Gender As a Softly Assembled Performance: Interrogating the Tenuous Possession-Self Link When Women Don’t Want Pink and Men Don’T Want Blue

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Gender as a Softly Assembled Performance: Interrogating the Tenuous Possession-Self Link
When Women Don’t Want Pink and Men Don’t Want Blue
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ABSTRACT
The extant product gender literature uses experimental designs in arguing that consumers’ [static] gender identities match their product choice. Conversely, interview data from the present study illustrate that decisions regarding product gender are not always a reflection of the [fluid] gendered self. These findings complicate theory on this possession-self link.

INTRODUCTION
In 2012, the ‘Cristal for Her’ pens, introduced by Bic, received a dose of negative publicity and ridicule in both media (e.g., West 2012) and product reviews. On Amazon, over 2,000 people shared their opinions about Bic’s assumption, based on gender stereotypes, that women need slim, pastel-colored pens. Some women joked that the pens would be useful for completing feminine tasks, such as writing recipe cards, while others wondered how they could get a man’s permission to write with the pens. While most of the reviews were negative, a small minority provided more positive feedback. One customer wrote: “Serious review here . . . They are really nice pens and I’m glad I got them” (Amazon 2014). This example highlights the potential challenges that a firm faces if it relies on gender stereotypes to alter an otherwise gender-neutral product to be “for her” or “for him.”

Referencing traditional gender roles by employing gender stereotypes in product design may be an effective way of appealing to men and women in a sex-based market segmentation strategy (Alreck 1994). In contrast, there is also evidence that showing men and women in non-traditional gender roles can be successful (Zawisza et al. 2006), in part because it appeals to consumers seeking more realistic representations of femininity and masculinity (Barr 2013). However, as the Bic example illustrates, since such research has largely focused on stereotypes in advertising, attention must be paid to gender stereotypes in product design and the role they play in consumers’ lives as part of the extended self (Belk 1988).

Bic’s sex-based marketing segmentation strategy is premised on a correlation between gender identity and product preference. Yet, recent research on gender performativity (e.g., Corbett 2008) suggests that consumers’ gender identities are more fluid than identity-based segmentation strategies consider. In juxtaposing sex-based market segmentation strategies with the increasing scholarly acknowledgement of gender’s fluidity, the present study asks: How do consumers understand and navigate gender identity when selecting products? Further, how do they evaluate gender cues from products targeting the stereotypical man or woman? The resulting analysis extends theory on the possession-self link in relation to gender identity, and offers a critical voice to conversations surrounding the use of gender in guiding product design.

GENDER IN PRODUCT DESIGN AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR
Products have sex-typed identities in that consumers can readily and consistently identify them as “male” or “female” and, correspondingly, “masculine” and “feminine” (Milner and Fodness 1996; Fugate and Phillips 2010). Product gender is inherent in many designs, such as the feminine curve of a wine glass or the masculine angularity of an off-road vehicle. While these designs may elicit a perception of gender, gendered products have the same basic characteristics, but the design, packaging, or advertising is intentionally modified to appeal to the stereotypical man or woman (Alreck 1994).

These design decisions are linked to traditional sex roles rooted in sex-trait stereotypes (e.g., masculine strength and feminine gentleness; Williams and Best 1990). The present study considers consumer responses to both product gender and gender products as part of consumer identity projects (i.e., consumption that both constructs and bolsters the self). Since consumers use products as signals to express their self-concept to themselves and others (Berger and Heath 2007) they prefer products congruent with their self-concept (Van den Hende and Mugge 2014). Studies on the possession-self link have explored many elements of the self-concept, including those surrounding sex and gender. One stream of this research (e.g., Alreck et al. 1982; Van den Hende and Mugge 2014) argues that individuals respond to stimuli that reflect an identity tied to their biological sex (i.e., their physical maleness or femaleness; West and Zimmerman 1987). Here, a woman would be feminine-identified and seek feminine products. A second stream (e.g., Fry 1971; Feiereisen et al. 2009) posits that individuals respond to stimuli that reflect their gender identity (i.e., their self-perceived endorsement of stereotypically masculine or feminine traits; Palan et al. 1999). Here, masculinity and femininity are not confined to the physical realms of maleness and femaleness, respectively, and a feminine-identified person would seek feminine products.

