Discourses of Femininity in Advertising Among Gen X Women

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Much of gender research in the past followed the feminist critique tradition and sought to highlight the prevalence of gender stereotypes and sexist portrayals of women in advertising. However, as Stern (1999) points out, it is important to explore the complexities of gender across individuals. In this vein, this study explores conceptualizations of femininity within the context of advertising among a group of Gen X women. Findings reveal three salient themes of femininity. Moreover, women’s moral judgments provided a distinct lens through which they expressed their ideals of femininity as well as their responses to portrayals in advertising.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Traditional feminist discourse challenged social structures and cultural discourses associated with the patriarchal domination of women (cf. Hollows 2000). The marketplace was identified as a negative capitalistic structure and the media was perceived as a vehicle for disseminating stereotypical, sexist portrayals of women (Linder 2004). As a result, feminists and marketing scholars have been slow to bridge marketing and feminism (cf. Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens 2000). In recent years, researchers have begun to address the positive role of the market for feminism and to challenge traditional thought (e.g., Scott 2005, Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens 2000). However, researchers have not studied the marketplace interplay between feminist discourses, consumers’ feminist perceptions, and the construction of feminine identities.

One particular feminist discourse of women’s identity construction focuses on the myth of “having it all” (Bordo 1989, Haussegger 2005). This idealized discourse centers on the belief that women can successfully fulfill diverse roles simultaneously: mother, wife, professional, friend, consumer, and so on, and is often represented in the media. However, “having it all” juxtaposes diverse discourses and roles of women (i.e., professional role/capitalistic discourse; mother role/nurturer discourse), creating a tension-filled, multi-discursive environment for identity work. The proposed session frames the consumption of female-targeted media as a space for negotiating the complexities of modern feminist and cultural discourses through the characters or representations of women who embody various roles and identities. By so doing, the media acts as a mirror in which women reflexively analyze and incorporate or reject cultural material into their identity and beliefs (Schröder and Zwick 2004).

The proposed session addresses the question of how women interact with the media to identify feminist discourses and construct modern feminist beliefs and identities. The objectives of the proposed session are therefore to: (1) demonstrate responses of women to female-targeted media, (2) discuss the salient discourses in female-targeted media and characters, (3) examine the relationship between market-mediated discourses and individual notions of feminism, and (4) analyze the effects of media incorporation in the behavior, attitudes, and lifestyles of women.

To address the session objectives, the researchers demonstrate how women analyze and incorporate elements of market-mediated discourses to create personalized, multi-dimensional feminist beliefs and identities. First, Linda Tuncay discusses the ideals of femininity women create in response to advertised depictions of women, interweaving authenticity and feminist discourses. Leah Carter then explores the relationship between feminism and romance, analyzing how women construct practical feminisms of romance through consumption of “chick flicks.” Finally, Hope Jensen Schau and Kate Thompson show how the Twilight brand community is used as a marketplace tool for negotiating feminist ideas and roles based on the liminality of represented discourses. In each of these contexts, women encounter multiple discourses in the media representations of women and resolve the discursive and role tensions by active engagement with the material and identity construction.

We anticipate discussant Pauline Maclaran will encourage audience participation and direct the discussion of session themes utilizing her understanding of consumer culture and feminist literatures. We also anticipate the broad appeal of this session among consumer culture researchers as we address the popularity of female-targeted media consumption, explore manifestations and consumption of market-mediated discourses to resolve role and discourse tensions from “having it all”, and investigate the identity work of the marginalized female culture in marketing research (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Ozanne and Stern 1993).

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Discourses of Femininity in Advertising among Gen X Women”

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Much of gender research in the past followed the feminist critique tradition and sought to highlight the prevalence of gender stereotypes and sexist portrayals of women in advertising, such as the homemaker or the sexualized woman (Linder 2004). This early research serves as an important foundation for subsequent scholarly research in this area. However, as Stern (1999) points out, it is important to explore the complexities of gender across individuals, not conceptualizing women as a homogeneous group that is infinitely different from men.

In this vein, this study explores Gen X women’s conceptualizations of femininity within the context of advertising. Gender is an important factor in not only the way consumers construct meanings in their lives, but the way in which individuals interpret text such as advertising (Stern and Holbrook 1994). Due to the fact that individuals glean much information about gender from media, advertising serves as an important milieu in which to explore the complexities of femininity among women. Defining femininity can be difficult due to a number of factors which have altered the discourses of gender in today’s American society. These include the increasing earning power of women as well as a greater variety of representations of women in the media. However, little past research actually explores what consumers, themselves, define as femininity and how these notions influence the way gendered ads are interpreted. Thus, the principal research questions for this study are: 1) What ideals of femininity are held by women? and 2) How do women interpret notions of femininity in advertising?

