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## **Constructing Masculinity in Women's Retailers: An Analysis of the Effect of Gendered Market Segmentation on Consumer Behavior**

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**Abstract** While gender-based differences in consumer behavior have been previously investigated within the context of gender-neutral or unisex retailers, men's behavior in women's retailers remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, most studies frame the retail environment as a passive platform through which essential gender differences yield setting-specific bifurcated behavior, and do not address the role the commercial establishment and men's shopping habits play in gender identity formation and maintenance. To address this gap, we analyzed men's behavior in women's retailers using interactionist and social constructionist theories of sex/gender. Data were collected through non-participatory observation at a series of large, enclosed shopping malls in South-Western Ontario, Canada and analyzed thematically. We found that men tend to actively avoid women's retailers or commercial spaces that connote femininity, while those who enter said spaces display passivity, aloofness, or reticence. We suggest the dominant cultural milieu that constitute hegemonic masculinity—a disaffiliation with femininity, an accentuation of heterosexuality, and a prioritization of homosocial engagement—inform the dialectical relationship between individual and institutional gender practice that manifests through consumption.

**Keywords** Retail; Masculinity; Consumer Behavior; Gender; Market Segmentation

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## Gender-Based Differences in Consumer Behavior—Contributions from the Marketing Literature

Marketing researchers have long been interested in consumer behavior as an area of inquiry. Reflecting the stereotype that shopping is an activity predominantly reserved for women, the majority of the consumer behavior literature has focused on women's shopping habits (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes 1999). As Gupta and Gentry (2015) remark, however, dominant constructions of masculinity as they relate to consumption and identity are in a state of flux, and men are increasingly participating in what have traditionally been viewed as feminine activities, such as shopping. The masculinization of consumption thesis has been used to describe the growth of consumerism among men since the late 1980's, which it argues is associated with the transition to postmodernism, second-wave feminism, and post/neo-Fordism (Galilee 2002). While there is debate regarding the assertion that men have universally become active—as opposed to reluctant and apprehensive—consumers, most theorists corroborate the expansion of male consumer markets and market activity. Dholakia, Petersen, and Hikmet (1995) observe that approximately 15% of heterosexual married men claim primary responsibility for grocery shopping, while 56% purchase their own clothing. Similarly, from 2011-2012, the masculine luxury sector grew at an annual rate of 14% compared to the feminine luxury sector, which grew by only 8% (Bain and Company 2012).

More recent empirical research examining male consumerism has uncovered significant gender-based

differences in consumer behavior. For example, men are less likely than women to report using a shopping list when grocery shopping (Thomas and Garland 2004). During Christmas shopping, women tend to start shopping earlier, spend more hours shopping and less money per recipient, and give more gifts than men (Fischer and Arnold 1990). Men also tend to be more competitive when shopping in fast fashion environments and are less likely to display in-store hoarding or hiding behaviors—keeping an item for oneself while shopping, undecided as to whether they will actually buy it (Gupta and Gentry 2015). Hermann (1998) found that men are significantly more likely than women to bargain at garage sales.

Researchers have also shown increasing interest in men's shopping habits in particular, and have discovered a range of unique attitudes and decision-making processes. For example, despite being as brand-conscious as women, men are known to uniquely display brand promiscuity, a priority for finding low prices, and a tendency to prematurely make purchases and/or be confused about which shops to visit (Bakewell and Mitchell 2006). Galilee (2002) found that men tend to be comparatively more cautious when clothes shopping; they also judge products' value in terms of quality, individuality, value for money, practicality, and conformity.

Shifting our focus to the psychosocial and cultural implications of gender-based variance in consumer behavior, we note limited research alludes to the fact that consumer behavior is intimately tied to identity construction. Tuncay and Otnes (2008), for example, suggest men maintain the boundaries of

heterosexual masculinity by consulting women and gay men, to whom they attribute superior expertise, over other heterosexual men in feminine-coded retailers (i.e., cosmetic and fashion outlets). Few studies acknowledge the commercial establishment as a site for the production of gender-based differences. Instead, most observe gender-based differences with minimal theoretical inquiry in terms of how consumer behavior constitutes or maintains gender identity. By integrating theories of sex/gender and masculinity we can achieve a deeper level of analysis that goes beyond the comparatively superficial observation that men and women shop differently.

