In the late Victorian period, as growing numbers of families entered economic spheres where women were not required to consistently work, consumption—rather than production—increasingly became essential to the household obligations of middle-class women. By the twentieth century, as scholar Cynthia Wright argues, “shopping had come to form a major part of most women’s lives.”

This trend, which has been well-documented by scholars of Canadian history, resulted in middle-class women playing new roles in the Canadian economy and in the marketplace. However, little research has been conducted on the way contemporary advertisements and trade literature perceive and catered to this wave of female consumers.

Through my research this summer I examined the presentation of female consumers in advertisements themselves, focusing specifically on the way Victorian and early Edwardian advertisements present women and their interaction with the marketplace. Using the marketing of the sewing machine—as a product explicitly intended for and marketed towards female consumers—I examined the language of advertisements from four different Ontario newspapers: *The Globe*, *The Ottawa Daily Citizen*, *The Ottawa Journal*, and *the Windsor Star*. This analysis consisted of close readings directed by the use of corpus analysis software. First, I created a corpus of 188 advertisements from the four newspapers, composed of every unique advertisement found between the years of 1875 to 1907. Then, I used the AntConc program to look for common uses of gendered and economic language within the advertisement, individually examining the text and imagery of relevant advertisements.

Ultimately, through my findings I assert that despite the financial agency and newfound ability to participate in the marketplace as consumers, female consumption remained a source of social anxiety and the marketplace continued to be attuned more largely to gendered expectations about female desire. Throughout the course of my research, I found that many of the advertisements depicted the marketplace as a deceitful and manipulative place, presenting themselves as the only reliable company in a sea of lawless sales practices. In describing the untrustworthiness of the market, the advertisements also emphasize that the intelligent consumer must be able to see beyond trickery: while many women can be duped into paying exorbitant prices for a machine, one 1899 ad notes, “the prudent housekeepers of Ottawa” should not be. Several ads similarly depict the experience of shopping for a new machine as one to be minimized and avoided. In this way, though each store presents itself as a haven for female shoppers, participation in the marketplace more generally is implied unpleasant and dangerous.

In addition to the implication that the female consumer should avoid the vulgarity of consumption, my analysis of the ads also indicates gendered expectations create a disconnect between the marketing of sewing machines and the real-life concerns of the women buying them. Firstly, the ads demonstrate a preoccupation with aesthetics that contradicts the realities of the cabinet sewing machine industry from the period. However, as noted by sewing machine historians, in North America the late Victorian sewing machine was characterized by a distinct design, with very few machines deviating from the standard. Moreover, analyses of the sewing machine industry of Ontario in particular suggest that the popularity of sewing machines within the province can more directly be attributed to cheaper prices and increased efficiency, with many Ontario-built machines considered unfashionable for the period. Furthermore, this disconnect appears to contradict a contemporary understanding of female consumption, as scholars in the time period suggested that women purchase material goods as a way to visually assert status and identity. While the late Victorian and early Edwardian advertisers may assume this to be true, emphasizing the elegance and aesthetic
impressiveness of the sewing machine, the reality of female consumption differs from these gendered assumptions.

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¹ Wright, Cynthia. “‘Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance’: Writing Gender into the History of Consumption.” Gender Conflicts, New Essays in Women’s History. Edited by Francesca Iacovetta. 236.