**Gendering Consumer Ethics**

**Abstract** Consumer ethics research has greatly enhanced our knowledge of the social and environmental consequences and considerations of consumption choices. We argue, however, that gender theory introduces important aspects of ethical enquiry currently overlooked. To build our argument we undertake a critical literature review that assesses current gender theory and related applications in gender and consumption research. In doing so, we offer a conceptual pathway that elucidates the intersection of gender with consumer ethics in relation to three distinct levels of understanding; socio-economic, embodied-affective and representational. Although fundamentally intertwined, for our current purposes, these are analytically distinct. Implications and avenues for future research into gendering consumer ethics are discussed.

**Keywords** Consumer Ethics; Gender Theory; Gender Norms; Gender and Consumption Research

**Introduction**

Underpinned by “political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives” (Harrison et al. 2005), consumer ethics is commonly understood as “the evaluation and choice of producers and products with the aim of changing ethically, environmentally or politically objectionable institutional or market practices” (Michelleti, Stolle and Berlin, 2012, p. 145). Related research has grown considerably since the 1990s (Shaw, Chatzidakis and Carrington, 2016) and has provided significant advancements in relation to consumers’ attitudes and behaviour (e.g. Shaw and Shiu, 2002; Michaelidou and Hassan, 2008; Miniero et al. 2014), the perceived ethicality of certain behaviours across different cultural contexts (e.g. Belk, Devinney and Eckhardt, 2005; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004; Papaoikonomou, 2013) and the influence of factors such as religiosity and moral identity (e.g. Vitell et al. 2009, Vitell, Ramos-Hidalgo and Rodriquez-Rad, 2018). However, the intersection of consumer ethics with gender theory and gender politics has not attracted the theoretical and practical attention it deserves.

To date, most emphasis on gender has looked at its role in consumer decision-making and how, for example, women behave differently to men when it comes to making ethical decisions. Gender is thus viewed as a “background” demographic variable that influences consumers’ attitudes and behaviour. Accordingly, results have been inconclusive with studies reporting both statistically significant (e.g. Van Kenhove et al. 2001; Mostafa, 2006; Moerbeek and Casimir, 2005) and non-significant (e.g. Rawwas, 1996) findings. These are further confounded by the observation that (biological) sex in most of these studies has been used as a proxy for (socially constructed) gender, an assumption that is highly problematic (e.g. Hearn and Hein, 2015). Where attention has been given to the more socially constructed aspects of gender (i.e. Dalton and Ortegren, 2011; Bossuyt and Kenhove, 2016), the focus has still been on gender differences in ethical decision-making as opposed to gender as an ethical issue in itself. This is also the case for a more recent stream of studies (re)asserting that decision-making is gendered by looking into more feminine modes of reasoning and relating (e.g. Pereira Heath et al. 2016; Shaw, McMaster and Newhom, 2016). These studies have drawn on prominent care ethics scholars such as Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto, to acknowledge that women (more often than men) tend to understand ethical issues as matters of care rather than abstract principles of social justice.

Drawing on the above observations, our aim in this article is to introduce gender and consumption research to consumer ethics thereby “gendering” the field. In doing so, we follow Segal’s (2010) understanding of gender as a particularly “restless term” that is always “on the move”, yet having largely to do with the way(s) in which we are *positioned* as sexed beings (Segal, 2010). Accordingly, we complete a critical literature review and conceptualise three levels of current understanding, labelled socio-economic, embodied-affective and representational. We explain how these may help advance a more gender-sensitive stream of consumer ethics research. We conclude by exploring the interconnections of these three levels and outlining some possible directions for future research.

**Gender in Consumption**

If “gender reality is created through sustained social performances” (Butler, 1999, p.180), everyday consumption represents a primary arena for its reflection and reproduction. Accordingly, gender research in consumption has employed a variety of alternative prisms and disciplinary traditions (see Bettany et al., 2010; Arsel, Eraranta and Moisander, 2015, 2017; Hearn and Hein, 2015). For example, a considerable number of marketing and psychological studies have focused on how various brands and products may be perceived as gendered (see e.g. Oakenfull, 2012), as well as how social standards around sex roles and gender identities (i.e. gender norms) influence decision making (Meyers-Levy, 1988; Palan et al., 2001). Many studies have also exposed the ways in which advertising portrayals reinforce gender stereotypes, emphasising women’s passivity and sexual allure (Soley and Kurzbard, 1986). In turn, more anthropologically-oriented and sociological treatments of gender in consumption have deepened our knowledge of how gender assigned to various objects and activities reflects the divisions of labour, social roles and cultural values in any given society (Costa, 1991; Joy and Venkatesh, 1994). In other words, the gender identity of consumption activities and objects is associated with the gendering of practices taking place in other domains including relations of production, division of public and private spaces, practices of marriage and inheritance, religious rituals and so on (see e.g. Costa, 2000). Whilst some of these gendering practices are specific to cultural and socio-historical contexts, there are also some commonalities, for example, the association of most domestic consumption activities with women (Costa, 2000). Marketing discourse reflects these cultural associations and, indeed, Fischer and Bristor (1991) have exposed the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the construction of the consumer as female.

