

HOW FAR, AND IN WHAT WAYS, IS CONSUMER CULTURE A GENDERED PHENOMENON?

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ABSTRACT

How far, and in what ways, is consumer culture a gendered phenomenon? It will be discussed in this study in relation to two of the following topics: How is fashion and consumer culture a gendered phenomenon? How are celebrities and consumer culture a gendered phenomenon? Companies are ultimately the makers of ideology, and it is all geared towards influencing the consumer to buy their product. The class that is most influenced is the wealthy because the wealthy have more money to buy things. Companies will create celebrities to indoctrinate the consumer with certain ideas that will lead the consumer to buy the product of the company. It seems that companies try to influence women more than men because women are naturally geared toward maintaining their attractiveness.

Keywords: Consumer culture, Gendered phenomenon, Fashion, Gender, Identity, Celebrity

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a lot of discussion about how much marketing and advertising depend on psychological techniques in order to influence potential consumers. In order to be successful and to stay relevant to the contemporary environment, there are some fast-moving and evolving areas of consumer activity that should be taken into consideration, including fashion, identity, gender, and celebrity. Consumer culture can be influenced by each of these. Contemporary producers attempt to use celebrities and mass media in order to advertise and ultimately sell their products, by trying to influence potential consumers' attitudes towards purchasing their products. As well as differences in types of product, there is a difference between female fashion sense and male fashion sense that is related to identity and socio-culture. It is not easy to assess the significance of these, in terms of impact on society. The whole process of globalization has to an extent normalized how gender is represented, with global media, consumer culture and gender becoming an increasingly important value for marketing and advertising people.

This kind of critical value increases demand for the fashion industry and actually change consumer attitudes to shopping, focusing attention on new designer products and priorities. Thus, globalization lowers consumer attraction to traditional products, in favour of more universally popular brands; this is especially so with women's products (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007). This has led to traditional cultural boundaries of consumption and ideas of fashion and appearance weakening and new views about consumer culture and fashion emerging (Rajagopal, 2010). As such, companies and their marketing teams are motivated to utilize celebrities and global media to advertise their products and brands to reflect the global scale of consumer culture towards universal, and away from traditional brands, for example fragrances such as Lacoste, Boss, and Chanel (Rajagopal, 2010). With this in mind, the aim of this article is to analyse the ability of fashion and celebrity endorsements to reflect and influence interpretations of gender. It will offer some definitions at the beginning of this paper as to the meaning of the concepts of fashion, celebrity, identity, and gender, in order to present a clear understanding of the issues involved. After that, a brief literature review of consumer culture will be presented. The article will then focus on two main areas, fashion and celebrity, both of which will be explored through theories and examples of consumer culture behaviour. Finally, this paper will address to what extent and in what way consumer culture is a gendered phenomenon.

The concept of fashion is, a term used to refer to the style, taste, techniques, and methods which can be used to disguise the true characteristics of the human body, and which is usually influenced by the creativity and lifestyle choices within society, or of a particular individual or group. The term can include features as broad as clothing, entertainment, social practices, decoration and architecture; in essence, fashion is a method of social communication (Entwistle, 2012). According to Marshall (1997), a celebrity is someone with recognisable characteristics, who fascinates the general public. Examples include sports players, singers, leaders, and so on. For many people, particularly fans, celebrities become 'benchmarks' upon which they model their own lives and patterns of lifestyle (Driessens, 2013).

The concept of gender, which psychologists refer to as a socio-cultural construct, defines the role and representation of women and men differently. In contrast, the notion of 'sex' refers simply to the biological aspects of being female and male (Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000). Based on this definition, it can be said that these separate but linked terms, often cause misunderstanding and misinterpretation. One further concept within this article is identity, which sociologists believe relates to a sense of self, and can reveal insights into why people behave and think as they do. According to the theory of social identity, individuals subdivide themselves and others into particular classes or groups, which may be similar to, or more usually different from, other social clusters and categories (Chegg, 2013).

