Judith Butler, Gender Theorist: Philosophical and Phenomenological Insights Into Marketing and Consumer Behavior

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This session brought together three papers that draw on contemporary philosopher Judith Butler. Butler has profoundly influenced contemporary theory: “Judith Butler’s work has changed the way we think about sex, sexuality, gender and language” (Salih 2002). However, few studies within marketing have used a developed notion of Butler’s philosophical thought (e.g., 1989, 1990, 1993, 1997a,b, 1999, 2002). Although quite critical of status quo institutions, Butler rarely discusses consumption or marketing issues, per se. Butler, who became infamous for supposedly claiming that gender was simply a performance (1990) – and hence could be worn or not worn rather like a particular combination of clothing – remains, regardless of her theory’s evocativeness for gender fluidity and drag performances, primarily not a queer theorist, but a phenomenologist. She was trained in philosophy; her work – radical as it may seem – responds to classic questions of ontology, philosophy of language, and epistemology. Like others in the phenomenological tradition, Butler has sought to understand paradoxes and complexities of poles of meaning and being, the ideal category and the particular instance, and the interrelations between them.

Butler’s theory of gender stands against essentialist understandings of the relationship between femininity and the female, masculinity and the male, culture and biology, identity and existence. In this session, we focus on several concepts from her writings that have promising implications for researchers in gender, marketing, and consumer behavior.

First, Janet Borgerson, a philosopher, presented a general introduction to Butler and her relevance for gender, marketing, and consumer behavior. Then Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder turned to Butler’s influential concepts of gender as performance, identity and iteration, and her insights into ontological traps of dualistic thinking. They focus on marketing communications for illustrative examples, showing how Butler’s theory can be applied and insights that it generates. They closed by offering some practical implications of her work, and some hints of how engagement with her ideas might affect research practice and theory construction.

Kent Drummond explored gender roles, sex roles, and sexuality as they are presented in a radical restaging of the ballet *Swan Lake* – swans male. Butler’s theory of gender seems applicable, and Drummond deftly weaves his way through a performative example, offering insights and suggestions along the way.

Isabelle Hanifi and Jean Sébastien Marcoux presented an ethnography, informed by Butler’s theoretical work, of Dress for Success, a not-for-profit American organisation aimed at helping disenfranchised and disadvantaged women integrating into the workplace. They illuminated the multiple relationships between gender, body and the material culture of fashion and style.

Together, these three presentations contribute to understanding philosophical issues within gender, marketing, and consumer behavior, and push researchers to think about theoretical implications of their work. Each paper discusses theoretical and methodological implications, and ties Butler to basic concepts in marketing and consumer behavior, with the goal of stimulating new research and thinking in the intersection of gender and consumption. Butler’s work can be difficult – especially for researchers without exposure to the phenomenological traditions in which she writes. We offer an introductory guide to this influential, complex theorist, along with directions for future research.
Mythical structures underlie consumer behavior (e.g., Holt 2003: Johar, Holbrook and Stern 2001; Thompson 2004). To understand mythic cultural processes, such as gender, we must delve into the ontological underpinnings of marketing. We concur with Holt’s recent assessment: “such knowledge doesn’t come from focus groups or ethnography or trend reports – the marketer’s usual means for ‘getting close to the customer.’ Rather, it comes from a cultural historian’s understanding of ideology as it waxes and wanes, a sociologist’s charting of the topography of contradictions the ideology produces, and a literary critic’s expedition into the culture that engages these contradictions” (Holt 2003, p. 49). To which we would add, a philosopher’s engagement with the historical and theoretical significance of gender, identity, and consumption.

References

“Identity and Iteration: Marketing and the Constitution of Consuming Subjects”

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Marketing communications depict consumer society as a fountain of personal freedom, choice and satisfaction, where citizen and consumer are almost interchangeable expressions of identity. The apparent insight that consumers construct identities with brands, images, and market choices has exerted a profound, foundational influence for marketing and consumer research in recent years. In this paper, we turn to Judith Butler’s work to problematize the notion that “the consumption of symbolic meaning, particularly through the use of advertising as a cultural commodity, provides the individual with the opportunity to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings” (Elliott 1997, p. 285). This stance assumes several things: first, that ads make identities available to consumers as raw materials for identity construction, second, a consumer agency in appropriating meaning, and third, a position from which the consciously aware consuming subject can choose to consume particular symbolic meaning in relation to desires and motivations. We do not disagree that marketing messages interact with identity. However, we contend that marketing
communications, including advertising, corporate web pages, annual reports, brochures, and so on, iterate – or repeat – identities and symbolic meaning in the form of discourses. Furthermore, such iterations are circumscribed and limited in their potential polysemy of subject constitution by tacit interpretation processes as well as stereotypical representations of identity (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). Our contribution is to articulate traces of the iterative processes that influence consumer subject formation. We bring together three strands of thought: interpretive consumer research, social attribution studies, and contemporary phenomenological theory to theorize consumer subjectivity from a phenomenologically informed perspective, influenced by Butler’s influential and intellectually stimulating work.

