
PINK TRUCK ADS

Second-Wave Feminism and Gendered Marketing

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Second-wave feminist media had a contentious relationship with corporate advertisers. This article uses automotive advertisements to explore the role of gender, class, and race in the construction of consumer markets from the 1970s through the 1980s. It analyzes the struggle of Gloria Steinem and other liberal feminists to navigate the terrain between the women's movement and corporate advertisers. The increased economic power of women, stemming from the Equal Credit Opportunity Act as well as broader social and political shifts, facilitated their efforts. In the 1980s, automobiles continued to be marketed to women, albeit through "feminine" imagery conforming to the era's dominant trends.

A white woman gazes out from the pages of a 1983 advertisement for a Chevy S-10 Blazer in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Wearing a floral-patterned blouse and heavy cosmetics, she dominates the two-page layout, her image larger than that of the vehicle being sold. Although trucks are often associated with masculinity, readers here saw one bathed in pastels, and were assured that a woman driving a Blazer need not be unfeminine.¹ "Pink truck ads" embodied the tensions of their era, as advertisers profited from women's increased financial independence yet depicted them primarily within a narrow range of normative gender roles.

Retailers had long identified women as the principal buyers of domestic items. But most had assumed that automobile purchases remained the domain of men, who might solicit wives' opinions on paint color or fabrics, but rely on their own superior mechanical knowledge in making a decision. Structural economic changes occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, as American women's presence in the workforce increased and new lending practices enabled them to purchase more automobiles and other expensive goods.

Some second-wave feminists sought to harness the power of women's consumerism to spread their message. *Ms.* magazine's founders attracted advertisers of automobiles and other traditionally masculine items, prompting changes in marketers' understanding of the American woman consumer. Once advertisements targeting women appeared, debate ensued over the images and text they employed, as feminists lobbied for less patronizing messages.

Historians have analyzed the cultural significance of market segmentation and consumer movements in postwar American life. Feminist



scholars have acknowledged the role of consumerism in the construction of women's identities, considering it a site of female pleasure or labor and either liberatory or pseudoemancipatory expression. Examining the role of consumerism within second-wave feminism reveals the tensions between feminist activism and corporate culture. Activists tried to place women's consumerism in the service of their cause. But by the 1980s, even as women's economic independence became increasingly accepted, the visual and textual markers of feminism in advertisements were increasingly eclipsed by those of femininity.²

This article focuses on the marketing of automobiles, one of the most expensive purchases made by modern consumers. It explores the intersection of gender, class, and race in the construction of consumer markets, while analyzing the effects of second-wave feminist media interventions. The study of popular culture representations of women, ethnic minorities, and other historically marginalized groups remains important for the very reasons such images were challenged in the 1970s. The pervasiveness of advertising's images, many of which demean or trivialize the roles of women and minorities, renders them especially powerful. Sociologist Erving Goffman pioneered the analysis of the "ritualization of subordination" of women in advertisements, documenting the repetition of childlike gestures, demure posture, and relative size. Such images, created for corporate America, have limited the ways in which women and other historically marginalized groups have been perceived, at times even by themselves.³

This topic also offers a window into the shift from the 1970s, when feminism drew a relatively great amount of media attention, to the 1980s, when the movement's continued efforts slipped from media view amidst a powerful political backlash. Pink truck ads reflected the consumerist vision of women's independence that infused 1980s popular culture. Emerging from a strand of 1970s feminist discourse, this model, described by advertising scholars as "consumer feminism" or "commodity feminism," focused narrowly on the financial independence of middle-class, most often white women, to the exclusion of other, more challenging and community-oriented goals. Through this study of the unlikely relationship between feminists and Detroit executives, I argue that consumer feminism reflected some hard fought, if limited, victories.⁴

Juxtaposing the achievements of the 1970s with the developments of the 1980s lends insight into the extent and legacy of the effects of second-wave feminism. Adopting this longer view affords a better understanding of the cyclical development of social movements and institutional struggles to adapt in a changing environment. This article does not seek to measure popular culture representations of feminism against an imagined yardstick of "authentic feminism." Instead, it situates the artifacts of mass culture within

the context of their creation, in order to analyze the ways in which popular culture and feminism have influenced each other's development.⁵

Second-Wave Feminist Negotiations of Consumerism and Advertising

The editors of *Ms.* magazine explained their approach to advertising in their first regular issue: "We don't spend half our money on makeup . . . and the other half on food, as traditional women's magazines would make it appear. We also buy cars, books, airline tickets . . . and the many products that aren't usually directed to women at all." The magazine's feminist platform included this mission of securing nontraditional advertising accounts in an effort to change the way advertisers and readers thought about the "women's market." The editors hoped that acknowledging the American woman's purchasing power would encourage respect for her shifting position in society. Cars topped the list of goods because automotive purchases ranked second only to home buying in economic and symbolic magnitude. Founding editors Gloria Steinem, Letty Pogrebin, Patricia Carbine, and others fused two strands of dialogue within the women's movement, one centering on the nature of consumerism, and the other on the politics of advertising.⁶

Second-wave feminists complicated the era's debate over consumerism. In *One-Dimensional Man*, philosopher Herbert Marcuse described a society in which material possessions encouraged a "false consciousness" among their owners: "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment." Drawing on Marx, this New Left critique framed consumerism as a problematic habit to be overcome in pursuit of social change. Critics and historians alike have connected consumerism to the late-nineteenth-century development of psychological advertising, which soothed the tensions created by rapid modernization.⁷

