Cross-Dressing and Cyber-Shopping: the Internet As Consumption Tool and Community

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Cross-dressing and Cyber-shopping:
The Internet as Consumption Tool and Community

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Abstract  
Access to resources through the Internet has become critical for many cross-dressers today. Once only available through obscure mail-order catalogs, thanks to the Internet, products and services marketed to cross-dressers are now readily obtainable at the click of the mouse. This study examines 25 websites that concentrate on selling products and services related to cross-dressing. Within this examination the websites are interpreted as texts, linked together through their meanings as developed within a theoretical framework based on notions of self and identity in social context. In particular, the marketing and availability of products used to dress the body in a manner that achieves a gendered, ideal self are explored. An interpretation of themes that surfaced within and across these websites is developed which illustrates how members of this community create their own cross-dressed identity in the realm of cyberspace. This exploratory study demonstrates that in order to better meet the needs of this growing cyber-consumer market, an in-depth investigation of the consumption behavior of cross-dressers is essential.
Consumers who cross-dress have found a forum for dialogue and acceptance through the browsing and purchasing possibilities available via the World Wide Web. There are thousands of websites devoted to the experiences of individual cross-dressers, including those that sell products and services for use specifically by this consumer market. Individuals can locate these sites through the Transgender WebRing and CrossDress NetRing, both of which function as search tools for locating individuals, support groups, electronic magazines, and appearance management resources recommended within the transgender community. Clearly, as is the case for many different consumer groups and subcultures today, “[t]he Internet is not just an information repository; it is also a community” (Cohen 1998, p. 9). Throughout this paper, cross-dressers are understood to be a particular consumer subculture that has established its own virtual community, as is indicated by the myriad of electronic discussion groups and websites currently available to this group.

In a previous study, we examined personal websites of individual cross-dressers for similarities and differences in terms of lived experience and particularly with respect to issues of dress and appearance (Hegland and Nelson 2002). It was found that in the process of coming to terms with a need to cross-dress, the web-authors sought ways to create a realistic feminine identity – many to the point of successfully passing as a woman in public. Through this previous study, it was established that the existence of the Internet was critical, as this virtual world has helped cross-dressers to realize they are not alone. Rather, they are part of a rich and complex virtual global community, a community that seeks to meet the desires of its members and particularly those needs
related to appearance. As a result of the findings that surfaced within the previous research, the current paper focuses on websites that sell products and services targeted to the growing cyber-consumer market of cross-dressers.

This present study is a qualitative exploration of 25 current websites offering products explicitly marketed to the transgender community and in particular, appearance-related products. The majority of websites and products currently offered within cyberspace are created for the male-to-female cross-dresser; therefore, we have chosen this as the focus of our study. What follows is a brief overview of terminology, a background discussion on the topic of cross-dressing and the Internet, a discussion of the concepts that form the theoretical framework, an explanation of the methods used in the design of this study, an interpretation of the content found within the selected websites, and finally, a discussion of the implications.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Labels used by cross-dressers to explain their activities include such terms as *transgender, transvestite, cross-dresser, across-gendered, and even gender gifted* and *expressing the feminine self* (Tewksbury 1995). The term *cross-dresser* is used predominantly throughout this paper, though it is often used interchangeably with *transgender* within and across the websites. *Cross-dresser* is a more behavior-specific term commonly used to refer to someone who dresses in the manner of the opposite gender rather than undergoing surgical processes that lead to a biological change from one gender to another (Tewksbury 1995). *Transgender* is a broader term that
encompasses all behavioral manifestations of feeling unlike their biological gender (Ramet 1996).

According to popular use within this particular subcultural group, the term *transgender* actually points to more of a continuum of sorts rather than a hard and fast category. This continuum regularly interfaces with the notion of identity in both the biological (sex) and social (gender) sense, thus making the terminology rather difficult to pin down. *Transgender* (often abbreviated to *TG* on the Internet) may refer to individuals who are either full- or part-time cross-dressers, those who cross-dress and are seriously considering medical options for sexual reassignment (such as hormone therapy or surgery), those who may be undergoing a medical process, or those who have already fully completed available medical procedures. Although *transgender* is used most frequently by members of the subculture, we are particularly interested in products employed to cultivate the non-surgical, cross-dressed, appearance; therefore we confine our terms to that of *cross-dresser* and *cross-dressing* throughout this paper.

