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Consuming Gender: Identity Construction under Global Capitalism

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This special issue of *Assuming Gender* seeks to examine and problematise the relationship between consumer culture and gender—but what does it mean to be a ‘consumer’ of gender, or a gendered consumer? In a 2005 review of the state of consumer culture theory, Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson suggest that, from one perspective, the consumer market plays a positive role in identity politics, providing ‘consumers with an expansive and heterogeneous palette of resources from which to construct individual and collective identities’.¹ More than ever before, we define ourselves through the things we buy, and the ways in which we buy them. This theoretically gives us a certain degree of agency, transforming the act of buying (or refusing to buy) into a political or ideological statement. Individuals identifying themselves as culturally ‘male’ might choose to buy a skirt as a statement against gendered codes of socially acceptable clothing, for instance. As many scholars have argued in recent years, however, the use of considering the ‘individual consumer’ an autonomous political entity is limited. For sociologist Alan Warde, ‘it is much better to unseat the dominant model of the sovereign consumer and replace it with a conception of the socially conditioned actor, a social self, embedded in normative and institutional contexts and considered a bearer of practices’.² Consumer identity is intersectional and highly complex, and must be regarded as a nexus of competing and often contradictory influences.

¹ Eric J. Arnould and Craig J. Thompson, ‘Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31.4 (2005), 868–82 (p. 871).

² Alan Warde, ‘The Sociology of Consumption: Its Recent Development’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41.1 (2015), 117–34 (p. 129).

Following consumer theory's move away from cultural studies in the 2000s and 2010s, it has become abundantly clear that the market plays a dominant role in our self-definition. While we (as individual agents) construct our identities by consuming certain things in a particular way, at the same time 'the market produces certain kinds of consumer positions that consumers can choose to inhabit'.³ This constricts our patterns of consumption, and reduces our range of possible identities. To return to our initial example, a shortage of major clothing labels marketing skirts to men might stop individual consumers from realising that this form of consumption is even an option. Indeed, as we often see in the women's clothing and toy industries, items marketed and perceived as 'feminist' can actually work to *encourage* heterosexist identities and behaviours.⁴ In this case, to consume gender is inevitably to consume a particular gender ideal, produced by a normative market.

As cultural theorist Judith Butler argues, in this context normativity is strongly connected to ethics.⁵ A normative market makes judgements on what kinds of expressions of identity are valid and acceptable. Considering advertisements, for instance, even though it can be argued that they have become more inclusive of a wider variety of sexual preferences, they often validate only a particular kind of sexual identity—one that again fits into a traditional, couple- and family-based construction. Advertising campaigns like IKEA's 2016 'All Homes are Created Equal', which includes an image of two young men of different ethnic backgrounds cuddling on a sofa,⁶ are not made on idealistic grounds, but because showing two young men may draw in those gay couples with money to spend. Being perceived as a company that promotes diversity can also give retailers a key marketing advantage, targeting a younger range of customers who support such seeming open-mindedness.⁷ While

³ Arnould and Thompson, p. 871.

⁴ Derek Johnson, "'May the Force Be with Katie': Pink Media Franchising and the Postfeminist Politics of HerUniverse', *Feminist Media Studies*, 14.6 (2014), 895–911; Suzanne Scott, '#Wheresrey?: Toys, Spoilers, and the Gender Politics of Franchise Paratexts', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34.2 (2017), 1–10.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. xxii.

⁶ 'IKEA declares "All Homes Are Created Equal" in New Ad Featuring Gay Couple', <<http://www.newnownext.com/ikea-gay-couple-ad/10/2016/>> [accessed 12 December 2017].

⁷ Marc Hooghe, 'Political Socialization and the Future of Politics', *Acta Politica* 39 (2004), 331–341 (p. 333).

such ads initially seem to create room for a wider range of expressions of identity, then, their main goal remains a commercial one.

