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Consumer After Modernity: Transcending the Feminine

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I

A paper presented at the first Gender and Consumer Behavior Conference investigated the historical connection between gender and consumption, illustrating the reasons for the overlap between the feminine and the consumer in modernist narratives (Firat 1991). While the paper suggested that a decoupling had begun between the culturally signified categories of gender (feminine and masculine) and the biologically determined categories of sex (female and male), it did not provide a complete discussion of what such decoupling would imply for consumers and consumer behavior in postmodern times. This paper will attempt to examine the consequences of the break between gender and sex categories -- that is, when female and feminine, male and masculine no longer exclusively represent each other -- for consumption and the study of consumer behaviors. The questions are: What happens when both males and females can assume feminine and masculine qualities and the order of significations that so clearly designated proper roles for the sexes and provided explicit guides for behavior goes into crises? What happens when gendering of the consumer as feminine and of the producer as masculine breaks down? Finally, what happens to a culture of consumption that was initiated on the basis of such a gendered order of significations?

II

As explored in the paper mentioned, and elsewhere (Habermas 1983; Franco 1986), modernity was, indeed, big on seeking and generating order through separating spheres and assigning "proper" roles and significations to them -- as, for example, in the separation of the spheres of science, morality, and art, each working within its own proper logic (Habermas 1983; Beardsworth 1992). In a majority of cases, modernism tended to separate spheres into oppositional, bipolar categories (e.g., subject-object, consumption-production, masculine-feminine, public-private). Such bipolar splitting helped in establishing norms for an order through privileging one pole of the opposing categories as good and sacred (e.g., production, subject, active, reason), and the other pole as profane and inferior (consumption, object, passive, emotion). Attaching such superior versus inferior qualifications and meanings to bipolar categories provided the "rational" grounds for identifying the essentials and principles of what was proper within the order of things.

In overlapping the categories of feminine, female and consumer, as well as the categories of masculine, male and producer, modern western culture imbued those categories related to the feminine with meanings that represented inferior qualities while those categories related to the masculine represented superior meanings as illustrated in Figure 1. The dichotomies shown in the figure were dichotomies used by modernism to establish an order that made sense given certain experiences in modern capitalist society (Firat 1991). These categories also aided in establishing norms; a major undertaking in modernity (Habermas 1983; Keane 1992; Steuerman 1992). There existed a void of norms because modernism rejected the norms promulgated by premodern (meta)narratives based on beliefs that a higher spiritual order existed. Also rejected was the idea that norms could be merely given by a higher order, without human inquiry into the material conditions of life. Since modernity still believed in the existence and necessity of an order, however, the search for and constitution of norms, be they different from those of the earlier order, were considered essential. As Habermas (1983) articulates in his appeal that the project of modernity not be abandoned, this quintessential quest for establishment of norms based on scientific inquiry into the material conditions of human existence had the central purpose of emancipation; the emancipation of the subject (the human being) from both the limitations of nature and the exploitation by other subjects.
Modernity rarely, if ever, noticed the paradox, and if noticed it was suppressed and repressed by the modernist rhetoric. Several of the paradoxes are explored in Firat (1991). These paradoxes, and the contradictions in the representations of the value of the feminine/female/consumer in modernist rhetoric versus modern valuation practices left the consumer, as it did the feminine, in extremely trying and difficult circumstances with very conflicting messages to be heeded (Butler 1990; Firat 1991; Flax 1987). At the same time that the consumer was the subject, the act of consumption, a feminine act, was profane, it did not produce any value but only devoured or destroyed it. As a feminine act, consumption was primarily a passive moment and one that required little reason or the use of mind. Again, primarily a bodily act, consumption was sensual rather than rational. Even the man, representing the masculine and, thereby, the mind that created and produced, became the performer of bodily functions and fulfiller of bodily needs and desires when at home, in the private domain, during consumption. However, the man had, at least, the redeeming values attached to being the producer in the public domain, as the active and rational being. The producer, therefore, could be proud of one’s productive activity, while for the consumer what one consumed was not to be talked about or flaunted.

