



# The Influence of FEMALE's Awakening Consciousness on Consumer Culture

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**Abstract.** Since the post-modern era, with the rapid development of the world economy and the spread of diversified ideas, feminism has attracted increasingly more attention from the public. Meanwhile, various women have the ability to use their judgement to make decisions by themselves instead of staying in domestic areas. In the field of consumer culture, women play an important role and their cultural significance is affected by the improvement of women's self-awareness. Thus, scholars combined theories of symbolic consumption and social gender to illuminate women's roles in consumer culture which change according to the needs of the times. Since the mechanisms that shape women's consumer culture include production and media, feminine consciousness has also arisen in these cultural mechanisms since the post-modern era.

**Keywords:** Feminism · Symbolic consumption · Customer culture · Female consciousness

## 1 Introduction

The consumer society has been a widely debated topic in academic circles. Due to the changing times, consumer culture is becoming increasingly more diverse, and much interdisciplinary research has been conducted, especially between consumption and feminism. This paper divides current research into two parts. The first part is about the role of feminine consciousness on the construction of female self-awakening in consumer culture, which is created by consumption according to a wide range of feminist and consumerist studies. It expresses the symbol and value systems produced in a certain era. Feminine consciousness is a product of women's self-awakening, which is particularly evident in consumer culture. Therefore, many scholars noticed the role of feminine consciousness in consumer culture and concluded that the study of feminine consciousness and consumer culture is inseparable from the analysis of social structure. Second, in a patriarchal society there are still stereotypes about female consumer culture. Its characteristics change with the social context and social structure. Based on symbolic consumption theory, scholars focused on female consumer culture in different periods. They observed that female consumer culture is endowed with meaning because of the needs of the social environment, which includes national policies, economic construction, media environment, etc. This endowment of meaning is essentially a result of social construction.

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## 2 Female Consumer Culture

### 2.1 Female Self-construction in Consumer Culture

Early in the 1960s, Baudrillard had stated that “consumption is a constraint, a morality, an institution. It is entirely a value system” [1]. Based on his theory, scholars who study women’s consumer culture believed that the characteristics of women’s consumption are the result of social construction. The emergence and development of women’s consciousness are driven by the need of the social environment. However, the change in the concept of consumer culture influenced by the social environment essentially requires the support of collective ideological consistency. That is to say, women’s self-identity in consumption plays a huge role in the transformation of consumer culture. It is generally accepted in the academic community that the image of women in consumption depends not on the level of their own consumption power, but on the proxy consumption they assume in the household [2].

Bellamy’s theoretical framework linking dependence and independence had a strong influence on the field of consumption, and it was cited by much literature to analyse the social significance of women’s consumption. As Bellamy said, production is a civic responsibility rather than the source of one’s right to consume [2]. Women’s right to consume has become distinct from any producer’s status and is primarily rooted in their status as wives or daughters. In the historical context, not only has the traditional social environment caused the marginalization of women, but women have also implicitly considered themselves to be subordinate in the concept of consumption. This actually runs counter to the social perception that women are the main consumer power. This phenomenon is caused by the differences in the concepts used by men and women in constructing their self-identity. Men tend to develop an independent self-identity, emphasizing individualism and autonomy; women develop an interdependent identity, focusing more on emotional dependence and building an intimate connection [2]. Gilman argued that women are marginalized not because they are women, but because they are female consumers. Women’s self-consciousness built on the emotional approval of others creates their self-misunderstanding in consumer culture [3]. The statement that “shopping is a woman’s nature” also blurs the position of women in a consumer society, where women’s self-identity is presented in the form of “consumption”, but the purpose of their consumption is not based on their own needs. In other words, consumer society assigns women the role of consumers, which is reflected only in the process of consumption or in specific behaviours that are separate from production [3].

### 2.2 Feminine Consciousness in Production and Consumption

Current research also looks into the construction of women’s consciousness, mostly based on the exploration of women’s position in society. Research on female consciousness is more oriented towards making judgments about women’s discourse at the political level, while studies about women’s consciousness at the economic and cultural levels of consumer culture present a hollow state of thinking.

