

# The Commodification of Women’s Insecurity: How is Capitalism Exploiting Women?

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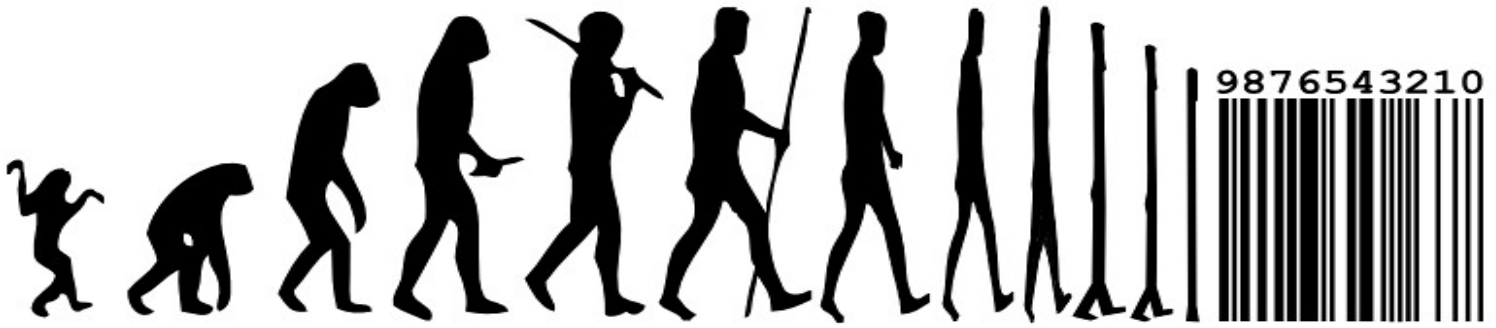
The third wave of feminism emphasizes women’s liberation of agency and individual choice in contemporary society. Exemplified by lifestyle influencers and female entrepreneurs, women are encouraged to live a life of self-fulfilment and expression (Pettersson McIntyre, 2021). However, there has been a shift in feminist discourse through the critique of ‘consumer society’ and neoliberal commodification (Chen, 2013). Theorists like Dimulescu (2015) advocate society has rebranded women's exploitation and concealed their lack of choice through beauty culture and lifestyle influencers, who preserve patriarchal control and gender inequality. Recent feminism criticises neoliberalism and consumer culture to have target insecurities for women to commodify women’s struggles. Although Pettersson McIntyre (2021) argues that beauty standards and self-expression for women in contemporary society are empowering and liberating, we must consider the possibility contemporary society is not empowering women's self-confidence and expression in the way we were led to believe. A new upsurge of feminism –known as the 4/5th wave- advocates the post-modern world appears liberating for women but truly

women are another commodity for capitalism (Daniels, 2023).

This critical reflection will evaluate how the commodification of women’s insecurity is embedded in consumer society and evaluate the new growth of feminist belief: the current market is inherently patriarchal and gendered, exploiting women’s insecurities and their struggles for capitalist benefit. I will also consider how neoliberalism and women’s active roles as prosumers contribute to the exploitation and commodification of women’s insecurities. This will be measured against the differing perspective of third-wave feminism rhetoric that the current expressions of women’s beauty and self-entrepreneurship are acts of feminism and empowerment (Pettersson McIntyre, 2021), rather than a reflection of the underlying patriarchal standards and gender disparities (Dimulescu, 2015). To finish, this critical reflection will conclude the feminist debate if the postmodern neoliberal world empowers women or if capitalism is sustaining gender disparities through the exploitation and commodification of women’s insecurities.

