Consuming Modernity

Gendered Behaviour and Consumerism before the Baby Boom
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Between 1919 and 1945, residents of Western countries faced tremendous cultural, social, economic, and political change. The economic expansion of the post-war period was combined with new techniques in advertising, and a concomitant growth of a new culture of consumption, which had begun well before 1914, gained speed in the 1920s and then faced significant modification during the Great Depression. Along with this accelerating consumerism, the mobilization of citizenry during the Great War forced a reconsideration of gendered social roles, with the result that, in the interwar period, ideas of womanhood (and manhood) challenged a status quo that was already in flux. The intersection of the changes in gender roles and the growth of mass consumption presented new challenges and opportunities. Images of the New Woman infiltrated and at times drove advertising strategies. Ideas of the importance of the consumer, and the need to nurture both male and female buying habits, expanded the reach and altered the assumptions of advertisers. At the same time, the image of the female body became even more clearly contested terrain. Progressive reformers and everyday people resisted what they saw as a damaging and socially corruptive sexualization of the female form. But to little avail: by the end of this interwar period, it is fair to say that their world had, in the words of W.B. Yeats, “all changed, changed utterly.” And (to extend the quotation), in some ways “a terrible beauty was born.”

The essays in this collection examine key themes in the intersection of modernity and gender, framed by the expansion of consumer culture in the decades bookmarked by the two world wars. The book itself emerges from a session titled “Between Fantasy and Reality: Changing Gendered Behaviours...
and Consumerism in North America and Britain, 1920s-1940s” at the American Historical Association Pacific Coast Branch annual meeting, held in 2007 at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. The editors, as well as the co-chair of the panel, Penny Tinkler of Manchester University, have researched the impact of marketing and regulation on alcohol and tobacco consumption in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. The interwar years proved pivotal in naturalizing those behaviours across gender and class. Our call for papers for the panel produced an exceptionally varied host of subjects, many of which are presented in this collection.

Although consumption was not new in the twentieth century, and people in every era have probably called themselves “modern,” the interwar period was arguably a time of significant social, political, and cultural change. The growth of the professional advertising industry, fuelled by the priorities of expanding market capitalism, harnessed archetypes and stereotypes of idealized consumers to push the agendas of clients. Some of the most common images were gendered, usually female. The modern woman, representing a new independence and non-traditional lifestyle, captured the imagination of both advertising executives and consumers alike. This process was roughly coincidental with the rise of mass consumer culture, with the need for more, new, and technologically advanced products, leading to a changed relationship between the citizen and the capitalist market. Seduced by the images and the possibilities, citizenship was about consumption, and the important role of the consumer her- or himself affected the way in which politicians defined key issues during Depression-era election campaigns. This was not simply something foisted on the people by free-market capitalism. Within this changing market, governments and regulators sought to harness or control the way that citizens consumed for broader nationally significant ends (indeed, the need to “get out there and spend” as a form of nationalistic imperative was reiterated after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and in subsequent economic crises).

This work contributes to a growing literature on the histories of consumption, gender, and ideas of modernity. Consumer culture and gender have been the focus of several important collections, with essays spanning several centuries. Although it is not specifically concerned with consumption, the collection The Modern Girl around the World (2008) by the research group of the same name, includes numerous essays that suggest an inevitable intersection of consumerism with gender and modernity in the twentieth century. Covering roughly the same period as this current collection, a special issue of NWSA Journal (“Gender and Modernism between the Wars, 1918-1939”) presents essays that consider the literary representations of gender in several countries.
and diverse political contexts between the two world wars. Here the emphasis is on presentation and re-presentation of gender in often tumultuous and transformative political situations, resulting in shifting discourses and revised self-identities.6 The “sense of the self” has become intricately intertwined with consumerism, and the power of consumerism to define self-identity has been explored in detail by Gary Cross. Though not focusing specifically on gendered identities, Cross illustrates how modern capitalism materially and discursively restructured the individual’s sense of self-worth. Demonstrating that modernity did not lead to more leisure, he shows that consumer culture emerged from a prioritization of consumption of goods, rather than from “wasting” time with leisure.7 As Jennifer Scanlon notes in her introduction to The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader, researchers have viewed consumer culture from the perspective that it represented the “insidious victimization” of individuals but have also claimed that consumer culture “can be liberating.”8 In the examinations of gender and modernity, and consumerism and modernity, this rearrangement of identities in the expansion of consumer culture is a central concern.

