



Astala Yalnaz (2021), *The intersection of Neoliberal Capitalism and Liberal Feminism: Analysing the influence of Public discourse*, London School of Economics Undergraduate Political Review, 113-129

The Intersection of Neoliberal Capitalism and Liberal Feminism: Analysing the Influence of Advertising on Public Discourse

Astala Yalnaz

London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

The paper argues that liberal feminism movements are affected by Neoliberalism that once intersects with social modes of communication like advertisements, undermines the project of feminism and makes it “commercialised”. This commercialisation is largely influenced by patriarchal discourses too.

Keywords: Intersection, Neoliberal Capitalism, Liberal Feminism, Advertising

Feminism is understood differently in terms of its objectives, expectations, triumphs, and shortfalls. While the existence of these differences in perception is a product of various political and historical processes interacting with one another at specific spatial and temporal junctures, they are created and influenced primarily by structures with an underlying capitalist logic.¹ Limiting this study to a theoretical definition that will be explored in further sections, this paper asks: How can advertising explain the impact of neoliberal capitalism on the liberal feminist movement for the lower-class woman? This paper tries to assess the role of mass media (particularly in the form of print advertisements) in upholding and proliferating the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the liberal feminist movement – specifically for lower-class women.

The larger enquiry undergirding the specific question this paper asks is how capitalism affects the liberal feminist movement in the first place. This is not to draw a line of causality between capitalism and female oppression – the domination of women by men in both the domestic and the social spheres have existed long before the advent of capitalism.² An increase in the interdependence of political and economic institutions today³ has meant that even the demand for rights and freedoms for women will, in many cases, end up being mediated by institutions whose primary goal is in tandem with ethos of a capitalist market society – profit-making.



 ©Astala Yalnaz, 2021. This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Herein lies the significance of exploring the question for this paper through a limited analysis of mass media – especially in the form of print advertisements.⁴ They are deeply entwined with maximising sales by co-opting and reflecting the social values that prevail among a people – provide a keen insight into the intersections of neoliberalism and liberal feminism. Despite the many fluctuations of the mainstream popularity of liberal feminist movements, any commercial medium that aims to co-opt their rhetoric will inevitably be informed by it, and shapes the public discourse around it.

Lastly, the significance of limiting the focus of this question to the lower class woman⁵ is this: commercialisation addresses a certain class of society – those with access to physical mediums such as television or internet to access these marketing campaigns, to a means of literacy, or means to purchase the products being advertised. Analysing how such media – that essentially panders to the upper classes – affects public discourse among lower class women would help to conclude how, and to what extent, the political and social goals of the liberal feminist movement manifest in their lives.

The liberal feminist movement

Broadly, and for the purpose of this essay, the liberal feminist movement theoretically constitutes various political demands that arise from the idea of “freedom” as a fundamental basis of women’s personal and political lives. This paper will avoid referring to feminist movements within the framework of the ‘wave construct’⁶, for its reductionist categorisation. It discounts the various political movements across the world and defines only the movements of the West or especially the American feminist movements. Additionally, these rigid distinctions also do not account for the demands in the periods of transition between these movements that marked important achievements for the social and political freedom of women⁷ that also overlap between the different waves and are not unique to a strict time period. However, there are many varying definitions of this freedom. Nancy Hirschmann, in *The Subject of Liberty*, discusses the importance of looking beyond the simplistic binaries between negative and positive liberty.⁸ This paper recognises and argues for nuancing the definition of ‘freedom’ that the liberal feminist movement aspires towards. This is a definition that keeps the individual ‘self’ as its centrepiece – a ‘self’ that is a product and an intersection of one’s social relationships as well as one’s inner barriers or ambitions – including one’s own desires, fears and apprehensions.

¹ Huyssen, *Introduction to Adorno*, 3.

² Among others, such domination entailed the absence of equal political and social rights for men and women, physical or psychological violence over women, and a naturalisation of the sexual division of labour to the extent of oppressing individual choice.

³ Robert Dahl on modern economics and politics, quoted in Swanson, *The Economy*, 14.

⁴ Print advertisements are more accessible to the lower economic classes – such as in the form of newspapers. An analysis of multimedia advertising would assume a financial capacity for lower classes to access technologies like television or radio – and is thus ignored for the scope of this paper.

