

## **Ecofeminism and Role of Women in Conservation of Environment: A Feministic Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Women, as prime caretakers of families, are placed on the front line of the environmental crisis through their shopping responsibility. This paper discusses why women are playing such a major role and how eco-feminism, a branch of feminist theory, can be applied to the area of environmentally-related consumption to throw light on the connection between women and the natural environment. The purpose of this paper is to present an eco-feminist perspective on Environmentally-Related Consumption. The paper then develops an eco-feminist agenda designed to overcome some of the problems of the traditional approaches. This agenda will take a closer look at the role women are asked to play as environmentally-concerned consumers.*

**Keywords:** *Eco-feminism, Women, Environmental Crisis, Prime Caretakers.*

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## Introduction

Environmentally-related consumption (hereafter, ERC) is defined as the exhibition of environmental responsibility in the marketplace by consumers through such activities as 1) choosing to buy products deemed environmentally safe, 2) choosing not to buy environmentally unsafe or unsound products, and 3) properly disposing of products (Petkus, Jr. 1991). More than 80% of consumers are labeled "generally concerned" about the environment, suggesting that ERC could become a powerful force in the marketplace (Burnside 1990).

More consumers worldwide are showing their concern for the environment in the marketplace by buying environmentally-friendly products or by responsibly disposing their waste. Interest in this consumption behavior originated in the 1970's when it became apparent that the consumption patterns of industrialized nations were creating a polluted world. Marketing research mirrored this movement in the 1970's with a plethora of research designed to determine the characteristics of the environmentally-concerned consumer and evaluate strategies that would change consumption patterns (from products deemed less safe to products deemed

environmentally-safe or friendly). With the 1980's came a shift in perceptions of what were important political and social issues, and therefore, environmental issues gave way to issues such as the cold war and nuclear power. The 1990's have been marked by a return to environmental issues such as pollution, waste disposal, and ozone depletion.

Currently, there is much interest in the popular media concerning "Green Marketing" and its counterpart "Green Consumption" (Reitman 1992; Kleiner 1991; Nulty 1991). The latest trend in the environmental movement is the emphasis on reduction of waste generated at the individual household level. "Environmentally friendly" products have begun to appear on the shelves of supermarkets and consumers are purchasing them at an ever increasing rate. One poll revealed that the percentage of respondents who had chosen a product because of its environmental friendliness rose from 19% to 42% between November 1988 and May 1989 ("Cleaning Up", 1990). Another survey found that 80% of respondents could be considered at least "generally concerned" about environmental issues (Burnside 1990).



The proliferation of consumer goods targeted at the environmentally conscious has given the consumer many options. However, choosing among these options is often difficult because of a lack of, or biased information, questionable package labeling, and confusing advertising.

The purpose of this paper is to present an ecofeminist perspective on ERC. First, the research program known as ecofeminism is delineated. Next, traditional environmental research in consumer behavior is reviewed and critiqued from an feminist perspective. The paper then develops an ecofeminist agenda designed to overcome some of the problems of the traditional approaches. This agenda will take a closer look at the role women are asked to play as environmentally-concerned consumers.

### **Women's Role in the Environment**

What is the connection between women and the environment in consumer research? Statistics indicate that 80% of household shopping is performed by women (Berk 1988). Therefore, environmentally-related purchase behavior is left primarily in the hands of the female consumer. She is the one who must sift through all the conflicting evidence concerning

recycling of styrofoam. She must make tough decisions on whether to buy non-biodegradable plastic diapers or water-wasting reusable ones. She must be cognizant of labels that may be misleading or blatantly false.

A substantial burden has been placed on women consumers to attend to the environmental crisis. With women's role as primary caretaker still intact within most segments of society (Ferree 1987; DeVault 1987), women have had to take on an additional role: that of caretaker of the planet. Ecofeminism provides some insight into this connection between women consumers and nature.

