Special Session: Women’S Empowerment and the Positive Role of the Market

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ABSTRACT
In the last twenty years of Consumer Culture Theory scholarship, consumer researchers have been actively inquiring about consumers’ desire, need, ability and implication to resist, escape and emancipate themselves from the market and from dogmatic capitalistic discourses (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Thompson and Troester 2002; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Murray and Ozanne 1991). While acknowledging the value and the importance of understanding this phenomenon, we believe that the field of consumer research would benefit greatly from a more balanced perspective. That is, there is a gap in scholarly understanding of how consumers may seek individuality and power via activity in the market. We have observed through our dissertation fieldwork that, for some women, participation in the market has the potential to liberate them in varying ways and to varying extents from certain forms of restraint: class, political, bodily and gender. At the same time, the literature overstates women’s vulnerability and characterizes women’s experiences in the market as passive, unambiguous, and singularly oppressive. Thus, it tends to exclude the possibility that women could experience market activity as freeing and precludes approaching women as creating meaning, status, power and identity in the market (Scott 2005). To redress this situation, we propose this special session “Women’s Empowerment and the Positive Role of the Market” to share our ideas and research with other scholars at the 8th Conference on Gender, Consumer Behavior and Marketing. In this session, we will present research on thus-far unexplored market phenomena, particularly relevant to gender studies: the history of the fashion modeling industry and the emergence of East European models; the consumption of beauty in times of health crisis; and the construction of women’s so-called vulnerability in advertising. We will examine situations in which meeting their goals brings women up against discourses of class, nation, consumption and gender, and will develop theoretical insights regarding emancipation via the market versus from the market. The presenters in this session will bring unique perspectives to this issue. Catherine Coleman (PhD Student, Advertising Dept. University of Illinois) has been critically investigating the discourse(s) of women as marketed images in advertising. She has professional experience in political consulting, advertising and marketing and as a community educator for a Rape Crisis Center to decrease violence against and to help empower women. She has been applied this experience to her study of gender issues in advertising, conceptions of vulnerable audiences, advertising ethics and communication regulation. Marie-Agnès Parmentier (PhD Student, Marketing Dept. Schulich School of Business, York University) has been studying the role of the fashion model in consumer culture since 2004 and has conducted in depth interviews with several protagonists of this networked milieu: female fashion models, fashion photographers, stylists, fashion models’ agents, and corporate clients. She has also worked as a professional model and holds a postsecondary degree in fashion marketing. Katherine Sredl (PhD Candidate, Advertising Dept. University of Illinois) has spent nearly two years in Croatia conducting ethnographic fieldwork in advertising agencies, focusing on women’s experiences of postsocialist transformations, especially class and consumption of beauty products and communications technology. In addition to advertising and consumer behavior, her area of scholarly expertise is Balkan Studies. She also has three years of professional experience in international political communications with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia. Doctor Linda Scott (University of Illinois) has recently taken on the long-standing feminist orthodoxy on dress, capitalism, and commercial imagery in her deeply documented book, Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism, by recasting and extending the history of fashion and women’s movement in America (2005). Dr. Scott will put forward her
expertise and unconventional ideas as chair of the session. The purpose of this special session is to expand the views on discourses of women’s involvement in the market. The research in this session not only crosses boundaries of geography and state, but also explores diverse social roles of women. Indeed, the papers describe the cases of very sociodemographically different women who seek well-being, empowerment and emancipation by actively participating in consumer culture, both as consumers and producers in their very own and unique way. Presenters aim to sensitize the audience to the repressive effects of some popular and intellectual discourses toward women’s implication in the marketplace.