⁵ For the scope of this paper, the lower-class woman is defined as one who is reliant on government support for livelihood, participates minimally in the labour force, is educated typically till the high-school level, and typically has a household (typically 3-4 members) income of \$18,000. This figure, however, is from an analysis by Leonard Beeghly in 2004. In 1961, according to census reports from the US Department of Commerce, this figure corresponded to about \$5826 for families with year-round full-time workers. Thus, despite an uncertainty in the exact figures of consumer earning across the years, these figures are intended to provide a basic idea of the financial resources of what is referred to as the lower class for the purpose of this paper.

⁶ Refers to the rigid definition of the first wave as a movement that demanded women’s suffrage, the second as one that demanded equal rights and pay in the workplace, and the third as one that aims to address the liberation of categories beyond the white upper-class cis woman. However, owing to the popularisation of this construct, and for ease of understanding, this paper will refer to the ‘waves’ to refer to certain historical junctures.

⁷ Tarrant, *When Sex Became Gender*, 222.

⁸ This is based upon the categorisation between the two types of liberty in Isaiah Berlin's essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Positive liberty constitutes the freedom to act according to one's desires, and negative liberty the absence of hurdles or constraints to acting however one may desire. Hirschmann argues that the mere absence of constraints is not enough, but there must be positive provisions for women to be able to make these choices – for example, provisions needed to mitigate barriers of disability in pursuing one's ends. Quoted in Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty*, 31

Given the constraints of social construction⁹, the goal of the liberal feminist movement can then be understood as one that maximises the amount of overall and quotidian and political autonomy¹⁰ an individual has within that structure. For this, Hirschmann proposes the intervention of the liberal state, especially in the legislative realm. This aims to balance out the scales of “disadvantages” and “influence” (such as coercion) and make the legislative agenda, and thus the social and political lives of individuals, more equitable.¹¹ This points to a “comprehensive liberal feminism”¹² that takes root in some fundamental social values, and then calls for state power to be utilised in taking action that furthers a “feminist” end of freedom. However, the element of state intervention involved in this idea of comprehensive liberal feminism could serve as a point of contention – and it would be a valid one. The state’s top-down projects of providing rights and of law-making run the risk of creating a normative vision of what constitutes the ideal life for a woman and the ideal definition of ‘freedom’. This might perhaps discount the very intention of allowing for individual agency in the making of the self and one’s own life that is at the centre of the call for liberating the woman. Many thinkers who adhere to this school of thought don’t advocate state intervention to enforce feminist values outside of the traditionally ‘political’ realm, an example of which is policy-making, or securing the right to vote for one’s government without discrimination.¹³ It is then imperative for the social sphere, where individuals form associational relationships, to organise itself in a way that furthers personal autonomy and that furthers an equitable distribution of “duties, benefits, and burdens.”¹⁴ This may be conceived of as grounded primarily in a moral theory of mutual respect that governs personal relationships¹⁵, gives women the right to choose their sexual expression and self-determination¹⁶, and allows space for reflection and self-transformation of social relationships that are based upon a life that allows for autonomy of the individual.

In line with the above arguments, liberal feminism does not demand a static and singular form of identity as the only requiem for understanding or demanding liberty. It is becoming increasingly important to address the subjectivity of different emotional and physical experiences of womanhood, most of which are socially constructed. Thus, this paper holds that the politics that demand freedom should not be viewed as one of merely ‘identity’ or ‘interests’, but about discrete “issues” that must be made concrete and discussed. This conception transcends that of ‘identity’ because the latter is “neither uniform nor all-encompassing”¹⁷ – and it discounts the highly subjective needs of women and recognises that these needs are not homogenous within the label of a certain identity based upon race, gender, and so on. The identification of these issues arises from naming them in language – and eventually, the individual woman can identify the specific issues of her unfreedom by learning from the experiences of women collectively, and also making choices that are more removed from patriarchal influence and discourse. This helps in partially resolving questions around the origin of such liberating contexts for women in the first place.

⁹ The phenomenon explaining the lives of individuals as a confluence of social interactions and structures.

¹⁰ By quotidian autonomy, I refer to a freedom in the everyday choices that women make that lead up to a life of their own choosing, and political autonomy refers to a freedom of being able to co-create the conditions and laws under which one lives their lives.

¹¹ Influence and coercion constitute forces informed by existing structures, like the patriarchy, that dictate choice-making. Chambers, *Sex, Culture, and the Limits of Choice*, 263.

¹² Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*, 10.

¹³ Hampton, *Feminist Contractarianism*, 248.

¹⁴ Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*, 52.