### **Developing a Theoretical Framework for Sex/Gender and Consumption—Social Constructionism, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Gender Performativity**

Making explicit our theoretical framework that explains the role consumption plays in gender identity formation and maintenance is essential because the myriad theoretical and philosophical accounts of gender are often grounded in incommensurable epistemological assumptions. Our working definitions for gender and various masculinities are borrowed from Connell's (1995) seminal work. Prior to introducing them proper, we shall briefly detail the historical shift from essentialist to constructionist frameworks, along with their shortcomings, to better contextualize the current model.

The *natural-masculinity* thesis is the traditional essentialist approach to gender that dominated gender theory up until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to this biological-reductionist model,

gendered social behaviors manifest as a result of physiology, neuroanatomy, evolutionary psychology, and biochemistry. Employing the metaphor of "body-as-machine," it was thought that men and women are "hardwired" to behave differently. Cross-cultural and historical analyses provide little empirical support for this model—in fact, differences in psychological characteristics often vary to a greater extent within, rather than across, sex/genders (Connell 1995).

Feminist and symbolic interactionist theorists began to challenge this view in the 1960's by arguing that gender is, in fact, a social product. This new way of conceptualizing sex/gender was galvanized by Garfinkel's (1967) path-breaking case study of Agnes, who was assigned male at birth, but identified as a woman and displayed "feminine" secondary sex characteristics. Garfinkel's inquiry into the daily challenges Agnes faced in "passing" as a woman led him to conclude womanhood itself is an accomplishment achieved by navigating social contexts. In *Gender Display*, Goffman (1976) framed gendered behavior as a series of scripted dramatizations that, rather than indexing essential gendered characteristics, are designed to serve context-specific ends. A gendered display, in his terms, is optional and often functional. He notes, "what, if anything, characterizes persons as sex-class members is their competence and willingness to sustain an appropriate schedule of displays; only the content of the displays distinguishes the classes" (Goffman 1976:76). West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that, if anything, Goffman downplays the pervasiveness of gendered displays in everyday interaction. The process of "doing gender," they suggest, involves

engaging in behaviors that are assessed in gendered terms. Since society is organized so fundamentally around essential binary sex divisions, people are held accountable to upholding this conception through their behavior. One is therefore always “doing gender,” and the social character of gender is inextricably associated with sex in its construction as “essential.”

Connell (1995) expresses concern that while social constructionism's claim that gender exists independent of biology is useful for cultural analyses, a pure socially deterministic model of gender has a disembodied effect—it ignores the fact that physical bodies do indeed pose limits on the possibilities of being. In response, she offers an alternative model for gendered embodiment dubbed *body-reflexive practices*. According to this theory, social processes render the body mutable and shape its cultural intelligibility, but its materiality (e.g., menstruation, ejaculation, childbirth) cannot be completely transcended. By extension, practices that construct the body in a gendered manner are “onto-formative,” which is to say that social processes enacted *through* the body create a range of possibilities of being. As a compromise between biological essentialism and social constructionism, subjectivity that is constructed through bodily practices inevitably has a bodily dimension, but is not necessarily bodily *determined*.

Masculinity, then, can be defined as a series of onto-formative and body-reflexive practices and their reciprocal effect on gendered identities and socio-cultural structures. Gender, more broadly speaking, refers to a particular rubric by which so-

cial practices are ordered. Gender, and by extension masculinity, is inherently relational. These relations take the form of power (i.e., the dominance of certain groups over others), production (i.e., gender divisions of labor and accumulation) and cathexis (how emotional and sexual desires are permitted to manifest). Importantly, there are multiple forms of masculinity across time and space that interact with and constitute one another by virtue of hierarchical power relations. These are not fixed character types, but patterns of practice that mutate across varying historical, geographical, and cultural contexts. These include:

- *Hegemonic masculinity*: a configuration of gender practices that not only supports the domination of women by men but the domination of certain groups of men by other groups of men.
- *Subordinate masculinity*: a configuration of gender practices that is not only culturally stigmatized but materially oppressed (i.e., gay, bisexual, and queer men).
- *Complicit masculinity*: a configuration of gender practices and their actors that may contribute to masculine hegemony, but themselves do not wholly embody hegemonic masculinity.
- *Marginalized masculinities*: a series of gender practices and their actors that cut across other social structures, such as race and class, which thereby renders them dominant or subordinate.

