The Ties That Bind Consuming, the Consuming Iest Hat Bind

Eileen Fischer, York University

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The Ties that Bind Consuming,
The Consuming Ties that Bind

Eileen Fischer
York University

Abstract

Past arguments have stressed how the embeddedness of consumers in marketing institutions limits their potential to consume in a liberated postmodern fashion. This paper examines how the social and cultural embeddedness of consumers limits the extent to which they enact the potential offered by popular visions of postmodernity. It also examines critically the view that has been developed of consumer emancipation in the referenced versions of postmodernity, and questions its compatibility with any narratives that include connectedness through consumption to other people. The links between embeddedness, understanding of liberation, and socially constructed notions of gender are explored in the final section of the paper.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE CONSUMERS DOING IN THE (POSTMODERN) HERE AND NOW?

Our ideas about consumers and consumption in the contemporary world have been much influenced, of late, by discussions of postmodernity and postmodernism (e.g. Brown 1995, 1998; Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Sherry 1991). While some have used the set of ideas associated with various versions of postmodernism as a perspective from which to analyze consumer and marketing related phenomena (e.g. Brown 1999), others, in particular Firat and Venkatesh (1995), have tried to explore what the advent of postmodernity itself will mean for consumption. In concentrating on the potential of postmodernity to reshape consumption, these authors have suggested that various characteristics of a postmodern age – including spectacularization of “realities”, hyper-realities, pastiche, fragmentation, and decentered subjects – make possible the “liberation” of consumers and the “re-enchantment” of consumption. They argue that the modernist institutions of the market are impediments to this liberatory potential, but suggest that other modern social and political institutions that constrained consumers have been effectively undermined by postmodernist and other counter-modern discourses.

This paper is sparked by the observation that, despite the potential postmodern liberty that Firat and Venkatesh have noted, much consumption appears to be very much constrained and shape by particular kinds of commitments. These are commitments that arise from contextualized conventions or traditions deeply embedded in the contexts of consumer connectedness to families,
friendships and communities. Examples of such consumption have been reported in studies of ritualized or “special” consumption such as that associated with Christmas (e.g. Fischer and Arnold 1990), and American Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), but my argument here is that everyday consumption also continues to be influenced by such commitments.

In this essay, I want to ask, and attempt to develop some very partial and particular answers, to the following questions:

- Are market institutions the primary impediments to the kind of consumer emancipation in that has been envisioned for the postmodern era?  
- What assumptions are encoded in the vision of consumer emancipation that has been developed?  
- And, finally, is there any connection between socially constructed notions of gender and those of postmodern emancipation or its alternatives?

I will draw on the empirical work of other consumer researchers to illustrate my analysis, and to elaborate the arguments made here. Before taking up the substance of this paper, however, I must first stress that I find deep insight and great value and intellectual stimulation in what Firat and Venkatesh in their 1995 paper and elsewhere (e.g. Firat and Dholakia 1998; Venkatesh 1989) have written across their many works on postmodernism. The courage and the clarity with which they have drawn their conclusions are what enable me to build on, and take issue with, what they have said.

I want to note also that I recognize that there are many views of postmodernism, just as there are of modernism, and that the Firat and Venkatesh’s has been criticized, for instance because it is viewed as being excessively totalizing and unduly epochal (e.g. Gottdeiner 1998). I will, however, use their perspective on postmodernism as a point from which to depart for two reasons. First, their work – in particular their 1995 article in the Journal of Consumer Research – has been prominent in discussions of what postmodernism means for consumer behavior. Second, while their view may be unique in some respects, it is well grounded in the prior literature. Moreover, it is consistent with work that has come after in terms of features that are salient to this paper, notably the emphasis on postmodernity as a state that entails lack of long-term commitments (e.g Bauman 1996). Thus while my analysis will largely refer to Firat and Venkatesh’s version of postmodernism, some of the questions I address are relevant to a broader set of discussions about postmodernism.

WHAT BINDS THE FRAGMENTED POSTMODERN CONSUMER?

In their paper on the liberatory potential of postmodernism, Firat and Venkatesh (1995) argue that the characteristic of postmodernity most important for liberating consumers and consumption is the fragmentation of metanarratives. They state (p. 253) that this fragmentation involves the end to any one “regime of truth” coupled with the rise of multiple realities. Most importantly, the fragmentation of metanarratives frees the individual “from seeking or conforming to one sense or experience of being” and gives them the “liberty to live each moment to its fullest emotional peak, for the experience, for the excitement of the senses, for the pleasure . . . .”