The interpretation of female discourse is based on gender discourse. It refers to the way in which women express their gender status, gender relations and gender consciousness. Scholars in different research fields put different emphasis on female discourse.

There is an emphasis on the body politics of the consumer era and gender relations in the context of consumer culture [4]. Feminists engaged in cultural and literary studies often tend to underestimate or ignore the material context of production. It is a crude economic and reductionist approach that is incongruous with the level of women's general desire for consumer goods [5]. Relevant research has always focused on analysing or critiquing the impact of women's sense of self from a gendered social perspective. Scholars emphasized that women should have the same voice as men in order to completely change the consumer culture environment created by the patriarchal society. Women's values in the consumer society are no longer functional consumers or limited to specific consumer behaviours [6]. Scholars must notice the importance of the battle for voice to change the status of women.

However, to change social value orientation towards women's consumer roles, it is not sufficient to consider the socio-cultural value of women in the larger cultural context. Many studies on consumer culture have mostly considered the materials, like fashion, film, and television, women's bodies, and their social gender [3]. The differences in the self-identity of women at different social levels are hardly mentioned. The reason for it is the shortcomings of Baudrillard's theory that they cited. Although Baudrillard's theory of consumer society sharply criticizes many areas of contemporary society, the abstract nature and the superficiality of this theory make it too one-sided and lead to the phenomenon that the explanation of symbol consumption does not effectively contribute to the solution of real social problems [6].

Horace Kallen pointed out, "the easiest way to marginalize producers is to feminize them, while the best way to establish consumers as key identities is to masculinize them". Consumers were neither those who "went shopping" nor producers who created wealth [4] Kallen's theory is highly controversial among academics. He presented the position of women in production and consumption through a gendered theory. Essentially, it still places women from the perspective of a male-dominated society and discusses their role positioning with strong gender overtones. It is an effective means of reconnecting consumption and production under the influence of the modern market economy. Others believed that this solution will only reinforce traditional notions of consumer culture. It will not only be detrimental to the integration of women's consciousness in consumer culture but also make women's self-identity more dependent on emotional ties, which defeats the original purpose of awakening women's consciousness [2].

### **3 The Development of Female Consumer Culture**

#### **3.1 Stereotypes of Females in Consumer Culture**

As mentioned above, Western consumer society theory laid the foundation for the exploration of women's consciousness and status at the consumer level. From the general completion of industrialization and modernization in Western societies to the beginning of the era of post-modern societies, consumerism has become the main expression of consumer culture. This phenomenon indicates that awareness of consumption no longer stays in the aspect of object. Some academics found that consumers use the goods imbued with cultural meaning to present different categories of culture, develop certain life values, construct self-concepts, and witness and mark social changes [7]. Consumption

plays an important role as a cultural phenomenon, especially symbolic consumption. Baudrillard's "symbolic consumption" argues that in the process of consumption, consumers enjoy not only the products themselves but also the beauty, class, mood, and atmosphere symbolized by these products. According to him, society is a consumption system manipulated by symbols and that symbolic consumption has become the focus of people's consumption [6]. Bourdieu's study of cultural consumption, on the other hand, makes the symbolic nature of the modern idea of consumer culture increasingly salient [2]. Regarding the explanation of symbolic consumption, some scholars have proposed that Bourdieu's perspective is a modern inheritance of symbolic consumption that has existed for a long time [8]. It is an inevitable manifestation of consumer culture in the stage of social development, abandoning the narrowness of use-value consumption. It has a certain social significance.

