Postmodernism, feminism, and the body: The visible and the invisible in consumer research

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The academic discourse on consumer behavior has paid no attention to the body as a site of cultural representation and social power, despite its generous exploitation in the world of marketing practice. This paper explores the relationship between postmodernism and feminism in the context of consumer behavior and restores body to its rightful position in our discourse. Postmodernism and feminism challenge the fundamental tenets of Enlightenment philosophy based on rationality and dualist assumptions – subject/object, culture/nature, rational/irrational, and mind/body. Feminism goes further than postmodernism: It argues that not only are the first terms in each of these dichotomies more privileged but that they are gendered as well. This paper examines the process of production and consumption of gender through body rituals. The mutuality of the two spheres is central to our understanding of both production and consumption processes. Postmodern feminism allows us to deconstruct the various levels at which cultural mediation of the body occurs and allows women to re-make their bodies and call various marketing practices into question.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we will outline some salient characteristics of postmodern feminist thought that prompt us to question and rethink key assumptions in consumer behavior.

In particular, we will focus on the production and consumption of gender through a cultural inquiry into the discourse and practices concerning the body. \cite{1} This discussion will incorporate what French poststructuralists call “écriture feminine,” \cite{2} or “writing the feminine body,” which we will use to critique the literature on body culture. Feminist writing of the body does not presuppose a distinction between production and consumption and recognizes that both production and consumption are thoroughly cultural phenomena (Jameson, 1984).

\cite{1} Although men use products to groom themselves, our focus in this paper is only on women's body rituals. In the contemporary context, men can operate in both masculine and feminine modes. Further, there are many aspects of the body that one can include in a paper like this. We are restricting ourselves to body rituals (diet and make-up) rather than attempting to deal with other bodily behaviors such as cross-dressing and so on.

\cite{2} North American feminists have criticized heavily the works of French poststructuralists such as Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva. The first reason may be that the feminists misread the work, which led them to classify it as essentialist. The post-structuralist focus on libidinal energy identified in the term jouissance has been described as yet another version of feminine nature. The feminists' second criticism revolves around the excessive focus on sexual pleasure, the importance of the female erotic body, the exclusion of the male, and of ignoring the material forms of oppression based on class, ethnicity, and age, not only within our culture but also on a cross-cultural basis.

The term jouissance refers to the embodiment of sexuality that does not depend on the separation between self and other. Woman's body it is argued, is oversupplied and should not be defined as in traditional psychoanalysis as having a lack. Through this reference to feminine autoeroticism, Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva displaced the male economy based on desire. It is a principle of continuity, of non-oppositional otherness that they proposed (Cixous, 1981; Irigaray, 1985).

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The focus on the body is significant because of its centrality to feminist discourse. It also provides a critique of Enlightenment philosophy which emphasizes a mind-centered theory of knowledge that marginalizes the body as the chief enemy of objectivity (Jaggar and Bordo, 1989, p. 4). Although not all feminist discourse acknowledges the body, "writing the body" is an important aspect of it. In promoting dualist oppositions such as culture/nature, rational/irrational, subject/object, and mind/body, and by privileging the first of each of these oppositions over the other, Enlightenment philosophy admits only one vision— that of the constitutive male subject (Owens, 1983, p. 58).

Forging the alliance among postmodernism, feminism, and consumption, albeit disconcerting, opens up the possibility of breaking the silences in consumer and marketing research and finding in the gaps an occasion to provide insights from the periphery. Part of this uneasiness stems from the fact that feminism is itself a modernist project, as is the bulk of consumer and marketing research, with its emphasis on instrumental rationality (Venkatesh, 1989). As well, opening ourselves to voices from the postmodern periphery creates problems because it rocks the comfortable status quo that exists at the center.

Despite the proliferation of writing on postmodernism in most other social sciences, articles with postmodern flavor have just begun to surface in consumer behavior or marketing (Domzal and Kernan, 1993; Firat, 1991a; Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Sherry, 1991). This slow diffusion has left marketing and consumer research isolated from other social sciences. Ironically, most discussions on postmodernism revolve around issues of culture and consumption (Baudrillard, 1988; Venkatesh et al., 1993) making it necessary for us to pay attention to these new developments and incorporate them into our own discourse.

Likewise, while feminist frameworks have had a major impact on most social sciences, including management (Calas and Smircich, 1990; Martin, 1990), very few studies have emerged in consumer behavior and marketing (Costa, 1991; Fischer and Arnold, 1990; Fischer and Bristor, 1991; Hirschman, 1991). The initial literature in marketing in the late 70's and early 80's reflected liberal feminist ideology (Venkatesh, 1980), while more recent research studies span the spectrum of perspectives imminent in feminist scholarship. Yet, while feminist frameworks challenge underlying theoretical and methodological assumptions and practices, they have not yet found their way into the major journals and consequently have had little effect on contemporary modes of thought in the respective disciplines. In an effort to fill this gap, at the very least, a three-way polylogue is suggested. First, as Suleiman notes (1990, p. 189), feminism brings to postmodernism the political guarantee which postmodernism needs in order to feel acceptable as an avant-garde practice. Second, postmodernism, in turn, brings feminism into a certain kind of "high theoretical" discourse on the frontiers of culture, traditionally a male domain. Likewise, finally, a postmodern feminist perspective on consumer behavior and marketing exposes a male-centered or patriarchal worldview that is both implicit and explicit in the literature and that raises important ethical concerns.

2. Background – the concept of the body in consumer research

2.1. Metaphors we live by

Within the social sciences as a whole, the body as metaphor has manifested itself in many ways. Terms such as "the cosmic body," "the body politic," "the social body," and "the body of believers" are used to emphasize the contours of the disciplinary thought
in the social sciences. In art, the female body is the representation of nature, truth, and the sublime. In consumer behavior, the term "consumption" itself presupposes the body and Firat (1991b) has argued that it is also gendered. According to the New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary, the term means "to eat up completely." In more common usage, it has come to mean to expend, to use, to dissipate, to waste slowly, as well as to refer to the use of products of industry. In consumer research, until recently, consumption, has been viewed merely as purchase behavior, that is, a disembodied phenomenon, and this interpretation has had a direct bearing on the marginalization of feminine perspectives.

The machine metaphor, a derivative of Enlightenment philosophy that has been pervasive in consumer research, was also based on the belief that human endeavors could be modeled after the functions of the machine (an inanimate body). Such a metaphor was apropos, given the pervasive mechanization of society. Even the advances in medicine have tended to reinforce the mechanistic, dualistic and reductionistic constructions of the body (Synnott, 1993).

According to Thompson et al. (1989), the machine metaphor, borrowed from theories in cognitive psychology, is probably the most prominent theme in consumer research and likens humans to information-processing devices. The dominance of the machine metaphor is also evidence of the silence regarding the body in consumer research. We argue that we study consumption, typically an activity associated with the animate body, yet we shape our thinking with metaphors that portray consumers as inanimate machines. Thompson et al. (1989, p. 134) note that the manifestations of such assumptions take the form of methodological prescriptions in consumer research - the use of formalized language, analytic procedures, and causal laws for enacting social practice.

Marxists, argues Hirschman (1993), have been extremely critical of the machine metaphor because it represents the dominance of labor by capital. Feminists likewise have rejected this particular metaphor, because it values technological production over human reproduction. Machines act but do not feel. The machine metaphor has become so pervasive that we no longer liken people to computers but think of them as computers and evaluate their performance based on mechanical strength.