In fact, in order to avoid the appropriation and/or denial of the multiplicity of the experiences of the 'woman', Hirschmann encourages debate and general public discourse that questions and discusses varying political beliefs, not just within a community – but cross- culturally¹⁸. While experiences may, in themselves, be limited by their reliance on individual perception (which is also socially constructed)¹⁹, it is this idea of the “discursive construction of social meaning”²⁰ that is deeply dependent on the creation and presence of a public consciousness through discourse.²¹ However, the focus that liberal feminism lends to relationships governing distribution of resources and to the concept of autonomy, verges upon neglecting the practical power relations that create oppressive conditions for women, and positing that independence and self- sufficiency of women are goals in themselves.²² This view may act to discount the dependency of lives on one another and on the importance of caring for others within a society. Thus, this final theoretical limitation as laid out for the purpose of this paper will be addressed by viewing personal autonomy as a relational entity that accounts for the interdependence of individuals, of different cultural contexts, and does not rigidly define a practical choice as constituting autonomy, or not.

These theoretical considerations inevitably and crucially demand for participation of various individuals in public discourse surrounding notions of autonomy, and what constitutes freedom. However, as this paper aims to address in further sections, there are many hurdles to a form of discourse where many categories of individuals are represented and heard. The hurdle explored in this paper, among many that exist, is that of feminism’s “dangerous liaison”²³ with neoliberal capitalism, the implications of such a liaison on mass media, and some further effects of this on the liberal feminist movement for the non-elite.

Capitalism and the Feminist movement

As a socio-economic system, the broad logic of capitalism refers to the private ownership of capital and the accruing of socioeconomic benefits to those who own capital, as opposed to those who do not.²⁴ This paper will only refer to ‘neoliberal capitalism’, a phenomenon that has resulted in a less-restricted flow of capital and commodities across the globe. This has led to granting financial hegemony to countries that are industrially advanced²⁵. It would be reductionist to provide an analysis of capitalism’s effects on the feminist movement across the history of its existence – not least because there can be no definite comparative or quantitative analysis of the total human expense at which capitalism has persisted across centuries.

¹⁵ These include fairness and equality in personal relationships, and Kantian ideas of dignity as treating human life as an end in itself, and holding that individuals are rational beings capable of making their own choices.

Hampton, *Feminist Contractarianism*, 23.

¹⁶ Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom*, 17-18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁸ She emphasises dialogue between the East and the West for conducive criticism of the social norms that proliferate patriarchal attitudes and hinder women’s freedom. *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹ This view would necessarily reject merely the individualistic ‘imagination’ of freedom – because the imagination is in itself constructed through patriarchal discourse. *Ibid.*, 219.

²⁰ The “discursive construction of social meaning” refers to the phenomenon of using discourse to give meaning to the ways of organisation and practices of society, and how people define reality.

²¹ Discourse – it must be emphasised – is only one of many elements of the social construction of lives. Hirschmann discusses other ‘levels’ of constructing meaning, such as our material lives and social “customs and practices”. *Ibid.*, 93.

²² Khader, *Adaptive Preferences*, 24.

²³ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, 14

Thus, the limited scope of this paper will only consider some tangible and measurable effects. As a whole, it may be considered that some goals constituting women's empowerment have been furthered by capitalism. This can be credited to various advancements in medical and industrial technology that have ultimately increased the demand for labour – thus bringing women into professional work that they are remunerated for. This has also coincided with women getting the right to vote, having higher rates of literacy due to more access to capital and education, having access to better healthcare options, and a net increase in material wellbeing. In a system where accruing capital is equivalent to accruing power and achieving autonomy²⁶, some women have definitely achieved this, and passed on their social and economic capital down to newer generations of women in their family – creating new generations of economic elites who ride upon the successes of the circumstances of the preceding generations. However, it is crucial not to confuse correlation with causation. Increased literacy rates, better healthcare and more jobs for women may be a partial product of a capitalist society, but rights for women have been primarily achieved as a result of collective social movements alongside, of course, the liberal feminist movement – such as civil rights or labour rights movements.

This helps explain why not all women are equally empowered by neoliberal capitalism. The concentration of wealth among the elite occurs simultaneously with the exploitation of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. The exploitative nature of neoliberal capitalism means that many activities of production have been relocated to less industrialised or less developed countries of the world – so that large companies can maximise their profits at the expense of low-wage earners in these countries²⁷. While such practices work to the detriment of all individuals in the lower classes, it affects women to a larger extent due to coupling with their own social and political struggles, such as the low wages women earn due to the naturalisation of the sexual division of labour.²⁸

Such discrepancy in the effects of neoliberal capitalism for women across different socioeconomic classes is because, I argue, the state also has vested interests in supporting and drawing support from the financial elites within their country and outside. Legislation regulating fiscal responsibility of a country, in fact, functions in a way that only provides incentives for the accumulation and creation of capital, rather than actively using government funds to directly increase employment.²⁹ This means that existing cycles of disadvantage are reproduced, and further exploit individuals at the bottom of the ladder.

