Marxist Feminism: Balancing the Paradox of Sweatshops and Hyper-Consumerism

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of capitalism, hyper-consumerism, and the exploitation of sweatshop labor, revealing how these factors manifest within the capitalist patriarchy. Through feminist efforts for economic liberation, women have become a significant driving force in the economy. However, the influence of corporate marketing within the beauty and fashion industry has enabled a system in which women's self-worth has become contingent upon material consumption. Consequently, sweatshop labor is vital in maximizing surplus value to sustain the supply and demand for these goods. Yet, women are the primary labor force in sweatshops, facing issues of working in unsafe and underpaid conditions. As women engage in the commercialization of beauty and fashion, they are simultaneously sustaining the commodification of femininity and subjugation of women in sweatshops. This underscores a dual mechanism of oppression that maintains gendered economic disparities in the pursuit of corporate profits while simultaneously manufacturing a false need to consume beauty products. Even if feminism advocates for women's independence from the patriarchy through consumption, corporations have utilized the pervasive influence of capitalism to reconfigure the feminine identity. By analyzing these dynamics through a Marxist-feminist lens, this paper contends that women's economic and social liberation cannot be achieved within a system designed to commodify and oppress them. To achieve systematic reform, collective awareness of the root of women's exploitation must derive from the dismantling of patriarchal hegemonic gender norms and the disengagement of capitalist practices. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the profoundly intertwined nature of consumption practices and the gendered global assembly derived from the capitalist patriarchy.

Introduction

This research applies Marxist feminist theory to explore the intersection of capitalism, hyper-consumerism, and the exploitation of garment workers, focusing on how late capitalism fuels the commodification of women. Marxism is a theoretical framework developed by Karl Marx that has been expanded in feminist literature to address the intersection of class and women's oppression (Augustinos, 1999). While this theory addresses the issues of post-modernity and gender inequality as the result of a capitalist society, the literature fails to discuss the direct relationship between consumer demand for cheap goods and the exploitation of women in low-wage garment industries. Globally, women have become a significant driver in the economy, controlling approximately $31.8 trillion in annual consumer spending (NIQ, 2024). Women are the predominant decision-makers in purchasing products. For example, they are responsible for 94 percent of home furnishings, 92 percent of vacations, 91 percent of houses, and 60 percent of automobiles (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). Accordingly, companies create products targeted toward women, especially in the fitness, beauty, and fashion industries, where women influence a significant portion of consumer spending and decision-making (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). Internationally, these industries have substantial market values, with the fitness sector worth $104.05 billion in 2022, compared to the beauty sector, which generated $528.50 billion in revenue in 2022, and the fashion industry, which garnered $625 billion in 2023 (Statista Market Insights, 2024; Carter, 2024). By examining the consequences of late-stage capitalism, hyper-consumerism fosters the commodification and exploitation of women, from marketing to alienated labor, which I discuss below. I aim to expand the literature by discussing the inadequacies of feminism and examining the exploitation of women through the lens of contemporary consumption practices.

Navigating the scope of gender equality, the second wave of feminism was the most significant social movement in the United States (U.S.) (Gordon, 2013). Compared to the first wave of feminism, which sought to secure women's right to vote, this movement challenged the patriarchy in public and private spheres to address psychological, economic, and legal inequalities (Hewitt, 2008). Utilizing the rhetoric of equality and entitlement, liberal feminism has lobbied successfully for changes in education, employment, and reproductive rights (Moran, 2004, p. 226). By incorporating a conscious-raising (CR) strategy formed by thousands of women, CR groups connected personal experiences of gender oppression, such as abuse and economic insecurity, to a broader systemic structure, laying the foundation for women's advocacy in combating institutionalized sexism (Hewitt, 2008, p. 268). Through notable efforts in addressing wage inequities and exploitation, union organizations in female-dominated sectors–such as clerical work, healthcare, and service industries–have made a difference in increasing wage equity. For instance, feminist groups like Women Office Workers (WOW) in New York and Women Employed (WE) in Chicago, to name a few, in 1993 had increased women's wages up to 77 percent of men's, highlighting momentous improvements from the 1950s, when women earned only 59 percent of men's salaries (Hewitt, 2008, p. 421). Although these efforts underscore the significance of unification and activism, a persistent wage gap persists between men and women. Today, women earn approximately 83 cents for every dollar a man earns, highlighting the limitations of achieving wage equality in a capitalist patriarchal system (Fry & Aragão, 2025). Regardless, the movement showcased the possibilities for the economic empowerment of women to induce practical reform. Due to the movement's popularity and collective action, the second wave of feminism achieved significant progress in addressing systemic oppression and uplifting women's economic independence.

Despite the successes, there are various critiques of second-wave feminism being inadequate on the broader and global scale of women's liberation. Critics, such as Noami Wolf (1990), argued that the second wave framed women as victims, reinforcing a disempowering narrative. Wolf distinguished between "victim feminism," described as seeking power through an identity of powerlessness, and "power feminism," which emphasized women's agency and independence. Thus, the perpetuated agenda of women's perceived moral superiority and suffering to portray a sense of hopelessness is outdated. On the other hand, power feminism proposed an ultimate embrace of women's autonomy and economic entitlement as a road to liberation (Wolf, 1990; Genz & Brabon, 2009). Audre Lorde (1980) argued that second-wave feminism excluded women of color and those with intersectional experiences by whitewashing the feminist agenda, depicting a homogeneous, whitewashed chronology of feminist history. Similarly, Rekha Mehra (1997) asserts that policies have failed to integrate women into larger economic frameworks of reproductive and informal labor roles. Hence, the lack of consideration of women in developing countries often bears the dual burden of unpaid domestic work and underpaid labor in agriculture and informal sectors, such as the garment industry, which exacerbates their economic marginalization. While the initial movement fostered collective action and challenged patriarchal ideals, it relied on victim narratives and the exclusion of intersectional identities, displaying the inability to address systemic inequalities entirely.

Nevertheless, legal and economic reform within the Western world, such as in the United States, has seen significant improvements, allowing women to participate more fully in the economy. However, the broader economic system must be structurally remodified to achieve genuine economic equity. There are deeper systemic issues beyond wage and workplace gender disparities, such as the revaluation of financial instability and labor devaluation. In Nancy

Fraser's (2012) recent critical comment, she articulated that second-wave feminism unintentionally served as a new form of capitalism. Feminist criticism of welfare-state paternalism and a male-breadwinner model of marriage, for example, was turned into a justification of the neoliberal state's call for women's labor force participation and the two-earner family. Feminist claims for women's rights of autonomy and bodily integrity blended into neoliberalism's emphasis on self-reliance and identity politics (Him, 2020). While feminism provided avenues for women's engagement, it was often absorbed into the dominant culture, diminishing the movement's countercultural essence. Although this overview offers a perspective on the evolution of U.S. socio-politics and economic participation, the issue of capitalism utilizing femininity and women's labor transcends borders, as evident in the garment industry.

The majority of garment workers globally are women. In 2019, about 60 to 80 percent of women worked in sweatshops worldwide. Although this statistic varies by region, in Asia and the Pacific, approximately 80 percent of the garment industry workforce is women (CARE, 2022). Specifically, Asia accounts for 75 percent of garment workers, with 42 million women employed in these factories (International Labour Organization, 2023). Within the United States, most garment workers are immigrant women from Mexico and China. These workplaces are rife with abuse. For example, the U.S. The Department of Labor found that 80 percent of employers were breaking minimum wage and overtime pay laws. The department caught a contractor paying their employees only $1.58 per hour in a state where the minimum wage was $15 per hour (Uniform Market, 2024). Predominantly located in Los Angeles, the country's leading fashion capital, LA sweatshops can promptly produce fast fashion with reduced travel time, accommodating ever-changing trends and making it an ideal location. Even with current labor laws implemented to protect laborers and maintain accountability, sweatshops still exist within

the U.S., and employers illegally practice poor working conditions and unfair wages to maximize profits. By noting the employment demographic of sweatshops, the issues within the garment industry and sweatshops are gendered.