The Cartesian dualism of mind/body distinctions also gave rise to other metaphors of the body that privileged the mind over the body, such as "homoeconomics." The use of such a metaphor creates a particular textual reality which appears to be fixed. Homoeconomics forces us to think of human consumption behavior as primarily economic in character and eliminates consideration of other aspects of consumption, such as hedonism or symbolism. Maximization of gain and rationality have come to be regarded the cornerstones of economic activity. Even when consumers have been discussed in a context such as information processing, they have been regarded as rational problem solvers who carefully consider the objective features and functional benefits of products and services. The use of such a metaphor based on rationality brings to prominence the mind-body dualism that privileges the mind and cognitive activity over the body and emotional or physical labor (Bristor and Fischer, 1993). As Hirschman (1993, p. 545) observes, from a marxist and/or feminist perspective, such ideology is distorted and incomplete, because it excludes all other forms of social behavior other than contractual relationships. The rational economic model of consumption has now given way to more affective modes of consumption, but the gendering of the consumer, as for instance in "man as computer," still is privileged in the literature (Belk, 1987).
2.2. The invisible body and the visible mind

As an academic discipline, consumer behavior has paid little or no attention to the "human body" as a possible source of cultural knowledge. Of course, this has not prevented the marketing practitioner from colonizing the human body, especially the female body, over the past five decades for commercial spectacle (Fig. 1). The typical academic approach to the study of consumer behavior examines consumers in terms of various social and psychological categories, as cognitive agents; decision makers; members of social groups; or individuals with beliefs, attitudes, needs, emotions, and feelings, ambitions, material aspirations, social affinities, family ties, and so on. All of these categories are non-corporeal constructs. None of these discusses the consumer in "bodily terms." In the field of consumer behavior, there is hardly any reference to the body itself in the depiction of the consumer. Very rarely, if at all, do we refer to consumers as people with bodies, except by implication when we talk of gender. We have no way of theorizing about the consumer in terms of her/his physicality.

Further, while the study of consumer behavior focuses on categories such as human needs, wants, and motivations, it seldom concerns itself with the issue of "human desire". Desire is ignored, because, (a) desire has no object and is its own object, and (b) desire is the sublimating point for temptation, flesh, and body, and is identified with the sins of material existence (Turner, 1984, p. 27). According to this view, the historical body is the location of desires, and desires must be checked or they will lead the flesh astray. It is said that one controls one's body by controlling one's desires, and (s)he who cannot control his/her body cannot control herself/himself and has therefore failed morally.

Since the mind makes the body consume, consumer research has not had to deal directly with the body. Re-examining the role of body in consumption exposes many interesting possibilities. The body is visible, the mind is invisible. The body can be sublime, beautiful, and vulgar, all at the same time. Its language has no written script but has its own grammar and syntax. However, the invisible mind of the consumer has always been the subject of our probe and the source of our knowledge about consumption behavior. Even when we have looked at the body of a consumer phenomenologically, we seem to

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Fig. 1.

3 An exception to this general representation of the individual can be found in the application of Goffman's work (1976). Goffman's work on the presentation of the self using bodily images certainly touches on the role of impressions in social interactions.
have ignored what is visible and relied on consumer's feelings and beliefs (the invisible) about the body in order to make sense of the visible. Our epistememe has thrived on making the visible invisible and invisible visible. One of our aims in this paper is to incorporate the visible into our discourse, for the discourse can never be complete unless we study consumers in terms of both their visibility and their invisibility.

3. The visible body and the market culture – never mind, no matter

The strong silence in the field of consumer behavior concerning the body, (despite the historical role the body has played in marketing practice), is contrasted by the impressive force with which it consumes the attention of scholars in various other fields; cultural studies, social history, literary criticism, phenomenology, feminism, postmodernism and poststructuralism, and media studies (Featherstone et al., 1991; Foucalut, 1979; Bordo, 1993). Although there are no specific causal links between these various academic discourses, there seem to be many common philosophical threads running through them. One has to wonder why, lately, so much attention has been directed towards the body and consumer culture in these disciplines, for in the popular mind, this is not the stuff that these disciplines are made of. One possible reason is the realization that consumer culture cannot be separated from the broader manifestations of culture at large and, in fact, is integral to it. There has been a growing tendency in recent years to unite high and low cultures, and to regard everyday practices that circumscribe the low culture as providing a key to a true and complete understanding of the culture in its entirety. In this regard, the burgeoning literature on "human body," originally the site of low culture, has become central to postmodernist, poststructuralist, and feminist discourses on the mind–body relationship and to the cultural constructions of female body (Frank, 1990).

An examination of the recent literature suggests that the female body, which historically was dismissed as a benign preoccupation of market culture, has entered the realm of feminist critique (Jaggar and Bordo, 1989). By all accounts, the female body has been indispensable to the growth of market culture. In the "real-world" of marketing practices, the inscription of the body on consumerist ethos has been compelling. With the emergence of televisual culture (e.g. MTV), there has been further objectification and glorification of the human body in the electronic media. Ann Kaplan (1987) examines the relevant issues under the socially constructed category of "gaze" in media culture. Very few consumer products are sold without at least an allusion to the human body. Looking around us, we see the full force of marketing linking the body to numerous products and services – perfumes, fashion, clothing, dining, all kinds of sensual and pleasurable objects, exercise machines, fitness centers, dietary products, cosmetic surgical procedures and the like. One wonders whether marketing/consumer culture could survive without the millions of dollars spent annually promoting body culture and on products and services whose images fill countless advertising pages.

In both traditional and modern cultures, the human body generally has been regarded with a certain awe and respect, but only in modern industrial cultures has the body been exploited with full-scale vigor (Feher, 1989; Gallagher and Laqueur, 1987). The body is acted upon in so many ways – clothed, shaped, painted with lotions and creams, and loathed if it does not meet the aesthetic norms of commodity culture. Marketing and consumer practices in the last half a century
have derived considerable economic benefits by positioning the human body – specifically the female body – as the piece de resistance of consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991). While academic consumer researchers were ignoring the body completely, the marketing industry was making billions of dollars by selling products closely tied to it and, ultimately, by selling the body itself as the central concept of contemporary life. This relentless marketing activism has produced a consumer culture so dominated by body culture that bodily images have become the most visible of all objects as well as the instruments of current commodification. In other words, what was invisible to academic researchers was always the most visible tool of market culture.

3.1. Recent works on body culture in consumer behavior

Consumer studies dealing directly with the gendering of the consumer suggest a distinction between men and women along agentic-communal lines (Meyers-Levy, 1988). While the concept of the body is not explicitly discussed in such studies, the identification of the essential nature of men and women reifies the mind/body opposition that informs much of our scientific knowledge. As Bristor and Fischer (1993, p. 522) note, because of a lack of apriori conceptual development and/or post hoc discussion of gender, reported differences can appear to be "biologically hardwired," thereby reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Thus this stream of research also assumes and reifies the opposition of the masculine and feminine which postmodern feminism throws into question. Richins (1991) has investigated how idealized images of women in advertising may create self-doubt and dissatisfaction among female consumers based on social comparison. This seems to be less of an issue with male consumers.