With the growth of the role of the products of the public domain (products found and acquired in the market) in consumption lives in the private domain, representing the feminine increasingly required that the women consume market products, fashion items, such as clothing and accessories, or cosmetics. Furthermore, with the growth of “time-saving” or “labor-saving” products in the market, the expectations from the women at home, in terms of, for example, frequency of washing, cleaning, and cooking increased, causing them to consume more of these items and have greater physical and psychological pressures on them. In the end, “time-saving” devices did not decrease the time required by women in "consumption" activities (Acker 1978; Ehrenreich...
and English 1979; Moore and Sawhill 1978; Vanek 1978). Consumers (women) therefore, were being pressured to increase their consumption, but belittled for being consumers, never being rewarded for their expertise in consuming and having to endure a pejorative public rhetoric that kept them silent and in relative shame for their existence.

III

When different social and cultural movements and discourses, such as feminism, postmodernism, and counter-cultural youth movements rejected and successfully negated these significations, however, with the help of marketing (an ultimate institution of postmodernity) that increasingly glorified the act of and ability for consumption, the role and meanings attributed to consumption began to change. Largely, consumption has become an acceptable activity, even for males who have relatively been freed from having to represent only the masculine due to the cultural break that has begun to take place between the categories of gender and sex. Furthermore, these contemporary discourses that seem to have gained greater force in popular conscience and, especially, in popular arts of all kinds, such as music and film, tend to invest greater confidence in sensibility and intuition, as well as emotion, since they can provide ample evidence that centuries of emphasis on reason and scientific technology have brought not much other than misery for a large majority of the world's population and depletion and destruction of ecological resources, along with international strife. A limitless zest for production, control of nature and its resources has increasingly lost its privileged image. Production and being a producer of "goods" are no longer such lofty efforts. People, especially with the social impact of marketing and advertising as the art forms which command the greatest resources, increasingly tend to (re)present themselves through what they consume. Who one is, more and more, communicated to others, as well as to oneself, by what one has, wears, drives, does during periods of leisure, etc. The other side of the coin is that in contemporary (western) culture people largely make their judgements about others on the basis of what others consume, and how they (re)present themselves through what they use, wear, etc. One's "occupation," or role in production is, merely, a conversation topic.

With such a fissure in the consumption-production duality, along with the relative dissolution of other oppositional categories which linked to and reinforced the significations of the consumer and consumption, consumption no longer is profane, worthless, and exclusively feminine. Consumption is now an active endeavor. It is the "production" and signification of one's self-image. It is how one constructs and (re)prepresents (one)self to obtain position(s) in society and maintain livelihood.

IV

It is not possible, however, to yet state that gender categories are lost, or that significations of feminine and masculine are completely changed. Modern significations of gender categories are still very strong. It is just that males and females are now encountering a culture which is much more tolerant of both sexes participating in roles and meanings attached to both gender categories. That is, increasingly we find both males and females representing the feminine and the masculine during different moments in their lives (males participating in housework, taking on more nurturing roles with children, and increasingly consuming fashion products, cosmetics, etc., while women are becoming part of the workforce, managers, politicians, and representing very masculine qualities in their participation in production in the public domain), finding it possible to move from one (re)presentation of self to another in fragmented moments of everyday life.

Consequently, while postmodernist philosophers, such as Baudrillard (1975 and 1981), recognize the different meanings of consumption than ones in the modernist (meta)narratives -- as in the case of value being created in consumption, sign-value, rather than in production -- such contemporary awareness is not completely transmitted to popular culture, especially in the case of gender significations. A major culprit in this delay is the marketization of feminist, postmodernist and other counter-cultural ideas. Currently, the displacement of metanarratives from public consciousness and the disillusionment with universal norms have rendered the market the only locus of legitimation in society. That is, any idea, movement, or even culture can maintain itself only by translating its images, expressions, or messages into marketable commodities. There is no other basis of justifying or validating a claim,
in contemporary postmodern culture, than finding a market for it. Even when an idea system, a counter-cultural movement resists the marketization/commodification of its expressions, it loses to the marketized versions of its expressions when and if this translation is done by other parties, most often, marketing organizations.