Thus, consumption reflects, and reproduces, gender realities and identities that fall both within (e.g. Brace-Govan, 2010; Littlefield, 2010) and outside conventional normative contexts (e.g. Borgerson et al., 2006; Kates and Belk, 2001). Culturally-oriented studies in consumer research reveal a diverse range of masculinities and femininities and how consumers use various interpretive strategies to negotiate conventional gender ideals (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Martin, Schouten and McAlexander, 2006; Thompson and Ustuner, 2015).

For example, Kjeldgaard and Nielsen (2010) focus on the case of Mexican telenovela consumption to theorise how specific characters provide teenage girls with alternative identity discourses that enable them to navigate the clash between traditional and modern values. Likewise, Borgerson et al. (2006) foreground the interpretive strategies of gay family members in response to marketing communications.

Authors such as Warner (1993) and Penaloza (1996) have shown how gay cultures have grown in tandem with capitalist consumer culture to appropriate their own range of consumption objects and activities including gay entertainment venues, gay tourist destinations, fashion labels and so on. Here, consumption is often viewed as a means through which gay consumers revalue their identities as well as establish meaningful relationships with important others (for a review, see Hsieh and Wu, 2011). In turn, the remarkable growth of this “dream” or “pink” market has often led to observations that the gay and lesbian movement has been “sold out” and dissociated from its original more politically-oriented strands (Chasin, 2001). As Duggan (2003) argues, “gayness” has been turned into commodities serving the interests of the neoliberal capitalist order. Similarly, advertisers encode narratives of female empowerment that equate feminist messages with spending power in the marketplace (Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens, 2005). Of course, as will be discussed below, the question remains whether consumption acts really imply transgression as opposed to co-optation within a capitalist system. Although there can be no doubt that markets have assisted in the wider societal acceptance of gayness, it is often framed within the dominant heteronormative order i.e. assuming that the norm for non-heterosexual couples is a stable, monogamous relationship (Nölke, 2017). Such assumptions often replicate middle-class values that exclude others who have not the economic means to perform their identity through what they purchase. It also stigmatises those perceived to be outside these norms, and who may thus be seen as deviant or lacking in some way (Rowe and Rowe, 2015). This stigmatisation is not restricted to sexuality alone: even “being single” may be regarded as an abject state because it deviates from the dominant heteronormative framework that emphasises partnerships and the family (Lai, Lim and Higgins, 2015).

A useful entree to understanding how different gender realities are reflected and reproduced within the sphere of consumption is through theories that have focused on the symbolic function of material possessions and the social interactions they facilitate. Within consumer research for instance, the notion of the “augmented product” (Levitt, 1980) implies that apart from the core product (primary benefit or reason for its purchase) and the actual product (the delivery of this benefit) there are additional “augmented” features that often relate to more intangible, symbolic aspects such as aesthetic satisfaction, perceived desirability, ethicality (Crane, 2001) and so on. In many consumption contexts, the perceived gender of an object or activity can be also perceived as an additional “augmented” benefit that reinforces the “gender identity congruity” (Oakenfull, 2012) of the consumer. For example, although products like a pink hairdryer or a car of a (perceived as) feminine aesthetic may not be purchased primarily because of their gender attributes, congruency with someone’s gender identity is expected to exert a positive influence on purchasing behaviour (e.g. Fry, 1971; Gentry and Doering, 1977). As such, gendered attributes of this nature serve to reinforce stereotypical gendered norms. Gender contamination can even occur when “men searching for masculine distinction work to avoid brands that have been infiltrated by women” (Avery 2012, p. 324). Avery’s study of the Porsche owners’ community showed how male owners’ masculinity was severely threatened after the launch of the Porsche Cayenne SUV, targeted at females.

In contrast, gay and lesbian consumers are often found to behave in gender-atypical consumption in so far as this is aligned with gay identities that flex, or attempt to flex beyond the heteronormative context of consumption and challenge gender norms (Oakenfull, 2012). This is in line with a long-standing tradition within consumer research that has identified the ways and stages through which possessions ultimately become part of people’s perception of their “extended self” (Belk, 1988) and thus indispensable parts of their identity projects (see e.g. Arnould and Thompson, 2005 for a review). Concurrently, related anthropological research has illustrated how the more consumer culture becomes prevalent in a given society, the more cultural values previously expressed through other spheres of social activity (e.g. religious rituals, ethnic traditions etc) are objectified and mediated through consumption (see e.g. Miller, 2012). Social interactions in the marketplace can be conceived of as performances that draw on particular cultural and gendered scripts (Arnould and Price, 1993). Accordingly, key social divisons may be reinforced by scripting and especially in relation to class and gender (Hanser, 2008). For example, research has shown that appropriately gendered staff reassure customers during the retail service encounter (Foster and Resnick, 2013). Altogether, such theories emphasise that the symbolic aspects of consumption, including both material objects and the service encounters engendered around them, can be perceived as a completely different realm from their primary functional role or value; or as an arena that allows, but also regulates, the expression of a variety of different cultural norms and values, including gender-related ones. It follows that it may also represent a potential context for their transgression.

