just enough change to keep them under control, hegemonic capitalism benefits from warping political feminism into commodified feminism. The politics of representation help to show that femvertising is not feminism—it is a foil that points to a political referent but fails to engage with it. Femvertising becomes a strong example of how counter-hegemonic forces feed the very systems they aim to dismantle.

For example, in an episode of CBC's *Under the Influence*, Terry O'Reilly describes the bleak climate of the 2008 economic crisis. By 2010, many major businesses had gone under. In the midst of the wreckage, *Unilever* was awarded the Cannes award for Creative Marketer of the Year and, more significantly posted a 5% gain as the stock market suffered a crushing 25% loss (O'Reilly). O'Reilly attributes *Unilever's* success to the *Dove Real Beauty Campaign*, and specifically, the "Evolution" advertisement I outlined in chapter one. Celebrated as a step forward for women and advertising, the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*, spearheaded by Ogilvy & Mather Toronto, is still exalted as one of the most creative *and* effective advertising campaigns of all time. All this said, the "senior managers

at Dove were predominantly male. These men had built a vast global business. This massive success was due, in large part, to the fact Dove had used heavily re-touched images of beauty as a fundamental underpinning of its marketing” (O’Reilly). As O’Reilly reveals in this episode, the senior managers at *Dove* were not keen on Ogilvy & Mather’s suggestion to move toward the “real beauty” campaign. While the team needed marketing support, senior management was not comfortable with a complete overhaul of *Dove*’s brand. Rather than give up on their idea, Ogilvy & Mather persisted.

In order to convince management to adopt their advertising strategy, Ogilvy & Mather went to the daughters of the senior management team and showed them *Dove*’s traditional advertisements. The daughters of these executives responded by explaining how these ads made them feel; Dove was part of a media climate that made women and girls feel inadequate and unattractive. Ogilvy & Mather showed these reactions to the team of executive dads who were all personally moved by hearing their own daughters speak honestly about their feelings. Because of its creative, personal appeal, Ogilvy & Mather was given the green light to build the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*. *Dove* did not sign onto the *Campaign for Real Beauty* because the team welcomed a female executive; the brand owes the ingenious campaign to paternal (and paternalistic) feelings. Tracing the roots of *Dove*’s real beauty reveals that, at its inception, this campaign had little to do with a feminist mentality and more to do with fathers wanting their daughters to feel beautiful.

A boardroom of men is behind the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*—a team of skilled and adept executives who ventriloquized feminist ideas—and if it were not for overwhelming, personalized market research, the campaign would not have come to pass. A *Dove* advertisement that adopts the rhetoric of the *Campaign for Real Beauty* is a vessel—or dummy—through which advertisers speak. In this format, extensive market research is wielded for profit. If the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* is considered to be such a bounding step forward for the representation of women in advertising, it is apt to remember that commercials such as these still operate within the patriarchal context of representing the other. Femvertising is far from an example of self-representation. The

images and messages that come from femvertising might appear more female-friendly—a welcome break from the re-touched images so often used in cosmetic industrial complex—but they still objectify by rendering their dummies mute. Worse, these commercials objectify feminism by making it a sellable and attractive commodity.

## Setting Limits: The Parameters of Ventriloquism

A detailed investigation of ventriloquism analyzes the limits that are set upon the performance; while most of this chapter has focused on the limits set upon the dummy by the ventriloquist, it is also interesting to question what parameters the dummy sets upon the ventriloquist. For example, if the ventriloquist breaks the illusion of the performance and obviously speaks for himself, the audience will become suddenly aware of the totalizing narrative being performed. If the illusion of dialogue, the very crux of the ventriloquist act, is shattered, the integrity and magic of the performance will be lost. A good example of this is when Ellen DeGeneres chimes in at the end of *CoverGirl's* GirlsCan advertisement (discussed in detail in the next chapter) that women should make the world more “easy, breezy, and beautiful.” Her on-cue repetition of *Cover Girl's* well-known slogan is cringe-worthy; it is a moment that undercuts an ad that has not even shown make-up in the commercial. This kind of slogan regurgitation can be an immediate turn-off for feminist audience members. *Cover Girl Corp.* is much too obvious here; the ventriloquist is pathetically sipping water to hide his lack of skill. Just as the dummy is restricted by the expectations of the master, the master is restricted by the traditions and expectations of the performance, which pledges him to the dummy and the believability of their dialogue. Femvertising asks brands to rethink their tactics—even their most established slogans—to appeal to feminist consumers. When Ellen DeGeneres pays lip service to *Cover Girl*, consumers question the authenticity of the entire commercial, which is framed as a genuine heart-to-heart between celebrity spokesmodels and girls around the world.

According to scholars who have deployed the ventriloquial metaphor in other contexts, the ventriloquist/dummy dynamic is not one of overt control; it is more nuanced, and in my opinion, more reflective of the complicated, contemporary situation of women in

Westernized countries who experience both freedoms and discrimination. I will return briefly to the work of Helen Davies to describe this discrepancy further. While “the history of ventriloquism is already embroiled in gendered politics” (Davies, 41), the dummy is not devoid of agency, but rather has “agency under constraint” (30). For Davies, “although the ventriloquist might be positioned as having the ability to exercise influence and possess other subjects, s/he is always dependent on another” (57). Davies prompts a critical look into the extent to which the dummy can limit the ventriloquist’s capacity to control; it becomes clear that the ventriloquial metaphor is also useful for its inherent optimism. Like Davies, Steve Connor suggests, “the ventriloquist, it seems, could do everything, and yet could do nothing” (327). The feminized dummy may be susceptible to the control of the masculine ventriloquist, but as highlighted by Davies and Connor, the very presence of the dummy sets limits on the capabilities of the speaker and how they speak suggesting “if we return to the examples of ventriloquism where the subject fulfilling the dummy/puppet role is actually a subject (the medium, the possessed subject, the prophetic priestess) the division between activity and passivity begins to unravel and agency becomes an increasingly debatable issue” (Davies, 30). In the context of contemporary gender politics, feminism has undeniably made improvements in the lives of many women and to say that women are directly controlled by men is not only reductive, but also an inaccurate portrait of contemporary gender dynamics. The metaphor of ventriloquism attempts to go beyond the physical artistry of the marionette; there are no visible strings in the ventriloquist act, but rather, less hierarchical modes of control. There is an intimacy, an illusion of consent, between the speaker and the spoken for. The task of this project is to illustrate the complex dynamic of agency that women experience and to interrogate what agency for women should look like.

At the same time, the vessel of the dummy affords the ventriloquist a route to say things that he might not utter from his own lips. The dummy frees the master from having to take responsibility for things said, similar to corporations not wanting to take responsibility for the unsavoury actions that lead to profit. For example, Dunham’s Achmed act pushes the limits of politically correct speech in an ISIS-fearing world and

relies on stereotypes and fears about “terrorists.” In 2008, the government of South Africa banned a commercial that featured Achmed: “...the government of South Africa doesn't think it's funny. According to iafrica.com, South Africa's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) ruled that a GloMobile ringtone commercial featuring Dunham and his puppet was offensive to Muslims” (Rhett Miller). Dunham’s response was that he offends everyone in his performance so his depiction of Achmed should not be singled out. He claims to have “skewered whites, blacks, Hispanics, Christians, Jews, Muslims, gays, straights, rednecks, addicts, the elderly, and my wife. As a standup comic, it is my job to make the majority of people laugh, and I believe that comedy is the last true form of free speech” (ibid). Likewise, in a 2014 show in Malaysia, “the government requested that he [Dunham] not use or name Achmed in his show. Due to the restriction, but to avoid disappointing fans, Achmed was renamed to be ‘Jacques Merde, the Dead French Terrorist’” (YouTube).

While it is beyond the scope of this project to do a comparative analysis of Dunham’s comedy as opposed to his comedian counterparts, it is clear Dunham’s act differs because of his dummies. While other comedians, roast-masters, and performers, like Canadian comic Russell Peters, have based their careers on deploying racial, cultural, and gender stereotypes, pushing the boundaries of political correctness, and relying on harmful assumptions, Dunham is able to speak through his dummies, a facet of his act that makes him unique in the industry. In this way, Dunham is allowed some wiggle room when it comes to the affordances of speech. Of course, it is not him speaking, but his dummies. According to Mooallem, “the jokes that get some of the wildest, loudest reactions aren’t really even jokes, just statements. Like when one puppet shouts that all Mexicans should learn English, or when Dunham wishes Walter ‘Happy Holidays’ and Walter responds: ‘I’ve been wanting to say this for a couple of years now: Screw you, it’s ‘Merry Christmas’!’ And the crowd doesn’t laugh; it riotously applauds. Dunham describes them as moments of ‘catharsis,’ when the dummy says something ‘everyone wants to laugh about, or that you snicker at with one or two friends, but that you could never say out loud.’” This moment of “cathartic glee”, when the dummy is able to say something taboo, showcases a key idiosyncrasy of the ventriloquial exchange. Even though Dunham is on

stage and clearly animating each of his dummies, his thrown speech is not only a “get out of jail free card,” it is also one of the highlights of his performance:

Dunham does concede that he’s extra-sensitive to one of his largest constituencies: the conservative “country crowd.” “That’s why I don’t pick on basic Christian-values stuff,” he told me. “Well, I also don’t like to, because that’s the way I was brought up.” He then stopped himself short and said: “Oh, boy. I’m walking into something here.” Dunham started to explain — as if realizing it for the first time — that this would appear to make the jokes he does about Islam with Achmed “hypocritical.” But he quickly unburdened himself of the idea. “I try to make the majority of my audience laugh,” he said. “That’s my audience. They’ll laugh at the dead terrorist” (Mooallem).

Just like most comedians, Dunham is looking for laughs; by admitting that he tailors his performance to please his majority demographic, Dunham shows that the dummies give him a way out. The “country crowd” is not laughing at him, but rather at “a dead terrorist.”

Missing from Dunham’s performance is a metatheatric sensibility; Dunham does not deploy harmful and limiting stereotypes as a critical comment on society, but as he himself admits, to please a wider audience. Apt here is an example from the Canadian play *Adventures of Ali & Ali and the aXes of Evil* by Guillermo Verdecchia, Camyar Chai, Marcus Youssef: *Ali & Ali* features a mid-play puppet show in which the disenfranchised characters are given the opportunity to lend their voices to puppets. What is fundamentally different about *Ali & Ali* and Dunham is how Verdecchia, Chai, and Youssef give voice to stereotypes to make a wider comment on social norms. In the scene, the Alis and Tom put on *The Classical Puppet Theatre of Agraba*. During the puppet show, the Alis and Tom are able to adopt the speech of the ‘Real Life Men of America’ and don their privilege and status for a portion of the play. The puppet show explodes with the fraternity house, hyperbolic, privileged speech of white, American men who hold power:

DUBYA: Oh hi, Semi-Colin

RUMMY: ‘Sup dog?

SEMI-COLIN: Mr. President, the media are having a field day with the  
prison abuse—

RUMMY: Fuck’em. Keeps their mind off the really nasty shit we’re doing.



Hehehe.

DUBYA: I saw those Abu Gayrab (sic) pictures. Didn't I?

CHENEY: You did, sir.

DUBYA: Can I see them again?

RUMMY: No, sir. (68)

The puppet show affords the Alis the “opportunity” to take on the Alpha-male roles of George W. Bush, et al. This scene reaches far beyond toilet humour and sinks to the depths of scathing homophobia, misogyny, racism, masochism and violence. Indeed, the puppet show can be interpreted as a “delicious” critique of U.S. foreign policy (Wasserman). The playwrights take us here to comment on post 9/11 America, white privilege, and male domination. This scene is a play within a play where the Alis bask in a fantasy world of excessive and indulgent power and independence—something only afforded to certain members of society. Playwrights Chai, Youssef and Verdecchia have intended for the puppet show to condemn overt masculinity and peg the White House representatives’ banter as overcompensating for their lack of security in their manhood. At the same time, the Alis are really the ones paying lip service to the puppets and should be held accountable for their speech. To throw one’s voice does not mean that one can dissociate from that voice. The Alis and Tom indulge in an all-you-can-say buffet of men’s choice taboos and inside jokes, but get away unscathed because they are behind the puppet theatre curtain. At the very least, *Ali & Ali* asks the audience to think about relevant, contemporary issues rather than simply pander for a laugh.

In this section, I have considered the limits set upon the ventriloquial performance both for the dummy and the ventriloquist. Ultimately, the power of the ventriloquist reigns supreme—just like the capitalism that controls much of the globe in our contemporary moment. The important takeaway as it relates to corporate feminism is the ways in which the same ventriloquist can give voice to disparate dummies. In media studies, it is widely understood that fewer and fewer companies own more and more media (see Croteau & Hoynes). Corporations that use femvertising to attract female consumers may still use

objectification and sexualization to attract male consumers. One of the most popular examples is that while the *Dove Real Beauty Campaign* was showing happy, confident women with “real” bodies, *Axe* was advertising body spray showing bikini-clad models fawning over scented men. *Unilever*, the parent company of both brands, only felt it necessary to femvertise in certain contexts. Ventriloquists can have a whole set of different dummies, so it is worth asking whether because one uses more feminist, politically correct language, the others can be excused for their misogyny. Just as Jeff Dunham has a cast of different dummies, capitalism can, at any point, move on from femvertising. Significantly, capitalism can decide to rely less on female consumers as a whole, a shift that may have an impact on the very freedoms we assume to be guaranteed. Such a scenario may prove that advances in the women’s movement are less determined by political activism and more by the value a certain demographic of women brings to the market.

## Audience Response and Agency: Active or Passive?

Ventriloquism has helped to describe femvertising’s strategy as well as the dangers of feigned dialogue. The metaphor continues to be fruitful in the ways it helps to explain the complicated audience positioning essential to media studies, particularly when it comes to femvertising. Femvertisements—as is true of all advertising—are neither deterministic nor open source. Like the ventriloquist’s performance, these commercials are expertly crafted, curated and concise; they have the ability to render an audience as both consumer and activist, as inert and active, as apolitical and feminist. Important here is the idea that representations are actuated when they are experienced by an audience. This section will outline some important audience reception theory to better shed light on the capacities of media audiences. Significant to media studies is the way audience theory and resistance are theoretically linked. How audiences respond to femvertising may have a correlation to their capacities to enact change.

Ventriloquism and femvertising elicit questions about the complexities of performance while also setting the stage for a nuanced discussion of audience response. In media studies, there is an ongoing discussion about the power of the audience—indeed, in

the idea of human agency as a whole—and the ways in which mass media shape, influence, and have an impact on society. Adorno and Horkheimer, the fathers of media studies, encouraged the ideas of The Frankfurt School, which understood the media as a “hypodermic needle” that injected audience members with a dangerous, ideological serum. Understanding the media as a business and not as art, the 1940s Frankfurt School argued, “in late capitalism, use value has been brought within the control of the capitalist producers, thanks to the power of advertising and the mass media” (Edgar & Sedgwick in Gamble, 63). This account suggests that members of the audiences of media (certainly including advertising) are “passive dupes” (ibid) who do as they are told by the capitalists who aim to exploit them. By defining the culture industry and calling out the mass media as the culprit that helps to inhibit Marx’s revolution, Adorno & Horkheimer argue that the capacity for the masses to resist domination is almost non-existent. They argue, “to the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the sense to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance is the condition of life in this society” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 131). Adorno & Horkheimer posit that the culture industry has subsumed all iterations of art into “unending sameness” and, therefore, has dissolved the oppositional possibilities it may prompt (106). This dynamic helps to shape unthinking citizens who are occupied by mass-produced, status-quo-reinforcing trash “from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in in the morning” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 104). The Frankfurt School thinkers conclude that the culture industry sets significant limits on the conception and materialization of resistance as whole. Writing much later, Zygmunt Bauman tends to favour the Frankfurt School approach when he claims that late-capitalism has rendered resistance inert. He writes, “this new way, practiced by the liquid modern society of consumers, arouses little if any dissident” (74). Bauman suggests that at best, citizens of consumer-based societies will tend toward consumer activism (146) or, indeed, no resistance at all.

At the same time, this kind of determinism is widely criticized because, while advertising certainly has an impact on capitalist society, human agency must be taken into account. Natalie Fenton posits, “this type of media effects theory has been widely criticised

as textual determinism which robs readers of their social context and critical agency, leaving no room for interpretive manoeuvre. In the extreme it leaves the audience as no more than cultural dupes, blank slates waiting to be written on” (Fenton in Gamble, 111). Research that relies on determinism does not consider the unintended consequences and potential meanings that can be taken from mass communication by an engaged, critical, and diverse audience. Audiences are varied, especially in a globalized media, so the hypodermic needle model, while it does raise a just alert to the power of the mass media, oversimplifies a complicated dynamic. As Natalie Fenton argues, the hypodermic model misses out on some more nuanced effects of the media; while advertisements might not brainwash us into buying a certain product, they can more stealthily impact our norms and notions. For example, “images of femininity in the mass media may not change the way we actually dress, but they may influence the way we think about what it means to be a woman. Similarly, the fact that sexist imagery in the media can not be directly correlated to sexist attitudes in society does not mean that it is of no consequence” (112). Transmitter and receptor are far too simplified for the world of media studies.

Feminist understanding has contributed greatly in revising the simplified cause and effect of media engagement. By arguing that messages do not have a monopoly on meaning, feminist media scholars have suggested that mass media objects are open to the scrutiny and interpretation of their readers and viewers. For example, Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, is a good illustration of active audience theory. In her text, Radway explores how romance novels are consumed and subverted by female readers. While such novels may seem to be a potent source of patriarchal messaging, Radway argues that *how* these texts are consumed is more important than the intention behind them. Specifically, Radway asserts, “the simple act of taking up a book addresses the personal costs hidden within the social role of wife and mother. I [Radway] try to make the case for seeing romance reading as a form of individual resistance to a situation predicated on the assumption that it is women alone who are responsible for the care and emotional nurturance of others” (Kindle version, location 212). Radway argues that resistance does not need to be a taking up of arms, but rather can be as

simple as women “erect[ing] a barrier...in order to declare themselves temporarily off-limits to those who would mine them for emotional support or material care” (ibid). Thus, Radway argues that the Smithton women use romance novels as a means of resisting the affective labour expected of them. While physically taking up a book may appear to be a form of material resistance, what Radway suggests is that reading is a symbolic gesture too. These women are not hiding behind their novels or literally using them as a shield; rather, they are representing themselves as occupied. While Radway’s analysis goes on to interpret how these women interact with different romance novel structures and characters, it is important to highlight that resistance is depicted as a symbolic act; picking up the book is just as important as reading it in this situation. Therefore, while Adorno & Horkheimer might argue that the leisure time that these women enjoy and the activity that they fill it with is merely an extension of the motherly role that they resist (Adorno & Horkheimer, 109), on a symbolic level, Radway makes a convincing point: by reading, the Smithton women resignify themselves in a non-motherly way, notably as women who are indulging in time away from their families. Resistance, under this definition, can be a gesture of resignification and not just a critical or oppositional reading.