We can learn much from studies that look beyond the traditional Anglo-American nexus. Consuming Modernity is the first collection to combine a Canadian focus with an international perspective that illuminates the similarities as well as differences of early twentieth-century modernization across continents, languages, and political structures. Except for Chapter 1, all of the chapters focus on consumerism and gender. That exception (Bettina Liverant’s study of the mid-Depression federal election) looks at the centrality of consumerism in the rhetoric of national politics, underlying how consumerism had become such a dominant discourse, shaping identities and justifying actions, in modern society. In many ways, the exceptions to some of the dominant patterns help us prove the rule. So, the multinational narratives and analyses presented by essays from countries outside Britain, Canada, and the United States provide some valuable contrasts, allowing us to see how the lure of “Western” culture was consumed, rejected, or modulated to fit national and/or cultural contexts. After all, that culture was decidedly white, middle class, and English speaking. Even within Canada, such a cultural behemoth could be complicated by cultural and linguistic differences.

The international perspective also encourages us to reflect on the concept of modernity itself, since it has been used to define various aspects of twentieth-century life. As several authors have noted, some research on “modernity” often end up equating the term with “Western,” “developed,” or “ahead” (versus “catching up”).9 This perspective contains an inherent hierarchical and ethnocentric bias. This issue becomes more complicated when one begins to look at mass
consumer culture, where the notion of a “developed” world stands in stark contrast to the less-, under-, or undeveloped countries in which the economic situation does not facilitate such blatant consumer cultures. Moreover, considering gender in modernity leads in potentially contradictory directions; as Rita Felski observes in *The Gender of Modernity*, modernity may be presented as “a purposefully striving masculinity” or a “fetishized, libidinized and commodified femininity.”¹⁰ In her introduction to the *NWSA Journal* special issue on gender and modernism between the wars, Margaret McFadden presents her idea of “the modern” as political – “the modern of socialist politics and Depression economics.” Elsewhere she acknowledges that the terms “modern” and “modernity” often change depending on disciplinary traditions.¹¹ Harvie Ferguson has argued that the best way to understand modernity is to see it as a mindset in which genuine experience replaces experience that is mediated by “extra-empirical reality.” In premodern times, then, all experience was given meaning through the interpretation of the church or other elite institution. According to Ferguson, “For the modern world, there is no higher authority than experience.”¹²

These definitions of modernity demonstrate the range of meanings for, and the complex nature of, the term. If we assume that “modern” is just a trope for “developed,” we could argue that not only is our perspective of modernism ethnocentric, but also that “modern consumer culture” is potentially redundant. Could consumer culture exist in an “undeveloped” society? Similarly, if we apply Ferguson’s definition of modernity, consumerism may be considered the quintessential modern activity, since consumption is a real, almost visceral, experience. At the same time, however, given that consumerism is mediated by advertising, which gives meaning to consumption, we could argue that modern consumer culture replaces one form of mediated experience (such as that facilitated by the church, for example) with another (consumerism given meaning by advertising). Due to the wide range of ideas around modernity, the editors of this collection have imposed no restrictions on its meaning apart from the chronological positioning of the chapters themselves. The essays in this collection explore the various “modernities” that consumed and were consumed in the interwar period. Here modernity cannot be distilled to one definition. The “modern” held diverse cultural, economic, and political meanings in each of the contexts under examination.

