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Meg Janes

Bowdoin College

May 2020

GSWS 2261: Gender, Film, and Consumer Culture

Professor J. Scanlon

Pandemic Consumer Portfolio

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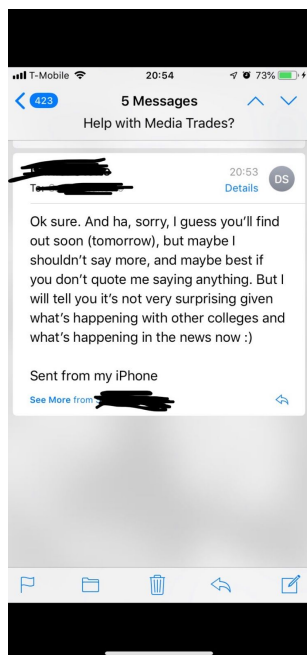
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Introduction: A World Turned Upside Down

Around late February/early March I remember hearing rumors that Bowdoin was preparing to go virtual in the case that Coronavirus became very bad. COVID-19 is a virus that has spread across the entire world and has killed an incredible amount of people. I do not remember who told me exactly, but it seemed as if in the span of two days, everyone had heard the rumor. My friends and I freaked out a little, but told ourselves that it was just an overreaction and we would definitely see each other in the next two weeks. I remember texting my family group chat that there were rumors going around that we would not return to school after spring break and they all pretty much said that I was overreacting and should not be worried about it.

A day or two before spring break started, all the sports teams were told that they were not going on their spring training trips. Because rowing is a club sport, the coaches can make their own rules and we were lucky enough to still be allowed to go on our trip to South Carolina. At this point, most people were thinking that teams could not go on their trips only because it meant that the Bowdoin Athletic Department could have been putting them in danger by sending them through airports. We did not see this as a sign of not returning after break.

While in South Carolina we kept hearing news of more and more schools that decided to send students home, but we had not heard of any of the NESCACs doing this, so we were a little worried but still hopeful. The night before Bowdoin sent out the email that we were not returning to campus, a few teammates were receiving emails from professors that were causing us lots of stress and anxiety. We were all hovering over each other as we tried to read emails that people were receiving. Here is one example that a professor sent to a student:



Receiving messages like these did not make any of us feel better. We were all crammed into the only room that had wifi as we tried to warn our families about what to expect and plan how we were going to deal with it.

The next morning we got an official email saying that we would not be returning to campus after spring break. What was supposed to be a two week long rowing trip got cut a week short. We were all scrambling to change our flights back to Brunswick, so we could pack up our rooms and head home. Even though we did not get the news we wanted, I was glad that I was surrounded by friends as we tried to make the most of what little time we had left together.

When arriving back at Bowdoin to pack up our belongings, everything was already very stressful and different. In Moulton, the workers had to serve you food and each item was individually wrapped. In an effort to reduce the risk of a coronavirus case on campus, everyone was expected to act socially distant, and leave campus as quick as possible. Additionally, it was very stressful to try to find a storage unit and try to pack everything in your room in a timely

manner. Many people had their parents drive up to campus and help them move out by packing everything into the car, but my family is from Salt Lake City, Utah so it did not make sense for my parents to fly out for just a day or two. I was lucky enough to have one of my friend's dad help me drive all my belongings to a storage unit.

To make matters worse, the day I was supposed to fly home, there was an earthquake in Utah that morning. The airport was shut down in the morning, but luckily it opened back up by the time I was supposed to land. For a brief moment it felt like everything that could go wrong was happening. As my dad said, "Mother Nature is reminding us who's boss."

I think I speak for most of my peers when I say that the idea of having to do classes at home was not our biggest concern. The college experience is so much more than the rigorous, interesting classes that are available. It is all about being with your friends and entering a new stage of life. They say that college is supposed to be the best years of your life, and this was being taken away from us. It felt as if we were going to be back in highschool when we had to do homework at home and eat dinner with your parents each night. Not that I don't love spending time with my family, I would just rather have that family time only be during the winter/spring/summer breaks, not the entire semester.