Radway’s observations open the possibility that femvertising may have political power when taken out of the context of the market. For example, at a conference in San Francisco in 2015, I presented my research on femvertising to a fellow presenter. My colleague, who was an international student from Hong Kong doing research at The University of Texas, was shocked that my research was to criticize—not celebrate—femvertisements. She told me that since she’s been living in North America, she has taken great joy in sending these ads to her friends back home to show them how North America treats its women. For her, femvertisements are less about selling products and more about showcasing the position of women in North American culture. For her, femvertisements were not banal ads. Instead, they were nodes of political power—they were inspirational to her friends still living in Hong Kong. My positioning as a researcher—especially because I am one of those targeted by femvertising—colours my reading of these commercials, which to another audience, can have a completely different meaning.

Another proponent of active audience theory is Stuart Hall who argues, “that the makers of television programmes cannot determine the sense that the audience will make of them. The message will be encoded in the context of a set of cultural preconceptions and taken-for-granted knowledge, relations of production and technologies” but how that text is decoded is in the hands of the audience (Edgar & Sedgwick, 359). Likewise, in his paper on applying Gramsci to the study of race and ethnicity, Hall rightfully reminds readers that resistance is not a monolith. On the contrary, “the object of analysis is therefore not the single stream of ‘dominant ideas’ into which everything and everyone has been absorbed, but rather the analysis of ideology as a differentiated terrain, of the different discursive currents, their points of juncture and break and the relations of power between them” (22). Just as audience members can read a text differently, many social movements that might appear coherent (like feminism) are often deeply fragmented because power affects members of various communities differently. Hall notes that human agency, whether it is interpreting a media text or resisting power, must be considered as a multifaceted terrain.

Of course, this kind of audience epistemology is more in line with post-modern thinking and has also undergone criticism. For example, some theorists argue that active audience research neglects the political economic factors that undergird individual textual offerings. Such interpretations miss how mass media messages are part of a wider, structural system that reigns supreme, despite a scattering of subversive interpretations. A return to the arguments made by Natalie Fenton shows that it is important to avoid privileging either the powerless or the active audience model, but rather, “to remember from Foucault...that discourses reflect and produce power and certain discourses claim legitimacy over others. Aspects of contemporary mass media practices can be used to reproduce a repressive social system” (115). The mass media is a hegemonic system, one in which discourses are always colliding and morphing to reproduce consent. For Antonio Gramsci, counter-hegemonic activity is a necessary component to reproducing the consent required by hegemony: “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence)

which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci, Location 1884). Thus, the populous can renew its consent to the “dominant fundamental group”, the hegemonic state must absorb allowable amounts of dissidents in order to keep the masses docile and complacent. In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams clarifies that “hegemony is always a process...it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. *It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures*” (emphasis added, 112). Williams’ concept of counter-hegemony suggests that audiences, whether they embrace or resist mediated messages, are still part of an oppressive system. Resistance, in this framework, is one of the ways hegemony maintains itself. Just as it is impossible to separate bubbles boiling on the surface of water from the underlying liquid, it is impossible to separate hegemonic states from their various counter-hegemonies. In this way, hegemonies incorporate “oppositional codes” because it is in the best interest of the system’s survival (Hall, *Encoding*, 103). Gramsci’s contribution to resistance is useful because it recognizes that audiences are both free to interpret media texts while they are complacent in a system that oppresses them.

In this regard, I want to highlight the author/audience or power/resistance binary as a dialectical relation in which each mutually sets the other’s capacities, yet remembering that these cultural processes are profoundly complicated. As Williams articulates, we are dealing with “a complex and interrelated process of limits and pressures” (87) in society. Crucial here is that the system sets capacities for what forms of resistance or interpretations will manifest; however, more hopeful is the fact that resistance itself has the ability to augment the system. For my project, it is useful to consider hegemony as a type of performance. As Gramsci notes, hegemony, like ideology, always has an alibi and never declares itself as hegemony. A hegemonic system, just like the ventriloquist, must maintain its performance as a non-hegemonic system and feign its genuine interest in addressing oppositional notions. It becomes crucial that the dominant system not break the illusion because it might awaken the public and spur a revolution. To continue to theorize resistance is still a fruitful endeavour because there is room to expand capacities in ways that can

make life better. To review, it is evident that the problem with resistance is that it is seriously limited by the system against which it attempts to push. David Harvey argues that the limits set upon resistance by capital and the way that space and time are conceived within capitalism render almost all social movements impotent:

all such social movements, no matter how well articulated their aims, run up against a seemingly immovable paradox. For not only does the community of money, coupled with a rationalized space and time, define them in an oppositional sense, but the movements have to control the question of value and its expression as well as the necessary organization of space and time appropriate to their own reproduction... Capital, in short, continues to dominate, and it does so in part through superior command over space and time, even when opposition movements gain control over a particular place for a time. (239)

Harvey identifies that social movements, like interpretive readings, are inhibited by capitalism because these resistances are forced to operate within capitalist confines. For example, many social organizations and social movements depend on money to do the work that will better society. Without the help of corporate sponsors who donate money under their corporate responsibility mandate, many non-profit organizations would disappear. In order to expand the capacity for change, it is pertinent to consider how different perspectives of time and space might reinvigorate the notion of resistance altogether.

The ventriloquial metaphor I am putting forward helps support a hegemonic interpretation of audience response. This kind of performance reflects how audiences are not dupes; its members know that the ventriloquist is a skilled actor, one who sets the parameters of the performance. Audiences are savvy to many aspects of the enactment, and in fact, this knowing engagement can help to make a performance better, funnier, and unique. On the other side, audience interpretations are limited by the parameters of the performance: while they may be able to interpret or subvert the messages they are offered, their interpretations are confined by what the performance gives them. Mediated texts always offer some interpretive confines or else we risk “relativism gone mad...an interpretative free-for-all in which the audience possess an unlimited potential to read any meaning at will from a given text” (Fenton in Gamble, 113). The audience of the



ventriloquist's act relishes both in its knowing of how the performance works *and* in being convinced that the dummy is alive. The audience is both knowing and duped all at once—a joy specific to this kind of theatre and one in which the pleasure of participating as an audience member is to bask in both interpretive freedom and manipulative deceit.

For example, the biggest laugh and applause of the Dunham clip proves that the audience members, while they enjoy being lulled into Achmed's shtick, also derive enormous gratification from being reminded of the metatheatrics of the performance. Particularly, the audience relishes in being reminded that Dunham's is the only voice in this performance. Ironically, he adeptly does this by adding a "third" voice to the act. At this crucial turning point in the performance, Dunham, animates the voice of Walter, a dummy who is still folded up in a nearby suitcase. Walter criticizes Achmed from within the case and speaks even though he is not in view and Achmed still takes the stage. The audience not only laughs, they applaud—both because Walter is another beloved character and also because of Dunham's ability to multi-task and bring two characters to life at the same time. Dunham is also able to make Walter's voice small. It sounds muffled and distant, in keeping with someone trapped in a suitcase. All at once, the audience is in a unique position within the dialectic: they are laughing at Achmed and Walter's "relationship," especially at the notion that Walter and Achmed share interactions within their communal suitcase as they travel the world with Dunham. At the same time, the audience is suddenly very aware of the performance and Dunham's impressive skill, comedy, and sleight of "voice."

## Conclusion

Ventriloquism helps to explain femvertising's paradoxical nature—femvertising's animation of feminism is the avenue to its containment. This chapter has considered how the metaphor of ventriloquism offers insight into tyrannical dialogue, self-representation, and audience response. The more complicated and serious question that arises from the relationship between feminism and capitalism is what happens if the market stops seeing women as lucrative consumers—what happens when the ventriloquist retires a dummy? It

is interesting to trace how strides in women's rights have been afforded by the whims of capitalism. It is impossible to ignore that women have lobbied, fought, protested, and died for the rights that are enjoyed today in the West. It is also important to consider larger factors that have contributed to contemporary life too. According to Forbes, "Women drive 70-80% of all consumer purchasing, through a combination of their buying power and influence. Influence means that even when a woman isn't paying for something herself, she is often the influence or veto vote behind someone else's purchase." In a patriarchal, capitalist society that thrives on consumer spending, it only makes sense to elevate the rights of your most valuable consumer. While women were fighting for their right to participate in capitalist life, the market was (and is still) honing in on them.

# Chapter 3

## Fame-inists: Celebrity Feminism and Neoliberalism

### Introduction

The sudden popularity of corporate feminism has not just encouraged the deployment of femvertising but can also be associated with the growing trend of celebrity feminism. Recently, some high profile, celebrity women have claimed feminism as part of their public identity. As I will discuss in this chapter, cultural critics like Roxanne Gay have questioned the role of celebrity feminists in North American pop culture. To extend Gay's analysis, I will discuss the connection between femvertising and celebrity feminism by analyzing key examples of celebrity feminism and applying the theories and implications of femvertising to them. An analysis of celebrity feminism helps to elaborate the implications of corporate feminism, and critically, suggests that *how* feminism is communicated has an impact on its potential. To borrow Gay's term, the "gateways" that are available to bring people into the feminist dialogue are important. The examples that I offer here are gateways predicated by profit. The important question at the heart of this chapter is whether corporations, celebrities, and advertisements are sufficient and appropriate gateways to feminism. Feminism should not need a seductive marketing campaign. And yet, the idea of women moving through the world as freely as men does not have enough caché to sell itself. The serious question that arises from this conclusion is whether women would be as highly valued in the Western world as they are today without their status as prime consumers. Should we be asking if contemporary gender dynamics are rooted in the behaviours of capital?

Another question that I offer in this chapter is whether contemporary liberal feminism should hold equality to men as its marker of success. Throughout my thesis, I have identified neoliberal attitudes as one of the major culprits in forming and perpetuating corporate feminism. One of the most reliable tactics of liberal feminism is the notion of

equality—it is the cornerstone of mainstream feminism. While I certainly do not want to dismantle “equality” to the point that it becomes inoperable, I do want to question how familiar forms of feminism have used equality as a staple in feminist struggle and in what ways that reliance on equality has, perhaps, limited the feminist agenda. Perhaps the pursuit of being equal to men within a capitalist, patriarchal framework has been doomed from the beginning: should feminism be about being equal to men or about making the world a better place for women to live too? I argue that it is not enough to create a world in which women have the right to equally exploit those around them. Considering celebrity feminism helps to crystallize this argument, specifically in the ways that celebrities act as beacons of neoliberal success and perpetuate individualistic ideology.

## Rebranding a Social Movement: Feminism Goes To Hollywood

Femvertising is one prominent arm of corporate feminism; however, the trend of wielding feminism for profit is not confined to commercials. While most of this project has focused on close readings of various femvertisements—their rhetorical strategies and their implications—there are other examples that spill over the confines of advertisements and into the wider media landscape.<sup>18</sup> Feminism, particularly the iteration that is endorsed by celebrities or lauded in popular shows, appears to be increasingly popular. The idea of feminism becoming “cool” was almost inconceivable only a few short years ago—how the pendulum has swung in favour of marketable feminism: “Feminism and women’s rights are often hijacked by Hollywood, corporations, celebrities and elites as a public-relations tool, who use it to portray something as an insightful or revolutionary step toward equality for women. In reality, these appropriations are not feminist. Rather, they embody the elitism that hurts feminist causes” (Skojec & Sainato). The F-word is not as frightening as it once was now that it has the appropriate commercial machine behind it to make it profitable. This, plus the support of the Millennial generation with all their sensitivities to gluten,

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<sup>18</sup> Even as I open *iTunes* to play some music while I write this chapter, my Apple Music recommends to me a playlist of “Essential Feminism Songs” that features Beyoncé, Katy Perry, and Taylor Swift.

identity politics, and intolerance, helps to make feminism one of today's trends. Suddenly, as if overnight, feminism has gone from ugly to chic. Clearly, times have changed: "In 1992, in a public letter decrying a proposal for an equal rights amendment (the horror!) television evangelist Pat Robertson hilariously proclaimed that feminism would cause women to 'leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians'" (Bennett). Leaders in the feminist movement questioned whether feminism needed a new name—a new brand. As I discussed in chapter one, the transition from second-wave feminism to third-wave feminism was mired by post-feminist rhetoric. Many young women did not see the need for feminism anymore and disassociated with representations of "the feminist." Those who still believed in the feminist cause (and understood that more work needed to be done) called for a revival of feminism. For example, in 2013, *VitaminW*—an online, women-owned publication that reports on women's news, business, philanthropy, and entrepreneurship—launched a contest in partnership with *Miss Representation* to "rebrand" feminism. The group's call to action suggested that feminism "has been given a bad rap and gotten a bad rep." Their goal was to show that feminism is for *everyone* and how it is far from the exclusionary, man-hating, bra-burning movement that many people think it is. Their campaign tried to make feminism palatable, universal, and comfortable. The winning entry was from Mariam Guessous, an art director at an advertising agency in New York. Her submission consisted of three posters that centered around the question: "Feminism is Human Rights | Are You a Feminist?" The posters did not try to give feminism a new name, but rather aimed to associate it more broadly with universal human rights and equality for all.

When I first encountered *VitaminW*'s campaign, I was disturbed by the call to "rebrand" feminism. Their chosen verb is an on-trend buzzword that is indicative of corporate discourse; to "rebrand" means to "change the corporate image of a company or organization." The term's usage has grown significantly since 1990 (Google). *VitaminW*'s campaign, while it raised appropriate concern about the future of feminism, had limited exposure and, therefore, was rather benign in overhauling the movement. Indeed, their summons to "rebrand" feminism became, in hindsight, foreshadowing for the firestorm that

was to come. *VitaminW* was correct in its conclusion that feminism needed to be rebranded; however, feminism did not need another series of uplifting posters aiming to universalize the women's movement. Rather, it needed to be taken to market. Turns out, feminism did not need to be rebranded at all. It needed the endorsement of a lifetime, a savior, perhaps, a Queen. It needed Beyoncé.

## Celebrity Endorsed Feminism: Beyoncé and Emma Watson

### Beyoncé, the VMA Awards and FEMINIST

In 2014, Beyoncé saved feminism from its bad rap. Unlike *VitaminW*, Beyoncé did not universalize feminism; instead, she gave it her stamp of celebrity approval. At her performance at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs), Queen Bey paved the way for a blitz of celebrity feminism. Her hair-flipping, body-suit clad performance culminated in the word “FEMINIST” being blasted onto the screen behind her power-stance silhouette. It was a moment that seized international media attention: “Beyoncé would become the subject of two-thirds of all tweets about feminism in the 24 hours after her appearance, according to a data analysis by Twitter, making Sunday the sixth-highest day for volume of conversation about feminism since Twitter began tracking this year” (Bennett). According to *TIME Magazine*'s Jessica Bennett, Beyoncé's unapologetic performance, especially her unrepentant embrace of the word “feminist”, saved the troubled movement from its increasingly negative associations with the likes of militant, radical, and man-hating hags. Bennet writes, “As far as feminist endorsements were concerned, this was the holy grail.” Beyoncé's unprecedented performance at the VMAs did, perhaps, what years of feminist action and discourse could not do. So, “whether you like it or not, she's [Beyoncé] accomplished what feminists have long struggled to do: She's reached the masses. She has, literally, brought feminism into the living rooms of 12.4 million Americans” (Bennett). While *VitaminW* aimed to widen the appeal of feminism and showcase the universal values and goals of feminism, Beyoncé expanded feminism's appeal by giving it a Hollywood veneer. By lending her celebrity power to the term, Beyoncé helped to bring feminism into a contemporary capitalist framework so that it could be linked to her \$290 million brand.

The result is that feminism, like the latest fashion trend, became a specific consumer market. Celebrity feminists do not universalize feminism for wider political appeal; they make feminism more widely accessible through the process of commodification. Rather than be embraced for its commitment to human rights, feminism in this contemporary moment is palatable, universal, and comfortable because it is for sale. We might not know what to do about feminism, but we certainly know how to shop.

Journalists like Bennett celebrated Beyoncé’s backing of feminism, citing the idea that there is power in language; for her and many others, the 2014 VMAs was a turning point. Beyoncé’s feminism was not just isolated to the VMA’s; her feminist coming out was bolstered by a commitment to organizations that encourage leadership in girls like *Ban Bossy*. She also began producing music with an overt feminist inflection—her 2013 song *Flawless* is punctuated by a speech titled "We Should All Be Feminists" delivered by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at a TEDxEuston conference. Even some of the most outspoken critics of celebrity feminism, like Roxane Gay, knew that Bey had changed everything: “This has been the year when many of us, myself included, have been giddy over Beyoncé boldly declaring herself a feminist. At the MTV Video Music Awards, Beyoncé stood in front of the word FEMINIST and it felt like a *moment*. Here was a young, powerful, black woman openly claiming her feminism. Who wouldn’t want to be a feminist, too, with Beyoncé as a face of feminism?” And yet, despite her initial excitement, Gay is not so comfortable with how feminism has been picked up by the celebrity machine. Writing a year after Bennett, Gay is equipped to address the onslaught of celebrity endorsements of feminism that came after the VMAs. One of her quibbles is with Emma Watson:

A couple weeks ago, United Nations goodwill ambassador Emma Watson (best known as Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter movies) delivered a passionate speech before the UN that was, for the most part, very well received. Watson announced her “He For She” campaign meant to unite men and women in the feminist movement and help women achieve equality throughout the world. Clearly, the speech and the campaign were both well intentioned: video of her speech went viral and hers was the face that launched a thousand essays and articles about “Emma Watson’s feminism”. The feminist movement found a

new brand, even though Emma Watson wasn't saying anything feminists haven't already said for more than 40 years.