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Special Session  
Women’s Empowerment and the Positive Role of the Market  

Session Chair: Linda Scott, University of Illinois  
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REFERENCES


EMANCIPATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION: THE CASE OF THE SLAVIC FASHION MODEL

Marie-Agnès Parmentier (PhD Student), Schulich School of Business, York University, Toronto Katherine Sredl (PhD Candidate), University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

“Emancipation through Participation: The Case of The Slavic Fashion Model” is an ongoing project that combines the authors’ respective dissertation research on the role of the fashion model in consumer culture and women’s experiences of consumption in postsocialist Eastern Europe. Our purpose is, using historical perspectives, to stimulate scholarly discussion around the potential harmful effects of some gender and class discourses on the participation of postsocialist women in the market (Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Gal and Kligman 2000; Einhorn 1993).

History has not been kind to the model. For centuries, the artist’s model was stereotyped as a female nude with a reputation little better than a whore. At the turn of the 19th century, Manet’s watershed work Déjeuner sur l’Herbe made the artist’s model a subject of art by picturing the muse, nude and triumphant, at the center of the canvas. This caused an outcry amongst polite Parisian society; Manet had not only made the model the subject of the work but also a subject of envy (Quick 1997). The artist’s model is the fashion model’s natural antecedent: both pose for a living and both share a similar history.

When Charles Frederick Worth first used live “mannequins” to display his couture in 1850s Paris, he did not expect them to do much more than walk back and forth in the salon, allowing prospective clients to see how the garments looked in motion (Evans 2001). Modeling was not a sought-after occupation; recruits were usually drawn from the workshop floor or found among the demimonde (Quick 1997). Models did not enjoy prestige; in fact, it was quite the opposite. Since they displayed their bodies for a living, ambiguity arose as to what, exactly, was for sale: the garment or the woman modeling it.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Lady Duff Gordon, owner of the dressmaking establishment Lucille, began hiring impoverished women to groom as models. Some models became very popular; in spite of their fame, they were not received in polite society as they were considered on par with the tailor’s dummy.

Today, although fashion models are well known as one of the strongest assets of the fashion industry, they are still stigmatized by the cultural establishment and some feminists as beautiful commodities whose roles consist of nothing more than acting as a blank canvas and destroying other women’s self-esteem. This criticism seems to buy into discourses that women are weak and passive and victims of their unique beauty (Scott 2000).

Like other Third Wave women’s studies scholars (Linda Scott and Camille Paglia for instance), we argue that models are creative agents who contribute favorably to consumer culture by producing rich visual cultural resources. A model, like a silent movie actress, must express herself without words. She must possess a unique artistic intelligence to make her body translate a range of emotions in photography and on the
runway. She has an intuitive understanding of fabric and design which enables her to turn a mundane piece of clothing into something that seems worth a million bucks (interview data 2004-2005). Her critics may say she is merely an accessory, a tool in the hands of photographers, designers and fashion editors, but the model is the focus of any great fashion plate (Bailey 1999). A great fashion model does not just follow instructions; she exert a certain power and control over the final output while working in collaboration with photographers, stylists and make-up artists (Leigh and Hobe 1980; Gross 2003). She is more than a blank canvas. In front of cameras, the model’s performance makes a good fashion image great.

The rise of the East European model in the “west” since the end of the Cold War points out how prejudices against the model are related to notions of women’s involvement in the market broadly. Looking at these models is also a way to understand how class and nationality determine how women can participate in consumer culture. In the postsocialist era, modeling is a new means of achieving a long-standing goal of women in this region: emancipation from poverty through immigration.

The silent screen stars of the US in the 1920s were mostly poor, East European immigrants. Pola Negri and others were neither concerned with respectability nor with having the “correct” Anglo background, but with escaping poverty. Their films expanded what could be represented on the screen, for example bathroom scenes. Their risqué fashion, especially the use of cosmetics, was emulated by lower class female audiences. They saw the stars as a sign that women who did not come from the old order could “make it” (Scott 2005). Just as the screen in a former era was a way up and out that also pushed social and artistic boundaries, Slavic models now work as the embodiment of a new look of beauty in the “west” as a way up and out (“New Slavs of New York: All Bling and No Borscht;” “Slavs of Fashion: The New Beauties”).

