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Defending the markers of masculinity: Consumer resistance to brand gender-bending

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ABSTRACT

I study the Porsche Cayenne SUV launch to ethnographically analyze how men consuming a gendered brand respond to perceived brand gender contamination. The consumers' communal gender work in a Porsche brand community is analyzed to uncover brand gender contamination's effects on the identity projects of consumers, the brand as an identity marker, and the prevailing gender order in the group. Through the promulgation of gender stereotypes, Porsche owners stratify themselves along gender lines and create an ingroup that is sharply defined by masculinity and an outgroup that is defined by femininity. The construction of social barriers limits access to Porsche's meanings to those who achieve masculine ideals and causes the SUV owners to resort to hyper-masculine behaviors to combat exclusion. The consumers' gender work reverses the firm's efforts to gender-bend the brand, reinstates Porsche as a masculine marker, and reifies particular definitions of masculinity in the community.

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1. Introduction

"It's a boy!" claims Volkswagen in the 2012 relaunch of its Beetle. The Beetle's more aggressive design was devised to bring men into the female-skewed customer base. Harley-Davidson once claimed that it made "big toys for big boys"; today, the company is trying to attract women. Marketers are gender-bending their brands, taking products that had been targeted to one sex and targeting them to the other. In the postmodern era, both men and women have engaged in gender-bending consumption, co-opting the consumption practices and products of the opposite sex to play with definitions of gender and support new ideologies. Consumer researchers argue that we are in a post-gender period in which the stark lines that have historically divided men's and women's consumption are blurring (Firat, 1994; Patterson & Elliott, 2002). Have we finally reached a time when gender does not matter in consumption? Can brands transcend their gendered roots and become neither masculine nor feminine, but an androgynous mixture of both?

Throughout history, our consumption has been gendered and consumers have relied on gendered products and brands as props to perform their gender identities. In 1994, Fischer and Gainer (1994: 101) hypothesized that gendered consumption was ubiquitous and enduring:

> If we find…that most consumption domains are gendered, and not particularly susceptible to revision in this regard, we will begin to have a better appreciation of the ways that consumption practices are shaped by and support other mutually reinforcing social practices that contribute to the current gender order.

Gender still takes center stage in many brand narratives, and brands often find it difficult to attract the opposite sex to brands associated with one sex. Pepsi and Coke launched new brands to attract men to diet soda after their efforts to sell Diet Pepsi and Diet Coke to men were unsuccessful. PepsiMax, Coke Zero, and Dr. Pepper Ten work hard to distance themselves from feminine diet sodas by claiming that they are the "diet cola for men" and "it's not for women." When entering the more feminine body wash category, Gillette infused its advertising with masculine images of power tools and footballs and encouraged men to "wash like a man, feel like a man," while Dove for Men featured men in traditional roles, acting as a protector and lifting weights, reassuring men that their masculinity would be preserved if they used the product. Despite consumers' gender-bending consumption, gender appears to remain an important organizing construct in branding.

In this article, I analyze consumers' lived experience and collective response to the gender-bending of their brands by exploring consumption in situ to understand the role that gender plays in today's postmodern world. I explore two research questions: How do consumers respond to the appropriation of their brands by the opposite sex and how does their response affect the brands' potency as a gendered identity marker? I first illuminate how consumers use brands to enact gender and why the gender contamination of brands occurs. Then, I describe my design for the study of consumers' response to the gender-bending of Porsche via the launch of an SUV that attracted women to the masculine brand. I outline the SUV's identity threat and analyze the existing owners' collective impression management

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practices. I show that the consumers who rely on a brand's gendered identity respond to gender-bending by fighting for their brand rather than discarding it. In fighting, the consumers strengthen the brand's gendered meanings, paradoxically increasing its potency as an identity marker as the other sex encroaches. The consumers' gender work reverses the firm's efforts to gender-bend the brand, reinstates the brand as a masculine marker, and reifies the particular definitions of masculinity in the brand community. I conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of gender-bending branding.

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Enacting gender through consumption

Our most salient and central identity in the multitude of identities that define us is our sense of ourselves as being male or female. We rely heavily on gender to define ourselves and to classify and understand others (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). Gender, unlike sex, is not biologically determined; instead, it is a socially accomplished, culturally constituted ongoing construction project. We are not granted a gender at birth; we perform our gender through situated, symbolic social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987). We construct gender in social interactions by tailoring our actions to conform (or not) to the normative conceptions of masculinity and femininity that exist in our culture (Gherardi, 1995) by choosing from a cultural repertoire of gendered behaviors (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). These practices, in turn, create a social gender display that reinforces (or resists) the prevailing conceptions of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1990; Lorber, 1994). Although many different forms of masculinity and femininity exist concurrently in a particular culture (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985), one form is held as the taken-for-granted hegemonic standard. All people might not adhere to the hegemonic definitions, but these definitions inform people's actions and how others interpret them (Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