Out of my four classes, most of them tried to maintain the same syllabus and same meeting times. Social Psychology, Research Design in Psychology, and Intro to Sociology still had synchronous classes and assignments. The one class that adapted and readjusted to fit the current situation was Gender, Film, and Consumer Culture. The new syllabus required us to submit a portfolio entry each week discussing a different aspect of consumer culture that was impacted by the pandemic. I was excited that each week I could dive into a new topic of my

interest. It seemed that the possibilities were endless. Almost every business, school, or person has been impacted by the pandemic in one way or another. The way that people go about their everyday lives has a whole new meaning. Things as simple as going to a restaurant with your friends, going shopping, or working out are all either not allowed or just look very different.

So much of our lives revolve around us engaging in consumer culture. We buy and look at new things, and then just a day later we are already seeking out new clothes, foods, pictures, etc. to purchase or consume. The pandemic has changed the way we consume because now everything has to be done from your home. Our only way to actively participate in consumerism is through the internet and our phones. Almost everything was changed due to COVID-19, but some specific examples include workout studios, shopping, social media, and commercials/advertisements.

Workout Studios and Exercising from Home

As many non-essential businesses had to close down for the time being, many of them decided to change and adapt into a virtual system. One major example of this is workout studios and gyms providing online classes via their website, their app, instagram etc. Instead of driving to a studio/gym to workout with others, everyone is finding ways to workout at home or outside.

People who like to regularly exercise typically belong to a gym or attend classes at a workout studio. Whether the place is expensive or not, both of these options cost money and people have to pay in order to get their workout in. Now that the pandemic has forced these places to close, the workout studios are still trying to maintain their image and get people moving while stuck at home. They are live streaming and uploading videos all for free. No one

acts as a “consumer” in the workout world right now because everyone has access to these videos for free. In the past, the typical person who was a regular at one of these fitness centers, was someone who had the means to pay for every time they wanted to workout. They were buying into the fitness world and paying to have someone tell them how many squats to do or how fast to go on the treadmill. Now that these gyms are doing free videos online, anyone can be part of this “elite” group that can afford multiple fitness classes.

Additionally, the online and live streamed workout videos are eliminating the gender divide we typically see at gyms. Usually more men will occupy the weights section of the gym, and more women will spend more time on the treadmills or ellipticals. It can be intimidating for women (at the Bowdoin gym especially) to go where the weights are when lots of men are there. People do not want to make a fool out of themselves in the gym. One way to avoid this embarrassment is to stick to what you know and not try something new. Now that everyone is exercising in the comfort of their own home, people do not have to worry about others watching them. They are free to do and try whatever they would like in a non judgmental space.

I am unsure of how this pandemic will change people’s actions and feelings towards gyms and fitness centers once they are able to open back up. On one hand, I think people are now realizing that they are capable of staying fit while at home. They do not need to spend money to go somewhere to workout, when they can do it right in their own house. Additionally, people might now fear who else is touching the workout equipment at their gym or studio and not feel safe or protected from catching the virus. On the other hand, I think people could also realize how much they enjoy getting out and being somewhere other than their own home. Even

people who do not typically participate in the culture of workout classes might start doing them because they feel as if they were just sitting home/gaining weight each day.

In terms of a shift from character to personality when it comes to exercising and working out through this pandemic, it depends on the person. I think you could argue that because some people keep posting pictures on their social media of them participating in fitness classes in order to maintain an image for themselves, they are trying to attract a greater and more significant following on social media. These people are showing a curated self because they are trying to keep up with the trends during these times. On the other hand, I think some people are showing more character (authentic self) during these times because they are free to do whatever they want in their own homes. People do not need to go to the gym or studio and put on an acceptable workout outfit. They can stay in their own homes and exercise in whatever way they prefer without anyone else seeing them.

I decided to interview my sister. Sophie is 26 and has always enjoyed working out and she has been taking many workout classes during this time.

Me: When you heard that we had to stay home and the workout studios were closing, how did you feel? And what did you think you were going to do for your exercise purposes?

Sophie: I was bummed because I really enjoyed the social aspect of working out. But I also understand the need to protect the public health. I liked having a designated workout place, and a designated relaxing place (home). I thought that I would go running a lot. Maybe download an app. Get workouts from instagram. I could do my own workouts, it's just fun to have someone tell you what to do.

Meg: Are you getting your workouts for free?

Sophie: Well yes, but this morning the workout I did was from the gym I belonged to. I put my membership on hold, so I used to pay \$70 a month, but now I'm only paying \$6 a month.