Radical feminists like the Redstockings adamantly rejected this critique of consumerism as elitist, sexist, and misguided. If consumers were not the passive dupes of Madison Avenue, women's shopping reflected less capitulation to manipulative media than sexist societal norms defining consumption as an integral part of women's labor. Rather than criticizing women for fulfilling such expectations, they insisted, activists should address male domination of American society. In their words, "Male supremacy is the oldest and most basic form of class exploitation; it was not invented by a smart ad man. The real evil of the media image of women is that it supports the sexist status quo. . . . When we create a political alternative to sexism, the consumer problem, if it is a problem, will take care of itself."⁸ Second-

wave feminists from diverse backgrounds rejected the New Left's reductive critique of consumerism.

As it gained momentum, the women's movement garnered attention from the mainstream media. Initial coverage ridiculed the movement, but by 1970, media treatment was more serious and extensive. Feminists also shaped public understanding of the movement by publishing their own newsletters and newspapers. More than one hundred feminist periodicals had appeared by 1971; more than five hundred would be produced during the 1970s.⁹

The establishment of *Ms.* magazine in 1971 marked the entry of feminist publishing on the national stage. Its founders' efforts to subsidize the publication with advertising launched them down a difficult path of negotiation. Historian Amy Farrell has described the "double life" the magazine was forced to lead in order to appease both feminist activists and corporate leaders. Even the female advertising sales staff of *Ms.* was revolutionary to marketers accustomed to meeting with men.¹⁰

The editors of *Ms.* encouraged readers to engage critically with advertising and other media representations of women. Refusing to "solicit or accept ads, whatever the product they're presenting, that are downright insulting to women," they welcomed reader comments on the magazine's advertisements. The first issue drew eight thousand letters commenting on advertising. The editors promised to forward summaries of these comments to the relevant businesses. Beginning in 1972, the magazine's "No Comment" section also reproduced offensive advertisements submitted by readers, including those that had run in *Ms.*¹¹

Ms. barred not only sexist images, but also those promoting dangerous goods like cigarettes and feminine deodorant products. As manufacturers began printing warnings on packages, and as the magazine struggled to attract advertisers, cigarette ads appeared. The notorious Phillip Morris Virginia Slims ad campaign, "You've Come A Long Way, Baby," angered readers with its use of the term "baby" as well as its framing of smoking as a liberatory act. *Ms.* lost the account, forfeiting \$250,000 in one year, and subsequent losses for sixteen years.¹²

Negotiating the space between feminism and corporate America, *Ms.* engaged in the ongoing debates over advertising's negative depiction of women. A 1971 study found few ads "offensive" to women, although most depicted them as dependent characters. Women comprised one-third of the nation's full-time work force, but only 12 percent of the workers portrayed in advertisements were female. While almost half of men in ads were depicted at work, this was true of less than 10 percent of women, none of whom appeared as a business executive or professional. Women's roles in advertisements had changed little since the 1950s, failing to keep pace with women's shifting social and economic roles.¹³

Sexist depictions of women in advertisements offered feminists an arena in which to attack gender bias. Betty Friedan had singled out Madison Avenue in her 1963 bestseller, *The Feminine Mystique*, accusing advertisers of inundating the public with images of passive women. Friedan asserted, "If they are not solely responsible for sending women home, they are surely responsible for keeping them there."¹⁴ Other feminists spoke more forcefully against the industry. Lucy Kosimar wrote in 1971, "Advertising is an insidious propaganda machine for a male supremacist society," criticizing advertisers' treatment of women consumers as people of "low intelligence."¹⁵

Similar criticism had emerged within the advertising industry. Executive Amelia Bassin told the audience of a 1970 *Advertising Age* Creative Workshop that a space alien familiar with American women only as presented in advertisements would assume them to be "hysterical, adorable, masochistic, dangerous, sex-maddened idiots." Franchine Caldwell, president of the advertising firm Caldwell Davis Co., described housewives depicted in television commercials: "Their childlike fantasies best respond to giants in washing machines and little men in boats who paddle around their toilet bowl." Some activists went beyond verbal critique, staging highly public demonstrations against the advertising industry. Most famously, in 1970, one hundred members of the National Organization for Women, the Redstockings, and other groups visited the offices of *Ladies' Home Journal* demanding the increased hiring of female staff, an end to offensive advertisements, and media coverage of the women's movement.¹⁶

Television advertisements also drew feminist fire. Commercials were deemed "insulting to women" by 40 percent of the female respondents to a 1971 *Good Housekeeping* reader poll. In 1970 nine members of the Women's Liberation Front disrupted the annual CBS shareholder meeting, shouting "CBS abuses women," and "You use our bodies to sell products . . . you blackmail us with the fear of being unloved if we do not buy. We will not longer pay your extortion." After years of high-profile protest from feminist groups and the Association of Flight Attendants, NOW inducted National Airlines into its "Hall of Shame" for its "Fly Me" campaign, which featured attractive flight attendants enticing passengers with slogans including "Fly me. I'm Debbie." NOW denounced offensive advertisements through its widely publicized "Barefoot and Pregnant Awards for Advertising Degrading for Women," but also conducted staff workshops on sexist imagery for advertising agencies.¹⁷