This already complex relationship between ethics, consumption, and identity has additional implications within the context of global capitalism. As Anne Allison and Charles Pinot suggest:

As one barter labor for life in an economy in which employment becomes ever more flexibilized and just-in-time—continually outsourced to those willing to work the hardest for less—the organization between work and life, and the ecology of existence itself, takes on a kinetic shape with labor often assuming novel forms.⁸

Gender, race, and other forms of identity become something one needs to quite literally buy into in order to compete and survive in the global market. Those unwilling or unable to do so are either excluded from the system (and thus from existence) or are perceived as a threat to the system (and disciplined accordingly).

In recent years this perspective has most commonly been linked with neoliberalism: ‘the set of discourses, practices and apparatuses that determine a new mode of government of human beings in accordance with the universal principle of competition’.⁹ As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval argue in their 2014 monograph *The New Way of the World*, neoliberalism is much more than a passing phase. Instead, it is ‘the *rationality of contemporary capitalism*—a capitalism freed of its archaic references and fully acknowledged as a historical construct and general norm of existence’.¹⁰ In this framework, individuals judge themselves by their ability to compete with other individuals. This naturalises the idea that each individual can fairly compete by buying or selling labour—the physical work of oneself, or of others. Crucially, in addition to these individualistic effects, neoliberalism also produces ‘certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities’ at the wider, cultural level.¹¹ In this world, the market is ‘a natural reality’—individuals are

⁸ Anne Allison and Charles Pinot, ‘Editors’ Note on “Neoliberal Futures”’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 29.1 (2014), 3–7 (pp. 4–5).

⁹ Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (New York: Verso Books, 2014), p. 4.

¹⁰ Dardot and Laval, p. 4, italics in original.

¹¹ Dardot and Laval, p. 3.

encouraged to constantly build themselves into newer and better versions, more capable of competing in a global market.¹² This is the labour of life.

On the global market, this competitive and capitalistic paradigm reflects back onto individual, personal lives once more. Social media and other global communication platforms implicitly (or explicitly) encourage people to display an identity to others which shows a commercialised version of themselves. It is no longer about who you are, or even about who you know—it is about what you have and what you show the world. Even one's social life becomes quantifiable, as people compete in the number of online 'friends' and followers, the number of comments and likes. While identity has always been to some extent performative, now the audience has grown and the spotlights are always on.

A classic study in self-objectification published in 1998 points to the fact that young women were much more likely to adopt an observer's perspective towards their own bodies.¹³ Referring to the title of the original research article (which starts with 'That Swimsuit Becomes You'), a more recent article published on the 'Well' section of *The New York Times* website states that 'For Teenage Girls, Swimsuit Season Never Ends'.¹⁴ While young people are increasingly critical about commercial images on social media, they do not necessarily apply the same criticism to the images posted by friends. Consequently, the glamourised identities that many people create online may be taken for the real thing, even though at the same time people creating those profiles may be very aware of their constructedness.¹⁵ Although some counter-movements are visible, such as the #HalfTheStory project,¹⁶ where people share images and stories that reflect critically on the performative act of identity

¹² Dardot and Laval, p. 2.

¹³ B. L. Fredrickson and others, 'That Swimsuit Becomes You: Sex-Differences in Self-Objectification, Restrained Eating, and Math Performance', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75.1 (1998), 269-284.

¹⁴ Lisa Damour, 'For Teenage Girls, Swimsuit Season Never Ends', *The New York Times*, 10 August 2016 <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/08/10/for-teenage-girls-swimsuit-season-never-ends/?_r=0> [accessed 21 December 2017].

¹⁵ Amelia Harnish, 'Me Vs. My Social Media Self: Why Gen Z Is the Saddest Generation', *Refinery29*, 27 March 2017 <<http://www.refinery29.com/2017/03/146733/identity-crisis-causes-social-media-fake-world>> [accessed 21 December 2017].

¹⁶ #HalfTheStory <<https://halfthestoryproject.com/>> and <<https://www.instagram.com/halfthestory/>> [accessed 21 December 2017].

construction on social media, the gendered identities created and supported by consumer society are still far from ideal.

