Is Consumer Culture Good For Women? a Study of the Role of Consumer Culture in Disadvantaged Women’S Gender Role Negotiation

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Consumer culture is often perceived as a force that drives the perpetuation of patriarchy as discussed in feminist consumer research literature. Findings from Romanian women immigrants to Italy indicate that the ideology of consumer culture by favouring feminine values becomes a resource for women’s gender performance.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The category of gender, a “filter, through which individuals experience their social world” (Bristor and Fischer 1993) is recognized as an important aspect of consumer behavior. Yet, it has been noted elsewhere that it tends to be overlooked in the mainstream consumer research (Schroeder 2003). Particularly, we argue that there is not enough understanding of the role of consumer culture in women’s gender negotiation and their emancipation from traditional gender roles, especially so in the case of minority, non-middle class, non-Western women (Catteral, McLaren and Stevens 2005). The lack of these women’s viewpoint is increasingly significant, as consumer culture logic is spreading and becoming the dominant ideology in an ever larger part of the world. Furthermore, an increasing number of female immigrants from developing countries are integrated in first world households as they are engaged in paid care work and the ensuing consumption opportunities (however meager) oftentimes lead them to experience emancipation from home culture’s traditional gender roles. These renegotiations of gender roles emerging from global cultural flows remain relatively unexplored and the study of this promises further conceptual development of the role and inter-relationship of gender and consumption within consumer culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW
With relation to gender, consumer culture has been traditionally seen by the second-wave feminists as an overpowering force that drives the perpetuation of patriarchy both in feminist and consumer research literature. It is often criticized for picturing women in stereotypical roles or as sexual subjects, creating unattainable beauty myths serving to keep women under patriarchal domination (Bordo 1993; Wolf 2002; Faludi 2006). Such critique, however, reproduces the dichotomy found by feminist deconstructions of marketing literature, i.e. the active, controlling, male marketer/creator and the passive, controlled, female consumer/destroyer (Hirshman 1991, Bristor and Fisher 1993). In this way, this view of market and gender thus reproduces this dichotomy by picturing women as passive consumers uncritically taking over the market representations of herself (Scott 2000, 2005).

Another view has been offered by postmodern feminism that draws inspiration from the liberatory postmodern view of consumerism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), suggesting that through consumption choices women in the postmodern era can escape the construction of femininity imposed upon them (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens 2005). Critics of this stream, however, draw attention to the fact that such claims do not hold for non-white, non-middle class women not originated in Western countries (McDonald 2000, McRobbie 2000, 2004). Yet, the role of marketplace in these women’s gender negotiation has not been explored. There is thus a need to address these issues and study the role of consumer culture in disadvantaged women’s emancipation from traditional gender roles. However, the traditional emancipation theories are based on the notion of production: emancipation through participation in the workforce, while we concentrate on the role of consumer culture that favors consumption.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Our research question seeks to uncover if and under what circumstances can gender become a resource rather than constriction. In particular, we want to explore if the conditions of late modern consumer culture, precisely because of its accent on consumption rather than production, can act as a facilitator for these processes, offering it potential for disadvantaged women to perform alternative (to traditional) gender roles. In this paper, we investigate if and how exactly do these women use conceptions of gender as a resource on day-to-day basis, altering their gender roles through consumption practices.

METHOD
In order to answer the research questions, we have carried out interviews with fourteen Romanian female immigrants to Italy between June 2008 and February 2009. Two of the respondents were then interviewed again July 2011, which allowed to follow up on processes of gender negotiation individuated in the first round of data collection. Our respondents were 23 to 51 years old and had low-status jobs in Italy. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Parts of our analysis that deal with the general accounts of gender roles in Romania and Italy concentrate on the interviews with all fourteen respondents, while the two specific informants’ accounts are used where we treat the long-term effects of consumer culture on gender construction.

FINDINGS
The respondents have shown to be acculturated into traditional gender role centered on notions of self sacrifice, care and passive endurance of hardships. Such gender role is an evidence of a culture historically centered heavily around production. As Ceausescu strived to level out the national debt, the whole country revolved around producing as much as possible and the ideal of a woman reflected this trend in that women were expected to sacrifice their own aspirations in order to produce and reproduce (to produce more labor force). Traditional gender roles were enforced without an alternative and gender in this setting thus represented a constriction in self definition.

Our respondents moved to a setting with advanced consumer culture, which is centered on consumption and which offers a different gender discourse, part of which is constructed in and by the marketplace. In the accounts of the informants we have individuated gender resources, some offered by consumer culture, that immigrant women use in their gender role negotiation. Namely, the (global) modern woman discourse found in the marketplace offered individualism, active self-help, free (consumption) choices and the focus on hedonistic and self-enhancement consumption.

Our informants made use of these resources in their gender role negotiation. For instance, for both Georgeta and Elisabeta, our long term respondents, hedonistic consumption has proved to be instrumental in the negotiation of their perception of themselves as women. This perception they had of themselves as women, or their gender, then became a resource in their everyday lives, enabling them to overcome the constrictions of the traditional gender role.

CONTRIBUTIONS
We show that different contexts are gendered in a different way, depending on their focus on either consumption or production. Contexts favoring production (such as those presented by communist regimes) do not offer alternative resources for women to draw on.
in their gender negotiation and gender thus becomes a constriction. Consumer culture, on the other hand, with its focus on consumption (constructed as feminine), allows for more gender negotiation space.

We argue that the second wave feminist critique of consumer culture reproduces the same dichotomy it criticizes, i.e. the active producer/passive consumer. Furthermore, the criticism of certain aspects of consumer culture, such as hedonistic consumption, can be seen as instantiation of Western thought, in which what is on the surface is superficial.

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