Though they shared the widespread feminist frustration with advertising, the editors of *Ms.* faced an uphill struggle. Many advertisers doubted that explicitly feminist advertisements would boost sales. The editors' refusal to dedicate a portion of the magazine to "complementary copy"

discussing food, fashion, beauty, and consumer products, as other women's magazines did, further alienated many potential advertisers. The editors struggled especially to attract advertisers from male-dominated industries like electronics, where trade show staff demonstrated the features of VCRs by screening pornographic videotapes.¹⁸

But some advertisers did respond with remarkably progressive campaigns. Several early advertisers emphasized the gender integration of their own staff. A full-page advertisement asked "Could a woman become a Merrill Lynch Account Executive?" and answered in the affirmative. *Fortune* magazine displayed a full-page group photo of their New York staff with the caption, "All the Ms.'s and M's at *Fortune* salute Ms. Magazine." Amidst its legal debate over hiring female employees, AT&T and the Bell Company depicted one of their first woman telephone installers. A provocative campaign by NOW featured a line drawing of a businessman raising his trouser legs, with the text, "Hire him. He's got great legs. . . . If women thought this way about men they would be awfully silly. When men think this way about women they're silly, too."¹⁹

The second-wave feminist critique of advertising addressed the content of various campaigns. Seeking more egalitarian representations of women, feminists called for texts more respectful of women's intelligence, paired with images more reflective of their diverse roles. *Ms.*, the nation's best known feminist publication, proved influential in this area, as its editors came to command respect from corporate America. As the women's movement gained media attention, the editors of *Ms.* solicited automobile advertisements, confronting an industry plagued by outmoded ideas about gender.

Equal Credit and Automobile Ownership

The expansion of personal credit during the 1970s altered the landscape of American consumerism, especially for women, who had historically been denied credit for consumer purchases, education loans, or business financing. In 1973, the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs documented examples of gender discrimination in lending. The passage of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA) in 1974 as an amendment to the Truth in Lending Act, along with subsequent provisions, signaled the dawn of a new era in women's financial independence. Credit would no longer be ended due solely to divorce and new joint accounts would be recorded under the names of both spouses. Some lenders had previously asked women applicants to provide a certificate of sterilization to ensure they would remain creditworthy.²⁰



The long overdue legislation reflected the increased presence of women in the American workforce. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the number of married women ages twenty-five to forty-four working outside the home nearly doubled. By the 1970s, marketers considered “workwives,” married women in the workplace, a significant new demographic providing support especially for luxury markets. Financial traditions changed slowly, though, and long after ECOA’s passage, financial services firms opted not to promote credit cards specifically to women.²¹

Women’s car purchases were shaped by persistent discriminatory attitudes within the lending agencies and the automotive industry. A 1980s J.D. Power survey revealed that many women felt patronized by auto sales representatives, who ignored them or charged inflated prices. These attitudes continued despite the fact that women decided approximately half of the nation’s automotive purchases. Women financing their own auto purchases quickly developed a reputation for purchasing modest vehicles within their budget and making car payments fastidiously, often proving more sensible consumers than their male counterparts.²²

Although never widespread, from the earliest days of the auto industry, automotive manufacturers had characterized specific vehicles as appropriate for women drivers. The initial electric cars were promoted as the best option for delicate female motorists. The colorful paint and interiors of the 1920s were touted as aesthetically appealing to the ladies. The 1950s automotive aesthetic has been characterized as an effort to appeal to husbands under the guise of addressing wives. Lee Iacocca’s 1960s Mustang commercials featured female secretaries embarking on adventures.²³

Other than these limited appeals, the female consumer had been ignored by the automotive industry, although women comprised 41 percent of the nation’s registered drivers by 1966 and nearly half by 1985. In January 1970, no automakers placed advertisements in *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle*, *McCalls*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *Glamour*, or *Vogue*. In imagery, too, women fared poorly; a survey of automotive advertisements from 1950 to 1971 found women continuously appeared as passengers rather than drivers.²⁴

By the 1970s, critics pushed Detroit representatives to acknowledge and pursue the women’s market. Charlotte Montgomery, a *Good Housekeeping* columnist, asked the audience at the annual National Automobile Dealers Association convention why those rare ads targeting women did not address them as serious consumers, presenting useful facts instead of focusing on “color or some other gimmicky feature.” The editors of *Ms.*, too, pressed American auto executives to follow the lead of import manufacturers in pursuit of the women’s market, hosting major receptions in Detroit and eventually hiring a full-time saleswoman there.²⁵

As they tried to attract ads, *Ms.* editors' commitment to gay rights posed problems, as some corporate executives hesitated to support the magazine. The auto industry proved especially intolerant of such positions. By 1977, Norma Davis, the magazine's Michigan sales representative for nearly four years, grew frustrated by her limited success. Afraid of losing the existing accounts, Davis cautioned that "editorial shock lessons" would hinder the feminist cause. In a fiery memo to the editors, she warned, "The subject of second generation lesbianism and center-of-the-page fifteen point quotes on fucking will not settle with these people out here." But the editors persevered, convinced they could integrate their political goals with the corporate marketplace.²⁶