Although these factories provide employment opportunities and salaries for women to fund their livelihoods, this system of labor operates on the exploitation of women. Garment factories have historically employed women in these unskilled positions due to social justification for women being physically suited for repetitive work, justifying lesser pay (Jahan, 2009). Employers frequently exploit cultural stereotypes that depict women as passive, flexible, and less likely to challenge authority. Factories validate paying women less by framing their incomes as supplemental to their husbands' (Fashion Checker, n.d.). Specifically, in the garment sector, women comprise the lowest-paid jobs with the poorest prospects of promotions (Fashion Revolution, 2015). Despite performing the same tasks as men, the gender pay gap persists, perpetuated by systemic biases and social expectations surrounding women in the workforce. Through national and global efforts, organizations ranging from labor unions (International Labor Committee) to foundations (CARE) strive to address the gender disparity in education, employment, health, and poverty, offering tangible solutions to uplift women. However, as feminism uplifts women across the globe to vocalize their value within the employment sector, the same feminists in developed countries, like the United States, are actively contributing to the commercialization of these goods, fueling the corporate need for cheap labor.

Products have an inherent use value, as people purchase essential goods; yet, we have a consumption problem in the United States. As one purchases a commodity, each product has a use-value–the inherent physical aspect of a good that satisfies human needs (Marx, 1884). While people consume goods to satiate their needs, consumerism has shifted from necessity to

overindulgence. The fashion industry exemplifies this phenomenon, with projected growth from $136.19 billion in 2024 to $184.96 billion by 2027 (Uniform Market, 2024). Fashion brands like Shein, an affordable online retailer of trendy clothing, hold nearly a 50 percent market share in the U.S., catering primarily to women aged 18 to 24 (Uniform Market, 2024). While the free-market economy promotes endless innovation and a wide selection, it simultaneously detaches consumers from the exploitative labor conditions underpinning these goods. With an abundance of products available, corporations distort one's understanding of the economy, creating a sense of false consciousness. Consumers often dismiss the exploitation and inequality ingrained in the labor process, rendering them invisible to the consumer's eye (Marx, 1887). Even if the inherent use-value of these products is necessary, excessive consumption practices can make individuals, particularly women, feel stressed and anxious due to the overwhelming choices available in big-box stores and online (Isham et al., 2022). By fetishizing commodities, the system prioritizes profit and the accumulation of goods over the well-being of individuals, disguising the systemic exploitation of workers as capitalism drives markets with endless new ideas and trends.

Specifically, corporations utilize trends to create artificial needs and mass-produce items and services to maximize profits, repackaging the concepts of femininity and beauty into marketable goods. The average American woman spends about $3,756 annually on beauty products, services, and fashion, with men following closely behind with $2,928 (Howarth, 2025). Given the gender wage gap, women spend a greater percentage of their salary on these products on average. These figures underscore the commodification of femininity and social beauty expectations, compelling people to invest heavily in their appearances. As the beauty and fashion industry primarily targets women, it creates an illusion that women can achieve their identity

through a consumer-oriented lifestyle (Waal Malefyt & McCabe, 2020). While women may indulge in these goods to fuel their identity, the discussion of women's consumer behavior in an era of economic opportunities available to women is understated (Augustinos, 1999). We live in a society that overindulges in fast fashion, which makes slow fashion and sustainable shopping challenging to obtain (Karlsson & Ramasar, 2020). Exploring consumer behavior in the context of sweatshops, the weight of this issue is not solely due to women not practicing ecological shopping but also to capitalist systems that prevent the average person from engaging in sustainable practices. In the pursuit of profits, corporations take advantage of femininity, beauty, and labor, capitalizing on women's identity. Whether a company's campaign preaches inclusivity and diversity through material goods, women remain at the center of these schemes, used as tools for both labor and consumption. Regardless of the social and class divide, capitalism fetishizes women as commodities.

As feminism attempts to dismantle bigoted systems, Marxist feminists critique the exploitative nature of capitalism and its intersection with patriarchy, exposing feminism's shortcomings in protecting women from these structures of power. Under Marxist feminism, the ideology of dual systems highlights the exploitation of individuals by both capitalism and the patriarchy, a hierarchical system that indicates the subordination of women to men (Hartmann, 1979). However, dual systems have not been updated to address our current economic situation and fill the gaps in the literature (Sargent, 1981). Exploring the feminist theoretical framework of hyper-consumerism and sweatshops to underscore that capitalism simultaneously harms women regardless of social class highlights the presumption of false consciousness, the idea that capitalist income sectors mislead the working class regarding the root of women's oppression. In attempts to build women's freedom and independence from a patriarchal society, women are

unconsciously serving capitalism framed by the patriarchy (English, 2013). By examining the limitations of feminism in addressing the challenges women face in a hyper-materialistic society, I aim to expand the academic discourse on this paradox and its impact on women's economic empowerment.

Literature Review

Marxist theory, developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, articulates a critical analysis of the relationship between economic structures and social existence. Historical materialism is a significant component of Marxism, where economic structures concerning production and political and legal systems drive social change (Tucker, 1978). These superstructures protect and reinforce this monetary base, shaping lived experiences and consciousness. According to Marx, historical progression is driven by class struggles, with the modern bourgeoisie exploiting the working class to monopolize labor and profits (Tucker, 1978). Compared to feudalism, which relied on lords and serfs, capitalism dismantled the feudal system, constructing a society based on production and profit, shifting social values toward individualism, and portraying poverty as a failure of personal ambition (Tucker, 1978). Marx adopts Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of the alienation of human essence. According to Feuerbach, humans see their alienated love in the figure of God and, to regain that essence, worship him. Thus, religiosity is just people inadvertently worshipping themselves as they feel estranged in salvaging their identity and relationship with the world around them (Feuerbach, 1841). Marx applies John Locke's idea of human essence as "life, liberty, and property," emphasizing individual ownership and self-determination (Tucker, 1978). He then argues that a similar process to what Feuerbach describes occurs with human alienated labor as the true human

essence. Through modes of production, Adam Smith, the father of modern capitalism, encourages a free market where labor can become a source of value (Tucker, 1978). However, the development of capitalism actively alienates individuals from their labor, humanity, and each other. They no longer are paid for what they produce, as is the case in Smith's understanding. Instead, the owners of the means of production pay them as little as possible for as much labor as they can squeeze out of each worker. Under this system, labor no longer becomes an outlet for creative expression but a means of degrading workers by making wages necessary for people to live and buy back the essence of what was lost. Thus, the separation of human essence becomes alienated and recaptured through the products one buys, encapsulating people into capitalism.

Through Marx's critique of capitalism, he highlights the reliance on use-value (an item's utility) and exchange values (the market price) with labor at the core of production (Tucker, 1978). Capitalism aims to maximize profits by reducing wages and the value of produced goods, extracting as much surplus value as possible (Tucker, 1978). The commodification of labor evolves from ownership of production to the buying of labor, creating a system where workers' efforts supplement capital instead of expressing their individuality. Imbuing material goods with value and significance beyond their practical use, Marx underscores the fetishization of commodities that symbolize status and wealth while alienating the labor behind them (Tucker, 1978). Hence, a significant theme in Marx's theory is alienation, manifesting in various forms, including workers' alienation from their labor, their fellow workers, and their concept of being truly human (Tucker, 1978). Consumerism deepens this alienation, as individuals seek to fulfill their essence through material goods but remain disconnected from their humanity and interrelation with one another. Therefore, Marxism argues that humans can only recapture their human essence when capitalist systems are dismantled. He envisions a time when society will

outgrow the current epoch and grow to participate in a communist world, where people reprioritize their humanity over capital and reconnect with human values. Marxism portrays capitalism as an exploitative system that undervalues labor and prioritizes material accumulation over human dignity (Tucker, 1978). By scrutinizing the ascent of capitalism in society, Marxist theory becomes essential for comprehending systemic class struggles.