²⁴ Scott, *Capitalism*, 5.

²⁵ Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, 21.

²⁶ This refers to the idea of financial independence and self-sufficiency as discussed in the theoretical section on liberal feminism.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸ In addition to not being given equal wages in the workspace, the labour performed 'at home' is to be performed voluntarily as a 'duty', or the labour arising from love. This means that there has been a naturalisation of the idea of the woman as the primary caregiver in the domestic sphere – a system of unpaid labour – which restricts the public and professional lives of many women who cannot afford paid help in the home.

²⁹ Shoup, *Taxation and Fiscal Policy*, 188.

Public discourse

While the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the liberal feminist movement as laid out above may be institutional, they are consistently informed by the social ethos and public discourse. However, these effects are rarely highlighted in popular discourse, and are largely restricted to academic or policy circles. This is for a reason that is twofold:

1. Ideas presented in analytic circles, such as in academia, are inaccessible to the larger public. This is true because first, there is a lack of open-source material that is accessible to the general public. Active enforcement of paywall policies means that those with the literacy and physical means to access such academic discourse are still unable to gain access to important scholarship because of financial constraints.³⁰ This also holds true because of the manner in which ideas are presented in academic works – they are nuanced and often rely on niche knowledge and understanding of economic or political theory, and use language that is dense and very removed from its colloquial use. A reason for this is also because these works are produced mainly for an audience within policy or academic circles that would indirectly affect public lives of people on the outside, and indirectly translate into politics in the participatory realm – rather than being written to influence the public understanding directly.
2. The second reason follows from the first – in that information is disseminated and public discourse is influenced by mediums that are more directly available to the public – and primarily, these have more traction and an influence over public discourse because of the cheaper costs of their access and the easily-digestible chunks of information they disseminate. They do not require much conscious effort, and seep into public understanding and form (and reflect) mass opinions.

The primary means of influencing public consciousness and social values in the latter way is through mass media – which includes visual entertainment, popular writing, and social media, among others. This paper, however, chooses to lend its focus to the role of print advertising in informing and co-opting trends in public discourse.

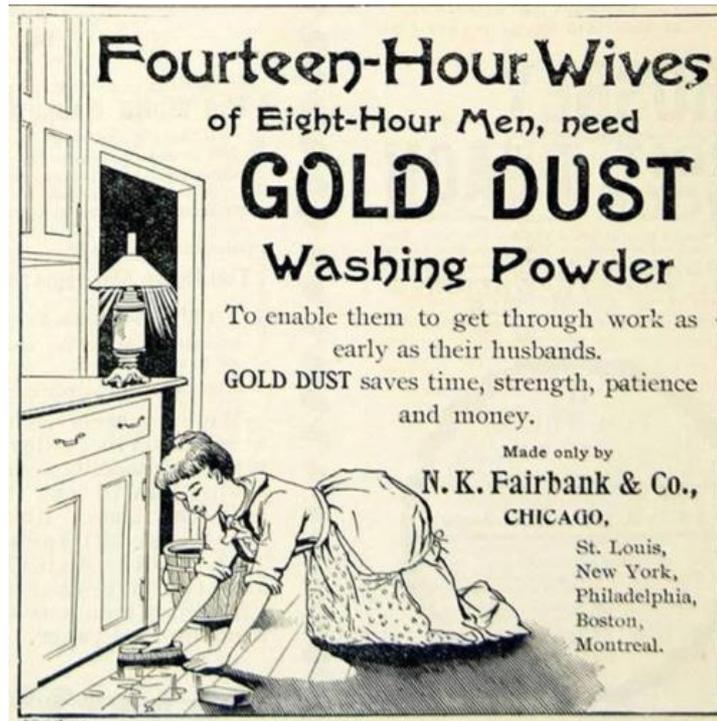
Print advertising and public discourse

As a form of mass media readily available to the public, and in higher frequencies and through cheaper mediums than even entertainment in the form of TV series or movies, print advertisements play a very important role in reflecting and influencing public opinion³¹ due to greater accessibility. For a medium with the ability to influence political stances and views, it is noteworthy that these forms of media do not, in themselves, have intentions to either hamper or further the goals of social movements. The sole consideration of commercial advertising is in serving itself and maximising profit for the company selling a certain product.