**Different Levels of Understanding Gender and its Intersection(s) with Consumer Ethics**

In this article we aim to foreground gender-related injustices as part of a consumer ethics agenda. That is, following current debates in politics and increasingly the business ethics literature too (Loacker and Muhr, 2009; Painter-Morland, 2006; Islam, 2012), we view questions around gender norms, experiences and identities as essentially ethical issues that are distinct from consumers’ (better studied) preoccupations with social and environmental justice. Furthermore, a potential difference between “gender norms” and other types of pro-social and pro-environmental norms (at least as understood in mainstream consumer ethics research; e.g. Vitell, 2003, 2015), is that the former are more commonly viewed as negative, due to their capacity to reproduce patriarchy, heteronormativity and various related forms of gender-based oppression (e.g. Butler, 1999, 2004; Fraser, 2013). Therefore, unlike moral norms in favour of social and environmental justice, gender norms often need to be resisted or subverted by more ethically and politically oriented consumers. This can be achieved, for instance, by buycotting organisations that respect gender equality (e.g. the recent Edge certification; <http://www.edge-cert.org/>) and boycotting those that do not. Furthermore, gender norms are profoundly embodied and as such, they pose additional challenges to ethically minded consumers, including working knowledge of the discursive and cultural dimensions that make gendered bodies and identities intelligible in the first place. Finally, gender norms are reproduced, and sometimes disrupted, by actors other than the ethical consumer. These include business retailers and advertisers that have long engaged with the gendered dimensions of everyday consumption. In turn this points to the potential of strategic alliances and consumer mobilisation(s) beyond the spheres of buying and using ethical services and products, to include, among others, representations of gender in online and offline media.

In sum, the influence of “gender norms” in consumption goes beyond current understandings of social norms as understood within the consumer ethics field (e.g. Vitell, 2003). That is, norms are more than social expectations that consumers consciously consider before they reach their (un)ethical decisions (e.g. Hunt and Vitell, 1986, 2006). In attempting to provide a more elaborate account of the intersection of gender with consumer ethics we develop three distinct levels of conceptually understanding gender: the *socio-economic*, the *embodied-affective* and the *representational*. We corroborate these levels by drawing on the work of some prominent gender theorists and related contributions within marketing and consumer research. Subsequently, we highlight implications for consumer ethics research.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

***Socio-Economic Understandings of Gender***

There is a wealth of feminist literature that emphasises the intersection of gender norms with socio-economic injustices. McRobbie (1997, 2009), for instance, forcefully argues that the invitation to consume is not extended to all women (and neither is to all genders) independent of means and status. She observes that although “material feminists” have been accused of failing to investigate what happens to commodities once they leave the shops and enter the field of symbolic value, “cultural feminists” can be equally accused for failing to address questions of production and distribution. McRobbie (1997) makes a scathing critique of the British fashion industry for their questionable ethical working practices, exposing how their products and manufacturing processes are based on the labour of low-paid females who are often working in male-dominated management hierarchies. The choices for these women are severely limited by their economic circumstances.

Similar to McRobbie, Nancy Fraser (2013) – another prominent gender scholar – distinguishes between politics of (economic) distribution versus those of (cultural) recognition. Whilst viewing issues of recognition and distribution as empirically intertwined, Fraser argues that they can be analytically distinguished on the basis that they call for different forms of political-economic and cultural-symbolic restructuring respectively. As an archetypal example of distribution politics Fraser cites the social struggles of working classes whereas for recognition politics, she talks of forms of “despised sexuality” that call against unfair cultural devaluation. Fraser’s distinction has been since heavily contested both in broader philosophical and epistemological grounds (e.g. in the famous exchanges between Honneth and Fraser; in Fraser and Honneth, 2003) and with respect to gender politics, most famously in her exchanges with Judith Butler (1997). Nonetheless, Fraser has since responded to Butler’s criticisms – mainly through a historically situated account of how the politics of recognition have been decoupled from the politics of redistribution in late capitalist societies (see Fraser 1997) – and her “perspectival dualism” still informs current debates on the politics of gender as well as other modes of collectivity such as race and religion (e.g. Lovell, 2007). Fraser’s distinction has also been applied in marketing and consumer research albeit primarily at a public policy as opposed to individual consumption level (Hein et al. 2016; but see Steinfeld et al. 2019 for an exception).

In relation to gender in consumer research more broadly, Catterall, Maclaran and Stevens (2005) have argued that critical (economic) perspectives on gender, especially feminist voices, became muted from the late 1990s onwards and that this coincided with the “postmodern turn’ and the concomitant notion of self-expression and rebellion through consumption. Whereas feminist critiques had earlier exposed the ways in which both theory and knowledge in marketing and consumer research were gendered – deconstructing, for example the rhetoric of marketing relationships as using the language of seduction (Fischer and Bristor, 1994) – by the end of the decade feminist criticism had largely been subsumed in the wider debates around identity politics. This also reflected a so-called postfeminist period that was in sharp contrast to the feminist activism of the 60s and 70s, an activism that was generally anti-marketing, anti-consumption and anti-capitalist. Instead postfeminism reconciles feminism and consumption by regarding the marketplace as a site for empowerment and the realisation of particular feminine subjectivities (Scott, 2006).