The interpretive paradigm in consumer research likewise has drawn our attention to the body in both implicit and explicit ways (Schouten, 1991). Humanistic inquiry has led to the view that consumer behavior means more than "purchase behavior" and includes all of the interactions between individuals and goods/products before, during, and after purchase (Arnould, 1989; Belk et al., 1988; Hirschman, 1986; Holbrook, 1987). In all these studies, either an implicit or explicit assumption about the nature of the body is made, with the body being opposed to the mind. This perspective is not surprising, given that the disciplinary knowledge traces its genealogy to a more august body of thought – Enlightenment philosophy. Postmodernism deconstructs such a representation that admits only a masculine vision. Feminism goes one step further: It challenges the misrepresentation of the feminine as "other" or "object." Therefore, for women, the explicit purpose of writing the feminine body is to give substance and body, so to speak, to the insistent feminist voice that has been denied legitimacy. Postmodern feminists suggest that it is only through writing the feminine body that the hegemony of patriarchy embodied in language can be subverted. The point of writing the feminine body is not so much to create a new theory as to displace old oppositions.

As part of the interpretive approach, Belk (1988), for instance, makes the distinction between the inner self and the external world when he refers to products as tangible markers by which we construct, transform, and reconstruct ourselves. Yet he acknowledges that the extended self is a masculine notion. Similarly, McCracken (1988) makes an implicit reference to the body in his analysis of person–object relations. As McCracken (1988) observes, the focus in person–object relations is not so much on what we think of the objects as on what we do with them. Consumption, in this sense, refers to the
continuous assimilation of products into one's own body and of one's own body into products (Frank, 1991, p. 62). As Baudrillard (1988, p. 1) observes, the body does not reproduce itself by externalizing objects in labor but does reproduce itself by internalizing objects through consumption.

McCracken's theory of the meaning of consumer goods is further posited on a trajectory based on collaborations between individuals and institutions. He argues that there are three locations of meaning – the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer – as well as two moments of transfer – world to good, and good to individual. Institutions, such as advertising and the fashion system, transfer meanings from the world to the good, whereas rituals of possession, exchange, divestment, and grooming move the meanings from good into the lives of individuals. In both moments of transfer, the body is implicated, yet the gendering of the consumer – and more precisely the possibility of writing the feminine body – is suppressed.

Rook (1985), too, talks of "grooming rituals" in referring to both individual and societal bodily practices. He describes, at great length, the activities by which a product's properties can be coaxed out of it and transferred to the user in a way that will empower the consumer. While he states that grooming rituals dramatically and symbolically portray an individual's strivings for social status, maturity, and sexual identity, he does not refer to the coercive power of the "beauty myth" that women and men, too, to some extent, suffer from. The beauty myth, says Wolf (1991, p. 272), is not really about body shape, size, adornment or clothing. The real problems lie in our lack of choice. That is, we are trying redefine beauty in an environment that is unreceptive because it is protecting the status quo.

We shall now examine the nature and genealogy of body culture.

4. The nature of body culture

4.1. Body in everyday life

Everyday human life is marked by corporeal existence. According to the utilitarian perspective, the functions of the body pertain to eating/dieting, grooming, beautifying, purifying, dressing, exercising, resting and sleeping. These functions are designed to maintain, condition, and develop the body to socially acceptable levels (Featherstone, 1991). The neglect of these functions results in decay and disorder. Symbolically, the structures and meanings of these functions become culturally constituted and acquire semiotic properties. Consumer culture defines bodily functions at micro and macro levels, as well as physical and symbolic levels (Featherstone, 1991). At the micro level, culture establishes standards of performance, appearance and aesthetics, and at the macro level it produces what Bourdieu calls "the body culture." Together, they produce the cultural imaginary into which are incorporated bodily discourses and practices.

Our consumer culture is dominated by a preoccupation with the body. This preoccupation extends from such areas as food, dieting, clothing, fashion, and exercise, to all kinds of phenomenological experiences concerning the body. This preoccupation with the body, with its shape and appearance, began to evolve with the democratization of the Western societies (Turner, 1991). Prior to that, only the elite or the aristocrats were engrossed with the aesthetic physicality of the body. During the Greco-Roman antiquity only the bodies of the divine persona received attention in literature and the arts (Williams, 1989). One exception to this, of course, is the Greek society where ordinary citizens were concerned about the appearance of their bodies. Otherwise, the bodies of the common citizens were not part of any discourse. Over the past hundred years,
with the democratization of Western cultures, growth of consumerism, the availability of body-care products, and the accessibility of bodily images to ordinary consumers, a new culture of the body has emerged.

5. The importance of the body in the social order

Society is confronted with many functional tasks relative to the disciplining and regulation of the human body (Foucault, 1979). Four are mentioned by Turner (1984, p. 2) and we have added a fifth: the reproduction of human populations in time, the regulation of the human body in space, the restraint of the interior body through discipline, the representation of the exterior body in social space, the articulation of cultural norms and standards, and, finally, the development of meanings and symbolic values associated with the body, both as physical entity and cultural icon. These represent respectively five institutional subsystems: patriarchy, panopticism, asceticism, commodification and signification (Frank, 1990). Through these, society develops various mechanisms to control the human body and the language associated with it; for example, there are norms about, and sometimes even laws about, which parts of the body can be revealed in public, directly addressed in popular discourse, and how language can be used to reveal and conceal body in all its manifestations and fragmentations.

From a societal perspective, there is yet another dimension in the regulation of bodies – i.e., human populations. Essentially, this means that the social order is concerned with the bodies that reproduce, the bodies that need to be fed, and the bodies to be disciplined. In industrial cultures, the expression “able-bodied” represents a socially useful individual (historically attributed to the male gender) who can put his body to work.

5.1. Notes on the cultural constructions of body and sexuality in history

The discourse on body has expanded into several areas, but none is as controversial as the relationship between body and sexuality, or, more broadly, the cultural-historical articulation of the body in terms of sexuality, gender roles, and social mechanisms of control and representation (Scott, 1988).

Historical interest in the body arises out of the realization that the human body is not without history. Perspectives on the body have changed over the centuries, and the various constructions of the body are very similar to the historical construction of other social institutions (Feher, 1989). Our conceptions of the body, its representational themes, the social distinctions and meanings attached to it require a cross-disciplinary investigation into the construct of body, which is one of the most important cultural constructions of modernity. To quote Gallagher and Laqueur (1987, p. vii):

Scholars have only recently discovered that the human body itself has a history. Not only has it been perceived, interpreted, and represented differently in different epochs, but it has also been lived differently, brought into being within widely dissimilar material cultures, subjected to various technologies and means of control, and incorporated into different rhythms of production and consumption, pleasure and pain.

Prior to the 17th century, the prevailing view of the body was homological. The male body was the perfect creation, and the female body came very close. Bodily/sexual pleasures were interpreted as signs of heat generation in which the male represented “heat and energy” and the female represented “coolness.” The reproductive organs of men and women were considered inversions of each other. Male-female bodies were considered hierarchically, and the very hierarchical idea of the body itself was reminiscent of a predemocratic epoch. Consequently in Western thought, in the premodern era,
the human body was undifferentiated in terms of gender. Female and male bodies were considered as two different versions of the same body and discussed in hierarchical terms. For example, the male body was considered more perfectly developed and therefore occupied a higher status.

Two important developments shaped the culture of the body in the post-seventeenth century epoch and have continued into the present time, that is, into the period known as modernity. The first development has to do with the rise of science and medicine which established the biological/physiological differentiation of male and female bodies and resulted in the emergence of the medical body. The medical body was primarily the body of the interior. The second has to do with the gendering of the body from a sociological perspective and the social reproduction of the gendered body under conditions of modern industrialism. Both of these developments altered the cultural notions of the body and have created a new discourse.