It is appropriate for Gay to question why Emma Watson was able to enthrall the world with her speech when her talk offered little that had not been said before. While many celebrities have acted as UN ambassadors, there is something about Watson that does not sit right with Gay. Like Beyoncé's FEMINIST, Watson's UN speech was more of an endorsement—a public face—to an already existing movement. Jean Hannah Edelstein writes, “Since her UN appointment in 2014, the best way to describe Watson's relationship with feminism is to say that she has made it an intrinsic building block of her public identity.” And yet, it is certain that both Beyoncé and Watson were able to do what many feminists of old and present could not—they reached people with their celebrity.

### Emma Watson, *HeForShe*, and *Beauty and the Beast*

Like Beyoncé's FEMINIST moment at the VMA's, Emma Watson's speech to the United Nations went viral, spurring media frenzy. For many feminists, including Gay, Watson's UN speech was not newsworthy for its groundbreaking content but rather because an established, Hollywood entity was boldly claiming feminism. Watson's feminist advocacy was reaching millions and, like Beyoncé, she was certainly making an impact in the feminist discursive field. In fact, it was not until after hearing Watson's UN speech that Malala Yousafzai—a feminist figure in her own right—decided to call herself a feminist ('Malala', New York Times). However, Watson's public image as a feminist was significantly undercut when her work at *HeForShe* was funneled back into the Hollywood machine. Shortly after feminism was absorbed into Emma Watson's brand, she became the latest live-action Disney princess. Cast as Belle in Disney's 2017 revival of *Beauty and the Beast*, Watson was tasked with revitalizing the character for a new generation of children with open-minded, Millennial parents. Disney, like many contemporary brands, takes into account the marketability of feminism: a perfect Belle needed to be someone who holds both wide appeal as well as enough feminist verve to fit the character and leverage the trend of popular feminism. Watson was the obvious choice; a large part of her *HeForShe* campaign is to invite those who feel excluded from feminism—particularly men—into the



feminist dialogue. Like *VitaminW*, Watson encourages a feminism that is inclusive, liberal, universal, and rooted in choice<sup>19</sup>. Edelstein finds it hard to think of a celebrity who could make feminism more palatable, especially to men: “It’s hardly Watson’s fault that she is who she is and she frequently notes her privilege. But it’s hard not to consider that Watson’s qualifications for her role as a bridge-builder between men and feminism included the fact that she’s a young and beautiful, incredibly famous white woman with a cut-glass accent. A telegenic British girl next door – if you lived in a really good catchment area.” It is no wonder that *Disney* chose Watson for the role. Funnily enough, in this time of popular feminism, her feminist dealings in *HeforShe* worked in her favour. Like an effective femvertisement, Disney was banking on feminism paying off in their *Beauty and the Beast* revival.

It is important to briefly address some of the conversations around *Disney* and its attempts to offer more “feminist” *Disney* princesses. The corporation’s efforts to leverage feminism are not isolated to *Beauty and the Beast*. Critics and scholars alike (see Hecht & Tillinghast and van Kessel & Daalmans) are considering how *Disney*’s princesses are evolving—from the passive and domestic Snow White in 1934 to characters like *Brave*’s Merida who refuses an arranged marriage in 2012—to represent the freedom and possibilities for contemporary, Western women. These cultural critics often adopt a celebratory perspective and hail *Disney*’s efforts as progressive and feminist. For example, *Brave*’s feminism is celebrated in the character of Merida who refuses to marry one of the suitors her parents arrange for her. Rather, she vies in the archery contest to win her own hand in marriage, and in a poignant scene, she physically busts out of her corsetted party dress to shoot the winning arrow. However, in the end of the film, it is understood that Merida will, one day, marry. Her efforts have postponed the inevitable, thus dousing much

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<sup>19</sup> Watson came under significant criticism for her choice to partially expose her breasts in a 2017 *Vanity Fair* spread—mostly because critics thought it was contrary to her feminist message. Watson’s response focused on the connection between feminism and choice: “Feminism is about giving women choice,” she said. “Feminism is not a stick with which to beat other women with. It’s about freedom, it’s about liberation, it’s about equality. I really don’t know what my tits have to do with it.” In an article about the incident in *The Guardian*, Emine Saner reminded readers: “Not everything a feminist does is a feminist act.”

of the film's feminist inflection. More recently, *Disney's* 2013 smash-hit *Frozen* was acclaimed for passing the Bechdel test and for its "feminist" storyline in which love's true form comes from sisterhood rather than from a handsome prince. Yet, a closer inspection of all these films yields the same conclusions as many of their femvertising counterparts—the façade of feminism might be present but these cultural products achieve little more than delivering socially-conscious consumers to marketers. For example, a deeper look at *Frozen* debunks many of *Disney's* "feminist" triumphs. Dani Colman's "The Problem with False Feminism: Why *Frozen* Left Me Cold" argues that *Frozen* is the same product in updated packaging: "Bloggers and reviewers alike are lauding it as 'feminist', 'revolutionary', 'subversive' and a hundred other buzzwords that make it sound as though *Frozen* has done for female characters what *Brokeback Mountain* did for gay cowboys. And after reading glowing review after glowing review, taking careful assessment of all the points made, and some very deep navel-gazing about my own thoughts on the subject, I find one question persists: *Were we even watching the same film?*" Much of Colman's concerns stem from the romantic relationship between Anna and Hans, who hastily fall in love at the beginning of the film and prance around singing "Love is an Open Door." Colman's reading misses the fact that the relationship between Anna and Hans is part of *Disney's* "progressiveness." The impulsivity of their relationship becomes a satire—it pokes fun at how quickly princesses and princes fall in love with each other. In this self-aware moment, the film is questioning the tropes of the *Disney* framework. Here, Anna and Hans know that they are falling in love too quickly: "Can I say something crazy? Will you marry me? Can I say something even crazier? Yes!" (*Love is an Open Door*). All this to say that *Disney* is trying to communicate that this is not your mother's (or grandmother's) *Disney* flick. Moments such as these help to convince audiences that this is something new when, as Colman proves in many other ways, such is not the case. Importantly, at the end of the film, after Anna is betrayed by Hans and she is brought back to life by the love of her sister, Elsa, Anna falls for sweet and loyal Kristoff. While the haste of her relationship with Hans was meta-theatric, her happily ever after with Kristoff is plain old *Disney* magic.

*Disney's* next offering, a live action portrayal of *Beauty and the Beast* starring Emma Watson as Belle, purports to keep the brand on-trend when it comes to feminism. Ironically, the story of *Beauty & the Beast* is not a feminist landmark; many critics and scholars have criticized *Disney's* telling for romanticizing the dynamic between an abused prisoner and her captor. "In many respects, playing Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* itself seems a choice that's incongruous with Watson's philosophies. It is, after all, a tale about a young woman who is entrapped by a wealthy but antisocial male creature with whom, in time, she falls in love. When questioned, Watson has insisted it's a feminist film – Belle is good at inventing things and in the early stages of the film she objects volubly to the Beast's cruel behaviour. But ultimately, it's a stretch to embrace a Stockholm Syndrome narrative as a romantic one" (Edelstein). In the documentary *The Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, Carolyn Newberger of Harvard Medical School discusses her concerns with *Beauty and the Beast*:

A great deal of my work in my professional life has to do with family violence and when you look at that movie [*Beauty and the Beast*] with that eye, the abuse is horrific. He screams at her, he imprisons her, he throws her father out the door and rips her family away from her. His behaviour is, without question, frankly and horrifically abusive. And yet the whole thrust of the story is that she returns to him, that she socializes him, that she excuses him, that she reinterprets his rage and his abuse as temper. That she reinterprets his personality as tender and vulnerable and then that she falls in love with him. And this is a movie that is saying to our children 'overlook the abuse, overlook the violence, there's a tender prince lurking within. And it's your job to kiss that prince and bring it out. Or kiss that beast and bring the prince out.' That's a dangerous message. (19:29-22:06)

While Watson stands by the 2017 retelling of *Disney's* 1991 animated hit, it is important to note that *Disney's* original telling was also lauded as "feminist" for its time despite valid criticism from commentators like Newberger. While the bones of its story might appear to be patriarchal and oppressive, *Beauty and the Beast* derives much of its feminism from its protagonist, Belle. Significantly, Belle owes most of her feminist articulation to Linda Woolverton, the first woman to ever write an animated feature for *Disney*. While the story of *Beauty and the Beast* may not appear feminist on the surface, Woolverton was committed to creating a new kind of brave and book-smart *Disney* princess. Woolverton explains, "After the women's movement had been around, I really didn't feel that we would

accept yet another heroine who was insipid... That was really how I conjured Belle up. She could still be the *Disney* princess but there she was thinking and saving her father, not having people save her, and changing the world from within. I was highly conscious of what we were trying to do” (Rothman). Edelstein and Newberger’s concerns are accurate—this fairytale is deeply problematic, and in some ways, normalizes abuse. However, Edelstein’s surprise at Watson’s enthusiastic participation as Belle is contrary to her feminist persona, is shortsighted. Belle has always been “feminist” in the Disney princess oeuvre especially in juxtaposition to her predecessor, Ariel, who gave up her entire underwater life and voice to be with Prince Eric. Ariel was scantily clad in a purple shell bra and, on the advice of Ursula, had to rely on her “body language” to get to know Eric. Belle has easy competition in the feminist race. According to *Disney*, if she reads, she is a feminist figure.

Despite Woolverton’s commitment to creating a feminist heroine in 1991, *Beauty and the Beast* circa 2017, simultaneously tries to modernize and honour the 1991 original. Many of these so-called feminist updates came from Watson herself, particularly in her refusal to wear a corset as part of her costume: “The actress [Watson] told *Entertainment Weekly* she had a hands-on part in reshaping the identity of princess Belle. In the past, she was solely an object of desire, and let’s be honest—true to Disney princess form—pretty helpless and dependent on males in the film. Watson was determined to play a princess who had more agency and would be able to take action, and a corset just didn’t fit in with that storyline” (Bateman). Watson’s Belle does not let her dress get in the way of her movement—her iconic blue apron dress is often tucked into her belt throughout the film, revealing her puffed petticoat underneath. Likewise, in her attempt to race back to the castle to save the Beast from Gaston and a mob of angry villagers, Belle strips off her famous golden-yellow dress and rides away in her undergarments. This Belle, a corset-less inventor who has more—albeit vaguely defined—“agency” and “interests” was championed by Watson. For example, this modern Belle is the one who invents while her father, Maurice, is a melancholy painter, tinkerer and widower. Likewise, this iteration of the film offers more diversity than the original. Significantly, Gaston’s right-hand man, Le Fou is

portrayed as a gay man who has an acute crush on Gaston—until he realizes that Gaston is the villain of the story. The cast is also *slightly* less whitewashed and features appearances from Audra McDonald as Madam Garderobe and Gugu Mbatha-Raw as Plumette as well as a sprinkling of racial diversity in the chorus.

Most of the excitement about this feminist retelling is muted by the limitations of the *Disney* machine. For example, Belle's invention is a washing machine. While it may have been progressive to cast Belle as the inventor, according to Skojec and Sainato, "this invention still confines her talents and intellectual capacity to domestic duties, a restriction historically forced on women while men are generally encouraged to pursue whatever they want." These adjustments, while they might be significant in the limited representations offered by *Disney*, are insufficient in the eyes of feminist critics. Emma Watson is thin enough to not require a corset and, while her bustled dress helps her move, she does not take on many tasks that require increased freedom of dress. As one feminist commentator wrote in *Paste*: "I keep seeing interviews of Emma gushing over this 'strong' character she plays. Bitch, please. Belle's just another Disney embroidered doormat who puts up with endless bullshit from a man who throws a table at her. Emma also bragged about how modern this remake is because Belle not only likes to read (WOW!!!) but she's an "inventor" this time around" (Hamlett). Zoe Williams agrees that the contemporary *Beauty and the Beast* still glorifies male domination, and while Watson's Belle is supposed to subvert the original, "the problem is that all her new traits are pretty saccharine, so she still reads as a traditional heroine, just with bits missing. The opposite of a damsel in distress is not a damsel with a plan, it's a damsel with a sense of humour." Williams concludes that, like most corporate attempts at feminism, *Beauty and the Beast* misses the mark, despite Watson's assurances that it is a feminist retelling. "Watching this film as a feminist fairytale is like listening to someone who claims to be able to speak German, then realising that they have only mastered one phrase. They can ask for directions, but if you actually told them the way to the Bahnhof, they'd be stumped. Still, hats off for trying. It's better to speak a tiny bit of feminism than no feminism at all." In many iterations of corporate feminism—from femvertisements for *Barbie* or *Disney* retellings—the market is not fluent

in feminism. It knows just enough to yield a profit.

Like Williams, Gay agrees that while celebrities may not be the best feminist role models, they are better than nothing. She writes, “There is nothing wrong with celebrities (or men) claiming feminism and talking about feminism. I support anything that broadens the message of gender equality and tempers the stigma of the feminist label. We run into trouble, though, when we celebrate celebrity feminism while avoiding the actual work of feminism.” Both Beyoncé and Watson justify their public feminist image with good work done behind the scenes. Yet, here is where I disagree with Williams and Gay: juxtaposing celebrity feminism with femvertising and contextualizing it within the widespread subduction of feminism into the capitalist landscape should give critics and scholars reason to pause. My research is interested in the implications of a feminism that is motivated by profit. The wider question at the heart of this research is how feminist understanding changes when we consider the market’s role in affording women the rights and freedoms that they enjoy. Without market forces and the status of the lucrative female consumer, would women be as highly valued in the Western world as we are today? My guess is no. Gay argues that the best way to interpret celebrity feminism, whether it is Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, Watson’s Belle, or Jennifer Lawrence’s public outcry about the Hollywood wage gap, is to understand these celebrity feminists as gateways to feminism and not as feminism itself. She writes, “But it irks me that we more easily embrace feminism and feminist messages when delivered in the right package – one that generally includes youth, a particular kind of beauty, fame and/or self-deprecating humour. It frustrates me that the very idea of women enjoying the same inalienable rights as men is so unappealing that we require – even demand – that the person asking for these rights must embody the standards we’re supposedly trying to challenge. That we require brand ambassadors and celebrity endorsements to make the world a more equitable place is infuriating.” Gill’s observations echo Gay’s in terms of celebrity feminism. Gill adds,

Of course celebrity statements about feminism or queer politics can be profoundly significant and have a huge cultural impact. However, I want to suggest that claiming a feminist *identity*—without specifying what that means in terms of some kind of *politics*—is problematic. Indeed, it is striking to see how just about *anything* in the mainstream media universe can be (re)signified

as “feminist”... What is new here is not the contestation but the mere fact of feminism being championed as a cheer word, a positive value—yet in a way that does not necessarily pose any kind of challenge to existing social relations. (619)

Gay and Gill’s arguments suggest that the important question at the heart of this matter is whether corporations, celebrities, and advertisements are sufficient and appropriate gateways to feminism.

## Celebrity Feminism in Femvertising: *CoverGirl*

While celebrities like Beyoncé and Emma Watson have made feminism part of their personal celebrity identity, other famous women endorse feminism through their existing corporate relationships. Apt examples are the celebrities who sell for *CoverGirl*—a brand that has deployed femvertising with vigor by relying on a cross-section of femvertisements and well-known spokesmodels. *CoverGirl*’s 2013 “#GirlsCan: Women Empowerment” advertisement features Ellen DeGeneres, P!nk, Sofia Vergara, Natalie Wiebe, Becky G, Queen Latifa, Katy Perry, and Janelle Monae. While *CoverGirl* does not only rely on celebrity faces to promote the brand, this particular campaign depends greatly on the clout that celebrity spokesmodels bring to the table. This example is useful because this ad marks a clear connection between femvertising and the wider culture of celebrity feminism. This is another case study that suggests, yet again, that femvertising and celebrity feminism are deficient gateways to feminism.

As I describe at the beginning of chapter one, *CoverGirl*’s GirlsCan campaign tries to bust the myth that girls cannot be or do many things. The power of this ad comes from its celebrity stars, each of whom addresses the fact that they were discouraged from encompassing the trait for which they are now famous. The commercial is empowering—it tells girls to ignore the haters, believe in themselves, and do what makes them happy. The commercial is convincing and wields the feminist theme of empowerment to capture its audience. The form of the commercial helps to underscore its purpose; the edgy cuts, the play of colours, and the incorporation of interview snippets are not usually found in the

traditional makeup advertisement. In fact, no *CoverGirl* products actually appear in the commercial proper: none of the models show off the long-lasting coverage of foundation or apply a juicy layer of lip-gloss. Despite being a global makeup brand, *CoverGirl* has opted to focus this ad on the concept of feminism and not on makeup at all. Just like other femvertisements, *CoverGirl* is taking this moment to show off its feminism with the intention of getting in the good books with feminist-minded consumers. Femvertising takes the same old products—whether it is *Dove* soap, *Secret* deodorant, or *Cheerios* cereal, and markets them by showcasing a brand’s sensitivity to existing gender inequities. Unlike the brands that used women’s empowerment to sell them products—like *Virginia Slims*’ “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby”—*CoverGirl* empathizes with the contemporary female consumer. The GirlsCan campaign, just like other femvertisements, speaks to women in a different way: “We’ve Got a Long Way to Go, Baby.” And yet, just like *Dove*’s *Campaign for Real Beauty*, *CoverGirl* fails to address the structures that support the cosmetic industrial complex.

In fact, it is valuable to briefly showcase how *CoverGirl*’s efforts to remove makeup from their ad falls short; closer inspection reveals that this advertisement is all about beauty and makeup. Notably, the celebrities, who are all official *CoverGirl* spokesmodels do a successful job of advertising *CoverGirl*’s makeup without a lipstick entering the frame. For example, during Natalie Wiebe’s soliloquy about her ice hockey career, the camera pauses on her face (0:29) and reveals what is under her hockey mask. First of all, when I showed this ad to a group of undergraduates, many of them commented first on the fact that Wiebe is probably the most attractive hockey player *CoverGirl* could find; she sports alabaster skin, strawberry blond hair, and perfectly framed blue eyes. However, what is more problematic is that her makeup is flawless—certainly uncharacteristic of someone who just played a game of hockey. *CoverGirl*, therefore, uses Wiebe to advertise makeup and not to encourage girls and women to play sports. In fact, during her close-up, her doe-eyed, mascara-framed stare renders her the object of Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze”—she is a pretty hockey player and therefore not a threat. Her “to-be-



looked-at-ness” overrides her message about being “courageous”; her representation tells viewers more about being pretty than about being a hockey player.