Nike’s representation of sport as empowering to women in the late 1980s, an ongoing campaign said to have changed perceptions of women and sport (Goldman and Papson, 1998), very much typifies this period. However, wider structural issues around gender, race and class are silenced by what McDonald (2000, p. 4) refers to as these types of “postfeminist self-help strategies.”

Notwithstanding, there has been a resurgence of feminist (sometimes referred to as “the fourth wave”) and LGBT activism in response to a deepening disquietude with the structural inequalities that so evidently still prevail and that the politics of recognition have failed to successfully challenge. For instance, many gender activists view the increasing commodification of LGBT events as a sign of loss of authenticity and distantiation from their more foundational, political strands (Kates and Belk, 2001), and take part in movements such as the OccuPrider – which aims to make people aware of the exploitation of LGBT parades by corporate actors [[1]](#footnote-1). Despite the ability of some consumption acts to embody the symbolic refusal of dominant norms, “no amount of subcultural incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced” (Hebdige, cited in Strickland, 2002, p. 5). In other words, addressing the gender politics of economic distribution requires a certain extent of commodity de-fetishisation that will uncover production relations which would otherwise remain silent in the sphere of symbolic consumption. Here, appropriate forms of consumer ethics would inevitably entail boycotting the products of corporations that are known for gender discrimination and buycotting those that do not. In addition, from an ethical decision-making perspective, it would entail incorporating “gender norms” and gender-related injustices as a key consumer concern; for instance, as a sub-set of social norms and attitudes in Ajzen’s (1985, 1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour or as an additional set of teleological and deontological considerations in Hunt and Vitell’s (1986, 2006) general theory of Marketing Ethics.

***Embodied-Affective Understandings of Gender***

Whereas socio-economic perspectives tend to emphasise the intersection of gender norms with economic and social injustices, much feminist theory and research tends to more directly emphasise how gender is fundamentally affective and embodied, often in ways that escape conscious and reflective awareness. Most notably, Butler’s (1999) work on *heteronormativity*, the seemingly natural correspondence between binary categories of sex, gender and desire, and the related notion of gender *performativity*, the idea that gender is always a doing and constitutive of the very identity it is purported to perform, have sparked a series of studies into how gender norms are reflected and reproduced through consumption. Within the context of LGBT festivals, for instance, Kates and Belk (2001) draw on data from a four-year ethnographic study to illustrate that acts of excessive, dramatised and overly sexualised consumption during the festival serve to symbolically invert the marginalisation of everyday gender-atypical consumption. In addition, the extent of shopping and commercialisation witnessed during the festival, on the whole serves to express the purchasing and political power of the LGBT population.

The “semiotic excess and fuzziness of meaning” (Kates and Belk, 2001, p.408) in LGBT festivals allows for a symbolic challenge and inversion of the heteronormative norms that guide everyday consumption. Indeed, in so far as consumption is viewed as a system of discourse or communication with its own regulatory norms and conventions, this would be in line with Butler (1999) who argues that subversion can only occur *inside* the cultural and linguistic system in which heteronormativity operates. Subversion, “... does not imply that repetition itself ought to be stopped – as if it could be. If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: What kind of repetition might call into question the regulatory practiceof identity itself?” (Butler, 1999, p.42). It follows that subversion in consumption should also entail repetition of the regulatory practices that maintain the heterosexual matrix, but in a way that alters them. Butler refers to these as resignifying practices. Resignifications may challenge traditional notions of masculinity or femininity and their associated binary distinctions, often using parody or ironic juxtaposition to expose the culturally determined boundaries of gender categories (Thompson and Ustuner, 2015).

However, as Chambers (2007) clarifies, to deviate from a norm does not equate subversion, as most norms depend on a certain percentage of deviant cases for their survival (e.g. Foucault, 1977). In other words, gender-atypical consumption may be used as a means of self-affirmation or identity revaluation without destabilising heteronormativity. This is because many “marketplace performances” (Arnould, 2005) incorporate elements of resistance to mainstream values (i.e. the “rebel sell” – see Heath and Potter, 2004) but these may operate at a more micro, individual level and are based on temporary states that engender a sense of liminality or escape from everyday life. For example, Kozinets (2002) shows how the Burning Man Festival facilitates a new order where many social divisions including gender categories are blurred, albeit only for the duration of the festival. Similarly, Ritson, Elliott and Eccles (1996) document how a lesbian subculture appropriates the symbol of IKEA to form their Dikea group identity, an identity that they use to subvert “straight’ culture during Gay Pride Festivals. Although acts of resistance such as these are provocative, they are also localised and temporal, doing little to challenge entrenched social hierarchies and power relations in the longer term.

