"The largest growing economic force in the world isn’t China or India -- it’s women. The earning power of women globally is expected to reach $18 trillion by 2014 -- a $5 trillion rise for current income, according to World Bank estimates. That is more than twice the estimated 2014 GDP of China and India combined" (Voigt 2009)

The above quote from a recent article posted on CNN.com, titled “Women: Saviors of the world economy?” reflects heightened attention to both the earning power and spending power of today’s women. Economists, product designers, and marketers are turning to women as the consumers who can perpetuate capitalist growth in this post-economic crisis moment. The FemmeDen, a group of women researchers who focus on the gendered implications of product design, write in one of their online publications, “Why is gender important? Women’s continuing evolution combined with their increasing buying power has created an explosive business opportunity in the consumer products industry.” They then point out that women in the U.S., though once “powerless,” are now “powerful,” in that they buy or influence eighty percent of consumer decisions (FemmeDen 2009a).

This heightened attention to U.S. women’s purchasing power comes at a time when discourses that link women’s independence to consumption abound in popular culture. Today’s television line-up, heavy in “reality” programming focused on celebrities and wealthy women, serves this intersection to millions of viewers on an everyday basis. Wealth and the ability to consume are routinely celebrated and held up as exemplars of the most current iteration of the American Dream, which today is illustrated as a lifestyle display rather than a particular set of achievements. Shows such as MTV’s The Hills and The City, Bravo’s Real Housewives franchise (which now includes New York, New Jersey, and Atlanta, in addition to the original: Orange County), and E! Entertainment’s Keeping up with the Kardashians and Kourtney & Khloé Take Miami emphasize a celebrity lifestyle and all the consumer trappings that come with it.

These shows are not unique or particularly new. This trend has grown over the last decade, and has included shows such as Rich Girls, The Gastineau Girls, The Osbournes, Newlyweds, Run’s House, My Super Sweet Sixteen, MTV Cribs, Life in the Fab Lane, Princes of Malibu, Laguna Beach: The Real OC, Newport Beach: The Real OC, So NoTorIous, Inn Love with Tori and Dean, and Hogan Knows Best. Although popular entertainment media has historically represented and focused on the lives of men, now women’s lives can be found at the front and center as stars of a narrative in which they are modern day “heroes of consumption” (Lowenthal 1961).
In an age in which women’s independence and achievement are often framed by and articulated through consumer discourses and practices, what does this mean for the future of feminism and feminist identities? We wonder about such consequences precisely because the consumer lifestyle, as the cultural logic of capitalism, is a fundamentally un-feminist thing. The epistemological foundation of feminism and feminist identity historically has been the eradication of inequalities. Thus, feminism is diametrically opposed to consumer practices which support the dominance of global capitalism: a system which thrives on the exploitation of labor, theft of resources, and facilitates vast accumulation of wealth among a tiny percentage of global elite, while simultaneously impoverishing the majority of the world’s population. Further, since consuming is a singular act of identity formation and expression, we question whether women’s empowerment through consumption at the individual level undermines the possibility of gendered social change at the collective level. In responding to these questions in this essay we critically interrogate the intersection of discourses of women’s independence with discourses and practices of consumption, with an eye for contemporary attitudes toward and definitions of feminism.

The concept of women’s independence in the United States has long been tied to discourses about wealth, and the accumulation of material goods and wealth, primarily due to the dominance of patriarchal hierarchy in our society. The gendered control of wealth has its roots in the gendered division of labor that emerged in the context of early hunter-gatherer societies. During this context, women cared for children due to the biological reality of breast-feeding. As nomadic hunter-gatherer societies transitioned into settled, agrarian communities, the established familial division of labor sustained and became taken for granted as social constructions of gender and the ideology of patriarchy emerged and intersected. In settled societies the concept of property was born and as men were expected to handle familial business outside of the home, they were granted the title of property owners and wealth managers, and thus were able to accrue status unavailable to women (Lorber 1994). In these circumstances women were economically disenfranchised, which set the stage for the development of the modern world in the capitalist context.

Within this patriarchal context women were forced into a model of economic dependence on men. Even in the case of women who worked outside of the home, they could not own property, and on this basis were excluded from the political franchise as well. Thus, it makes sense that early critiques of gendered power relations and gender roles focused on women’s economic disenfranchisement and the prohibition on women working outside of the home (Gilman 1998; Woolf 1998). Such critiques reflected the experiences of upper class white women. Poor women, often women of color, have historically been required to work outside of the home in order to support themselves and their families, confined primarily to domestic and service sectors. Women employed in the paid workforce beyond these sectors is, broadly speaking, an achievement of feminism. However, it is also a function of increased production under industrialization and later phases of capitalism. What is often framed as an achievement of the women’s movement must also be recognized as a condition both required for and stimulated by growth of capitalist production.

The invention of the television heightened the practice of product advertising, and as television spread throughout U.S. households during the 1950s and 1960s, a consumer society became the norm (Marcuse 1964). Many scholars have argued since this time that the act of consuming, or more specifically, of acquiring goods, is a primary medium for crafting and expressing identity and group affiliation (Baudrillard 1981; Jameson 2000; Dunn 1998). Sociologically speaking, identity formation is generally understood as a social process that necessarily unfolds in relation to other individuals and groups that exist in the world (West & Zimmerman 1987; Taylor 1989). Thus, consuming goods allows for one to chart an identity based on appearance and lifestyle which both illustrates personal distinction from and sameness to others (Lasch 1979; Bourdieu 1984).