Within this paper, *dress* is defined as a combination of modifications made to the body itself along with supplements placed on top of the body (Eicher, Evenson, and Lutz 2000). Modifications can be temporary or permanent and are considered to include products that alter the physical form of the body, whether via cosmetics, hair color, nail polish, tanning, or lightening cream. Supplements are characteristically temporary in nature and consist of such items put on the body as garments, shoes, and accessories.

Because we are focused on the availability of Internet products and services marketed to cross-dressers in order to alter the appearance of gender, it is necessary to
discuss the distinction between the terms *female, feminine* and *femininity*. Throughout this paper, we refer to products and services used by cross-dressers to achieve a gendered identity akin to that of biological females. However, because we are not concerned with medical options within our analysis, we rely on the terms *femininity* and *feminine* to refer to the nature of the ideal as achieved through such products and services. Though we are cognizant of the fact that the terms *female* and *feminine* (and *male* and *masculine*) are not synonymous, the definitions become muddled when discussing biological *males* who take on *feminine* trappings in order to create an appearance that is persuasively *female*. While the term *female* results in biological categorism, *femininity* is continuously variable – and is underpinned only by the prevailing definitions of *masculinity* and *femininity*. Within the websites there is a clear motivation to sell and purchase products that create a finished appearance that comes *as close as possible* to resembling a biological female.

**BACKGROUND**

Much research exists on the use of the Internet for the purposes of consumption. Indeed, a cursory review of the literature reveals that studies have kept pace with consumer use of the Internet. A variety of approaches have surfaced within the literature, from exploring issues important to consumer’s use of the Internet, such as safety, confidentiality, and satisfaction (eg., Kwon and Lee 2003; Miyazaki and Fernandez 2001; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz and Warrington 2001), to examining product-specific attitudes and buying behaviors as they pertain expressly to the Internet (eg., Lee and Johnson 2002; Lohse, Bellman, and Johnson 2000; Rowley and Okelberry 2000). Motivations of Internet consumers have been found to differ in some ways from those of consumers who
rely solely on traditional retail environments, but not so much from those of consumers who utilize such vehicles as catalogs or television (Eastlick and Feinburg 1999; Lennon, Sanik, and Stanforth 2003).

As distinct product categories, apparel, accessories, and cosmetics are frequently purchased through use of the Internet. Dress-related products abound within cyberspace. Although it was initially thought that consumers would not want to purchase such products without seeing them in “real” time and space (wherein such items could be “tested” for fit, quality, and feel), they have ultimately become among the most purchased products via the web (Kwon and Lee 2003). There are a great many studies on the use of the Internet by specific consumer groups, whether by demographic, geographic, or other form of market segmentation (eg., Dennis, Harris, and Sandhu 2002; Johnson et al. 2003; Sheehan 1999; Siu and Cheng 2001). There are, however, very few studies that shed light on cross-dressing as a type of consumption and cross-dressers as a segment of consumers who may have motivations, needs, and goals that diverge from those of non-cross-dressing consumers. Members of a distinct subculture, cross-dressers must rely entirely on products to achieve their desired gender identity, and particularly those products that are related to dress and appearance. Given the manner in which products are marketed on the Internet, it is clear that cross-dressers appreciate the array of benefits provided by the Internet that distinguish it from other retail channels. However, as we will soon point out, issues of confidentiality, accessibility, and product selection rise to the top as particularly important attributes that make on-line shopping more desirable for the cross-dresser.
Internet access to resources for transgenders is critically important, especially for many inexperienced cross-dressers. The practice of cross-dressing is typically viewed as a serious endeavor; hence the notion of achieving the appearance of a biological female is of utmost importance. Particularly for male-to-female cross-dressers, learning how to dress like a woman, carry oneself, and even to apply makeup can be a mystery for those just beginning to fully realize their desire to cross-dress. Such resources were once only available through obscure mail-order catalogs, but thanks to the Internet products and services are now readily obtainable within one’s own home. Today there are countless websites related to cross-dressers and cross-dressing, ranging from those designed and published by individual cross-dressers to sites specifically developed to meet the needs of the cross-dresser as consumer through a wide variety of products and services for purchase.

