Crossing Boundaries/Drawing Lines: Gender Trouble in Consumer Research

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"But what is the different/other if not the dominated?... To constitute a difference and to control it is an act of power, since it is essentially a normative act. Everybody tries to show the other as different. But not everybody succeeds in doing so. One has to be socially dominant to succeed in it" Claude Faugeron and Philippe Robert (1978).

In this work I am concerned with the ways in which gender based knowledge is created and sustained in consumer research. Central is the concept of gender boundaries, lines demarcating the intersection of gender domains I will refer to as male/masculine and female/feminine consumer cultures in the U.S. My focus is on gender transgressions - movements across the constraints and constructions of gender boundaries. I turn to the terrain of gender transgression because here key properties of gender boundary construction and maintenance are visible. These properties (i.e., principles and practices of inclusion and exclusion) demonstrate the ways in which the one (male) continuously constitutes and is constituted by the other (female), and characterize mainstream/marginal gender dynamics.

Specifically, in this presentation I turn the research gaze to the margin in order to elucidate a number of gender trouble spots in consumer research. By margin, I mean those areas in which gender as a bi-polarized, mutually exclusive categorization breaks down. It is at these margins where much insight may be gained as to gender conventions. Drawing from a rich body of material including personal testimony, scholarly texts, film, advertisements, and music videos, I highlight such troublesome areas as androgyne, gender bending, gender blending, hermaphroditism, homosexuality, women taken to be men, men impersonating women, and women dressed as men (Barbin 1838; Butler 1989; Chapkis 1986; Devor 1989; Dyer 1982). From these varied phenomena I abstract key overlapping domains of gender -- social construction, biologically determined category, and individual as agent -- which serve as bases for a discussion of gender trouble in consumer research. Three gender problems are posed: 1) the reductionism of the bi-polar dichotomous treatment of sex, 2) problems of decontextualization (i.e., gendered consumers lifted from their particular social space and time, and demorphicized), and 3) the relative absence of individual agency.

REFERENCES


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