Gendering Consumption

To investigate our everyday acts of consumption helps us see consumption as ‘a social activity conducive to and illustrative of the nature of social relations, including gender relations, rather than an activity engaged in by an individual solely for their own “selves”’.¹⁷ This is vitally important in a culture where such acts of consumption are increasingly tied to questions of identity, legitimacy, and the right to compete. Gender is only one of many lenses through which we can better understand consumption, but in many ways it is foundational. Focusing specifically on the gendered nature of consumption, Julia M. Bristor and Eileen Fischer argue that ‘gender is a pervasive filter through which individuals experience their social world, [and] consumption activities are fundamentally gendered’.¹⁸

Despite repeated calls that feminism is dead, or is no longer needed, gender discrimination clearly continues to play a role in the global labour market. Shortly before this special issue was published, a study done by University College London’s Institute of Education found that while teenage girls were more likely to be confident about their educational abilities, teenage boys were more likely to aspire to higher-income jobs.¹⁹ And though the study explicitly states that girls and boys both ‘tended to want jobs where the workforce was dominated by their own sex’,²⁰ there is no reference to the fact that female-dominated fields often pay less, as the work done by women is valued less highly.²¹ With this project’s focus on teens, it is clear the financial aspects of gendered consuming clearly start early (and even earlier if we

¹⁷ Emma Casey and Lydia Martens, ‘Introduction’ in, *Gender and Consumption: Consumer Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, ed. by Emma Casey and Lydia Martens (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 6.

¹⁸ Julia M. Bristor and Eileen Fischer, ‘Feminist Thought: Implications for Consumer Research’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19.4 (1993), 518-36 (p. 519).

¹⁹ ‘Teenage Girls Set Their Sight on Lower Paying Jobs than Boys, New Research Finds’, <<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news-events/news-pub/dec-2017/teenage-girls-lower-paying-jobs>> [accessed 14 December 2017].

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Asaf Levanon, Paula England and Paul Allison, ‘Occupational Feminization and Pay: Assessing Causal Dynamics Using 1950-2000 U.S. Census Data’, *Social Forces* 88.2 (2009), 865-891 (p. 865).

look at the annual Childwise report, which claims that boys generally receive more and more regular pocket money than girls).²²

Likewise, gendered consumption is visible in the ability to consume financially. Increasing attention is being paid to the notion of the gender pay gap, but in many countries, developed and not, women on average earn significantly less than men in similar positions. Iceland made the world news when, in October 2016, countless women left work at 2:38 pm, protesting the national average pay gap that indicated women worked for free after that time.²³ Some groups may be disadvantaged even more strongly, as research shows there may be a sexual orientation pay gap as well. While anti-discrimination laws provide improved regulation for workplace discrimination, as the UK Government Equality Office states in their reasoning behind a nationwide #LGBTSurvey done in 2017, ‘equality in law [...] doesn’t guarantee equality in life’.²⁴

This strongly gendered, neoliberal approach towards consumers of all ages is visible in a broad range of movements. It is also clearly reflected across mass media and popular culture. One striking example can be found in Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* novels, and their subsequent film adaptations. As critic Michael J. Goebel argues, Bella and Edward (the couple at the centre of the *Twilight* saga) ‘illustrate one-dimensional reductions of personality that only allow for individuation through materiality’.²⁵ Edward is white, wealthy, and educated—traits expressed largely through the things he and his family own—and Bella (a pretty, thin, traditionally feminine woman) attempts to buy into this system. These characters ‘embody a new conception of quintessential masculinity and femininity based on the acquisition of material wealth that [...] quickly translates to ideas of beauty, as well as social and

²² Sally Weale, ‘Gender Pay Gap Starts Early with 20% Disparity in Pocket Money—Study’, *The Guardian*, 24 January 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/24/gender-pay-gap-starts-early-20-disparity-pocket-money-study>> [accessed 14 December 2017].

²³ Alexandra Topping, ‘BBC Women Use Equal Pay Day to Highlight Gender Gap’, <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/nov/10/bbc-women-use-equal-pay-day-to-highlight-ongoing-gender-gap>> [accessed 14 December 2017].

