A Typology of Gender Retail Practices Within the Retail Environment

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A Typology of Gender Retail Practices within the Retail Environment

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Theories related to consumer behavior and gender have examined the relationship between gender and the retail environment and have suggested that differences between men and women create various types of gendered space, as well the genderedness of space creates different social relations between men’s and women’s practices (Spain, 1992). These efforts have detailed masculine/feminine dualism and yet, as postmodern pluralism and blurred boundaries continue, gender roles become less distinctive and reveal a gender continuum (i.e. a combination of male/female identities in one person or one place). We explore this postmodern notion within the context of consumer retail experiences. Emerging from this study is a typology of gender practices within a retail environment. Our research entailed one year of formal field immersion in the mall, during which time we employed participant-observation and conducted interviews. Broad sampling criteria were used to capture a diverse set of consumer retail experiences and practices.

This study reveals how gender evolves in consumer experiences within a retail environment. More specifically, it explores the experiential products of two gender perceptions, the ‘Self’ perception, which depicts how consumers view their own gender identities and the ‘Retail’ perception, which reflects how consumers perceive the retail space. We further examine two underlying structures present in each these consumer perceptions, which we refer to as: 1) Distinctive gender role and 2) Connective gender role. In the former, consumers discern themselves or the retail environment as being either male or female dominant, whereas the latter acknowledges the continuum of gender perceptions and in doing so finds gender to be less distinctly male or female and more a combination of the two identities in one person or one place. Analyses of the dynamics between each of these have led to the development of a typology characterizing four different gender practices within the retail setting: 1) Gender Positioning; 2) Gender Flexibility; 3) Gender Differentiation; and 4) Dynamic individualism. (Figure 1)

The first, Gender Positioning, emerges when perceptions of both self and retail space are ‘distinctive’. Consumer retail experiences within this domain mirror those reported in prior theories discussing the influence that gender may have in consumer behavior and the gendered servicescapes (c.f. Fischer et. al, 1998).
In the second gender practice, Gender Flexibility, we begin to see the presence of postmodern perspectives. The retail environment perception is ‘distinctive,’ while one’s self perception is ‘connective’. Immersed in a consumption setting interpreted as male or female dominant, consumers extend their flexibility of gender identities. This retail practice is exemplified in the comment of one male informant.

“Basically the mall is the place for women because they like shopping and the only thing they care about is shopping and having new things ...but they don’t like spending money! I love shopping... Even if I don’t have to buy anything I just go shopping and in most cases, I end up buying something. I don’t know I just love having a new thing. There’s a female part of me coming out when I go shopping. It’s like I don’t really care what I need and what I don’t need. I just go there, and I just look around. But, uh, I mean, whenever I like something, I just buy it, regardless of the price, regardless... I mean... That’s a male part... That’s a male part. I don’t mind spending money. I’m not really quite sensitive.”

This male consumer confers with the historical identification of the mall as a female dominant space, yet he delights in the shopping experience inspired by gender flexibility (i.e. his “male part” and his “female part”).

The third gender practice, Gender Differentiation, presents when consumer’s self perception is ‘distinctive’ and the perception of the retail space is ‘connective’. In this study, common examples of this were informants discerning the mall as a shared space, appropriate for both sexes, yet possessing features uniquely appreciated by men and women. One consumer’s remark illustrates this practice, “it’s an interesting place for everybody, but as a women, I really enjoy walking around and window shopping, while my husband enjoys getting what he came for and going.”

The final gender practice, Dynamic Individualism, finds ‘connective’ perceptions of place and self, reflecting individual freedom and independence. Consumers are encouraged to explore the diversity of people, places, and structures that exist in the mall and the convergence, divergence of gender, cultures, etc. Ultimately, they feel empowered to create personalized retail experiences and as one informant states, “get into my own little world and be everywhere.”

Research examining consumer retail experiences has shown how retail space may be gendered and demonstrated how the gendered place creates differences between men’s and women’s perceptions. Emphasis, however, has been placed on exposing consumer interpretations that highlight masculine/feminine dualism. The present study extends current efforts by incorporating the dimension of “connectivity”, representing the consumer’s ability to interpret a continuum of gendered perceptions. Subsequently, the proposed typology provides a framework for understanding the gender retail practices employed by consumers in a retail environment.
Figure 1: A Typology of Gender Practices within the Retail Environment

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self Perception</th>
<th>Retail Perception</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distinctive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distinctive</td>
<td>Gender Positioning</td>
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<td>Connective</td>
<td>Gender Flexibility</td>
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