Wiebe is not alone; all the celebrities in this commercial are traditionally beautiful and fully decked out in *CoverGirl* façade. It follows that, while girls may be able to do a lot of things, according to this commercial, they certainly need to be pretty while they participate in public life. As Ellen DeGeneres overtly asserts at the end of the advertisement, this ad is not about empowerment; it is specifically about *CoverGirl* profiting from the insecurities fostered by a patriarchal culture. She does this by reciting *CoverGirl*’s well-known slogan: “make the world a little more easy, breezy, and beautiful.” Earlier in the piece, it appeared as if DeGeneres was speaking about her difficult experiences about being a female comedian—“girls can’t be funny.” However, in the last instance, the viewer is reminded of DeGeneres’ true role in this commercial: that of spokesmodel, brand-endorser, and celebrity. #GirlsCan<sup>20</sup> becomes deeply hypocritical—especially because the company is using messages of empowerment to reinforce that women need to be easy, breezy and beautiful.

The most disturbing component of *CoverGirl*’s GirlsCan campaign is the way in which the celebrity feminism within it spurs individualistic ideology. In three key ways, merging celebrity feminism with the tactics of femvertising makes *CoverGirl* a complex and deeply troubling campaign. First, using celebrities in this commercial sends the problematic message that anyone can become famous. Indeed, celebrities are one of society’s most potent examples of the potential of a neoliberal framework; they are proof that the model works. The rare success story of a regular person pulling up his or her bootstraps and hitting the big time demonstrates that anyone can strike gold: anyone can be a celebrity *CoverGirl*. Better yet, *even feminists* are now invited to become *CoverGirls*. If

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<sup>20</sup> Of note is also how this commercial attempts to extend the conversation regarding female “empowerment” by introducing the hashtag #GirlsCan. At the end of the formal 60-second spot on YouTube, *CoverGirl* tags on a product-focused advertisement featuring mascara with the tagline “Now you can look good and do good.” The mascara packages display #GirlsCan and boast names like “Flamed Out” and “Clump Crusher.” By listing “look good” first, *CoverGirl*, once again, reinforces the status quo and uses femvertising to sell women the products that society tells them they need. Markedly, most of the YouTube videos that have been created since this February 2014 ad use the #GirlsCan hashtag to accompany how-to makeup tutorials.

Ellen DeGeneres—a pop culture trailblazer who has made incredible strides for the LGBTQ community—endorses *CoverGirl*, then surely feminist-minded consumers can get behind the brand. Perhaps “easy, breezy, and beautiful” means something different when DeGeneres<sup>21</sup> says it. Regardless, a key difference when it comes to this *CoverGirl* campaign is the way it leverages celebrity clout. By virtue of their very presence, celebrities help to instill problematic ideas about becoming famous in North American culture.

The second key way neoliberal values are conveyed in this commercial is how each celebrity spokesmodel acts in isolation. Throughout the ad, each model speaks from her own experience of challenging stereotypes and breaking down barriers, a message that conveys anyone who leans in will be able to break the chains of oppression. Further, the vignette format of the ad reinforces this observation; each celebrity is featured in isolation from the others so they can focus on telling their individual story. In this way, GirlsCan offers a clear, visual representation of individual-based ideology. The message here is that feminism has little to do with cooperation and more to do with intrinsic strength and conviction.

Finally, this neoliberal ideology is reinforced in the later part of the ad, when a solution to the unfair treatment of girls is presented. Here, each celebrity presents her solution to the gender-biased, unfair world; they encourage individual girls to simply decide to pursue their individual dreams—“be off the wall, be funny.” While this might be an empowering concept—to get a foothold in a deeply imbalanced world, girls just need to believe in themselves—it is far from powerful. It is not powerful because it does not give girls the tools they need to actually make change and question the structures that hold them back. Having celebrities ignore feminist cooperation and assure girls the solution to their feelings of disenfranchisement is to lean in culminates in a hat trick of neoliberalism. While

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<sup>21</sup> Some of Ellen DeGeneres’s early *CoverGirl* ads were highly satiric. Some poked fun at the *CoverGirl* brand and the concept of spokesmodels. In a self-deprecating way, DeGeneres jabbed at why she was chosen to be a spokesmodel. However, GirlsCan is markedly not an example of DeGeneres’s satirical work. A good example can be found in a 2011 ad for *CoverGirl*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qzz7mT2OUfs>

this kind of messaging might be considered incongruous within a feminist framework, it is completely at home in femvertising—especially in a campaign that includes celebrities.

Appearing in just under a decade after the start of the *Campaign for Real Beauty*, *CoverGirl*'s #GirlsCan advertisement proves that the beauty myth remains alive and well. *Dove* has not been able to eradicate the social pressures that women face. While both *Dove* and *CoverGirl* sell self-esteem to women as a proxy-subversive act, it appears that self-esteem, feelings of empowerment, and generalized confidence are not enough. As Naomi Wolf comments, “inside the majority of the West’s controlled, attractive, and successful working women there is a secret ‘underlife’ poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self hatred, physical obsessions, and dread of lost control” (34). If feminist action is able to dismantle the beauty myth as described by Wolf and help women truly enact change and live up to their potential, *CoverGirl* would be devastated, bankrupt, and stuck with a warehouse of unused bronzer, liquid eyeliner, and shimmering eye shadow. *Dove* would see shelves of unsold cellulite cream. It follows that these brands are just as committed to the status quo as they are in projecting a feminist gloss. Keeping women restrained, and in Wolf’s words, “obsessed” with their physical appearance is better for business—*CoverGirl*'s use of femvertising simply reinforces these anxieties in a repurposed, sophisticated way.

## Feminist Television as Femvertising: Tina Fey and *30 Rock*

Celebrity feminism is not limited to celebrity endorsements or spokesmodel roles in ad campaigns; the trend is also present in feminist television shows. In this section, I will discuss how feminist television, specifically NBC’s *30 Rock*, can be interpreted under the framework of celebrity feminism. I think this is an important application because it shows, yet again, that the form that feminism takes has impacts on its potential. As I have shown throughout this chapter, both femvertising and celebrity feminism succumb to the same pitfalls, especially in the ways they endorse neoliberal values and act as insufficient gateways to feminism. *30 Rock* is a very thought-provoking show, and in my opinion, is often successful in prompting critical, feminist engagement within a mainstream format.

However, as I will show in this episode analysis, the show often uses the same tactics as both femvertising and celebrity feminism. So, while it is beyond the scope of this project to unpack the entirety of feminism and television (see Lotz, 2007), it is apt to connect my research to one potent example of feminist television.

*30 Rock* ran for seven seasons on NBC (2006-2013) and attracted international attention and a plethora of Hollywood awards for its off-beat, self-referential and quirky humour. The sitcom is known as Tina Fey's brainchild. Fey was the auteur, showrunner and lead protagonist of *30 Rock* and is often credited with revolutionizing the sitcom format with her wildly funny show-within-a-show: "the true selling point of *30 Rock* repeats is the humor. The series may have helped catalyze the ongoing half-hour revolution, but its roots run deep into TV history. And in becoming less outwardly about television, it entrenched itself further in the legacy of the medium" (Adams). The praise for *30 Rock* is not just focused on its metatheatric genius or its ability to poke fun at how big-network television does business but also because of what the show did for women. According to pop culture analyst Linda Holmes, *30 Rock* is "one of the most important, helpful, meaningful, landscape-altering shows for women in the history of television for one simple reason: whatever the positives and negatives of the show's voice and aesthetic, it is Tina Fey's voice and her aesthetic, and everyone knows it." Holmes' praise is warranted because, indeed, Tina Fey is *30 Rock's* engine and the show itself centres on the fictional-yet-autobiographical character of Liz Lemon in her struggles to run her Saturday Night Live-type variety show called *The Girlie Show*. However, while Holmes is correct to question *30 Rock's* feminism—"I have never considered Liz Lemon a feminist icon of any kind, nor have I ever considered *30 Rock* especially strong when it comes to gender politics"—she is too dismissive of the complex and nuanced way *30 Rock's* talks about women and feminism. Just like femvertising adopts the surface terminology of feminism or celebrities pick and choose the facets of feminism that fit their brand, so too does *30 Rock*. I am less interested in debating whether the show is feminist or not; I am more interested in engaging with the program and situating it within the broader context of capitalism's relationship with feminism. Therefore, holding *30 Rock* under the light of femvertising will provide a

more useful critique that respects the complexity of the show while also questioning the series' hegemonic implications.

Episode sixteen of season five of *30 Rock* is titled “TGS (The Girlie Show) Hates Women.” I chose this episode for two significant reasons. First, having watched the entire series of *30 Rock*, this is an episode that offers more than the usual feminist tidbits while the primary story arc is elsewhere. Episode sixteen puts feminist concerns at the heart of the narrative. Likewise, according to Erik Adams, “TGS Hates Women” is one of the ten episodes that he considers best represents how *30 Rock* engages with its critics; the episode is a direct answer to critics of *30 Rock* who argue that two of the female characters—Jenna and Cerie—perpetuate negative stereotypes about women being vapid, sexual, and superficial. For Adams, Fey’s fearlessness to tackle her critics, pervasive issues of gender, and to make herself look “foolish” is integral to the show’s success (Adams). *30 Rock* is never afraid of airing its contradictions and hypocrisy—of which this episode is a pertinent example. *30 Rock* is not a piece of “feminist art [that] depict[s] an egalitarian utopia” rather, *30 Rock* bravely argues that feminism currently exists in a patriarchal society (Donelan). Like Liz Lemon, many feminists struggle to negotiate their feminism with the ways that patriarchy has taught them to see the world and themselves. Significantly, “TGS Hates Women” was first aired on 2011, years before the pileup of “fame-inist brand ambassadors” (Gay) would be fully realized. Loretta Donelan writes, “It’s important to note that 2006, when the show premiered, was a different time for feminism. Beyoncé hadn’t proclaimed herself a feminist on the stage of the VMAs, Emma Watson was just a teen movie star, and they were still making Ocean’s 11 movies with men in them. As a self-proclaimed feminist and woman whose plot lines often centered on the struggles of working women in a male dominated world, it’s hard to complain too much about Liz Lemon’s feminism when there were so few characters like her on television.” Years before Beyoncé openly claimed feminism, Tina Fey was writing about it for NBC—in a quirky, wink-wink show-within-a-show format that was not like anything else on television.

“TGS Hates Women” follows Liz Lemon as she tries to prove that her show supports women after it is berated on a feminist blog called ‘Joan of Snark’ for representing women in a negative light. As Adams illuminated, the spark for this episode was the criticism *30 Rock* proper was receiving for its representation of women. In true *30 Rock* fashion, the show explored those disparagements head-on and invited those real-life criticisms into the world for TGS. It is evident throughout the episode that TGS’s crime is depicting powerful women—like Amelia Earhart and Hilary Clinton—succumbing to the fury of their raging periods. The subtext in one sketch is that Amelia Earhart crashed in the Pacific Ocean because she got her period mid-flight. While Liz tries to defend TGS’s sketches as “ironic reappropriations” (1:05), she is left insecure about the public perception of her show. To compensate, Liz decides to hire an up-and-coming comedienne named Abby Flynn to start a “fem-o-lution to rid TGS of male douche-baggery” (6:55) and prove that TGS backs women. To Liz’s horror, Abby Flynn arrives and is the opposite of the smart, sassy, patriarchy-bashing comedienne that she thought she was hiring; instead Abby is the epitomé of the baby-talking, sex-kitten porn star who skips around the office smooching her boobs together to get male attention. Liz’s mostly-male writing team is paralyzed by their attraction to Abby. After Liz tries to confront Abby to get her to drop her sexy act to no avail, she discovers that Abby’s real last name is Abby Grossman and that Abby used to be a hip, alternative, feminist voice in the comedy world but that she mysteriously changed her identity. When Liz reveals Abby’s true self “in the name of feminism,” Abby discloses that she changed her appearance to escape a violent domestic relationship and that Liz’s meddling has stripped her of years of hiding from her dangerous ex-husband. The episode ends by transforming Liz’s feminist attempts into shortsighted misogyny. Like most of Liz Lemon’s trials and tribulations on *30 Rock*, she is left with the short end of the stick despite her genuine efforts. After Abby leaves, Liz asks the writers to return to the sketch they were working on in which Wonder Woman gets her period.

“TGS Hates Women” overflows with compelling instances of feminism grating up against its own contradictions. The moral of the episode is that one woman’s feminism is another woman’s death warrant: while Liz thinks she is trying to help Abby by illuminating

that “society puts a lot of pressure on us [women] to act a certain way,” she ultimately puts Abby in danger by revealing her true identity. While Liz was trying to make TGS a more female-positive space, she ultimately transforms herself into a “Judas for all womankind” (20:20) who harshly judges Abby on her “embarrassing” (15:30) appearance and dons a feminist superiority complex that alienates her from the solidarity she seeks. Therefore, this episode is a clear example of *30 Rock* grappling with its own relation to feminism in light of real-life criticism, as well as Liz Lemon dealing with the public perception of her show and, most importantly, her own feminism. Superficially, this episode, like femvertisements, appears to be doing productive counter-hegemonic work. In particular, the show’s intensely ironic framing and self-referential format help the show’s creators address serious questions in a funny-but-critical way. Everything in *30 Rock* is caricatured and that hyperbole is often useful at highlighting the absurdities in contemporary life—especially in terms of gender, race, corporate culture and the value of the arts. *30 Rock* is always aware of the structure upon which it depends but that does not stop the show from calling out power in subtle-yet-searing ways. For these reasons, *30 Rock* is one of the most successful mainstream sitcoms to address the intersections of gender and corporate culture.

Prior to exploring the ways this particular episode resembles femvertising, it is important to highlight that a political economic perspective clarifies that all mainstream television shows are, indeed, intertwined with advertising pursuits (see Croteau and Hoynes, Hesmondhalgh). Television shows bolster the advertisements that punctuate them and use many strategies to keep lucrative customers watching—particularly women. As Lauren Rabinovitz reminds us, “programming with a specifically feminist valence emerged in the 1970s because ‘it was good business’” (8). Thus, it follows that if femvertising is a prevalent practice in the advertising world, it will also appear in other mainstream media products. This hypothesis is especially true in light of the deluge of female-driven television that has emerged since Tina Fey’s success with *30 Rock*:

In recent years, that discussion has started — just *started* — to shift. I don't *like* Chelsea Handler's style of comedy, for instance, but it is hers, and it is associated with her, and it is assumed to be something a network can translate into a comedy she isn't performing on. While that comedy, *Are You There, Chelsea?* failed (justifiably), it made it on the air, and it's spun out into Whitney

Cummings not only creating a show for herself, but also co-creating *2 Broke Girls*. And Mindy Kaling, while she does perform on her show (as Fey does), works more in the Tina Fey model. She had a relatively small on-screen role on *The Office* and a much larger one in the writers' room, and she came to *The Mindy Project* known as much for her style and her writing as for her performance. And of course, there's Lena Dunham, who appears on *Girls* but whose public image — both positive and negative — is at least as driven by what people think of her as a creator and writer as it is by her acting. (Holmes)

The influx of female voices on television mixed with the simultaneous explosion of femvertising begs a critical investigation; it is essential to question how they might positively and negatively inform one another. Equally important is how female voices in mainstream formats are restricted by the confines of a capitalist media system. In her conclusion of *Feminism and Youth Culture*, Angela McRobbie mourns that popular representations of feminism in the mainstream media are “a further sign of how far a version of feminism can be pulled in the direction of the political right, where the values of brutal individualism and the pursuit of wealth and success turn all personal and social relationships into an extension of the market economy” (211). Likewise, in Lynn Spiegel’s *Television After TV*, Lisa Parks raises similar concerns and identifies that while female-focused television channels like *Oxygen* might offer women more “applicable” “women’s” programming, they should be held accountable for their corporate roots. For Spiegel, “corporate feminism has an ambivalent politics, then, because it involves the production of new...spaces for women while...capitalizing on those spaces as sites of economic exploitation and expansion” (147). McRobbie and Parks offer convincing reasons for the examination of television shows like *30 Rock*.

“TGS Hates Women” particularly resembles a femvertisement in the way that it addresses—or more accurately, ignores—the systemic nature of the problems it tackles. Abby Flynn’s story is one of domestic abuse and while sitcoms often take liberties with topics that are not at all humorous, *30 Rock* does little to comment on the issue at all. In fact, domestic abuse becomes a *deus ex machina* that conveniently ties up loose ends and functions to make Liz Lemon look sufficiently rash and reckless. Troublingly, *30 Rock*’s treatment of domestic violence is akin to, for example, *Cheerios*’ treatment of dieting in



women and girls with their *World Without Dieting Campaign*. While the General Mills' advertisement may acknowledge the dieting epidemic in the West, it fails to question the patriarchal beauty myths that demand women take up as little space as possible. Likewise, *30 Rock* acknowledges a serious injustice against women, and yet does nothing to combat or question it. It is not enough to simply mention an issue that plagues women and not point to the structures that undergird the problem. Rather than question or combat these systemic, gendered problems, these instances instead become, as Heath and Potter argue, nodes in which domestic violence and dieting are normalized and reinforced in Western culture. Certainly, *30 Rock's* neglect of an issue as sobering and prevalent as domestic violence leaves much to be desired. Therefore, like femvertisements, *30 Rock* falls short in tackling patriarchal assumptions, and while this particular episode does, like *Cheerios*, *CoverGirl*, and *Always*, acknowledge that women experience "pressure from society" (20:25), the keen feminist begins to wonder if that acknowledgement is enough.

Another important way that *30 Rock* mirrors femvertising and celebrity feminism is the way that feminism manifests in individual, isolated acts. As outlined earlier, femvertising reduces feminist activism to the individualized act of consuming; by choosing a product that uses pro-female messaging, women can enact their feminism. Likewise, in *30 Rock*, acts of feminism are attributed to Liz Lemon's individual journey to "have it all" and to balance her handful of a career with her personal life. In "TGS Hates Women" feminism manifests in Liz Lemon's individual pursuit of bettering her show. While her efforts are portrayed as genuine—"we should be elevating the way women are perceived in society"—her solitary journey is removed from any kind of female solidarity, and in fact, is underpinned by the capitalist goal of keeping her sketch-comedy show alive. At one point, when Liz is trying to convince her starlet Jenna Maroney not to destroy Abby out of jealousy, she acknowledges that "men infantilize women and women tear each other down" (9:20) and, therefore, convinces Jenna to support her in "helping" Abby bust out of the confines of the sexy-baby persona "forced" upon her by society. However, as the episode continues, Jenna does not accompany Liz in trying to help Abby. On the contrary, when Liz

confronts Abby—pointedly in front of a statue of Eleanor Roosevelt—her intervention becomes deeply personal:

*Liz:* TGS is a safe place so you can drop the sexy baby act and lose the pigtails.