To explore these questions, a qualitative study of 19 Gen X women was conducted. Because notions of gender can be influenced by factors such as social class, education, race/ethnicity, age (e.g., see Beynon 2002), this study examines notions of femininity from the perspective of women falling into the Gen X cohort, who are largely college educated and living in the Midwest. In-depth, semi-structured interviews using ads as projective aids (McGrath, Sherry, Levy 1993) are employed to uncover meanings of femininity in advertising. A series of ads depicting various notions of femininity were selected from some of the top circulating lifestyle magazines for the Gen X female demographic, including Vogue, Glamour, Cosmopolitan, Oprah, and Parenting Magazine. Informants were asked open-ended “grand tour” questions (McCracken 1988), as well as questions specifically probing into their ideals of femininity and their interpretations of the ads. This research mirrors a study conducted by Tuncay (2006) on men’s conceptualizations of masculinity.

Three themes dominate women’s ideals of femininity in this study: the Alpha Woman, the Classic Woman, and the Centered
Woman. The ideal of the Alpha Woman emerges when women discuss confidence, strength, independence, empowerment, and a “take charge” attitude as attributes which exemplify their ideal sense of femininity. The Classic Woman is another ideal that informants identify. Women often discuss the notion that elegance, class, sophistication, and grace go hand in hand with femininity. The third salient theme is that of the Centered Woman, who is happy, relaxed, and at peace with herself. Women often comment on the desire to be happy in one’s own skin, and to be drawn to women depicted in ads in a relaxed, positive atmosphere, where the models are laughing or smiling. This last theme illuminates the way women make comparisons to models in ads. When women engage in social comparison to ads, they often feel the most appealing ads are ones that they could identify with (similar to some of the informants in a study by Hirschman and Thompson, 1997) and ones that present attainable standards. Informants reveal that they feel women in advertising should be authentic and accessible and even “flawed,” “not perfect.” Decidedly absent from the narratives of the informants is an ideal related to domesticity, or an “other-oriented” perspective (Bordo 1989). This is surprising given this theme has been widely discussed by past scholars as central to predominant discourses of femininity.

While the themes of femininity discussed above can be seen in various forms in past research, what is most telling is that women continue to use moral judgments as a distinct lens through which they interpret feminine ideals. For instance, while having an attractive appearance or being in shape is valued, women maintain certain boundaries of what is acceptable, particularly when it comes to sexual depictions. Lamb (2001, p.43) states, “Ideals of femininity ensure that girls will not be too sexual or too aggressive…” and that it is taboo to be sexual if it is not within the context of romantic love. In fact, several informants displayed high agency negative emotions (Fisher and Dubé 2005) such as anger and disgust when they viewed an ad which depicted very thin women in scantily clad clothing (see Bower 2001). They found the ads objectifying, annoying and even calling them “disturbing” and “repulsive,” and rejecting any notion of comparison (e.g. Richins 1991). Thus, while being beautiful and sexy are discussed by women, the scantily clad models depicted in the ads are conceptualized as crossing the boundary of “normal” femininity by giving a performance that is not respectable. This notion of respectability (and morality) serves as a distinct lens through which many of the women interpret gender ideals (see discussion of respectability by Skeggs 1997). Images that cross these boundaries are met with extreme outward resistance.

One limitation of this study could be the subset of ads used in this study. Further research should seek to develop a more refined understanding of what gender means today among Gen X women, as well as how notions of gender are interpreted by consumers among other groups of women and using different methodologies.

“Critically Romantic: Negotiating Feminist and Romantic Discourses in the Marketplace”

Leah Carter, York University, Canada

Early feminist discourse centered on liberating women from oppressive patriarchal systems and discourses of power (Hollows 2000). The media, in particular, was criticized for shaping women into one-dimensional, passive consumers of “false consciousness” and hindering women from freeing their “true” and natural “wild woman within” (Embree 1970; Friedan 1963; Daly 1979). In order to liberate women and encourage “true” feminine identity construction, feminists advocated recognizing and resisting the influential power of patriarchal trappings disseminated in the marketplace (Embree 1970). Female identity construction was therefore placed outside the realm of the market and in direct opposition to perceived masculine-oriented structures and discourses of power.