Finally, since masculinities are a configuration of gender practices within a gendered system of

social relations, and because they are mutable across time and space, they are often the site of contestation and reconfiguration. Crisis tendencies refer not to the disruption of a static and universal model of masculinity, but to those rather frequent cases where gender practices are renegotiated and transformed (Connell 1995). Gherardi (1994), who promoted a similar symbolic interactionist approach to gender, suggested that the dominant gender order is maintained by two strategies: ceremonial work, which maintains and celebrates the dominant gender order, and remedial work, which restores gender order when under threat.

Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity may serve as a logical extension of Connell's (1995) body-reflexive practices model of gender. Like Connell, Butler claims that gender is socially constructed through a series of bodily practices. Critically, these bodily practices are misinterpreted as being the products of a stable, internal gendered self, when in reality gender is constituted only by its signification. In other words, the ontology of sex/gender is contingent upon a series of repetitive and imitative acts that reify hegemonic configurations of gender practice. Butler (1990:185) explains:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as the cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs

and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. [emphasis original]

Butler (1990) suggests gender subsumes cultural assumptions of sex—rather than being the social or cultural manifestation of sex, gender naturalizes sex characteristics. There is much pressure to produce an authentic practice, since what is at stake is the cultural survival of both gender *and* sex. Those whose gender practices fail to conform to hegemonic standards are punished through both cultural stigmatization (marginalization, isolation) and material oppression (harassment, employment discrimination, income and wealth inequality, abuse by the criminal justice system, etc.). The tacit agreement to reproduce hegemonic gender practices results both from their false sense of credibility and punitive consequences for transgression.

Since gender practice is socially situated, hegemonic masculinity is constituted by a particular social milieu in contemporary Western societies. Configurations of gender practice are widely variable, but Kimmel (1997) provides some common themes that pertain to how hegemonic masculinities are embodied and reinforced. The following three dimensions are relevant to the current study:

- *Masculinity as the Flight from the Feminine*: rather than defining itself in positive terms as an affirmation of the masculine, masculinity derives its meaning from a disavowal of femininity. Stemming from this is the routine practice of sexism—the discrimination against, objectification, and devaluing of women.

- *Masculinity as a Homosocial Enactment*: men predominantly look to other men for evaluation and approval of their masculine performance. Hence, men will demonstrably behave differently when in the company of other men compared to women.
- *Masculinity as Homophobia*: masculinity is inextricably associated with heterosexuality in their construction. Consequently, men stereotype, ostracize, and victimize gay, bisexual, queer, and gender-nonconforming men in order to stave off suspicions of oneself being gay, and therefore less masculine.

### Compensatory Consumption as Accumulative Gender Practice

Central to Connell (1995) and Kimmel's (1997) models is the idea that masculinities are historically shifting. McNeill and Douglas (2011) suggest there has been a breakdown in the production-consumption gendered dichotomy, where men's identity was previously understood to be derived from their work and women's from their consumption. Shifts in power, gender roles, and social norms over the past few decades have accompanied a change in the dominant image of masculinity that relies increasingly on appearance rather than occupation. As Kimmel (1996) notes, men's gender identity was further threatened by major socio-economic shifts occurring over the past century. Modern industrial and bureaucratic shifts in production and wage labor promoted gender-role conflict within men—as they increasingly occupied white collar positions, men experienced an incompatibility between their

identities constructed through their work and the traditional, idealized practices of hegemonic masculinity.