*Abby:* But I like my pigtails; my uncle says they're sexy...

*Liz:* Enough with the gross jokes...and that voice...I want you to talk in your real voice.

*Abby:* This is my real voice! And the whole sexy baby thing isn't an act. I'm a very sexy baby. I can't help if men are attracted to me.

*Liz:* Abby, I'm trying to help you...

*Abby:* Really? By judging me on my appearance and the way I talk? And what's the difference between me using my sexuality and you using those glasses to look smart?

*Liz:* I am smart.

*Abby:* My life is none of your business.

*Liz:* But it is because you represent my show and you represent my gender in this business and you embarrass me. (12:00)

This exchange between Liz and Abby explicates Liz's concerns with Abby's behaviour and certainly does simmer with contradicting perspectives on female expression; however, because of Liz's individual pursuit, her efforts are ultimately unproductive. The conversation ends with Liz wanting to change Abby's personality not to help Abby escape from social constraints, but rather because Abby is not "feminist" enough for Liz. Ultimately, Abby is embarrassing. Liz's approach, while it alludes to the struggle of a third-wave feminist, is neoliberal in its insistence on individuality and victim blaming. Therefore, *30 Rock* approaches feminist action like femvertising by reducing its potential to that of individual actors and their isolated actions.

Furthermore, the end of the episode speaks to the discouraging outcomes of trying to be an individual feminist who beats against the current only to be dragged back into the status quo. After Abby frantically flees studio 6H, Liz leads the writers back to their task:

“Okay, we were on page six...where Wonder Woman gets her period” (20:30). As the credits pop up, the audience is left shrugging off the potentially political remnants of the episode: in the end, Liz’s efforts failed and TGS is still producing sketches depicting women falling over because of the onslaught of their periods. Like most feminist moments in *30 Rock*, the joke takes the cake, undercutting any potential transformation that it might have tried to incite. As Myra MacDonald writes, “before the blow can be struck for feminism, however, the joke takes over. The playfulness of this...encourages us to laugh at traditional forms of femininity, but stops well short of openly challenging them” (MacDonald 58). Even more salient is that, as Erik Adams illuminates in his article, “TGS Hates Women” is a response to critics of *30 Rock* who tried to take the show to task for its representations of women. The end of the episode communicates to these critics that it is too complicated to be a feminist because, as Abby and Liz’s relationship shows, feminism is touchy, complicated, and messy. When Liz tried to be a feminist, it backfired to yield disastrous consequences; thus, both shows—*30 Rock* and its fictional counterpart TGS—are going to continue doing what they have been doing. Here, capitalist patriarchy rears its ugly head: the episode concludes that feminism is hard to understand and execute. Like a difficult diet, feminist action is something you try once or twice before falling back into old habits.

It might seem apparent that a performance from Beyoncé, Watson’s portrayal of Belle or a commercial for *CoverGirl* would fall short as feminist gateways. Indeed, an episode from a hit network station may also appear an obvious example. I would argue that, while *30 Rock* has its blind spots, particularly in this important episode, the show is a better gateway than some. It does have deeply corporate roots and is certainly the output of Fey—a celebrity who has a similar mixture of feminist clout and wide popularity as Ellen DeGeneres—but the show does take risks and asks its audience to be critical. *30 Rock*’s downside is the follow through; it can be a fickle feminist friend. For example, while the show often takes up political concerns, those concerns are often masked in a flippant or bizarre joke and then left alone. In another moment, the show can self-referentially balk at forced product placement, and at other times, the show embraces product placement like

every other sitcom. Sometimes, Liz says very feminist things, and other times, she advocates for traditional values. Overall, *30 Rock* is rife with important moments; my respect for this show is still intact, but I am aware it is part of a climate that is interested in wooing consumers through their feminism. *30 Rock* certainly attracts me for this very reason, which is why it is important to consider in this context.

## Celebrity Feminism: A Backlash?

Celebrity feminism is a key piece in the wider trend of corporate feminism. Just like femvertising, celebrity feminism relies on a superficial and strategic commitment to feminism. However, it is important to note that, unlike femvertising, celebrity feminism appears less afraid of “the F-word.” While femvertising might be feminist in its messaging, I have not crossed any femvertisements in my research that have actually used the word “feminist.” And yet, celebrity culture still shies away from feminism if it is off-brand; the contemporary feminist climate proves that feminism is both wildly popular and still, somehow, vilified. For example, at a 2017 Tribeca Film Festival press conference promoting Hulu’s adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, cast members Madeline Brewer, Ann Dowd, and Elisabeth Moss were adamant that *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a dystopian tale about a patriarchal, religious society that systematically enslaves fertile women, is **not** a feminist story. Brewer—whose character goes mad and has her right eye gouged out after talking back to an Aunt—was adamant that “any story that’s just a powerful woman owning herself in any way is automatically deemed ‘feminist’...[the story is] just a story about a woman... not feminist propaganda” (Schwartz). In an article for *The New Yorker*, Alexandra Schwartz is at odds with how to reconcile the attitudes of these actresses with the current climate of rampant corporate feminism:

All this smacks of some Gilead-style prohibition. Had the cast members been explicitly instructed to distance themselves from the feminism label, maybe for marketing purposes? That seems improbable, considering that in our age of pussy-grabbing Presidents and pussy hats, the word has been rehabilitated from its commercially toxic status and spun into marketing gold. You can find the phrase “feminist as fuck” emblazoned on everything from hoodies to hoop earrings; Dior is selling T-shirts printed with the sentence “We should all be feminists,” after the title of Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie’s TEDx Talk turned

book, for a cool seven hundred and ten dollars each. (Proceeds go to charity: Rihanna's.) Then there are companies, such as the embattled Thinx, peddler of period-absorbent underwear, that proudly brand themselves feminist even as their business practices suggest otherwise. We have corporate feminism, consumer feminism, life-style feminism. In current adspeak, a feminist is someone who buys bras, not burns them.

Schwartz's struggle to reconcile this discrepancy is understandable; her observations showcase that for some celebrities, associating themselves with feminism may not be a golden ticket to popularity. On the contrary, the way that the stars of *The Handmaid's Tale* treat the question of feminism suggests that some celebrities want nothing to do with the stuff, whether it is for their personal reputation or for the marketability of their latest project.

Likewise, it would seem that the corporate popularity of feminism might translate into a wider passion about women's rights; however, celebrity feminists are perhaps having the opposite effect on the movement. Discerning feminists are easily able to see through the celebrity feminist facade. According to a study by Jeetendr Sehdev, some celebrities are perceived to trivialize feminism, and as a result, turn people away from the movement as a whole. Hosie writes, "the main problem is that feminism is increasingly seen as a publicity tool by celebrities who want to increase their popularity. If a celebrity hasn't demonstrated his or her commitment to the feminist cause before speaking out about it, 80 per cent of people won't buy their feminist credentials. And this is all damaging the reputation of feminism as a whole" (Hosie). Sehdev's research reveals that certain celebrities—Taylor Swift is one such culprit—incite repulsion in some media-engaged feminists: "Taylor Swift herself was even singled out in the results, as a shocking 30 percent of people admitted they care less about feminist issues because of her involvement." Sehdev's research suggests that, usefully, some people are critical of the ways in which celebrities associate themselves with certain social movements or brands for exposure and notoriety.

At the same time, this research also illuminates a concern echoed by Gay, who suggests that one of the major problems with celebrity feminism is that the general citizenry is overwhelmingly ill equipped to engage in feminist discourse because they do not know

what feminism is. Such is the position of Gay: “This is the real problem feminism faces. Too many people are willfully ignorant about what the word means and what the movement aims to achieve. But when a pretty young woman has something to say about feminism, all of a sudden, that broad ignorance disappears or is set aside because, at last, we have a more tolerable voice proclaiming the very messages feminism has been trying to impart for so damn long.” What Gay has not considered in her astute observation is that, according to Sehdev’s work, “a pretty young woman” can have the opposite effect upon the reception of feminism. For some, Beyoncé’s endorsement is enough to make feminism tolerable or, perhaps, desirable and for others, Taylor Swift’s participation is enough to prove that feminism has lost its way. *If she’s a feminist, I’m definitely not one.* Such an attitude contributes to the individualization of feminism—a symptom of mixing a third-wave approach to feminism with corporate feminism. Basing one’s relationship with feminism on celebrity spokesmodels facilitates the fragmentation of feminism. Such individualization closely correlates to the neoliberal insistence on the individual, and sets the stage for post-feminism because a unified feminist front is no longer apparent. And yet, as I will discuss in chapter four, even at the Women’s March on Washington, a seemingly “unified” show of feminist solidarity, there are caveats. Feminism has never been homogenous and nor should it be. However, there are crucial differences between the important diversities and complexities within third-wave feminism and a consumer culture donning the mask of corporate feminism. The goal should not be a utopian, unified feminism—nor should it be an individualized feminism that is enacted by shopping. While recognizing the multifaceted nature of feminism is important, a feminism void of collectivity/sharing/understanding or cooperation has little chance for success. This leaves feminism to be fought in individual sites of symbolic or material resistance and fundamentally leaves it susceptible to being subsumed by capitalism altogether. As my research has shown, recent trends show that feminism is being “revitalized” through commodification and not through a commitment to basic human rights.

## Conclusion: Moving Beyond Equality?

I argue that whether a person is wooed or repelled by celebrity feminism, the

problem lies with the celebrity channels—the gateways—in which people are invited into the feminist house. Disowning feminism because of a celebrity endorsement is just as shortsighted as embracing it because of one. So long as feminism is in the hands of the rich and famous, the capitalist elite, it will never be able to offer new and challenging ways to improve the lives of all women. Surely, the power and potential in the worlds’ women can amount to more—indeed, can imagine more. For example, in her 2015 book *Women in Dark Times*, Jacqueline Rose calls for a “scandalous feminism,” one that is new and unabashed. Far from the current situation in which feminist discourse is rendered safe in femvertising and coopted by patriarchal consumer culture, Rose imagines a feminism that is less about equality, choice, and rights. For Rose, feminism should use the amazing inner power of womankind (broadly defined) to seek a new way of life. Rose maintains, in contradiction to other feminist scholars like Judith Butler, that the category of *woman* still should be upheld, “women have the gift of seeing through what is already crazy about the world, notably the cruelty and injustice with which it tends to go about organising itself” (35). Rose suggests women have commonalities, even if they are culturally imposed, which can be mined for the purposes of advancing the feminist cause. She also suggests that while feminists do not “want a mad world” (35), the structure of the Enlightenment-Patriarchal-Capitalism that prevails is a dangerous and uninspiring place for women: the structure needs to be reconsidered and, therefore, perhaps “equality” should no longer be the primary goal of feminism, despite what Emma Watson says. Feminism, rather, needs to bravely leave behind the tactics that are unsuccessful, or worse, shortsightedly uphold patriarchal domination, and adopt a mandate that seeks structural change and asks difficult questions. Indeed, women, if given the opportunity to take “political struggle to the furthest limits of conscious and unconscious life,” will most likely imagine all facets of life operating in a different way (46-52).

Striving to be equal to men has been a component of liberal feminism since its inception. Despite the contributions of radical feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, the liberal feminist model has prevailed in many pursuits. Liberal feminism, the model most associated with first wave feminism and the suffrage movement, advocated for women to

be equal to men and to participate equally in patriarchal structures like owning property, filing for divorce, and voting in elections. However, this kind of approach asks women to adopt the language and attitude of patriarchy to succeed. A recent example of this kind of equality-based feminism that I have already mentioned in earlier chapters is Sheryl Sandberg's wildly popular so-called 'feminist' how-to book, *Lean In*. Sandberg argues that women need to simply push harder against the glass ceiling to enter the boardrooms and play with the big boys. Since Sandberg bases her argument on equality—that women should strive for positions of power that patriarchy has deemed valuable to society—her approach leaves many feminists uneasy because her recommendations reek of a liberal feminism that fails to question the deep structural roadblocks that women face to reach positions of power and influence.

Moreover, while Sandberg offers suggestions for ways women can participate in corporate life, her lack of reflexivity normalizes patriarchal attitudes. As Rose astutely claims, while it is important for women to participate in the “courts of judgement” or the “corridors of power”, feminism surely has the potential to be more dangerous in its creativity than simply to help women to do the things men do. Thus, “it will be a different world from the one that feminism is meant to aspire to—sane, balanced, reasoned, where women are granted their due portion” (35). It becomes clear that familiar equality-based approaches to feminism have their limits; even if women are able to participate equally in social, political, and corporate life, they will still be participating in “White Capitalist Patriarchy” because, indeed, the modern world has been constructed from a male perspective (Haraway, 589). The history of gender inequality will always shape so-called gender equality. In these same ways, using the market as an avenue to promote feminism—or relying on celebrities to take on the tasks of feminism for all of us—will fundamentally influence the kinds of the feminism that can be enacted. As Roxane Gay reminds us, not all gateways are created equal. Those with a corporate inflection that summon feminists with products, commodities, and celebrities are perhaps less capable of offering change. While this kind of feminism may not be completely inert, its political economy sets limits on what it can achieve. Beyoncé, Emma Watson, Ellen DeGeneres, and Tina Fey should not be



excluded from feminism because of their enormous privilege; however, when we allow these women to be our fame-inists—the most active and recognizable feminists in public life—we must also question how their commodified personae have an impact on the movement as a whole. Scandalous feminism may not come to light when we hand it over to the marketplace. We may feel better when we shop—at least someone cares about women these days—but it is a sad day for feminism when popularity becomes the goal and selling out becomes a triumph.

# Chapter 4

## Freedom Through Consumption

### Introduction

In this chapter, I consider how freedom is conceived and enacted through consumption in late-capitalism. Specifically, I consider how women's rights are tied to their position as valuable, prime consumers. As I have shown, one of the most disturbing qualities of femvertising is how shopping can be considered a surrogate feminist act. My goal in this chapter is to investigate the relationship between women and consumerism further. In the first section, I consider in brief the history of the North American, specifically Canadian, department store and how department stores influenced how women shopped and worked. Significantly, I argue that women were welcomed as employees in these spaces because the extra income they generated from their jobs was funneled back into more consumption. Next, I use Zygmunt Bauman's framework to describe a society of consumers and argue that our contemporary moment is rooted in the goals of capitalism more than anything else. I question how realistic it is to expect our social movements to be protected from the market when its omnipresence affects everything else in contemporary life. Finally, in the last part of the chapter, I showcase how corporate feminism and femvertising has bled into some of contemporary North American culture's most potent examples of political feminism, namely The Women's March on Washington. The question at the heart of the chapter is how 21<sup>st</sup> century feminists should enact their feminism in a climate that is predicated on relentless consumption.

### Work Hard, Shop Hard: A History

Femvertising is a particularly interesting phenomenon because it is the next chapter in capitalism's relationship with women. Many interdisciplinary scholars have outlined the relationship between women and consumer culture. While it is outside the scope of this project to fully revisit the history of women and shopping, it is important to provide some

contextual background on the subject. Particularly important is to outline how shopping and consumption have intersected with women's liberation. One such example of this cross section is the Canadian department store at the turn of the century. This slice of time offers a rich microcosm of how consumption and freedom for women is complicated both historically and at present.

From around the turn of the twentieth century, North American women have been associated with consumption as an extension of their domestic duties. According to Gail Reekie, "although the nature and extent of shopping may have varied considerably for women of different classes, it was invariably women who were charged with either buying or managing the purchase of clothing, household goods, food, drink and other daily necessities for themselves and for their families. It is still common knowledge and conventional marketing wisdom that supermarkets and department stores are predominately female worlds" (Reekie, xi). Likewise, Graham Broad argues that shopping was an integral part of homemaking:

Innumerable advice books as well as articles and ads in consumer magazines argued that a woman's failure to be an informed and judicious consumer was tantamount to failure as a wife and mother. Providing food, clothing, comforts, and appropriate gifts for one's family was a duty upon which both the health and happiness of the whole family depended. Shopping was serious business, not a leisure activity, even if major department stores did everything they could to make it as leisurely as possible with amenities such as beauty salons and dining rooms. (Broad 17-19)

Broad points directly to the fact that department stores helped to construct shopping as more than a job; their fantastical displays, seemingly unlimited selection of products, and perky salesclerks manufactured a world in which women wanted to consume. Department stores complicated the world of consumption; the activity of shopping was *more* than simply an extension of housework like vacuuming or preparing meals. Shopping is a complex activity and for many upper-middle class women, far from drudgery: it is part leisure, pleasure, chore, obligation, indulgence, and can be both isolating and social.

However, understanding shopping as a mandatory aspect of homemaking suggests that consumption for the home and work outside of the home are not very different tasks. According to David R. Wells, the very same forces that allowed women to enter the workforce also encouraged them to shop: “through a complex gender-centered process, the idealized role of women moved in the direction of embracing a consumer society. The same changes which challenged the role of women in the homes [sic] also opened up new opportunities, shopping. Many women found new meaning with a life which evolved around department stores” (Wells, 84). As Wells suggests, like working outside of the home, shopping takes women out of the confines of the domestic space and offers them “new meaning”. Therefore, the department store, by making both a spectacle and a convenience of shopping, fundamentally changed the behaviours of women. These palaces of consumption offered freedom, all the while anchoring the shopper’s allegiance to the home: “the wife managed her house, but access to consumption goods and deriving self-satisfaction from them is still contingent on the acceptance of an ideology relating to her position vis a vis her husband. Under the new ideology the husband earned the money and the wife spent it” (Wells, 86). Therefore, is it possible to see the department store as a place of contained liberation for women—the department store is fundamentally dependent on the continued business of the housewife, and ultimately, her domestication. She has freedom through consumption.