### **Ecofeminism**

Eighteen years ago, well before the current environmental movement emerged, feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether cautioned women to look with suspicion on the symbolic role that women would be asked to play in an ecological crisis as portrayed by the dominant (patriarchal) culture's perspective:

Any effort to reconcile such a male with "nature," which does not restructure the psychology and social patterns which make nature "alien," will tend to shape women, the patriarchal symbol of "nature," (emphasis



added) into romanticized servitude to a male-defined alienation. Women will again be asked to be the "natural" wood-nymph and earth mother and to create places of escape from the destructive patterns of the dominant culture. Ruether's statement illustrates several elements that comprise ecofeminism. First, nature has been conceived by the dominant culture as "alien" and separate from humans. This human/nature separation is what feminists call a dualism which is when two concepts are separated and used for analysis. Feminists add the idea that when two concepts such as nature and humans are separated, hierarchy forms and one is given a higher status than another. In this case, humans dominate nature. Second, Ruether's quote suggests that women and nature have traditionally been aligned in terms of symbols and terminology. The popular media has demonstrated this by popularizing the slogan "Love your mother earth." Other examples that engender nature are "raping the land," and "virgin resources." Third, women are already very visible in local grassroots movements and other political activist groups centered on changing policy and rampant consumerism in order to save the environment. Thus, women have already begun to play that major role in the environmental movement that Ruether prophesied. One such role is that of

environmentally-conscious consumer.

The primary belief of ecofeminism is that the domination of women (as studied in traditional feminism) parallels the domination of nature and that this mutual domination has led to environmental destruction by the controlling patriarchal society. Within feminism, a locus of scholars believe that a historical, symbolic, and theoretical connection exists between the domination of nature and women. This philosophy is based on four principles (Warren 1990): 1) there are vital connections between the oppression of nature and women, 2) understanding these connections is necessary to understanding the two veins of oppression, 3) feminist theory must include an ecological perspective, and 4) ecological problems must include a feminist perspective. Ecofeminism claims that both women and nature are dominated and thus stresses the need for a more interdependent worldview. Ecofeminists believe that all living things are essential to the well being of the planet and that humans are not separate or superior. If this worldview were applied in ERC, the research agenda would be starkly different. More emphasis would be placed on the role consumers have played in environmental destruction and how basic value structures need to be changed in accordance with the concept of interdependence. This



different vision is delineated in the sections that follow.

### **Traditional Approaches to ERC**

In 1971, the Journal of Marketing devoted an entire issue to the role of marketing in the changing social marketplace, thus marking the advent of the environmental movement as an important phenomenon to be studied by marketing scholars. Concepts such as segmentation of the market to accommodate the new consumer-citizen (Kelley 1971), application of marketing to affect social change in such areas as fund raising and health care (Mindak and Bybee 1971; Zaltman and Vertinsky 1971), and distribution of recycled wastes (Zikmund and Stanton 1971) were addressed in this issue. The research during this period can be classified into three types. First, researchers tried to determine the characteristics of the environmentally-conscious consumer and how elements such as social class, demographics, and political ideology affected changes in consumption patterns for environmentally-friendly products (Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Kinnear, Taylor, and Ahmed 1974; Buttell and Flinn 1978a; Buttell and Flinn 1978b; Samdahl and Roberston 1989; Schahn and Holzer 1990; Vining and Ebreo 1990). Second, the impact of

variables such as environmental knowledge and attitude on environmentally-related consumption was studied (Webster, Jr. 1975; Diamond and Loewy 1991; Newhouse 1990; Samuelson and Biek 1991; Williams 1991). Third, influence strategies to increase participation in environmentally-related behaviors were explored. In other words, this third research stream was driven by the desire to "fix" the damage already created by consumers by persuading them to change or eliminate certain behaviors deemed environmentally unsafe (Henion 1972; Burn 1991; Burn and Oskamp 1986; Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren 1990; Folz 1991; Folz and Haslett 1991; Hopper and Nielsen 1991; Katzev and Pardini 1987-88; Luyben and Cummings 1987-88; Simmons and Widmar 1990; Wan and Katzev 1990; Witmer and Geller 1976).