Consumption plays a conspicuous role in gender identity construction. As previously mentioned, Connell (1995) classifies production relations—which encompass both labor and accumulation—as a means by which hegemonic and alternative masculinities interact. In order to reduce the incongruity between one's current and idealized gendered self-concept, men partake in what has been described as compensatory consumption, whereby they symbolically reaffirm their masculinity through a patterned consumption of commodities (Ehrenreich 1983). Men use mass culture and commodities as discursive tools in the construction of a gendered self that adheres as closely as possible to the ideal. It follows from this logic that the retail environment would elicit a unique range of behaviors based on sex/gender and other aspects of one's identity and positionality.

Several studies have demonstrated that men display a unique range of behaviors in gender-neutral retailers (e.g., grocery stores, unisex clothing stores), while others have investigated "gender-neutral" / "gender-ambiguous" retailers that may carry a feminine connotation (e.g., jewelers, home décor, cosmetics retailers), but it remains unclear what behavior men display in retail spaces that are explicitly marketed as being appropriate for women (e.g., women's lingerie/clothing/swimwear retailers, women's shoe stores, women's accessories). Further, many studies in this space are grounded in essentialist notions of sex/gender—by investigating gender-based differ-

ences in consumer behavior without positing its role in gender identity construction, they suggest, implicitly or otherwise, that the observed differences are a result of innate, “natural” differences between sexes/genders. To illustrate, evolutionary psychologists contend the differences observed between men and women in modern shopping behaviors are attributable to sexually dimorphic foraging strategies that developed from hunter-gatherer societies (Kruger and Byker 2009). The current study is founded on the premise that gender-based differences in consumer behavior reflect gender practices—that is, they do not merely correlate with or reflect essential sex/gender characteristics but are implicated in their construction. To that end, the purpose of the current study is to examine men’s behavior in women’s retailers and to posit its significance as it relates to gender identity formation and maintenance. In line with the study purpose, our research question was twofold:

1. What patterns exist in men’s behavior within women’s retailers?
2. How does men’s behavior in these spaces contribute to gender identity formation and maintenance?

## Methods

The exploratory nature of the current study lent itself most closely to a qualitative methodology. Data were collected through non-participatory observation, which is characterized by minimal visibility and communication with the population under study (Kawulich 2005). The justification for this

study design over alternatives, such as participatory observation or interviews, is provided hereinafter with our description of gender practice.

Observations were conducted at a series of enclosed shopping malls in south-western Ontario, Canada between October 2016 and August 2017. Two of the three municipalities have populations exceeding 500,000 and are locally known for being culturally and ethnically diverse. Two of the three malls visited are considered the second and seventh largest enclosed shopping malls in Canada, respectively, with the largest containing 1,800,000 square feet of retail space and 360 stores. Data were collected on weekday afternoons, weekday evenings, and weekends to account for any changes in behavior that may result from store crowding. Data were collected across five sessions, each lasting approximately 3-5 hours. In total, we conducted 20 hours of observations. Our time was distributed relatively evenly across all retailers (see: Appendix A), with the exception of a few retailers where we spent slightly less time due to a lack of customers. Each retailer was only visited once. In line with the aim of the study, we focused on observing men of all ages and racial-ethnic backgrounds that were inside or in close proximity to women’s retailers. Following this, we collected data from retailers specializing in products that carry a feminine connotation (e.g., Lush, Bath and Body Works, Michael Hill) and retailers with gender-segregated departments (e.g., H&M, The Bay). Women’s retailers were operationalized as such based on whether they appeared under groupings such as “women’s” and “women’s apparel” in mall directories. Because observations were conducted at a distance where most conversations were inaudible,

observation was mostly focused on body language. Consistent with Merriam's (1988) observational inventory, we recorded observations pertaining to the physical environment, participant characteristics, and activities and interactions (including frequency and duration, informal and/or unplanned activities and non-verbal communication). Minor data were collected from women for the purpose of comparative analysis. For example, to understand whether the time men spent gazing at window displays as they passed by stores was relatively low, we also observed how long women gazed at the same displays.