However, the cultural perceptions infused in consumption will vary depending on the socio-historical context. Beauvoir revealed the constructive relationship of gender conceptualization in *The Second Sex*. A theoretical concept that has contributed greatly to the development of feminist studies [9]. In the Chinese academic community, scholars have cited gender theories to illustrate the significance of the influence of female consciousness on consumer culture. For example, in the early days of the founding of China, due to the needs of the country, the government advocated that women should also take up social responsibilities, get out of the house, and participate in social work as men do. This indicates that women were needed by society as a human resource, so a discourse that promoted women's integration into society and socio-economic development was needed to promote consumption. Slogans, like "a woman can hold up half the sky", and "both men and women are the same", indicated the social context [10]. Although in this period, feminism was just a tool of national governance, it had a huge impact on the original traditional concept of consumer culture, because in the traditional discourse, women's identity and their consumer significance were based on the cultural perceptions and institutional levels formed in a patriarchal society. After the reform and opening up in China, the country's economy and culture developed rapidly and the institutional guarantee of women's rights has also been improved.

Nevertheless, research interest in women's consciousness changed from state discourse to market discourse [7]. At this time there was another voice that "women should go back home". With the background of economic development, some social media advocated the significance of family for women to bring women back into the family and make them housewives again. The earlier slogans, like "a good job is better than good marriage" were criticized. However, why did this happen after the feminism issues have been widely disseminated as a consumer culture ideology? With a series of policy changes, the traditional gender discourse defines not only the social order of traditional family-oriented society and the operation mechanism of power relations but also the subject situation and identity of men and women [8]. It has become deeply rooted in history. Thus, later scholars, in an epochal dissection of female consumer culture in the Chinese consumer society, criticized that the mismatch between economic development and ideological awakening made the status of female discourse not more influential in the social structure and distribution of power. Instead, female status remained stagnant, severing as a temporary, instrumental ideology for national development [7].

### 3.2 WOMEN'S Consciousness in Modern Media

The consumer culture is increasingly diversified because of the changes in mass media. During this period, theories about consumer society and female consciousness were combined. Existing literature concludes that consumer culture uses mass media to disseminate symbols [11]. According to Baudrillard, "the new symbolic consumption is bound to have a great impact on the original ethics and customs of traditional society, which formed a new consumer culture or other new humanism based on symbolic consumption" [8]. The mass media have become one of the most widespread ways to spread culture in the current era, which makes women's access to information less narrow. The commonality of culture allows feminism to expand its influence, and women's traditional cultural identity is constantly being impacted by new ideas. According to the previous concept of female consumption, women have been portrayed as someone who loves beauty and shopping and concentrates on taking care of the family. They are not out of women's nature, but out of the underlying concept that they are keen to please men under the male gaze [12]. For the women with deep-rooted traditional consumerism, this is not involuntary. The formation of their consumption habits is generated in the promotion of consumer culture in the consumer group, which has been revealed by scholars as early as the 19th century. However, nowadays, women's consciousness reached a new stage, and many women, after receiving higher education, have new considerations about the status of women in society and the roles they play [10]. This change appears in the discussion of the meaning of Women's Day. It is a period when consumer society enters the information age. For example, the slogan of some advertisements on March 8 is "Gender is not borderline, but prejudice is". Increasingly more films and songs with a feminist theme are being presented to audiences. These are signs that women's increased sensitivity and the awakening of consciousness are changing the concept of consumer culture. These businesses are reinforcing and reshaping women's cultural identity to cater to the female market [12].

In conclusion, the awakening of women's consciousness is also an opportunity for the transformation of consumer culture challenging the patriarchal social order.

## 4 Conclusion

To summarize, the studies on the development of females' awakening consciousness in consumer culture were comprehensive. They analyzed the social construction of women and used qualitative research to stress the importance of women's self-awareness and to break away from traditional consumer culture concepts. Especially in the context of the market and nation, the focus of academic research on women's consumer culture has also changed. Scholars combined women's roles in production and consumption with Baudrillard's symbolic consumption, which is a major breakthrough and contribution in this field. They did not make strong connections between women's studies and consumption theory. That is to say, the impact of women's awakening consciousness on consumer culture needs to be reflected among the entire female population. The significance of the studies on women's consumer culture in the existing discussion remains at the theoretical level.

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