Meg: Are you trying new workouts that you wouldn't have tried before the pandemic?

Sophie: I got different apps, but they are all the same types of workouts that I would do.

Meg: Does this make you feel more inclined to go to workout studios once we are allowed to go outside? Or, do you feel like you now have the means to do everything from home?

Sophie: I will still go to workout gyms and classes, but it's nice to now know that I can workout from home if needed.

Online Shopping and the Pandemic

Now that no one can venture out to the malls because the stores are closed, or they feel as if it is unsafe to enter a large public area, stores have to come up with other ways to make sure they stay in business. Many stores are promoting their websites and trying to get consumers to purchase things online. Stores are having major sales during this time to try to persuade people to keep buying clothes. I find it interesting that people can not go out and hangout with friends, so this is the exact time when no one needs to purchase new outfits, yet it is very tempting. The world of shopping was greatly affected by COVID-19 because now the items that people are purchasing are different and the way we are purchasing is different as well.

I am not someone who typically buys clothes online because I prefer to try the clothing on before I purchase it. But, due to the great amount of sales (almost every store I would shop at), I am tempted to buy new clothes now while it is cheaper. In some ways I think it could be said that the pandemic is actually helping stores become more popular. For example, after

clicking on one clothing store ad from instagram, virtually all of my ads on instagram now are for clothing stores. And they are not just stores with new clothes to buy, they are stores with a sale happening. Additionally, retailers know that people are just sitting at home staring at their computers. Consumers have nothing better to do during this time, so the online stores are taking advantage of this and pulling people in to buy clothes by having a big sale. Also, another way that stores might be benefiting off of the pandemic is because less-known stores are now becoming better well known. For example, a decent amount of the ads that are appearing on my instagram are from clothing stores I had not heard of before. I then end up clicking on the ad because I am curious about what the store has to offer. Just by me clicking on the ad, I am setting myself up for more clothing store ads. During these times, online shopping is acting as a source of entertainment. Various retailers and brands are providing consumers with something new to look at on our phones or computers.

The pandemic is forcing people to think about what items are necessary and what items are just a desire. Currently, I am struggling with the new idea of online shopping. I always enjoy getting new clothes, but would much rather do it actually in the store versus on their online store. I know that it will probably be quite some time until the actual stores open up again and it is safe to go, though. I am wondering if I should be buying new clothes now while they are cheaper because I might be mad at myself in the future if I have to pay full price for something knowing that I could have gotten a discount. On the other hand, I also think I would be mad at myself if I bought lots of clothes right now because I know I have nowhere to go these days, and a majority of my outfits have been sweats.

Furthermore, stores understand that most people are staying home now, which means many people are just wearing their comfy clothes. Stores are trying to sell cute, attractive comfortable outfits. For example, the tie-dye sweatsuit has become popular during this time. Elizabeth talked about these during her thing presentation as well. I recently purchased one of these, and the only reason was because I knew lots of other people were buying one as well. I do not necessarily need a tie-dye sweatsuit, but I thought it looked cute/comfy, and many others were also purchasing one. I think another reason why I decided to buy it was not just because it was cute or others were also getting it, but because it gave me something to look forward to during this time. During this pandemic, when we do not know of an end or how much longer, I was trying to give myself something to be excited about. The process of ordering an item and waiting for it to arrive in the mail is an exciting period and gives people a little thing to be hopeful for.

I do believe that there is a big gender difference when it comes to online shopping. Shopping is typically seen as a more feminine activity, so I assume that more women would online shop during this time and/or receive more ads for clothing stores. I decided to ask friends and family about the ads they are receiving and whether or not they are buying clothes/other items during the pandemic. I asked people if they had been online shopping during this time and what sorts of ads they receive. My sister said that she has not been online shopping during these times, and a majority of her ads are for workout related things. One of my best girl friends said that she has been online shopping for clothes during this time, but interestingly she keeps getting ads for the things that her mom looks at. My brother said that he has not been doing much online shopping during this time, and he gets lots of ads for different tv shows and food delivery apps.

One of my good boy friends said that he is tempted to get more clothes during this time but does not want to spend a lot of money, and his ads are mostly targeted towards clothing and fitness gear. These few examples do not necessarily support my idea that online shopping is very gendered, but I would probably need to ask more people about their experiences if I wanted to make a bigger claim.

