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ABSTRACT
Given the importance of gender in consumer research, one might expect feminist perspectives to be at the forefront of critical engagement with consumer behavior theory. However, in recent years, critical, feminist voices have been barely audible. This paper explores the value of, and insights offered by, feminist theories and feminist activism, and how feminist theory and practice has altered our understanding of gendered consumption. It then argues that postmodern and postfeminist perspectives have diluted feminism’s transformative potential, leading to a critical impasse in marketing and consumer research. In conclusion, we suggest that feminist perspectives, notably materialist feminism, may open up fresh new possibilities for critique, and interesting and worthwhile areas for transformative research in consumer behavior.

INTRODUCTION
The value of critical perspectives on theory is uncontested in disciplines across the academy, as such perspectives challenge assumptions, stimulate debate, and bring about changes in current ways of thinking. Given the importance of gender in marketing and consumer research discourse, one might expect feminist perspectives to be at or near the forefront of critical engagement with consumer behavior theory. An upsurge of critical feminist voices during the 1990s, however, has been followed by a lull in recent times. This paper offers some explanation as to why this has happened. The paper begins with a brief review of how insights from feminist theories and feminist activism began to alter our understanding of gendered consumption. It then discusses how postmodern and postfeminist perspectives have diluted feminism as a potentially transformative critique, leading to what we consider a critical impasse. Finally, we suggest ways in which to move beyond this impasse, and how feminist perspectives, specifically materialist feminism, may open up new possibilities for critique, together with new avenues for transformative research in consumer behavior.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN CONSUMER RESEARCH
Modern marketing has relied on gender to help conceptualize, understand and explain consumers and their behavior. Indeed the gender discourse of the marketplace is well-documented in our discipline. For decades marketers took it for granted that consumers were female (Frederick 1929). However, in spite of its omnipresence in marketing theory, research and practice, the concept of gender is not always well-understood or conceptualized in marketing and consumer behavior.

Consumer research on gender in the 1970s focused primarily on two gender-related topics, namely gender portrayals in advertising, and how gender identity could be used to conceptualize, understand and predict consumer behavior. Most of the advertising studies examined how women were portrayed and whether or not these portrayals altered in line with the changing role of women in society. Kacen and Nelson, however, in their 2002 study of gender portrayals in advertising, found little change in the ways that women have been represented over the decades. Similarly, the other main area of research, gender identity, or the extent to which a person identifies with masculine or feminine personality traits, has also proved disappointing, with inconclusive results across a wide range of product studies (see Palan 2001).

Some researchers, however, took a more critical view, arguing that such approaches consistently failed to address the complexity of the relationship between gender and consumer behavior. Artz and Venkatesh (1991, p.619), for example, observed that studies of gender issues in marketing and advertising generated ‘superficial and self-evident inferences’, were devoid of theory, and were preoccupied with the single issue of sex stereotyping. A paradigm shift in the 1980s led to a shift in emphasis, and new theoretical and methodological perspectives began to emerge in consumer research, as anthropologists, sociologists and literary critics joined marketing departments (Belk 1995). These fresh perspectives explored wider consumption issues such as the meanings that consumers attached to products, how products were consumed, and how products were used to create and sustain identity and self-concept. This ‘new’ consumer research has recently been termed Consumer Culture Theory by Arnould and Thompson (2005).

Whilst the term gender has no single and universally agreed meaning, most consumer researchers in the Consumer Culture Theory tradition accept that gender is a socio-cultural category which refers to the ways that men and women are socialized into male and female roles. As such, Consumer Culture Theory problematizes the category of gender, and challenges traditional, ontological tendencies to essentialize men and women.

The paradigm shift in consumer behavior research in the 1980s brought to the fore new perspectives, some of which mirrored the development of feminist theories on gender and research methodologies in other disciplines. Feminist methodologies stress parity between researcher and informant, and researcher involvement in the research process to minimize ‘otherness’ (Madriz 2000). They also privilege consumers (readers) rather than producers and products (authors and texts), and emphasize the importance of context and the ‘lived experience’ of informants, rather than ‘expert’ interpretations of consumer experience (Rinehart 1998; Andrews and Talbot 2000). Above all, feminist research addresses social change and political equality. The concepts of transformation and praxis: ‘the struggle to unite theory and practice in action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it for women’ (Humm 1995, p. 218), is central to its aims. We now turn to the application of feminist theory in consumer research.