Recent philosophical approaches to subjectivity might be called upon to illuminate the interstices of identity, marketing, and consumer culture (Butler 1993, 1997, 1999, 2002; Derrida 1978). Drawing upon this research, we theorize marketing communication through the notion of iteration – as repetition of performative gestures – and critically discuss how iteration functions in marketing images. Iteration expresses a continued occurrence or pattern without assuming that there was at some point in time an original instance, natural state or ideal of which the continued instances are simply re-iterations. In this way, the iterative normativity or conventionality of marketing images contributes to the construction of ideal categories—such as male, female, black, white, European, immigrant, straight, gay, rich, poor—that circulate in culture (Borgerson and Rehn 2004). As iterations, marketing communications play a powerful role in constructing, maintaining, and endlessly re-communicating normative values and identities made available to and existing in tandem with the subject in consumer culture. Ads are a crucial representational practice of iteration. That is, ads do not simply interact with or reflect identities – providing material for open-ended identity construction – but ads perform iterative gestures. Whereas the iterational status of gestures makes possible shifts and alternatives, we see in tacit interpretive processes potential blocks to such shifts – thus conventional representations evoke and maintain tacit processes, which mitigate against free and creative subject constitution.

The “subject” of this paper is not a person or an individual. That we theorize the roles of ads in the subject’s construction and constitution apparently marks the simultaneous emergence of the consumer subject in relation to iterated consumer identities. We note that the subject is a category of some confusion and contention (Deleuze and Guttari 1987; Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh 1995; Oliver 1996). Theorists have presumed, assumed and hypothesized a variety of subject forms, including related processes around the constitution of the subject (see Borgerson 2001). Butler articulates the subject as follows:

The genealogy of the subject as a critical category, however, suggests that the subject, rather than be identified strictly with the individual, ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder, a structure in formation. Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a “site”), and they enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are, as it were, first established in language. The subject is a linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency (Butler 1997, p. 10-11).

As such, this subject takes form from language and gestures – body positions, speech acts, and performative behavior, including consumption – given and accessible to it. The subject’s intelligibility or legibility is limited by the available, as well as the foreclosed, repertoires of performative iterations.

We move away from recent models that posit relationships between consumers and ads, exploring instead how identities are constructed within ads themselves. (Brands, for example, have been conceptualized as having personality, character, or identity.) The
consuming subject may perform identity, but ads, moreover, as iterations of normative subject positions, perform identities as well. We use gender as our main example, but our analysis is relevant for other identity categories, including race and culture. Butler’s work on subject identity constitution – via gender roles, for example – demonstrates that performative iterations are not simply the playing out of natural or pre-existing ways of being in the world. Each iteration plays the role of recreating and maintaining the illusion of natural categories of identity, similar to what in consumer research has been called a process of “recombinant culture” (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). We suggest that identities that are iterated and made available via marketing discourse overwhelm the possibilities of the consuming subject, reconfiguring concepts of an ideal category, rather than offering the ‘new’ identities that individual consumers are said to be able to construct, either by imagining their ideal identity in an ad, or through consumption processes (cf. Holt 2002; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Our contribution is to show how Butler’s influential work on subject constitution, in conjunction with interpretive processes, illuminates the relationship between marketing and identity within the context of consumer culture.

References


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“The Butlerization of Swan Lake”
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By applying several of Butler's major theoretical concepts to a data set – namely, a videotaped production of the ballet Swan Lake – this paper demonstrates the 'mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self' (Butler, 1990, p. 140). If, as Butler maintains, a gendered self is constituted of gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds, a fruitful site in which to examine them may well be a stylized performance of interacting bodies, such as classical dance.

In 1996, the British choreographer Matthew Bourne presented a controversial remake of the ballet classic Swan Lake. At the center of the controversy was the fact that Bourne made all the swans male, with traditionally masculine effects: bare, hairy chests, powerful thighs, and sharp, aggressive movements. What he didn't change was even more controversial: the fact that the Prince falls in love and dances closely with The Swan, now also male.

Critics and audiences alike were shocked at Bourne's re-conceptualization, yet the ballet was both a critical and commercial success. A significant segment of the general population was ready to "consume" this ballet, but why? One explanation may be found in Butler's deconstruction of gender. Just as Derrida insists on recognizing language as a free play of signifiers lacking a stable center, so Butler suggests that there are no fixed gender identities. She questions the inexorable, linear relationship between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexuality, calling upon readers to do the same. What are the cultural practices, she asks, which reify sexual identities for the consumer, to the point where we think we have a choice of which gender we "try on," when in fact we don't?