A potentially deeper-rooted strategy for ethically minded consumers could be to destabilise the binary categories of sex, gender and at the symbolic level of material possessions, paralleling what could be described as a progressive approach to the politics of commodity fetishism (see e.g. Sukhaitis, 2013). Indeed, authors such as Duncombe (2007) argue that rather than trying to escape from the symbolic values and fantasies that are objectified in products sold in capitalist markets, a more useful approach would be to work through them as a basis of politics. In this sense, the “augmented” properties of products and their capacity to form part of consumers’ “extended selves” (Belk, 1989), could be reclaimed as an arena where the normative imperatives of patriarchal ideology are resisted rather than reproduced. For instance, Sukhaitis (2013) discusses work by various authors showing that this was exactly the aim behind some “communist objects” that tried to destabilise the (capitalist) binary of production and consumption and to communicate a status of equality. TeZhe, the Soviet state trust for cosmetics in the 1930s is a good example of this ideology, having the declared aim of bringing “beauty to everyday citizenry” (Zhemchuzhina, 1934, p. 8 cited in Kravets, 2013). In sharp contrast to capitalist cosmetics, an industry based on Charles Revlon’s infamous claim to sell hope to women, Tezhe emphasised the functionality and scientific basis to their products rather than the transformational beauty ideals of the West.

More recently, Thompson and Ustuner (2015) explore how women’s flat track roller derby in the US subverts traditional ideas of femininity by juxtaposing physical aggression alongside more flirtatious behaviours and displays of playful eroticism. Drawing on Butler’s theories of performativity, they illustrate how the women’s resignifying practices permeate wider social structures, performing “ideological edgework” at a more structural, macro level and expanding “the discursive and material limits of gender performativity” (p. 257). Hence, there is some documented support for the claim that the symbolic realm of consumption can be used as a site where cultural and social values in relation to gender (but also class, race, etc) are reproduced (e.g. Baudrilliard, 1981) but also destabilised and contested.

Concurrently, applications of heteronormativity and gender performativity in consumption highlight a key difference between traditionally studied norms in ethical consumption (e.g. social and pro-environmental norms) and gender norms. Whereas the former can be viewed as existing normative pressures that lead to marketplace performances (through e.g. the consumption of Fair Trade and organic products), the latter explicitly challenge the idea of an agentic subject. As Butler (1999) puts it, whereas performance assumes a subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject. Gender norms are discursively and materially inscribed in bodies through habituated performances and emotional predispositions that in turn, become all the more naturalised and ideologically powerful through mundane repetition. Notwithstanding, Thompson and Ustuner (2015, p.257) highlight that under appropriate conditions, market-mediated gender resignifications “can expand the discursive and material limits of gender performativity” in ways that reach out to other institutional fields, arguably causing “quiet” and implicit shifts as opposed to seismic revolutions. From a consumer ethics perspective, this carries implications for both the impasses of marketplace co-optation (see e.g. the mainstreaming of Fair Trade movement, see Dolan, 2007) and how additional norms such as social and pro-environmental ones can be examined beyond the level of marketplace performance.

A strand of feminist research that is increasingly and rather more readily applied to consumer ethics focuses on the affective aspects of gendered thinking and decision-making. At stake is the seemingly autonomous and impartial nature of moral individuals, assumptions that are ideologically compatible with masculine as opposed to feminine traits. In contrast “care ethics” scholars such as Nel Noddings (2003), Carol Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993) emphasise that (what is understood as) feminine thinking is more relational and socially embedded, being astute to the various caring dilemmas and multiple demands of care in consumers’ everyday choices. Caring is fundamentally gendered (e.g. Noddings, 2003) because in most societies, it has firmly resided within the sphere of the household as opposed to the polis and has been kept separate from the spheres of production and value creation. Gilligan’s (1982) extends that critique by pointing to how Kohlberg’s well-known account of children’s moral development was based on rating more highly masculine values such as abstract and rational reasoning as opposed to feminine ones that focus on interpersonal relations and caring responsibilities.

Correspondingly, consumer ethics scholars such as Chatzidakis, Shaw and Allen (2019) and Heath et al (2016) have recently begun to re-conceptualise consumers’ ethical choices as questions of care and caring dilemmas as opposed to the socially disembedded and abstract cognitive-rational processes outlined in the more established decision-making models such as Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behaviour and Hunt and Vittel’s general theory of marketing ethics. Their inherent “masculinity” bias can only be remedied by developing accounts of everyday consumption that more explicitly acknowledge its affective and embodied dimensions as well as its fundamentally social and even collectivist nature (Maclaran and Chatzidakis, 2019). Anthropological research, for instance, has long highlighted that ordinary shopping is, more often than not, done with others in mind and is commonly embedded in rituals of love, empathy and care for others (Miller, 1998). Accordingly, consumer ethics activism increasingly foregrounds the language of care and inter-dependency as opposed to the utility-maximising and atomised homo economicus (e.g. Littler, 2009). Also at stake is the extension of consumption-mediated forms of care across difference and distance, in ways that subvert what Massey (2004) describes as the “hegemonic geography of care”, the idea that care is (and should always be) extending outwards from the home to the local to the national and so on. Ultimately, care and interdependency for both human and nonhuman forms of life should be radically reappraised (Segal et al. 2019) and made an integral part of everyday consumption and beyond (Maclaran and Chatzidakis, 2019).