By the late 1970s, domestic automakers were interested in reaching female buyers. Chrysler established a women's passenger car committee in 1978, Ford in 1980, and Chevrolet in 1985. These committees, composed of female employees of the automaker and its advertising agency, evaluated the market and suggested design and marketing schemes.²⁷

To reach this women's market, automakers placed ads in publications targeting high-income demographics. Working-class and traditional women's magazines struggled to attract automobile advertisements despite high circulation rates, due to the conviction that homemakers, especially working-class ones, made few large purchasing decisions. Automakers instead turned to *Ms.* and *Cosmopolitan*, two-thirds of whose employed readers were unmarried. By 1978, *Ms.* ran twenty automotive advertisements from nine different manufacturers, including General Motors and Chrysler.²⁸

As they reached out to the women's market, American automakers also targeted the African American market. In part, this trend reflected the broader market segmentation of the 1970s, which fueled research into the buying habits of ethnic minorities. Throughout the 1960s, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had pressured advertisers to include more positive images of African Americans, but faced skepticism over the viability of the African American middle-class market. Many marketers protested such efforts, claiming the presence of African American models within advertisements would alienate white readers.²⁹

African American women appeared only infrequently in postwar advertisements, and then, most often in sexualized or demeaning roles. African American feminists among the founders of NOW and early editors of *Ms.* participated in those groups' critique of women's media representation. Other African American feminists argued that such critiques lacked the class analysis to render them relevant to women of color. Linda La Rue argued forcefully: "Common oppression' is fine for rhetoric, but it does not reflect the actual distance between the oppression of the black man and woman

who are unemployed, and the “oppression” of the American white woman who is “sick and tired” of *Playboy* foldouts, or of Christian Dior lowering hemlines or adding ruffles, or of Clairol telling her that blondes have more fun.”³⁰ Yet media critique appeared in the mission statement of the National Black Feminist Organization, whose Atlanta chapter organized members in protest against the overbearing title character of the television program, “That’s My Mama.”³¹

As Black feminists challenged reductive media representations, in 1970 a group of African American men launched the first national magazine designed for Black women readers. *Essence’s* editors declared that “Black is Beautiful,” offering to elevate readers “onto a pedestal and into the spotlight.” Like *Ms.*, the magazine drew readers, but struggled initially to attract advertisers.³²

But by 1972, Ford, Chrysler, Dodge, and Chevrolet were advertising in *Essence*. As the oil crisis hit Detroit, many African Americans remained loyal to American manufacturers, preferring their larger, more powerful vehicles. Others purchased imports, pushing Detroit to market aggressively. By the 1980s, several manufacturers had created separate marketing divisions targeting African Americans. Still, by 1986, the Big Three automakers’ advertisements in African American magazines and radio totaled only 2 percent of their advertising budgets, when African Americans made more than 12 percent of automotive purchases.³³

The combined forces of women’s increasing economic power, the expansion of credit opportunities, and the persistent lobbying of feminist activists and media professionals led to the appearance of automobile advertisements targeting women customers in *Ms.*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Essence*. The presence of such advertisements testified to Detroit’s increasing recognition of women as a viable consumer base for even major items. On the second front of feminist struggle, women’s representation within the ads, developments proved less linear.

Advertising Imagery and Content

Second-wave feminists demanded ad campaigns addressing them as knowledgeable consumers. The innovative editorial stance of *Ms.* magazine inspired several auto manufacturers to develop remarkably progressive campaigns. Those advertisements revealed the other reason behind Detroit’s pursuit of the women’s market, the fuel crisis devastating the American auto industry.

Launching its 1974 Honda women’s market campaign, Chick Phillips, vice president of Chiat/Day, Inc advertising agency, said, “This campaign, I think, is valid because it treats women as people—or as discriminating



buyers." The experience of *Ms.* reader Mallory Kirk-Marshall dramatized the attitude of some women toward informational automotive advertisements. After a Honda ad in *Ms.* discussed rack-and-pinion steering, she wrote, "When I went down to look the Honda Civic over, I took the issue of *Ms.* in which the ad appeared with me, and the salesperson took me on a tour of the engine before he started going over the advantages of color schemes. I don't know whether he took me seriously because his consciousness had been raised or because Honda tells their salespeople to watch out for grim women clutching *Ms.* magazine and marching stoically along mumbling things about disc brakes. But he *did* take me seriously." Some Honda ads incorporated women's voices, through letters from female drivers praising the vehicles.³⁴

Volkswagen, known for its innovative advertising tactics, ran a 1973 advertisement celebrating its long-standing feminist principles, noting that it had never run an ad it would not run in *Ms.* Saab depicted a female autoworker on the job. Although few autoworkers were women, General Motors in 1974 referred to itself as both male and female: "We—the women and men of Chevrolet—invite you to test drive a Vega." Subaru also adopted an explicitly feminist advertising position for *Ms.* An ad narrated by a (perhaps fictitious) female advertising copy writer read, "Those male auto experts told me to tell you it's an adorable little car and owning one will make you look rich and sexy. . . . They told me not to mention technical car terms, because you wouldn't understand them anyway. . . . I locked myself in my office and wrote this ad my way."³⁵