I am curious to see how clothing stores will be affected after the pandemic. On one hand, I think that people could be upset that lots of clothing/items might go back to full price, so they are less inclined to shop. On the other hand, I think some people will be motivated to get out of their house and shop, and willing to spend lots of money.

Consumer Culture and Social Media During the Pandemic

When first deciding what to write my portfolio about, I thought about how much social media has changed or become more prevalent in our lives during this time. Although, I had a hard time deciding if social media falls under the category of “consumer culture.” Typically, I think of consumer culture as something a person buys (such as clothes, movies, technology), but after looking up a definition for consumer culture, I came across the quote, “In consumer culture, a large part of what you do, what you value and how you are defined revolves around your consumption of stuff.” I realized that social media (Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Tik Tok) is a giant platform where people “consume stuff.” Even though we are not buying into anything when using social media, we are consuming new pictures, memes, videos, others’ ideas and opinions, etc. Social media has changed due to the Coronavirus in many ways.

At the beginning of the pandemic, when schools were starting to shut down and everyone was arriving home from college, Instagram's purpose had changed. Typically, I think of Instagram as a way for people to see what is happening in others' lives and people post pictures to let others know what they are up to. Due to quarantine, Instagram felt as if its purpose had shifted. It was becoming a way for people to stay connected and socialize, and provide some entertainment during these boring times. For example, people were participating in Instagram challenges and then nominating other friends to do the same. Each challenge would go on for two or three days, or until it died out and a new challenge came along. The culture surrounding Instagram had shifted slightly. The first challenge to kick off was drawing fruit. A user would draw an orange for example, and then nominate others to do the same. This is maybe the most random, pointless challenge invented, but it provided people with entertainment as they looked at everyone's drawing.

There were also gender differences in the challenges. For example, the "spread positivity" challenge was meant for girls to put up a picture of themselves that they thought they looked pretty in, and then nominate other girls to do the same. Although, boys decided to take their own spin on this. They began doing the "beautiful men challenge" which was the same thing but for boys. It was more meant for the purpose of poking at and teasing the girls for doing these sorts of challenges. Additionally, typically women tend to be more active on Instagram than men, so it was interesting to see when and how the men decided to join in. Another example is the "see 10 push-ups, do 10 push-ups" challenge. In my opinion it seemed as if some guys decided to do this challenge because it was a way to show off their strength. There were women who also participated in this challenge, but it felt much more directed towards men. When you

can't see anyone in person, people have to find ways to show themselves off and remind others that they are still there.

Another thing I noticed was the different generations participation in these challenges. Typically, it was mostly middle school, highschool and college aged people being active with the challenges. The one challenge that I only saw older people (late 20s, early 30s) doing was the "first pic" challenge. This was when someone would post the first picture taken with their significant other. It is also interesting to note that Instagram (as a company) is not paving the way for any of this, people came up with it themselves and Instagram is just the platform used. A person's consumption of watching others' challenges and participating in it themselves is the new culture surrounding Instagram during these times.

Another social media platform that has taken off because of the pandemic is Tik Tok. Quarantine has caused Tik Tok to become much more popular for varying age groups. When someone opens up Tik Tok, they truly become fully consumed in the app. Watching the videos is very addictive and it is easy to just sit down and spend 20 minutes watching without looking away. Before quarantine, the majority of Tik Tok users were middle school and highschool students. Once all college students were sent home, we looked for more sources of entertainment and ways to stay connected, and one of those ways was through Tik Tok. I think one reason that people enjoy using Tik Tok versus Instagram is due to the more casual demeanor. People will spend hours editing a photo for Instagram to try to get the most likes possible, whereas on Tik Tok, many people are just wearing their sweats and not trying to impress anyone. It is interesting to note the various ways Tik Tok is being used. For example, my sister is running for a student body officer position at her med school and her sole reason for downloading Tik Tok was to

create videos to use in her campaign. When you can't interact with people in person, you have to find other ways to show people your personality and who you are. Tik Tok has changed the way people consume and participate in social media. An article from Business Insider discusses how Tik Tok has changed marketing and how "brands are becoming more comfortable with shooting video ads, specifically for mobile social environments." Advertising through social media platforms is a great way to reach younger audiences.