McBride argues that Canadian department stores were “a world of women” in terms of those who shopped there and those who worked there. Lorraine O’Donnell suggests that Eaton’s stores and catalogues were “women’s places” because they appealed to the female consumer first and foremost:

...these Eaton’s stores and catalogues were women’s places in two ways. First of all, they were venues arranged *for* women: their services, rhetoric, and so on were explicitly aimed at them, and they were the people most likely to shop there. Women were the targets of Eaton’s as it went about the ‘rebuilding of an observer fitted for the tasks of “spectacular” consumption...’ Secondly, and related to the first point, the stores and catalogues under consideration were organized as places *of* women: on entering these environments, one was confronted with visions of women everywhere one turned. (O’Donnell, 297)

Indeed, as O'Donnell suggests, women were at the centre of the department store shopping experience: both the stores and catalogues were targeted to female consumers, "it was taken for granted that women—or 'ladies' as Timothy Eaton called them—comprised the largest proportion of the shopping public...Eaton's efforts, therefore, were directed almost totally to women's needs and desires" (Santink, 68-69). Catalogues too were targeted directly to women. For example, it is no coincidence that the 1910-1911 *Hudson's Bay* catalogue devotes the first sixty-five pages exclusively to women's fashion. Similar to the *Eaton's* catalogues that O'Donnell describes, these documents "were always intended primarily for women" (O'Donnell, 332). Notably, these documents did not just appeal to women by advertising women's garments and accouterments; a close reading of these cultural artifacts illuminate that even in the men's, children's, and household items sections, these catalogues hail women as the primary purchasers of the entire family's needs. A contemporary catalogue for a 21<sup>st</sup> century department store will, tellingly, yield the same results. Therefore, it is apt to consider the department store as a uniquely female space of work *and* consumption.

However, Lorraine O'Donnell goes further and suggests that the very inclusion of women on the sales floor was a tactic to lure female consumers to *Eaton's*: "their [female salesclerks] presence alone was enough to ensure that increasingly over the year, female employees contributed to the feminized visual environment characterizing Eaton's stores" (O'Donnell, 319). O'Donnell's observation illuminates that, like the mannequins, models, special window displays, and skylights, female clerks on the sales floor marketed *Eaton's* to female consumers.

However, a closer look reveals that women consumers and women workers are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are often one and the same. Donovan stresses that one of the perks of working at a department store is that "the store itself is fascinating, chock-full as it is with colorful merchandise, the understanding of which is in itself a liberal education" (Donovan, 198). Women who worked at department stores were the first to be "educated" and get a sneak peek at the latest trends and fashions; their employee discounts

were a major source of incentive to turn their “education” into consumption. For many employees, a 20 percent employee discount was standard at many major department stores, including *Eaton’s* (Donovan, 198). In her discussion of the commodification of department store employees, Donica Belisle argues that “Canada’s giant retailers seized every opportunity to demonstrate their benevolent treatment of staff...” (Belisle, 125). Major department stores also had employee magazines that offered exclusive “employees’ shopping specials” (Belisle, 126). The employees of Canadian department stores were given many incentives to do their shopping at their place of work. Therefore, department stores manufactured a taste for commodities in their customers as well as their employees, who were equally part of a thriving consumer culture.

It becomes essential to question the ways in which consumer culture drove women to get jobs in the first place: “the growth of consumerism is critical in understanding why married women are no longer exclusively housebound” (Wells, 5). While many women took on part-time jobs during the day, their extra income was not spent on the essentials of life, but rather, was funneled back into the consumer mill through the purchase of “nice”, albeit superfluous, consumer goods. Many women took on small, part-time jobs to contribute to the family’s budget for material goods that made for a lovely home: new kitchen curtains, toys for the children, ornaments, holiday presents and dust collectors. Many women saw the department store as a place to work so they could participate in consumer culture and make their home better than that of their neighbours.

The line between female workers and consumers is indistinguishable, and paints a complicated picture of how the department store affected women’s daily lives. Moreover, by criticizing the specific worker/consumer dynamic of these enormous institutions, it becomes clear that women’s inclusion in the public sphere of work is, perhaps, not entirely due to progressive developments in women’s liberation. Feminism itself, while it undeniably continues to make improvements in women’s lives, cannot escape the omnipresence of consumer culture in the West. This can be seen in the rhetoric of 20<sup>th</sup> century culture: society encouraged women to value their “work” as consumers over

their potential involvement in other forms of work. Rather than encourage women to seek jobs for their own benefit, expert columns and advertisements in magazines increasingly told women that her “role was to support her husband and children” (Wells, 95) by shopping. Indeed, “consumerism became an activity around which governments shaped policies and that transformed the cultural, material, and even spiritual lives of millions of people” (Broad, 3). Broad’s observation is crucial in the consideration of women and department stores: these were not just benign places to shop— their very existence has helped shape the material lives of women to this day.

While consumerism was socially prescribed as the work of women, many negative stereotypes about the female shopper vilify women for doing the “work” that society demands of them. As with many facets of women’s lives, *she’s damned if she does and she’s damned if she doesn’t*. For example, according to Robert Tamilia, “the so-called department store disease, called kleptomania, [was] a disorder diagnosed in the mid 1800s as a psychiatric or psychological disease, affecting mostly women” (Tamilia, 9). Women’s already deep connection with weak mental fortitude, lack of reason, frivolity, and impulsivity were exacerbated by their connection with consumption. Evidently, the predominately gendered “work” of consuming creates and perpetuates negative stereotypes about women. Nan Enstad argues “it is no wonder then that women have been most often the symbol of the mindless consumer, from the turn of the century to today. [Society] mistake[s] women with pretty hats for women with empty heads” (Enstad, 5). As Enstad states, the stereotype of the female shopper can be traced from the turn of the century to today. For example, Henrik Ibsen’s 1879 play *A Doll’s House* features “spend thrift” Nora Helmer who is infantilized and scolded throughout the play by her husband Torvald for her flippant and indulgent spending:

Nora: Just a minute (*Hides the bag of macaroons in her pocket and wipes her mouth.*) Come here, Torvald, and see what I’ve bought.

Helmer: Don’t disturb me (*A little later he opens the door and looks in, pen in hand.*) “Bought,” did you say? What! all that? Has my little spend-thrift been making the money fly again?

Nora: Why, Torvald, surely we can afford to launch out a little now! It's the first Christmas we haven't had to pinch.

Helmer: Come, come; we can't afford to squander money. (Ibsen, 3)

Even into the years of World War II, a time when, as Broad argues, women were celebrated for their ability to manage their consumption in the face of war (Broad, 3), women were still portrayed as malleable and impulsive consumers. One Canadian government propaganda advertisement depicts Hitler whispering into the ear of a tentative female shopper: "Go on, spend it...what's the difference?" The message below the image speaks directly to women: "And THRIFT begins with those little things you *needlessly* buy from day to day—THRIFT begins in the home, in the kitchen, in the clothes you wear. From now on, resolve that *needless* spending is out! *Your* personal war job is to save every cent you can...and invest those savings in War Savings Stamps!" (Broad, 75). Like Torvald Helmer, the Canadian government scolds women for their needless spending and suggests that, even in wartime, women are still not able to govern themselves, and therefore, their spending. In reality, many women had risen to the challenge of war: "In the late 1940s different groups of female activists, including the Housewives' Consumer Association (HCA), demanded that the federal government reintroduce wartime price controls on household goods" (Belisle, 645). However, as both Broad and Belisle insinuate, while the image of "women's work" during the war years might be Rosie the Riveter in popular imagination, dominant messaging told women that the best way to help the war effort was to shop carefully. Unfortunately, recent films and television programs like *Clueless* (1995), *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009), and the entire *Sex and the City* franchise (1998-2010) reinforce these stereotypes of the female consumer to this day. Therefore, it is questionable how department stores specifically and wider consumer culture in general helped to emancipate women from the home by offering them retail jobs. As long as women are the Chief Purchasing Officers of the home, they will continue to be part of a complex social system that strives to oppress them.

In the same ways that Canadian department stores complicate the relationship between women and consumption, so too does femvertising. While femvertising may



appear to offer consumers messages about female liberation or draw attention to embedded and harmful gender norms, the advertisements do the opposite: rather than spur a dialogue about gender equality, femvertising contains the avenues of feminist discourse that they offer to consumers. This containment under the guise of liberation is akin to how Canadian department stores appeared to offer both women shoppers and workers alike freedom from their domestic lives; however, when considered more carefully, that freedom was a façade, one that afforded women liberation in the context of the capitalist marketplace only. In a similar way, femvertising broadcasts duplicitous messages that uplift feminist-minded consumers to take action against the very real oppressions that remain in North American culture. That summons is far from a call to action and is, rather, a call to consume.

## A Society of Consumers

In the contemporary West, little, including our most important social movements, is excluded from being absorbed into commodity culture. Feminist consumerism is part of a larger feature of modern life in which capitalism shapes the very time and space of our lives. In his book *Consuming Life*, Zygmunt Bauman carefully identifies how the developed world's contemporary hyper-capitalism has morphed daily existence into individual moments of consumption. Bauman argues that one of the key features in creating a consumer-based society is to staccato time. He writes, "pointillist time is more prominent for its inconsistency and lack of cohesion than for its elements of continuity and consistency... Pointillist time is broken up, or even pulverized, into a multitude of 'external instants'" (31-32). In a society of consumers, which is defined by its "insatiability of needs with the urge and imperative 'always to look to commodities for their satisfaction'" (Bauman, 31), life is fragmented to facilitate steady and automatic consumption. In this setting, individuals operate in isolated moments and have little to no connectivity with those around them or with the history that brought them to their present moment in time. Bauman's understanding of the consumerist climate helps to explain the commodification of all aspects of life; his text captures the structure of feeling that permeates contemporary culture. While it may seem inconceivable that feminism has been subsumed into the marketplace, Bauman provides context in his observations; if consumption structures

contemporary life, there is no reason why social movements would be granted immunity. His work also helps to foreground the necessary discussion about how the values of neoliberalism interact with the feminist marketplace. Particularly concerning is how feminist consumerism perpetuates the values of neoliberalism and encourages feminist action to take place in isolated moments of commercial exchange. In this framework, feminist action is relocated from the incredible history of women's liberation and a climate of solidarity to the realm of products. Bauman argues that shopping has become such an essential part of our modern world—and to our own self-actualization—that we have come to a point in human history where consumption is far from neutral or banal. Shopping has become the place where significant political action is taken.

Many women are using their purchasing power to make a statement about feminist concerns. In her article in *AdWeek*, Michelle Castillo shows that femvertising makes women feel empowered; seeing a brand support women's issues instead of, for example, objectifying women's bodies, is sometimes enough for women to support that brand: "52 percent of women admitted to buying a product because they liked how the marketer and its ads presented women, and 43 percent said it made them feel good about supporting the brand." Women shoppers enjoy purchasing products from corporations that have a vested interest in broadening the representational and material possibilities for women. However superficial this commitment may be, appealing to female consumers by way of their investment in feminist concerns yields big dollars for big businesses. And yet, from the perspective of these mega-corporations, femvertising's success does not lie in the fact that these ads make tangible impacts in the lives of women; it prospers insofar as it is astoundingly profitable: "Consumerism is a religion here and everything, from what you wear to where you eat lunch, requires careful determined and incessant shopping. Consumption is presented as the primary path to true self-actualization and product placement is ubiquitous" (Douglas, 257). Any smart advertising firm would embrace the ideologies held by the majority of its target demographic. Even if that ideology is at odds with its corporate identity, "ignoring counter-discourses such as those of feminism or ecology has never made good commercial sense...fully accepting and integrating their

implications is, however, equally unsound financially. The compromise is to adopt the surface terminology, without taking on board the ideology that underpins it” (MacDonald, 57). As MacDonald identifies, femvertising strikes a fine balance of simultaneously using the language it needs to appeal to a lucrative demographic, paying lip service to the issues it purports to hold dear.

While femvertising may communicate a diluted feminism to the pleasure of some consumers, the problem with advertising is that it only speaks to those with disposable income. In a society of consumers, those who do not have purchase power have no power whatsoever:

People are cast in the underclass because they are seen as totally useless; as a nuisance pure and simple, something the rest of us could do nicely without. In a society of consumers – a world that evaluates anyone and anything by their commodity value – they are people with no market value; they are the uncommoditised men and women, and their failure to obtain the status of proper commodity coincides with (indeed, stems from) their failure to engage in a fully-fledged consumer activity. They are failed consumers, walking symbols of the disasters awaiting fallen consumers, and of the ultimate destiny of anyone failing to acquit herself or himself in the consumer’s duties. All in all, they are the ‘end is nigh’ or the ‘memento mori’ sandwich men walking the streets to alert or frighten the bona fide consumers. (Bauman)

If femvertising is afforded a significant role in perpetuating feminist ideas, it becomes essential to consider those who are not exposed to commodified feminist messages. A society of consumers excludes the poor, and for Bauman, and vilifies them as the outcasts of social order and normalcy. In this framework, some of the most in need of feminist activism are denied access to contemporary feminism. While feminist discourse has always grappled with class and privilege, femvertising takes that dynamic to a heightened and disturbing level; feminism becomes entrenched in privilege when it is marketed to the upper class. It takes an enormous amount of privilege to be addressed by the market as a feminist.

It becomes clear that, in addition to “will and enthusiasm” (Douglas, 560), women need capital, first and foremost, to bask in the pleasures of corporate, so-called freedom. As

Douglas argues throughout *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism*, the market will sell girl power if it is in demand. That demand began to rise in the 1990s. At the same time as young women began to flee from feminism because they feared the “feminazi” persona or the frumpy second-wave feminism of their moms and aunts, they began to bask in girl power. Girl power, a byproduct of enlightened sexism, was embraced by the mainstream market; it was, after all, tame, sexy, and profitable. Rosalind Gill agrees and argues that to appeal to so-called “liberated”, financially independent, Westernized women, advertisers began to deploy different strategies to appeal to female shoppers: “This [change] was also prompted by women’s increasing financial independence—which meant that advertisers need to address them in new ways: it is no good showing women lying on or draped over a car, for example, if you want to sell that car *to women*” (original italics, 84). Gill’s observation, circa 1988, is still relevant because it foregrounds the market’s relationship to women and feminism. But, as Douglas shows, enlightened sexism has brought *back* tropes of “women lying on or draped over a car” because, as Douglas convincingly proves, objectifying consenting, “liberated,” women is acceptable under the paradigm of enlightened sexism.

The new marker of privilege for women is to be protected from the images of enlightened sexism. Just as it is an option to pay for premium, ad-free apps, women of a certain privilege enjoy more politically-correct advertising. Femvertising is a breath of fresh air from everyday sexism. Indeed, a trend is emerging in contemporary advertising to—in some cases—trade sex, misogyny, and objectification for activism, of which feminist consumerism is a significant part. After the 51<sup>st</sup> *Superbowl* in February 2017, *The Guardian* published an article that captured the overarching trends in the much-anticipated commercial time slots: “That’s the crux of successful marketing today: activism is in” (Holder). In light of the recent inauguration of President Donald Trump and his deluge of executive orders, most *Superbowl* adverts that received after-the-fact attention for their “activism” were those that took a stand on openness, diversity, and inclusion in the shadow of the Trump administration’s 2017 travel ban; the *Superbowl*, and its commercials, were aired during the sweet spot between the travel ban executive order being signed and February 10, 2017 when the United States appeals court refused to reinstate the ban despite

pressure from The White House. Most notable were advertisements from *Lumber 84*, whose banned advertisement was available in full online. The advertisement depicts a Latino mother and daughter's hike to the U.S.-Mexico border only to come up against President Trump's promised wall. However, thanks to *Lumber 84*, a large door in the wall allows them to enter the land of The American Dream. Likewise, *AirBNB*'s advertisement was a testament to diversity and inclusion, which aligns with the corporation's new nondiscrimination policy: "We believe no matter who you are, where you're from, who you love, or who you worship, we all belong. The world is more beautiful the more you accept. #weaccept." Alex Holder for *The Guardian* asserts, "companies are now attempting to outdo each other with major acts of generosity, but there's a catch; they'll do good as long as they can make sure their customers know about it. There is no room for humility when a brand does a good deed."

While messages of inclusivity and tolerance dominated the *Superbowl* landscape, femvertising appeared too. In an advertisement for *Audi*, a voiceover echoes as young children prepare for the start of a go-cart derby. There is, noticeably, one girl in the race surrounded by a bunch of brutish boys. Her dad eagerly looks on from the crowd. His voiceover resonates: "What do I tell my daughter?" The flag waves, the race is on. "Do I tell her that her grandpa is worth more than her grandma? That her dad is worth more than her mom? Do I tell her that, despite her education, her drive, her skills, her intelligence, she will automatically be valued as less than every man she ever meets?" The girl in the car, having outdriven her counterparts throughout the voiceover, soars past the finish line in first place. Her dad comes from the crowd and greets her with jubilation. As they walk to their Audi car after the race, he finishes his voiceover: "Or maybe, I'll be able to tell her something different." The camera focuses on the smiling girl as they get into their car. The screen then reads, "Audi of America is committed to equal pay for equal work. Progress is for everyone." The hashtag that accompanies the advertisement is #driveprogress. Like its pinkwashed counterparts, Audi's femvertisement is an excellent example of the empty promises of femvertising. Indeed, one of the most salient and significant aspects of marketplace feminism is that all brands are welcome to join. While femvertising has been

widely applied to products that are mostly targeted to women (makeup, tampons, dolls, etc.), advertisements like Audi's soap-box car race showcase that femvertising reaches far beyond traditionally or exclusively female products. While Audi's commercial simmers with feminist ideals, "Business is still business. These brands aren't being good from the bottom of their hearts, they're run by smart people who know being good sells" (Holder). However, it is not just being "good" that sells; the appeal lies in part in adopting a stance, and for many companies that stance, however tenuous, is a feminist one.