In post-modernity women are seen as commodities rather than individuals (Daniels,





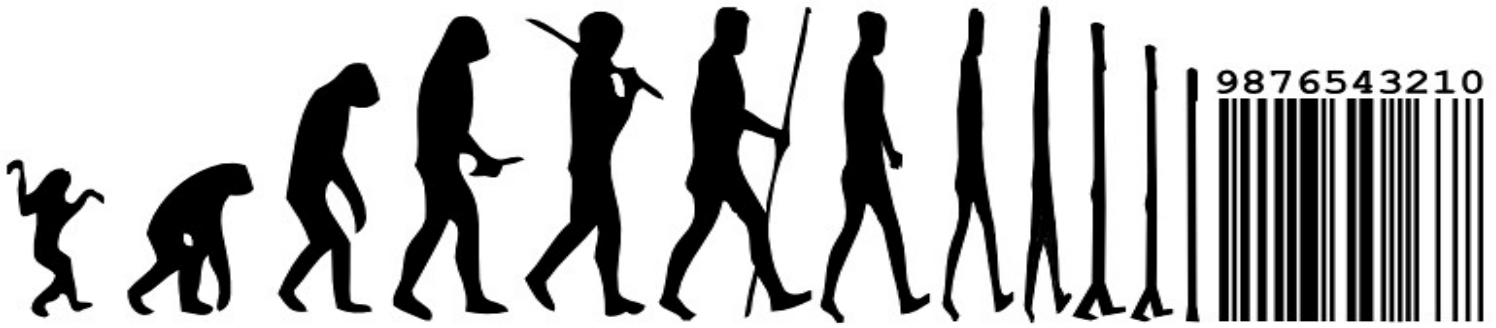
2023). Consumer culture has commodified women's bodies, lifestyles and struggles through the male gaze to profit off women's exploitation in today's patriarchal society. Alyssa Daniels (2023) accentuates women's value is determined by the male gaze- if they fit the current aesthetic dictated by male's sexual appetite society will consider them more worthy of society's attention, dehumanizing women to an object of male desire. Those unable to attain these societal standards imposed by social media and magazines are criticized and ridiculed as less feminine thus less desirable, allowing capitalism to exploit women's struggle in patriarchal society as they capitalize on those insecurities. Sarkar's (2014) article underscores a correlation between magazines and women's struggles; women who consume mainstream media have higher levels of insecurity, low self-esteem, and depression. Industries then exploit women's vulnerability by supplying females with products that will aid them in today's beauty culture, profiting from women's societal pressure to fit within the beauty ideals (Daniels, 2023).

Accordingly, consumer culture is structured by gender inequality and patriarchy, selling products for issues that are fabricated by internalized misogyny in the capitalist system. The present beauty industry and markets facilitate products that cohere to the male's

definition of femineity, authorizing a narrative that there is a singular way a woman should display themselves and such products will help achieve these misogynistic goals (Daniels, 2023). Young-Ja (2000) theorizes consumer culture and everyday commodities influence people's way of thinking and living. Hence, it can be stated women's insecurity is encouraged by consumer culture trends that influence people's lives. As commodities and product trends are implemented into people's lifestyles and routines women's insecurities are constantly mirrored by their everyday beauty products, subconsciously reminding women of the beauty standards they must live up to. Beauty culture as a form of empowerment and self-expression (Gagné and McGaughey, 2002) can be criticized by the current feminist narrative which uncovers a patriarchal structure to the beauty and commodity culture. Where the norms are ideals are fundamentally constructed by the male gaze and not female choice (Dimulescu, 2015).

Moreover, the current wave of feminism accuses the post-modern neoliberal market ideas of privatized businesses, state withdrawal and competition (Pettersson McIntyre, 2021) are what enable the exploitation and commodification of women's insecurities (Chen, 2013). The general philosophy of neoliberalism is that 'individual choice' stimulates freedom and increases the quality of the market's goods. Freedom of choice also minimizes inequalities within the system; individuals are responsible for the





decisions made (Petersson McIntyre, 2021). Nevertheless, neoliberalism is criticized for advertising the illusion of choice; those with existing economic power have more advantages and selection over the markets than others. Feminist discourse additionally critiques neoliberalism as created through patriarchal ideals. Therefore, women are constantly in subordination to men due to commodification and consumer culture that reinforce gender inequalities (Collins and Rothe, 2017). Collins and Rothe (2017) argued that the underlying nature of consumption is exploitive through the blatant gender roles and inequalities legitimized in the products and commodities sold to us.