Personal websites of individual cross-dressers typically include photographs and textual descriptions of the individual. Other aspects might include sound, video, and links to other cross-dressers and cross-dresser-friendly events and activities. Such personal webpages often link to commercial websites that sell products and services focused on developing the cross-dressed appearance. These consumer sites include access to products used to modify the body through hair removal and makeup. In addition, sites sell such body supplements as shoes and clothing in sizes that accommodate the larger build of the male-to-female cross-dresser. Another commonality among the sites is the inclusion of a list of tips for creating a passable transgender
appearance, and often an additional link to a live expert who can provide personal assistance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper, we situate our interpretation of the websites within the framework of symbolic interaction theory, specifically as it pertains to the creation and attainment of the ideal self by means of appearance-related products and services. Therefore, we also espouse the notion of a difference between selves, particularly the real self as compared to the ideal self and the ideal social self (Solomon 2004). We posit that commercial websites marketing appearance-related products to cross-dressers rely on shared meanings of not only the products, but also the ultimate goal of their use – that of achieving the ideal self. In this case, the ideal self is social to the extent that for many (but not all) cross-dressers, it is a convincing (i.e., appropriately interpreted) gender identity. Since it is assumed that such individuals have either chosen not to undergo hormone therapy or surgery, or have done so and need some “enhancement,” this is achievable primarily through the use of specific products and a reliance on the meanings such use of products conveys. We suggest that cross-dressing helps to achieve the ideal self for these individuals as a whole, and the ideal social self for those who are planning to or already have “come out” to family, friends, and society at large.

It should be noted that the framework of symbolic interaction theory applied here is not intended to establish the use of products and their meanings to communicate aspects of the self or to bridge the different selves, as this has been proven in the material culture and consumer research literature many times over (eg., Belk 1988;
Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Fischer and Arnold 1994; Kleine, Schulz-Kleine and Kernan 1993; Laverie, Kleine and Schulz-Kleine 2002; Sirgy 1982). Rather, our focus is to highlight the role of dress and appearance-related products through the elucidation and interpretation of the gendered, ideal self. The following section attempts to establish the utility of the present study for elaborating upon the link between dress and the communication of gender identity and therefore the importance of this link to the interpretation, cultivation, and presentation of the ideal self.

The notion of meanings of appearance and the self as communicated within society is pertinent to any discussion of gender, but particularly with regard to the consumption of products specifically marketed for the purposes of creating a cross-dressed identity. Erving Goffman’s (1959) theoretical development of the self by means of role enactment firmly establishes this reflexive relationship between the self, others, and society. However, he suggests that as a process, this in part relies on aspects of one’s identity kit, which includes such details as clothing, cosmetics, and other accoutrements specifically used to facilitate role enactment (Goffman 1961). Such kits are fundamental to the ability of an individual to create and express who he or she is in social terms, and therefore are necessary for maintaining the self in relation to others. Indeed, it is when our ability to do this is taken from us that we see its crucial importance within our daily lives, as illustrated by Goffman’s now classic studies done within mental institutions (Goffman 1961).

As one of Goffman’s contemporaries, Gregory Stone (1962) succinctly points out, “In appearances…selves are established and mobilized…. As the self is dressed, it is
simultaneously addressed” (p. 87). The link between being dressed and being addressed is particularly important when one seeks to understand the self as gendered. In his discussion of identification as paramount to communication through appearance, Stone posits, “Seldom, upon encountering another, do we inquire concerning the other’s gender. Indeed, to do so would be to impugn the very gender that must be established. The knowing of the other’s gender is known silently, established by appearances” (p. 83). As we will discuss further within the interpretation, ensuring that this “silent knowing” will occur in the manner intended is critical to male cross-dressers who seek to be “read” as female and whose ideal selves are established predominantly by and through a successfully gendered appearance.

Identity, according to the symbolic interactionist perspective, is what and where a person is situated in social terms (Stone 1962). As consumers, we incorporate the social meaning of objects within our conception of self to cultivate an identity consistent with our interpretations of the self. Even in the case of altered selves or the process of identity reconstruction, meanings reflected in and stemming from experiences help to shape the self (Schouten 1991). Moreover, shared understanding of these symbols is crucial to ensure that an individual’s use and interpretation of them within everyday life are consistent with that of others. As Solomon (1983) writes, “Consumption does not occur in a vacuum; products are integral threads in the fabric of social life” (p. 319). We posit that this relationship is also true in cyberspace, as a newly developed arena of social life created by the Internet, and therefore, product meanings related to gender are as applicable in cyberspace as they are in “real” time and space.
METHODOLOGY

As is the case with other types of data, Internet data can be useful in providing a snapshot of a given subject at a specific point in time (Kardas and Milford 1996; Mann and Stewart 2000; McKie 1997). After careful study of numerous websites, we began to develop criteria for those ultimately selected for analysis. In the process of narrowing the field, we excluded websites of individual cross-dressers, focusing instead on sites devoted to the sale of dress-related products and services. Additional criteria included descriptions and photographs of the products, access to customer service through email contact, and the means to conduct purchase transactions through the site itself. In addition, the website must clearly be marketed to the transgender community.

