



## Advertising and the Middle-Class Female Consumer in Munich, c. 1900-1914

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In this essay, I consider the emergence of ideas about the relationship between women and consumption in early twentieth-century Germany. I am concerned primarily with assumptions about women's buying instincts and how attempts by advertisers and retailers to capture the attention of women contributed to a "feminization" of consumption. Of central importance is the development of specific ideas about the relationship between women and consumption, and the way these concepts contributed to shopping becoming socially ingrained as a gender-specific activity. The discussion draws upon German advertising and trade journals, as well as on the advertising strategies of four Munich firms that served as case studies for a larger research project.

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In a world of ever-increasing consumer desire at the turn of the twentieth century, the marketing tool of greatest influence was the advertisement. Retailers constantly sought more effective methods of organizing, controlling, and promoting their businesses in an attempt to gain a greater share of the consumer dollar.<sup>1</sup> In order to distinguish themselves from competitors and to impress their customers, members of the marketing industry implemented new systems of selling that are reflected in early twentieth-century advertising and trade journals.

These journals were manuals designed to teach salespeople the tricks of the retail trade. The typical advertising and trade journal consisted of

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<sup>1</sup> Gail Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men: Psychological Constructions of Sexual Difference in Sales Literature to 1930," *Australian Historical Studies* 24 (Oct. 1991): 359-77, quotation at p. 362. See also Clemens Wischermann, "Placing Advertising in the Modern Cultural History of the City," in *Advertising and the European City: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Clemens Wischermann and Elliott Shore (Aldershot, 2000), 1-31.

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themed articles specializing in various elements of the retail business. Descriptions were provided of specific strategies that had proved successful: the novel window decoration of a small retailer at Christmas might be reported, or the importance of giving customers attention and advice, illuminated by an example in which the provision of sufficient service results in a successful sale. Clear instructions were offered for the layout and placement of advertisements, their content, and the use of images. The format of sales and advertising journals varied from a broadsheet newspaper layout, as was the case for the *Zeitschrift für Waren- und Kaufhäuser* (Journal for Department Stores), to a smaller version preferred by journals such as *Mitteilungen des Vereins deutscher Reklamefachleute* (Notes of the Association of German Advertising Professionals) and *Die Reklame* (The Advertisement).<sup>2</sup>

In addition to offering readers a selection of sales techniques and advertising inspiration, the journals detailed explicit ideas about perceived typical male and female consumer characteristics.<sup>3</sup> The construction of gender types, systems of customer classification, and the description of corresponding sales and marketing methods reveal prevailing perceptions of gender and their increasingly significant position in the discussion of sales and advertising techniques. Of particular interest are the specificities of female consumption. References to women were often implicit, revealed by the choice of adjectives, emphasis on particular products, or on areas for which women were most likely considered to be responsible.

The historical construction of the female consumer was the product of a consumer momentum created through a network of social practices and further molded by marketers and retailers to stimulate and maintain consumer interest. Whether in advertising examples for small businesses or department stores, in discussions about marketing, or in ideas about customer management, reference to the female consumer in advertising and trade journals could seldom be avoided. Industrialization saw the development of gender roles in which the attributes of the feminine were newly defined wholly in terms of a domestic and private sphere. The professional homemaker's skills included thrift, good domestic management, and the ability to buy wisely.<sup>4</sup> The expenditure of her household budget was an exercise requiring scientific precision. It was this financial

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<sup>2</sup> *Zeitschrift für Waren- und Kaufhäuser: Offizielles Organ des Verbandes Deutscher Waren- und Kaufhäuser*, published from 1911 until 1933; *Mitteilungen des Vereins deutscher Reklamefachleute*, edited by Max Poculla and published from 1909 until 1919, *Die Reklame: Ihre Kunst und Wissenschaft*, edited by Paul Ruben and published from 1913 until 1915.

<sup>3</sup> Gail Reekie, *Temptations: Sex, Selling and the Department Store* (St. Leonards, Australia, 1993), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Reekie, *Temptations*, 35.

responsibility and domestic perfectionism that was a significant prerequisite for the legitimization of women's role as consumer within the emerging consumer society.