As if in answer to Butler's query, Bourne's Swan Lake presents a series of gendered conundrums that allows the viewer to witness, from a safe distance, the sometimes humorous, sometimes horrifying consequences of Western culture's sexual paradoxes. By tapping into culturally agreed upon clusters of gendered behavior, Bourne establishes particular expectations about characters and relationships, only to confound those expectations by presenting another cluster of gendered behavior – often within the same character or relationship.

For example, Act II, which takes place in St. James's Park in London, culminates in a well-known pas de deux (literally, step of two) between Prince Siegfried and the Swan: traditionally between a man and a woman, but here between two men. The dance begins with an extended gaze between the two, which may suggest an erotic attraction. They then dance together in ways that support that eroticism. Yet as the scene progresses, it becomes clear that the Prince is imitating The Swan's movements, as though he desperately wants to BE the Swan, as opposed to sexually desire him. The scene ends with other gestures that may signify intimacy with an undercurrent of eroticism: a caress, and embrace, and a carry in which the Swan cradles the Prince in his arms.

As the ballet continues into Act III, the Swan becomes the Stranger. Dressed in black leather pants, black boots and black shirt, the Stranger dances lasciviously with all the young women at the ball, before engaging in another pas de deux with Siegfried. But where the Swan was tender, supportive and instructive, the Stranger is rough, cruel, and mocking: his movements vacillate between the promise of sexual gratification and the infliction of pain.

At every turn, then, expectations of desire are established, then violated. Bourne, like Butler, takes the starting points of sex, gender, and sexuality and stops: are these categories really as fixed, out-of-play and unproblematic for a contemporary audience as the traditional Swan Lake suggests? And if they aren't, what would an updated version look like which
destabilizes the nerve center of sex, gender, and desire, using that instability to propel the plot?

Given the critical and commercial success of Bourne's *Swan Lake*, the audience seemed “ready” for an evening-length work that calls these ostensibly fixed relationships into question. By applying key principles from Butler's work, this paper hopes to explain that acceptance by critically analyzing the artistic, gender and consumption issues behind a performative exemplar.

References


“Getting Dressed for Success: Overcoming the Opposition Between Substance and Style”

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This paper seeks to shed a new light on the relationship between gender, body and the material culture of fashion and style. It is grounded in an ethnography of Dress for Success, a not-for-profit American organisation aimed at helping disenfranchised and disadvantaged women integrating the workplace.

Dress for Success was founded in 1996 in New York City by Nancy Lublin, a 25-year old law student. In the years that followed, the organisation expanded to numerous other cities in the US and to other locations abroad such as Canada, England, and New Zealand. The organisation’s main purpose is to help women to find their way in the workplace by giving them tools to successfully make the transition into the economic mainstream. Its particularity is to recuperate second hand clothing among women and businesswomen and distribute those to other women referred by non-profit job agencies that are partners in preparation of job interviews.

The process by which second hand clothing are put back in circulation raises important questions for consumer researchers. First, it reminds the fundamental role of self presentation (Thompson and Haytko 1997), and informs us on the social construction of the “successful” female body through the medium of clothing. Dress for Success reveals how such a successful body takes shape through material culture and products that objectify in themselves social norms and expectations. Second, Dress for Success reveals the conditions of exclusion of disenfranchised and disadvantaged women, which are grounded in a matrix of gender relations. It reveals, and amplifies, what philosopher Judith Butler (1990, 1993) calls a heterosexist frame within which genders take their meanings and are normalised. If we push Butler’s perspective, Dress for Success appears to be using clothing as a means of attempting to subvert a detrimental matrix of gender relations, while perpetuating it. Dress for Success promotes what could be considered a non-radical form of feminism. It uses consumption as a means of integrating women into the workplace, but also for integrating them into a certain idea of gender role. In other words, drawing on Butler, it could be argued that Dress for Success helps women fitting into social categories, while the cloths become the boxes they tick.

This paper does not only aim at analysing the logic of Dress for Success, it also seeks to explore how Judith Butler’s works may help push consumer researchers to place gender into a philosophically informed theoretical framework. In this respect, it moves beyond Dress for Success’s apparent fetishist discourse on clothing and its relationship to the myth of success, and reflects on the complex – often contradictory, relationship between substance and style. Beyond the performative construction of gender and the idea that gender can be worn, Butler
raises important questions on appearance, surface and image that a cultural valorisation of substance over style (Postrel 2003), or ontology over style (Miller 1994), has led us to disregard. As such, her works helps consumer researchers better reflect on the use of material culture like clothing in the production of a meaningful sense of identity and joins current reflections in anthropology, material culture and aesthetics.

References