Reflecting the gender neutrality favored by many second-wave feminists, some manufacturers placed identical advertisements in men's and women's magazines. Honda ran an ad claiming the Civic had been "designed around a shopping bag" in both *Playboy* and *Cosmopolitan*, assuming men would care how groceries fit into the hatchback. Honda also addressed gender equality in several campaigns. One advertisement outlined the reasons "Why a man buys a Honda Civic" and "Why a woman buys a Honda Civic." The two identical lists featured practical, economic, and aesthetic factors. Their ad, "Women only drive automatic transmissions," criticized automakers tailoring cars to a false vision of feminine taste, proclaiming that Honda made both automatic and manual transmission vehicles, but not "a woman's car." Even Honda's motorcycle ad, "You don't have to take a back seat to anyone," opened with the traditional offer a man might make: "I'm goin' ridin' honey—wanna hop on back and come along?" and continued "With the new Hawk³⁶HondamaticTM from Honda, you can take firm control of your own destiny. . . . It has room in back, just in case you want to bring some man along for the ride!" Both in print and television ads, Honda highlighted the equality of the sexes.³⁶

Selling nontraditional vehicles to women sometimes inspired an old-fashioned approach. When attempting to stimulate female desire for motorcycles, scooters, trucks, or vans, marketers reassured the reader that her femininity need not be compromised. Yamaha declared motorcycles appropriately feminine. Beneath a picture of a fashionable young woman seated on a bike, one ad employed feminine adjectives, "Why not ride a motorcycle? Because motorcycles are only for men? Not chic enough? Chappy, from Yamaha, is smallish and graceful. Even stylish . . . You? Test-ride a motorcycle? Why not?"³⁷

Yet some *Ms.* campaigns demonstrated little respect for the reader. In 1974, in the wake of the highly publicized fuel crisis, Chevrolet's Nova campaign featured a chatty, ignorant narrator: "When I got the car I wasn't aware of the current energy situation. Luckily, my Nova is pretty good with gas." She had purchased her own car, but only after consulting a man for advice. Less surprisingly, many ads in *Cosmopolitan* remained traditional. In "How to live happily ever after with a car," pictures of sunflowers framed the top of a Datsun ad, labeled "He loves me, He loves me not, He loves me." American Motors' Gremlin ad employed an even more romantic image of the woman consumer, depicting a model cuddling her car below a header reading: "I bought it because it looked like it needed me." The woman became a girl, her car a puppy: "You know, if I hadn't taken it, I think it would have followed me home."³⁸

Automakers placed some advertisements in *Essence* that attempted to acknowledge the magazine's dual awareness of African American culture and women's liberation. Some awkwardly employed period expressions, like Chevrolet's 1972 campaign featuring African American models and the catchphrases "This is where it's at," and "No jive." Chrysler consistently advertised larger vehicles in *Essence*, in advertisements featuring African American models. Most remarkable, though, were Chrysler's *Essence* Cordoba advertisements for 1976 and 1977, featuring biographical portraits of women car owners. One profiled Ceola Lee, a general manager of a Los Angeles mortuary, who volunteered for the NAACP and drove children from a sickle cell anemia group. Lee purchased her car, "after a full day of testing other new cars, including a Buick Riviera and a Cadillac Seville." Another ad bore the headers, "Jean Hamilton has two careers," and "Chrysler Cordoba fits them both." Hamilton taught high school business classes and worked as a part-time real estate agent. She stood beside her car, smiling and confident, carrying a binder, books and, a briefcase. Larger cars were marketed to African American women, through advertisements featuring their practicality, and framed within a remarkably feminist lens. Yet outside of *Essence*, nearly all of the ads surveyed for this project featured young, thin, white models. Even advertisers trying to market to African

American women chose not to represent them in women's magazines drawing a majority white readership.³⁹

In *Cosmopolitan* and *Ms.*, advertisements emphasized fuel economy. The fuel crises of 1973 and 1979 led many consumers to clamor for smaller cars. The federal government initiated efforts to establish fleet averages of 27.5 miles per gallon by 1985, inspiring panic among Detroit executives. Although long assumed to care primarily about automotive aesthetics, women were addressed as practical, value-oriented automotive shoppers. As women buyers frequently chose the fuel-efficient imported vehicles that comprised nearly 27 percent of new car sales in the United States by 1980, domestic manufacturers launched "informational" campaigns touting the merits of larger vehicles. Ford assured *Ms.* readers, "the family of six trying to get by with a small-size car may soon find out that a full-size or mid-size car isn't an extravagance—it's a necessity," but many buyers clearly disagreed. The early years of auto marketing in *Ms.* and *Cosmopolitan* were dominated by importers; in 1974 import ads in *Cosmopolitan* topped 70 percent. By contrast, import manufacturers did not advertise in *Essence* until 1986.⁴⁰

As women emerged as an attractive demographic for auto ads, publishers sold the women's market as the next advertising frontier. *Cosmopolitan's* publisher, Hearst Magazines, described its readers as affluent and ambitious: "The truth is, the *Cosmo* girl does more, knows more, earns more, spends more. That's power. That's the *Cosmopolitan* girl." Hearst also emphasized *Cosmopolitan's* automotive ads in the advertising press. One ad read "Put your models where the money is. Nine major auto makers do." Similar advertisements characterized the *Ms.* reader as a financially successful individual with diverse interests.⁴¹

As civil rights movement activists had encouraged more positive advertising images of African Americans, feminists had hastened media change. Detroit's attention to the women's market also stemmed from the threat posed by the twin specters of fuel shortage and encroaching import sales. Even advertisements that appeared socially progressive were grounded not only in political, but also economic and consumer trends.⁴²