The perception of advertising experts that women were instinctively concerned with the care of home and family reveals an unspoken and underlying assumption that women were naturally and innately suited to mothering and domestic duties, including shopping. The female responsibility as consumer for the household was seen as an indisputable fact. Underpinning much of the new marketing psychology was a definition of consumption as an extension of the gendered division of labor, whereby men were categorized as producers and women as consumers.<sup>5</sup> Viktor Mataja, editor of the advertising journal *Die Reklame*, clearly summarized this position in 1912: "The division of labor is approximately such that the man earns the money and the woman spends it; in doing so she not only looks after her own needs, but also those of the man."<sup>6</sup>

Within the context of the household economy, consumption was the primary area of responsibility allocated to women. While the homemaker was given the prerogative to spend some of the household income on herself, she also had to take care of the needs and requirements of her husband. Women's consumption of a range of items, both for personal pleasure and as homemaker and mother, had a direct influence on bourgeois consumption patterns and meant that female custom was of utmost significance to the retail sector. Thus, female consumers were not a passive audience for advertising but, instead, active individuals within the social practice of consumption context that increasingly shaped the German *Bürgertum*. Middle-class women occupied a formative position within that society by contributing to the maintenance of cultural and aesthetic norms through consumer behavior.

In early twentieth-century German advertising discourse, the term the "female consumer" (*die Konsumentin*) carries multiple meanings, simultaneously taking on rational and irrational characteristics or playing the role of both economist and spendthrift.<sup>7</sup> Female identity and presence within the public sphere were considered legitimate only when secured through consumption. Through personal adornment and external appear-

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<sup>5</sup> Reekie, "Impulsive Women, Predictable Men," 366.

<sup>6</sup> Viktor Mataja, "Reklame und Publikum," *Mitteilungen des Vereins deutscher Reklamefachleute*, no. 26 (1912), 7-13, at p. 10 (translation by the author).

<sup>7</sup> Gunilla-Frederike Budde, "Des Haushalts, schönster Schmuck: Die Hausfrau als Konsumexpertin des deutschen und englischen Bürgertums im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert," in *Die Europäische Konsumgeschichte: Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums (18. bis 20. Jahrhundert)*, ed. Hannes Siegrist, Hartmut Kaelble and Jürgen Kocka (New York, 1997), 411-40, quotation at p. 421.

ance, women could consolidate their social position and establish a level of agency. The socially acceptable and legitimate domain of female agency was, therefore, the world of commerce. While women were not explicit holders of power, their implicit strength lay in their ability to influence and uphold aesthetic norms, a task that was first a female responsibility exercised through consumption and that evolved into a female prerogative.

This double-sided construction of the female consumer stems from the parallel discussions about the influence of women as consumers on the retail industry, and the female shopper as “seduced” by advertising, resulting in the awakening of latent and potentially overpowering desires.<sup>8</sup> Women as consumers were generally recognized as discerning consumption experts and carriers of information about contemporary fashion and trends, or were at least politely accorded this status. By the same token, perceptions of women as biologically programmed to shop led to their representation in advertising journals as impulsive, potentially irresponsible, psychologically malleable consumers and, in extreme cases, susceptible to kleptomaniac tendencies.

By drawing generalized conclusions about female consumption, retail writers contributed to the social construction of women as naturally suited to the domestic sphere and, therefore, interested in the trivialities of fashionable consumption or the purchase of items for the house and home. The resultant adoption of these ideas in advertising strategies formed the basis for an assumed and unprecedented relationship between women and consumption. Female consumer “types” were epitomized and constructed through advertisements, which carried elements of both positive and negative representations of female consumption.

The larger body of research that provides the foundation for this essay includes the examination of the advertising material of four Munich firms that serve as case studies: the family-owned businesses Roeckl (a glove manufacturer and retailer) and Loden-Frey (producer of woolen “Loden” material and coats made thereof), as well as the department stores Warenhaus Hermann Tietz and Kaufhaus Oberpollinger. The types of femininity presented in these firms’ advertisements did not only involve recreation, and consumption was not necessarily presented as an activity tied to personal gratification. Messages of domestic accountability, family ties, and household chores can be read in the advertisements. They not only carried aesthetic messages, but were also emotionally charged, calling on the female consumer to purchase according to her conscience. The case studies demarcate the spectrum of female consumption and the messages with which middle-class women were presented. We might not be able to

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<sup>8</sup> Monika Bernold and Andrea Ellmeier, “Konsum, Politik und Geschlecht: Zur ‘Feminisierung’ von Öffentlichkeit als Strategie und Paradoxon,” in *Europäische Konsumgeschichte*, 441-66, quotation at p. 460.

decipher exactly how middle-class women themselves interpreted the advertising messages presented and what influence those messages had on women's perceptions of their roles as homemakers and consumers in the early twentieth century. However, an analysis of advertising strategies does allow an understanding of the themes that shaped the advertising messages and contributed to the construction of the female consumer as possessing an innate desire to shop: an assumption that would become socially entrenched and gain widespread acceptance over the course of the twentieth century. Advertisements from single-product retailers and large department stores provide an indication of the complexity of women's consumer choices and highlight the way in which advertisements concealed messages of hedonistic desire, social expectations, representative appearance, and domestic obligations.