2. A LITERATURE REVIEW OF CONSUMER CULTURE

In the second half of the nineteenth century, marketers first experienced the phenomenon of international consumption. According to Greet Hofstede (1997), ‘culture’ can be described as one method of distancing people from each other (Vazifeh-Doost & Adibi-Fard, 2012, translated by the author). The focus of this definition is to compare cultures of consumption, by illustrating the impact of such culture(s) on consumers. One person’s pattern of behaviour and consumption of, for example fashion, can become a guiding principle – even a template to follow for other people in society (Spears et al., 2013). Communication plays a very important role in how much influence culture has on consumer behaviour. Marketing communications is therefore seen as a “mediating variable”, which expresses culture and targets advertising to maximum effect (Cleveland & Laroche, 2007, p. 249; Rajagopal, 2010, p. 3). These can be seen in the way that popular brands and marketers use celebrities to advertise their products. One example is ‘Lux Soap’, which uses advertising campaigns with female celebrities, particularly film stars, because they are considered to be more attractive to both men and women, “in 1927 a headline for Lux Soap read 9 out of 10 screen stars’ care for their skin with Lux toilet soap” (Yoon & Powell, 2012; Spears et al., 2013). Using celebrities in advertising seems to be aimed at making people change their consuming behaviour, especially female shoppers who, back in the 1930s, first began to be more financially independent, and quickly became the “primary commodity consumers” (Berry, 2000, p. xiv).

Bourdieu (1984) argued that consumption reflects something of a class struggle within classes. Some observers suggest that the types of product people choose to consume reflect their differences and cultural consumption (Asadullah-Nezhad, 2012, translated by the author). Similarly, Veblen’s (1899) theory of the leisure class addresses the idea of “conspicuous consumption”, suggesting that it is necessary to understand how consumer culture is enacted, and to recognize it as another means to define the leisure class (Aronsson & Johansson-Stenman, 2013, p. 552). In other words, an upper class tries to distinguish themselves as someone different and ‘above’ others, by “conspicuous consumption”. Veblen makes a specific argument that females waste their money; this will be explored in more detail in due course. In addition, Arnould and Thompson (2005) present their notion of consumer culture theory, which reflects ideas around the relationship between individuals as consumers, and the related environment, which also has an impact on behaviour. Their view is significant because of its focus on enlightening socio-cultural elements which are associated with an individual's identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The consumer culture theory, Veblen’s leisure class theory, and Bourdieu’s orientation of consumption will be central to the discussion in the rest of this article.

3. FASHION AND CONSUMER CULTURE

The context of consumption can be given such features, value, or quality of a symbolic induction that exists in a product. In other words, one view is that the process of producing is more important symbolically, than either the value or the consumption of the good themselves, these representing status and prestige more than actual material worth. From the perspective of Veblen (1899), consumer culture is a social simulation, with lower classes trying to mirror the upper classes (Aronsson & Johansson-Stenman, 2013, p. 552). Furthermore, social interaction is one of the most significant influences on consumer trends towards fashion apparel and body decoration. Fashion has an essential relationship with identity, present social class or position of a person or group. The relation between identity and dress is understood through consumers' perspectives of values produced in different social interplay.

Tseelon (1992a) discusses the history of fashion and divides it into three main periods: classical, modernist, and postmodernist. The classical era of fashion spans the 14th to the 18th century, seeing the arrival of the “urban patrician” and the challenge to the feudal position. During this time, fashion and clothes ranged from “courtly to common”, unlike the modern and postmodern era when the strong links between dress and social position were confronted and weakened (Tseelon 1992, cited in Entwistle, 2012, p. 44). According to Finkelstein (1991) and Sennett (1997) however, clothes and fashion remain linked to personality or identity, the latter of which to this day, represents in part, the class of individuals. As such, fashion is still one way to illustrate and show off the position, identity and class of an individual or group in the society. In contrast to this opinion, dress and fashion cannot be thought of expressing someone's whole identity, so there is a risk of incorrect interpretations or stereotypes, especially where it is not possible to have direct communication with the person being observed or analysed. (Entwistle, 2012). For instance, women from ethnic group, the ‘Kabyle’, in Algeria, place fashion at the centre of parties and ceremonies to assert and demonstrate their position and social class in society (Ourahmoune & Ozcaglar-Toulouse, 2012).

In addition, features such as gender and age, have also been identified as factors which can influence patterns of consumption. As mentioned, studies from the late 1970s agreed that “sex” relates to the biology of the individual, male or female. By contrast, gender is deemed to be more of a socio-cultural construct relating to male and female, and more of relevance to the ideas in this paper. From early in their lives, females and males are encouraged to conform to “culturally specific notions of gender” (Caterall & Maclare, 2002, p. 406). For instance, it is often claimed that women are more drawn to luxury items, fashion, and shopping than men (Rajagopal, 2010). In contrast, Bloch (1981) claims that men tend to favour luxury consumables such as cars (O'Cass, 2004). However, the majority of contemporary western fashion studies suggest that

women are generally more inclined to consume luxury items and fashion than men (Craik, 1998), which supports Veblen' (1899) leisure class theory (Aronsson & Johansson-Stenman 2013).