This picture of continuously re-invented, sensually-stimulated, pleasure-filled consumers successfully negotiating multiple competing realities of their own choosing is
fleshed out in the following passage, where we are told what a postmodernist is and does.

With the end of metanarratives due to fragmentation and with the freedom to live in fluid spaces comes the end of pretension to commitments... In this world of shifting images, there is no one sense of being to which the individual needs to commit. Furthermore, the postmodernist is well aware of the incongruousness and disillusionment associated with modernist projects that promised much “progress” yet produced only disenchantment. The postmodernist is willing to live the fragmented moments and the thrill of the spectacle without committing to any one moment. S/he is content to live with the paradoxes that may arise from fragmentation, the free juxtaposition of objects (therefore, even of opposites) in the bricolage (pp. 253-254).

What stands in the way of the fulfilment of postmodernity’s potential? According to Firat and Venkatesh, it is “the market” that “still adheres to modern criteria” and “constantly regulates the consumers’ desires and intents to signify and represent rejection or repulsion of the dominant culture or, constructively, for a new vision” (p. 254).

I will argue here that, because this analysis is so focused on the relationship of the individual consumer to objects and to the market, it fails to take adequately into account how relationships to other people figure into the consuming lives of the not-so-isolated individual. In order to understand how the embeddedness (Granovetter 1985) of individuals in relationships mitigates the impact of postmodern conditions, we must reflect both on the role that others play in the lives of consumers, and on the kinds of narratives associated with cultural and social embeddedness in particular settings.

If we wish to look at how others figure into the lives of consumers, many good examples are to be found, as was mentioned above in the consumer research literature on rituals (e.g. Arnould and Price 1993; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) and gift giving (e.g. Fischer and Arnold 1990; Belk and Coon 1993; Ruth, Ottes, and Brunel 1999). These papers stress how connectedness to others and boundaries of social networks can be constructed through consumption rituals and the stories that are told of them (e.g. Arnould and Price 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), how inter-personal relationships can be strengthened or weakened through consumption rituals (e.g. Belk and Coon; Ruth, Ottes and Brunel 1999), and in general emphasize how consumption choices are often grounded, not in object relations or in self-definition, but in scripts that govern ritualized interactions between people.

Relevant as these works are, one thread of my argument is that it is not just “special kinds” of consumption that are embedded but also the most seemingly mundane. For this reason, I will focus here on an article that delves with dexterity into such routine consumption: Thompson’s (1996) work on the juggling life-styles of professional working mothers. This piece makes several observations which usefully supplement the picture painted above of the consumer living in a postmodern era, and of what keeps that consumer from fully realizing the alleged potential of postmodernity.
There are many ways in which professional working mothers fit nicely the description of the postmodern consumer. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) highlight five conditions of postmodernity that they expect to find reflected in a postmodern consumer: a continuously symbolically constructed hyper-reality; fragmentation and incoherence of human experiences; a culture of consumption, in which consumers are active producers of consumption symbols; decentered, historically constructed, subjects; and juxtaposition of opposites through pastiche.

Thompson’s (1996) focus is precisely upon a group that is, by definition, living a sort of “pastiche” of contradictory discourses and practices. To be included in his sample, the women had to be both mothers and “professionals.” In this sense, they could be considered to exemplars of those who “live in fluid spaces” and who are “not dominated by any one ‘regime of truth’” (cf Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 253). These women are also very much part of the hyperreal world where signs are appropriated, manipulated and reconstructed: for instance, Thompson suggests that they symbolize balance in the meals they feed their children by opening up and serving canned green beans alongside other (even more) pre-processed foods (Thompson 1996, p. 399). Further, for Thompson’s informants, the distinction between production and consumption is not a meaningful one: they are profoundly producerly consumers who put extraordinary effort into managing consumption with dexterity. Thus, in some ways, these are postmodernity’s poster-girls.

Yet in certain key respects, they are anything but. Most significantly, though they have chosen or fallen into an inherently fragmented pastiche of realities, and are not dominated by single regimes of truth, their lives are still extremely influenced by particular culturally scripted narratives (those of what it means to be a mother and what it means to be a professional). Moreover, as Thompson indicates, they struggle constantly to balance the competing demands or expectations associated with their roles within these narratives. Using the metaphor of juggling, Thompson paints a picture of women negotiating compromises between the demands of others and their own plans. Thus, they appear to feel compelled to reconcile the fragmented narratives of which they lives are composed. And rather than living each moment to its fullest emotional peak, or living for sake of experiences, the excitement of the senses, or for their own pleasure, these women are often “harried, unorganized, forgetful, imperfect, rushed, engaged in multiple activities, and most of all stressed” (Thompson 1996, p. 399).