In the mid to late 20th century, the medical body was slowly grafted onto a representational system that took biology into the realm of cultural and social construction. Body thus became an externally oriented representational tool.

Further, under modernity, the effacement of religious representation and the introduction of democratic and secular ideas of the body created a new perspective. We see the emergence of cultural and political interpretations of sexual differences and the sexual subject. Woman's body and reproductive organs are now discussed in terms of how socially appropriate a woman's sexuality is for her staying at home and performing domestic activities. The body is also a sexual body of pleasure as much as it is a gendered body of the social order (Bordo, 1993). Gradually, the physical body begins to be represented in terms of social interaction. For example, the male body is the bearer of the rational sub-

Fig. 2.

ject. The female body is the opposite of the male body and is, essentially, an expressive body in service to male aspirations and ideology. The female body is also the sexual body, while the male body is a neutral or passive body. See Figs. 2 and 3 which appeared on the cover of Esquire a few years ago and illustrate the textuality and symbolism of the gendered bodies in contemporary Western culture. The male body is nondescript but the real superiority of men over women is cast not in terms of the physical body but in terms of social construction; that is, what resides inside the body. The male body contains the rational mind, and the neutrality of the male body is now compensated by the superior power of the rational mind.
The parallel nature of these two discourses began to dissolve in the mid-to-late 20th century, with the rise of consumer culture and advertising imagery. With the advent of the new consumerism, science began to combine with commerce, and the connection between the medical body (inner body) and the aesthetic body (outer body) was firmly established (Fig. 2). Advertising images were enhanced as a result of developments in the fields of fashion, dieting, and exercise, which became known collectively as the "body culture." These developments have become the subject of serious critique among social theorists and feminists. To understand these critiques, we need to explore further the concepts of postmodernism and feminism.

6. Postmodernism

As noted earlier, the use of the term "postmodernism" begs clarification in terms of its association with modernism (Huysen, 1990, p. 236). Fundamentally, the postmodernist movement displaces the modernist search for stability in the creation of knowledge. Modernist thought, which has its roots in Enlightenment philosophy, exalted rationality over all other human faculties and viewed knowledge acquisition as based on a distinction between a "known subject" and a known object" (Foucault, 1973). Thus in modernist theory, the mind was privileged over the body, and the former was associated with the masculine while the latter came to be associated with the feminine. Consequently, the body, and in particular bodily practices which belonged to the realm of the senses, was not associated with objectivity and the search for truth. Cooper and Burrell (1988) note that instrumental rationality, typified by scientific philosophy and methodology, gave priority to the unitary manner in which knowledge is constructed. Further, enlightenment can itself be viewed as the unify-
ing theme of modernity, with progress as its ultimate goal (Venkatesh, 1989).

Postmodernists argue against the creation of such totalizing frameworks, against foundationalism and absolutism in the social sciences (Foucault, 1971; Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1979). They question positivist understandings that privilege the natural sciences and dualist ontologies built on the primacy of reason. Further, they challenge the existence of a stable, reasoning, and coherent self. The subject, they argue, is not a locus of authorial intentions or even a privileged, separate consciousness (Alcoff, 1988, p. 415). Knowledge is not abstracted by an individual from a separate object but is collectively constructed through language. Language is thus constitutive of the world (Derrida, 1981; Foucault, 1972). Further, they argue, there is no transparent correspondence between word and thing.

Even the hermeneutics of suspicion ⁴ used by interpretivists did not displace the modernist discovery of truth. To postmodernists the social is too heterogeneous to be reduced to any one concept such as class, gender, or race (Agger, 1991). As Foucault (1980) notes, particular discourses create particular truths. There are only multiple truths and multiple realities (Venkatesh, 1989). Such a decentering of the coherent subject contributes to what Owens (1983, p. 57) refers to as the “crisis of authority.”

The postmodernist displacement of rationality is central to our understanding of the process of embodiment in their thought. Further, the shift in emphasis from knowledge to experience presupposes the move from mind to body. The dissolution of the subject/object and rational/irrational distinctions opened up the possibility of exploring the ways in which the cultural constructions of the body are made through language. Since the body is associated with the feminine, suggesting that the body is a culturally mediated text allows the repressed female voice to be heard. However, despite the focus on the powerless, one important oversight in postmodernist frameworks is the absence of women and discussions of gender constructions in the framework (Owens, 1983, p. 9).

Although postmodernists challenged the modernist embodiment of women as nature, truth, or the sublime, they themselves marginalized the very group that they had identified as powerless. This is particularly ironic, given that feminism has been one of the most important social movements since the 1960s. Not surprisingly, there are few women’s voices to be heard in the modernity/postmodernity debate. Consequently, many feminists have been wary of the claims of postmodernism and its celebration of what Kristeva (1981, p. 137) calls a “feminist practice that can only be negative.”

Despite the absence of women’s voices and female practice from postmodernist discourse, the decentering of the individual and the dissolution of subject/object opposition brings the postmodernist enterprise in line with feminist discourse. Like postmodernism, feminism challenges the fundamental assumptions of rationality and dualist oppositions inherent in Enlightenment philosophy. Although the initial thrust within feminist writing was an attack on patriarchy and male-dominated science, today there are many feminist perspectives. Contemporary feminism has also become skeptical of its own narratives, finding them totalizing, elitist, racist, and reductionist (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen, 1989). Consequently, contemporary feminism remains a diverse and pluralist enterprise.

An analytical technique used by both postmodernists and feminists in the critique of

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⁴ A number of authors have talked about the challenges to modernism in both consumer behavior and marketing while referring to the specific totalizing visions and the logic of scientific inquiry. See Sherry (1991) for an extended discussion of the interpretive turn in consumer research.
modernity is the process of deconstruction, exemplified in the works of Derrida. Deconstruction refers not only to the process of uncovering but also to the process of displacement of existing meaning. According to Derrida (1982, p. 329),

\[\text{Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization; it must by means of a double gesture...practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes.}\]

Deconstruction as philosophy and technique is subversive because it challenges the inscriptions of patriarchal gender codes on the body. According to Derrida, the dualisms such as subject/object, culture/nature, mind/body are untenable because the first term in each of these oppositions has been privileged. Feminists take this challenge one step further. They not only attack the privileging of the first term but argue that, more importantly, such dualistic oppositions are gendered (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990; Suleiman, 1990).

Overall, discourse theory shows that language is fluid and open. Discourse analysis suggests that there is no one overarching coherent subject, except that which is constituted through language and discourse. Hence there are many subjectivities, many realities, and many readings to a text (Culler, 1982). For postmodernist feminists in particular, the gaps, silences, and ambiguities of a text provide the possibility of resistance and writing the body.

7. Feminism

7.1. The body in feminism

Much of the recent reaction to the absence of body is inspired by the feminist reaction to the cultural construction of gender and sexuality which is essentially a product of Western male ideology, and the exploitation of the female body in consumer culture (Bordo, 1993; Jaggar and Bordo, 1989). Historians of sexuality and body have begun to carefully document the discourse on body both as a product of modern science and cultural hermeneutics. The recent work on body is nothing short of revolutionary. The reasons for this are plentiful.