Romanticism was also cast as a cultural discursive villain that promoted the female surrender to male domination (Beauvoir 1953; Firestone 1970; Millet 1970; Faludi 1992). Romantic relationships, ideals, and goals were believed to constrain women to the subordinate, dependent role of the traditional “house wife” and limited the development of one’s “true” identity (Friedan 1963). Contemporary cultural critics and feminist writers frequently problematized the ubiquity of romantic discourses in modern entertainment television and cinematic outlets on the basis that the consumption of these story lines and narratives reinforces longstanding gender norms and power structures (Mulvey 1975; Mintz 2003). Alternative research suggested, however, that consumption of romantic novels provided a necessary, beneficial escape from women’s roles and the associated stresses of everyday life (Radway 1984). Thus, though traditional feminist discourse emphasized a dualistic worldview that reinforced binaries of romanticism/agency, market/consumer authenticity, masculine/feminine, and constraints/emanipation, consumption of romantic narratives in the media appears to create a space for active negotiation and deconstruction of feminist and romantic discourses.

In this research, I address how individual consumers integrate and enact feminism and romanticism by analyzing female consumption of mass market-mediated discourses in “chick flicks.” I argue that a more nuanced theorization of the traditional relationship between feminism, romanticism, and the representations of women in the media can be derived from investigating female identity politics at the intersection of practical feminisms (the discursive and practical ways in which women construct their feminist identities in their everyday social surroundings) and the consumption of contemporary media. By so doing, I aim to deconstruct the binary boundaries in feminist discourse between feminism and romanticism, romanticism and agency, and feminism and the marketplace.

The central research question is how women engage with market-mediated products to navigate feminist and romantic discourses and construct personal, modern feminist beliefs of romance. In order to address the research question, this research focuses on consumption of female-targeted movies and television shows (i.e., “chick flics”). These media products are specifically created for and targeted to women and are thematically centered on romantic discourses from a female’s perspective. Further, they generally depict women’s struggles in contemporary romantic encounters as the protagonists navigate issues such as traditional versus modern gender roles in dating contexts, relationship discord, and personal identity within a relationship situation, with the goal of achieving the idealized “happy ending.” The data consist of: (1) in-depth interviews with 10 women, ages 18-30, (2) online message boards and communities connected to female-targeted media products, and (3) participant observation field notes.

From the data, the “Critically Romantic” process emerges in which women engage with and negotiate market-mediated discourses of romanticism and feminism. The media disseminates a combination of feminist and romantic discourses to the mass population in its portrayal of female stereotypes: the homemaker, the promiscuous woman, the career woman, and so on. Women identified and interacted with these market-mediated discourses as embodied and enacted by the female characters. Acting as creative agents, the respondents reflected on the symbolic meanings associated with the represented stereotypes through the lens of internalized personalized discourses (religion, ethnicity, and so on) and life experiences. For example, finding “Mr. Right” was often described as a desired fantasy ideal promoted by the media and yet tempered
by real-life romantic mishaps. Real life experiences acted as criteria for assessing the truth-value of the romantic and feminist discourses depicted. Respondents also highlighted the centrality of social interactions with other women during and after the media consumption experience in analyzing represented themes and representations. Women then constructed practical, modern romantic beliefs interweaving both romantic and feminist, fantasy and “reality” elements. These beliefs shaped feminine self-concepts, personal romantic ideals and goals, and consumption preferences. Based on their own practical feminism of romance, women selected and evaluated media products, indicating certain prototypes and romantic narratives as superior to, or more resonant than, other media offerings. Respondents often cited “Sex and the City” as an exemplar of the right mix of women’s roles portrayed, and of romance and feminism. Other similar shows (e.g., “Lipstick Jungle”), however, failed to portray a resonant mixture of characters, themes, and discourses, and as such, failed to connect with the respondents.

The “Critically Romantic” process develops key theoretical insights for feminist and consumer research: (1) the permeability between cultural discourses and the marketplace, (2) the intertwining of traditionally disparate romantic and feminist discourses when represented in the media and consumed by women, (3) the necessity of the market as a fluid site of discursive construction and deconstruction, (4) the agentic nature of consumers in consuming mediated discourses and constructing a practical, working concept of feminist romance, (5) the social component of discourse negotiation, and (6) the deconstruction of historically and discursively reinforced dualities in individual discourse construction. By detailing the "Critically Romantic” process, I demonstrate the necessity of the marketplace and media in the construction of practical feminisms and the interconnectedness of feminism and romanticism enacted on the consumption level.