Gendering the Men's Automotive Market

As automakers acknowledged the women's market, a distinct men's market also developed. Extreme examples of gendered advertising appeared in *Playboy*, Hugh Hefner's publication geared to the sophisticated bachelor. Hefner controlled the magazine's advertising, barring products like weight-loss plans and hair restorers, which might detract from that image. *Playboy's* automobile advertisements appealed to men's perceived desires

for power, control, physical strength, sexual gratification, and dominance over women.⁴³

Several companies employed explicitly masculine language and imagery. Ads for Harley-Davidson motorcycles predictably featured themes like "guts." Men's relationships to their cars were occasionally equated with human ones, yielding predictable jokes: "Like all honeymoons, the first few months of new car ownership are generally a period of adjustment." The new bride was rendered a machine, to be driven by a skilled operator.⁴⁴

Other ads objectified and denigrated women. Datsun promised the male driver several "extras," including a beautiful young woman passenger. Honda, whose ads to women were remarkably progressive, asked men, "Which would you rather have? Automatic transmission, air conditioning, and a 400-horsepower engine? Or Michelle and Tammy and Alison?" Toyota depicted a young man evicting six bikini-clad young women from his car in favor of his surfboard. Responding to contemporary feminist critiques of advertising techniques, such chauvinistic reveling paralleled contemporary *Playboy* articles and editorials attacking what Hefner characterized as radical feminism.⁴⁵

"Bad boy" characters were also developed to target the male reader, as in Kawasaki's 1980 "Don't let the good times pass you by" campaign centering on fictional characters like "Bob Larkin," who "always believes in going the distance." Larkin appeared in his dorm room, putting on his shoes and grinning into the camera while a cheerleader applied lipstick. In another ad from the campaign, "Dave Lewis" sat intimately with a woman in the backseat of a car, "Because Dave believes in full power when making a pass." This campaign's crude sexism was remarkable, but the core theme of male dominance was common to many of the era's advertisements targeting male customers in magazines such as *Esquire*.⁴⁶

Several manufacturers appealed to men's longing for "control." BMW noted, "The man who controls corporations ought to be able to control his own car." Dodge even branded trucks and vans with overtly masculine names, like the "Macho Power Wagon" and "Warlock II." Nissan called its "King Cab" the "New Power King": "You sense the *power* right away. You feel it from the moment you climb into the performance cockpit of this restyled hunk of muscle." The 4x4 "Hardbody" was marketed in language of male physicality: "Inspired by an attitude that can only be described by one word—domination. Start with the sheet metal. It's tightly wrapped around a sleek, muscular body. Not an ounce of fat on it. So taut, so tough, so utterly bold in design, it could only be called a Hardbody." Even Toyota added a "Muscle!" element to their "Oh what a feeling!" campaign.⁴⁷

The development of advertising during the 1980s exemplified the diversity of gendered marketing. Feminists had urged advertisers to consider

women consumers a specific demographic group within auto buyers. Yet the progressive, respectful advertising appeals they favored lost ground to reductively normative gender visions of both women and men. Even in the auto market, free from the complex and often problematic connotations of femininity rooted in the cosmetics, fashion, and housewares industries, large trucks moved over rough terrain in ads targeting men, while those addressing women featured traditional, nonchallenging images. As women's social and economic progress threatened to bring true equality of the sexes, the era's conservative backlash infused popular media, producing cartoonishly hypermasculine and exaggeratedly feminine images.⁴⁸

The Rise of Consumer Feminism

In the 1980s, Detroit's marketing of cars to women gained momentum, attracting attention from both the automotive and advertising industries. Women's economic gains continued as the feminist movement, which had enjoyed high media visibility during the 1970s, began to fade from the view of the mainstream media. This shift reflected broad legislative and political trends, as well as media bias. In the popular press, the expansive feminist goals of the 1970s yielded to a narrow, consumer-oriented vision of liberation.

The political trajectory of the women's movement partially explains these developments. By the 1972 passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) through Congress and the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, feminism was, as sociologist Barbara Ryan has observed, "no longer a joke." Many historians consider 1977 the year of the movement's peak visibility, as the International Women's Year conference in Houston drew unprecedented attention. By 1980, the political tide was turning, as the country embraced conservative leaders. In that year's campaign platform, the Republican Party dropped its support for the ERA. NOW and other feminist groups became tightly bound to the Democratic Party, which faced mighty struggles of its own.⁴⁹

Feminists during the 1980s fought to preserve affirmative action and abortion rights, while building expanding vital women's services. American women and men continued to embrace feminist ideals; even as the ERA was defeated in 1982, nearly two-thirds of those surveyed supported its passage. Yet the media had proclaimed the women's movement dead since the 1970s. During the 1980s, the frequency of such proclamations increased, as media pundits declared the dawn of the "postfeminist" age. Under this rubric, the principal goals of the women's movement had been achieved, leaving American women, and especially young women, with no need for further struggle. Even as American men and women of all ages continued to support the goals of the women's movement, media rhetoric closed its coffin.⁵⁰