Although the modern consumer culture examined by all the chapters in this book was harnessed by the capitalist market, we would be mistaken in imagining that the stories of consumerism and modernity are all about capitalism dominating the individual; the influences were multi-directional. Capitalism certainly may be considered the most powerful catalyst of this change, and
individuals were drawn to the self- and lifestyle-improving arguments of product advertisements, but a more nuanced consumption was going on. As noted earlier, consumer culture could be liberating. Advertisements themselves were consumed, when the targets of their fantastic promises, such as the characters of Mary Quayle Innis’s short stories, consumed the dream, even though they could rarely afford the products. Governments and regulators sought to push back or embrace the expansive appeal of mass culture. Consumerism became intertwined with national identity. In some places, such as Weimar Germany, fears of the consumption of foreign, corrupt culture led citizen regulators to clamp down. In Argentina and Mexico, the consumerist modernity became a fundamental part of national identity. Reconfiguring gender identity and the modern consuming citizen created a multi-faceted gem, or a many-headed beast, however one chose to view it.

The expansion of mass-market capitalism altered the relationship between citizens and consumption, a link that was forged and refined by the art of advertising. Here was an industry that developed – perhaps transmogrified might be a better word – into the art of convincing the individual not only of a need for a product’s material utility, but of its importance to the consumer’s self-perception. In Chapters 3 and 4, Kristin Hall and Denyse Baillargeon each explore how advertising to women drew on their anxieties as mothers. Lysol Disinfectant would ensure a healthy family; medical advertising more broadly reinscribed gendered discourses of a woman’s dependence and simultaneously her responsibility for the health of her family. In Chapter 2, Tracy Penny Light illustrates how medical authority was sought to reiterate this influential discourse, using science to convince women to buy products that would best protect the home.

The power of the consumerist discourse is demonstrated well in the Canadian federal election of 1935, when each political party (some newly formed) sought to assert its interpretation of how best to encourage consumption. As Bettina Liverant illustrates in Chapter 1, politicians argued that the Depression was not a problem of production, but one of consumption. It was up to the political leadership to ignite the will to spend, and the ability to do so. Most economic solutions, then as now, involved convincing citizens to do their patriotic duty: spend money to support national capitalistic enterprise. Liverant’s description of the power of consumerism as an economic ideal on which each political party could imprint its own strategic vision, and a discursive reconstruction of what it meant to be a modern citizen, helps to inform the perspectives of other chapters. She shows us that consumerism was not just something pushed on individuals by the private capitalist market; it pervaded many if not all aspects of “modern” life.
In many advertisements and even entire marketing campaigns, the female body became a central discursive trope. The women who were used to sell products were not just traditional mothers or housewives, who might have some influence in the purchasing of the product. Rather, women's bodies became metaphorically consumed by the gaze of the potential purchaser. In Chapter 9, Jane Nicholas demonstrates that advertising allowed for a “re-enchantment” of consumer goods that was reflexive; women looked at images of the idealized woman and scrutinized their non-ideal selves. The power of ads expanded far beyond the market for their products; in Chapter 13, Donica Belisle illustrates how consumerism fuelled fantasies for poor women during the 1920s and 1930s, who dreamt of living the fabulous lifestyles advertised as a way of escaping, however temporarily, the reality of their own lives.

This process of consumption was not simply a paternalistic imposition of male values on women. As several authors demonstrate, women were asserting their new roles and visibility in society, opening themselves up, often willingly, to the new public role. The “modern woman” was perceived as independent, intelligent, and socially active. Characterized in the stereotype of the flapper, with her bobbed hair, short skirts, and androgynous physical form, this modern woman defied social expectations, asserting her independence against traditional roles that would push her back into the home and motherhood. Referring to Marshall Berman’s All That Is Solid Melts into Air, Rita Felski shows that modernity can be considered a masculine drive and push for expansion, contrasted with a traditionalism and conservatism that is gendered female. Felski discusses how the feminist critique of this characterization of modernity as male “carries with it the seeds of domination ... and ... fear of subjugation.”14 As essays in this collection reveal, modernity combined with consumerism could be liberating to women, who had been repressed by a male-centred traditionalism. Nevertheless, as several critics have shown, and as several authors in this collection also note, the stereotype of the modern woman (or “modern girl”) is problematic, bourgeois, and not universal.15