Goldsmith et al's study (1996) found that women are more fashion conscious than men (in O'Cass, 2000, p. 872) due to cultural and psychological encouragement from other women who claim to be more fashionable than men as a result of their gender. It is true that, in western society, women can and frequently do present themselves as fashionable and attractive through fashion techniques such as clothing, makeup, cosmetic surgery, and so on. Steele (1989) claims that men's bodies are not attractive and also men do not represent themselves as well dressed. Based on this, the mantra – or principle - of men's fashion has tended to start from a position of denial; there is no such thing as men's fashion, and that men do not care about beautiful clothes but rather about comfort (Steele 1989, cited in Craik, 1998: 170). Taking this view, fashion can be perceived more as a technique to display the body in an orderly manner through clothes, thus hiding the true nature of a person or celebrity's body. It is therefore a superficial decoration for the body (Craik, 1998).

Many people, especially women, attempt to alter the style of their hair, clothes, and even try to change their faces and bodies through the use of cosmetic surgery in order to look fashionable, the latter of which is a particularly dramatic technique. One example of this is outlined by Blum (2007), who discusses a reality television programme, "American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery". According to the programme, since 2002 cosmetic surgery in the US has increased by (44%), with surgery becoming a realistic choice for 'normal' women who want to represent their bodies as attractive, and imitate celebrities and film stars (Blum 2007, cited in Featherstone, 2010, p. 203). Thus, cosmetic surgery has become a popular method of creating beautiful bodies, largely as a result of infatuation with celebrities and film stars that can be traced back to the "Hollywood ideal" promoted by fashion magazines of women and films (Elliott, 2010; Featherstone, 2010). This also links back to the assertion that women are encouraged to be more enthusiastic than men about fashion and shopping, also due to the influence of fashion magazines and fashion shops that specifically target women.

O'Cass (2004, p. 872) suggests that this may be partly because females more easily change their style and attitude. For example, a study conducted by Reekie in Sydney (1987) on the expansion of department shops, identified how opinions on buying styles were affected by gender. Results showed that majority of buyers were women (70% to 90%) who spent three times more than men. By the 1890s, shops were starting to take advantage of this pattern (Reekie, 1987, cited in Craik, 1998: 70), which indicates that men and women have different attitudes to fashion and shopping (consumer culture). According to Veblen (1899), women cannot produce but in their communication behavior have some signs instead actual consumption goods he states that

women only use their husbands' wealth and imitate each other rapidly (Aronsson and Johansson-Stenman 2013). Furthermore, he claimed that women use fashion and beautiful clothes not because they care about fashion and nice clothes but because they want to assert their class to other members of society (Aronsson & Johansson-Stenman, 2013).

4. CELEBRITY AND CONSUMER CULTURE

Celebrity and fame both play a vital role in influencing and shifting consumer behaviour, in terms of consuming commodities and establishing fashion preferences. Celebrities exist in every culture and society, and many people attempt to copy or recreate their behaviours and lifestyle as a pattern for their own lives. In this part of the article I will consider the role of celebrity and mass media in changing consumer culture and how and why marketing managers and companies use celebrities to introduce products and establish a name for brands. It will be suggested that the use of celebrities in advertising generates wealth, whilst at the same time causing a shift in gender-related patterns of consumption.

Globalization plays a significant role in changing cultural attitudes and behaviours around consumption. Marketing managers with significantly sized companies, increasingly advertise their products, brands, and styles through global and mass media such as fashion channels, online fashion magazines, and social networking sites (e.g., Twitter and Facebook). The aim is to introduce their product to potential consumers, to cross borders and to “remove or merge different attitudes of consumer culture” (Yoon & Powell, 2012, p. 1325). Thus, marketing managers have the potential to change traditional consumer attitudes to modern-style ones, by careful use of celebrities and global media. Techniques include advertising products in fashion magazines and using female celebrities who have attractive features such as youth, slim bodies, happy faces and so on. Also, to present colourful, positive images of celebrities and products in advertising. Such techniques are used to particularly target women consumers’ decisions, as these have been shown to be easier to influence than men’s consumer decisions (Caterall & Maclarens, 2002). For example, as Bye and De Long (1990) reported, the number of advertisements in US fashion magazines increased two-fold between the 1950s and the 1980s (Bye and De Long, cited in Craik, 1998, p. 163), indicating that for sellers the target consumer is female. This example supports the belief that female celebrities and fashion magazines have a greater influence on women than men. As Herrmann (2002) points out, “women have never been absent from studies about consumer practices” (p. 540). The leisure class and the consumer culture theory both note that upper class individuals and especially women attempt to simulate celebrities and their lifestyles in order to assert their situation in society. This behaviour comes from a view belonging to the upper echelons of society because they consume glamorous and expensive items, services and lifestyle accessories. However, it should not be forgotten that in

using celebrities and especially female ones to advertise their products, marketers and companies are frequently targeting men as well as women.

