

University of Missouri, St. Louis

IRL @ UMSL

Undergraduate Research Symposium

UMSL Undergraduate Works

September 2021

Torches of Freedom and Gender Inequality

Amna Baghli

gust0016229@gust.edu.kw

Follow this and additional works at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/urs>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baghli, Amna, "Torches of Freedom and Gender Inequality" (2021). *Undergraduate Research Symposium*. 59.

Available at: <https://irl.umsl.edu/urs/59>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the UMSL Undergraduate Works at IRL @ UMSL. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Symposium by an authorized administrator of IRL @ UMSL. For more information, please contact marvinh@umsl.edu.

Amna Al Baghli

Torches of Freedom and Gender Inequality

Men, and society believe that it is a problem with women wanting complete equality. Women battled through laws that did not allow them to perform daily needs, and if they did, they would be punished. Not only laws, but also society, pressures women to satisfy men into having women become inferior. Men denied women many basic rights, which then made women realize that they were victims. First Wave Feminism is a movement in the nineteenth century where women fought and marched for their rights using the phrase “torches of freedom”. In this paper, I would like to analyse the phrase torches of freedom and how it influenced women's mindset regarding gender equality.

In 1928, The president of the American Tobacco Company, George Washington Hill, wanted to have a campaign that led women to smoke. Hill has specified that he wanted women to smoke Lucky Strike cigarettes. First, Hill was in contact with a famous advertising executive, Albert Lasker. Lasker had the idea of linking smoking with weight loss and youthfulness an advertising strategy. The campaign proved to be effective and helped increase the company's sales. However, Hill wanted women to smoke outdoors confidently. The Father of Modern Public Relations, Edward Bernays, was hired in the smoking department to fulfil Hill's aspirations. As put by Leal, “the act was a political challenge as well as a break in customs of the time: smoking was an exclusively male habit” (Leal et al. 49). Bernays approached the practice of smoking through a psychoanalytical lens. With the help of the psychoanalyst, A.A. Brill, they presented cigarette smoking as a symbol of feminine freedom, or the “torches of freedom”. The campaign has started when, in the Journal of Historical Research in Marketing, Maclaran introduced in 2012,

“Bernays then persuaded a group of debutantes to light up cigarettes during the 1929 Easter parade in New York City, ensuring maximum publicity for the event that achieved widespread news coverage across the USA, under the evocative caption: Torches of Freedom. This highly successful campaign is seen as having a lasting effect on women smoking” (2012:23).

By choosing the debutantes, Bernays is demonstrating to all kind of women, rich or poor, that it is fashionable, elegant, and rebellious for a woman to start smoking outdoors. Because of the Ninth Amendment that granted women the right to vote, they marched through the parade with cigarettes instead of signs. Smoking publicly was an extreme message from women to society, men, and even themselves, to show them that they now can smoke publicly without fear of judgment. When women who are from a lower class see a woman from a higher class feeling confident in smoking outdoors, they would be encouraged to believe that it is elegant and fashionable. Bernays had lots of media coverage of the event that has happened in the parade, so the image of rich women was widespread quickly to the women around the country. “By the last years of the 1920s, hesitations about convention and mores among tobacco advertisers had succumbed to a widespread recognition that increased numbers of women smoking presented a vast new market for the cigarette” (Brandt 64). The advertising campaign was a huge success. Having women in the cigarette market proved beneficial for the tobacco companies. When women are confidently smoking, they would also be confident in buying cigarette’s publicly and buying as much as they need, which is a vast benefit for the companies. The media always follows behind any movement that will benefit the idea of men being dominant. So, when the media is portraying equality from the point of view of a male, it will be natural for the cigarette

companies to capitalize from this idea. The companies will be benefited from both making more money and appear pro equality in front of women.

Bernays capitalized on first wave feminism. First wave feminism was during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and it had a big influence on how Bernays designed the campaign ad. Feminist activists wanted to shed light on how women's lives were tragic. During these times, women, according to law were second-class citizens who were denied basic rights such as not being allowed to vote, get into any legal contracts, and own property. Finally, in 1920, women got the right to be able to vote, which is the Ninth Amendment. Having the right to vote was a big step into the women's lives during this period, it made them realize that there is a chance for equality between the genders. Because Bernays knew women want to have equal rights as men, he targeted the audience that would be most effective in influencing: women. Women's main goal is to be equal to men, which is a goal that is not difficult to achieve. But, because of laws, some interpretations of religion, and men in society, women are oppressed in a massive way. Not only did women fear society if they smoked, there were laws banning them to do so. There were laws signed off by the National Council of Women in the United States that banned selling cigarettes to women. A woman in 1908 was arrested for having a cigarette in public in New York (Leal et al. 52). Having a law that doesn't allow women to smoke demonstrates that women are denied their own basic right to have a decision. Allowing men to smoke and women not to, shows women how the rules are not in their favor without a reasonable motive. Women during these extremely rough times, needed to do something to prove that they are equal to men, both opportunity and action wise.