Twenty-five websites that offer products and services for cross-dressers were examined in this study. Between the two researchers, 50 sites that fulfilled our criteria were located through various web rings for cross-dressers. The final 25 sites were then culled from the larger pool. The sites are global in the sense that they can be accessed from just about anywhere in the world; however, the majority of the sites were based in the UK, the US, and Canada. The sites were used as “texts” constituting the data for the study (Thompson, Locandar, and Pollio 1989).

Analysis and interpretation of the texts followed a hermeneutic process, in that each website was analyzed as a part within the larger whole (Nelson 2000). Within the websites, both written and visual content were interpreted. Each part within the website was read alone and then read as part of the entire site. Likewise, each website was read alone and then read again as part of the entire set of websites. This iteration allowed for
full development of the interpretation as well as connections within and across
the websites to be seen. Ultimately, as a result of this back and forth process, inductive
categories and inferences as to specific themes that could be used within the
interpretation were established from the texts (Spiggle 1994).

As there is very little available research on the topic of cross-dressers’ use of the
Internet for appearance-related product consumption, our objective within the
interpretation was to attempt to understand the range of options available through
commercial websites to individuals who cross-dress. We were also interested in
beginning an exploration of how these sites market products used to create and
communicate a cross-dressed identity. Rather than setting specific parameters for
analysis, we allowed themes to emerge from the set of 25 websites. Our preliminary
study of the narratives revealed that two main categories surfaced with respect to the
content of the websites: marketing to the cross-dresser as consumer and cross-dresser
identity and e-consumption. Themes emerged from within both of these conceptual areas
and across the websites explored. What follows is our interpretation of the form as well
as content common across the 25 websites analyzed.

**INTERPRETATION**

Through the initial interpretive analysis, two primary factors immediately
surfaced across the 25 websites. First, each offered for purchase a range of products to
help achieve the cross-dressed appearance through dress. Products included such tools
for modifying the body as cosmetics, hair removal alternatives, and breast and hip
enhancement materials, along with the standard body supplements of clothing, shoes,
wigs and pantyhose. Second, all sites offered services to assist in the application and use of such products, whether in the form of instructional videos, books, or stylists and consultants available through email correspondence.

Marketing to the Cross-dresser as Consumer

_Developing the identity._ As a subculture, cross-dressers have needs that are unique from the dominant culture – needs that link them together as a group. At the same time, like subcultures in general (Solomon 2004), they are also members of culture at large, adhering for the most part to the norms and expectations of the mainstream. Male-to-female cross-dressers seek to communicate an identity that will be read as “feminine” by others within the larger culture (Rollins and Rollins 1995; Stoller 1985). This typically requires following the dictates of appropriate dress for men and women according to contemporary society to the extent that others believe the cross-dresser to be a biological female. One could even go so far as to call it a “feminine imperative.” That is, the need to achieve a feminine appearance is the core of the motivation for marketing many of the products – promoting an appearance that is almost hyper-feminine.

Evidence of this can be found on any of the websites we examined. For instance, a positive review of the “Cleavage Creator” on Abgender.com reads, _This works so well for giving cross-dressers real cleavage that I’ve had lots of women ask me, ‘How in the heck can YOU always have such perfect cleavage?’_

Oftentimes the central feature of the site is an expert available for consultation. Sometimes referred to as “passing consultants,” such individuals function in a manner similar to assistants found on the sales floor in the traditional retail sense in that they are
there to help facilitate the decision-making process. However, the expertise of a passing consultant generally surpasses their brick-and-mortar counterparts, in that these consultants are often called upon to help with dressing the body as well as creating the ideal self in a gender-specific manner. For example, the consumers shopping with femdirectory.com can get help with a wide range of concerns, including,

- aerobics, appearance, complexion,
- cooking, eye wear, entertainment, fashions...hair loss, hormones, legalities,
- posturing, sex change, textiles, voice change, weight loss, and more.

**Targeting the market.** For the cross-dressing consumer, appearance-related issues are of the utmost importance. Many transgenders are serious in their desire to cultivate a convincing female appearance and to cross-dress in a way that allows them to function in society as a member of the opposite gender. Hence, for most transgenders cross-dressing is far more than a hobby. Therefore websites that cater to this consumer cannot simply meet the demands of the target consumer, but rather must do so in a way that respects her motivations. As indicated on transformation.co.uk,

> If you are TV or TS, my staff and I are here to provide, totally confidentially, for your every need and desire so why not make contact soon and we will turn your feminine fantasy into reality!