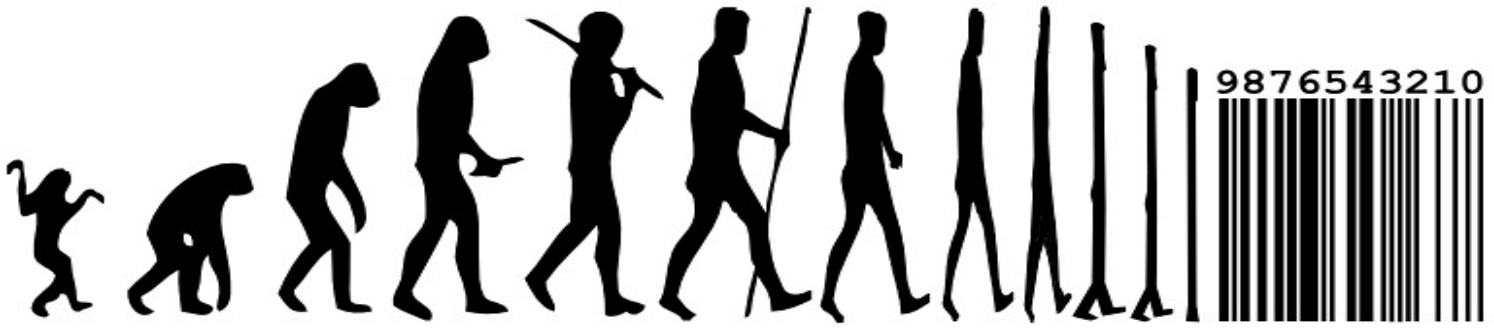
However, neoliberalism's manipulation of the consumption market goes unquestioned as the belief that everyone has individual choice and is voluntarily buying such products overpowers any objection to the gender disparities embedded in neoliberalism (Collins and Rothe, 2017). Baer (2016) notes that Angela McRobbie characterizes this surge of individualism and empowerment as the 'undoing of feminism'. Feminism is being dispositioned as it has become secondary in the neoliberal context of individualism and agency. This discussion exposes the patriarchal nature of neoliberalism. The exploitation and commodification of women is camouflaged behind the falsehood of choice, when in reality those in economic power- white heterosexual men- have the fundamental power to

manipulate consumer culture and the current market to their desires.

It has been argued that neoliberalism entitles women to more autonomy and control over their own lives and occupations. Neoliberalism encourages women's independence and freedom of choice. Individuals are free to utilize themselves –life, body, desires- to the market (Petersson McIntyre, 2021). This creates entrepreneurial self-individuals who treat their life in a business-like manner and profit from the commodification of their lifestyle, blurring the lines between personal life and work. Post-feminism characterizes the entrepreneurial self as empowering; women can make choices out of self-interest (Petersson McIntyre, 2021). In this perspective, women are not seen as exploited but empowered by neoliberal regimes; they have authority over their lives and work. Therefore, the commodification of women's insecurities is not capitalized on but seen as entrepreneurship, free will and empowering.

The feminist criticism of capitalism rebuttals such belief that self-entrepreneurship permits women's independence, advocating capitalism has systematically manipulated women to take part in their exploitation and commodification (Chen, 2013). Women are active performers in consumer culture, where the preservation of patriarchal power and gender disparities are established by their participation in the gender-biased consumer culture (Collins and





Rothe, 2017). Ideas of women's liberation of choice are discredited as contemporary feminism is now aware women are embedded within the system of exploitation and commodification as prosumers. Alvin Toffler (1980, cited in Kotler 2010, p. 51) coined the term Prosumer as individuals who -within their consumptions- provide their service and goods for such commodities in the marketplace, i.e., influencers and lifestyle bloggers. Charitsis (2016) further argues that due to social media the market has widened its audience.