The first papers in the consumer research literature to draw on feminist perspectives were by Stern (1992), Bristor and Fischer (1993), Hirschman (1993), Fischer and Bristor (1994), Joy and Venkatesh (1994) and Peñaloza, (1994). These authors showed how theory and knowledge in marketing and consumer research was gendered in taken-for-granted, unarticulated, unrecognized, and, above all, profound ways. Stern (1992), for example, applied feminist literary theory to the interpretation of advertisements. Fischer and Bristor (1994) deconstructed the rhetoric of marketing relationships. These authors argued that the discourse associated with the marketer/consumer relationship revealed parallels to that between male and female. Specifically, they argued that notions of seduction and patriarchy were woven into that relationship. In a similar vein, Hirschman (1993) examined the ideology expressed in articles published in the 1980 and 1990 volumes of the Journal of Consumer Research. She concluded that the dominant ideology
was masculinist, and that a key theme in both volumes was the use of the machine metaphor to characterize human behavior. Joy and Venkatesh (1994) applied a postmodern, feminist perspective to deconstruct the machine metaphor in consumer research, a pervasive metaphor that privileged the mind and cognitive activity (assumed male) over the body and emotions (assumed female). Drawing on feminist epistemology and research approaches, Peñaloza (1994) recommended the use of participatory and dialogic research methods, in order to achieve a greater understanding of consumers, and thus move away from traditional, machine-like, information-processing models. Numerous other studies have also contributed to our knowledge of the gendered nature of marketing and consumer behavior (Venkatesh 1993; Ozanne and Stern 1993; Dobscha 1993; Costa 1994; Woodruffe 1996; Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens 2000).

Despite a proliferation of feminist perspectives on consumer research during the 1990s, there has been little work of this nature in recent times, both in terms of journal publications and conference proceedings, apart from a few exceptions (Stevens, Maclaran and Brown 2003; Stern and Russell 2004; Houston 2004). Furthermore, although Friend and Thompson (2000) demonstrated how one method, feminist memory work, could result in transforming the ways that women viewed and understood their experiences and attitudes in a shopping context, few studies have had an explicit transformative agenda which is at the heart of feminist research. In the section that follows we explore some of the reasons why we think this may be the case.

**THE DEMISE OF CRITIQUE**

As part of its critique of elitist assumptions and traditional hierarchical orders, postmodern thinking argued that gender is also one of those universalizing and unhelpful dichotomies that typify modern Western thought (Scott 1992). What is meant by masculinity and femininity are now so indistinct that dividing people on the basis of gender identity is simply unproductive and only serves to reify sex differences (Firat 1994). In a postmodern world of endless possibilities and multiple personas, gender becomes another ludic element and an aspect of identity that can be altered at will.

The terms postmodern feminism and postfeminism are often conflated. Although postfeminism has been influenced by postmodern feminism, the two terms are not synonymous, nor does postfeminism mean the end of feminism. It does, however, represent a significant shift from the activist feminist movements of the 1970s (often referred to as second-wave feminism) to what has sometimes been described as ludic or celebratory feminism. In this respect it contrasts sharply with feminist critiques of consumption during the 1960s and 1970s, which focused on how marketers manipulated the female consumer through advertising images that stereotyped women and contributed to unequal power relationships. Typified by Wolf’s (1991) critique of the beauty myth in consumer culture, this critical approach to the marketplace persisted into the 1990s. At this time feminist activists were essentially anti-marketing and anti-consumerism, promoting a natural, authentic self that could be realized through various styles that were both anti-fashion and anti-capitalist (Cole and Hriber 2000). The ethos of Anita Roddick’s The Body Shop, founded in 1976, with its natural, herbal-based products and ethical policies, was very much in keeping with these feminist perspectives.

The reconciliation of feminism and consumption characterizes the postfeminist imaginary, with the remaking of feminism into desires and identities that can be realized through consumption. This postfeminist celebratory position is epitomized by the Nike culture that began to target women in the late 1980s. Nike’s campaigns to women appealed to a more authentic self that could be realized through exercise. As such they were accorded with upholding feminist values and playing a pivotal role in encouraging women to become more physically active (Scott 1993). Representing sports as empowering to women, Nike constructed the female athlete as resolute, determined and committed (Goldman and Papsen 1998). Yet, this view is received somewhat skeptically by many feminists, because its focus on individual satisfaction stifles collective action (McDonald 2000).

