Contextualizing Gender: Theoretical Perspectives on Consumption Practices and the Multiplicity of Masculine and Feminine Identities

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Just as individuals are not simply instances of the abstraction humanity, we are not embodiments of the abstractions man or woman.

(Steven Seidman 1994, p. 133).

Gender is one of the most significant social categories of identity. In everyday life, one's status as a man or woman (or more specifically a particular type of man or woman) is a pervasive, paramount, and largely inescapable identity marker that encodes a complex of power relations, social hierarchies, identity positions, normative prescriptions (and procriptions), and cultural distinctions (Fraser 1989). In recent years, consumer researchers have begun to explore the complex relationships between gender and consumption, and to also call for a broader, more theoretically diversified program of gendered consumption studies (e.g. Bristor and Fischer 1993). This session seeks to contribute to this emerging research agenda by analyzing the ways in which gendered consumption meanings are contextualized within the different kinds of masculinities and femininities arising from unique intersections of social class, family history and other socio-cultural factors.

Each paper in this session conceptualizes masculine and feminine identities as a heterogeneous system of culturally scripted performative actions (Butler 1990) that interweave elements from this multi-textured cultural matrix into consumers' activities and life projects:

Gender is not a point to start from in the sense of being a thing but it is, instead, a posit or construct, formalizable in a non-arbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices and discourses. Further it is an interpretation of our history within a particular discursive constellation, a history in which we are both subjects of and subjected to social construction (Linda Alcoff 1994, p. 114).

From this perspective, gender identities emerge in relation to the particularities of personal/familial histories (through which gender ideologies are differentially refracted) and other socio-cultural strands such as class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation (Fraser and Nicholson 1994, p. 258). These intersections can give rise to gender identities that are "multiple, transitory, and open" (Kellner 1992, p. 158) and that can transgress conventionalized gender roles, boundaries, and distinctions (Penaloza 1994).
Rather than seeking to identify generalized differences between the consumption experiences of men and women, the papers in this session address the questions of "what kind of gender differences and distinctions are constructed by men or women in their particular social settings?" and "what distinctive forms of masculinity and femininity are expressed through these situated consumption practices?" Across three different contexts, these studies show that gendered consumption meanings are contextually nuanced and signify distinct forms of masculine and feminine identities.

Thompson and Holt explore the consumption practices among middle-class, middle aged, heterosexual, white men. They argue that these consumption meanings are embedded in a neo-traditional gender project. Through this gender project, this class of men are able to construct a personal identity that assuages the "crisis of masculinity" precipitated by their collective position in the patriarchal social hierarchy. They further show that sustaining this neo-traditional gender project necessitates a continuous, context specific movement between dominant (i.e. traditionally masculine) meanings and subordinate (i.e. traditionally feminine) meanings within the ideological complex of patriarchy.

The paper by Sandikci and Ringberg focuses on sexual imagery in advertising. The paper's motivation comes from Stern's (1991) distinction between pornography versus romance, which itself is based on the work of Snitow (1978). The paper problematizes the idea that romance is for women and pornography is for men. Instead the researchers propose a view of pornography and romance that is sensitive to the multiple sexual identities as well as the socio-cultural locale of individuals. By interviewing gay, lesbian, straight men and women from different socio-cultural layers, Sandikci and Ringberg attempt to understand both how different interpretive communities define pornography and romance in their own terms, and how these definitions affect what they view as pornography or romance in advertising imagery.

In her analysis of the consumption experiences of Italian women, Tambyah presents a feminized view of assimilation that has been lacking in the current literature. She examines the confluence of gender and ethnicity, and their effects on individual and communal consumption practices. Specifically, her paper explores how these women enact symbolic consumption behaviors in their homes and communities, and how these processes are linked to their narratives of identity as Italian women.