The glove manufacturer and retailer, Roeckl, was a firm in which taste and elegance appeared as continuous themes in the firm's advertising strategy. The company perpetuated a particular bourgeois and gender-specific ideal in which women functioned as carriers and promoters of taste and visual aesthetics. Dominant in the advertisements presented was luxurious femininity, conveyed chiefly through emphasis on grandiose depictions of leisure representing a hedonistic ideal. To purchase Roeckl gloves was an attempt to identify oneself with a particular social class through material possessions. Roeckl advertisements played upon this representation of the bourgeois woman through advertisements depicting pleasurable femininity. While not necessarily reflecting her actual situation, the advertisements offered an archetypal image of bourgeois female life. They presented women with an aesthetic ideal according to which they should look, act, dress, and behave. Furthermore, as the primary consumer for both herself and her family, the female reader of the advertisements was offered a model of family life and, thus, a context within which to position her ideal self. Upholding the social position of the bourgeois family also entailed maintaining an external, aesthetic façade. Roeckl took advantage of this fact by emphasizing the role of the glove for the female wardrobe and focused upon the woman as the principal glove wearer, as consumer for the household, and as upholder of an aesthetic, class-specific ideal.

At the other end of the spectrum, representing responsible consumption, was Loden-Frey, the manufacturer of *Loden* material, a tight, waterproof woolen weave. Here, practicality, protection, warmth, and health were of utmost importance, with the female consumer of Loden-Frey products addressed as the nurturer of the family. Her consumption choices were not made for enjoyment, but after serious consideration, with aesthetic finery sacrificed for practical considerations, and personal desires placed behind the need to ensure the well-being and protection of the family. Loden-Frey advertisements presented a conservative family-oriented image of femininity. The company not only offered a more sensible, simplified, and traditional picture of femininity,

but it also added a regional aspect. It latched directly onto ideas about Bavarian traditionalism, which introduced the viewer to a particular region-specific construction of femininity, in which traditional dress played a central role. The Loden-Frey woman represented a commitment to home, family, and the simple pleasures of fresh air and exercise, while also functioning as a symbol for a particular Bavarian identity.

By combining ideas about pleasurable and responsible consumption, the advertisements of the department stores Kaufhaus Oberpollinger and Warenhaus Hermann Tietz provide an interesting contrast to the strategies of single-product retailers. In the department store, shopping was no longer merely part of the drudgery of running a household, but became an activity that could be combined with meeting friends, browsing, and perhaps discovering an unexpected item and making a spontaneous purchase. Department store advertisements promoted the idea of creative shopping, whereby responsible consumption could be combined with pleasurable activities and undertaken in attractive surroundings.

Advertisements containing extensive product lists, including fashion, accessories, children's wear, and housewares gave the female consumer a feel for the expanse of commodities awaiting her arrival. The department store offered women the opportunity to enter a world in which they were free to move around alone, undisturbed, and in which they could make independent consumer decisions. Product quantity and variety, theme weeks, sales, and cheaper prices were popular advertising strategies, which were not always gender-specific, but frequently referred to the frugal homemaker, or emphasized particular product ranges specifically aimed at women. In some cases, these direct advertising strategies were supplemented with information in the form of in-house magazines, which informed women of their role and responsibilities as consumers. Employing innovative advertising methods to make the most of product display and visual allure, department stores successfully created a cultural narrative around ideas about consumption, shopping for pleasure, and city life.<sup>9</sup>

Department stores represented a tension between pleasurable consumption on the one hand, and an aspect of bourgeois culture concerned with thrift, stability, and authority on the other. As a consequence, the female department store customer was not always seen in a positive light. Sometimes regarded as a sensible, economical consumer, at other times she was looked upon as indulging her own desires in the world of goods the department store offered:

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<sup>9</sup> Erika D. Rappaport, "A New Era of Shopping," in *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850-1939*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain (Aldershot, 1999), 130-55, quotation at p. 131.

Oh, the ladies often know exactly what they want; although they might only know it after a solid hour when a whole mountain of goods is piled on the table, when the head of the poor lady serving is throbbing—but when madam leaves with a pair of Venetian gloves, then she meant precisely these gloves and not the leather handbag, not the theatre shawls, not the lace collars and not the silk blouses that ultimately only stimulated her decision, but couldn't influence it.<sup>10</sup>

Advertising and trade journals used the idea of the perceived self-indulgent nature of women's consumer behavior as an opportunity to discuss strategies by which a woman's "natural" weakness could be exploited. A New York department store, for example, impressed the advertising journal *Mitteilungen des Vereins deutscher Reklamefachleute* with an advertisement that made the most of ". . . women's addiction to the maintenance and enhancement of their beauty."<sup>11</sup> The store was reported to have engaged "a famous hair and make-up artist" to hold a presentation about the maintenance of female beauty, coupled with a musical concert, all of which was, of course, free of charge.<sup>12</sup> The use of the negatively charged word "addiction" is typical of the type of language frequently used in discussions about the relationship between woman and shopping. An image of the female consumer was thereby created who, from the outset and by virtue of her femininity, was plagued by an addictive, overly emotional personality, making her ripe for temptation and an easy target for advertisers.