A criticism common to all three of these research streams is that nature is viewed as separate from humans, or consumers in this case. When maintained within research, this dualism leads to problems. For example, the energy crisis saw a dramatic increase in prices for resources. Most of the research done at the time focused on how to change consumption patterns and improve information dissemination to consumers on decreasing



energy usage. Yet when the externalities (lower prices) were removed, consumers resumed their normal energy usage rates. No real change occurred. Also, trash disposal is another example of this separation of consumers and nature. When we place our garbage at the curb, it disappears. No real understanding of where the packaging and other waste produced from consumption goes until the local government starts to talk of a landfill in one's backyard or within smelling distance. Only then is the separation between the consequences of consumption and the nature it destroys dissolved and only then can real change occur.

As the decade came to a close, so did the environmental focus within marketing. The ERC literature that appeared during the late 1970's and early 1980's concentrated almost exclusively on energy consumption. The energy crisis of 1979 fueled consumer research in areas such as the effects of information on consumers, consumers' attitudes toward energy conservation, and consumption behavior directly related to the energy crisis (Petkus, Jr. 1991).

After 1981, which marked the year that energy conservation research proliferated marketing journals, the interest in ERC research fell off

drastically. It was not until the late 1980's that ERC research began to re-emerge within marketing publications such as Marketing News and Advertising Age.

### **Feminist Critique of ERC Research**

In order to maintain a strong research and political agenda in the area of environmentally-related consumption, a new approach to research is needed. This approach will overcome the weaknesses of past research by: 1) placing less emphasis on rational plans to change behavior that will "fix" the planet, 2) placing more value on the passionate and emotional aspects of consumers' connection with the earth, 3) emphasizing the interdependency of nature and humans, and 4) allowing for a more contextual and deeper analysis of the behaviors that comprise environmentally-related consumption.

### **"Fix it" Ideology**

The first critique is based on the "fix it" ideology. It is assumed that humans can "fix" the environment; nature is viewed as a force that can be harnessed or controlled and somehow humans are separate from nature, thereby, creating a human/nature dualism. The separation of humans and nature allows humans to do things to the environment that



they would not do if they conceived of nature as being part of entire system of which humans were one part.

Ecofeminism criticizes the use of dualisms in analysis (Plumwood 1991). More formally stated, a dualism is a disjunctive pair [of concepts] in which the disjuncts are seen as oppositional (rather than complementary) and exclusive (rather than inclusive) and which place higher value (status, prestige) on one disjunct rather than the other (Warren 1990, p. 128). Dualisms such as human/nature foster a value-hierarchical mode of thinking that in turns gives rise to domination. Feminist philosophy has derided the use of dualisms for categorization in all realms and ecofeminists have specifically chosen to focus on the human/nature dualism as the source of human oppression of nature. The human/nature dualism is the primary object of criticism in ecofeminism because of the manner in which humans and nature are separated and in opposition with each other. This dualism implies that humans are superior to nature and can thus dominate and control it. A recent commercial for a Time/Life Video series provides disturbing evidence for the idea that humans are superior to nature. It shows animals "in the wild" (meaning their natural habitat) "violently killing their prey" (hunting

for survival). The commercial then warns the viewer that some scenes may be unsuitable for young viewers and ends with the disturbing statement: "See why we call them animals". Animals killing other animals in order to survive is a "violent" act. Yet, is it more violent than when humans kill other humans for a pair of tennis shoes?

Currently, the "just fix it" mentality prevails. Traditional ERC research reflected this principle when researchers focused on behavior modification (making the house more energy efficient, using less electricity when cooking, etc.). In tune with this behavior modification agenda, American companies are rushing to produce products that will be deemed environmentally safe or friendly by consumers. Yet, focusing on consuming differently (in terms of switching "good" products for "bad") does not solve the problem of overconsumption, which is the core problem of which buying hazardous products is a symptom. By providing products that help "fix" the environment, American firms have redirected the focus of the environmental movement away from their own wasteful manufacturing processes. As one consumer put it: "It [should] be up to the manufacturers to reduce packaging and pollution... The average person can only do so much (Reitman 1992)."