In Audi's contribution, the voiceover stirs the feminist consumer—here is a mainstream platform publically suggesting that gender inequality is rampant and that men are valued as more than women in almost every instance. Gone is the rhetoric of the mid-nineties where Phoebe Buffay of *Friends* questioned: "We can drive, we can vote, we can work, what more do these broads want?" in response to being invited to attend a Vagina Monologues-esque one-woman show called "Why Don't You Like Me: A Bitter Woman's Journey Through Life" (The One with the Soap Opera Party). Rather than spout sexist messages or silence feminist concerns, contemporary corporations are speaking feminism. However, the marketplace format of these messages warps their political potential. Absent in these commercials is an understanding of feminism's history and messiness. For example, while Audi may display a commitment to bolstering the future of young girls by committing to equal pay, their generous and aspirational advertisement is on trend when it comes to appealing to the masses: "for the millennial...more activist, less sexist" (Holder). Will Audi consumers confirm that the corporation stands by their commitment to equal pay? Without that equal pay explanation at the end of the advertisement, Audi's ad reads as disjointed; their efforts to connect a flashy Audi with feminism is a stretch. Even connecting the advertisement to a feminist concern like equal pay is problematic: advertisements should not be the battleground where issues of such economic and social importance are discussed. Enlightened sexism may have been helpful in describing a post-feminist landscape; however, the consumer market caught onto the fact that feminism was much more profitable if it remained active. Instead of enlightened sexism, we have corporate feminism—neither of which are sufficient for the tasks at hand in modern life.

## The Women's March & The Market

An increasing number of social commentators as well as scholars are considering the landscape of contemporary, North American feminism. Since I began this research in 2013, a few are starting to recognize and discuss the idea of the feminist marketplace and consider how feminism has been seized by corporate power and wielded for profit. While most of this burgeoning commentary has come from journalists and media critics in sound-bite articles, Andi Zeisler, the cofounder and creative director of Bitch Media published a book in 2017 about buying and selling feminism. *We Were Feminists Once* points to the incongruity of glossy, marketable feminism and the sustained sexism that permeates contemporary culture. At the same time, the public conversation about contemporary feminism has also been stoked by the Women's March on Washington the day after Trump was inaugurated. The Women's March on Washington was held on January 21, 2017 in Washington, DC on the grounds of the inauguration ceremony—in the aftermath of the inauguration of a widely criticized presidential candidate (in)famous for his narcissism, racism, and misogyny. A million people flooded Washington for the march. They jammed the streets, waved their witty placards and peacefully railed against what they saw as a looming threat. Another five million took part worldwide in sister marches. It was the largest single-day protest in American history (Broomfield). For a millennial scholar living in Canada, it was the first time that I was aware of such a large-scale, public display of feminist action. Unlike the abortion protests in Poland in 2016, The Women's March on Washington drew members of my own family and friends to protests across Canada—a few even went to Washington. Here I was writing about the deep implications of marketable feminism while women around the world were making history at a high-profile rally. At first, these two components seemed incompatible. In the aftermath of this action, however, the heightened discourse about feminism in the wake of the march has offered unexpected insight into corporate feminism.

The Women's March was one of the most public affirmations of feminist commitment—six million people around the world actively protesting against inequity. The protests also questioned the election of an unqualified, misogynist President over Hilary

Clinton, America's closest opportunity at having a female in the top job. Despite the thrill of the day, it was the commentary that followed the march that was more insightful than the march itself. For example, writing for the *New York Times Magazine*, Jenna Wortham commented, "who didn't go to the Women's March matters more than who did." Her provocative think-piece uses a photograph from the march (see appendix A) as the catalyst of her argument—the close reading that she offers points to the nuances of the march. While many photos captured capacity crowds using aerial cameras, Wortham's chosen photo hones in on the individuals at the march. The effect is an analysis that exposes the divisions in contemporary gender politics:

There's a photo making the rounds from the women's march in Washington of a black woman named Angela Peoples (taken by her friend Kevin Banatte) holding a sign that reads, "Don't Forget: White Women Voted for Trump." In the photo, she stands nonchalantly, casually sucking on a lollipop with a jaded look in her eyes that suggests her familiarity with the ritual of protest, of demonstrating for civil liberties. Behind her stand three white women, all wearing the pink knitted "pussyhats" that the march made famous. Two are on their phones, pleased grins beaming from their faces. One appears to be taking a triumphant selfie.

Wortham goes on to describe the demographics of the march; she celebrates that the march was generally described as multiracial and multigenerational. Specifically, she applauds the number of children in attendance—for her, a symbol of long-term activism. Yet, speaking about her experience at the march in Manhattan NYC, Wortham "began to feel exclusionary as the day wore on. Equating vaginas with feminism and with gender equality felt outdated, given that there were a number of trans women who showed up to support the cause. Other photos were also emblematic of this divide — notably, a sign carried by Amir Talai, an actor and improv performer, that said, "I'll See You Nice White Ladies at the Next #BlackLivesMatter March, Right?" Wortham's argument becomes clear here: the march, certainly a triumph in numbers, retained at its core the deep divides in the feminist discursive field. The photograph offers insight into the different kinds of protesters on the scene that day: by juxtaposing Peoples with the three white women behind her makes plain the differences within the movement. Just like Wortham, I have friends who went to Washington and returned "brimming with the energy of radicalism and the spirit of change." They wore their pussy hats, and posted a lot of photos to Facebook with their



smart phones. They could afford the gas to drive down to DC and stay in a safe hotel and they enjoyed the racial privilege of whiteness. For some reason, the women's march was enough to stoke their commitment to protesting on that day. For these women, the march still carried with it the safety that comes from being white as well as the celebrity endorsements, social media, and mainstream media attention that made it cool and safe:

It felt indicative of the ways in which the day's events could be viewed as problematic: the notion that women's rights were suddenly the most important cause in our nation, or that there haven't been protests and activist movements worth attending until the election of Donald Trump. The photo of Peoples is certainly the image that was most shared among the black women I know and that surfaced in feeds from women who opted out of the march, who chose to spend time with their families or one another instead. Those who were criticized for not participating reminded their followers of the suffrage movement, when black women were increasingly marginalized in the fight for the right to vote, and highlighted the lack of policing at the women's march, a luxury never granted at Black Lives Matters demonstrations. And they reminded anyone who'd forgotten that 53 percent of all white women who voted for Trump, while 94 percent of black women voters cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton. They reminded people that it is very likely that the white women in the photograph probably know — or are related to — someone who voted for Trump. That photo cuts to a truth of the election: While black women show up for white women to advance causes that benefit entire movements, the reciprocity is rarely shown.

Wortham concludes that contemporary feminism is “molting” and that while the march might have solicited an unprecedented turn out, questions remain about who individuals were marching *for*. “Is it only for themselves?” Wortham's analysis is useful because it briefly halts the celebration of an unprecedented turn out and critically asks questions about the meaning of the march. In this context, it is worth considering whether it is enough to be in attendance. In the standard university classroom, basic attendance is never enough to get a passing grade. And, as it pertains to a loose commitment to feminism—of which femvertising is a part—I argue that it is not enough to wear a pussy hat or to buy one's way into a movement. If even our most powerful protests are impacted by corporate feminism, what is the best way to enact feminism in 21<sup>st</sup> century late-capitalism?

The contrast between the Women's March and the climate of corporate feminism can be baffling; contemporary gender politics is rife with contradictions. “On the one hand,

feminism has never been more widely proclaimed or marketable than it is now. On the other hand, its last ten years of mainstream prominence and acceptability culminated in the election of President Donald Trump.” Here in *The New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino’s concern is valid and, presumably, one that many across North America share, but I would argue that it is precisely feminism’s marketability that has led to this point. Tolentino’s article goes on to feature the arguments of Jessa Crispin, whose book and manifesto “Why I Am Not a Feminist” rages against this version of mainstream, liberal feminism: “the push to make feminism universally palatable has negated the meaning of the ideology writ large” (Tolentino). A significant part of mass-producing feminism is to monetize it—feminism, for Crispin, has become a cash cow for big brands that use it to sell a multitude of consumer and specialty products. Therefore, while contemporary feminism has been diversified based on the notion of inclusion, the truth of the matter is that feminism’s third-wave inclusivity has been poisoned by neoliberal values. Feminism has become a “fight to allow women to participate equally in the oppression of the powerless and the poor” (Crispin). If contemporary feminism means that women can make enough money to exploit the world as much as men, Crispin wants none of it—she wants to, understandably, lean out. Just as Bauman asserts in *Consuming Life*, a society of consumers encourages the purchase of products as the endgame of every human pursuit. In the case of political engagement—the result is isolated and apathetic consumer activism: “We’re all feeling the need to right the wrongs of today’s Brexit and Trump world – but few people are willing to actually sacrifice anything. If a brand can allow me to carry on living exactly as I was and fuel my social conscience then they can have all my pocket money” (Holder). Commitment without sacrifice dominates the field of modern political engagement—while it may make for lousy widespread change, it does make for fantastic business. Even in the triumph of the Women’s March, it is apt to consider how many will take part in the follow-up 100 Days of Action versus how many buy the Women’s March t-shirt, like the Facebook page and go about life as if it never happened. “The inside threat to feminism in 2017 is less a disavowal of radical ideas than an empty co-option of radical appearances—a superficial, market-based alignment that is more likely to make a woman feel good and righteous than lead her to the political action that feminism is meant to spur” (Tolentino). Under this warped

framework, feminism is about individual gains, commercial engagement, and the warm-fuzzy feeling of self-righteousness: “the corporations we work for poison the earth, fleece the poor, make the super rich more rich, but hey. Fuck it... We like our apartments, we can subscribe to both Netflix and Hulu, the health insurance covers my SSRI prescription, and the white noise machine I just bought helps me sleep at night” (Crispin). Crispin’s manifesto casts a disconsolate shadow on feminism. Her argument rests on that fact that if you do call yourself a “feminist” and ground that feminism in wearing a “this is what a feminist looks like” t-shirt, buying commodities that are sold vis a vis femvertising, and seeking success in the status quo, you are not a feminist at all. To disavow this version of contemporary feminism might be the most feminist thing you can do in 2017.

The analyses from both Wortham and Crispin help to contextualize femvertising; their observations explain the backdrop in which femvertising is so popular and financially successful at the same time as women’s rights are still tenuous around the world. Femvertising is just one arm of a wider commodification of feminist ideals, one that disturbingly cashes in on the concerns of feminist consumers and works to keep public, political, and purposeful feminism domesticated and inert. While feminism has never been so widely popular, it has also never been more flaccid. Instead of transforming the precarious feminists of the millennium into freedom fighters, capitalism has created freedom consumers. Want a place to practice your feminism? Try the mall: “[contemporary feminism] means simply buying one’s way out of oppression and then perpetuating it...it embraces the patriarchal model of happiness. Women, exploited for centuries, have grown subconsciously eager to exploit others” (Tolentino).

## There’s Something About Rosie

Tolentino’s piece in *The New Yorker* offers interesting insight into feminist consumerism; by highlighting Crispin’s arguments and concerns about contemporary feminism, Tolentino complicates the contemporary feminist dialogue and calls out marketers for pimping out cheap feminist foils. However, in the promising afterglow of the Women’s March on Washington and the subsequent, strong feminist voices (like

Tolentino's) in the magazine, *The New Yorker* itself succumbed to the popularity of the feminist marketplace; in the same breath that the magazine offered useful commentary on the Women's March, it slapped a "modernized" Rosie the Riveter on the cover of the magazine in a tribute to the March. Just like the empty t-shirt slogans of "Girl Power", "This Is What a Feminist Looks Like" and "Girls Just Want to Have Fun-damental Human Rights" are edgy enough to sell, but tame enough to avoid starting fights, Rosie the Riveter has lost her political power and has become part of the feminist marketplace. *The New Yorker's* misstep in using her image illuminates the subtle and insidious nature of femvertising.

The cover of the February 6, 2017 issue of *The New Yorker* features Abigail Swartz's "The March," an original art piece that depicts a young woman of colour in the familiar feminist posture of J. Howard Miller's Rosie the Riveter or "We Can Do It!" design—the flexed bicep, strong stare, raised eyebrow and blue workers' shirt are all represented on a bright yellow background (see appendix B). This time though, Rosie sports a pink, knitted pussy hat. Gray Schwartz has taken a tired feminist image—itsself a stereotype—and has attempted to bring it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to a significant time when many people are emboldened by the dawn of the Trump administration. This is *The New Yorker's* nod to The March—an ode to the unprecedented, historic turnout, the pussy hats and the diversity of contemporary feminism. Despite Gray Schwartz's updates, Miller's image is stuck in the feminist cannon: the myth of feminism, particularly a feminism suggestive of the second wave, permeates Rosie, despite her darker skin and hat. While choosing to remake Miller's depiction of Rosie makes sense because of its iconic nature—Rosie easily connotes feminism wherever she appears—the cover is weighed down by Rosie's historic consumerist roots and deeply embedded capitalism. This is how alluring femvertising is and how omnipresent corporate feminism has become.

Rosie the Riveter is one of the most famous American icons of the Second World War era; her manifestation in the "We Can Do It!" poster has been a cornerstone in feminist imagery since she was rediscovered in the 1980s. While widely interpreted as a feminist

symbol—“We Can Do It!” became a powerful summons to combat a variety of patriarchal controls—Rosie the Riveter in 1942 had little to do with feminism. In fact, “We Can Do It!” was a poster commissioned by Westinghouse to motivate its employees in the war effort. While the poster was intended to stir an industrious spirit in female *and* male workers, the roots of this iconic now-feminist image lies in one of America’s most robust corporations. Reimagined in the 1980s as a symbol of the strong feminist, Rosie carries with her a history of commercial progress and productivity in the war years. Thus, Gray Swartz’s choice of *this* image becomes questionable—its corporate roots and, frankly, obviousness does not seem to capture the verve of The March at all. Rosie’s corporate roots have translated into the contemporary moment; Rosie the Riveter is one of the most popular Halloween costumes chosen by millennials. In October 2016, PopSugar released an article featuring “15 Fierce Ways to Dress Like Rosie the Riveter for Halloween.” Beyoncé famously posted a photo of herself on Instagram in 2016 posing as the famous Rosie. Critics like Rebecca Winson of *The Guardian* criticized Queen Bey’s depiction as “working-class drag” and wrote that dolling up Rosie is to mock the working-class women she represents. Such borrowing begs the question: with all the baggage that Rosie brings with her, is dressing up like Rosie, posing as Rosie, and “repurposing” her, all the feminist creativity we have in 2017? Rosie’s roots are already deep within a history of patriarchy, commercial activity, and wartime, and her over-used image has become empty and available to second-order signification. Her image has become highly marketable in contemporary society—her retro-cool status (supported by celeb feminists like Beyoncé), sexy-safe feminism, and misunderstood history lends her to be reproduced and sold.

Despite the fraught history of the image that Gray Swartz chose to reinterpret for *The New Yorker* cover (problematic enough!), the full extent of its commodification came to light in the following issue in which the entirety of page 69 of the magazine featured an advertisement for a tank top with the February 6<sup>th</sup> Abigail Gray Swartz cover on it (see appendix C). Here is the *New Yorker’s* ode to The March and “contemporary” Rosie glaring back at us—silkscreened on a shirt. The ad tagline boasts that you can “wear a part of history” by purchasing one of these tops with a percentage of sales going toward the

Committee to Protect Journalists (the fine print specifies that only 3% is donated to the CPJ). On the *New Yorker*'s shop page, there are no other covers available on apparel—just a medley of styles of the February 6<sup>th</sup> cover with another appeal to “wear a part of history.” The shirts range from \$28-\$34 USD. It appears that the marketability of feminism is too tempting to pass up—even for a reputable and thoughtful publication like the *New Yorker*. Perhaps the impressive solidarity of the Women’s March is better translated into useful market research; millions of marchers could equal millions of t-shirts sold. And, better yet, perhaps these tank tops will appeal to those who did not attend The March too; if you did not get to attend, you can wear a part of history instead. This is precisely the problem with femvertising/feminist consumerism/recuperation: wearing a part of history becomes a proxy for action, or at best, a souvenir. Consumers can now purchase their feminism and wear it proudly. An outdated image of feminism is repurposed, rebranded and sold in this example even in the aftermath of one of the most compelling and exciting displays of feminist action in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America. Perhaps this tank top helps to illuminate that not much has changed—same old bootstraps Rosie (albeit this time a different hue and with a pussy hat) and the tell-tale commodification that follows. This example illustrates that feminists will find it difficult to participate in public demonstration and not have that enthusiasm for feminist goals sold back to them.

## Commodity Feminism

While femvertising may appear to do more cultural work than other advertisements, the cultural work that femvertising—or any mainstream cultural product—does should be critically examined; the priority of these campaigns is not to participate in feminism, but rather to reinforce the status quo in order to keep women shopping. While messages of empowerment might emerge from this type of advertising, it is important to notice that they are still, first and foremost, advertisements that aim to perpetuate consumption. Femvertising is an example of how consumer culture has used remnants of feminism to perpetuate female-driven consumption. Femvertising appeals to women who seek feminist sentiments in popular media. Yet, the calls to action they receive from it work to render them as consumers and not as politically and socially-equal citizens.

While femvertising is an emerging industry term, it is a strategy that has been in practice since the beginning of the women's movement; as long as women have had rights, advertisers have tried to use their enfranchisement to sell them products. As Myra MacDonald illustrates, an unnamed version of femvertising was at work in the 1920s and 1930s when advertisers latched on to the progressive and counter-cultural flapper: "her outgoing modernity allowed advertisers to align her independence of spirit with women's rights campaigns. Following a lead caption 'When lovely women vote', the text concludes that their inevitable choice is Listerine toothpaste" (51). Women have been sold products that align with women's liberation for a century, which showcases that, while feminism has sparked significant improvements in the lives of Western women, contemporary girls and women still experience some of the same commercial pressures as their grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

Critics of this analysis of femvertising could certainly argue that femvertising, while it may not emancipate women, is not a detriment to society. If women are being better represented in advertisements, is that not a positive development? I am not so sure. Those who unquestioningly embrace femvertising can be blind to the ways these commercials actually do the opposite of what they boast. As MacDonald illustrates, "consumer discourses in...advertising...eagerly absorbed the terminology of self-assertiveness and achievement, transforming feminism's challenging collective programme into atomized actions of individual consumption" (56). Here MacDonald usefully suggests that femvertising not only reinforces the cycle of shopping but also changes the very nature of how feminism is enacted within society; "deciding which brand to favour could become a surrogate political act" (51). Meredith Fineman of *The Harvard Business Review* agrees, urging caution when it comes to femvertising because of its ramifications for the entire feminist movement. "Inauthentic support cheapens the idea of women's equality, and that is dangerous not only for the purveyors of business behind those token messages, but to the feminist movement itself. Too many attempts to "market to women" seem to me to turn female power into a commodity — or at least, reduce female power into something mostly

good for buying more commodities” (Bahadur). MacDonald and Fineman are astute to address big business’ feigned interest in women’s rights and remind us that commodifying women’s rights can be a detriment to the integrity of the movement as a whole. More troubling, perhaps, is Brunson’s claim that the effects of co-option are devastatingly misleading because “not only do the oppositional idea and practices lose their bite, but they can function to make it appear as if change has been effected” (Brunson in MacDonald, 57). Brunson points to the post-feminist consequences of femvertising: it exacerbates the already dangerous dialogue that feminism is dead.