The feminist reaction to body can be analyzed at three levels, all of them directed against male ideology. The first is liberatory, the second is celebratory, and the third is critical. At the first level, there is an attempt to liberate the body from the prison house of Cartesian thinking which relegates body to an inferior position and as a vulgar dimension of individuality. Since body symbolically was identified with female, and mind with male, this liberatory exercise is an attempt to liberate female constructions from male ideological positions. At this level, the effort is to dignify body as part of human essentialism and symbolically restore female gender to a position of equality with men. At the second level, the celebratory position attempts to reconfigure the aesthetics of the human body not in accordance with the dictates of male ideology but in counter to it. Here the notion of the body gets clearly entangled with social constructions of gender in various domains, such as work, marriage, family, where the body is used as a weapon to establish female identity separate from and equal to male identity. The third level, which is the critical level is a serious attempt to expose the male exploitation of the female body within the male dominated media culture, which essentially treats the female body as a sexual object. Marketing culture is exemplified at the third level for it operates primarily at this level, treating the female body as a sexual object.

Feminist reactions to the body culture
stems from two main sources. First, the realization that the female body has been exploited for commercial purposes. Second, the body itself is the object of modern sexuality and cultural construction completely dominated by male ideology.

The single most important advance in feminist theory is the problematic nature of the concept of gender. Gender can no longer be treated as a simple, natural fact whether one views it from the point of view of liberal, cultural, socialist, or poststructural feminism (Flax, 1987). Feminist discourse is pluralistic and does not speak from the point of view of the "other." It speaks as the other, and in many voices (Mascia-Lees et al., 1989). There are no central texts, no definitive techniques. It is multidisciplinary in its explanations and offers insights without privileging any one (Mascia-Lees et al., 1989). In this respect, feminism is definitely postmodern, especially because of its play with context (Strathern, 1987, p. 68).

This celebration of pluralism within feminism requires explanation because, as in most other disciplines, marketing and consumer researchers will seek to align themselves with one perspective over another. Jaggar (1983) offers perhaps the best overview of the different strands of feminism. She identifies liberal feminism, radical feminism (broadly classified as cultural feminism), and Marxist/socialist feminism (also referred to as feminist standpoint theories). More recently, poststructuralist/postmodernist feminism has challenged some of the existing assumptions. We offer a summary of each of these positions in order to show how each perspective constructs the embodiment of the feminine in order to suggest political action.

7.2. The body in liberal feminism

At a philosophical level, the rational/irrational distinction associates the male with the non-sensual realm of reason and the female with the sensual realm of the body. To the extent that liberal feminists make the distinction between a male abstract rationality and women's nature that is practical and intuitive, they deal with issues of embodiment. Liberal feminists subscribe to a theory of essentialism or more specifically, recognize the intuitive, practical nature of women, as an issue to be resolved in order to become equal participants. They go as far as to say that male abstract rationality makes possible the distinction between what is moral and what is not.

Contemporary feminists such as Gilligan (1982) find this position untenable and reject the possibility of emancipation offered by liberal feminism. They find the liberal solution of suppressing their feminine nature and becoming like men or accepting the differences and becoming partially empowered through education unacceptable. In summary, liberal feminism does not displace the gendered dualist ontologies of subject/object, culture/nature, or rational/irrational. Hence liberal feminism upholds the ways in which gender hegemony is inscribed on the body.

7.3. The body in cultural feminism

Cultural feminism, also known as radical feminism and exemplified in the works of such writers as Firestone (1971) and Daly (1978), has leaned toward a theory of essentialism and monocausalism to explain women's inferior status. Again, the discussion of the body arises from the dualist opposition of rational/irrational and the association of women with the sensual realm of the body. They present an intriguing but troubling view of this distinction, by accepting that women are less rational than men. Yet, they argue that the "man of reason" is not only associated with rationality, but also with domination, the destruction of nature, and other destructive aspects of the modern
world, which women are fortunate not to be a part of (Hekman, 1990). Consequently, in an attempt to recover their “repressed subjectivity,” cultural feminists exalt feminine qualities over the masculine. They strongly believe that this feminine nature based on nurturance and caring should be reappropriated in order for women to be emancipated.

For cultural feminists, social institutions are not the real enemy—it is masculinity itself (Alcoff, 1988, p. 408). It is no wonder, then, that the solution they offer is rooted in privileging the feminine over the masculine. To cultural feminists, “taking back their bodies” is thus central to the emancipatory process. However, as Alcoff (1988) reminds us, the argument of the innateness of gender differences in personality and character is indefensible.

7.4. The body in socialist/feminist standpoint theories

Once again in social feminism, issues of embodiment revolve around questions of rationality and knowledge. However, unlike the cultural feminists, they do not focus on women’s essential nature (Harstock, 1983). Socialist feminists draw on a historical materialist viewpoint and argue that knowledge is mediated by factors that relate to an individual’s position, such as race, class, and gender. According to this view, knowledge is historical, decentered, non-hierarchical, and contextualized (Rose, 1986). While male dominant views of truth are partial and untenable, they maintain that a feminine viewpoint can correct such a perspective (Hawkesworth, 1989, p. 536).

One version of this theory suggests that there is a gap between women’s experiences and the dominant conceptual schemes that ignore women’s work. Consequently, inquiry from the standpoint of women is expected to overcome the partiality and distortion of existing theories. Most importantly, feminist standpoint theory does not begin with any form of essentialism except to analyze it and proposes alternatives to counter it (Harding, 1990, pp. 97–99). Since women’s work is central to the marginalization process, women’s bodies become an instrument of production in socialist feminism. Further, socialist feminists argue, sexuality and desire are shaped by social structures. Thus the body becomes the site of a struggle for control (Dallery, 1989, p. 64). Ultimately, although they claim to correct a distorted view of society, socialist feminists themselves fall into the universalist trap they question, by propagating the women’s perspective.

7.5. The body in postmodern feminism

Postmodern feminism is recent and was anticipated in the works of poststructuralist feminists such as Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva. French feminism in particular—rooted in European philosophy, linguistics, and psychoanalysis—relies on discourse analysis (Moi, 1987). French poststructuralists argue that the human body is a text or sign and hence is always mediated by language. These authors rely on a theory of discourse to explain that there is no essence to masculinity or femininity but that everything is language (Conley, 1984, p. 57). In Kristeva’s works, subjects are constituted by discourse and have no identity or essence apart from that discourse (Kristeva, 1980a). By focusing on discourse, they attempt to break out of the Enlightenment opposition of sexual differences, which undermines women. They choose to reject male bias but do not wish to replace it with female bias. The signal contribution they make lies in stating that women’s oppression is historically, culturally, socially, and linguistically located. They contend that the only way to break out of this is to formulate a new discourse—one that is more liberating for women.

Unlike interpretivism, which seeks to rep-
resent the world fully, postmodernism is concerned primarily with the discordances and discontinuities within particular discourses. Irigaray (1985, p. 78), for instance, urges a disruption of systematizing strategies of inquiry, which she refers to as a “jamming of the theoretical machinery itself.” Rather than employing a hermeneutics of suspicion that engages in a deeper reading of reality, she urges a reading of the surface itself. In its relentless history of particulars, anomalies, and misfits, postmodernism exposes the forged sense of unity in our interpretations and is a politics of resistance (Connolly, 1987, p. 155).

7.6. Convergences and divergences

Postmodernism has much in common with the goals of feminism. Both feminism and postmodernism challenge the epistemological foundations of Western thought and argue that it should be displaced. Both reject the anthropocentric definition of knowledge and dualist oppositions that riddle Enlightenment philosophy. Both reject the principle of rationality on which modernism rests. Feminists on the whole contend that in each of the pairs of dichotomies such as subject/object or culture/nature, the male is not only the first element but is also superior to the female in the hierarchical scheme of things.