Indeed, many sites that sell to cross-dressers clearly hint at visits by other marginalized groups, such as the “SM” and bondage crowds. However, most cross-dressers give the impression that they are sincere in their efforts, as is evidenced by individuals who have established true cross-dresser-friendly commercial (vs. personal) websites.
“Transgenders, transvestites, transsexuals and cross-dressers we can help you!” reads the home page at 4transgenders.com.

*Customizing the product.* In order for cross-dressers to achieve the desired appearance, members of this consumer group require certain products. They are in a sense the ultimate gender-focused consumer. Because most cross-dressers have not had sexual reassignment surgery or even hormone therapy, they rely entirely on products and services to achieve the desired, ideal self – one that is based on a “feminine” identity. The Internet provides such products and more. Even within a seemingly cohesive subcultural group such as cross-dressers, diverse needs are being met through the dizzying array of current commercial websites. Sites targeting sub-segments within the broader context of the cross-dresser consumer market – such as *Big & Tall cross-dressers* and *Tall TG Girl Fashions* – abound on the Internet today in much the same way they have surfaced for mainstream apparel consumers over the past few decades. For instance, ladybwear.com advertises its

* Totally cross-dresser friendly custom made feminine clothes in either male or female cut in sizes from 4 to 34. That’s 32 different sizes for each

*product*...accommodating up to 56” waist and up to 6’3” tall.

Clearly, the Internet is an innovation that helps the cross-dresser concurrently to create and express the ideal self and is seemingly without limits as far as the options it can provide.
Cross-dresser Identity & E-Consumption

Confidentiality. As reflected in the introduction to Shopping with Kathryn (kathryn.com), the primary benefit of online shopping for cross-dressers is the consumer’s ability to discreetly locate necessary products:

Unable to find a pair of pink pumps in a size 12? Tired of explaining to sales clerks that you are looking for a gift for your wife/mother/auntie who is about your same size? Well, get out your gold card sister, because it’s time to do some shopping!

For most consumers today, issues of privacy and protection are extremely important when buying something on the Internet (Kwon and Lee 2003). However, privacy takes on another level of meaning for the cross-dresser who wants to shop online. Not only might one worry of the possibilities brought about by using a credit card to purchase mundane products, but there is also the added fear that one’s name and personal information could be shared with other online merchants and individuals who may not be accepting of the cross-dresser lifestyle and cross-gender orientation. MrMs.com points to the commitment to privacy for the transgender consumer:

Whatever degree of feminization you seek, we can provide it with a vast range of products and services. All of which you can now buy in confidence from your own home, knowing that your privacy will be protected by this TG owned and operated business.

In addition to the extra emphasis on confidentiality promised by the websites, there is often acknowledgement of the need for purchases to be mailed in plain packages.
and that their final destination may in fact be a PO Box instead of a street address. Translife.com writes:

Due to a number of circumstances not everyone can have their goods sent to their home address. We are accustomed to sending goods to PO Boxes and addresses other than your normal home address. You can even arrange to collect the goods in person.

According to the sites examined here it is obvious that discretion is vital for this consumer, in that many cross-dressers who cyber-shop do so because they have yet to come out to their spouses, families, and friends.

Ease of use. The Internet is capable of handling text and images as well as purchase transactions. These webpage attributes simplify product selection and purchase, thereby enhancing convenience for the consumer – particularly for a consumer who prefers shopping for transgender-related products in the privacy and comfort of her own home. One site’s tagline reads: Unique transvestite and transsexual products available to buy securely and confidentially online for worldwide delivery (transformation.co.uk).

Assistance with creating a unique, cross-dressed identity is only a click away with the Internet. On many sites, questions can be answered in real time and often by the creator of the site. Links to chat rooms, as with other interest groups, provide cross-dressers with a sense of community. If the consumer is interested in travel, most of the sites also point out brick-and-mortar retail locations that serve this consumer group throughout the US, Canada, Europe, as well as Latin America and Asia. Most of these locations sell products similar to those available online, but they also offer makeover and
even shopping services. These retail stores often market themselves as “safe spaces” for members of a seriously marginalized group, and usually have a community room where customers can lounge while reading cross-dresser interest group materials or chatting with others. Indeed, much of what can be found in these “real” spaces mirrors that of their “virtual” cousins.