To examine the subordination of women, feminists have challenged and extended Marxist theory to critique capitalism in fueling the gender division of labor and women's oppression. Marxist feminists assert that traditional Marxist frameworks state that capitalism has created a work, class, and labor divide, leading to the rise in economic inequality, yet overlooks the factors that induce women's oppression (Jahan, 2009). Engels stated that before the emergence of capitalism, women held matriarchal power rooted in kinship structures (Robinson, 2018, p. 1). However, the emergence of private property ownership transformed these communal kin groups into isolated units, shifting society and the subsequent rise of class divisions that embodied a broader social system of capitalism and oppression (Dixon, 1977, p. 2; Robinson, 2018, p. 1). By removing the communal relation of care, women became predominantly associated with the roles of social reproduction, encompassing childbearing, childcare, and domestic labor within the home. Consequently, the development of private ownership and patriarchal structures has been significantly dependent on women's labor, reinforcing women's confinement to the domestic sphere and the nuclear family (Jahan, 2009). Because capitalism depends on unpaid domestic labor, women's role in social reproduction is essential in sustaining the workforce and society. As women ensure that laborers are cared for, fed, and prepared for production, this reduces the burden on the system to provide these external resources (Jahan, 2009). Hence, unpaid labor is grounded in the rise of private property as private goods are concentrated in the hands of men,

who often rely on women's domestic labor. As women's social reproductive efforts became confined to the private realm, their contributions to the production of value became invisible, allowing the system of private ownership to grow without compensating women for their work, perpetuating unequal labor relations (Jahan, 2009). This gendered division of labor subsidized capitalism by enabling the economic subordination of women to keep wages low, as women's unpaid domestic and reproductive labor absorbs the costs of reproducing labor power (Robinson, 2018, p. 3). Thus, the start of the double shift where women work both in public for a wage and in private for free. Although the American dream has created this illusory dynamic as an ideal, it has constructed a culture where women were economically, socially, and politically dependent on their husbands, leading to long-term economic instability and power dynamics (Acker, 1988; Hartmann, 1979; Jahan, 2009). By integrating gender into the work and class struggles, Marxist feminist critiques of capitalism underscore the systemic perpetuation of women's subordination through the entangled systemic structures that undervalue women in contemporary society.

Regarding Marxist-feminist literature, the dual system theory presents a critical framework of the interrelationship between capitalism and patriarchy as a unified system that exploits women (Hartmann, 1979; Sargent, 1981). Initially, socialist feminists discussed that women's oppression was an underlying consequence of capitalism, neglecting the independent systemic role of the patriarchy (Sargent, 1981). However, American economist Heidi Hartmann advocated for the dual systems approach that examines the patriarchy's interactions with capitalism to understand the complexities of women's oppression (Sargent, 1981). Identifying these independent systems that coincide, Hartmann elaborates that these systems interact by exploiting unpaid domestic labor, such as childcare and work within the home, which elevates the family and remains invisible (Hartmann, 1979). Although dual system theory acknowledges

the interconnection between these systems, critics, such as Iris Young, highlight that the dual system does not provide a comprehensive analysis as it individualizes patriarchy and capitalism as independent social structures (Sargent, 1981). Specifically, Young proposes that dual system theory should further conceptualize “capitalist patriarchy” as a single system, unifying these structures in which women’s oppression is intrinsic to the functioning of capitalism (Sargent, 1981, p. 44). Thus, she critiques the dual system theory by rejecting that capitalism merely adapts to or incorporates pre-existing gender hierarchies. However, the gender hierarchy is the foundation of the capitalist structure, reinforcing the notion of private property ownership (Sargent, 1981). Private ownership shifted social attitudes from communal benefit to individualistic control and power by tying women to the home and domestic labor, denying women the ability to own property and gain economic independence. As heteronormative dynamics of the patriarchal family persist, women are unable to achieve financial freedom due to their male counterparts owning private property. While Young acknowledges that gender hierarchies predate capitalism that drew on sexist ideologies and feudal gender division, the reinforced notions of labor positions that men are primary and women are secondary is an essential feature of capitalist systems. Hence, Young infers that capitalism reshaped gender dynamics into a distinct and systemic form of oppression.

Capitalism–and the resulting exploitation–operates internationally. Ester Boserup asserts that capitalism and industrial methods in the third world continuously marginalize women’s labor and worsen economic positions. “Essentially, the system permits the capitalist to undervalue labor power, that is, to purchase the commodity labor power at a price (wages) far below its real value” (Costagliola, 2023, p. 1293). This process of undermining the value of labor production exemplifies the concept of “commodity fetishism,” where a product "must be stripped of its

production value" to be reinforced with advertised monetary value, sold solely for profit, and lose its inherent, intrinsic value (Costagliola, 2023, p. 1293). Capitalism not only exploits but also integrates and sustains non-capitalist modes of production, perpetuating patriarchal and gendered labor dynamics. To these critics, there is not an instance where a capitalistic society does not devalue or marginalize women, emphasizing that gender exploitation is not only “an external feature of capitalism but integral to its structure” (Federici, 2004, p. 118). By reimagining Hartmann’s dual systems, Young promotes the idea that patriarchy and capitalism are a singular unit where gender oppression is central to capitalism’s functioning.

Friedrich Engels forged the term 'false consciousness' to state the shortcomings of the working class and recognize their exploitation in a capitalist system. Under capitalism, labor and production processes are not a social phenomenon between individuals. Instead, capitalism fetishizes the products of human labor as commodities that overshadow the individual's essence (Augustinos, 1999). The theory of ‘false consciousness’ is not the idea that the working class did not achieve their 'true' economic value outside of the bourgeois society, but the lack of acknowledgment of participating in a complex system shaped by material and power relations, which actively impact our perception of reality (Augustinos, 1999). From this perspective, the development of late-stage capitalism in a postindustrial society has led to consumerism to become pervasive, where shopping dominates everyday life. Thus, the efforts of human labor and production have been overlooked and replaced by the mere existence of consumable goods. Engel advances the notion that capitalism has shifted values, prioritizing the well-being of the individual over societal values of consumerism (Augustinos, 1999). As postmodern consumer societies revolve around a fundamental materialist culture, the perpetuation of this framework prevents marginalized groups and the working class from challenging the elite (O’Connor &

Wynne, 2017, p. 113). Hence, capitalist and patriarchal systems dictate the perceptions of laborers and consumers. The distinct isolation between these two groups makes creating an illusionary dependency on these systems more manageable.

Indulgence in consumerism creates an illusion, connecting materialism to the essence of being a woman. Social media has targeted women's outer appearance in fashion, makeup, and behavior, leading to an influx of spending and materialistic trends that objectify a woman's innate characteristics (Dimulescu, 2015). While women may indulge in these practices to uplift and connect to their feminine essence, the production of these goods, especially in the beauty and fashion industry, often exploits women in sweatshops or disadvantaged social positions, creating a void within feminism—women benefit economically while simultaneously contributing to the exploitation of others. Kathy Peiss (2000) argues that the emergence of the beauty sector in the economy has been devoted to catering to women, utilizing beauty as a business strategy to project corporate identities through beauty standards and goods. Even if women participate in beauty and fashion trends harmlessly, this serves capitalist agendas of seeking to commodify femininity further and equate the acquisition of identity to consumption.

In the 19th century, beauty ideals tended to naturalize gender differences and represent the identity of the middle class. For instance, the appearance of "a young, fair-skinned, sun-bleached blonde, fit and active, modeled by Cybill Shepherd and Cheryl Tiegs, this 'California look' was specifically intended to appeal to Middle America, the mass market and cultural mainstream. The ad designers perceived the light skin of models and white space in the ads as a 'clean' look, and 'cleanliness' was a message that they believed would appeal to girls and parents alike" (Peiss, 2000, p. 495). Practices of beauty transformed into commercializing feminine ideals through mass marketing and fashion, which progressed beauty into profitable

commerce. Businesses began to use the term “beauty sells,” utilizing beautiful women and handsome men to sell specific products to promote a consumption-oriented lifestyle. Beauty no longer existed as a representation of oneself but as the perpetuation of a desired appearance obtained through consumerism. Despite the advancement beauty has on business strategy, opening opportunities for women and men alike, corporations deploy an agenda that capitalizes on and exploits women’s bodies (Peiss, 2000).