But as noted earlier, there is not one version of feminism but many, and most of these schools, especially cultural feminism, call for the reversal of order in the oppositions, so that the female is privileged over the male. Postmodern feminism, on the other hand, is the only school of thought that suggests that it is futile to reverse the order and privilege women— the only way to transcend the hierarchy is to dissolve it. These postmodernists argue against embodiment of the dualisms inherent in Enlightenment thought (Hekman, 1990).

Thus postmodernism and most variants of feminism (except poststructuralists) are at odds with each other. They have a tenuous relationship, because although both critique Enlightenment philosophy, feminism is not only a theory or an aesthetic, but also a political philosophy. Most variants of feminism are committed to a philosophy of essentialism that empowers and valorizes women. For many, the ideas of relativism and nihilism are inherent in postmodernism and are in opposition to feminist theory and practice. The greatest challenge many feminists face is the idea that all texts are undecidable. Consequently they argue, if patriarchy is a form of fiction, how can feminists speak out against sexism (Harstock, 1983)? Many feminists therefore find Derrida’s work irrelevant to their political agenda.

7.7. Summary of feminist positions in modernity/postmodernity debate

As a result, feminists have taken different positions with regard to the modernist/postmodernist debate. According to Hekman (1990), the first position states that feminists should reject the problematic features of modernity, such as anthropocentrism, rationality, and dualism, and retain what is useful. The second is to argue that a feminist standpoint theory rectifies the distorted view that currently exists (Harstock, 1983). However, since they reject a masculinist science, they ultimately reify the culture/nature dichotomy that they propose to problematize (Harding, 1990, p. 99).

The third version some feminists are trying to formulate is a postmodern approach. They reject outright an epistemology built on male superiority, yet the methodology of deconstruction reveals the futility of defining an essential female nature. Rather, postmodern feminism states that there is no one (masculine) truth but many, none of which is privileged along gendered lines. Further, de-
construction is not apolitical. According to Derrida, it is radical in its opposition to dualist thinking and displaces it. Inverting the dualism to privilege women or creating a new term that is a synthesis of the two oppositional terms does not displace the dualism but only reifies it. Instead, deconstruction allows for subversion, of disruption of totalizing theories, and to break up unities (Spivak, 1983). The focus is on gaps and silences. The stability and completeness of familiar interpretive accounts are challenged by disruptive and violent rhetorical devices.

What postmodernism offers is discourse analysis that reinforces the claim that women are made and not born and thus focuses on the number of ways in which gender is constituted in different societies. As Fraser and Nicholson (1990, p. 39) note, feminist theory informed by postmodernism would be explicitly historical and attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and different periods.

So what does this all mean for consumer researchers? Does feminism – and particularly postmodern feminism – offer any insights into contemporary consumer behavior? In the following section, we would like to argue that postmodern feminist frameworks offer a significant challenge to both positivist and interpretivist thought, although our focus is on the usefulness of postmodern feminism in deconstructing interpretivist frameworks of consumption processes that create and transform the body.

8. Implications for consumer research

For feminists of all persuasions, the body as a cultural text is indeed the locus of struggle over which much debate has developed. In the early years of feminism, cultural forms such as beauty pageants, make-up, girdles, and the like were viewed as instruments of domination leading to the objectification of the body. Indeed, the struggle against patriarchy was exemplified in such expressions as “the personal is political.”

Today, while the body is a central text of feminist cultural critique, such outright statements of domination have been nuanced. Most of all, such body configurations have become problematized. French poststructural feminism has offered certain analytical techniques through which writing the feminine body is possible in the contemporary context.

8.1. Developing a body language

According to French poststructuralists, the “feminine” is that which is repressed and misrepresented in Western culture and thought. Irigaray (1985, 1987), Kristeva (1980b, 1986) and Cixous (1981) argue that the new woman’s writing of discourse is necessary to retrieve the repression of the feminine unconscious in Western thought and discourse. Feminine writing is distinguishable from masculine writing because it does not “rush into” meaning but remains at the threshold of feeling. Cixous (1981, p. 54) notes, “Writing the feminine is writing what has been cut off by the (masculine) symbolic.” Expanding on this theme Cixous says, “Woman is body, more than man is... more body, hence more writing is necessary” (Cixous and Clement, 1986, p. 92).

Against the charge of essentialism leveled at her, Cixous notes that feminine writing is a style and not a signature (Conley, 1984, p. 147). The point of encouraging women to write is that it subverts masculine writing. Thus emancipatory potential for Cixous, as for Irigaray and Kristeva, resides in a linguistic revolution.

The overall themes that guide French poststructuralist writing can be summarized as follows. According to Dallery (1989, p. 58), in “écriture feminine,” the focus is on women as sexual subjects and not objects of
male desire. Further, the strategy of writing the body also deconstructs categories of binary thought and signifying practices of male perception of the female other. In this process, the woman's body is liberated from objectification. Most importantly, writing the body exposes the phallocentric approach used by Freud where the feminine has been consistently defined in the negative, "remaining ever a partial man and complementing the male" (Cixous, 1981).

Since male desire in psychoanalytic language is predicated on a separation between "self" and "other," the term "jouissance" is preferred by Cixous. This latter term based on the notion of sexual pleasure experienced by women, does not necessitate the distinction between "self" and "other." The "other" according to Cixous, is located within the "self" and does not require differentiation.

Thus writing the feminine body is a political act of re-constituting the body as a metaphor ("writing the repressed"), inasmuch as it is a deconstruction of previous discourse that appropriates women's bodies. It is also a performative utterance that emphasizes connectedness and touching that is central to "jouissance." For woman, otherness is always within her(self). In the sense in which it is used by Cixous, there is no "real" or "biological" body – discourse always structures and mediates the body (Dallery, 1989).

In the following section, we will provide one version of a postmodernist feminist account of body rituals, in order to show that multiple readings of a text are possible. Inasmuch as it is our reading, it is subject to further deconstruction as well.

8.2. Making / writing the body

Featherstone (1991) discusses how consumer culture combines the self-preservationist conception of the body with the idea of body as a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression - the inner body and the outer body respectively. The cultural imagery of advertising accommodates the two oppositional ideas of discipline and hedonism as a condition of possibility in consumer culture. The inner body refers to the concern with health and functioning of the body. The outer body refers to appearance, aesthetics of the body, and bodily movement in social space. The hallmark of consumer culture is the connection between the inner body and the outer body and the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body is for the enhancement of the outer body.

The morality of a body culture thus begins with the notion of discipline of the inner body which is then transferred to the appearance of the outer body. Preservation of the inner body is the moral equivalent of the work ethic, that is, he or she (mainly she) who does not have the discipline to take care of the inner body has no moral right to expect to maintain an attractive outer body. This moral principle is turned around in such a way that the person with an aesthetic outer body (with a good shape and appearance) is the moral equivalent of a good person. In consumer culture today, the discourse on inner body becomes secondary and the outer body is on the ascendance. The person who feels good (inner condition) is the one who looks good (outer body condition) and therefore is "good," in a moral sense.

This dynamic between the inner and outer body is particularly apparent when one examines grooming rituals which are an important component of body rituals. From a feminist perspective, grooming rituals are important, since the focus is on the body on which gender configurations are inscribed. Grooming rituals always presuppose some form of modification of the body through cleaning, cutting, shaping, or anointing. Rook (1985, p. 258) describes it as "a form of body language, communicating specific messages
about an individual’s status, maturity, aspirations, conformity, even morality.”