GENDER AS A SOFTLY ASSEMBLED PERFORMANCE
While the aforementioned consumer research assumes gender identity is static, elsewhere scholarship argues that the identities individuals construct around gender are stable, but never fixed (Faust-Sterling 2012). Here, gender is considered a “softly assembled” collection of behavioural attractors that vary in form and stability depending on an individual’s life history and the context and task at hand (Harris 2000). Gender-related causal chains are elusive since consumers’ enactments of gender are complex and personalized. Indeed, “norms do not exist without variance; the repetition of patterns or averages is never exact” (Corbett 2008, p. 839).

Poststructuralist feminist theory on gender performativity understands gender not as something one is, but something one does (West and Zimmerman 1987). A person who (un)intentionally succeeds at doing gender meets society’s expectations of how men and women look and act. Alternatively, a person who does not meet society’s gender-related expectations is undoing gender, or deconstructing it (Deutsch 2007). Decisions regarding product gender and gendered products can be considered performances that make statements about the gendered self and influence its ongoing development (Schulte 2014).

This theoretical framework is adopted to explore product gender because consumer goods can represent the kinds of social values and norms that exacerbate gender stereotypes that limit men and women in their self-expression (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen 2002). Feminist theory and methods offer the resources needed to critically engage with these goods and their consumption. Since there is little consumer research on product gender from this perspective, the pres-
ent study asserts that critical engagement is necessary for researchers to understand how these products are evaluated and used.

METHOD AND STUDY DESIGN

Twenty consumers (6 men and 14 women) living in a large city in western Canada and ranging in age and social location participated in the study. Because of the personal nature of the interview topics and the need for a diverse array of perspectives, participants were recruited using convenience, snowball, and purposive sampling (Creswell 2014). Between July 2015 and February 2016, the first author met with participants for 60- to 90-minute semi-structured interviews (McCracken 1988) focused around the act of shopping, identity, and social influence in a retail context. Participants were also shown a series of seven photographs of gendered products (e.g., bread, tea) and asked questions about the products and their packaging (see figure 1). Most participants chose a pseudonym.

The interview transcripts were reviewed using a feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. CDA views discourse as a countable noun that is not only the language of individual communication, but the larger systems of thought within a particular historical location (Foucault 1971). Feminist CDA, specifically, examines discourses that promote and reproduce androcentric perspectives that, for example, define appropriate behavior and attributes for women (Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002). This approach can advance analyses of the way power and ideology work in discourse to sustain patriarchal social structures (Lazar 2007).

Adopting Fairclough’s (1992) framework, interview transcripts were first reviewed for their internal mechanisms (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) by reading each text in its entirety, noting differences and commonalities between them. Second, patterns and themes were grouped together as discourses to be read and analyzed as cohesive wholes. In doing so, what participants deemed “thinkable” and “sayable” (Foucault 1971) from the perspective of their respective social locations could emerge. Third, the discourses were explained from a macro perspective by positioning the groupings within broader conversations regarding gender.

IDENTIFYING AND INTERPRETING PRODUCTS’ GENDER CUES

By interpreting products’ gender cues, participants engage in four discourses, which will now be discussed in turn (and are summarized in the attached table). Consistent with the understanding of gender as a softly assembled performance, assigning participants to a single discourse is an unfruitful task, and one not undertaken here, as participants do not consume one type of products (e.g., masculine or feminine) exclusively.

![Figure 1: Gendered Products](source:image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product 1: Earplugs</th>
<th>Product 2: Tea</th>
<th>Product 3: Bread</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<th>Product 4: Earbuds</th>
<th>Product 5: Lip balm</th>
<th>Product 6: Women’s tool kit</th>
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<tr>
<td><img src="" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<th>Product 7: Men’s sewing kit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="" alt="Image" /></td>
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1 https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/7-pointlessly-gendered-products-hesaid/
2 http://www.blogher.com/all-i-want-christmas-little-less-pink
3 https://bitemywords.com/tag/wellbeing-bread/
4 https://www.amazon.com/Woman-Charge-Ear-Buds-Pieces/dp/B00SFXQD1O
5 Link no longer available
6 http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/why-ordinary-things-go-pink/
7 http://www.seandgardner.com/work-1-8

Figure 1: Gendered Products
Discourse 1: Complying with Social Norms by Doing Gender

The first discourse surrounds participants’ doing gender in relation to the gendered products they were shown as well as through their daily consumption habits. Individuals who most consistently participate in this discourse have gender identities that “match” their biological sex. As these participants navigate gendered products and product gender, their purchases correspond with the possession-self link and they may abide by strict rules in selecting products. Ben, 57, cites his requirements in a bicycle: “You don’t want to look like your mom put you on it. You don’t want to look like a geek out there.”