Although Marxist-feminist theory presents an adequate theoretical analysis of the consequences of a capitalist and patriarchal system on gender dynamics, there remain various gaps in the literature. Despite feminism and Marxist feminist attempts to resurrect and uplift women, there is a lack of discussion of the simultaneous exploitation of women as perpetrators of indulging and being objectified within capitalism. The feminist movement advocates for women's economic freedom, enabling them to participate in monetary transactions and access employment opportunities. Since the second wave of feminism, there have been various feminist movements and new ideologies, such as the #MeToo movement to address women’s sexual exploitation and global feminism to advocate for the adversities that disproportionately impact women. However, from a capitalist patriarchal perspective, this unitary system has established an environment and social practices that employ women as active participants in employment and consumerism. This supply and demand for inexpensive goods produced by even cheaper labor is an exploitative process where women are at the end of both streams. Consequently, Marxist feminism has not discussed the double jeopardy of this situation, a prime example of which is depicted in the female global garment assembly. How can one navigate the scope of these systems when any or all actions are detrimental? By exploring another perspective of Marxist theory regarding the alienation of sweatshops and labor, the commodification of women, and the

corporatization of feminine essence for profit. Utilizing Marxist feminist theory on capitalism and the fetishization of consumer goods, I raise questions about feminism's role in addressing the intertwinement of hyper-materialism and economic involvement in the exploitation of garment workers. Even though feminist literature discusses post-modernity, capitalism, and historical traditions that impact women, the current conversation is void of the active exploitation of women regarding social demand for cheap commodities.

The global garment industry fueled by capitalist structures perpetuates gender inequality, systemically devaluing women's labor in prioritization of profits. In the late 19th century, US textile mills reinforced contemporary and gendered notions of physical traits, such as women's "nimbleness, dexterity, and small fingers," which indicated women were more suited to work in garment factories (English, 2013, p. 70). In addition, the low wages in these positions did not attract men, resulting in a distinctive difference in occupational roles, with men occupying specialized, trained positions. Women are seen as disposable and temporary laborers as production does not require a highly skilled workforce, toiling for long hours for low wages in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Since the 1970s, the textile and garment industries have relied on global assembly, with rural women primarily occupying these spaces due to the availability of work opportunities in developing countries, as start-up costs were relatively inexpensive. Consequently, this perpetuates a worldwide decentralized and feminized labor force capitalizing on cheap labor where the emancipation of women from class exploitation can only be achieved by dismantling class oppression in a capitalist society (English, 2013, p. 72; Jahan, 2009). The undervaluation of female labor is inherently systematic, which disproportionately relegates women to the most degrading and exploitative positions (English, 2013, p. 76).

Despite women's social reproduction being an essential component of society and capitalist production, it is unpaid and undervalued. Women are subjugated to second positions in the labor market due to women's social reproduction and capacity to bear children. Hence, women are disproportionately pushed into low-wage, labor-intensive jobs such as garment work or caregiving, where contributions are commodified and valued only based on their exchange value. Undervaluing women's labor creates a surplus value where capitalists profit from labor. This exploitative arrangement pays women the minimum wage while their work produces significant profits for employers. In a capitalist system, production is necessary only insofar as it contributes to making profits, and the use-value of products is only an incidental consideration. Profits derive from the capitalists' ability to exploit labor power, allowing them to pay laborers less than the value of what they produce (Hartmann, 1979, p. 7). Thus, capitalist exploitation and insufficient regulatory protection of women as wage workers are parasitic upon women's subordination in the private and public spheres (Him, 2020). Reconnecting to a 'feminine' identity can lead to overconsumption in the pursuit of regaining one's essence through material goods (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022). The exploitative nature of the garment industry and sweatshops are direct representations of the dehumanizing impacts of late-capitalist production of gender inequality and the devaluation of women's labor.

Sweatshops

In an era of late-stage capitalism, corporations rely on the global economy to assemble goods and services at a low cost. Sweatshops are "any factory that violates two or more labor laws. This can include working conditions, wages and benefits, and child labor" (DLF, 2020). Corporations in any consumable goods sector, such as electronics, food, or clothing, may utilize

a global workforce to manufacture and supply retail products. For this paper, I will focus on the garment industry as a byproduct of the demand for fashion capitalism in developed countries and the fallout of producing these goods on members in developing nations, as well as within the United States. Primarily due to the gendered nature of employment and underpaid wages, sweatshops will be the primary analysis in discussing the discourse of gendered capital exploitation.

The fashion industry drastically contributes to the global economy, generating billions of dollars annually. In the United States, the fashion industry generated $136.19 billion in revenue in 2024, projected to reach $184.96 billion by 2027 (Uniform Market, 2024). Currently, the U.S. is the world's largest apparel market. As of 2024 in the United States, Shein – a global online-only fashion Chinese apparel merchant - holds about 50 percent of the market share, indicating their popularity within this sector, followed by H&M (16%), Zara (13%), Fashion Nova (11%), Forever 21 (6%), and others (4%) (Uniform Market, 2024). Shein is leading the United States market, compounding $100 billion in revenue in 2022 (Rajvanshi, 2023). Compared to other companies, such as H&M and Zara, Shein is primarily associated with fast fashion. Fast fashion is a business model that rapidly produces clothing and styles to mimic popular, expensive articles of clothing (McKinsey & Company, 2025). The most significant appeal to Shein is its extremely low prices and trendy clothing, which outcompetes its competitors. Additionally, the sheer number of products Shein produces exceeds that of Zara and H&M. From November 2022 to November 2023, Zara and H&M introduced 40,000 and 23,000 new items in the U.S. market. At the same time, Shein produced 1.5 million products (Master, 2023). Hence, Shein has transformed the accessibility and practice of fast fashion with their online retail stores and affordability. While there have been discussions about the questionable

ethical and environmental impacts of Shein, these concerns seem to fade into the background as consumers, particularly young women aged 18 to 24, purchase on-demand and trendy styles from the company (Uniform Market, 2024). The fashion industry continues to grow rapidly, stimulating the economy by generating substantial goods and revenue.

Due to the low start-up cost in developing countries, the garment industry, as a capitalist tool, allows women to engage in the formal economy. Yet, sweatshops are not without their benefits, offering various economic opportunities for rural women. An article from the Adam Smith Institute (2024) conducted field interviews with thirty-one sweatshop workers in El Salvador and found that "workers perceive factory employment as providing more desirable compensation along several margins," highlighting the complexity of the global capitalist system (ASI, 2024). For example, "in the villages close to sweatshops, girls were substantially less likely to get pregnant or be married off (28% and 29% respectively, and this effect was strongest among 12 to 18-year-olds) and girls' school enrollment rates were 38.6 percent higher" (ASI, 2024). From an economic development perspective, factories provide financial opportunities that increase women's family bargaining power and autonomy through income generation.

Countries with greater openness to trade often experience higher levels of gender equality. These elements are partially due to the association between international trade and the increased educational attainment and skill development among women and girls. For women in developing countries, globalization presents opportunities to enhance their skills and wages, participate in the labor force, and provide for themselves and their families (ASI, 2024). Therefore, sweatshops offer economic opportunities, enabling people to increase their wealth and improve the lives of women and children in their communities. By connecting economic wealth and improved conditions, developing countries can experience significant improvements and

positive changes, such as substantial wage increases without unemployment (ASI, 2024). Jeffrey Sachs noted that “sweatshops are the first rung on the ladder out of extreme poverty” (Sachs, 2005). The allocation of financial resources to individuals to earn a wage enables women to achieve greater economic freedom, thereby attaining human rights that are comparable to those in developed countries. Capitalism as a systemic tool is the best solution for cultivating economic growth in developing countries, as globalization of production provides people with tangible opportunities for social and economic reform.

Although these opportunities may provide income for individuals in poorer economies, sweatshop laborers are exploited to pursue profits. Beth depicts sweatshop labor as “a form of structural exploitation that is continuously reproduced,” serving to benefit the U.S. (Beth, 2013, p. 74). While production is mobilized in developing countries, products are shipped to economies like the U.S. to be sold. A documentary by the U.K.'s Channel found that Shein employees worked 75-hour shifts with very little time off and produced items in facilities that lacked safety protocols, windows, and emergency exits. A Swiss watchdog, Public Eye, released a detailed report that accused Shein of violating Chinese labor laws (Rajvanshi, 2023). Moreover, the company has around 10,000 employees, with 58 percent being women and 42 percent being male. As the global assembly consists of about 60 to 80 percent of women, it is notable that sweatshop labor disproportionately impacts women (Buck, 2024).