In support of this argument, it would be apt to highlight that advertisements have historically ridden upon the shoulders of the latest trends in political labels that the mainstream public wants to claim in order to maximise profit. Figure 1 is an advertisement for Gold Dust Washing Powder, by a soap manufacturer called N. K. Fairbank & Co. It was published in the early 1800s, long before women gained the right to vote in America. It co-opts the rhetoric of the patriarchal structures that went unquestioned before what is known as the first-wave feminist movement – that of the subservient wife who handles domestic work on time, so that she is free “as early as [her] husband” and is available to satisfy his every need.

³⁰ Bergstrom, *Free Labor for Costly Journals*, 187.

³¹ Dudley, *Moulding Public Opinion*, 108



[Fig. 1]³²

In the 1960s, the rise of the second-wave feminist movement led advertisements to portray women in an empowered light, in line with new demands for women's equal pay and rights in the workforce. Fig. 2 portrays an advertising slogan for a brand of cigarettes, known as Virginia Slims.



[Fig. 2]³³

³² Old Paper Studios and Alamy Stock Photos, Gold Dust Washing Powder, for "Fourteen-Hour Wives of Eight-Hour Men." Made by N.K. Fairbank Co. of Chicago, IL. Image ID: B7PNBG.

³³ Duke University Digital Collections.

It appropriates the previous struggles of the first wave and the ongoing struggles in the women's rights movements at the time, to urge its audience that the ability to smoke freely in public was one of the great achievements in women's empowerment.

In a more recent example, the eruption of conversations around the #MeToo campaign also resulted in advertising that co-opted the sentiments of accountability for sexual assault, that became a great part of public discourse. Fig. 3 represents a print version of a video campaign launched by Gillette, "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be", that refashioned their previous slogan: "The Best a Man Can Get" – which was often accompanied by hypermasculine tropes of the male, as portrayed in Fig. 4, from 1996. It portrayed a positive belief in changing cultures of toxic masculinity and sexual misconduct, parallelly with the discourse around #MeToo.



[Fig. 3]³⁴

³⁴ Miami Ad School Archives.



[Figure 4]³⁵

However, not all adverts positively followed a trend of increasingly feminist rhetoric. Some also reflected male insecurities and anxieties with women in the workplace and gaining social and political rights as a result of social movements. These succeeded in popularising the product, despite a contrary social ethos, because decisions on expenditures within the domestic sphere still remained a male prerogative.³⁶ This is visible in Fig. 5 below, which depicts an advert from the 1970s that sells Van Heusen ties that reiterates that at a time when women are demanding equal pay for professional work and are not all confined to the domestic space.

³⁵ Miami Ad School Archives.

³⁶ Mann and Huffman, *The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism*, 83



[Fig. 5]³⁷

Thus, the analysis of these advertisements proves a point that is twofold: first, that advertising latches on to the demands and needs of its contemporary present, fashioning the rhetoric to sell the product in line with those desires³⁸; second, that the market itself creates new demands and needs, based on the socio-political ethos at a certain juncture, which are in line with its profit-making imperative in advertising.

Reflecting this, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer discuss the 'culture industry'³⁹ as the commodification of the mediums of our cultural consumption – which panders and appeals to

³⁷ Duke University Digital Collections.

the masses, ultimately altering human consciousness and greatly reduce autonomous choice independent of the existing market culture and power relations⁴⁰. Further, the “propaganda model”⁴¹ also helps explain how mediums such as advertising are systemically biased due to being driven by capitalism, so that they manipulate collective minds in a way that they ‘consent’ to socioeconomic policies that do not ultimately benefit them, but are acceptable to those who reap their benefits (such as state-backed policies that help large conglomerate accrue more capital at the expense of the salaries of their lower-level employees). It can also help explain issues of intersectionality: how neoliberal economics proliferate the sexism (or racism or casteism) persisting in its very design. The text and the concept can be used in studies of media biases – and the sections below will use this framework to analyse the misrepresentations of the goals of the liberal feminist movement.