Another interesting concept to point out is how Tik Tok has impacted other aspects of life. For example, many of the videos are of people dancing. Whenever I hear a song now on the radio or Spotify, I associate it with a specific Tik Tok. Additionally, people will post Tik Tok videos on their Instagram or Snapchat, which is interesting because they are combining different social media platforms.

Social media platforms have all been impacted by the pandemic, but they will continue to be impacted forever. As time goes on, new trends appear and people have different interests, which play a big role in shaping how we use social media.

New Advertisement and Commercial Messages Due to COVID-19

Coronavirus has had many impacts on people, specifically people are told to stay home and stay socially distant from others. The regulations around stay-at-home rules are causing companies to be affected because people can not go visit restaurants, malls, etc. Almost every business has been affected due to the Coronavirus. They have to come up with ways to encourage people to continue buying from them, even if they can not be physically present. Brands are promoting themselves through the commercials they air on television. Some

companies are still showing old advertisements, but others have made new ones in light of the current situation. These newer commercials are trying to highlight our new reality and trying to show they have adapted to allow people to continue buying from them. The American citizens have all changed as an audience collectively because we now are only focusing on establishments and companies that can promise to keep us safe. Companies are hoping that by mentioning coronavirus and providing reassuring messages, they will be able to attract and keep their customers.

My practices around watching TV have changed. One thing in particular that I notice I now do is pay more attention to the details in commercials. For example, when I watch a commercial that shows many people in close proximity, I think about how that would not be taken well today. When I see people too close together on an advertisement, my mind automatically thinks about how they are not socially distancing. I see people crowded into bars, or see people being served by a waiter with no mask or gloves on and I think about how those seem like activities of a distant past now. I know that some of the ads were created before COVID-19 took over, yet I can not get the “stay six feet away from anyone” idea out of my head. Because of the changing times and new perceived norms, the way I watch tv has been affected. Advertisers realize that some audiences have these feelings and are able to adapt quickly to create new commercials that highlight safe/healthy behavior during these times.

Many brands tried to emphasize that we will get through these trying times together. One of the new commercials that was produced is from the beer company, Budweiser. They showed how America needs to come together and we can all fight this pandemic as long as we are all in this together. They did this very creatively by using phrases such as, “this bud is for the blues...,”

the reds..., the warriors.” Some might hear these names and think of sports teams, but in this case they were referring to all the workers who are putting their lives on the line for others, as well as just everyday people who are being safe. They are delivering words of reassurance and letting us know that we will get through these trying times together. At the end of the commercial, they write that they are shifting their investments to people who work on the front lines instead of sports. The whole ad pulls at some heartstrings by including an example of a person that anyone in the audience can relate to. People will see this ad and think how Budweiser is being considerate and helpful during this time, so they will be more inclined to buy their beer. Here is the ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DESeMqNDhm8>

Additionally, companies are providing benefits to their customers, as well as using humor to attract more buyers. One company that is highlighting these aspects is Burger King. By showing a man lying on the couch at home, almost every person in America can relate to this as we are all stuck at home. They are incentivizing people to stay home by telling them that the delivery fees will be taken care of. By claiming that we will all be “couch potatriots,” they are using humor and a play on words to encourage people to stay safe by staying home. The use of the (almost) word “patriot” reminds people that we are all American and need to work together as a whole society. Additionally, they are highlighting how they are donating whopper sandwiches to healthcare workers. This allows people to know that they are a caring company, and causes people to feel like they should support them by ordering food from them. Here is the ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsQ7Wto0FJg>

Additionally, Walmart has released a new commercial to try to lift people's spirits during the pandemic. The ad features Walmart workers from all over America singing "Lean On Me" together. Also, the ad portrays hopeful messages and moments of people helping each other. Even though the ad does not directly show how Walmart is taking social distancing precautions in their stores, they are recognizing the workers who are brave enough to come to work each day. This commercial also pulls at some heartstrings, which causes people to want to shop at Walmart in order to support those who are working there. Here is the ad:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyYep_bXM3w

In each commercial we see the brand trying to highlight their involvement in the protection of our country. They are all helping or recognizing the workers who are risking themselves for our sake. These companies' off-brand tactic to offer help for others shows consumers that they care not just about their business/product, but also the well-being of our country. I also think it is interesting to note that I am curious about how each commercial was made. I would think that it would require a camera and editing crew to be in close proximity to each other, which would go against social distancing rules.