According to Wenner (2013), and Carrillat et al. (2013), marketers and international companies try to utilise mass media and celebrity endorsements that are popular among males, especially sports fans, to increase their sales and influence male consumers. For instance, companies such as Adidas and Nike aim to link names and images of famous athletes with their products. This serves a dual purpose; associating the product with handsome and muscular athletes whilst also implying that famous and highly successful athletes not only use their products but also endorse them; notable examples include David Beckham and Tiger Woods (Wenner, 2013; Carrillat et al., 2013). Research bears out the view that men and particularly women often choose a style or brand based on that of a celebrity. As such, celebrities and advertising should be considered not only from a marketing perspective but also from a sociological perspective, which offers meaning to any changes in attitude of consumer culture, fashion and even the structure of social life. In this case, celebrities serve as the fashion representatives (Berry, 2000). It is arguable that some celebrities become popular with their fans as a result of their sporting or artistic achievements (such as David Beckham, Michael Jordan, Lennox Lewis, or Brad Pitt), being identified as persons who possess and share very special qualities across a wide, public domain (Rojek, 2001). Through the consumption of expensive commodities such as luxury cars, clothes, and furniture, their wealth, success and social position are demonstrated, and lead to other people trying to emulate their lives. This emulation or 'copying' affects consumer culture and in turn changes patterns of spending and consumption.

Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) both argued, almost a hundred years apart, the upper class consumes too much in order to distinguish their class and lifestyle, with women in particular attempting to assert their social status through the acquisition and wearing of expensive clothes, jewellery, and make-up (Asadullah-Nezhad, 2012, translated by the author). For example, in the Middle East and particularly in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Kurdish marketers attempt to use mass media and female celebrities to sell their product. A notable example is the appearance of Dlnya Qrdaghy, a popular Kurdish singer, in advertisements for jewellery and fashion. Her presence in such campaigns is intended to impact on Kurdish women and convey that people can use jewellery to proclaim their social class in Kurdish society (Kakakhan, 2013). It is noticeable that consumer culture is changing in Kurdistan because of growing economic prosperity and widening use of social media. As such, people are able to observe celebrity lifestyles and consumption patterns that would have been unavailable to them a decade ago. This interest and exposure to celebrity culture has led to shifts in consumer trends and attitudes as a direct result of celebrity culture.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to illustrate how fashion and celebrity can shift gender attitudes of consumer culture. There has been a focus on the role of globalization and the mass media such as fashion channels, online fashion magazines, and social networks, which are increasingly impacting on buyers' attitudes and habits, turning previously diverse patterns of consumption into a more homogenous one. It has tried to define the concepts of fashion, celebrity, identity, and gender in order to clarify what these concepts mean in the context of consumer culture. A brief literature review of studies on consumer culture was provided, as well as changes that have been happening in gender attitudes. The issue of fashion and consumer culture was addressed in order to analyse the role the former plays in the latter, linking this discussion with the role of the celebrity in fashion advertising. It has been shown that there is a noticeable effect on male and female attitudes to consuming, but in particular by women. Case studies and examples of existing studies have illustrated that women are more enthusiastic consumers and fashion connoisseurs than men. There is a lot of evidence to support this, including previous research and statistical evidence, claiming that women try to assert their class and social position through fashion, although there is some evidence to suggest that men also enthusiastically consume and represent their class and wealth.

Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) have both argued that upper classes, particularly women, spend too much in order to represent their class to others. An analysis of the connections between celebrities and consumer culture has shown that the role of marketing executives and companies influence attitudes through their use of celebrities and global media. They do this by changing traditional attitudes, especially targeting women as they appear to be easier to influence with regard to shopping and fashion. Men, on the other hand, appear to be harder to influence. Weighing all the evidence, it can be concluded that although men and women have some similar approaches to consumer culture, significant differences exist which prove that consumer culture is in fact a gendered phenomenon.

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