Thus, the apparent correlation between social movements that gain mainstream popularity and advertising rhetoric at specific historical junctures work to create a homogenous society of consumers in three ways:

1. The phenomenon of commercialisation of various spheres of human life and relevant advertising, pander only to an economic elite – individuals who have the financial means to buy the product – or at least inhabit an economic class where they are able to aspire to own the product to only a partial detriment of their financial resources. This is portrayed by Fig. 2, which also defines empowerment as an image of a well-groomed elite woman in expensive attire.

Inevitably, pandering to this upper-class sentiment through a medium frequently also accessed by the lower classes means that advertising peddles a homogenous image of human need – especially the needs of women, who are disadvantaged socially even independent of their financial statuses. This results in a “false consciousness”⁴² among the lower classes that leads to a misunderstanding of their immediate material and political needs.

2. As portrayed in Fig. 6 below, these advertisements also tended to define the empowerment of women as the defeat of the man, or as in rebellion to who the man is. Fig. 2 also defines women’s cigarettes as slimmer than the ‘fat ones men smoke’ –likely alluding to defining female aesthetics (daintiness and smallness) in opposition to the male’s. This resonates with Simone de Beauvoir’s theory that men are consistently defined as the human ‘subject’ while the woman, defined in opposition to the man, has been ‘the Other’.⁴³ An implication of definitions with reference to an absolute type is that women are unable to collectively identify and mobilise for their demands. Additionally, resisting a common trope within these advertisements, Beauvoir also argues that women’s independence need not arise from a mimicry of men – but an understanding of the unique ways in which her freedoms are curbed⁴⁴.

³⁸ This argument need not be limited to important historical junctures, either. ColorsTV, an Indian television company, used the opportunity of International Women’s Day in 2019 to launch their #SundayisHerHoliday campaign, when women would ideally spend their free Sunday consuming women-centric content on the TV channel. This called for one day of respite from the taxing domestic work of the women and promoted the idea that she has ‘earned’ one day of leisure curated by her male partner and the family that depends on her, in return for the (unpaid and unquantified) labour she performs in the home.

³⁹ This refers to late capitalism has resulted in a phenomenon where every mainstream medium we consume as art or entertainment, works to further the goal of the market economy: they are all designed for profit, keeping in mind how to maximise this profit. Adorno and O’Connor, *The Adorno Reader*, 15.



[Fig. 6]

⁴⁰ The rather general statements put forth about the culture industry have been critiqued for a lack of clarity on its actual operation in daily life, and also for defending notions of high culture and vehemently opposing mass or popular culture. Despite these, this paper holds that the concept is important to assessing the impact of mass communications on the proliferation of dominant ideology (like capitalism). Additionally, while the idea is viewed as historically limited, it may offer an apt explanation of the evolution of mass culture with the rise of industrial society (approximately 1920 and 1970). Despite the fact that information has been greatly democratized with the rise of the Internet today, commercial hegemonies in the technology industry – Google or Facebook are examples – continue to propagate dominant ideologies through the regulation of the dissemination of information.

⁴¹ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 5.

⁴² False consciousness is a notion within critical and Marxist theory. While not directly utilized by Karl Marx himself, this term (as used prominently by Friedrich Engels, and later by György Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, and Louis Althusser, among others) has come to signify a phenomenon where (usually) the lower and oppressed classes in a society are unable to recognize that their material needs differ from the political and economic elite. This may often mean a belief in the scope for their upward social mobility, and result in the institutions of the capitalist state demanding, reinforcing, and rewarding conformity and obedience to the dominant ideals (in this case, profit-making). This definition also rests on the premise that 'consciousness' refers to the ability of a collective to recognize and demand their needs from their institutions.

⁴³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 24.

⁴⁴ Other than this argument, the concluding chapters of *The Second Sex* call for a woman's removal from the social environments that feminise her according to societal and culturally specific norms of femininity in order to realise true liberation.

3. Fig. 7 portrays an advertisement of a make-up company, CoverGirl. Their #GirlsCan Campaign was backed by many prominent artists like Ellen DeGeneres and P!nk, who have a great appeal among the masses – and are themselves embodiments of sexual liberation and subversion of gender stereotypes, respectively. Rather than primarily institutionalised barriers such as sexism, these messages operate to break one’s internal barriers – such as low self-esteem and lack of ambition in order to realise their freedom. The solutions to social and political hurdles seem to lie in active participation in the market, which ultimately leads to a seat at the corporate table. The hard work and hustle culture that is propagated ignores meritocratic structures and thus the lower classes – whose disadvantage is reproduced generationally and often through state-backed policies⁴⁵; this includes those who can outsource domestic and child-rearing responsibilities to make time for professional achievements.