In a similar vein, the issue of gender in social and political processes is diluted by postmodernism, with its emphasis on lifestyles and ‘hybrid consumption’ for consumers generally, rather than suggesting that any one variable has priority over other variables in an individual’s make-up. Hollows (2000) argues that the lifestyle project may be experienced as a complex and troubling one for women; indeed the concept of consumer liberation through multiple choices in the marketplace may merely be experienced as another form of disenfranchisement and confusion (Miller 1995).

Although they acknowledge the postmodern critique of universalizing categories such as male and female, and the postfeminist reconciliation with, and celebration of, consumer culture, many feminists argue that gender is still an important category. But whilst distinctions between male and female gender categories may now be more blurred, the male/female binary remains an important organizing category in our society. Feminists have always campaigned for the proper representation of women, an agenda that postmodernists challenge in their questioning of the very identity of womanhood itself (Lee 2001). Thus, there are many points of agreement between postmodernists, postfeminists and the more traditional, and usually older, feminists, but they disagree on the significance and relevance of maleness versus femaleness in people’s everyday lives. To illustrate, when it comes to various quality of life indicators such as health, education and income, women are still disadvantaged in comparison to their male counterparts (Hill and Kanwalroop 1999). Similarly, most jobs are segregated on the basis of gender, with female-dominated occupations still attracting less status and money than those of males (Jarman et al. 1999). This is particularly relevant to marketers, given the increasing ‘feminization’ of the marketing profession (Maclaran and Catterall 2000).

The decline in political engagement among feminists has occurred right across the academy and not simply in marketing and consumer research. Thus, Segal (2000) argues that the literary paradigms that dominate current feminist thinking have produced rich models for subjectivity and identity, but there also needs to be engagement between feminist theory and feminist activism.

**TOWARDS A TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA**

In this respect, one of the most interesting theoretical perspectives to attract attention in recent times is materialist feminism (Jackson 2001). Materialist feminists argue that the so-called ‘cultural turn’ embraced by postmodernists shifted feminism’s emphasis from social structures and inequalities, to issues of culture, language, representation and subjectivity (Jackson 2001). Gender is more than just a cultural distinction between men and women, however; it is sustained through hierarchical social structures that include divisions in labor.

Although this perspective is not new, there has been a resurgence of interest in some of its basic tenets. Materialist feminists refused to abandon the goals of early second wave feminism, and persisted in problematizing the category ‘woman’ in terms of class, race, sexuality, culture, and so forth (Landry and Maclean 1993). Historical materialism is a key method for analyzing relations between men and women, since it emphasizes the ‘social’ rather than ‘natural’. A key influence here was Delphy’s (1975) work *For a Materialist Feminism*, in which she argued that feminism was...
above all a social movement, one which underlined that the situation of women was cause for revolt and was not a ‘natural’ state of affairs, but one which should be challenged and changed, given the ‘social’ origins of women’s disadvantaged situation. From this perspective, patriarchal gendered structures are every bit as material as the capitalist ones, with which Marxist historical materialism is usually associated. Indeed, in sharp contrast to Marxism, patriarchal rather than capitalism is an object of analysis, and the former does not necessarily derive from the latter.

Of particular interest is Jackson’s (2001) work on materialist feminism, which foregrounds the social, i.e. social structures, relations and practices. She argues that adopting a materialist stance does not preclude an awareness of differences amongst women. On the contrary, it requires a focus on everyday social inequalities and everyday social practices. Nor does materialism ignore issues of language, cultural representation, and subjectivity, but it does entail locating them in their social and historical contexts. In 1981 Delphy wrote that materialist feminism goes beyond the oppression of women: ‘It will not leave untouched any aspect of reality, any domain of knowledge, any aspect of the world’ (Landry and Maclean 1993, p. xii). In this vein, then, materialist feminism explores ‘other axes of difference’ (Landry and Maclean, op cit, p. 150) and does not reduce women’s oppression to a single cause. Thus, it eschews attempts at totalizing grand theory, and transhistorical universalist claims.

The situation of low income consumers will be used to illustrate the research potential for materialist feminist analyses in consumer research. Consumers on low incomes are far from a minority group in society; 32.3 million people in the US are classified as officially poor (Hill 2002). It has also been long acknowledged that poor people pay more than their more prosperous counterparts to access even the most basic goods and services they need (Alwitt and Donley 1996). For example, supermarket prices are often higher in poor areas than in more prosperous ones. Poor consumers are also less able to switch to alternative suppliers because of existing debt burdens, and they are unable to take advantage of any savings from direct debit (Curtis 2000). As Bauman (1998) pointed out, the poor, who are limited in their ability to respond to market temptations, have been marginalized from mainstream society, and described as ‘unwanted’, ‘abnormal’, non-consumers, and flawed consumers.