Far from picking and choosing their own meanings and priorities, this group of women is highly susceptible to the traditional cultural valence placed on motherhood; they conform to this narrative when they justify career pursuits as a means of providing greater benefits to their children. Thus they are not, in the supposed postmodern fashion, free from commitments to any one narrative. They are highly committed to two particular narratives, one informing the struggle in a career in order to achieve professional objectives and the other affecting the way they offer care to others in their families. And while the women in his sample experience their responsibilities to their families and careers as simultaneously rewarding and constraining, they do not cast the narratives they are committed to—particularly those involving roles as caregiving consumers—as options from which they could be freed. One of Thompson’s respondents asked:
"What alternatives are there? You can’t stop being a mother, I guess I could quit work, but I’m a professional person . . . . So I just keep on trying to juggle it, and hope that nobody suffers and that my children grow up fairly well adjusted.” (p. 401).

As Thompson argues, for the women he studied, consumption behaviors are inextricably related to feelings of responsibility to maintain relationships and care for others, to gender ideals about motherhood, and to cultural beliefs about family life.

One observation that could, of course, be made of my reflections on the implications of Thompson’s (1996) work for that of Firat and Venkatesh’s (1995) is that the women featured in the former article simply are not the postmodern consumers imagined in the latter. Though they are arguably members of the privileged class in the global society as they would need be to sample the perpetual holiday from obligations that full blown postmodernism promises (see Bauman 1996) they have somehow failed to seize this opportunity. My point for now is question what it is that prevents these women from becoming emancipated postmodern consumers. And it seems clear that is not only, or even primarily, modernist market institutions. At least as important an obstacle to the kind of postmodern emancipation described by Firat and Venkatesh is the social embeddedness of consumers in networks of interpersonal relations and their cultural embeddedness in the associated socially constructed narratives concerning relationships.

Discussions of cultural and social embeddedness (cf Zucker and DiMaggio 1990) refer to the role of shared collective understandings in shaping behaviors and emphasize how social cognitions shape actions (cf Dacin, Ventrasca & Beal 1999) and understandings (cf Rosa et al 1999). These collective understandings are not grand universals, like the metanarratives whose demise is celebrated by postmodernists (Derrida 1970; Foucault 1980). They are, rather, taken-for-granted notions that are held to varying degrees by those who are to varying extents embedded in microcultures (Sirsi Ward and Reigen 1996) or collectivities (Holt 1997).

Social embeddedness in networks of interpersonal relations, and cultural embeddedness in understandings concerning relationships (whether the relationships be to immediate family, extended family, friends, or colleagues), cannot well be reconciled with the freedom of movement in an expansive narrative space or the lack of commitment to any one lifestyle or project. Being related to others as a colleague, as a friend, as a spouse, as a parent or as child does not necessarily fix us altogether in particular subject positions within particular narratives. It does, however, tend to shape our practices in ways we are often not aware of and that we could not easily “opt out of” even if we were. Simply put, social ties to others, particularly close family ties such as those between parents and children, come with many kinds of expectations that will affect and constrain consumption.

I must stress that I am not arguing that the narratives of connectedness are monolithic. Different cultures, different subcultures and ethnic groups, different social classes -- and, of course, different genders -- have different understandings concerning what it means to be connected in specific types of relationships (see e.g. Copper 1987; Ehrensaft 1980; Hill Collins 1990), and of the consumption choices associated with
caring for others in relationships (DeVault 1991). As a case in point, it must be noted that Thompson did not study professional fathers, and that his findings are very likely to have differed had he done so, given that the gendered expectations of parents have historically tended to differ dramatically in the culture that he studied.

A further point that must be emphasized is that different collectivities may understand the same consumption choices to signify different things (cf Holt 1997). Regardless, cultural and social embeddedness in these collectivities is likely to shape what is understood — what is relatively unreflexively taken for granted — about how one should and should not consume when one is a caring consumer in the sense developed by Thompson (1996).