The modern woman had her male counterpart – the damaged man – and both stereotypes were seen as threats to traditional society. Whereas the modern woman was newly independent, the damaged man, most often associated with the psychologically compromised returned soldier, represented an equally socially troublesome stereotype. The former was strong, independent, and resilient; she challenged traditional values and norms, and she was unwilling to be shoehorned into the role of wife and mother. The latter was weak, dependent, and broken, unable to fulfill his role as husband and breadwinner.
Unsurprisingly, then, it was the modern woman whose body graced the pages of print advertising across the Western world. She was both consumed and a consumer: living the good life, driving the best car, wearing the best clothes. As an idealized image, manipulated by the increasingly professionalized advertising industry, the modern woman became a type to which actual women had to conform. Female athletes, as both Fiona Skillen and Marilyn Morgan demonstrate in Chapters 6 and 7, were consumed, constrained, and eroticized under the gaze of the market. Thus, the female athlete was adulated as long as she behaved herself; the strong female swimmers, some of whom bested men at their sport, fuelled an expanded swimsuit industry and, ironically, led to the swimsuit phase of beauty pageants. Independence and self-actualization became just two more forms of dependence and submission, as real women found themselves craving that lifestyle. Similarly, Devon Atchison's Chapter 8 study of suntanning, a new fashion statement in the 1920s, explores the expansion of the cosmetic industry, the swimsuit industry, and the consumption of the exposed female form. In the arena of mass-market capitalism, the modern woman's lifestyle was usually unrealizable to most women, but it was not inaccessible. The power of the mass market was its ability to keep these dreams alive, just out of reach, to drive the market forward.

The modern woman was not solely a white Anglo-American construct. In Chapter 5, De Anna J. Reese examines the career of African American entrepreneur Annie Turnbo Malone, for whom consumerism facilitated entrepreneurial success and a redefinition of the “new black woman.” As Susanne Eineigel and Cecilia Tossounian show in Chapters 10 and 11, Latin American women also sought to challenge traditional values, and in doing so, they pushed against a monolithic cultural resistance. This opposition, though partly resting in the power of the Catholic Church, was also nationalistic; American movies and culture were perceived as fundamentally corrosive and damaging to the nation. This resistance in non-Anglo-American societies to the corrupt images of mass media is also shown by Kara Ritzheimer, who argues in Chapter 12 that movie censorship in the German city of Heidelberg sought to restrict the types of images and themes that were perceived as violations of decency and as potentially undermining the foundations of stable social life.

Several common themes run throughout this book: the role of advertising in driving the mass market; how the images of women as successful, desirable, and virtuous were increasingly shaped by advertising and mass media; and the evolving role of women as consumers and consumed. Obviously, there remained the contradictions between the expansion of the market, which sold dreams of
independence, and the ongoing inability of the financially and socially marginalized to realize those dreams. This bait and switch, of course, is fundamental to advertising, whose promise of permanent physical or emotional satisfaction is ephemeral and unattainable. Yet its impact, along with that of mass media, has been to provide universally recognized, and constantly changing, parameters to a modernity, or various modernities, that can never be obtained yet need constantly to be consumed.

Notes
6 “Special Issue: Gender and Modernism between the Wars, 1918-1939,” NWSA Journal 15, 3 (Fall 2003).
7 Cross, An All-Consuming Century.
9 Alys Weinbaum et al., “The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device: Collaboration, Connective Comparison, Multidirectional Citation,” in Weinbaum et al., Modern Girl around the World, 7-8.
12 Harvie Ferguson, Modernity and Subjectivity: Body, Soul, Spirit (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 2-3. Ferguson’s consideration of the meaning of modernity ranges beyond the interwar scope of our collection, but his work is valuable for conceptually situating our studies and informing our understanding of how modernity can be interpreted.
13 For advertising in America, see Marchand, Advertising the American Dream; Lears, Fables of Abundance; Daniel Delis Hill, Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002). For Canada, see Russell Johnston, Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), though this study ends around 1930.
14 Felski, Gender of Modernity, 2.
15 An extensive analysis of the meaning of the “modern woman” and the contrast with the “modern girl” can be found in the introduction to Weinbaum et al., Modern Girl around the World.