Consuming on a low income is a rich topic for consumer research in its own right, but especially now, given the current neoconservative economic and social policies in the US, Britain and elsewhere. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (1996) in the US is similar to welfare-to-work initiatives elsewhere. These initiatives are based on an assumption that taking people from dependency on welfare or state benefits would augment their financial well-being and, by implication, their social inclusion and ability to participate more fully in the consumer society. As Myers and Lee (2003) point out many who leave the welfare system simply shift from the category of welfare poor to working poor. As in Britain, families may find themselves in even worse material circumstances after they leave the welfare rolls. The huge rise in service industries has provided job opportunities, and whilst there are highly paid, high-skilled service jobs, there are many low-skilled ones that may not provide a living wage (Barrington 2000). A key point here is that when we examine consuming on a low income, we need to contextualize this, and connect such studies to wider social structures, systems and practices. Studies on the poor in consumer research have tended to focus on those in extreme poverty. Clearly, there is a need to broaden our definition of what counts as poor in comparatively affluent service economies. More emphasis on relative rather than absolute measures of poverty would go some way to achieving this.

As consumer researchers we focus on the relationship between gender and consumption but in our efforts to understand this relationship in culture, we too often ignore important interrelationships with production and reproduction. To illustrate, Hill and Kanwalroop (1999) have drawn our attention to a lack of research on the gendered aspects of consumer disadvantage. Lone parents, mainly mothers, account for a significant percentage of the poverty population, and lone parenthood is the main cause of family poverty (Field 1996). Welfare to work policies and initiatives effectively mean that reproductive work (child bearing, childrearing and childcare) is no longer a valid basis for making welfare claims (Boyer 2003). The underpinning assumption is that reproductive work is not of value, and certainly not within certain forms of ‘family’ structure. The stigmatization of lone mothers is well-documented; one of the reasons for such stigmatization is the tendency to prioritize paid work. Thus, in addition to coping with the practicalities of working within a restricted family budget, lone mothers have to cope with the negative attitudes and reactions of other members of society. The impact on consumer identities, especially in relation to stigmatization, has yet to be investigated fully, together with the impact on family dynamics. For example, families on low incomes, through various consumption strategies, can mask or disguise their poverty from outsiders, and parents will attempt to hide their restricted finances within the family.

Feminist economists have long argued against the devaluation of reproductive work, given that it sustains, or even makes possible, productive work outside the home. Sivard (1995), for example, suggests that at least a quarter of the value of the world’s gross domestic product can be attributed to women’s work inside the home. At the same time, there is an increasing overlap between the productive and reproductive economies, the formal and informal economies. The separation of private and public spheres for example, becomes less distinct with home working. The productive economy has become increasingly informalized and more like the reproductive economy. The huge rise in service industries referred to above has been accompanied by increasing casualization of the service workforce. Economic activity outside of regulation, such as proceeds from illegal activity, and unrecorded income, were estimated at a quarter of the world’s gross domestic product in 1998 (Peterson 2002). Thus, Peterson (2002, p. 13) argues that such informalization connects the different economies and exposes ‘the inappropriateness of drawing rigid distinctions between economic and non-economic activities’. Whilst there are research opportunities to investigate the impact of this increasing informalization on consumption more generally, the blurring of boundaries between production and reproduction also opens up to scrutiny the divide between work, including consumption work, performed in public and in private spaces.

CONCLUSION

Critique from a variety of critical perspectives is important for academics and practitioners alike, in that it offers a space wherein the basic assumptions, theories and practices in marketing and consumer research can be challenged. It can also lead to a rethinking of key issues, and a reframing of the debates in which theory and practice development takes place. During the 1990s feminist perspectives on consumer behavior, especially in the arena of gender, performed an important critical role. However, as postmodernist writers challenged the modernist assumptions in feminist theories, and postfeminists disengaged with feminist activism, critical feminist perspectives seemed to wane. Whilst we do not propose a return
to the early 1970s feminist, anti-marketing and anti-consumerism critique, feminist critique still has much to offer us. This is especially so in relation to marketers’ assumptions regarding marginalized consumers. In this paper we have argued that feminist critique can enable us to challenge the current focus on consumption as a liberatory identity project, which, we suggest, neglects important structural interrelationships with production and reproduction in our market economy.

REFERENCES