MacDonald, Fineman, and Brunson offer compelling reasons why femvertising is a risky trend; however, the implications of these reasons require further discussion. Not only does femvertising use feminism to sell women superfluous products, but it also transforms feminism itself into a fetishized commodity. Commodity fetishism—the process by which commodities magically cast off the shackles of their material history—is a dangerous facet of commercial culture because it helps to foster a consumer society that does not question from where things come. While this has major implications for material goods—clothing made in sweatshops located in the global south are purchased unquestioningly every day—I think there are greater implications for immaterial “goods” like feminism. For Rosalind Gill, “commodity feminism” is a useful riff on traditional, Marxist, commodity fetishism because it draws attention to how advertisers “incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism while simultaneously ‘domesticating’ its critique of advertising and the media” (84). Commodity feminism illustrates how femvertising renders feminist sentiments into commodities for a population that is hungry for any kind of feminist outlet. However, if feminism is something that can be bought, it is more likely that the history of struggle that is embedded in the movement will be forgotten. Femvertising yields instances that do not celebrate the successes of feminism, but simply bask in the embedded feminism that has magically appeared for women in the West. If contemporary feminism is isolated from its history, it is vital to question what is in store for its future. Commodified feminism, specifically femvertising, is one component of a potentially catastrophic reaction; when mixed with the already saturated solution of post-



feminism, which already encourages that we cast off the expired goals and irrelevant history of feminism, femvertising may just be the ingredient needed to keep feminism permanently stagnant.

The central question at the heart of this chapter, and much of this project, is whether capitalism and feminism can cohabitate. This question is particularly potent at a time when corporations are recognizing the monetary value that stems from endorsing feminism. On International Women's Day of 2017, the same engine that fueled the march on Washington in January called for special action to be taken on March 8, 2017. This year, International Women's Day would witness a widespread strike enacted by women around the world. Dubbed #DayWithoutWomen, the purpose of the strike was to “use the day to dig deep and ask ourselves about how women, and all gender-oppressed people, are treated in our society - from our homes to our communities to our government, from our schools to corporate boardrooms, from bathrooms to hospitals to prisons, from the day we're born until the day we die” (@womensmarchonwash). Women around the world went on strike and gathered together to draw attention to the roles that all women fill in everyday life—even the Statue of Liberty went dark in support of women protesters. However, another movement made headlines on International Women's Day too—on the morning on March 8<sup>th</sup>, New Yorkers woke up to a small change on Wall Street. Staring down the famous Wall Street “Charging Bull” was a statue of a girl standing in lean-in superhero stance. Designed by Kristen Visbal, “Fearless Girl,” was instantly trending on social media with throngs of people taking photos of and with her. An apparent act of remarkable guerilla activism, “Fearless Girl” was erected in the middle of night and watched the sun rise on International Women's Day. For some, her presence was a major step forward, especially for the Wall Street boys' club. However, according to Jillian Steinhauer, the truth behind Fearless Girl enervates the excitement around her: “It features a branded plaque at its base. The companies that installed it had a permit. They are advertising firm McCann New York — whose leadership team has only three women among 11 people, or 27% women — and asset manager SSGA — whose leadership team has five women among 28 people, or 18% women.” Suddenly, instead of representing strength in the face of aggressive and

domineering capitalist patriarchy, “Fearless Girl” becomes yet another example of corporate feminism. For Steinhilber the statue is a slap in the face, “Could there possibly be anything more patronizing than two massive, male-dominated capitalist companies installing a branded statue of the most conceivably non-threatening version of womankind in supposed honor of a day devoted to women’s equality?” Installing “Fearless Girl” is symbolic support of feminism—a marketing ploy that went viral by design. According to Cara Marsh Sheffler’s article in *The Guardian*, “it’s really hard to take on Wall Street when you’re funded by Wall Street.”

When we celebrate “Fearless Girl” on International Women’s Day, we must look at the status of feminism in our culture. She is a corporate manifestation of feminism that does little to challenge the inequities that permeate North American culture: “Feminism is about human decency, not molding young girls in the image of a banking industry that bets against us, shorts us, and then receives government bailout money.” While Marsh Sheffler concedes that it is important to have female leaders hold top positions in the marketplace, it is also important that feminism question the very fabric of contemporary, capitalist life. The question—*are feminism and capitalist at odds*—is very difficult to answer. It depends on one’s definition of feminism and the extent to which one benefits from the structure of capitalism. From a socialist feminist perspective, feminism will never be able to fully deploy in a capitalist framework but, as I have argued, activism within capitalist patriarchy is still valuable. Feminism can still expand limits that are set by dominant structures. However, as long as capitalism remains the primary modus operandi of the West, hegemonic patriarchy will continue to thrive.

## Conclusion

According to Silvia Federici, feminism and capitalism are fundamentally at odds—irreconcilable differences make it impossible for capitalism to afford an equitable society. This is especially true in the case of women because their oppression is the cornerstone of capitalist production: “the degradation of *women* are necessary conditions for the existence of capitalism in all times” (13). By including an analysis of the “Great Witch-Hunt” of the

16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Federici expands Marx's description of primitive accumulation and the impacts of capitalism on social order. In particular, Federici considers the disenfranchisement of women in the transition to capitalism and how the disappearance of feudalism made women vulnerable in the rise of land ownership and the need to repopulate the work force. Federici explains that, "female serfs were less dependent on their male kin, less differentiated from them physically, socially, and physiologically, and were less subservient to men's needs than 'free' women were to be later in capitalist society" (25). However, the transition to capitalism reduced "women to wombs" and "has been able to reproduce itself...only because of the web on inequalities that it has built into the body of the world proletariat" (17). The way to eliminate scores of women was to call them out as a witch, and in most cases, drown them or burn them alive: "The witch-hunt, then, was a war against women; it was a concerted attempt to degrade them, demonize them, and destroy their social power. At the same time, it was in the torture chambers and on the stakes on which the witches perished that the bourgeois ideals of womanhood and domesticity were forged" (186). Federici's historic account helps to connect a "witch" of the 16<sup>th</sup> century with a feminist consumer of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Capitalism destroyed the first, and supposedly liberates the second. Or, perhaps not much has changed. Rather than exercise brute force, the capitalist system now relies on hegemonic consent. The myth of the market tells us that, in the moment of exchange, everyone can enjoy equality. And yet, we know that it is unapologetic inequality that keeps capitalism afloat; there is no other way to create the surplus needed for continual growth in a world of finitudes. While many women in Westernized nations enjoy freedoms fought for over generations, to what extent are those freedoms also tenuous and superficial within the current system? Just like femvertising offers partial insights into feminist concerns, it is important to ask in what ways the rights women have are also commodified or, more specifically, afforded based on the needs of capitalism. And in what way does corporate feminism help us to forget how precarious our freedom is?

# Conclusion: Fraudulent Feminism and What Might Be Next

The goal of this project has been to draw attention to the situation of commodified feminism by considering the commercial trend of femvertising. My approach has focused on reading femvertisements as ventriloquial manifestations that do not offer a platform to feminist voices, but rather to the patriarchal corporate ventriloquist that seeks profit by way of feminism's vogue. By doing so, I have raised important questions about contemporary gender politics, particularly how femvertising encourages a consumer activism that has limited potential to make lasting and meaningful change. While late-capitalist structures, economics, and politics are a staple in global culture, the messages that corporations use to communicate with consumers can be fickle. Trends come and go; when advertising moves onto another trend, feminist discourse will have little to show. Has the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* or *CoverGirl's GirlsCan* Campaign helped to dismantle the beauty myth or the cosmetic industrial complex? Has *Special K's #OwnIt* helped to decrease rates of eating disorders or made strides in curbing the culture of thinness? My answer is that femvertising is unequipped and ineffective in contributing to meaningful change. Rather, it has helped to fuse feminist messages with corporate culture and has jeopardized the future of feminism as a whole. Buying into the corporate model of feminism is not a real investment; it is a Ponzi scheme that can collapse once the schemer gets nervous and abandons the group. North American feminists should avoid buying into the scam—all corporate feminism has offered is an abridged version of contemporary feminist concerns. Add a marketable gloss and a few buzzwords and old products are new again when they are communicated by femvertising. When the market moves on—or the top of the pyramid makes off with billions—how is everyone going to get their money back? Just like cheated investors, feminists who bought into the idea that capitalism cared about them will be left wondering how they could have been so easily duped. Corporate feminism is a fraudulent feminism—

feminists would be wise to invest their energies into real political gains and not imagined connections rooted in the market<sup>22</sup>.

Undertaking this project has led me to consider avenues for further research. I have become particularly interested in conducting a more thorough historical analysis of the market's role in affording North American women their rights and freedoms. While I allude to this factor throughout this dissertation, a project focused solely on this historical relationship would be an informative endeavour. Many factors have contributed to the rights and freedoms North American women experience today. For example, feminist advancements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are often explained by WWI and WW2—wartime gave many women the opportunity to work outside of the home for the first time, learn new skills, and connect with other working women. But as women's rights expanded in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so did capitalism; my hypothesis here is that they have mutually fed off each other for decades. Capital needed female buying power and women needed income, power, and influence to advance their place in society. As I address in the final chapter, women have been in the spotlight of commerce well before they could earn their own income; as queens of the domestic space, women were the ones who shopped for their families while their husbands were participating and working in public. As women began to enter the workforce *as well as* maintain their role in the home, they became super-consumers who now act as both the gatekeepers of their household's expenditures as well as shoppers in their own right. In contemporary North American society, things are very much the same. A 2017 Forbes article boasts, "Women are the world's most powerful consumers, and their impact on the economy is growing every year. The global incomes of women are predicted to reach a staggering \$18 trillion by 2018, according to global professional services firm" (Brennan). I am interested in how this newfound wealth—financial empowerment—relates to the feminist project and to what extent North American women's rights are predicated on capitalism.

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<sup>22</sup> Using the language of the market is intentional in this section.

In 2017, feminism and capitalism have reached an apex in which they can supposedly cooperate like never before. Corporate feminism has made billions for the market and brought new attention to feminist concerns that were taboo only a few short years ago. But what happens if women are ever forced from their powerful seat as consumers? My guess is that their rights will evaporate quickly—and with them the *illusion* that capitalism and feminism were ever partners advancing seemingly shared goals. Bauman makes a convincing case that capitalism is only interested in those who have the means to shop.

What of a scenario in which women are not valued for their consumer power? One such scenario has captured the attention of North American women. In the 2017 *Hulu* adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, audience members are treated to a fuller glimpse into the rise of Margaret Atwood's dystopic Gilead. Published in 1985, Atwood's all-too-familiar dystopic story is one of the most conceivable plots about how all the successes of women's equality could vanish in contemporary North America. The Sons of Jacob form Gilead to cure 21<sup>st</sup> century America of its "obsession with profit and pleasure." An unnamed environmental catastrophe has forced capitalism to a halt; with no more resources nor an ability to replenish the workforce, the system cannot operate as normal. Babies need to be made and the gasping environment needs to be cleaned up; dogma states that God is "punishing us for indulging in such a life before." Feminism in this dystopic setting is about a new kind of freedom—one in which handmaids live out their "biological destiny" in peace. In this world, handmaids get to beat rapists to death and are protected by a Panoptic system that supposedly values them. Before she is imprisoned as a handmaid, Offred—nee June—is still able to function in the rise of Gilead until her bank account is frozen. By then, it is too late to escape.

Atwood's text argues that an environmental disaster that leads to a crisis in capitalism could be the end of contemporary women's rights. *The Handmaid's Tale* chronicles a perfect storm in which everything goes wrong at the right time. The structures that afford women their rights—particularly their value as consumers—are not guaranteed.

Gilead justifies its treatment of women because their reversion to “family values” has helped lower emissions and supposedly quelled society’s thirst for money and sex. Seen through this context, Atwood shows us what value women really have for those in power. Prohibit excess and sexuality and you have Gilead and the systematic enslavement of women. While Marxist and socialist feminists argue—as I have— that gender equity will never be possible in the context of capitalism, corporate feminism suggests otherwise. A sturdy capitalism contributes to the tentative equality that many women today enjoy. Remember it was Beyoncé who brought feminism to the contemporary masses, along with the sale of millions of downloads; my concern is that patriarchal consumer capitalism’s devotion to feminism will run dry one day—most likely in light of an environmental situation that will force capitalism to slow down. In that moment, when we realize that capitalism no longer needs us, women can either be at the front of the revolution or, as Atwood predicts, at The Red Centre being trained to succumb to institutionalized rape.

While I relish my freedoms as a Canadian woman, I also think it is helpful to compare strides in the women’s movement to the role women have taken in capitalism. Early capitalism, as outlined by Silvia Federici, spurred the elimination of women—the Witch Hunts gave capitalism fewer obstacles to overcome in its primitive accumulation stage. Late capitalism, it seems, welcomes women into the fold and relies on their participation in the marketplace. These bookends in the history of capitalism should send a sobering message to feminist consumers who might believe that their freedoms are guaranteed because they are represented in the mass media. On the contrary, I hope this research illuminates how the ventriloquist will throw his voice to whoever is needed to support the system. Femvertising is just one of the cast of dummies in the ventriloquist’s trunk that can, at any point, be put away to make room for a different character. Significantly, capitalism can decide to rely less on female consumers as a whole—a shift that may have an impact on the very freedoms we assume to be permanent. Such a scenario may prove that advances in the women’s movement are less determined by political activism and more by the value a certain demographic of women bring to the market.

Going forward, it will be important not only to keep an eye on examples of femvertising but also on the spaces that are made to help corporate feminism thrive. For example, the *Washington Post* has recently introduced *The Lily*, a newspaper outlet designed for women. Robyn Urback of CBC News states, “The Lily, named after the first U.S. newspaper produced by women back in the 19th century, will ‘boldly reimagine the Post’s award-winning journalism’ through a female lens. It will be online, on social media and distributed twice weekly through a digital newsletter.” My concern with platforms like this is that they are being created specifically to curate a consumer base for corporate feminism. While *The Lily* may, again, not be entirely new, it is relevant within our specific cultural moment. Urback continues, “To be sure, media marketed to women has been around forever in the form of ladies’ magazines, radio shows, newspapers and so forth. But you’d think the trend these days would be to move toward more gender-neutral media. Yet our fixation on identity politics seems to be promoting a return to the days of old.” My early research into this field suggested that North American Millennial women were fleeing from identity politics; it appears that the surge of marketable feminism has made identity politics—insofar as wearing a sassy, feminist t-shirt makes one political—popular again. As my research has shown, identity politics can be a useful avenue to foster a niche market. In the climate of corporate feminism, women-only spaces become particularly vulnerable to instances of femvertising.

As femvertising starts to gain notoriety, my hope is that more and more feminists, activists, and cultural critics will attempt to jam or parody its messaging. One of the best examples that I have found is by Toronto-based advertising agency *john st.* In a spoof campaign video on Vimeo, the company announces the opening of a sister company: *jane st.* The video depicts the company as feminist and progressive. Its tagline states, “to cater to the increasingly popular trend of femvertising, john st. has opened jane st., an agency that specializes in empowering women through advertising.” The video, with its subtle comedy, can be easily mistaken as genuine. The agency takes on clients that want to celebrate all kinds of female body hair, their male staff go through intensive “empathy training”, and their goal is to unearth body-image anxieties in women so they can liberate them. With the



goal of boosting women's self-esteem, *jane st.* works for its clients to celebrate women by bolstering and thwarting deep-seeded insecurities: "In order to really stay ahead of the game, we need to be able to identify tomorrow's insecurities today." Another executive says, "there is literally no limit to the amount of empowerment we can empower through the power of our brands. It's a win-win for women and girls and it's a win-win for the brands...because they sell more stuff." The video closes with a happy crowd—sipping pink champagne—chanting "Women! Women! Women!" outside of the new *jane st.* building and the screen goes dark on a painter covering the brick walls of the office in hot pink paint. *john st.* understands why femvertising is so ridiculous; this video spoofs the very real corporate logic at the heart of femvertising. These kinds of critical, creative videos help to expose femvertising for what it is; while I do not expect *jane st.* to dismantle the trend of corporate feminism, I do think this is a bright spot in a bleak landscape.

Commodified manifestations of feminism suggest that the only tolerable forms of feminism in a patriarchal consumer culture are those that are contained by the structure of the market. According to Luce Irigaray, keeping women commodified is one of the best ways to keep them docile: "[women] remain amorphous, suffering from drives without any possible representatives or representations. For them, the transformation of the natural into the social does not take place, except to the extent that they function as components of private property, or as commodities" (65). By focusing on the rabid, contemporary commodification of feminism, my research aims to question what happens to a feminism that is bought and sold. As it turns out, not much feminism is needed to make something "feminist"—just a spoonful of feminism seems to make the patriarchal consumer capitalism go down. Interrogating various representations of femvertising ultimately contributes to the broader discussion about how feminism is communicated, or spoken, within a capitalist system. This research contributes to the ongoing discussion of how feminism is enacted and silenced, and, I hope, stirs important questions about how we should move forward.

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# Appendices

Appendix A: Image accompanying Jenna Wortham's article in *New York Times Magazine*



Appendix B: February 6, 2017 *The New Yorker* cover By Abigail Gray Swartz



Appendix C: Advertisement to “Wear a part of history” using previous week’s cover

Wear a part of history.



“The March”  
Abigail Gray Swartz, February 6, 2017  
Multiple styles available

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A percentage of sales will go to the Committee to Protect Journalists\*



# Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Kate Hoad-Reddick

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2007-2011 B.A.Hons

The University of Guelph  
Guelph, Ontario, Canada  
2011-2012 M.A.

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2013-2017 Ph.D.

**Honours and Awards:** AEJMC Conference Top Faculty Paper, Media Ethics Division  
August 2017

Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2011-2012, 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016

D.S. Wilson Award, University of Guelph  
September 2011

Gold Medal, University of Western Ontario  
June 2011

**Related Work Experience** Limited Duties Instructor  
The University of Western Ontario  
2017

Graduate Research Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2016-2017

Graduate Teaching Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
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