Data collection ceased after reaching saturation. Saturation, according to Charmaz (2014), is the point at which collecting additional data ceases to lead to new categories, themes, connections between categories/themes, or other insights upon analysis. To ensure we did not reproduce the common error of conflating reaching saturation with witnessing repetition of observations, we undertook an iterative, constant comparative approach for data collection and analysis. Instead of conducting each phase of research in isolated sequence, data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel to find emerging themes and patterns. The final round of data collection resulted in no noteworthy additions or changes to our themes or exemplars, so we took this to mean saturation was reached.

Before moving forward, we feel it necessary to also detail how we conceptualize human behavior in sociological terms. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice is essential to Connell's (1995) definitions of gender and masculinity. Gendered practice in the Bourdieusian sense distinguishes itself from other forms

of human behavior based on a number of features. First, gendered practice is contextually-situated, both locally and within broader society; that is, it is both produced by and reinforces gendered social structures through its repetition. This situatedness also implies an element of temporality—practice is done with the intention of manipulating future outcomes. It is inherently anticipatory. Consequently, it also has a temporal directionality. The outcomes of one's practice can never be reversed or effaced, but only corrected or placed on an alternate trajectory with subsequent practice. Finally, gender practice is to a certain extent automated, or unreflexive. It is instilled over the life course, starting at an early age, by a constellation of social institutions, including families, schools, workplaces, and broader socio-political structures. Practice is therefore spontaneous, but far from arbitrary (Martin 2003). Bourdieu (1990:81-82) explains:

Practice unfolds in time and it has all the correlative properties, such as irreversibility, that synchronization destroys. Its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of meaning...In short, because it is entirely immersed in the current of time, practice is inseparable from temporality, not only because it is played out in time but also because it plays strategically with time...A player who is involved and caught up in the game adjusts not to what he sees, but to what he foresees, sees in advance in the directly perceived present; he passes the ball not to the spot where his team-mate is, but to the spot he will reach...a moment later, anticipating the anticipations of the others...He decides in terms of objective probabilities, that is, in response to an overall, instantaneous assessment of



the whole set of his opponents and the whole set of his team-mates, seen not as they are but in their impending positions. And he does so “on the spot,” “in the twinkling of an eye,” “in the heat of the moment,” that is, in conditions which exclude distance, perspective, detachment, and reflexion.

To disambiguate our terminology, we view consumer behaviors in the retail environment that have a gendered character are implicated in the larger structural gendered order, and therefore constitute a form of gender practice. Viewing consumer behavior as gender practice also has specific implications for data collection strategies. Martin (2003) argues that since gender practices that correctly reproduce specific forms of masculinities and femininities are indexing tacit knowledge and skills that have been developed over time, they are likely taken for granted and difficult to articulate. Thus, it is easier to observe or experience gender practice than it is to narratively describe it. For this reason, and in addition to the fact that our goal was to observe men’s gender practices “in the field” rather than how they rationalized these practices, we opted for purely non-participatory observation.

Theory was used both inductively and deductively at different points in the current project. Throughout data collection and concurrent thematic analysis, we made the explicit choice of avoiding extant theory so as not to prematurely influence our expectations and foreclose potential areas of exploration. As mentioned previously, we simply used Merriam’s (1988) observational inventory to record any observations that may relate to the research question, rather than referring to theory to provide sensitizing concepts

that narrow the range of observation. Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis, we first developed themes inductively through stepwise coding of field notes, then following data collection referred to existing theories of sex/gender and consumer behavior to articulate our findings in a deductive manner. Since we are focused on understanding the role consumer behavior plays in constructing gender identity, we felt it more appropriate to integrate, rather than ignore, the wealth of pre-existing literature that addresses both the social construction of sex/gender and consumption. According to Joffe and Yardley (2004), one of the most salient risks when using theory deductively in qualitative research is the increased potential to downplay observations that contradict hypotheses or pre-existing theories. Bearing this in mind, data collection and analysis incorporated a directed search for contradictory evidence or men that otherwise behave as “exceptions to the rule.” For instance, after noting men tend to trail behind the women they accompany in women’s retailers, we intentionally searched for men who either walk side-by-side or in front of women, and noted the varying contexts in which they do so.

