

Chapter 9

Digitizing Consumer Activism: A Thematic Analysis of Jezebel.com

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ABSTRACT

Charting connections between consumer protest, feminist activism and affordances of digital media, this chapter argues that social media and blogging platforms are becoming instrumental in creating new spaces for feminist action. Women's blog Jezebel (www.jezebel.com) has been chosen as a case study to examine how feminist bloggers use the dialogical environments of digital media to construct narratives of involvement in consumer culture. The chapter provides a critical overview of the major thematic categories identified on Jezebel. Such an analysis is particularly important for situating the blogosphere as a site of ongoing cultural negotiations while marking the limits of feminist consumer mobilization under the conditions of neoliberalism. The chapter concludes with the discussion of how Jezebel.com establishes a feminist networked space where bloggers construct diverse narratives of consumer activism.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism's relation to commercial culture and consumer activism has always been conflicted. The 1970s were marked by anti-consumerist and anti-marketing tendencies in the women's movement; feminist thought of the 1980s and the 1990s brought to the fore the complex meanings that consumers attach to commercial products and consumer practices (Catterall, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2005). Although contemporary feminist scholarship exhibits a continuous interest in the intersections of gendered, sexual and consumer citizenship (Cronin, 2000; McRobbie, 2009), there has been little discussion of how feminism reshapes the contours of consumer activism and develops new modes of citizen-consumer agency in the context of digital cultures.

Scholars of feminism and consumer culture have been largely skeptical of politics aligned with consumerist logics of the neoliberal marketplace. Angela McRobbie (2009), for example, tackles the impact of neoliberal demands on young womanhood in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. In particular, McRobbie contends that feminist concerns with sexual politics are

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rendered irrelevant in the terrains of capitalist economy, mainstream media and popular culture. According to McRobbie, the prevailing paradigms of individual empowerment create modes of sexual and economic regulation that curtail possibilities of collective feminist actions. Informed by these critiques, this chapter offers a different perspective on the possibilities of feminist collective mobilizing from within consumer culture. After providing a brief overview of the literature on consumer activism, the chapter offers a thematic analysis of Jezebel blog (www.jezebel.com) to examine the roles of feminist networked publics in advancing and reshaping the existing modes of consumer protest.

As a number of academics have pointed out, consumption has become a legitimate, although not unproblematic, form of political action (Kang, 2012; Lekakis, 2012). Consumption-based or consumer activism is an umbrella term for various ways in which consumers attempt to challenge and sway producers through displays of discontent: letters, street demonstrations, petitioning, lobbying, boycotting and the practice of ethical consumption, or “buycotting”, involving purchases based on ethical concerns around trade, environmental sustainability and the political meanings of products (Hawkins, 2010). As Richard A. Hawkins (2010) points out in his overview of historical and global dimensions of consumer activism, “boycotts, buycotts and other forms of consumer activism provide an opportunity for the relatively powerless individual consumers and workers to redress the imbalance in the marketplace” (p.123).

Given an increasing consumer awareness of the intersections in purchasing and political power, it is counterproductive to dichotomize between active civil duty and self-interested, individualistic consumerism (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012; Scammel, 2000). Instead, a more fruitful approach is to frame consumer citizenship as a form of political involvement based on consumption and implicated in consumer culture. Such framing of consumer practices implies that neoliberal consumer-citizens realize their political subjectivities from within rather than from outside of consumer culture (Mukherjee, 2012). Rejecting the notion that all forms of consumer activism are inherently futile or hypocritical, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee (2012) reconsider the productive potential of consumer mobilization in their introduction to *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*:

... commodity activism may illuminate the nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions that bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes (p.3).

Social media and the blogosphere are becoming *the* key spaces where voices of feminist resistance come into being. While consumer activists use a variety of digital media to reach their aims, the focus on the role of bloggers in consumer movements is particularly significant because blogs have become a major form of online communication and a default format of Web publishing (Rosenberg, 2010). Current blog studies, coupled with popularity logic of search indexing, tend to devote more attention to “serious” political blogs, tacitly reinforcing the notion that the political sphere is a domain of white masculinity where women and minorities cease to be political subjects (Pham, 2011). Given the limited visibility of women in mainstream blog studies, it is important to recognize political agendas and activist impulses behind women-authored content that covers not only governance and formal political institutions, but also a range of topics that pertain to popular commercial culture. Techno-cultural studies scholar Minh-Ha T. Pham (2011), who has written extensively on the economy of social media, argues that the high compatibility of fashion blogs with the neoliberal values does not preclude them from being politically significant, but creates political subjectivity as performed in and through consumption. Drawing on these insights, the chapter claims that Jezebel, a popular women’s blog, is involved in a constant nego-

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