*Participating in a community.* The idea of a community, whether real or virtual, is likely the single most important part of a successful cross-dresser-friendly website. Therefore, acknowledging the challenges inherent to this particular lifestyle adds a degree of sincerity to a commercial cross-dresser website. **TGGuide.com**, a site that has won several awards, most notably the Best Informational TG Site Award 1999 and 2000, includes this introduction:

> *Our goal is to continue providing the Transgender Community with the same quality resources that we are so well known for. We are committed to publishing the most comprehensive site of services and information, accurately representing the Transgendered Community, in a positive manner. We would like to make you feel comfortable here, encourage your feedback and hope you will explore the site. Whether you need help determining your size, coming out to your family, or learning about how the law affects you; the answer is right here!*

One of the most comprehensive sites included in the study, **TGGuide.com** includes on its home page access to such things as transgender photo personals, announcements, live chat opportunities, forums, a library, book reviews, a message board, greeting cards, poetry, and even job or help-wanted postings. Many other sites provide the opportunity
for sharing experiences, reflection, and even soul-searching, all of which accompany the need to cross-dress. Links titled *Information for Spouses*, *Transgender Humor*, and even one for *Transgendered Christians* point to the very real use of the Internet to deal with confusion and conflict that can be brought about by cross-dressing. Most importantly, the Internet functions as a global repository of information and tips to be shared among members of this consumer group, subculture, and ultimately, global community.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The value of the Internet as a shopping alternative for cross-dressers should not be underestimated. Members of this socially marginalized community have access to products, advice, and support in creating their own cross-dressed identity – all in the privacy of cyberspace. They are able to purchase products via the Internet, an experience that might otherwise be uncomfortable in traditional brick-and-mortar retail store settings. Most importantly, however, thanks to cyberspace, members of this consumer group are able to feel like they are not alone in their use of such products to achieve the desired sense of identity and self-fulfillment. Products and services that bridge the gap between the real self and the ideal self can be customized to the individual’s own specific needs and purchased easily and discreetly.

According to Stone, “the self is established, maintained, and altered in and through communication” (1962, p. 82). Communication of gender is one of the primary functions of dress within contemporary culture. It is often seen as imperative to discern information about someone’s gender immediately upon seeing him or her. Indeed, there is a feeling of discomfort when we are faced with an ambiguous answer to our “question”
of gender, and by default, of biological sex. Likewise, it causes an individual similar
distress when others misread his or her presentation of gender. Consequently, dress
serves to either challenge or validate the self (Stone 1962) in the sense that it is a tool
used consciously to make manifest cultural symbols of what it “looks like” to be a male
or a female. The websites analyzed and interpreted here illustrate how critical such
symbols are for cross-dressers, and particularly those who choose to accept the risks
inherent to coming out. The need for others to respond favorably to one’s appearance,
whether from an aesthetic or normative perspective, is much the same for cross-dressers
as it is for non-cross-dressers. However, the need for others to correctly interpret the
meanings communicated by appearance is slightly more critical. Successful websites
acknowledge the degree to which cross-dressing consumers rely on carefully crafted
outward appearance cues created specifically through products imbued with gendered
meanings.

Although exploratory in nature, this study addresses several key issues important
to gender-focused, Internet-based marketing, and particularly with respect to consumers
who are members of the subculture of cross-dressers. Findings of this study point to the
need for further exploration into their overall consumption experiences and how such
experiences relate to the cultivation of a gendered identity, but more importantly, help
them to craft the ideal self. The motivations behind cross-dressing are indeed
multifarious, and this complexity carries over into the behavior of cross-dressers as
consumers. For instance, it is important to address whether or not this consumer group
fits the traditional models of consumer behavior given their subordinate status within
society as a whole. Future research into the decision-making process of such consumers may shed light on how to better market to them as a group while meeting their individual appearance requirements and wishes.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that in order to effectively meet the needs of this growing cyber-consumer market, further investigation of its consumption behavior patterns is essential. However, one of the interesting theoretical implications of exploring cybershopping for cross-dressers is the notion of femininity as it relates to dress and appearance. This notion forces us to question what precisely the terms feminine and masculine mean in contemporary US culture, as well as the role dress plays in manifesting such definitions for interpretation. Further study into the use of the Internet by this consumer group will result in an improved understanding of the cultural norms, values, and expectations that link gender identity with appearance in society today.
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