In Los Angeles, United States, there is a 107-block area known as the Fashion District, where 1,400 manufacturers and contracts produce about 80 percent of all U.S.-made garments (Guy, 2024). With factories residing in the “Fashion Capital,” this makes it easier for companies to distribute on-trend clothing without the delay of waiting for shipment from overseas to arrive in the States (Ward, 2022). For instance, Derek Guy, a Canadian writer and commentator in the

men's fashion industry, shares the story of Bilma, a seasonal garment worker who migrated from Oaxaca, Mexico, to make a living. He explains that she gets paid “three cents for a zipper or sleeve, five cents for a collar, and seven cents to prepare the top part of a skirt” (Guy, 2024). Bilma works for “fast-fashion labels such as Fashion Nova, Lulus, and Lucy in the Sky, which prioritize quickly stocking on-trend items over the quality of materials,” and these companies sell their products ranging from $80 maxi dresses to $5 crop tops (Guy, 2024). She explains that wages are distributed via a “piecework” payment system based on the clothing an individual produces and paid accordingly in the garment sector. This payment system creates a loophole for US-based manufacturers to avoid paying a minimum wage to their employees. For individuals like Bilma, instead of yielding almost $202.80 for her 12-hour shifts, she is paid around $50 per day (Guy, 2024). From poor working conditions to underpaid wages, the garment industry is a structural system that benefits from exploiting laborers. Even though these sectors provide employment opportunities for immigrant and rural women, as discussed above, it is still an exploitative system that preys on people experiencing poverty. Rather than a form of involuntary servitude, this capitalist system has transformed exploitation into a mutually–albeit asymmetric–beneficial system where capitalist elites profit from the labor production of women.

In the pursuit of economic development through capitalism, these systems reinforce patriarchal ideologies, subjugating women to secondary positions. Although the globalization of the garment industry provides numerous economic opportunities and improvements for individuals, there is a lack of basic legal protections and social ideations that prevent the progression of gender equality. Numerous domestic policies and practices in developing countries inhibit women’s economic freedom. For instance, in Bangladesh, there are no anti-gender discrimination laws that prohibit employers from discriminating against employees

based on gender. In addition, “women do not have the same rights to remarry as men” or “the right to inherit property or land,” highlighting the systematically induced economic vulnerability against women that leads to dependency and unfair power dynamics (Duflo, 2012, p. 1072). Aside from capitalist incentives to maintain sweatshop labor, political and legal institutions do not seek to instill avenues to protect women from exploitative labor laws, underscoring the second positionality of women in society.

Gender bias overflows into women’s occupation roles, constraining women from entering into industries that are seen to be more fitting. Hence, this underscores the societal justification for women to work in garment sweatshops as contemporary manufacturing sites reinforce stereotypes of women being more physically fit to work in these factories and the association of “sewing and knitting” suiting female labor (Elson & Pearson, 1982, p. 93). Despite external constraints of laws not protecting women, the internal biases and unconscious assumptions of gender roles inhibit women’s access to various opportunities. Even if male employers assert these assumptions, internalizing these traits in the female mind and body creates a narrow mindset where “women do not perceive alternative employment opportunities as viable alternatives” (Wolf, 1990, p. 29). Consequently, the lack of options decreases female workers' bargaining power, creating a worldwide, decentralized, and feminized labor force that is undervalued, impeding the actual worth of women's labor production (English, 2013). Even if sweatshop labor provides women the ability to gain economic freedom to reconstruct patriarchal familial structures, the garment industry reinforces gender stereotypes to capitalize off of women’s labor, denouncing it as cheap and affordable for corporate gain. The garment industry emphasizes the unified unit of the capitalist patriarchy that justifies lower pay in occupations and

positions perceived as patriarchally “lesser” (Soyer, 1999, p. 36). Hence, women’s oppression within the garment industry is a structural byproduct of capitalism.

From a Marxist feminist perspective, sweatshops are the direct manifestation of capitalist patriarchal exploitation. The garment industry utilizes women as a tool for capitalist accumulation, increasing profits for elites and corporations while producing goods that are highly dependent on the global assembly. Workers, mainly female, are subjected to underpaid, poor, and unsafe working conditions, enriching the elite capitalist class at the expense of the working class. Through Marxism, sweatshops represent an evident form of labor exploitation. Low wages in developing countries, coupled with a large unemployed or underemployed population, prevent workers from demanding better working conditions. Marx refers to this phenomenon as the “reserve army of labor.” As contractors have a steep surplus value, there is a strong incentive to cut costs to maximize profits (Marx, 1867, p. 442). Thus, working conditions and wages remain inhumanely low, as contractors can only profit by extracting every ounce of value from their employee's labor. They are “sweated” because the boss needs to get as much from them to survive on a narrow profit margin in a labor-intensive, low-capital, highly competitive, and hierarchical industry (Soyer, 1999, p. 36). There is an assumption that sweatshop laborers are expendable, and connecting this to women, that women’s labor is replaceable due to their “low” skilled work. Thus, it is necessary to use a Marxist feminist analysis to attend to both the impact of capitalism as well as patriarchy to analyze the “inescapable” cycle of commodification and exploitation. These gendered patterns of labor control and commodification are deeply interconnected, forming a continuum of practices that systematically form gender-based disadvantages in production (Mezzadri, 2016).

Benjamin Powell (2014) asserts that the technological development of the sweatshop industry, from high productivity of physical capital to the adoption of technology, would lead to its elimination. As developed economies establish factories in developing countries, they create capital and introduce new technologies, providing opportunities for those countries to build human capital and improve wages and job prospects (Powell, 2014). However, Powell excludes the innate capitalist patriarchal factors that the garment industry continuously reinforces gender stereotypes and women's oppression. Although he emphasizes the economic drivers that may improve the garment sector, the garment industry reinforces patriarchal ideals and gender dynamics that maintain poor working conditions and low wages, specifically towards women. Even in the same roles, women are paid less than men, depending on the country. Women in Asia earn 70 to 90 percent less than men earn, and in Bangladesh, women earn 21 percent less per hour than men for the same work (Rhodes et al., 2016; Kapsos, 2008). Even if factory positions provide a pathway to development through economic opportunities, sweatshops remain as are exploitative environments that subjugate women.

In 2016, Bangladesh sweatshop workers made headlines by starting a walkout that evolved into a protest, demanding triple the minimum wage. The minimum wage in Bangladesh was 5,300 taka (approximately $68 U.S.) per month, which did not cover necessities. However, protestors were violently silenced as authorities fired rubber bullets, and factory owners sued their workers for inciting labor unrest and firing 1,600 people (O'Neil, 2017). By silencing workers in their efforts to achieve livable wages, the overpowering exploitation of the capitalist patriarchy exceeds women's abilities to retain their humanity and essence within this industry and under these conditions. Even if capitalism has the initial impact of improving technological advancements in developing countries, cultural norms and discriminatory gender attitudes will

continue to impact women, restricting women from higher-skilled positions and opportunities. Consequently, the garment industry highlights the flawed economic system of capitalism where laborers are exploited by the elites to maximize profits, creating an unjust and unsustainable environment for production. This system, partnered with patriarchy, continues to perpetuate poverty and a veil of limited opportunities for women and their families.

Hyper-Consumerism

While feminism has empowered women to engage in the economic market, that same market has led to the indulgence of commodities and goods, promoting hyper-materialism in a capitalist society. Initially, women's consumption behavior reinforced female roles as domestic laborers. The consumer market of the early 1900s advertised domestic appliances and goods that reinforced traditional cultural stereotypes of the ideal housewife. Gradually, the rise of feminist movements sought to distance women from conventional gender roles and objectification by regaining their strength and gender identity through products. From domestic appliances to cosmetics, such as red lipstick, which symbolized strength and resilience for feminists, provided an avenue for women to express their femininity in opposition to the patriarchy (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022, p. 3372). However, this inconsequentially connected feminine empowerment to the idea of consumerism.