²⁴ ‘Why Do We Need the #LGBT Survey?’, <<https://equalities.blog.gov.uk/2017/10/11/why-do-we-need-the-lgbtsurvey/>> [accessed 14 December 2017].

²⁵ Michael J. Goebel, “Embraced” by Consumption: *Twilight* and the Modern Construction of Gender’ in *Bringing Light to Twilight: Perspectives on a Pop Culture Phenomenon*, ed. by Giselle Liza Anatol (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 167-178 (p. 169).

economic class'.²⁶ Bella and Edward are ideal neoliberal consumer subjects—and, accordingly, consumer objects.

Consumption is key to understanding how our society is structured by gendered assumptions, and how we, as consumers of goods, are encouraged to identify ourselves with certain ideologies. The articles in this special issue aim to deal with this topic from varied perspectives and disciplines. How has contemporary consumer culture constructed, and been constructed by, gender? Each article investigates and problematises the role gender plays in our everyday acts of consumption, thus seeking to demonstrate that 'Consuming cultures are [...] gendered, racialised, sexualised and intersected by relations of social class'.²⁷

Joshua Adair's "'More than slightly mad": Beverley Nichols and the *Merry Hall* Trilogy' focuses on the queerness of consumption. Adair looks at Beverley Nichols's *Merry Hall* trilogy, which takes the form of gardening books, but at the same time works very consciously to construct Nichols's public persona. Adair argues that Nichols's works indicates the process of self-commodification, when he 'makes the case for a conspicuous consumption that looks remarkably different from that depicted as mainstream masculinity' (p. 28). Using Jack Halberstam's conceptualisation of failure as a creative and subversive means of critiquing heteronormativity, Adair demonstrates that Nichols's failure to display any signs of normative masculinity in his excessive lifestyle allows him to honestly express his queerness. Adair's article reveals disruptive use of consumption as a way of expressing one's identity that is at odds with the mainstream (thus heteronormative) view of gender.

Megan Behrent's contribution, 'From a Women's Right to Choose to "A Women's Right to Shoes": The Commodification of Feminism and the Politics of Choice from *Fear of Flying* to *Bridget Jones*', delineates the transformation of the way female protagonists are represented. Behrent demonstrates that the popularity of the *Bridget Jones* franchise is indicative of a shift from feminism to postfeminism, a heroine who is 'stuck in a world of contradictions that expects her to be independent and dependent' (p. 33). However, *Bridget Jones* is far from the first postfeminist heroine. Behrent traces this legacy back to the early 1970s—specifically Erica Jong's

²⁶ Goebel, "'Embraced" by Consumption', p. 169.

²⁷ Avtar Brah and others, 'Editorial: Consuming Cultures', *Feminist Review*, 55 (Spring 1997), 1-3 (p. 1).

bestselling *Fear of Flying* (1973). Behrent shows how the protagonist of this novel, Isadora Wing, serves as a precursor to the individualistic focus that is also visible in postfeminism.

The issue surrounding consumption, choice, and desire is taken up by Lauren Zwicky. In her article ‘Gendered Consumption as Cruel Optimism: Purchasing the Feminine with Electrolux and Maybelline’, Zwicky analyses two commercials which each highlight a normative ideal of womanhood that for most people seems unreachable. Using Lauren Berlant’s concept of ‘cruel optimism’, where ‘normatively defined success is not only difficult to attain, but functions as its own, albeit flawed, social structure’ (p. 62), Zwicky demonstrates that Electrolux and Maybelline commercials contribute to this process. Arguing that through such commercials, only certain forms of—generally white and highly sexualised—femininity become legible as valid identities, Zwicky problematises the role of commodity culture as it facilitates the internalisation of unachievable, and therefore ‘cruelly optimistic’, beauty standards.

This special issue of *Assuming Gender* makes a conscious contribution to the discussion of gendered consumption, and to the role of gender identity in relation to consumption. By doing so, it aims to shed greater light on gendered and gendering processes in commodity culture. As the articles in this issue show, in the neoliberal age the relationship between consumption and the process of (gendered) identity construction is increasingly multifaceted.

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