This has largely happened to movements such as feminism. Expressions of equality have been appropriated and resignified by companies of cosmetics and personal care products, for example, in ways that expand the membership in being objectified/commodified to males. Equality between the sexes has, thereby, been resignified to mean that men can equally be objects of oppression, sexual harassment, etc., thus equally objectified. Such new significations are used to market products to females by implying access to power through having control over men, or through images of independence from men. On the other hand, products are marketed to men through implications that consumption of such products will make them more presentable and attractive to women. Thus, the ploys used to get females, representing the already commodified/objectified feminine, to consume are extended to males. Admittedly, the motivators and appeals used for women and men still adhere much to the ingrained modern meanings attached to gender. These meanings and images still reflect ideas such as that woman's worth is in her beauty and ability to attract men (Bristor and Fischer 1993). However, the idea of the necessity to represent oneself as an image, to present oneself as an attractive consumable, seems to be increasing among men also. One reflection of this orientation in women was the objectification of self in order to acquire the power of seduction extended to purchase of body parts through plastic surgery and implants. This trend (e.g., getting implants for biceps and calves) for purposes of "beautification"or "customizing"of body parts is increasing among men as well (Moyers 1989).

Currently, what we have is more a decoupling of sex from gender and less a deconstruction of gender. There are, however, several reasons to think that a deconstruction of modern gender categories will have to follow. One reason is the emerging transformation of gender categories from simply two, opposing, bipolar ones to multiple ones (Weston 1991). Even if some may not agree that gender categories other than masculine and feminine have already emerged, the boundaries of masculine and feminine have surely diffused due to gender crossings (Peñaloza 1994). Gay and lesbian lifestyles, recognition of individuals that cannot be categorized as male or female, and the meanings and expectations attached to both have gone through sufficient changes that their opposition is no longer as clear. Another reason is what was discussed earlier: The increasing occurrence that both men and women represent the masculine and the feminine in different situations and at different moments in their lives. Since in modernity male and masculine, female and feminine were so tightly identified, fragmented moments of "cross" representations will definitely have to create ambiguity and deconstruction of cultural significations of gender. Already, there are many indications of confusion, thereby, confluence in gender categorizations.

The confluence and confusion in gender also promotes a confluence in the conceptualizations of production/producer and consumption/consumer since, historically, these were also tightly identified with gender (Farat 1991; Farat and Venkatesh 1993). As mentioned earlier, consumption can no longer be conceptualized as qualitatively different from production. What were defined oppositionally as two separate moments, consumption and production, are just different moments in an ongoing, never-ending process of production/consumption. The likelihood is, therefore, that as this recognition entrenches within the popular culture, the two signifiers, production and consumption, will go through a transformation of significance. They are likely to lose their oppositional meanings, begin to lose their prominence among other signifiers that will come to represent different moments of the same process, and become only two of many categories that define differences (not superiority/inferiority or oppositions) perceived in the process of (re)creation. Again, as indicated earlier, consumer will be recognized as a producer of self-image), and these two words (signifiers), consumer and producer, may also become only two among an array of words that define different acts/roles in the process.

Certainly, the privileging of two oppositional categories among other categories is beginning to fade, and so is the privileging of any category
among others. The rejection of privilege by many popular movements is being felt in the loss of privilege for any signifier or category. It seems to be becoming less and less acceptable to "naturally" consider any ethnic group superior to others, any culture "better," "more advanced," etc., than others, and the list goes on. The preference for recognizing difference rather than superiority/inferiority is clearly becoming popular culturally. One consequence of such development is that production and roles people play as producers in their jobs, occupations and workplaces are not as important in defining who they are. Rather, as mentioned before, definition, or "production," of self(-image) is increasingly dependent upon what one consumes. Furthermore, what one consumes is increasingly the basis on which others assess one's position in society and make judgements regarding personality, etc.