It is important to clarify that, while there are collective understandings that pertain to many aspects of consumption within particular collectivities (see e.g. Belk and Costa 1999; Kozinets forthcoming; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), I am not arguing that all of these are equally likely to limit the potential for postmodern consumption as described by Firat and Venkatesh (1995). Some of these understandings may well be ones that consumers consciously can choose or not choose, or non-reflexively enact or not enact, without serious consequences for their ability to maintain some kind of connection to a collective. It is those collectively shaped understandings concerning the ways that consumers will consume with, and on behalf of, others that are likely to be most constraining. Most notably, the care-giving role in general, and the mothering role in particular, are among the most sanctified across a broad range of collectivities, even those where the notion of the patriarchal nuclear family is not resonant (Chodorow 1978; Hill Collins 1990; Jagger 1994; Shreve 1987). Those who are socially embedded in a care-giving relationships and culturally embedded in collective understandings of how one consumes with and for others cannot simply or easily choose not to act on those understandings.

My major point, then, is that the consumption behaviors of someone who is socially and culturally embedded in relationships and collective understandings concerning relationships, (particularly relationships where an element of care-giving is involved) are as constrained by the narratives or traditions regarding their relationships as they are by the market. Thus, there is reason to call into question that argument that:

As the hegemony of the market decreases and the postmodern culture gains ground, consumers, as producers of their self-images and (hyper) realities, will find a new freedom that is partially possible to predict and partially yet to be discovered (Firat and Venkatateh 1995, p. 256).

This becomes all the more true when we recognize that marketers have been effective in associating certain products and consumption choices with the maintenance of relationships. In particular, certain kinds of consumer behaviors are associated with care-giving within many different collectivities (Bristol and Fischer 1993).

WHAT COULD FREEDOM AS A POSTMODERN CONSUMER MEAN?

In the context of discussion suggesting that social and cultural embeddedness rather than markets, or markets alone, will prevent consumers from being emancipated under conditions of postmodernity, it is useful to consider the manner in which that
emancipation has been envisioned. This is particularly true given that, in this postmodern era, we recognize that “through their inquiry, scholars not only discover facts, theories and representations, but they also construct them” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 259). What kind of vision of emancipation are scholars constructing?

We are told that the most important characteristics of postmodernity are fragmentation and decentering, which “constitute moves toward greater emancipation” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255). This emancipation takes the form of allowing for nonlinear, improbable and discontinuous thought and practice at the individual level: consumers will not be constrained by any unifying narratives or projects. At the level of the family, this postmodern liberation might appear as follows:

As the number of cars, television sets, microwave dinners, and so on, multiply, the family members find options that did not exist before. Each individual consumer – each family member – can watch a different television program . . . eat prepackaged meals according to their individual tastes and schedules, and jog along his/her own preferred route listening to his/her own music choices on his/her own Walkman. To represent the variety of different images sought, each private consumer engages in multiple consumption experiences (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255).

While the description of what the postmodern consumer family might do is quite logically consistent with the characterizations given above of the practices of a postmodern individual consumer, the characterization of the family offers a much more vivid and concrete picture. The image of this loose collection of individuals, where each person does his or her own thing, according to his or her own tastes, in keeping with his or her own schedule, suggests that what postmodern emancipation means is not only freedom from all commitments, but also a diminution or termination of any kind of connection that a person might feel towards other people.

The idea that I have advanced above (that cultural embeddedness in collective understandings regarding social embeddedness in general and caring consumption in particular will represent an impediment to postmodern emancipation) is pressed further by considering the consumption practices of families under postmodernity. Given the vision portrayed here, it seems not that alternate narratives of caring consumption or relational consuming are made possible by postmodernity, but rather that only self-centered consumption projects of individual interest are likely. The vision of emancipatory postmodernity offered by Firat and Venkatesh would seem to entail only freedom from commitments, not freedom to imagine connections to others in non-traditional ways.

IS THERE A GENDER ROLE IN THE POSTMODERN HOUSE?

Having suggested that the postmodern consumer has been envisioned as a rather self-centered and isolated individual with little connection to or concern for others, I will go one step further and examine this image in the light of our lingering modern understandings of gender roles.

Modernist understandings of the consumer have been bound closely to female gender role, and the feminine gender significations that have been socially constructed (Bristol and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993). There
is much significatory baggage associated with this pairing of “consumer” and “female,” but what I particularly wish to highlight here is that the social construction of the caring consumer discussed by Thompson (1996) has historically been closely bound up with female gender roles and significations associated with femininity.