Ecofeminist research would work toward getting corporate America, the government, and consumers to share in the burden of maintaining a healthy environment. It would place much emphasis on the interdependence of humans and nature and less emphasis on the "just fix it" mentality perpetuated by the current "green marketing" trend. By placing the interdependence worldview at the forefront of environmentally-related consumption, consumers would experience a more direct link to the consequences of consumption. This direct link would consist of an understanding that all consumption has direct and dire consequences on the environmental well-being of the planet. These consequences would no longer be overlooked or minimized. There is much evidence that the government and industry have long ignored the ecological crisis as evidenced by its lack of presence in the current presidential campaign. Ecofeminist research would attempt to re-link all the major constituencies to improve the coverage of the problem and would then use agenda-setting research to change the current mindset that the environment is "not that bad off."

### **ERC Driven by Reason**

Research that focuses on issues such as improving environmental knowledge and increasing environmental information dissemination in order to change behavior is also based on the assumption that environmentally-related consumption is reason-driven. Reason, as defined by such philosophers as Descartes and Kant, is sharply separated from emotion and has been given more legitimacy in research. This assumption is attacked on two different levels by feminists. First, the stance purports that research should be conducted without any emotion, such as passion, desire, caring, and love. Second, research should maintain an approach that focuses on rational strategies for changing behavior such as improving knowledge of environmental matters through information dispersion. Nowhere is this ideology more prominent than in recycling research. Most recycling research studies compliance (in mandatory recycling programs) and participation (in voluntary recycling programs). Incentive-based strategies were the most prominent solutions offered to this problem. Virtually no research exists that studied the passion or emotion that often drives consumers to "think globally, act locally."





Emotion, feeling, and passion have traditionally been aligned with women and have not been given equal legitimacy within ERC (or any other) research. Unfortunately, when dealing with such a disturbing issue as global destruction stemming from flagrant consumption, the rational appeal may be the least effective and the most confusing (given all the incongruous information regarding such issues as cloth versus disposable diapers).

Feminist research into our connection with the environment would look much different. It would place passion and emotion at the center of the research and focus on the connectedness that drives consumers to perform environmentally-related behaviors. The rational style of decision making is inadequate for explaining ERC. For example, what inspires a consumer to purchase recycled computer paper when it is a lesser quality product priced higher? Utility maximization theory fails to explain fully the highly context-dependent and emotionally-driven behaviors of the environmentally-conscious consumer (see Hirschman, forthcoming). Feminist research would instead locate the female consumer and her everyday experiences at the center of the research to determine whether passion and emotion are part of the process.

### **Universalizing Consciousness and Behavior**

Defining and quantifying the environmentally-conscious consumer in terms of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics assumes that the consciousness experienced is of a universal nature. As discussed above, ERC research had focused primarily on trying to discern those characteristics that could be used to target environmentally-conscious consumers. Universal positions based on moral abstraction and disconnection fail to capture the often context-dependent, particularistic nature of many environmental behaviors. For example, many consumers consider themselves to be positively disposed to recycling, however, there are many contexts in which it is difficult to remain true to this conviction. How many consumers are willing to carry empty aluminum cans off the airplane and to their homes just to recycle them?

The feminist research program would focus on understanding the context-dependency of such activities. Feminists stay away from totalization of any kind. Universalizing theories perpetuate the oppressive systems already in place. Feminist theory would focus more on the historical and personal experience of women as the reference point. The women's world as "problematic" (Smith 1987) would



become the focal point of the research, thus eliminating the kind of universalizing theorizing viewed as controlling. Women would no longer be placed in the category of "other" and would be recognized as the primary caretakers of the family, thus, the primary consumers for household goods.