VI

With the growing importance of consumption in the (re)presentation of who one is, there is growing awareness on the part of consumers about the necessity to "customize" themselves (Moyers 1989) for the different situations and roles they find themselves in. Development of modern society has largely fragmented life-spheres, and this fragmentation is not only recognized but emphasized in postmodern culture. Indeed, the separation of the public and private domains in early modernity is extended in contemporary society into more life spheres that present subtle or pronounced differences. Today, an individual participates in home life, work life, shopping life, recreational life, neighborhood life, and a variety of "social" lives (religious institution, school social, etc.). Each life sphere requires different attention and qualities from the individual and, consequently, in each life sphere a different "persona" is generally likely to bring "success" to the individual. For example, the individual may have greater success at work if one exhibits assertiveness, ambition, and decisiveness. In the recreational sphere, on the other hand, the same individual may get success among friends, etc., by being merry, compromising, and easy going. Along with the persona, in each sphere the individual will likely have greater success by "dressing for the occasion." These "transformations," or "customizing," as earlier mentioned, are mostly considered to be natural in contemporary culture, not as violations of character. Simply, it is "normal" and "smart" to do whatever is necessary to "get places," as long as nothing criminal is done, and customizing self is by no means considered criminal. As a matter of fact, well ingrained with a celebrity/star culture, most awed by film actors, popular musicians and artists, many consumers may feel that adopting a self-image that fits the circumstance is perfectly natural and clever.

When consumers become conscious of the necessity to cultivate varied self-images, they indeed cease to be consumers and become producers and marketers of self-images. They begin to perceive themselves as marketable items and, thus, their consumption ceases to be an end and simply becomes a means for (re)production of selves (self-images). The producer-consumer duality indeed ends. This is likely to further cause the breaking down of modern gender categories.

VII

With the breakdown of gender categories, and their further separation from sex, one of the foundations, maybe the most important and effective foundation of motivating consumption, that is, sex or sexual appeal, is likely to go through substantial changes. Foucault (1990) argues that sexuality also underwent a modernization in the sense that a duality was created between the surface and the depth (the hidden, inner), or the appearance and essence of sexuality during the seventeenth century, later culminating in Victorian morality in western cultures. Sexuality and the body, which is highly related to sexuality, were relatively open to greater frankness before modernity. With modernity sexuality moved into the home along with the feminine (represented, especially, by the female body). Along with the body, sexuality, began to take on connotations of profanity and baseness as opposed to the sanctity of the mind and mental activity (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner, 1991). On the other hand, sexuality was the most sensual of all sensations in both the rhetoric and the "hidden" discourse. Consequently, it united two most important elements of a spectacle: The sensual and the "unknown," therefore, the "sensational" and the intrigue. The more sexuality combined these two elements, the more likely it was to create another essential separation for commodification: Separation of the objectifiable from the everyday activity; the ideas, the visual images, and the
accessories from the common act itself. This separation, as in the case of separating the sand painting from the medicinal ceremony, enabled the "sale" of the objects of sex as marketable commodities. And, being already objectified in the image of the feminine, the female was an object of sex as well depicted in modern art and literature. As Baudrillard (1990) suggests, the female, representing the feminine had the power of seduction as the object of desire. However, as an object the female was determined not by its own will but by the social will itself signified by the culture of the modern that privileged the masculine and objectified the feminine in the image that suited the masculine desires.

These images of the feminine largely represented the imaginary of sexuality in modernity and, consequently, signified much of the products that enhanced both masculinity and, much more so, the femininity of the true consumer, the female. Such was the source of many products for consumption, products that were necessary to assure femininity and enable the female to successfully represent the feminine. Correspondingly, while not as many in number, there appeared products to enhance and signify the masculinity of the male. Having relations to much of the most important categorizations in modernity, and given its immediate relationship to sexuality, gender oriented marketing of almost all consumption took center stage in modernity. That is why the deconstruction of gender in postmodern culture is likely to create radical transformations in both consumer behaviors and in marketing theory and practice.