Gender display is often accomplished through the use of props (Lorber, 1994). We create, enhance, and accomplish our gender identities through consumption and, thus, our possessions function as symbolic gender identity markers. Penaloza (1994) suggests that there are separate masculine and feminine consumer cultures that define what is appropriate (and inappropriate) for each gender to purchase and consume, while others support that possessions, brands, and consumption behaviors and practices are gendered (cf. Fischer & Arnould, 1990; Sherry, Kozinets, Duhachek, et al., 2004; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). Gendered brands contain either masculine or feminine identity meanings that are socially shared among the members of a culture. We adorn our gender displays with these brands as tangible markers; gendered brands help materialize gender, enlivening who we are as men or women. Brands populate the universe of choices that we make to express our gender, and men and women generally prefer and choose brands, possessions, and activities that reflect their gender identity (as reviewed in Palan, 2001; Stern, 1988).

2.2. The constraining forces of gendered consumption

The gendering of brands constrains what we buy, given the strong polarization of gender in many cultures, where what is feminine is understood to be the antithesis of what is masculine (Bem, 1993). When we do gender “appropriately” through consumption, our practices sustain and reinforce the prevailing roles (Fischer & Gainer, 1994; Gherardi, 1995) and people understand who we are or would like to be. When we engage in gender-bending practices by coopting the products of the opposite sex, we are often called to account and our gender identity is questioned (Kramer, 2005). Through our performative acts, we reinforce the regulative gender discourses (Butler, 1990) the cultural narratives that outline proper behavior (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2004).

The political nature of gender has a differential effect on men and women. Androcentrism reigns in most cultures, where masculinity is more highly valued and is seen as normal, while femininity is deviant from and less than masculinity (Kramer, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity in many cultures has been defined as misogynistic and patriarchal (Connell, 1993) and includes “the dread of and the flight from women,” (Donaldson, 1993: 645). Women and women's things signify not only femininity but also a lack of masculinity. The most important rule of manhood is to not be like a woman; real men “must never, never resemble women, or display strongly stereotyped feminine characteristics” (Brannon, 1976:14). Most men manage their masculinity through consumption to ward off fears that others will see them as effeminate or gay (Carrigan et al., 1985; Kimmel, 1996). For men striving to achieve masculinity, success largely depends upon renouncing the feminine (Conway-Long, 1994; Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994), and this constraint circumscribes male consumers' choices to those that fall within the regulative boundaries (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2004; Rinallo, 2007).

Research suggests that using feminine brands carries a greater stigma for men than using masculine brands does for women. While both men and women prefer brands that express their own gender identity, women are more likely to purchase masculine brands than men are likely to purchase feminine brands (Fry, 1971; Vitz & Johnson, 1965; Worth, Smith, & Mackie, 1992). Penaloza (1994: 366, 374) attributes this preference to differential power dynamics at work:

> Because most of those with money and power are men, the crossing of women into the male domain by wearing clothes associated with the masculine is viewed as rational and is naturalized, whereas for men, to cross into the feminine domain by wearing clothing associated with the feminine is to willingly pursue its stigma and downward mobility, which is viewed as irrational and it goes against individual male privilege and the male dominated culture.

2.3. Gender-bending consumption and gender contamination

First and second wave feminists appropriated men's consumption symbols to fight for gender equality by tossing aside the vestiges of femininity (Hollows, 2000; McCracken, 1988) and adopting short haircuts, cigarette smoking, and masculine fashion styles. Even the most masculine of enclaves, the Harley-Davidson brand community (Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006) and The Citadel, the all-male military college (Addelston & Stirratt, 1996), were infiltrated by women, many of whom used the oppositional tension generated by their consumption to create alternative femininities.

The emergence of the metrosexual discourse in the 1990s appeared to usher in the deconstruction of gender and a move toward the androgynous consumption that was promised by postmodern theory in which bricoleur consumers circumvent constraining categories by composing a multifaceted and creative self through their consumption (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The metrosexual was a media-proliferated masculine ideology (Simpson, 1994) that emerged as an alternative to traditional masculinity and gave license to men to pursue consumption activities that were never before deemed acceptable. Young, urban, heterosexual men began buying products that had been associated with women or homosexual men (Bordo, 1999; Crane, 1999). Through their countercultural consumption, metrosexuals redefined the boundaries of masculine consumption by disarticulating practices that were previously associated with women and homosexuals and resignifying them as appropriate for heterosexual men.

However, given the political and power disparity that still exists between men and women, women's gender-bending consumption

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