The rise of the beauty industry redefined the subculture of beauty as a form of resistance to female objectification in the patriarchy to reinforce the commodification of beauty defined by capitalism. By engaging within the capitalist structure, women began to internalize the mystified value of cosmetic goods to uphold and attempt to achieve the marketed beauty standards and lifestyle. Subtly, this has conditioned women into validating patriarchal corporate-induced

unrealistic beauty standards of the female body (Adorno, 1994). As capitalism controls mass feminine culture and perceptions, this perpetuates a continuing cycle of women's exploitation through the objectification and commercialization of self-worth as a materialistic possession. Women's significant purchasing power drives economic activity. Women account for approximately $16.73 trillion, or about 85%, of consumer spending in the United States (Capital One Shopping, 2024). Worldwide, women spend about $31.8 trillion, and the Consumer-Packaged Goods (CPG) industry showcases the pivotal strategy for corporations to connect with women (NIQ, 2024). In the US, single females spend approximately $3,736 per month, or 116.9 percent of their income after taxes, while males spend about $3,847, or 98.1 percent after taxes (Capital One Shopping, 2024). Although women are directly or indirectly responsible for 70 to 80 percent of consumer purchasing decisions, the figures showcase that males spend more than females. However, it is critical to note the income differences and breakdowns of items spent. Despite economic opportunities, such as employment, that allow women to enter the workforce, women earn 82 percent of what men earn (Fry & Aragão, 2025). These figures illustrate the varying incomes and financial resources available to each gender, highlighting the wage gap. Moreover, women spend approximately 2.54 percent of their income on apparel and services, compared to 1.83 percent for men. This includes 1.72 percent of total income after tax, which women dedicated to personal care, compared to 0.70 percent for men (Capital One Shopping, 2024). Although men statistically spend more, both genders consume the same categories of goods at different rates. Accordingly, women dominate the beauty and fashion industry, dictating the immense growth these companies oversee yearly. Regardless, women have become active and significant contributors to the economy.

Women's consumption behaviors heavily rely on the influence of corporate marketing that sustains social norms. Historically, the imagined consumer was depicted as a white, middle-class female, often associated with ladies of leisure (McRobbie, 1997, p. 74). While the concept of shopping and consumption has evolved to encompass both men and women, these behaviors remain persistent, with women still preferring to shop at physical retail stores. In contrast, men tend to prefer shopping online (Capital One Shopping, 2024). However, there was an evident shift in the type of advertised products towards women. According to Wolf, "the feminine ideal of physical beauty is a relatively new cultural representation of women" (Wolf, 1990, cited in Dimulescu, 2015, p. 506). Initially, the capitalist market reinforced traditional gender roles by advertising domestic appliances and items that promoted the ideal "housewife," who excelled in homemaking rather than personal aesthetics (Fox, 1990). Specifically, Bonnie Fox analyzed the relationship between the underlying ideologies in advertisements and how housewives conceptualized their situation and responsibility as domestic laborers (Fox, 1990). To maintain the nuclear family, women and daughters were expected to perform domestic duties to uphold patriarchal norms (Hartmann, 1979, p. 4). "Women's exclusion from the wage labor force has been caused primarily by capitalism, [which created] wage work outside the home and required women to work in the home to reproduce wage workers for the capitalist system" (Hartmann, 1979, 4). The marketing proposal for domestic appliances aimed to ensure efficiency within the home; however, the increased marketing of these gadgets did not reduce women's domestic labor in the house (Fox, 1990, p. 26). Instead, the advertisements "chiefly fashioned the housewife into the ultimate consumer to sell products" (Fox, 1990, p. 27; English, 2013; Strasser, 1982). Therefore, capitalism sought to maintain patriarchal ideals by reinforcing gender norms through consumption.

With the development of technology and media, corporations reimagined femininity as a product rather than a social role. Until the 1830s, the physical properties of the female body were not socially perceived as gender norms (Dimulescu, 2015, p. 506). As women's social values relied on the distribution of traditional gender norms within the home, "fertility and nurturing skills" were initially cultural identifiers for women (Dimulescu, 2015, p. 506). However, the beauty and fashion industry has significantly influenced women's perception of attractiveness, using advertising to increase profitability; this has led to a wave of consumerism that commodifies the female body (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022, p. 3365). Through capitalist patriarchal structures, "elites are at the root that may exclude or marginalize certain body types, skin tones, and features," reinforcing specific beauty standards as sources of pleasure and objects of exploitation (Sigdel, 2024, p. 7-9). As corporations advertise and depict images of the female body, this pushes the sexual objectification of women, which sustains ideas of sexism, traditional gender roles, and objectifying beliefs about women. "Through content, such as music videos, women's magazines and reality televisions, is associated with stronger support of sexist or objectifying beliefs about women" (Ward et al., 2023, p. 501). For instance, "Bikini-clad women parading their bodies for the sake of selling a product promotes the attitude that women are commodities or objects rather than people" (Gunter, 1995, cited in Massey, 2006, p. 5). By marketing the female body to men, women's objectification has a dual purpose of presenting as a sexual object attained through consumption to transform into a desired object that is viewed as "beautiful" by societal standards among men and women alike (Massey, 2006). Limiting women's sexuality and worth to their desirability among men, corporations seek to devalue the existence of women to serve and maintain men's power over women (Ciclitira, 2004). The shift of commodifying beauty was not a response to the demand for beauty and fashion goods. Yet, a

constructed narrative controlled by corporations dictates that shifts in beauty standards are an achievement rather than an inherent trait (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022, p. 3365). Thus, the industry capitalizes on women's positionality within the patriarchal structure by reimagining the feminine identity.

The shift of advertised products is deeply rooted in hegemonic consciousness as the widespread acceptance of beauty standards serves the interests of dominant economic and patriarchal systems. Indulgence in beauty and fashion products is more than just attaining one's identity; it is about participating in an aspirational lifestyle that these products promise. For instance, anti-aging skincare helps reverse and slow the aging process, lengthening the appearance of youthfulness. The patriarchy enforces youth and virginity as essential "conditions for the social gratification of women" (Wolf, 1990). By intertwining youth and virginity as physical manifestations of women's value, the patriarchy limits women's capabilities through their appearance and societal perception of purity. Hence, Wolf refers to these assumptions as patriarchal constraints designed to limit women's roles and worth in society, ensuring their subjugation of unattainable beauty and desirability (Wolf, 1990). Scholars believe this desire for women to look a certain way is through 'gender socialization,' the process by which people learn how they should act based on their sex. To reaffirm their gender identity, using women-specific products can increase their femininity and, consequently, perceived attractiveness in society (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022, p. 3383). Conversely, the perpetuation of patriarchal perceptions of women's beauty is closely aligned with Antonio Gramsci's theory of "cultural hegemony," which explains how dominant ideologies are internalized by individuals, convincing them to perceive cultural ideals as their desires rather than imposed constructs (Gramsci, 1929). While these scholars discuss the conformity of women to social expectations in different ways, as members

of society, social expectations nonetheless require women to appeal to social norms to be considered reputable.

This process of subjecting women to engage in achieving feminine desirability indoctrinates girls from an early age. An article published in The New York Times, "Babes in Makeup Land," describes the wave of marketing for cosmetics towards little girls, "six-year-olds “painted to the hilt”; one doll, Li’l Miss Makeup, “resembles a girl that’s 5 or 6 years old” who, when cold water is painted on, “springs eyebrows, colored eyelids, fingernails, tinted lips, and a heart-shaped beauty mark” (Wolf, 1990, p. 215). Thus, the need and desire to express femininity through cosmetic goods originate from early corporate marketing that characterizes women's future persona. From an early age, beauty standards have been taught and ingrained within women, with their earliest memories associated with femaleness deprivation, where starvation is eroticized for “little girls as an entry into their adult sexuality” (Wolf, 1990, p. 216). Hence, the pressure of conforming to beauty ideals that promote anorexia or “beauty pornography” advertised to young women normalizes these extreme depictions of beauty. Accordingly, younger women are increasingly using anti-aging skincare, highlighting the influence of purchasing behavior and societal pressures that glorify youth as a beauty standard (Haykal et al., 2023). By starting young, the industry capitalizes on young girls’ naivety and vulnerability to fortify the hegemonic consciousness of this idealized and commodified femininity. Therefore, women who pursue these standards believe their actions emanate from personal choice rather than systematic expectation. Without critical contemplation, women are unconsciously upholding patriarchal ideals that serve capitalistic hegemonic desires.