[Fig 7]⁴⁶

Popular feminists co-opt this, arguing that when women are at the table⁴⁷, or part of corporate decision-making – which it’s all about at the end – sexist stereotypes reduce and “conditions for all women improve when there are more women in leadership roles giving strong and powerful voice to [lower-class women’s] needs and concerns”⁴⁸. However, it is crucial to note that female corporate leadership does not act to address feminist issues on-ground, it is essentially about making more women part of the practice and goal of maximising profit.

These three representations of neoliberal feminism⁴⁹ intensifies the focus on the individual at the cost of larger societal change. By mediating women’s understanding of feminist discourse as theory and replacing it with feminist discourse largely as a trend, commercial mediums such as advertising (that are heavily dependent on the market calculus) make individuals increasingly passive participants in such discourse. This results in a form of the liberal feminist movement that focuses more on material aspiration and inward-looking to achieve freedom and, thus, empowerment. This form doesn’t aim towards collective justice or mobilisation, or larger political action. Thus, it may often result in the opposite of what the liberal feminist movement sets out to do and disempower various categories of women who ought to be able to claim the benefits of the movement.

⁴⁵ As argued above, in the case of legislation around the state’s fiscal responsibility towards ensuring employment and education for those with lower access.

This phenomenon necessarily steers the feminist movement away from the political, to a more performative realm – where it's no longer institutional accountability, but individual action that is self-reliant or reliant on family social and economic capital. 'Performative feminism' aligns its goals with that of the liberal feminist movement, but disregards the crucial aspect of diversity in identity and tends to ignore the 'social construction of lives' as has been elaborated upon in previous sections. While this approach necessarily puts women at the forefront, publicly demands for 'representation' or 'power' and intends to be inclusive of all the choices women make – it greatly discounts political action. It constructs for itself a 'universal woman', for whose rights, it is sufficient merely to appeal to the rest of humanity to believe in certain abstract ideals of 'the good', 'morality' and human dignity⁵⁰. More popularly, rhetoric around 'power' and 'ruling the world'⁵¹ misrepresent the oppression of many women and imbibe a sense of complacency in the achievements of previous movements for women's rights. A rise in such an apolitical form of consciousness among the public, I conclude, hinders the goals of the liberal feminist movement for the lower-class woman – whose needs are misrepresented as aligned with those of upper-class women. It not closes up myriad avenues to challenge the political status quo and demand social, political and economic rights; it also makes room for justifying various actions, that may be antithetical to the principles of freedom and autonomy, in the name of 'feminism' – whether in the private or the social sphere.

Methodology, Scope and Limitations

This paper uses feminist, Marxist, and critical theory as the framework within which it analyses limited examples of popular print advertisements in order to conclude on some of the effect's neoliberalism has had on liberal feminism. Broadly, the paper follows an interpretive methodology that is premised upon the understanding that human action has historical and social meaning, rather than trying to characterise patterns independent of a temporal and spatial specificity.

It offers a subjective analysis of the intersection between two social phenomena (neoliberalism and liberal feminism) and argues that its outcomes are observable within trends in print advertising. I recognise that, at all times, there will inevitably be advertisements I have not acknowledged (or ones that are unpopular) that co-opt and modify feminist rhetoric in different ways than I argue. However, the specific examples chosen were due to the great social popularity of the companies whose products are being marketed, and the fact that they have been analysed and addressed in public discourse. In terms of theoretical framework, the way the paper defines the 'woman' is limited, especially in light of intersectional feminism.⁵² This is not to adopt a heteronormative vision, but to lay out my arguments against an already-existing backdrop of heteronormativity, so as to lend credibility to my arguments. Lastly, although the analysis is limited to a lens of class due to its analysis of capitalist machinery, I acknowledge that the political demands for women's rights is simultaneously interlinked with other struggles against socio-political institutions and norms – such as the caste movements in India, the eco-feminist movement, or the 'Black Lives Matter' movement – such that intersectionality then becomes key in imagining a collective solidarity, and in moving away from discourse of 'identity politics'.

⁴⁶ www.covergirl.com.

⁴⁷ Refers to the phenomenon of being a part of discussions and decision-making practices at the higher levels of an organisation – and in for the purpose of this paper, this refers to high-level corporate positions.

⁴⁸ Sandberg and Scovel, *Lean In*, 7.

⁴⁹ This is the phenomenon of neoliberal capitalism co-opting the rhetoric of liberal feminism and women's empowerment in order to accumulate more capital, or enhance the popularity of products, etc.

