Gender in the Millennial Imagination

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Gender in the Millennial Imagination

Special Session Summary

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Session Overview

So-called Postmodern theory promises us a new freedom to create our own self-image(s) (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) and to explore multiple gender identities (Kellner, 1992), identities that transgress conventional boundaries and distinctions (Penaloza, 1994). In turn, the world of consumption enables and facilitates the symbolic expression of such diversity and pluralism. Yet market diversity does not necessarily mean human diversity (Mort, 1996) although it may be mistaken as such. In other words, choice in the marketplace does not necessarily translate into freedom of choice for individuals, constrained as we are by social and cultural norms.

At the dawning (albeit controversially, cf. Gould, 1998) of this new millennium, we question whether postmodern promises are living up to their liberating expectations. Through an analysis of various images of gender, the three papers in this session build on each other to show that we are still very constrained by our gender roles and that the so-called gender dichotomy continues to thrive. In a culture that remains determinedly heterosexist and patriarchal (Schroeder, 1998), there is much yet to be achieved before we have ‘equal opportunities’ in terms of gender identities; before we can break free from the gender ‘straight’ jacket, as it were, and be at liberty to choose. Key questions of gender theory remain: should women adopt masculinity to get ahead? Should men strive to attain feminine traits? Can we move beyond dichotomous categories of gender? Should we? How do representations affect lived experience, and what role does marketing, in particular have in imagining gender?

Using Edward Bellamy’s (1888) futuristic vision of the year 2000 as a springboard for the session, Schroeder’s paper explores the concept of gender equality portrayed in Looking Backward. He shows that whilst Bellamy’s concept represented a major advance in thinking for his time, his notion of gender revolved around a male-constructed heterosexual ‘norm’ for men and women. This notion is then contrasted to present day Sweden, the most gender equitable country in the world, according to recent statistics. What does gender equity
look like in a real place? How have imaginations of gender influenced how gender roles and gender equity is constructed in political, social, and marketing discourse?

In the second paper Stevens and Maclaran question whether we have moved much beyond Bellamy’s vision as they reflect on that cultural icon of the late 90s, Ally McBeal, arguably the most popular female character on television (Bellafante, 1998) and a figure that has captured the popular imagination of both women and men. Through Ally, David Kelley, her creator, offers an image of the professional woman as a frazzled, self-absorbed girl who spends most of her time fantasising about her failed love life. Stevens and Maclaran conclude that this portrayal of Ally McBeal is an archetype of femininity defined by men: a man’s woman, a little girl lost, an incomplete woman/child in need of a man/adult to make her whole. As such, Ally may even represent a retrogressive step in gender equality.

In the third paper Heilbrunn explores the power of contemporary brands to shape sexual roles and identities. Using a semiotic square of ‘maleness’ as defined by Greimas (1983) and Floch (1990), Heilbrunn positions leading brands on this square to discuss their representations of masculinity and femininity. Through this square he then considers the use of the ‘endrogynon’ position by companies such as Calvin Klein, and suggests that the power of such brands may lie in their ability to blur gender boundaries. In addition, he shows that these androgynous images are not necessarily gender neutral and that they are still defined by their relationship to an overarching category of ‘maleness’. The paper demonstrates how these brands try to help individuals to renegotiate their sexual identities by playing alternatively on the various sexual positions offered by the square. Hence, there is an essential circulation process around these positions which in turn may offer a potential transformation of sexual roles.

Summary of Individual Papers

Utopian Discourses of Gender Equality

Jonathan Schroeder, Royal Institute of Technology

Edward Bellamy’s famous 1888 best-seller Looking Backward: 2000–1887 imagined a paradisical world where social and economic problems of poverty, strife, class, and war were eliminated through a utopian political economy based on socialist principles. Equality is central to Bellamy’s vision, and his notion of gender equality, in particular, was further articulated in the sequel to Looking Backward, Equality (1898). Although his