According to Ayto (1990, p. 265), no one has provided a satisfactory explanation for the origin of the word “groom.” It appears in early Middle English, meaning boy or male servant. By the 17th century, it took on the meaning of one who takes care of horses. The word “groom,” according to the New Webster Dictionary, has its origins in the word “man,” whether one traces its origins from Anglo Saxon or Teutonic terms, hence the term “bridegroom.” These masculine overtones still persist in the usage of the term in many other contexts, such as “to groom an individual to take political office.”

In its verb form, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word “groom” refers to the act of caring or making attractive. It is not surprising, then, that the term is used in the contemporary consumer context to mean to spruce oneself up or to make a product attractive.

According to Rook (1985, p. 262) ritual expression is body language and involves both physical and mental behaviors. It illuminates the psychological depth, conflict, and fantasy components of everyday consumer behavior. Using Erikson’s work, Rook adds that consumer behaviors flow from deep-seated motives, and grooming ritual behavior is drawn from superstition and belief in magic and at times, from feelings of shame, guilt, inferiority, confusion, and isolation. However it is clear that the emphasis is on the outer body and that the term “groom” has strong masculine overtones.

On the other hand a word commonly used in advertising women’s body products is the word “cleanse.” According to Ayto (1990, p. 117), the word “clean” can be traced to the German term “kläinen” which means “clear and pure.” The connotation here is that the woman’s body is impure and therefore has to be cleansed. Cleansing has powerful religious overtones as well. Other terms that are used are “nourish,” “protect,” and “refine,” which mean to nurse, to cover, and to make something of high quality, respectively. A phrase that we also find useful to refer to women’s body shaping activities is “adorn.” Adornment is defined as the process of making oneself attractive and is a derivative of the verb “ornare” which means to equip, get ready, or decorate. More importantly, this also forms the basis of the term “suborn” which, etymologically speaking, means “to equip secretly” (Ayto, 1990, p. 376).

We find the ambiguity associated with the meaning of the term “adorn” important when one considers the body as a culturally mediated text. As Foucault (1979) and Bourdieu (1977) suggest, the body is a practical and direct locus of control. From a feminist perspective, one can view the body as a text one writes or a text in which the gender configurations of a patriarchal culture are reproduced. Beauty not only divides women from men but also women from other women. While a man’s looks embellish his worldly successes, a woman’s defines her. Cosmetics do not merely state, “I am an attractive woman”. Instead, they make women want to be attractive to men. Enslavement and empowerment are thus both simultaneously located in the body. According to Bordo (1989, p. 13), through seemingly mundane habits and practices, culture is made body – thus at one and the same time undermining deliberate and conscious acts of change. Practice and belief in the reproduction of femininity are both important considerations.

However, the focus on the body, Bordo (1989) argues, is not another version of essentialism; that is, the body is not just a fleshy entity. It is also a culturally mediated form. Foucault’s (1979) distinction between the “intelligible” body and the “useful” body provide a good way of talking about different levels of cultural mediation. The intelligible body refers to the aesthetic and philosophic representations, whereas the useful body is
made through a set of practical rules and regulations. While the two bodies may mirror each other, they also mock each other. A feminist reading of body rituals, then, is not such a benign activity after all. The gaps and silences in Rook’s text on grooming rituals allow us to explore what is hidden in the text.

Further, Bordo’s (1990, 1993) critique of body culture can be divided into three different themes – the notion of the slender body as a cultural icon, the plasticity of the female body as postmodern paradigm, and the dieting body and its ideological imagery created by and through advertising.

In the first theme, Bordo has very forcefully argued how consumer culture has elevated the slender body as the perfect standard by which all women must be judged. Her work is a comprehensive treatise on the politics and ideology of the female body as a historical, gendered construction. Her essay on the slender body focuses on the normalizing role of diet and exercise via the analysis of popular representations through which cultural meaning is developed, written, and diffused throughout the culture. For Bordo, the woman with a slender body has become the cultural icon of contemporary aesthetics. The slender body is the route to female attractiveness, but, from a psychological point of view, it is also the product of self-discipline; from a physical point of view, it is the product of muscle management, and from the nutrition point of view, the product of managed hunger and dieting. Weight is no longer the central focus of this ideal, but the contained body is – tight, smooth, with internal processes totally under control. The moral and economic meaning of the slender body in terms of self-containment and control of impulse and desire (for food) is the result of historical changes in the meaning of soft body weight and size. Until the late 19th century, the slender body meant aristocratic status, but by the middle of the 20th century, in a culture of abundance, excess body weight began to be associated with moral inadequacy or lack of will. Today, the muscled body has become a symbol of the correct attitude.

Preoccupation with the internal management of body (management of desire) is further produced by instabilities in the internal social system. As producers, we must, for instance, repress desire and cultivate the work ethic. As consumers, on the other hand we are seduced to indulge in impulse. Food and diet are central arenas for the expression of these contradictions. In addition, advertisers attempt to suggest that these contradictions do not exist – diet and exercise programs are presented with the imagery of instant gratification – e.g., “From fat to Fabulous in 21 days.” In reality, however, these two contradictory positions are not reconciled – so we vacillate between controlling and letting go. The exploration of contemporary slenderness as a metaphor for the correct management of desire must be read with the knowledge that the capacity for self-management is coded as male. In contrast, bodily spontaneities, hunger, sexuality, emotions, have been culturally constructed as female. Thus women’s desires are, by nature, excessive, irrational and threatening to erupt, and a challenge to the patriarchal order. Men are less threatened by the fleshy bodies of women, for they signify maternal power in a domesticated setting. But, women embrace the thin ideal as a symbol of liberation from reproductive destiny. At the same time, female bodies lost in the male world must be normalized according to professional (male) standards, and bodies must be stripped of all references to maternal power.

In the second theme, Bordo comments on the notion of “plasticity” as a postmodern paradigm, that is, as a cultural plastic that stems from the idea of rearranging, transforming, correcting – an ideology of limitless improvement and change, defying history, mortality and materiality of the body. Bordo
describes elements of plasticity and exposes some of the material and social realities that plasticity denies or makes invisible. According to this view, the body is an object to be rearranged and self-transformed by diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery. Popular culture extols the positive images associated with self-transformation, but effaces the inequalities of privilege, money, and time that prohibit many people from engaging in these practices. It also ignores the desperation that frequently characterizes the lives of those who may compulsively indulge in such activities.

An analysis of male dominance and female subordination, so much of it reproduced voluntarily through our self-normalization to everyday habits of masculinity and femininity, must draw from Michel Foucault’s conception of power. Power is a function of dynamic and noncentralized forces, its dominant historical forms attaining hegemony through multiple “processes, or different origin and scattered location,” regulation, and normalizing intimate and minute elements of the construction of time, space, desire, embodiment. Power is not held; people and groups are positioned differentially within it. Thus, women can participate in femae sub-ordination without involving power in the production and reproduction of sexist culture. Foucault also believes in the instability of modern power relations. The metaphor of the body as battleground, rather than as playground, illustrates the practical difficulties involved in the political struggle to empower difference.