***Representation and Gender***

Finally, gender is reproduced continually through mass media consumption and the meaning-transfer processes that underpin this (McCracken, 1986). Media representations of different genders – across advertising, branding, journalism, TV and popular music - exert a huge influence on our cultural norms and values. Not only do they contribute to the reinforcement of existing stereotypes, but they may also create new ones. In addition, by focusing on one group as opposed to another, the media also silence other voices, contributing to the marginalisation and potential stigmatisation of other categories that do not conform to prevailing norms. Feminist writer, Betty Friedan was an early critique of media representations of women. Her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), exposed the hypocrisy behind images of the happy housewife, tending to the needs of her husband and family while contentedly managing her domain, the domestic sphere. Friedan showed how this gendered separation of spheres (public/private) served a patriarchal ideology that devalued domesticity and ensured women felt they led empty lives. Building on these sexual politics, but coming from a more visual perspective, feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey, developed the notion of the “male gaze” to convey a way of looking that sexualises and objectifies women, whilst simultaneously empowering the male viewer (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey identifies how a masculine voyeurism dominates cinematic representations, resulting in women being the spectacle and men the spectators (Stevens and Maclaran, 2000). Similarly, but from a psychoanalytic perspective, the work of Luce Irigaray (1985) unpacks the masculine nature of interests and values encoded into the allegedly non-sexualised subject of Western discourse. Women, she argues, are associated with being the other (de Beauvoir, 1972) or with nature, rather than being seen as a subject in their own right.

Such feminist critiques influenced advertising research from the 1970s onwards, particularly in relation to whether female portrayals in advertisements resonated sufficiently with women, given their changing societal roles (Sexton and Haberman, 1974; Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Wagner and Banos, 1973). With the focus on obtaining a purchase decision, this type of studies explored how stereotyping affected women’s self-image and their resultant intentions to buy or not with a view to making recommendations for marketing strategy. For example, whereas more progressive professionally-orientated role portrayals were deemed suitable for beauty products and other product categories associated with a sense of self, the adaptation of traditional role portrayals could be more appropriate for products such as household goods (Courtney and Whipple, 1983). Most of this work on gender stereotyping in consumer research remained at a fairly atheoretical and uncritical level until the 1990s when, using postmodern perspectives and deconstruction theory, interpretivist consumer researchers challenged the implicit power relations embedded in stereotypical gender representations (Stern and Holbrook, 1994). Feminist consumer researchers exposed the machine metaphor that underpinned conceptualisations of the consumer buying process, a metaphor that foregrounded an economic, rational actor (homo economicus) and that privileged cognitive information processing (the mind perceived as masculine) rather than affective responses (the body perceived as feminine).

The sustained feminist critique of advertising meant that from the 1980s onwards many advertisers created more empowering images and messages to communicate with women (see our discussions in the previous section) and also began to develop more nuanced portrayals of masculinity as they sought to develop new markets targeting male consumers (Mort, 1996). Consequently consumer researchers broadened their focus to include the study of masculinities and their many manifestations in the media such as the man-of-action-hero (Holt and Thompson, 2004) as well as more domestic masculinities (Moisio, Arnould and Gentry, 2013; Marshall et al., 2014) and, of course, the metrosexual (Rinallo, 2007). These studies also reveal men’s feelings of vulnerability when faced with gender ideals (i.e. hegemonic masculinity) and how stereotypical representations of masculinity can be just as damaging to men as those of femininity to women (Zayer and Otnes, 2012; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004).

Likewise, media representations of gay men and women can be just as stereotypical and damaging (Tsai, 2010; Borgerson et al., 2006), made from a heteronormative perspective (as discussed at the outset of this paper) that silences non-conforming sexualities, and in particular the blurring of genders as in the case of bi-sexual, transgender or transsexual individuals. Following heightened social awareness of transgender issues, for example, this group is currently exposed to increased vulnerability and potential stigmatisation with little adequate representation in the media (Rowe and Rowe, 2015). One exception is the portrayal of the transgendered Ms Hudson in the US Television series, *Elementary*, a contemporary version of the Sherlock Holmes story. The series resists making Ms Hudson’s trangender status part of narrative, rather she is simply accepted as transgendered (her character is played by the transgendered actress, Candis Cayne) and her sexuality is never again referred to. In so doing, the programme resists assessing Ms Hudson’s sexuality against heteronormative standards: her transgender does not need to be questioned or explained and that’s the point (Maclaran and Otnes, 2017).

Thus, as our discussions indicate, much prior research in gender and consumer research testifies to the significant roles that marketplace actors in their various guises (advertisers, social media, retailers, mass media forms such as television and cinema) play in the reproduction of gender norms, as well as contributing to the marginalisation of groups who do not conform to the perceived norms. This highlights the need for more collective forms of action that move beyond individual buying actions, forms that may include ethical consumer organisations lobbying government or liaising with regulatory bodies to achieve change. Currently in 2018, the UK Advertising Standards Authority is implementing new advertising codes to prevent the use of gender stereotyping. After analysing existing academic research on the topic and consulting with a variety of expert stakeholders (regulatory bodies, public policy makers, advertisers, special interest groups and members of the general public), the ASA concluded that gender stereotypes can “lead to mental, physical and social harm which can limit the potential of groups and individuals” (ASA, 2017, p. 9).