Advertising messages created by retailers essentially subjected the female consumer to a dual characterization: she was both the consuming homemaker and a woman seduced by the lure of advertising.<sup>13</sup> In its characterization and description in advertising and trade journals, as well as in advertisements themselves, shopping could take the form of an act of discretion and economy, switching in the next instant to one of pleasure, hedonistic desire, enticement, and impulsive purchasing. While the contradiction between the rational and irrational components in the image of the consuming woman remained unresolved, it was clear to retailers and advertisers in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, that women as consumers needed to be attracted by combining enticement, such as novelty and visual effect, with rational argumentation in the form

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<sup>10</sup> Hans Guggenheimer, "Vom Schenken und Kaufen," *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, "General-Anzeiger," Sunday, 15 Dec. 1912, p. 1 (translation by the author).

<sup>11</sup> "Schönheits-Vorträge im Warenhaus," *Mitteilungen des Vereins deutscher Reklamefachleute*, no. 25 (1912), 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Christiane Lamberty, *Reklame in Deutschland, 1890-1914: Wahrnehmung, Professionalisierung und Kritik der Wirtschaftswerbung* (Berlin, 2000), 72.

of competitive prices and quality standards.<sup>14</sup> This was achieved most skillfully by the department store marketing machine, in which marketing campaigns cleverly combined messages of rational shopping with endless opportunities for spontaneous purchases. Advertisements became less product-centered, focusing equally on the experience of consumption and the increasing thematic importance of the product-user relationship.<sup>15</sup> Sliding between duty and delight, the middle-class female consumer remained always at risk of being perceived as failing to meet the socially prescribed expectations according to which her societal position was defined.

Early twentieth-century advertisements directed toward German women in Munich promoted not only a specific product, but also sold a particular type of femininity. The concept of femininity in relation to consumption moved along two primary tangents: pleasurable femininity and responsible femininity. By buying a particular product, the female consumer was told that she could either be happier, more attractive, and better live up to the social expectations of her class, or be a superior mother, homemaker, and partner. These oppositional representations demarcate the spectrum of consumer identities to which women consumers were assigned. It is essential, however, to remain aware of the nuances and undercurrent motivations influencing women's consumer behavior in order to avoid the temptation to categorize consumer activities and ideas about gender-specific consumer behavior as "positive" or "negative." That said, what emerges from the sources I draw upon are dominant consumption motivations or tendencies: consumption driven by a sense of responsibility for the family, with concern for a budget, and consumption motivated primarily by a desire to create an individual visual appeal, or by the intrinsic pleasure gained from the activity of shopping itself.

The positive/negative schemata provided women with a model of consumption with which they could identify and that was in line with other duties and functions they held within society. Lynne Frame proposes a convincing argument that these typologies acted as a form of self-regulation for women, and thereby provided a kind of structural stability to prevent the occurrence of potentially socially destabilizing practices and behaviors.<sup>16</sup> These typologies arguably had an interpretative and norma-

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>15</sup> Pasi Falk, *The Consuming Body* (London, 1994), 156.

<sup>16</sup> Lynne Frame, "Gretchen, Girl, Garçonne? Auf der Suche nach der idealen Neuen Frau," in *Frauen in der Großstadt: Herausforderung der Moderne?* ed. Katharina von Ankum (Dortmund, 1999), 21-58, quotation at pp. 22-23. Frame sees these typologies as part of a project of "systemization" in which German

tive application that was directed inward as well as outward. Thus, regulation of the self also entailed regulation of one's counterpart. In the context of female consumer behavior, then, women regulated themselves as well as became objects of regulation and interpretation with respect to their role as consumers. Each of the four firms examined uses elements of the categorizations or typologies identified, sometimes favoring one model over the other or combining the two.

In this essay I have provided insight into the identities offered to German women through their engagement in the commercial world at the turn of the twentieth century. I have touched upon the polarities of reproduction and production, frugality and frivolous spending, responsibility and hedonistic desire, polarities that were carried in the advertisements themselves and in the discussions about the role of the female consumer in advertising and trade journals. Despite limitations on the full participation of women in the commercial world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, by this time the nascent consumer society had most certainly assigned women the considerable and double-edged responsibility for the perpetuation of cultural and aesthetic norms through consumption.

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society was systematically categorized, particularly in relation to roles assumed in the modern city.