The rise of feminism, activism in the 20th century, and the expansion of capitalism have shifted social and cultural ideas surrounding beauty, transforming the representation of beauty as

a symbol of strength (Dimulescu, 2015). Within the feminist discourse, “purchasing feminism” provided consumers with a sense of satisfaction and association with the brand, empowering them through beauty, as they bought cosmetic products to reclaim femininity and boost self-esteem (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022). Purchasing commodities, whether makeup or clothing, under the guise of “purchasing feminism” allowed women to extend the personification of their power within society to their outer appearance (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022, p. 3374). Therefore, the reimagination of the capitalist agenda persuaded women that consumption was a means to profit from them. Even if women's social roles and perceptions were transformed into a paradoxical form of empowerment, the women's identity was repackaged under a hegemonic consensus, shifting from housewife to feminist-friendly. By perpetuating unattainable beauty standards, capitalist structures create an unnecessary demand for commodities that drive profits.

As consumerism emerged, the beauty industry became a pervasive force that impacted all economic sectors. The beauty industry redefined “female corporeality as the main object of discourse and observation” to become a tangible commodity (Dimulescu, 2015, p. 506). Through the rhetoric of women empowerment, the beauty industry has created another process of subjection that sells images of “liberation and gender equality at the cost of starvation, physical mutilation, and constant need for approval” (Dimulescu, 2015, p. 510). The beauty and fashion industry showcases the dual complexities of commodities. For instance, commodities have a material composition and symbolic meaning shaped by production processes but become dissociated from their origin of production (Hermann, 2002). Thus, material goods have a mystical value beyond their utility, which Marx refers to as commodity fetishism (Marx, 1867). By dissociating the purpose of a beauty product from self-grooming and hygiene, marketers associate social acceptance and higher values with the product, selling a lifestyle dream that

creates an illusion of personal worth being bound to material consumption. Thus, to recapture and possess their alienated feminine essence, consumers are deceived into wanting what they do not need, and companies learn to satisfy this desire by refashioning existing products. Rather than deriving from autonomous decision-making, consumer desires are shaped by market-driven conditioning and a false consciousness constructed by hegemonic structures (Hermann, 2002). By marketing these "false needs," women rationalize these expectations to engage within the social economy, internalizing these ideals despite the conditioning from broader media production systems. As these extensive network channels reimagine beauty, this leads to feminist mass consumerism under the guise of female empowerment (Banner, 1984, cited in Peiss, 2000; Benbow-Buitenhuis, 2014). The shift from production-led capitalism, where goods are produced to persuade people to purchase them, changed as technological advancements and the ability to globalize production shifted the scale and speed of retailing (Hermann, 2002). Thus, demand-led capitalism has made capitalism more profitable, changing consumer tastes, and consumers in developed nations have been relieved of the seasonality of distance and scarcity (Hermann, 2002). Thus, the consumption rate has dramatically shifted as capitalist-led demand has transformed the marketplace. The commodification of beauty and the false desire of wanting to consume beauty is the byproduct of a demand-led capitalist structure.

The perception of the commodification of beauty can be analyzed from the perspective of trans-women buying into femininity for social acceptance. In the discussion of beauty, the inclusion of traditional notions of womanhood raises questions about whether the industry genuinely embraces diversity or capitalizes on new consumer bases. For instance, the "Dove 'Real Beauty'" campaign features women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as various body sizes, to promote diversity and challenge corporate beauty standards (Taylor et al.,

2016). However, the efforts to be inclusive and utilize women of different identities continue to play into the role of capitalizing on women regardless of their characteristics. Regarding the reaffirmation of gender identity and beauty, womanhood has been closely associated with one's appearance, and the persistence of beauty consumerism is not just a reflection of personal choice but a structural outcome of capitalism's ability to create and sustain desires. Thus, trans-women may feel pressured to conform to traditional beauty standards to be socially accepted as a woman. Yet this behavior not only reinforces rigid gender norms but also serves the capitalist agenda–especially within an economy that objectifies and commodifies cis women by equating their identity with consumption. The reliance on beauty as an indicator of womanhood perpetuates the capitalist logic that self-worth can be purchased and femininity is achieved rather than an inherent possession.

The commercialization of beauty is a deeply entrenched mechanism of capitalist control, evolving social expectations of womanhood and creating false perceptions of success and happiness. While feminists have promoted a consumer-centric movement to uplift women through beauty and fashion, the correlation between empowerment and consumerism has become paradoxical. Rosalind Gill (2007) describes the contradiction between the internalization of feminine consumption as empowerment, which is meant to move away from external objectification, and the internalization of the beauty disciplinary regime. Rather than opposing the oppression and objectification of women from external sources, capitalism has reimagined the ideations of beauty to become commodified and internalized within the feminine mind. As capitalist markets have developed through technological and media advancements, the shift in demand-led production has efficiently and effectively altered consumers' tastes, causing them to falsely perceive new products on the market as needs rather than desires (Hermann, 2002).

Shifting from the domestic ideals of the 1950s to the “New Woman” and today’s beauty-driven consumer culture, women have been sold different versions of femininity (Banner, 1984, cited in Peiss, 1998). Through the ideas of commodity fetishism, where beauty products no longer hold their purpose but an ideal of an unattainable lifestyle and outcome persists in dictating women’s consumption behaviors to reinforce oppressive structures. In maintaining dominant hegemonic structures, capitalist systems have perpetuated unattainable ideas to sustain a cycle of women's consumption, subjugating women to unrealistic expectations that their self-worth is tied to their outward appearance. Consequently, feminist theorists must examine the effects of a capitalist patriarchal system on both the production and consumption ends.

Discussion & Implications

Utilizing Marxist feminism to analyze femininity and sweatshops, it is evident that these issues are distinctively intertwined products of the capitalist patriarchal system that oppresses women. The mass marketing of unattainable beauty standards and lifestyle expectations constructs the perception that self-worth is measured by material consumption. Rather than consumers dictating a production-led economy, corporations have introduced a demand-led capitalist structure, which influences the market by inflating product value rather than practical use. Corporations delude consumers into unconsciously believing they’re autonomous agents by dictating the consumer market. Especially when "purchasing feminism" is rooted in the idea that empowerment derives from buying power and consumption. This cycle not only fuels material consumption but perpetuates women’s subordination by reinforcing ideals that sustain exploitative labor practices. By masking the reality of these products, consumers do not see or acknowledge that many of these goods are produced by underpaid and exploited female workers

in sweatshops. In the garment industry, women disproportionately occupy low-wage positions where employers justify cost-cutting measures that result in underpayment and devaluement of women's labor. Yet, the existence of sweatshops is a byproduct of the significant demand for consumption practices within the cosmetics and fast fashion industry. The dissociation between product and labor has created this paradox where the assumed empowerment of consumerism has constructed a concurrent system where women are fueling the exploitation of other women laboring for these goods and the overall oppression in this capitalist patriarchal society. Regardless of our positionality, we all contribute to a scheme where corporations remain the primary beneficiaries. Hence, women are simultaneously exploited as both laborers and consumers, resulting in a dual mechanism of subordination that sustains corporate profit at women's expense.

To sustain the capitalist patriarchal structure, the beauty and fashion industry harms women on either end of production or consumption. While women have equality and rights on paper, women remain obligated to social reproduction and perform most of the domestic labor while working full-time outside the home (Penny, 2011). Even though it appears that women are separated into producers and consumers, women and people alike are all subject to the restraints of a male-dominated system that reaps the financial and social benefits of women's economic participation. The undervaluing of women's labor in sweatshops and social reproduction, which upholds the order of capitalism, is a testament to the lack of appreciation for women as contributors to society. Women are tools that serve and reel in the profits for corporations that dictate beauty and unrealistic lifestyle expectations to maintain women's self-doubt and consciousness. Even with this perceived notion of economic independence and financial opportunities presented through job prospects or purchasing power, financial independence is not

absolute when every dollar spent constrains women in these secondary positions. The systems that people depend on for their livelihoods are dictated by a capitalist society, where people's need and desire for consumption overpower their desire for freedom.

Regardless of feminist movements and corporate campaigns that seek to liberate women and redefine beauty standards, capitalism does not liberate women; it only reconfigures women's oppression. The modern economy hinges on women as a vital engine for consumption and various modes of production. Thus, they must disguise choice as empowerment to sustain gendered economic exploitation (Penny, 2011). Separating these issues feeds into the false consciousness, where women in privileged positions perceive consumption as self-care and feminine liberation, falsely perceiving themselves as rebelling against patriarchal constraints. However, there is a lack of acknowledgment of where these products originate and the fact that women from underprivileged and underpaid positions are being exploited in sweatshops to produce the same goods that seek to reclaim and empower women.