Other types of action against exclusion include mobilisation of consumers to bring pressure to bear on marketplace actors. For example, the “fatshionistas” are one such community who successfully use blogging to counter the normative expectations encoded in mainstream fashion’s body ideals (Harju and Huovinen, 2015). Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) theorise how plus-sized, marginalised female consumers (“fatshionistas”) came together to successfully demand and achieve inclusion in fashion markets. They illustrate fatshionista strategies include seeking alliances with more powerful institutional actors such as MTV and fashion journals to support their cause. Consumer activism can thus play a major role in countering negative representations and stigmatisations and over time can bring about deeper cultural change (Handelman and Fischer, 2018).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article we address calls for increased understanding of the role of gender in consumer ethics and social responsibility (Vitell, 2015). In doing so we draw on prominent gender theory, and related applications in marketing and consumer research, to argue that the literature so far has suffered from largely simplistic accounts of gender that ignore the complex and multi-faceted ways in which gender norms affect everyday consumption. Accordingly, we introduce three distinct perspectives to understanding the effect(s) of gender norms and outline ways in which they can inform consumer ethics theory and activism.

Socio-economic, embodied-affective and representational understandings of gender can be viewed as distinct for the current analytic purposes – not least, as a means to introducing the remarkably diverse range of traditions that are subsumed under the rubric of “gender studies” – yet they often overlap and intersect in both theoretical and practical grounds. For instance, as noted above, Fraser’s (1997) well-known distinction between the politics of (economic) distribution versus (cultural) recognition (and which, to some extent, echoes our distinction between socio-economic and embodied-affective) has been in part, an attempt to reconcile the traditional preoccupations of 2nd wave and socialist strands of feminism with economic inequality (and disadvantage), with what was then identified as a new wave of gender and identity politics, focused more on questions of cultural, symbolic and sexual regulation. The distinction was most famously challenged by Judith Butler (1997), in *Merely Cultural,* not least because of the inherent inseparability of economic and non-economic realms: “…The economic, tied to the reproductive, is necessarily linked to the reproduction of heterosexuality” (pp. 41-42). In response, Fraser has since provided an elaborate socio-historic account of how economic and cultural spheres have been decoupled in late capitalism, therefore arguing for a “perspectival” rather than “substantive” dualism (see Fraser, 2009, 2013).

More importantly, for the purposes of this article, analytic distinctions between socio-economic, embodied-affective and representational understandings of gender politics allow us to scrutinise the range of remedial and/or subversive consumer logics and practices, from boycotting and buycotting to marketplace performances to collective mobilisations and alliances. The extent to which such modes of consumer activism can or should represent emancipatory politics has been debated in prior literature (e.g. Cremin, 2012; Littler, 2009) albeit less in relation to gender. Hemmings (2012), for instance, claims that “...in late modernity a contemporary Western political economy produces differentiated subjects of capitalism whose function is not to reproduce and care for a labouring, exploitable population at no cost to the state, or at least not always or only, but to participate actively in markets” (p. 127). Her scepticism of market-mediated (gendered) consumer activism, echoes the rebirth of imperatives such as “community not commodity” in various gay prides and a broader call for the return to more socialist and radical strands of feminism (see e.g. Fraser, 2013; Segal, 2017; Rowbotham, 2016). Accordingly, although there is need to engage with the symbolic and experiential realms of consumption and with spaces that destabilise gender-related norms, it is also important to go beyond market-mediated action to address more macro-oriented and structural bases of gender-related injustices. In contrast, as we highlight above, authors such as Thompson and Ustuner (2015) argue that women’s resignifying (market-mediated) practices can, under specific conditions, permeate wider social structures.

Beyond these two positions, there is pertinent need to engage with more collective forms of consumer activism and re-conceptualisations of the consumer as a key stakeholder and/or institutional actor in various forms of gender politics. Increasingly, feminist and LGBT activists put pressure on both corporations and government to recognise the underlying patriarchal value systems that still dominate most areas of our lives. Websites like UK Feminista and Change.org facilitate these movements. For example the *No more page 3* campaign successfully forced British tabloid newspaper, the Sun to abandon its infamous topless female photo page and, currently, Change.org is being used to lobby politicians to end tax on tampons. Just how effective such campaigning is towards changing deeper structural issues remains to be seen; however, their actions appear to be moving the focus away from a more individualised and localised identity politics towards a more collective and global approach that (re)-ignites broader questions around patriarchy and economic justice.