“Betwixt and Between: Liminality and Feminism in the Twilight Brand Community”
Hope Jensen Schau, University of Arizona, USA
Kate Thompson, University of Arizona, USA

Our research revolves around representation of, and collective consumption by, females engaged in the Twilight brand community. The Twilight saga is a series of novels aimed primarily at young adult, female readers. The saga revolves around a human, Bella, and her romance with a vampire, Edward. The title Twilight captures the liminality of the heroine. Like twilight is the liminal space between day and night, Bella is riddled with liminality: child and adult, mortal and immortal, love and hate, good and evil, independence and dependence, lover and friend, present and past, mother and child, spiritual and corporeal, and offense and defense. Importantly, girls and women deeply and collectively engage with the brand. Empirically, the Twilight consumer collective offers a unique female-centered incarnation of brand community and feminine-driven consumer engagement which contrasts with previous studies favoring male-dominated brand communities, with two notable exceptions: Martin, Schouten and McAlexander (2006) who investigate modes of femininity within the Harley-Davidson brand community and Schau, Muniz and Arnauld (2009) who examine value creating practices across a set of brand communities including those that skew male, are gender balanced and skewed female. We reveal the manner in which feminist discourses are collectively negotiated, intertwined and reconstituted in a female-dominated brand community (Gill 2007).

Our data consist of: the Twilight saga (composed of four official novels and an unauthorized draft novel), a feature film (with another film in production and two other films planned), literary and film criticism of the Twilight media products, naturalistic and participant observation in three online fan discussion forums, fan-created videos, email and chat interviews with forum participants and videographers, and face-to-face interviews with Twilight fans. Our data were iteratively collected and thematically coded and recoded following the hermeneutic tradition.

We find this brand community is, as anticipated, composed primarily of female members ranging in age from 8 to 65. Members use Twilight as a platform to negotiate feminism and socially prescribed female roles (Mulvey 1975): good girl, independent woman, lover, wife, and mother. Twilight offers fans a paradoxical interplay of feminist and anti-feminist discourses characteristic of post-feminist media culture (Friedberg 1993). Throughout the saga, the female self is deferred in favor of the primacy of good intentions toward humanity, highlighting the “problem of femininity” as a quintessential pathology when defined in patriarchic discourses (Mosucci 1990). As in previous research tackling the intersection and interaction of gender and the marketplace (cf., Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens 2000, Costa 2000, Dobscha and Ozanne 2000, Scott 2000), this paper explores gender expressions within a media brand and specifically within the realm of brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). The brand community members are energized by Bella’s haphazard navigation of disparate role expectations and her perpetual liminality. The coven of vampires Bella (human/food) joins suppress their predatory instinct and dietary imperatives, favoring compassion, reason and defensive combat, over aggression, apathy, bloodlust and hunger. Similarly, Bella navigates her expressed ideal of eternal commitment, which is tempered by Bella’s reluctance to embrace marriage and the danger motherhood poses as a “newborn vampire.” In essence, we find that it is precisely Bella’s liminality and her quest for equality against almost insurmountable odds that make her a compelling heroine and rallying point for the community. At the conclusion of the saga, Bella is integral in conquering seemingly omnipotent foes through enacting a protective screen on the clan that, together with a clever plan put in place by her sister-in-law, proves a triumph of the feminine defensive over the masculine offensive tactics of the foes. Fans are quick to address this gendered strategy and use it toward negotiating their own social roles and toward understanding the post-feminist perspective (Johnson 2007).

The Twilight brand community walks the line of compromise and tradeoffs as the price of being a contemporary woman through collective discourse that focuses on maximizing complex social functions: maintaining familial loyalties while pursuing romantic love, asserting independence and reveling in dependence within romance and domesticity, asserting one’s self while advancing the collective good, and balancing motherhood and professional ambition. The Twilight brand community provides a media based platform to think through the complexities of femininity and of the different incarnations of feminism. Because the liminality is never fully resolved, there is ample opportunity for engagement and for continued engagement. The fan discourse is supported by the Twilight narrative, which leaves room for fans to write themselves into the story and to locate resonating themes (Derecho 2006) to extend their brand engagement. In short, our data reveal that the liminalities are key attributes of fan engagement. Furthermore, the primarily female members of the brand community grapple with fundamental issues surrounding femininity, expected roles and modes of feminist resistance (Whelahan 1995). Interestingly, the fans’ discussions map rather closely onto “third wave” feminism that recognizes and asserts multi-fold gender positions (Henry 2004).

While it would be easy to dismiss the Twilight phenomenon as yet another vampire tale or Harry Potter clone, our research demonstrates that Twilight is neither of these. The brand community...
actively negotiates multi-fold liminality and feminism through the
Twilight saga. The brand serves as a vehicle to contemplate women’s
potential and place in the world.

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