The lack of distinction between economic and social stability allows the capitalist patriarchy to continue to dominate and divide women into these separate categories of laborer and consumer. Integrating Marxist feminism, this dynamic highlights the global division of labor that capitalistic patriarchy seeks to maintain, alienating women's labor from their production and dissociating the realities of labor within the consumer sphere in developed countries. In essence, feminism's relationship to sweatshops and hyper-consumerism reveals an ongoing ideological struggle to either challenge or reinforce the systems women seek to dismantle.

To deconstruct systems of oppression, women, as consumers, must be conscious of their consumption behaviors. The phrase discussed by Milton and Rose Friedman, "We vote with our dollars," is crucial in disengaging from an oppressive system as the people can exercise more

power through consumer decisions that initiate political action (Burgis, 2021). As a theory of reform, “the working-class majority of society might be the beneficiaries of change, but they can’t be the agents of change” (Burgis, 2021). This statement suggests that individuals in privileged positions or organized groups, such as activists, policymakers, or labor unions, can enact reforms that benefit the majority.

Consequently, organized and well-structured collective actions, such as boycotts, can induce change with immense efforts. For instance, the Montgomery Bus Boycott illuminates the success of legal reform through consumer choice, as African Americans, who comprised the majority of public transportation users, boycotted the bus system, resulting in a loss of approximately $3,000 in revenue for the government. The movement lasted about thirteen months and was successful as boycotters resided in geographically close areas where they could keep one another accountable (Burgis, 2021; Young, 2024). Consumers and laborers often fail to recognize the legitimacy of collective power, which stems from reforms aimed at challenging capitalist patriarchal systems. However, regarding the wide demographic of beauty and fashion consumers, geographically dispersed consumers engaging in prolonged movements are more likely to fail, as they are unable to collectively create a structure and strategy to have a lasting impact on corporations.

Rather than working towards reform, individual consumers' choices may lead to accentuated cultural differences and conflicts, further dispersing women and consumers from boycotting. Many feel powerless against global corporate capitalism, believing there is no viable means to protest. In 2016, the anti-sweatshop movement in Bangladesh transformed from a walk-out to a protest. However, the caveats of factory retaliation against laborers did not lead to significant improvement, but this movement resulted in the factory losing millions in revenue

(Young, 2024). Nevertheless, consumer and labor awareness is essential in shaping corporate behavior; progressive change cannot occur without systemic protest. Corporations do not revise their campaigns or products out of goodwill; they respond only to public, profit, and media criticism. For example, Shein, the company discussed above, only took accountability for its unethical labor practices after a series of online criticisms against the company. Similarly, the exposure of over 3,000 beauty products containing harmful ingredients targeted at Black women underscores the negligence of corporations that prioritize profits over consumer safety (Perkins, 2025). Inducing collective action to spread awareness and challenge could bring about immense change by being conscious of where we spend our money from systems that treat people as replaceable. The only way to jeopardize this system is to hurt their profits. This long journey toward reform requires mitigating hyper-materialism, breaking the cycle where women, as consumers, inadvertently perpetuate the exploitation of women in sweatshops. These industries target diverse identities, needs, and desires, making it difficult for consumers to unite in a singular movement. As individuals seek to fulfill their personal needs through consumer goods, this heightened individualism diminishes the efforts required to organize effective boycotts. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of consumer choices and systemic exploitation is the first step toward meaningful resistance.

Furthermore, solutions must extend beyond consumer ethical consumption and corporate social responsibility to challenge this exploitative system and promote women's true economic independence. There must be structural change, such as stronger labor protection, fair wages, the dismantlement of unrealistic beauty standards, and countering dominant cultural homogenous beliefs regarding women worldwide. Although consumer and labor activism may pressure corporations to reform exploitative practices, these issues are deeply rooted in the organization

and behavior of society. As patriarchal ideals have encompassed the world, we need to acknowledge further and reconfigure our gender role-driven mindsets to come together to configure a form of class and gender-based consciousness. The gender wage gap, the undervaluing of women's labor, and gender-driven consumption have skewed people's perceptions of what is essential as we become isolated and hyper-focused in our own lives to fund our livelihoods, from necessities to desires. "Most importantly, there is an immediate need for recognition of the root cause of women's manipulation by the cosmetics industry: rigid, patriarchal beauty norms. This recognition must be accompanied by the rejection of such standards by not just women but society as a whole and the subsequent acceptance of all bodies, skin color, and other physical characteristics as 'attractive' and 'beautiful,' thereby promoting a culture that doesn't capitalize on women's insecurities" (Audhkhasi & Pavini, 2022, p. 3387-3388). A woman's identity has become so inherently intertwined with societal views of beauty that separating these elements may be impossible. Moreover, the issues that arise from this capitalist patriarchy have become internalized in our perceptions of women. Therefore, it is crucial to be cognizant of the practices in which we participate as both laborers and consumers. Women cannot achieve true economic independence if they're working and indulging in a system that actively oppresses and exploits them.

Ultimately, I do not believe that women can achieve "true" financial liberation within a system that seeks to exploit them. By recognizing the interconnectedness of labor exploitation and hyper-consumerism through a Marxist-feminist lens, feminist movements can shift the narrative from commodified empowerment toward systemic change that uplifts all women, regardless of one's economic position. While women have significant purchasing power and financial influence, they are participating in a cycle that seeks to commodify women for their

labor and money. Nonetheless, it is critical to acknowledge these issues as not separate but profoundly intertwined and rooted in the perpetuation of a capitalist patriarchal system that only intends to subjugate women.

Conclusion

The inadequacy of acknowledging the interconnected themes of sweatshops and hyper-consumerism as a singular unit produced by the capitalist patriarchal system diminishes feminism's ability to rectify the consequences of women's commodification. Under a capitalist system, women's freedom to participate in the economy through consumerism and access to economic opportunities has facilitated economic development for women. However, the lack of demystification in commercialized beauty and fashion products has fostered a hyper-materialistic society that no longer considers the value of production behind marketed goods. While women may participate in these consumption behaviors, these same women are unknowingly indulging in a system that seeks to maintain women's subordination to the patriarchy—underscoring a continual cycle where women are fueling the exploitation of those working in sweatshops.

By utilizing Marxist feminism, I have highlighted the dynamic of capitalism and the consequences placed on women. Women are both consumers and laborers. Patriarchal visions of femininity are used to increase consumerism and sustain systems of exploitation, whether it is utilizing femininity to project unattainable beauty standards and lifestyles or the global assembly. Sweatshops have become the backbone of these superstructures that preserve women in a cycle of subordination and inferiority. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge the unconscious participation within these systems to recognize how structures operate to exploit women. However, the capitalist patriarchy exists beyond individual engagement. There must be collective

and strategic efforts through counterculture and hegemonic change for reform. Hence, I assert the importance of understanding the dual paradox of women's consumption and labor exploitation within the capitalist patriarchal system. Especially in a generation of hyper-consumerism, it is vital to understand the cost of materialism and consumption within an era of fast fashion and never-ending beauty trends.

For future research, I hope to explore how we can end sweatshops and hyper-consumerism without harming women further. Although these economic structures exploit laborers and women, they also, unfortunately, serve as an essential part of society. While factories and employers can transition to more ethical and sustainable practices for laborers, eliminating the garment industry threatens the local economy. Regardless of the opportunities for corporations and factors to outsource ethically, they continue to choose not to; however, the question remains whether these companies are ignoring ethical labor or whether there is no other option to produce goods and services at the current level while staying affordable and ethically. Nevertheless, corporations are fueling this cycle of consumerism, causing women to participate in these systems to maintain their conceptualized identity. In addition, how can we re-envision the feminine identity and consumption behaviors that allow women to feel empowerment without being materialistic, or is the feminine identity so intertwined with purchasing commodities that it cannot be separated? While this discussion has been intriguing in exploring the paradox between sweatshops and consumerism through a Marxist-feminist lens, more questions still need to be uncovered and discussed to create an avenue for women to obtain economic and social equality globally.

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