Conclusion

This paper contends that the liberal feminist movement is a political project that demands socioeconomic and political rights for women, towards the ends of freedom, autonomy and through limited state intervention. However, market logic defined by neoliberal capitalism – that results in proliferating wealth for a limited economic elite – affects liberal feminism in many ways. While the growth of industrialisation and capital coincides with the empowerment of some upper-class women, these effects do not manifest unanimously across all women – especially those in the lower classes. This is because while the advent of capitalism created conditions for empowering women, it was in fact social movements that achieved rights for women. An effective analysis of this is provided by exploring trends in advertising – because it is popular mediums of communication like this that informs and draws from public discourse, rather than the more inaccessible academic discourse. Thus, in its wake, neoliberalism leaves a commercialised feminism – one that co-opts the rhetoric of social movements. As a consequence, the very nature of the liberal feminist movement as a political project is undermined by its new performative version. Importantly, one of the key ways in which discontents of women are co-opted by commercial rhetoric is one of the reasons that capitalism persists – that the solution to one’s problems lie in consumption – and the advertising industry finds innovative ways to convince us of this. The market appropriates many realms of our lives for its own ends, and the radical movements that begin as a fight against the establishment – such as the patriarchy and capitalism – are no exception.

⁵⁰ Zerilli, *Toward a Feminist Theory of Judgment*, 173.

⁵¹ A Keds print advertisement, released in 2016, had the slogan: “it’s not a running shoe, it’s a run the world shoe”, embodying a vague definition of women’s power that can only exist as playful rhetoric if it is not a sentiment backed by political action.

⁵² Importantly, an alternate spelling of the word is “womxn”, that is aimed at actively including people identifying as non-binary-gendered, to avoid normative assumptions made about sexuality, and to mitigate sexism that results from appearances as far as possible.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W., and Brian O'Connor.** *The Adorno Reader*. Blackwell, 2000.
Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Classic, 2015.
- Bergstrom, Theodore C.** "Free Labor for Costly Journals?" *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2001, pp. 183–198. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2696525. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.
- Bevir, Mark and Kedar, Asaf.** 2008. *Concept formation in political science: An anti-naturalist critique of qualitative methodology*. *Perspectives on Politics* 6 (3): 503–17.
- Bureau of the Census.** US Department of Commerce. Current Population Reports: *Consumer Income (1961)*. June 9, 1961. <https://www2.census.gov/prod2/popscan/p60-036.pdf>.
- Cornell, Drucilla,** 1998, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex, and Equality*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Dudley, Drew.** "Molding Public Opinion Through Advertising." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 250, 1947, pp. 105–112. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1024655. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.
- Fraser, Nancy,** 2013, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*, Brooklyn: Verso.
- Hampton, Jean** (1993). 'Feminist Contractarianism.' In Antony and Witt (1993): 227–56.
- Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky.** *Manufacturing Consent*. Random House, 2008.
- Hirschmann, Nancy J.** *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom*. Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Huyssen, Andreas.** "Introduction to Adorno." *New German Critique*, no. 6, 1975, pp. 3–11. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/487649. Accessed 9 Oct. 2020.
- Khader, Serene J.,** 2011, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*, New York: Oxford. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199777884.001.0001
- Kotz, David M.** *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*. Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Mann, Susan Archer, and Douglas J. Huffman.** "The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave." *Science & Society*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2005, pp. 56–91. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40404229. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.
- Okin, Susan Moller, et al.** *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Edited by JOSHUA COHEN et al., Princeton University Press, 1999. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7sxzs. Accessed 8 Oct. 2020.

Sandberg, Sheryl, and Nell Scovell. *Lean in: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead.* Alfred A. Knopf, 2019.

Scott, B. R., 2011, *Capitalism. Its Origins and Evolution as a System of Governance,* New York: Springer.

Shoup, Carl S. "TAXATION AND FISCAL POLICY." *Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Taxation under the Auspices of the National Tax Association*, vol. 52, 1959, pp. 186–194. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23406742. Accessed 9 Dec. 2020.

Swanson, Jacinda. "The Economy and Its Relation to Politics: Robert Dahl, Neoclassical Economics, and Democracy." *Polity*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2007, pp. 208–233. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4500273. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.

Tarrant, Shira (2006). *When Sex Became Gender.* New York: Routledge.

Zerilli, Linda M. G. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Judgment." *Signs*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 295–317. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/591090. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.