Examining Discourses of Gender and Consumption in the Media

Linda Tuncay, Loyola University Chicago, USA
Katherine Sredl, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Marie-Agnes Parmentier, York University, Canada
Catherine Coleman, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Gender identity is a fluid concept that has changed considerably over time not only in its representation in media and its interpretation by consumers, but also in its conceptualization by researchers. Using hermeneutic analysis, this paper explores the gender and consumption discourses that are salient in popular media. Specifically, two popular television shows, Entourage and Sex and the City are examined. Despite popular acclaim of each show’s portrayal of pioneering representations of men and women, the characters of both shows struggled to balance more traditional gender roles with the assumption of new, postmodern roles.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14464/volumes/v36/NA-36

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Examining Discourses of Gender and Consumption in the Media
Linda Tuncay, Loyola University Chicago, USA
Katherine Sredl, University of Illinois, USA
Marie-Agnès Parmentier, York University, Canada
Catherine Coleman, University of Illinois, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Gender identity is a fluid concept that has changed considerably over time, not only in its representation in media and its interpretation by consumers, but also in its conceptualization by researchers. Using hermeneutic analysis, a method used by prior consumer researchers, (e.g., Humphreys forthcoming; Coskuner 2006; Sherry 1995; Hirschman 1988), this paper explores gender and consumption discourses in popular media. Because gender is a relational and evolving construct, this study explores masculinity and femininity together to gain a holistic view of gender discourses in today’s society. Specifically, the authors draw from two popular television shows, Entourage and Sex and the City, to illustrate how contemporary notions of femininity and masculinity are intertwined with consumption. The researchers found that the characters in both shows struggled with tensions between more traditional gender roles and the assumption of new, postmodern roles intimately associated with consumption (see, for example, Firat and Venkatesh 1995 for discussion on the assumption of postmodern roles). The nuances of these tensions are less frequently mentioned in popular media.

Three themes of masculinity emerged in Entourage that were both rooted in prior research as well as intertwined with more feminized notions of masculinity not extensively examined in previous inquiries. The first theme that emerged in the show was the Peter Pan ethos of childhood play and fun (Register 2001) and the Playboy lifestyle of self-indulgence and sexual conquests (Osgerby 2001). For the characters in Entourage, consumption is instrumental in enacting the masculine themes of the Peter Pan and Playboy lifestyles. At the same time, it is intertwined with traditionally feminized notions of gift giving and shopping. Second, the theme of buddydom, or the celebration of friendships with other men, was prevalent in Entourage. However, the characters’ enactment of this relationship was more closely associated with a non-traditional family unit than with traditional notions of male bonding. While women are most often associated with communal goals, the portrayal of the Entourage “family” is reflective of broader shifts in the U.S. towards “non-traditional” households, including men living together beyond their college years (Lavigne 2004). Third, the consumption of “toys” has been demonstrated in prior research to be an important part of the enactment of masculinity (Fiske 1987) and is a central part of the male characters’ lives in Entourage. But the quest for acquisition sometimes causes internal struggles for the characters when it conflicts with their desire to remain authentic. The motivation for authenticity has been demonstrated as a core theme of masculinity for Gen X men in prior research (Tuncay 2005). This struggle was particularly evident in the breadwinner, Vince, in a tension between his desire to take on “meaningful” acting parts in independent films and offers to act in commercialized, yet lucrative studio roles that would subsidize the characters’ Hollywood consumption habits. Thus, in Entourage, several themes of masculinity emerged that resonated with prior research on gender and consumer behavior. However, the themes of this study were intertwined with conceptualizations of gender more traditionally associated with females, such as familial relationships, gift-giving, shopping, and emphasis on physical appearance. While in the recent past, these behaviors have been associated with a segment of male consumers called “metrosexuals,” such behaviors have now moved into the mainstream Thus, it is evident that new forms of masculinity are emerging, and are represented in popular media.

Three themes of gender fluidity and consumption also emerged in Sex and the City. While some of these themes have been discussed in prior research, the show demonstrates anxieties about balancing traditional and changing notions of femininity and masculinity. First, tensions between strict traditional gender roles and gender fluidity are prevalent. Negotiations over gender roles are demonstrated in the character Miranda, who struggles with her non-conformity to traditional gender roles when, for example, she prioritizes her career as a corporate lawyer, purchases a home and is faced with housekeeping. This tension is further demonstrated in the second theme that explores the costs of freedom and independence. Sex and the City displayed notable violations of traditional gender roles; in particular, the narratives of Samantha Jones portray striking examples of female sexual freedom. In asserting her independence and power through professional accomplishment, financial independence, sex without ties and home ownership, she is also forced to face her vulnerabilities. Third, the characters of Sex and the City struggle with the quest for authenticity, both in their consumption and in their identities. Much like in Entourage, the theme of authenticity builds through various storylines in which consumption actions are developed as metaphors for broader themes of life. For example, for the women of Sex and the City, the Playboy Mansion epitomizes notions of fantasy—sexual freedom and an idealized and luxurious lifestyle, especially for Samantha. However, their visit to the mansion ultimately signifies a lack of authenticity and fails to maintain the positive connotations of fantasy.

This research demonstrates that the characters of both shows actively explore masculine and feminine roles, though not without anxiety, as they move through new and fluid identities of gender that often are enacted through consumption. Tensions between traditional masculinity and alternative masculinities have been examined by past researchers (see, for example, Holt and Thompson 2004; Otnes and McGrath 2001). But in Entourage, the characters find ways to reestablish and reinforce their masculinities as they create new roles. In Sex and the City, several themes of gender found in prior research also emerged. While the notion of juggling and independence has been discussed in prior research (e.g., Thompson 1996) and despite acclaim in the popular press about groundbreaking portrayals of contemporary women, it is evident that the characters of Sex and the City still struggle to negotiate the gains of feminism with more traditional feminine ideals, much like how the characters of Entourage balance traditional gender roles with new masculine ideals. The authors find that these themes are reflective of ideological gains and shifts exemplified in feminist agenda and that, to a greater extent, they question what happens when these gains have been made.

REFERENCES