VIII

When sexuality based on modern significations of gender no longer can be used as the model and the incentive for consumption, what is likely to happen in its place? How are consumers likely to feel about and identify themselves? What signs are marketers to use in persuasively communicating to the consumers?

The market system has proven to be very resilient in co-opting many a counter-cultural movement's expressions by emptying them of their original meanings and translating them into images/products that are marketable (Frazat and Venkatesh 1993). This, therefore, may be an indication that sexuality, however signified, need not be the only or even the most important basis for marketization/commodification and consumption. The market and marketing sensibility can co-opt many a basis for creating images. The greater issue, therefore, is one of consumer identity when the modern gender order breaks down.

It could be said that, already, the fragmentation in (re)presenting images of self that differ across situations and life spheres have begun to dissolve the need on the part of postmodern consumers to find or constitute a centered, unique, uniform self. Consequently, that which provided the most important "proper" guides for such a consistent self, gender roles, may no longer be needed by consumers. As crossing gender boundaries, playfully integrating elements from gendered categories to (re)create or (re)produce exciting, marketable self-images become increasingly acceptable in a postmodern culture of fragmentation, consumers will increasingly employ different guides in (re)producing images. On the one hand, such fragmentation and the breakdown of gendered roles present a great potential for liberation from culturally signified and imposed limitations on constructing selves, as well as from requirements of having to be loyal to a single self. On the other hand, the issue of control over images represented by consumers is likely to become a central political and social as well as philosophical topic. As in the case of the feminine in modernity, if the objectification of self in representing images that will make self attractive, alluring, seductive, therefore, marketable is controlled by forces outside of the consumer's control, the emancipatory project of modernity will, indeed, not have been completed. The question may be: Will anyone care about such emancipation in a postmodern culture? If anyone does, will it be possible to achieve given the fragmentation, and given the necessities of being marketable, therefore, requirements of catering to the market?

IX

In response to the questions posed at the beginning, then, it could be argued that the fissure between gender and sex categories, and the fragmentation of self-images, while the modern (traditional) significations of gender are still forceful, create complex and paradoxical experiences for consumers (female and male). Marketing organizations, the principal players in representation and communication of images in
the market culture, currently seem to be playing on both sides of the fence. Sensing the impact of movements such as feminism and the impending fissure between sex and gender, they are more willing to (re)present nurturing, sensual images for men and assertive, powerful images for women. The roles represented, however, still seem to be gendered in the modern sense. This reflects in the way power, attractiveness and seductiveness images are played for women and men.

When the images played do not propose clear and precise messages as to what is expected of and proper for a woman or for a man, and yet when the gender categories still represent a dualistic, oppositional quality, both the individual consumers and the marketing organizations are left with a degree of confusion (Williamson 1986). As stated before, this affords a degree of independence for the individual. There is a greater possibility for the consumers to produce individual meanings for their consumption in a period of confusion; when the speed of acculturation of new sex and gender experiences lags behind the decoupling and decomposition of the old and the emergence of the new. Consumers are allowed to play with, deconstruct, reconstruct and signify the signifiers (items and practices of consumption) and become active participants in cultural construction (Foster 1985; Hutcheon 1988). This is partially observed in the experiences of consumer groups that are generally left out of the targeted markets and, therefore, left to their own devices for representation of (self-)images. When the socially signified and controlled meanings and role expectations are in the process of disintegration/ decomposition, this allows relatively greater ability by the individual consumers to control the meanings they attach to and evoke from their experience and existence. When and if the consumers develop a fondness for this new-found freedom, if the acculturation institutions indeed lag behind for a long period, the culture of consumption may, indeed, acquire a different meaning itself. Consumption will, then, no longer be a passive, received, or need oriented process, but an active self(-image) construction process. The consumer may then become a product that he/she, as a producer, truly participates in the production of. The role and meaning of the marketing organization will, then, also have to go through a thorough transformation.

Whatever the consequence, contemporary consumer behaviors cannot be understood without an understanding of gender and its demise. And, it may not be possible to understand future consumer behaviors without understanding how the decomposing gender categories of the day get to be resignified and represented in a culture of fragmented selves.

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