While reflexivity towards the researchers’ role in study design, data collection, and analysis is standard practice in qualitative research, we believe consideration of our own identities and social positioning is of particular importance in this study due to the subjectivity involved in interpreting behavioral observations and inferring the gender of persons and spaces. The first author, who was primarily responsible for the study design, data collection, and analysis, identifies as a cisgender man, while the second and third authors, who assisted in the

study design, analysis, and manuscript preparation, both identify as cisgender women. Because the current study is strictly observational, we were unable to collect self-reported data on participants' gender (the methodological limitations of which are discussed later). We therefore relied on the diversity of the research team's experiences to derive a working definition for men as a descriptive category. Reaching a consensus was predictably difficult, considering Smiler and Epstein (2010) conclude in their review of measures of gender, including Beere's (1990) review of over 1400 different measures, that there are substantial disagreements about measurement. We decided to rely on the first author's initial "gut response" when encountering individuals, as this replicates the process the majority of the general public use when assigning a gender to others. In this sense, while there are theoretical concerns with reproducing this practice in research, it demonstrates greater generalizability by not relying on esoteric measures of gender that are more stringently applied in research conditions.

We consulted the internal university research ethics board who advised that no evaluation was necessary because all observations were conducted in a public space with no expectation of privacy. All participants' identities were anonymized and no audio/visual recordings were taken.

## Results

### Avoidance of Spaces Coded as Feminine

One of the most readily apparent and consistent observations in women's retailers is the absence of

men. Women vastly outnumbered men in all observed cases; the discrepancy was so pronounced that in some instances stores would go upwards of 45 minutes without seeing a single male customer. In these cases, we focused our attention outside the stores to see how men act as they come into proximity of women's stores. With few exceptions, most men passing by women's retailers maintained their speed as they passed, rarely looking into the entrances of stores or at the window displays. Those that did look into stores maintained their gaze for approximately 1-2 seconds before reorienting their gaze straight ahead. Many were covert in their glances, shifting their eyes without moving their head. Others stared at the stores from a distance, but averted their gaze as they came in closer proximity, within 30 feet or so. These observations were similar regardless of whether men were alone, accompanied by women, or with other men. Women, on the other hand, generally looked into stores for longer periods of time, and were more likely to stop and look at window displays.

Men accompanying women that were interested in entering stores often waited outside while women browsed. In these instances, there was rarely any observed extensive conversation, suggesting this is routine practice. An interesting exception to this observation was a man in his late 40s who refused to enter Cleo, a women's clothing store, with his partner as the woman forcibly grabbed his arm and asked him to accompany her. With her attempt at persuading him unsuccessful, she entered the store alone. This observation suggested that men may periodically purposefully avoid women's retailers. Men occupied benches situated outside women's retailers much

more frequently than women; we inferred most were waiting for their partners or guardians as they shopped because they resumed walking through the mall once a woman rejoined them. These findings are consistent with the latter half of the “whine and wait” stereotype of perceived male shopping behavior, which Otnes and McGrath (2001) characterize as complaining or remaining stationary while shopping. While they observed little vocal complaining, passive waiting, and following was prevalent.

Similar avoidant behavior was seen with respect to women’s departments in gender-segregated unisex retailers. Like women’s retailers, men were not seen shopping in the women’s department of stores such as The Bay, H&M, or Forever 21. Men may have passed through the women’s department in order to reach either the exit, checkout, or men’s department, but they walked noticeably faster through the women’s department than they did through the men’s department. If possible, men also circumvented the women’s department to reach their destination: in order to reach the exit, one man in his 30s navigated the periphery of the fragrance department in The Bay instead of taking the shortest route through the center. Interestingly, it seemed that men were also apprehensive to use a changing room if it was located in the women’s department of unisex clothing retailers—unlike in H&M, which had a change room situated in the men’s department, during the 20 minutes of observation, there was not a single man lined up to use the unisex changing rooms located in Forever 21’s women’s department. We are hesitant to interpret this as simply being the result of a situational-unrepresentative sample of Forever 21 shoppers, which under other circumstances a sizeable propor-

tion is constituted by men, for several reasons. First, these data were collected on a weekday evening outside work hours. The store was consequently rather congested, certainly more so than would be expected earlier in the day. At points, the changing room line exceeded ten women, and numerous men were seen browsing the store in the time spent there. Also, men comprised the majority of those waiting in line at H&M several times. This led us to conclude that the disparity is likely not attributable to either men not shopping in adequate numbers in Forever 21 or men being unlikely to use changing rooms in unisex clothing retailers in general.