Thinking about consumer ethics through the lens of gender theory and politics raises a series of additional questions and contradictions. Current literature, for instance, has already illustrated the inherent difficulties in striving to be ethical in one’s purchase decisions. For instance, Bray, Johns and Kilburn (2010) note the often-cited contradiction between attempting to reduce food miles, or to support local producers versus helping developing countries via the purchase of Fairly Traded products. Similarly, Carey, Shaw and Shiu (2008) note the trade-offs involved in caring for one’s family versus more distant others. Inevitably, gender-related ethics and politics add further nuance to such decisions. Should one choose an Edge-certified product over a Fair Trade one when both certifications are not available? Likewise, the consumption of pre-made food versus home cooking may be viewed as potentially emancipatory from a feminist perspective (e.g. Bugge and Almas, 2006) but what about the social conditions of the production of pre-made food, let alone food miles? As we extensively illustrate in this article, various forms of gender-based oppression strongly intersect with (ethical) consumption. Acknowledging and recognising these issues is bound to add further perplexity on decisions over what constitutes ethical and non-ethical consumption choices.

What directions could future research on the role of gender in consumer ethics take? Firstly, there is need for more nuanced understandings of gender in already established theoretical accounts of consumer ethics. Gender norms, as noted above, could be viewed as a special type of moral norms that form part of consumers’ ethical decision-making. Within Hunt and Vitell’s general theory of marketing ethics (1986, 2006), they may affect consumers’ deontological considerations whereas within Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behaviour (1985, 1991), they may intersect with subjective norms and/or personal norms (as social norms that have been internalised). A different line of research could attempt to incorporate resignifying practices and the effect they have on wider social structures whereas there is also space for better understanding of gendered forms of reasoning beyond the already established models. Although scholars such as Shaw et al. (2016) and Heath et al. (2016) have counter-proposed more feminine-based models of care ethics, the extent to which care theory can be prescriptive rather than descriptive, and indeed effective in redressing broader questions of gender politics remains unclear. Finally, there is need for further research into intersectionality. Whereas here we have focused on gender-based identity politics, consumption is certainly an arena that puts into question various other forms of injustice and oppression based on class, age, and race among others. Ultimately, the introduction of such debates promises to advance more sophisticated understanding of questions posed around environmental, economic and cultural injustices; and the extent to which they do (or should) intersect with everyday consumption.

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**Appendix: Table 1**

**Table 1: Gendering Consumer Ethics – Three Perspectives**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Gendering Consumer Ethics Through ** | **Socio-Economic Perspectives** | **Embodied and Affective Perspectives** | **Representational Perspectives** |
| **Key Idea(s)** | Gender Norms result in a variety of socio-economic injustices | Gender is embodied and affectively experienced, often in ways that escape conscious and reflective awareness | Gendered consumption is reproduced and represented by actors other than the ethically-minded consumer such as business retailers and advertisers |
| **Main Scholars** | Angela McRobbie  Nancy Fraser  Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and other Second Wave Feminists (e.g. Lynne Segal, Barbara Einreich) | Judith Butler  Wendy Brown  Sarah Ahmed  Care Ethics Scholars (e.g. Joan Tronto, Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan) | Laura Mulvey  Betty Friedan  Luce Irigaray  Julia Kristeva |
| **Practical Examples** | Consumers questioning the gendered nature of labour exploitation (realising women are overrepresented in low-paid jobs etc) e.g. in the fashion industry (e.g. Fashion Revolution and “Who Made My Clothes” campaigns)  Consumers supporting the EDGE certification (products that guarantee gender equality in the workplace) | Consumption that resists mainstream gender values, e.g. gender-bending consumption in LGBT festivals and queer venues.  Practices that destabilise the binary categories of sex and gender at the symbolic level of material possessions. E.g. Consumers endorsing gender-neutral practices (e.g. buying gender-neutral toys).  Consumers reappraising the value of care and interdependency (e.g. engaging in community projects and/or attending to the invisible care work and systemic care deficits across different supply chains) | Challenging the male gaze and female beauty norms through alternative representations (e.g. Dove campaign)  Companies subverting stereotypical notions of masculinity and feminity (e.g. Gillette’s 2019 advertisement on “the best man can be”; Always’s 2014 campaign on #LikeaGirl)  Bottom-up consumer movements aiming at creating new non-normative markets (e.g. Fatshionistas fighting for Plus Size fashion) |
| **Implications for Consumer Ethics Researchers** | Consumers’s ethical concerns should more explicitly incorporate gendered dimensions.  Gender-related injustices are a key dimension in consumer ethics activism | Gender norms are often subverted and reproduced in ways that escape conscious awareness. Re-signifying marketplace performances may be necessary but not always sufficient for the subversion of gender norms  Ethics of care and inter-dependency are a key route to alternative understandings of consumers’ decision-making, one that foregrounds care for all forms of human and nonhuman life | Beyond boycotting/buycotting and marketplace movements and performances consumer activism should reach out to strategic allies to confront a variety of marketplace and institutional actors that are actively invested in the reproduction/subversion of gender norms |

1. <http://www.alternet.org/story/156362/%27we%27re_here%2C_we%27re_queer%2C_and_we%27re_not_going_shopping%21%27_protesters_call_out_corporate_sponsorship_at_pride_parade> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)