The resulting cultural landscape continued to celebrate many feminist ideals, like women's financial independence, career ambition, and confidence. But these values were divorced from the broader, more inclusive goals of second-wave feminism. Scholars have described the media images from this era as indicative of "consumer feminism" or "commodity feminism." The financially successful, independent women portrayed in the era's popular culture complemented the broader values of the consumerist 1980s, while still reflecting the impact of both women's changing economic roles and the results of the second-wave feminist media interventions. In these images, acceptable feminism espoused the goal of consumption. Women, most often white, and nearly always upper middle class, were fulfilled and satisfied by the power they held in the marketplace. Employment offered them the freedom to purchase designer fashions, upscale cosmetics, and automobiles.⁵¹

Analysis of the imagery of automotive ads in women's magazines of the 1980s yields dispiriting results. Yet critiques of the era's media often overlook the residual effects of the women's movement. For even as the progressive imagery of the 1970s faded, the numbers of advertisements targeting women increased.⁵²

Advertisements and popular culture of the 1980s celebrated femininity. Many feminists had distanced themselves from the socially constructed articulations of female passivity reflected in exaggeratedly feminine styles of clothing and mannerisms during the 1970s, but the 1980s media proclaimed a resurgence of feminine fashions. In the antifeminist political climate, such sartorial and aesthetic decisions became widely understood as ones of individual style rather than political statements. Self-indulgent consumerism and newly exaggerated femininity infused the automotive advertisements targeting women in the 1980s. Ads framed women as icons of individual financial success, sometimes pursuing vague professional or economic ambitions, all the while embodying traditionally feminine interests in nurturing, romance, and fashion.⁵³

Rather than addressing women's automotive savvy, some of the era's advertisements played upon their fears. Chevrolet's "Don't spend the next six years wondering if you did the right thing" depicted a woman clad in a nightgown and holding an infant. "Am I doing the right thing?" asked the text, encouraging women to let self-doubt influence their reading of the authoritative advertisement.⁵⁴

The corporate woman, a new consumerist stereotype, appeared in the era's ads for automobiles and other products. Usually blonde, slim, beautiful, and wearing high-heeled pumps and a skirted suit, she seemed vaguely ambitious, although rarely involved in any discernible activity. At once a progressive and a retrograde figure, she expressed a desire for power and

wealth, but style was her true passion. In Thunderbird's "Upward Mobility," the corporate woman climbed stairs, accompanied by text reading "Success. It's a look, a feeling, and a certain attitude. It's understated, yet unmistakably assured." She appeared again in Honda's "The \$6000 executive makeover," where an attractive, high-heeled blonde stood before her Civic, the price of her clothes, hairstyle, and car labeled. According to Madison Avenue, embracing the look of power offered a means of achieving it.⁵⁵

By 1986, the hype surrounding the women's automotive market prompted a journalist to proclaim "the year of selling cars to women." Marketing efforts reached from Detroit to the dealerships, as several auto dealers publicized their intentions to hire additional female sales staff. A California firm sponsored "Women on Wheels" seminars, training women in auto sales techniques. By this time, Toyota, 52 percent of which's sales had been to women in 1986, was advertising in *Essence*, and Ford in *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*. Chevrolet was targeting women through *Working Woman*, *Working Mother*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Self*, *Redbook*, and *Essence*. But Chevrolet's elaborate, unprecedented efforts to target women buyers reveal the company's uncertainty as to the type of appeal that would resonate in the complex climate.⁵⁶

As late as 1981, only 3 percent of General Motors' Chevrolet division's magazine advertising budget went to women's books. But the company began to consider women a potentially important demographic for trucks and vans. In 1983, as part of their "The kind of Blazer it is depends on the kind of woman you are" campaign, Chevrolet ran a series of pastel-colored ads featuring large photographs of women with small pictures of trucks. Automotive and advertising executives criticized the heavy-handed approach. Edsel Ford II, general manager of Ford Motor Co.'s Lincoln-Mercury division, said, "I don't know the answer to how to sell to women, but it's not pink truck ads."⁵⁷ Female automotive advertising executives also weighed in against such tactics. Marcie Brogan, principal of Brogan Kabot Advertising Consultancy, stated flatly, "Women don't want pink truck ads." Sean Fitzpatrick, Executive Vice President and Creative Director for Campbell-Ewald, the firm responsible for the advertisements, responded to the criticisms, "We learned a lot from that ad, including not to use pink anymore." The increased presence of women in positions of power within the advertising industry, coupled with the second-wave feminist critique of media images of women, had sparked awareness of the exaggerated femininity on display. While such tactics remained unremarkable when employed to pitch smaller household goods, the juxtaposition of a truck and a pink, floral advertisement was jarringly patronizing.⁵⁸

Chevrolet followed the campaign with the similar "You'll love the logic," and then "Out of the Blue." In this campaign, marketers tried to

reach the woman they saw in the era's media. Advertising supplements up to eight pages titled "Women in Motion" ran in several women's magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*. Each contained short articles on health and fitness and Chevrolet advertisements.⁵⁹ The ads connected automobiles and fashionable clothing, linking vehicles to garments available from Anne Klein II, Gitano, and Saint-Tropez West. The campaign centered on fantasy. In each ad, a woman experienced a different situation, clad in an appropriate clothing style and appearing with a Chevrolet vehicle, emphasizing distinct, consumer-oriented identities.