Women in the “west” have historically framed East European women’s emancipation and market activity as a problem. In the US pre-World War II garment and cosmetics industry, through their work in factories or eventual ownership of companies, they took leading roles in the marketplace (Marwick 1988). The Progressives, many of whom were upper class women, sought not only to reform garment factory working conditions but also the social world of these workers. This was a way to hinder immigrants’ encroachment on eligible upper class men and on the discourse of style and fashion (Scott 2005).

From the mainstream view in the “west,” East European models’ participation in the market is possible because they are viewed as oppressed foreigners who can do no better than model. For the models, an avenue for their emancipation from the problems of their postsocialist homelands is selling their Slavic look. At the margins of two worlds, working in the media spotlight, the experiences of Slavic models as cultural producers offers an interesting investigation of women’s market involvement as emancipation. Some preliminary interviews with model’s agents suggest that the experiences of these models are not singularly good or bad: “The East Europeans are starving. If somebody scouts them and tells them that they can become a model they will do everything for it...These Eastern girls, they send their money to their family so they won’t die” (N. agent).

Our research asks how the experience of Slavic models is framed by and challenges stereotypes and condescending attitudes
about models. How models experience their position between east and west through their market involvement complicates the discourse on modeling as oppressive. It points to specific notions of the dominant discourse that refer to the roles for which women from postsocialist regions may participate in the market in specific ways.

REFERENCES


DISEMPOWERING THROUGH DEFINITION: CONSTRUCTING VULNERABILITY IN CONSUMPTION ENVIRONMENTS

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The research project “Disempowering Through Definition” is a sociohistoric inquiry of prevailing discourses on gender and the marketplace—of women in the marketplace and of the market as a gendered concept—that seeks to challenge the implicitness, infused in popular and scholarly discourse, of women’s vulnerability in consumption environments. By examining sites (such as the Federal Trade Commission of the United States, industry self-regulatory structures and advertising texts) in which theories about consumer capabilities materialize in practices
directed at defining and subsequently protecting the “vulnerable” consumer, I intend to demonstrate that the construction of “vulnerable consumers” is inherently an assertion of power. When implemented in formal and structural ways, as in regulatory efforts, such practices can instead disempower the populations they are designed to protect.

Advertising frequently is criticized for creating and perpetuating negative stereotypes of vulnerable populations. These critiques, while sometimes acknowledging the complex interactions of consumers and advertising (Marchand 1985; Sparke 1995), tend to emphasize and extend assumptions of group weaknesses. For example, feminist evaluations of consumer society have asserted that women have been exploited by stereotypical imagery and by marketplace values (Bordo 1993; Kilbourne 1999; Wolf 1991). While scholars have begun to reevaluate the discourses that question women’s autonomy and intelligence and that presume their vulnerability in the marketplace (Scott 2005; Stevens, Maclaran and Brown 2003), these dialogues have affected not only the practices of the advertising industry but legal and ethical determinations of those practices that, instead, have suppressed women’s opportunities even while claiming to protect them. Within the framework of advertising theory and within industry and government regulatory bodies, vulnerability is not associated with white adult males, but rather with groups considered “weak” because of assumed emotionality and irrationality—because they are female (or otherwise marginalized, as by being poor or black). Thus, while criticisms of advertising practices and the industry’s treatment of so-called vulnerable audiences are vital, it is equally critical to question the ways in which vulnerable audiences are constructed and the concomitant effects of these definitions as they are implemented into practices.