### **Objectivity and Detachment**

Related to the concept of universal quantification is the use of detached and objective methods. ERC research is no different from any other research stream in marketing in that the subject (usually a housewife) is separated from the researcher in terms of education level and perceived power. Distancing is argued as the way to achieve objectivity. Yet, from a feminist's standpoint, distancing merely reinforces the hierarchy of domination between subject and object. The essence of the research relationship in feminism is understanding the women's experience. The feminist researcher diverges widely from the dispassionate, uninvolved researcher in the positivist tradition by rejecting the need for separation of subject and object. For example, feminist scholar Pauline Bart conducted research on rape survivors. She did not distance herself from the women. She cried when they cried. After conducting her

study, she felt changed, different. This revelation allowed her to write an impassioned essay about rape. ERC research would take a similar approach by trying to document the amount of effort and labor needed to shop responsibly. One way is to utilize participant/observation techniques or diaries, which have been used before to measure a woman's "work" efforts in and outside of the home (DeVault 1987). The researcher would also assist the subject in making environmentally-responsible decisions by providing information and training, thus eliminating the subject/object split that has been accused of placing housewives in powerless positions (Hirschman, forthcoming) and raising consciousness.

### **The Eco feminist Agenda**

The female consumer has been given full responsibility for a crisis created primarily by the structure she is so oppressed by. This "servitude" is what Ruether cautioned women about 18 years ago. The responsibility has come in the form of increased (unpaid) labor in the marketplace as well as participation in local recycling co-ops and grassroots activist organizations for which, historically, women have been the foot soldiers (Lahar 1991). Studying environmentally-related consumption



from an ecofeminist framework allows these discontinuities to be uncovered and thereby assists in the erosion of dominant social and political structures. It is apparent from this historical look at ERC research that it failed to make an impression on the consumer community. Prior research emphasized the derivation of universal and quantitative measures of environmental behavior, relied on the logic of reason to evoke change in behavior, and promulgated the domination of nature by providing algorithms for change that are based on "fixing" the environment. The unifying goal of feminist theory is to transform male-dominated society. This goal is to be achieved through research methods that work toward raising consciousness. Feminists employ consciousness-raising research to expose and change structures that are oppressive such as the current system that has left the lion's share of environmental responsibility to women consumers.

With an ecofeminist framework, ERC research would take a more emancipatory approach. The research agenda would be focused on changing corporate and public policy so that the burden for the ecological crisis would not be placed on women alone. Policy changes would include mandatory ecological labeling of all consumer goods (as is already instated in the United

Kingdom and Canada) and stricter pollution regulations. Other countries such as Italy are more dedicated to the environmental movement and have already banned all non-recyclable packaging. Education programs designed to benefit consumers would be developed in order to liberate consumers from the complexities of a marketplace that has profit as its primary motive. These educational programs would be comprised of teaching the consumer not just to consume differently, but to consume less. This redirection would aid in the development of the "green citizen" and not merely the "green consumer".

### **Conclusion**

Introducing ecofeminism to consumer research provides the springboard for research into environmentally-related consumption by reshifting the focus away from the characteristics of buyers and how they may be motivated to buy environmentally friendly products to a more sociopolitical analysis that links women with nature and exposes how they have been forced into the primary role of "environmental housemaids." By exposing this connection, consumer researchers can conduct research that will benefit the female consumer in her quest to be an environmentally-responsible shopper. As Elizabeth Hirschman



so elegantly stated in her Marxist-Feminist critique of consumer research: We construct knowledge about consumers and consumer behavior. And that knowledge can be used for positive or negative purposes, can advance constructive or repressive social agendas, and can provide a fulcrum for progressive social growth or can further inhibit people's legitimate requests for greater autonomy over their own lives. Let us choose collectively to conduct our research in ways that will benefit consumers, rather than support the status quo which all too often manipulates, misleads, and suppresses them. By shifting our goals to embrace Hirschman's recommendation, consumer researchers can begin to understand consumers as impassioned, emotional, and dedicated people who have extended the credo "think globally, act locally" into the marketplace.

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