Some advertisements from the series reflected marketers' fear that women might still recoil from purchasing a truck. The "Ice Blue" ad for the S-10 Blazer emphasized outdoor activities and independence, depicting an athletic young woman with her huskies and truck before a snowy peak. Her flowing blonde hair and elaborately made-up face assured the reader that her femininity was not in question, even though she appeared independent of a man. The corporate woman appeared in two of the campaign's ads. "Corporate Blue" emphasized ambition, depicting a Celebrity Eurosport before an office building, parked in a spot labeled "Reserved Parking Only." In "Brilliant Blue," a Spectrum appeared behind an adobe archway in a tropical setting, elevated on a pedestal of stairs and framed by seagulls, a palm tree, and sunlight. A woman clad in the era's ubiquitous skirted business suit smiled at a man sharing the table. The text stressed her competence and ability to excel in a man's world: "It's showtime. You've planned it perfectly. Practiced every line, covered every angle. When a presentation is this polished, you can't help but shine." Glamorous consumers of luxury items, women depicted in 1980s automotive advertisements navigated socially sanctioned gender roles.⁶⁰

The anomalous "Wild Blue" ad shared more with the *Playboy* advertising tradition than that of *Ms.* or even *Cosmopolitan*. Modeling safari attire available at Banana Republic, a woman stood confidently before a shirtless man, her Astro Van open in the background, their camping supplies just unloaded. This play on the Tarzan fantasy catered to the heterosexual female reader: "The adventure begins. This is where nature runs its course. . . . Forget the map. You know the way. . . . Matched for staying power by Chevrolet's new Astro Van." Far from the passive female role, the new Jane was competent and in control. "Wild Blue" appeared particularly outrageous when compared to the corresponding advertisement for the Astro Van from *Family Circle*, where "One Thousand and One Uses" marketed the same vehicle as eminently practical. A floor plan showed possible configurations for seating and cargo. The text outlined the engine's features and towing power and inset photos depicted people moving, towing a boat, transporting a basketball team, and posing happily beside the vehicle. Far

from the *Cosmopolitan* image of a sexually liberated couple embarking on a romantic adventure, the *Family Circle* advertisement presented van uses appropriate for the entire family.⁶¹

Some advertising experts vehemently opposed such "feminizing" of car ads. Mark Gjovic, a management supervisor for the Pontiac account at D'Arcy Macmanus Benton and Bowles, cautioned, "Our experience using poetry and pastel colors is that it is offensive and does more harm than good." Chevrolet executive Danielle Colliver announced that the campaigns on which she worked in the future would feature female models but would parallel the ads run in gender neutral publications. Even those within the advertising and automotive industries balked at the conservative visions of gender reflected in these campaigns. The image of the woman consumer as defined by 1980s media culture proved nearly incompatible with feminist political goals. This shift in automotive advertising parallels those that occurred in other industries, as more "alluring" models appeared in even *Ms.* ads by the 1980s.⁶²

Conclusion

This article has explored the role of race, class, and gender in shaping consumer markets through a case study of feminist intervention in the media. Breaking with the New Left critique of consumerism, second-wave feminists employed advertising revenues from products typically associated with men to promote the broad-ranging goals of the feminist movement. Although some corporate executives were reluctant to support their politics, others responded with remarkably progressive campaigns.

By the 1980s, however, the presence of middle-class women in the workplace was less novel. As the relative financial clout of middle-class white and African American women was acknowledged, their image lost its explicitly feminist connotations. Amidst the antifeminist backlash, the strand of feminist discourse stressing the importance of middle-class women's financial independence persevered. A consumerist brand of independence, rooted in individual material success and steeped in the acquisitiveness of the 1980s largely eclipsed other visions of liberation. Advertisements for cars and other goods urged women to purchase their way to freedom, encouraging them to reward themselves for their hard work with the decade's high-style trappings. These trends reflected a partial victory for the women's movement, as women's viability as breadwinners became accepted and recognized.

Second-wave feminist publishers had struggled to balance their concerns with those of corporate advertisers. Some historians conclude that the two are inherently incongruent, citing as evidence *Ms.*' 1989 shift to a

subscription-based format. Steinem has fueled this perception, observing in 2003, "Advertising, the most ubiquitous censor of all, will become less of an influence only as we protest its power over editorial content and/or pay for more of our own media." For all these limitations, however, feminist media interventions shaped the cultural landscape demonstrably. Images of financially independent career women permeated the advertisements and other cultural media of the 1980s and beyond. Although offering a narrow view of women's liberation, when considered in the longer context of the postwar era, these images reflected a new departure in women's images in popular culture.⁶³

NOTES

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⁶¹Supplement, *Cosmopolitan*, April 1986, 6–7; *Family Circle*, 6 May 1986, 33.

⁶²Carin Rubinstein, "Women in the Driver's Seat," *Across the Board*, April 1986, 43; Julie Liesse Erickson, "Colliver Steers Ads at Chevrolet," *Advertising Age*, 15 September 1986; S. Plous and Dominique Neptune, "Racial and Gender Biases in Magazine Advertising: A Content-Analytic Study," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1997): 627–44.

⁶³Farrell, "'Like a Tarantula,'" 54; Busby and Leichty, "Feminism and Advertising"; Gloria Steinem, "The Media and the Movement: A User's Guide," in *Sisterhood is Forever: The Women's Anthology for a New Millennium*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003), 103–117.

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