To Ben, not looking like a geek means avoiding feminine pastel colours in favour of darker ones, like the grey of his current bicycle. His rule revolves around image – looking like you rely on your mom is forbidden if one is to do gender correctly, especially in a social context like a bike trail where one’s ability to do gender is presented for judgment (West and Zimmerman 1987). For this reason, a product’s gendered positioning influences its evaluation. For those who most consistently engage in this discourse, the idea of a product being meant for the opposite sex is a powerful influence that threatens their self-concept and perceived social standing.

Discourse 2: Defying Expectations by Undoing Gender

The second discourse follows participants’ undoing gender both in their reactions to the gendered products they were shown and their daily consumption habits. Those who most consistently participate in this discourse are feminine-identified women, but they break the possession-self link according to guidelines they set for themselves. Chiefly, they do not want to be “put in a box” in terms of their consumption, because they consider their lives as women as being more nuanced than the stereotypes employed in gendered products. For example, Karen, 48, speaks of a desire to “rebel” against what is expected of her as a woman. This opinion corresponds with research that notes the failure of identity appeals in marketing when consumers’ agency in expressing an identity is restricted (Blattacherjee et al. 2014).

These women criticizing companies that rely on a sex-based market segmentation strategy. Responding to a photo of gendered tea, Jennifer, 30, says, “It’s just so offensive. It’s upsetting. . . I do want to try the tea but I’m not going to buy it.” This quote reveals a clear boundary condition to the possession-self link. That is, taking offense to a product – even one with appealing qualities – is grounds for dismissing that product. In response to a set of earplugs showcasing hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity, Deloris, 26, she says, “I think generally when things are like this I try to buy gender neutral . . . Just something in the middle.” Participants may also avoid products altogether or buy products meant for the opposite sex.

Discourse 3: Muting Gender as a Daily Performative Choice

In some cases, gender and its related norms and values are muted in participants’ consumption habits. Those who most consistently participate in this discourse do not use gender as a heuristic in their consumption habits. They may argue gender identity is unimportant to them and/or lament the arbitrariness of “masculine” and “feminine” labels. Products’ gendered positioning or use of stereotypes holds little sway, and these participants select what appeals to them with no agenda to conform or rebel. As the co-owner of an art gallery, Greg, 30, values creativity and risk-taking. Despite his masculine gender identity, he purchases products that have an aesthetic he enjoys. A pink suit and a woman’s coat are among the most feminine items in his closet that deviate from his typically masculine taste.

Moreover, Lorian (who identifies as masculine) and Stephanie (who did not provide a gender identity) articulate a frustration with the array of outdoor-gear options available to them as women. Lorian, 30, says pink and purple pastels are impractical because “when I’m on a glacier or on the side of a mountain, I want something vibrant that’s gonna be seen from a helicopter if there’s an incident.” Pragmatism is a powerful heuristic in these participants’ consumption decisions when they mute gender. This discourse’s muting of gender aligns with the notion that gender varies in salience across different situations (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) to the point that at some times it may be completely irrelevant (Deutsch 2007).

Discourse 4: Muting Gender as an Incidental Performative Option

Muting gender is not solely the realm of consumers who participate in that discourse on a daily basis. For example, individuals who most consistently do or undo gender through consumption may list consumption contexts (e.g., at home – away from social gaze) and purchases that do not implicate gender (e.g., for price-conscious consumers: products that might be on sale). For all participants, there is also cause to mute gender as an incidental performative option when the product is seen as “illegitimately” gendered. Participants question marketers’ urge to gender a product. Their skepticism may stem from annoyance, confusion, or amusement.

In turn, they offer what they perceive as more legitimate grounds on which marketers can gender a product: (1) ergonomics; and (2) biology (i.e., differences that may actually exist between men and women, beyond perceived aesthetic preferences). Responding to a photo of gendered earplugs, feminine-identified Valerie, 34, says that earplugs typically do not fit her ears, so if there were something designed for a woman’s ear, “I might consider buying it on that attribute alone.” Similarly, she says she considered buying a tea that promised to help menstrual cramps, and that the function of such a product meant she might overlook its aesthetic “pinkness.” That this observation is separate from participants’ doing and undoing of gender again shows that gender can be silenced (or less salient) in some consumer contexts.