With Bernays's approach in the campaign, women got influenced easily because it helped them with their actual goal: to be equal to men. Following the first wave feminism, which ended in women having the right to vote, was the second wave feminism. Second wave feminism was during the 60s and the 70s, and women had many positive outcomes. Because of being able to smoke outdoors without fear, and cigarettes became their torches of freedom, women were able to fight for their own rights. In the 60s, women were able to get their own birth control pill, which may be something small for men, but huge for women. Because women were not able to make their own decisions for so long, they were happy because of something that is their right to perform without fear.

The phrase torches of freedom influenced women on challenging the image of women in society that was designed by having men on the top of the social ladder. The laws put upon women explains the dominant and masculine thoughts that are deeply rooted in society. Smoking was a big part of men's lives, especially in the 1920s. Smoking is the gateway of a boy being transformed into a man. Women wanting to smoke was not even regarded. Bernays knew all about how women could not smoke in public and wanted to make it easier for women to smoke publicly. Women were seen as unfeminine when smoking, and to be able to smoke, they would always do it in secret. Smoking in secret was the women's only way out to not be judged by society. "Women began smoking in the United States during the 1920's, when the cigarette was adopted by factory workers and college women as a symbol of rebellion, independence, and equality" (Craig 2). The cigarette symbolizes power and dominance for men, but for women, it symbolizes rebellion. Whenever a woman wants to rebel against a man, or against society, the first thing she does is start smoking. Because men have made the cigarette as a symbol of power,

women are striving for it too. Even though smoking is bad for both women and men's health, women if seen, are judged doing so. Both genders look the same when smoking, and both have the same side effects. The only difference is that women are more at risk is when they are pregnant. If a woman smokes when pregnant, the baby can have many genetic defects and health issues including heart problems. But other than being pregnant, a woman should have the right to choose to smoke, equally like how a man has the same option. Therefore, the campaign that Bernays made, is effective for first, the tobacco companies by getting more income, and second for the women who actually want to smoke but are afraid because of society pressures. It is hard for women to challenge gender stereotypes, especially in the early twentieth century, so they try their hardest wanting to overthrow the image made for them by society, and especially by men.

One of the most important concepts of why women could not smoke in public, and be held accountable if they did in private, is because of the male gaze, a concept "to account for the position of women as objects to be looked at, while men do the looking" (Coppola 2). Men want women to look in a certain way, for them to be attractive, mainly for their pleasurable gaze. Women smoking is a threatening act for males because they are not inferior anymore, and they might be equal to them. When men are performing the "male gaze," they are seeing, watching, and wandering on the woman in front of them wanting them to be in a specific outlook that they find. In their perspective, having a woman smoke is not feminine. In the nineteenth century, "According to the etiquette of the period, respectable women would not smoke ... In this way, the possibility of women desiring cigarettes was not even considered, since it was a habit distant from their angelic characteristics" (Leal, et al 51). Women who wanted to be respected by society should not smoke, or else society looked down on them. For Bernays to hold this

campaign, he knew women would be quickly persuaded because they were upheld their whole lives in laws banning them to be comfortable in their own decision.

In conclusion, the phrase torches of freedom represent how the first wave feminism effected women's mindset on wanting to be equal with men, and Bernays taking advantage of this and having a marketing campaign promoting women to smoke publicly. First wave feminism has had a huge effect on how Bernays structured the campaign ad to encourage women smoking outdoors confidently. Since men symbolize smoking as something authoritative and dominant, women crave these characteristics too. Women were easily convinced to smoke after the marketing campaign because they want to challenge the stereotype of women in the perspective of the male gaze.

Bibliography

- Altensee, Fred, and Mark D. Bowles. "The Selling of Cigarettes to 20 th Century America."
(2010).
- Brandt, Allan M. "Recruiting women smokers: the engineering of consent." *Journal of the American Medical Women's Association* (1996).
- Coppola, Allison. *The Gendered Gaze: Analysis of Three Nineteenth-Century French Prints*.
Order No. 10826479 State University of New York at Binghamton, 2018 Ann
ArborProQuest
- Craig, Steve. "" Torches of Freedom": Themes of Women's Liberation in American Cigarette Advertising A Paper Presented to the Gender Studies Division Southwest/Texas Popular Culture Association February 25, 1999." (1999).
- Leal, Tatiane, et al. "Torches of Freedom: Women, Cigarettes and Consumption." *Comunicação, Mídia e Consumo*, vol. 13, no. 38, Aug. 2016, pp. 47–70. *EBSCOhost*,
doi:10.18568/1983-7070.133948-72.
- Maclaran, Pauline. "Marketing and feminism in historic perspective." *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* (2012).