Firat and Venkatesh suggest that postmodern trends mean that the significations of gender are changing, and that this will be associated with further changes in the meanings of consumption and consumers. They ask:

What meanings will evolve for consumption and what motivations will guide consumption when the modern significations of the feminine and the masculine are no longer in effect and when both males and females are afforded greater latitude to represent both feminine and masculine qualifications at the same time that these qualifications are transforming? (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 261)

As if in answer to this question, Thompson (1996, p. 405), having confined his study to the consumption practices of professional women, raises the possibility that significations of caring through consumption might become more comfortably associated with masculinity despite the fact that traditional conceptions of masculinity stress individuality and emotional reserve.

The image of the postmodern consumer depicted by Firat and Venkatesh, however, seems to have moved not toward some gender-bending, gender-blending, or degendering of consumer significations, but rather toward a substitution of one set of gendered image of the consumer for another. While they have no intention to foreclose the options regarding what a postmodern consumer might be or do (and in fact are quite consistent in arguing that postmodernity will not allow such foreclosure) the images they offer of that consumer seem markedly masculine in the Western, modernist sense. The preoccupation with self, the pursuit of private projects, the priority placed on structuring one’s own identity that are portrayed as characteristics of postmodern consumers all resonate with the modern notions of masculinity. Their characterizations of the postmodern consumer appear to leave little room for any of the qualities that, at least in modernity, have been associated with femininity, particularly those involving caring for others through consumption.

I am arguing, then, that the postmodern notion of emancipation advanced by Firat and Venkatesh enshrines and celebrates a masculinized ideal. In similar fashion, Thompson and Tambyah (1999) have noted that postmodernists discussing “post-tourists” have “reproduced a masculinized theoretical discourse” (p. 236) given the idealization of the nomad who is free of commitments and on an endless holiday. Their argument is grounded, in part, in the work of feminist theorists who have noted that masculinized images of travelers as unencumbered, unattached, and uncommitted have been valorized (e.g Morris 1988, Kaplan 1996). In contrast, feminized images of staying at home have been insidiously cast in a negative light as convention-bound, commitment constrained, and (perhaps worst of all) boring. These parallel observations raise, for me, the question of whether it is possible to imagine postmodern behavior (whether consumption in general or tourism in particular) that is not inherently masculinist in the modern sense.
TOWARDS ALTERNATE VISIONS OF POSTMODERN CONSUMERS

Firat and Venkatesh acknowledge that their vision of consumption under postmodernity is partial and incomplete. Moreover, their focus on, and concern for, the embeddedness of consumers in marketing institutions has meant that they have simply not been concerned with other kinds of embeddedness and what these might mean for, or look like, under postmodernity. It is in the spirit of helping to create an alternate vision or version of emancipatory postmodern consumption that I have written this essay.

I am aware that what I have written might be interpreted as a call for respect for the traditions of “women’s caring work” or even for “family values.” It is not, or not simply, these things. Feminists have long argued that patriarchal narratives constrain men and women in particular roles and relationships (Bristor and Fischer 1993), and I am not here asking that we honor or preserve conventions. To the contrary, I congratulate Firat and Venkatesh for challenging us to imagine other possibilities.

What I am suggesting is that the end of commitments to meta-narratives need not entail the end of commitments to people. Given the flexibility of postmodernity, it is possible to imagine that relationships with others can and will be constructed in a wider range of modes and manner. For example, relationships maintained almost entirely through electronic means are both increasingly common and not inherently less valued if we call into question traditional narratives of what is and what is not a “good” relationship. Further, given the free play of signifiers in postmodernity, these multiple kinds of relationships could be reinforced via consumption in a broader and more flexible set of ways. If this is to be achieved however, we need to theorize not just individual projects involving object relationships, but also interpersonal connections that draw on the significatory potential of consumer goods and behaviors in constructive and imaginative ways.

It will be necessary, in imagining alternate views of consumer emancipation, to be fully sensitive to the work of feminists (e.g. Kaplan 1996, Lutz 1993) who have noted that a number of the most prominent postmodern writers have equated a masculinized image of social autonomy with emancipation. Critical reflection on the assumptions and goals we enshrine in any image of emancipation will always be vital.

NOTE

1. Firat and Venkatesh themselves do note that constraints other than the market may be postponing postmodern liberation. For instance, they suggest that the production of consumer research that studies consumer objectively, from a distance, can construct the consumer in much the same way as the market does. However, their main emphasis is on the market as a constraint to the potential of postmodernity.

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