Consuming Patriotry: Consumption Practices and the Gender Project of Neo-Traditional Masculinity

Craig J. Thompson, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Douglas B. Holt, University of Illinois

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15639/gender/v04/GCB-04

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Consuming Patriarchy: Consumption Practices and the Gender Project of Neo-traditional Masculinity

Craig J. Thompson, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Douglas B. Holt, University of Illinois

While the effects of patriarchy have been discussed most often in relation to the subordination of women, the identity positions of men are also inscribed within the institutions of patriarchy and specific patterns of domination and subordination (see Connell 1987, 1995; Morgan 1992). Accordingly, we argue that generic statements about the dominance of men over women need to be replaced by nuanced considerations of specific power relations existing among different masculine and feminine identities.

Historical and cultural analysis have shown that not all masculine identities are dominant nor are all feminine ones subordinate; rather their positions in localized patriarchal hierarchies are relative to a field of semiotic, spatial, and temporal coordinates (Haraway 1984; Epstein-Fuchs 1993; Hearn 1992; Morgan 1992; Mort 1996; Willis 1981). Modern forms of patriarchy have been shaped through the struggles, shifts, and even reversals between subordinate and dominant gender positions that are precipitated by socio-economic forces and contextual circumstances (Kimmel 1996).

To further develop this insight, we draw from Connell's (1995, p. 72) concept of the gender project which denotes a dynamic configuration of social practices undertaken over time as people (individually and collectively) grapple with their socio-historic situations as gendered subjects. Through gender projects (of which consumption constitutes a major arena), men continually reproduce (and in some cases resist and even transform) their lived relationships to the patriarchal structures of modern consumer culture. In so doing, they map, with differing degrees of reflexive awareness, their daily activities and social relationships onto a heterogenous cultural system of gender meanings. Consumption meanings and practices are likely to be both a symbolic means through which their gender projects are enacted and transformed. Moreover, we contend that men's consumption practices serve to (from an emic standpoint) valorize their position within the hierarchal structure of patriarchy and (from an etic standpoint) symbolically effect adaptations that help to re-align the patriarchal order to ever shifting (and often threatening) socio-cultural conditions.

We explore this thesis by analyzing the consumption experiences and lifestyle patterns of ten politically and socially conservative, heterosexual middle-class, middle-aged men. This collective "gendered" group forms a core constituency for the burgeoning "men's rights movement" which includes organizations such as the Promise Keepers and the more loosely affiliated mythopoetic men's movement (Messner 1997; Schwalbe 1995). It is commonly proposed that this group of men is particularly prone to a "crisis of masculinity" because their relatively privileged position in this patriarchal socio-economic order is contingent upon institutional forces beyond their control and is most vulnerable to challenges from feminists, persons of color, gays and other subordinated social groups (Kimmel and Kaufman 1995).
In this study, depth interviews were used to gain descriptions from ten participants regarding their consumption practices. Our presentation will focus on their experiences and perceptions of mass media forms that are important to their gender project: the techno-thriller literary genre, action films, sports, and situation comedies. We argue that their uses of these media forms reflected a broader system of meanings that structured their gender projects. Our interpretation is that the meanings manifested in these gender projects reflect these men's collective response to their conditions of modern patriarchy.

We characterize this collective response as neo-traditional masculinity. This system of meaning entails an explicit identification with the dominant meanings of patriarchy and, reciprocally, highly contextualized usage of meanings identified with the feminine domain that enable these men to insulate their identities from the threats and challenges posed by their tenuous position in the patriarchal order. In our analysis, we employ the logic of Greimas' semiotic square to specify the relationships among this system of meanings and to highlight the paradoxes and contradictions which operate in the neo-traditional gender project.