In the patriarchal model that has dominated normative conceptualizations of family during the twentieth-century in the U.S., women, in the roles of wife and mother, have been charged as managing daily household functioning, which includes shopping for themselves as well as for their family. Women historically have been consumer-in-chief in this dominant model. This trend continues today, as recent research shows that women either decide or influence eighty percent of purchasing decisions for goods or services (FemmeDen 2009a). Advertisers long ago recognized the significance of the patriarchal model and targeted product advertising to women for a multitude of products. Historically speaking, advertising targeted to women has tended to emphasize a woman’s role as caretaker of a husband or family (in the case of household appliances, food and beverage, and cleaning products, for instance), or as an unmarried person seeking to land a man (as with beauty products and clothing).
Niche marketing trends that rely on gender tropes continue today, but of course have evolved as norms and conceptions of gender have. The older model of advertising to women as caretakers still exists, but newer models have emerged. Recognizing the gains of the feminist movement throughout the middle and latter half of the twentieth-century, advertising today interpellates women as strong, independent decision makers and money makers, and as sexually driven beings. These trends interact with another key trope deployed by advertising: that consuming allows one to express and articulate one’s individuality. Thus, a trend that we see in today’s advertising, and in popular discourse in society more generally, is that women are independent social actors who express their identities and independence through consumption.

What we find troubling about this trend is that the notion of women’s independence, as articulated in this particular way, is premised on participation in the system of global capitalism, as opposed to aligned with feminist epistemologies of equality. This situation today is far removed from Virgina Woolf’s plea for a “room of [her] own,” in that it is not about having freedom from patriarchal control in society, it is about having the freedom and power to acquire the goods that one wants in service of projecting an independent image and lifestyle. Problematically, for most women consumers today, as with most consumers of any gender, consumption is hardly an act of empowerment, but rather an act that creates debt and further binds one to the exploitative system of global capitalism and finance. This is represented and perpetuated in part due to widespread attention in popular culture today to celebrity lifestyle. Its luxurious and expensive trappings fuel the consumer desire for goods, both expensive and cheap (see the vast array of “knock-offs” available today).

The trend of expressing independence through consumption, coupled with the popular notion that today’s U. S. is a gender-neutral space wherein feminism is equated with man-hating renders feminism irrelevant or unnecessary. However, the increase in representations of women expressing independence through consumption has generated new discourses and representations that conflate independence and consumption. Indeed, in the spirit of ensuring feminism’s relevance to a new generation of women, third wave feminists have argued that contemporary feminism is about “judgment free pleasure.” To these feminists, such pleasures include shopping at retail stores such as Calvin Klein, without the guilt that previous generations of feminists often felt if shopping or otherwise supporting patriarchal businesses or exploitative consumer goods (Richards & Baumgardner 2000). Contemporary marketers and advertisers are well aware of the trend conflating women’s independence and consumerism, and capitalize on it. A recent study conducted by Boston Consulting Group focuses exclusively on “what women want,” in an effort to redirect advertising so that it is most appealing to today’s contemporary American woman (with the caveat, from these authors, that the contemporary American woman projected by this study is white and middle or upper class) (Mead 2009). This renewed attention to women’s consumer desires also extends to the realm of product design, as illustrated by the work of the FemmeDen. Their publications focus on the things that make women distinct from male consumers, ranging from body-shape to brain size and chemistry, and how these differences should be addressed by product designers and marketers in order to better design for and market to women (FemmeDen 2009a; 2009b).

This renewed interest in marketing to women coincides with the rise of discourses that links women’s independence to consumption. A shining example of this conflation is the De Beers campaign for the “right hand ring” that ran nationwide in 2004. The “right hand ring” was developed as an ad campaign by De Beers to encourage women (with means) to purchase diamond rings for themselves, as opposed to, or in addition to the heteronormative tradition of men gifting diamonds to women (for purposes of engagement or otherwise). The campaign deployed a charge to empowerment, stating, “Women of the world, raise your right hand!” Other ads that ran for this campaign stated, “Your left hand says ‘we.’ Your right hand says ‘me.’ Your left hand rocks the cradle. Your right hand rules the world,” and, “Your left hand is your heart. Your right hand is your voice” (Schooley 2004). Of the empowerment themed ads, said Richard Lennox, director-in-charge of the Diamond Marketing & Advertising Group at J. Walter Thompson, “There has been enormous trade support, and, from the consumer research we’ve done, there is good evidence that we have created a concept that resonates deeply with consumers” (Bates 2004). This campaign by De Beers is a clear illustration of the intersection of discourses of women’s independence and empowerment with consumer discourses and practices. Another series of ads by Broadview Home Security (formerly Brinks) is premised on the idea that there are certain things that single women must consume if they want to be independent: home security systems which protect them from dangerous men (See “The House Party,” and “The Ex”).
What we find troubling about this trend is that when discourses of consumption and women’s independence intersect, they do so in a manner that equates independent womanhood with consumption. The conflation of women’s independence and consumerism raises important questions about the shifting nature of feminism and feminist identities. The implications for this changing terrain of feminism are exhibited in many third wave feminists’ embrace of consumerism as both a choice and a source of women’s empowerment. This is a fundamental problem for feminism, since consumerism, as the cultural logic of capitalism, is the ideological and practical means to reproducing hegemonic domination of the exploitative and oppressive system global capitalism. Although feminist identities are multi-dimensional, nuanced, and often times individualist, consumption in a capitalist context is a fundamentally un-feminist thing. Because we are in a time period during which the relevance of U.S. feminism is continually contested and undermined, we feel such discourses and representations are significant, and warrant critical sociological attention.

References