DISCUSSION

The extant product gender literature uses experimental designs to argue that consumers’ static sex- and gender-based identities match their product choice. By contrast, the present study argues that decisions regarding product gender and gendered products can be considered performances that reflect and shape the softly assembled gendered self (Schultze 2014). Decisions regarding product gender and gendered products are not always a reflection of this gendered self. This finding complicates theory on this possession-self link by highlighting cases in which the link is broken, illustrating – in keeping with the idea of gender as a softly assembled performance – that no one develops as a simple mechanical reiteration of social norms (Butler 2004). Even participants content to regularly do or undo gender have exceptions to their habits.

Regardless of their identities and habits, participants question the separation of gender-neutral products into their masculine and feminine counterparts. As such, moving beyond gendered products based on men and women’s perceived aesthetic preferences to products that cater to men and women’s respective biological and ergonomic needs may draw support. Future research must monitor these opinions against the backdrop of ever-evolving structures in terms of gender and related identities. By understanding how identities are formed and act-
## Table 1: Summary of Findings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Illustrative Quotes</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>Complying with gender norms and “doing gender” regarding gendered products and daily consumption habits.</td>
<td>“If I ever heard someone say about a vehicle that I was interested in, ‘Oh, that’s a girly car’ or one of those kinds of comments, it would probably turn me off of that car.” (Robert, 52, masculine-identified)</td>
<td>The idea of a product being meant for the opposite sex is a powerful influence that threatens these participants’ self-concept and perceived social standing. Females discuss choosing and enjoying products that reflect their gender identity. Males more eager to discount products meant for the opposite sex. These findings correspond with research that shows women may face backlash if they violate feminine norms (Rudman and Phelan 2008), but men are generally held to stricter standards (Williams 1985) and are rewarded socially for adhering to masculine norms (Connell 2005).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defying expectations and “undoing gender” regarding gendered products and daily consumption habits.</td>
<td>“I would say that I am typically, I know ‘repulsed’ is a strong word but I’m typically repulsed by things that are overly femininely presented.” (Valerie, age 34, feminine-identified)</td>
<td>These participants do not want to be “put in a box” in terms of their consumption, because they consider their lives as women as being more nuanced than the stereotypes employed in gendered products. Findings from this discourse correspond with research that notes the failure of identity appeals in marketing when consumers’ agency in expressing an identity is restricted (Bhattacharjee et al. 2014), and extends these findings to the context of product design.</td>
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<td>Muting gender as a daily performative choice. Gender is “muted” regarding attitudes towards gendered products and daily consumption habits.</td>
<td>“It wouldn’t matter to me which [tea] to buy . . . Because I’d be the one drinking it so I’d want to buy what I like.” (Martin, age 45, feminine-identified)</td>
<td>This discourse aligns with research that shows that gender can be silenced or less salient (Ridgeway and Correll 2004 to the point that at some times it may be completely irrelevant (Deutsch 2007). For these participants, gender is consistently unimportant in their consumption habits.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participants’ gender identities may “match” their biological sex, but these identities are unimportant in consumption. Products’ gendered positioning holds little sway over these participants compared to other attributes (i.e., practicality).</td>
<td>“I would say [I’m] feminine but not very typical feminine. Um, not super tomboy-y, but I do enjoy playing sports, for example, or I don’t really relate with typical girl things. I don’t like pink. Anything very typical of girl things I’m very laissez-faire about.” (Coral, age 26, feminine-identified)</td>
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<td>Muting gender as an incidental performative option. Participants’ purchases may typically conform with or defy social norms, but there are specific instances in which they elect to mute gender.</td>
<td>“Why do men need protein and why do women get calcium, you know? Men can have calcium and Vitamin D . . . I don’t like products that would separate stuff like that.” (Catherine, 40s, feminine-identified, in response to a photo of gendered bread)</td>
<td>These observations are separate from participants’ doing and undoing of gender in the sense that even participants who typically conform with or rebel against social norms will opt to mute gender when they find it to be unimportant. As with the third discourse, this finding shows that gender can be silenced (or less salient) in some consumer contexts (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) to the point that at some times it may be completely irrelevant (Deutsch 2007). Different from the discourse regarding muting gender as a daily performative choice, this discourse emerges in specific contexts or in relation to specific purchases.</td>
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<td>A situation in which all participants mute gender in this manner is when they criticize products they see as “illegitimately” gendered (i.e., they are gendered based on perceived aesthetic tastes that are rooted in stereotypes).</td>
<td>“I thought they were kind of funny because I was like, ‘What determines that these are men’s flavours and what determines that these are women’s flavours?’” (Walter, 28, masculine-identified, in response to photos of gendered tea and bread)</td>
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ed upon through consumption practices, researchers can better understand the broader norms and values that guide consumers’ lives.

REFERENCES