For many postmodern theorists, resistance (as challenging the dominant notions of the female body) is imagined as the refusal to embody any positioned subjectivity. The truly resistant female body is not the body that wages war on feminine sexualization and objectification but is the body that challenges the stable notion of gender as the foundation of sexual difference. The entertainer, Madonna was, until the 1990s, seen as a postmodern heroine who refused to allow herself to be constructed as a passive object of patriarchal desire. In contrast to anorectics, whom she saw as self-denying and self-hating and as being in the hands of externally imposed standards of worthiness, Madonna saw herself as the defender of self-definition through the assertion of her own traditionally “female” body type. Madonna is a postmodern heroine, insofar as she is in “control” of her image, and she defies convention by using her ability to construct and reconstruct her identity. Yet, Madonna’s self-creation conceals her continual struggle to maintain her identity. Thus abstract, unsituated freedom glorifies itself only through the effacement of the material aspect of people’s lives, the normalizing power of cultural images, and the continuing social realities of dominance and subordination.

In the third and final theme, Bordo argues that advertising must be considered more than purely profit-maximizing and ideologically neutral. It must be considered a general ideology that services the cultural reproduction of gender difference and gender inequality. Increasingly, advertisements for diet products construct representations of women’s subjective relations with food. A slender body may be attainable through hard work, but a ‘cool’ relation to food is a tantalizing reminder of what lies beyond the reach of the inadequate and hungry self. These images are representations and reproducers of culture. A careful reading of contemporary advertisements reveals continual manipulation of problems that psychology and popular media have identified as characteristic dilemmas of contemporary women, who have conflicting role demands and pressures on their time. The use of a male figure in advertising is one method for representing compulsive eating as natural. Men are supposed to have hearty, voracious appetites. When a male figure is used in the ad, the grim actualities
of women’s eating problems remain obscured. When women are positively depicted as voracious about food, their hunger is a metaphor for their sexual appetite. Food is constructed as a sexual object of desire, and eating as more than a nutritive activity – as a worthwhile, sensuous and erotic experience in itself – is given a new legitimacy.

The metaphors presuppose an idealized (rarely actualized) gendered division of labor in which men strive, compete, and exert themselves in the public sphere while women are sheltered in the domestic arena (which transcends the laboring body). To make this division of labor seem natural, there is yet another ideology which underlies the cultural containment of female appetite—the idea that women are most gratified by feeding and nourishing others, not themselves. Thus, there is a long history of women preparing food and men consuming food in advertising. Advertisements showing men preparing or serving food highlight the exceptional nature of the occasion. Food is equated with maternal and wifely love throughout our culture.

Contemporary advertising offers a model for disorders related to food and hunger. By representing unrestrained appetite as inappropriate for women and depicting female eating as a covert and transgressive act, the denial of hunger is embedded as a central feature in the construction of femininity. The compensatory binge thus becomes the virtual inevitability. The social control of female hunger also operates as a discipline that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Thus denial of food becomes the important ‘micro-practice’ in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse.

Writing the feminine body is, to be sure, a difficult undertaking, but it remains a mechanism by which women can continue to subvert the signifying practices of a male-dominated culture. In particular, this includes television, advertising, films, and pornography – all the institutions that privilege and propagate male desire. Women’s otherness, as posited in “écriture feminine,” is an attempt to dislodge such culture-specific mediation of the female body (Dallery, 1989, p. 6).

Gender, race, class, and age all have an impact on how cultures are constructed; people acting as women and men, older or younger, make concrete readings and take concrete actions. The fragmentation of culture is obvious when a feminist deconstruction of otherness in one’s own culture is made. This is magnified when other cultures are examined. Postmodernism offers a critique of our philosophy of construing the other (De Beauvoir, 1972). What happens to women in any culture cannot be understood except in terms of what happens to both men and women and the overall social system (Strathern, 1987). In particular, nonwestern women have a double struggle in trying to find their own voice (writing their body): they have to articulate their differences, not only from their own cultural contexts but also from Western feminism. Even postmodern feminists who valorize marginalized groups tend to conceal such differences in their discourse. Thus writing the feminine body, as we have done here, can be displaced by further writing by women from other cultures. The universality of any privileged position is thus suspect.

Deconstruction and writing the feminine body thus are not removed from politics. They are radical ploys to dissolve the very grounds on which women have been oppressed. Deconstruction attacks the notion of a universal truth; according to this philosophy, there are multiple truths. Indeed, feminists needed to deconstruct the claims of power in patriarchy in order to dislodge or supplant such claims themselves. Deconstruction as a technique allows us to realize the dangers inherent in the project of feminist liberation. In that sense, as Connolly
(1987, pp. 159–160) notes, deconstructive techniques check our expectation of theory to be clean and whole.

What women need is a skeptical attitude toward the seeming routes of liberation. Feminism needs postmodernism to avoid meta-narratives based on essentialism, and postmodernism needs the constant reminder that in its attempt to expose the system of power that authorizes certain representations, it is oblivious to the insistent feminist voice. In writing women’s bodies, Bordo (1989, p. 28) reminds us that

(Resistance to gender domination) demands an awareness of the often contradictory relations between image and practice, between rhetoric and reality. Popular representations may speak forcefully through the rhetoric and symbolism of empowerment, personal freedom, having it all. Yet female bodies, pursuing these ideals, may find themselves as distracted, depressed, and physically ill as female bodies in the nineteenth century, pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity, and delicacy. The recognition and analysis of such contradictions, and of all other collusions, subversions, and enticements through which culture enjoins the aid of our bodies in the reproduction of gender, requires that we restore a focus on female praxis to its formerly central place in feminist politics.

In conclusion, the recognition of the “feminine subject” or, in more general terms, the “gendered subject,” is central to the redefinition of consumer behavior. It is long overdue and holds much promise for the future of the discipline. While the interpretivist turn with its emphasis on holism and humanism marked a new phase in the history of consumer research, a postmodernist perspective offers a way of accomplishing this.

9. Postscript

For reasons of space, it has not been possible for us to cover a wider range of topics which merit attention and further exploration. This paper may be considered one of the first attempts in marketing and consumer research to raise the consciousness of our readers to the social and cultural constructions of the human body, especially the female body, and to identify important issues that should yield several research topics for future studies. The body is not merely a physical entity in which our subjectivities and identities are trapped only to be recovered and restored to a more sublime level. It is the body itself that needs to be restored to a higher level of discourse and viewed as part of the human self with corporeal as well as social and cultural presence. The human body provides a metaphorical framework for the social body and the symbolism of the body is the basic constituent element in many cultures.

In more practical terms, we see several interesting trends which call for our attention. With the emergence of new technologies of body maintenance and cosmetic procedures, we need to examine how consumers are buying into these new forms of body capitalism. The globalization of consumer culture makes it imperative for us to examine how notions of body aesthetics are transported cross-culturally. The new movement toward natural appearance has become the object of multinational marketing strategy. The ideas of youth and age, which were once considered euphemistically “states of mind” are now recognized rather ironically as “states of the body.” In advanced economies, the market culture exposes consumers to bodily images at a very early age and determines their tastes, preferences and behavior through medial control.

For consumer researchers, all these have profound implications. We believe a new area of research is destined to emerge within the consumer behavior field where attention is likely to shift to bodily matters. Here is a short list of suggested topics for future research and many more can be added by others.
- Consumer Normalization and Social Disciplining.
- Images of the body (Slender body, Spare minimalism, Opulent body, etc., – Cross-cultural themes)
- Body Culture and Morality.
- Technologies of the body, dieting and exercise.
- Body and the Media Culture.
- Consumer culture and Scientific/Philosophic and Aesthetic Representation of the Body.
- Population Segments (Working Class, Middle Class, Aristocracy, Yuppies, etc.) and Body Images.
- Market Culture and Exploitation of Body.
- The Interrelationship among Body, Clothing, Fashion, Diet and Exercise.
- Body and self (inner and outer).

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