The traditional liberalist legacy of advertising in economic and legal discourse in the U.S. is one of democratic and rational debate. It assumes advertising provides an important public service by offering proper information for the marketplace to flourish through rational and informed decision processes. This view was supported and formalized in the United States Supreme Court in *Bigelow v. Virginia* (1974), a right-to-know case involving abortion clinic advertising and again under the doctrine of free speech in *Virginia Board of Pharmacy v. Virginia Citizen’s Consumer Council, Inc.* (1976). However, while these cases set legal precedents, they only offer one view of the marketplace in the expansive history of advertising theory. Conflicting concepts of advertising—as catering to consumer’s rational capacities and as manipulating consumer desires—reflect deep-seated historical depictions of the marketplace that envision seductive consumption environments as contrasted with the organization and rationality of production spheres (Bristol and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Ramsay 1996; Schroeder 1997; Sparke 1995); this terminology further perpetuates criticisms of masculine biases that portray consumers as passive and feminine (Ramsay 1996; Scott 2005). Men are constructed as rational producers and portrayed as advertisers with power over the persuasion environment; women are treated as emotional consumers with assumed weaknesses to persuasive appeals. Thus, while advertisers and scholars have acknowledged that social realities of gender relations are complex (Marchand 1985; Sparke 1995, Schroeder 1997, Scott 2005), discourse about capable women in consumer realms historically has been tempered by ingrained conceptions of the gendered forces of the marketplace.
For example, in 1972, the FTC, which regulates advertising in the United States, charged distributors and advertisers of the stimulant drug Vivarin with misleading consumers by giving the false impression the product would improve their sex lives and marital status, among other equally intimate claims (J.B. Williams Co., Inc., et al.). While the material facts of this case would seem sufficient for such charges—the advertisers had failed to disclose that the active ingredient was none other than caffeine—the FTC, in its analysis, also focused on aspects of the target market. Implicit in these charges, the FTC regulated on behalf of vulnerable consumers who could be misled by the claims. The target market for the Vivarin campaign was housewives, and the implicit assumption in the discourse of the case and in the regulatory decision seems to be housewives’ vulnerability to the emotional and irrational appeals of the advertising. Similarly, advertisers’ perceptions of the audience are often reflected in the conventions of advertisements and the expectations of how advertising representations will be interpreted (Bivins 2004). The Vivarin advertisers played on stereotypes of the domestic sphere and female emotionality; further, the advertiser’s failure to disclose the product’s active ingredient betrayed more about their own beliefs of housewives’ intellects than of the actual capacities of housewives.

Persuasion environments are particularly sensitive to issues of vulnerability. Any attempt to define a form of communication for which the purpose is inducing belief or action is inherently a struggle for power. The power to define what groups are vulnerable is the power of defining meaning and position within a society (Brummett 1994) and, in turn, is the capacity either to uplift or denigrate these groups. Perhaps because of the precedents set in legal and historical discourses of women in the marketplace, images of and targeted towards women in the popular press, particularly those in consumption situations, have been feared in contemporary critiques as major moral threats (Scott 2005), and as irrational appeals in the context of “rational” market forces. But women’s—and men’s—engagement with cultural symbols is more complex than is allowed by such critiques (Scott 1994, 2005, Ramsay 1996, Borgerson and Schroeder 2005).

What the discussion thus far suggests is that the unidirectional nature of a manipulation model of persuasion is too simplistic. Consumer behavior literature might benefit from sociohistoric and ideological analysis of the effects of gendered assumptions about the marketplace on academic discourse, public policy and as they are encoded in popular texts. As some authors have pointed out (Borgerson and Schroeder 2005; Scott 2005), too often critics read images without addressing the circumstances of their use, leaving the field of advertising with criticisms that have no substantial basis to allow for advances in ethical behaviors and theories in the marketplace, but which may nonetheless affect industry and government regulatory attempts. It is just as important to recognize and address the value-laden nature of these regulations as it is of the messages they attempt to alter. Using the power to define the communication environment, without proper understanding of its tools and without proper respect for its participants can result in unethical activity that can, if not checked, become widespread through the dominant institutions and, in doing so, diffuse the subjects of accountability and support the mechanisms of disempowering so-called “vulnerable” audiences. This is a place where Second-wave feminism needs to be corrected.
and where consumer behavior researchers interested in gender could take an active role.

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