Curious to see whether the disparity in men’s inclination to use changing rooms is influenced by other environmental elements besides the departmental placement of the changing room, we noticed that the men’s department in Forever 21 was significantly smaller than that in H&M. Additionally, the store was designed with more stereotypically feminine visual flourishes, such as pink walls, Victorian light fixtures, and sequined decorative elements. The men’s and women’s departments in Forever 21 were also confined to separate floors, while the H&M in this particular mall organized the two departments on opposite sides of the same floor. While a semiotic analysis of the role marketing plays in the production of gendered symbols is outside the scope of this paper, we infer that any one of these elements alone does not determine men’s practice of avoidance, but rather a constellation of these symbols are used in a form of institutional gender practice, where the retail environment itself communicates a gendered configuration that is either congruent or discordant with men’s individual gender practice.

An interaction between two boys (age 6-8 years) outside Claire's—a retailer specializing in accessories for girls and young women—provides a succinct illustrative example of the organizing cultural logic of hegemonic masculinity manifest through avoidant gender practice. As their mother and two sisters entered the store, one of the boys attempted to follow until the other remarked, "Are you a girl? Get out of there!" The boy then swiftly returned to the other, and the two waited outside until the rest of the family finished shopping. The avoidance of women's retailers by men and boys can be understood as a form of gender practice consistent with hegemonic configurations of masculinity (Connell 1995). The particular cultural rubric to which this practice adheres is a distancing from femininity, as stipulated by Kimmel (1997). As we see in this scenario, by entering a feminine space and transgressing hegemonic gender practice, the young boy is castigated by his brother in an effort to preserve the dominant gender order (Butler 1990). In effect, capitalist market technologies institute a form of gender practice that interacts with individual gender practice to yield a particular range of gendered subjectivities articulated through consumption. Within this particular context, a hegemonic gender practice is embodied through a rejection of femininity—the male shopper "does" masculinity by staying away from women's stores.

A noteworthy exception to this trend was seen outside La Senza—a women's lingerie retailer—where passersby stared at the large visual ads for significantly longer periods of time, sometimes up to 10 seconds. Men were also comparatively more conspicuous in their gazes, frequently turning their

heads and periodically stopping to reorient their entire bodies in the direction of the ads. This phenomenon can be seen as a violation of the hegemonic script of flight from the feminine. In fact, based on this dimension alone, one would expect this practice to be met with punitive action from observers. What we see, however, is in fact a cultural sanctioning of this behavior—two men stationed themselves outside the store for no readily apparent reason other than to rest. Neither were waiting for a woman to emerge from the store, as they eventually continued walking unaccompanied. The two gazed at the displays for minutes at a time, sharing laughter and conversational body language. Within our observations, we did not witness similar behavior outside other women's retailers. We suggest the critical difference in this scenario that exempts men from punishment for engaging with feminine visual symbols lies in the ad material itself, which prominently features sexualized young women in lingerie. Based on Kimmel's (1997) additional dimension of hegemonic masculinity as homophobia, this practice can be seen as favorable because it instrumentalizes women in displays of heterosexuality.