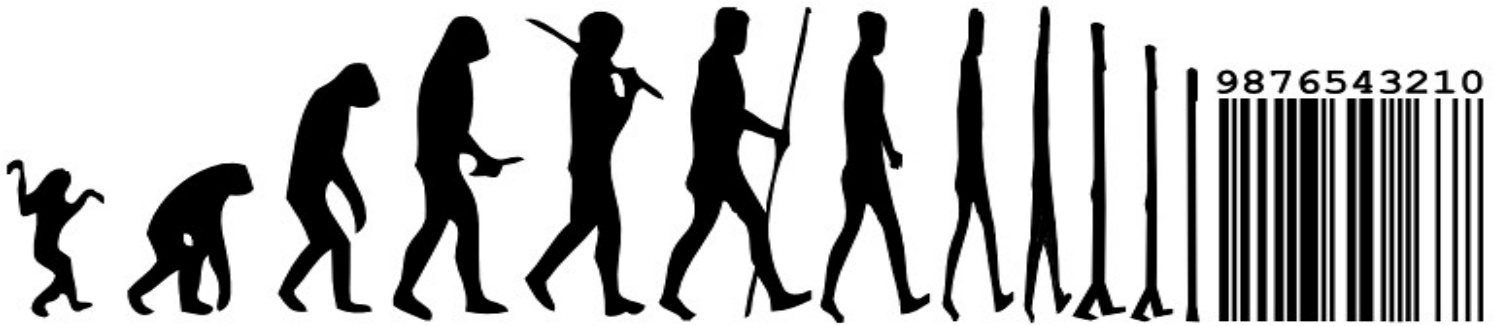
Consequently, industries have gone from advertising to consumers to utilizing consumers within their marketing strategies as prosumers. Nevertheless, prosumers are criticized by feminism as a mechanism of control for capitalists to push gendered narratives into the market sphere (Charitsis, 2016), exploiting women by reinforcing patriarchal power through their participation in capitalism gender structures. Girl Prosumers are heavily involved in the beauty culture (Pettersson McIntyre, 2021), seen to commodify and shape their bodies and lifestyle to their preference. Nevertheless, Sumita Sarkar (2014) discusses much of commodification comes from the male gaze. Sarkar found influencers and celebrities strive to fit unrealistic images promoted in mass media of 'thin' women. Thus, consumers contribute to these unhealthy ideals as capitalists exploit and utilize women who reinforce and strive for these unrealistic ideals to establish gender inequalities. Therefore, capitalism manipulates women into becoming

a part of the system of oppression. Though it may appear women are given control over their lives through self-entrepreneurship, in reality, they have become a tool for capitalism to further advance power imbalances in the patriarchal system.

In closing, contemporary society is not liberating women's choices as third-wave feminism claims. In the feminist critique, capitalism is covertly upholding patriarchal power imbalances and gender inequalities under the disguise of neoliberal autonomy, permitting women to believe their choices are decided by free will. In actuality, women's consumer decisions are dictated by the male gaze that has subconsciously been implanted in women's way of thinking through capitalist exploitation (Daniels, 2023). Moreover, neoliberal marketing strategies allow gender disparities to thrive; the disguise of agency and free choice allows those in power (white upper-class men) to establish gender structures within capitalism without question (Chen, 2013). Third-wave feminist perceives that the commodification of women and self-entrepreneurship is a personal choice of empowerment and control over their life (Pettersson McIntyre, 2021).

Nonetheless, a new surge of critical feminists has found consumer culture is systematically structured by patriarchal power. Women have unknowingly bought into commodities and commodified themselves under patriarchal standards that are embedded in capitalist and consumer culture (Dimulescu, 2015). Capitalism further exploits women by





manipulating them into the system as prosumers, subconsciously normalizing unrealistic beauty ideals through female participation in beauty culture. Consequently, the exploitation and commodification of women's insecurities are embedded into the capitalist system. Patriarchal capitalism has found new modes of exploitation through neoliberal strategies, commodification of women's insecurity and women as prosumers to limit women's freedom while profiting off their struggles.

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