### **Passivity within Spaces Coded as Feminine**

With very few exceptions, all men seen in women's retailers were accompanied by at least one woman. The most frequently observed configuration was one man and one woman—groups containing more than one man were particularly rare. We speculate the reason for this is that being accompanied by a woman in these spaces signifies that men are not there to shop for themselves, but to aid women. The absence of more than a single man per group can

be explained by Kimmel's (1997) remaining principle for hegemonic masculinity: masculine gender practice is predominantly homosocial in nature. Should men be required to enter women's retailers for various reasons, it is in their interest to minimize the number of men who may bear witness to this practice. A group of men in a women's retailer is a fraught scenario with ambiguous implications for gender practice. Do the men police one another if they are in a mutually subordinate gender configuration? Do they renegotiate these scripts through remedial work, as described by Gherardi (1994)? We watched this quagmire unfurl in Ardene—a women's clothing retailer—where three men ranging in age from early teens to mid-50s accompanied two women. While together, the men appeared comfortable enough; they conversed with each other and the women as they perused the merchandise, even offering their opinion on certain pieces. At a certain point, however, the women separated from the men, prompting them to remain stationary and in close proximity to one another. Still standing, they reoriented their bodies inward towards one another and resumed their conversation. With the women gone, the reduction in eye-wandering and engagement with the merchandise could telegraph only a fleeting, utilitarian interest in women's products, and that under typical circumstances, the curiosity towards feminine products is superseded by an interest in engaging with other men.

It appears that men relinquish authority or primary decision-making power to women upon entering women's retailers. They frequently followed behind women while shopping, but switched to walking side-by-side or in front upon exiting the store. Fur-

ther, men remained firmly attached to the women they accompany, rarely separating more than 5-10 feet. Women also did the majority of the talking when speaking to sales associates, who were almost always women. The men, meanwhile, shifted from gazing intently at the sales associate to surveying their surroundings in silence. It may seem counterintuitive that men abandon the gender practices that would in other instances reaffirm a hegemonic masculine identity (e.g., domination, independence, self-determinism [Connell 1995]), but Tuncay and Otnes' (2008) explanation for a similar observation may explain the motivation underlying this behavioral change: when heterosexual men shop for grooming and fashion products—thereby positioning themselves as “identity-vulnerable consumers” due to their interest in products that connote femininity—they seek advice from women and gay men over other heterosexual men. This is done, they argue, to elicit empathy and insight from those they perceive to be experts in purchasing these products in addition to maintaining the boundaries of normative masculine gender practice. By surrendering any pretense of expertise, men make the implicit claim, “I do not belong in this space. This is not who I am.” As avoidant practice indicates, merely being present in women's retailers defies hegemonic masculinity. This presents a crisis tendency (Connell 1995) to which men respond by going “off-script,” or displaying emergent gender practice, in order to restore the gender order. An exception to this was seen in jeweler's, such as Michael Hill and Pandora, where men stood side-by-side with women at the counters and were equally as engaged with the sales associates. This may be a result of the widespread cultural assumption that products that are a greater

financial investment, such as engagement rings, require shared rather than unilateral decision-making in heterosexual partnerships.

Generally speaking, men's demeanor in women's retailers can be described as passive, aloof, and indignant. As they followed women around the store, men frequently crossed their arms or placed their hands in their pants pockets. Others used their phones for extended periods of time, periodically glancing up and surveying the environment. Some, particularly the young boys, looked at the floor or ceiling. Most appeared unapproachable and lacked enthusiasm, warmth, or candor, even as they spoke to the women they accompanied. Some appeared rather impatient, acting dismissive or even antagonistic towards their partners in an effort to shorten the duration of their visit. For example, one man in his late 20s appeared particularly frustrated while he waited for his partner outside the changing room at Ardene. As she emerged to gauge his opinion on a top, he responded with a series of head motions indicating it was time to go. Men reinforced an air of nonchalance with their unwillingness to touch or engage with any merchandise unless a woman actively encouraged them to do so. To illustrate, a teenage boy was the only individual in a group comprised of himself and three girls around his age to not use any testers or smell any products in Lush, a cosmetics retailer specializing in hygiene and skincare products. The behaviors observed here extend the theory underpinning men's avoidance of women's retailers: if outright avoidance of the store is not feasible, men may still express a symbolic disavowal of femininity—and in the process avoid any further threats to the credibility of their masculine

performance—by displaying reluctance, indifference, or aversion.

## Discussion

Increasing participation by men in retail markets has prompted consideration of men's consumption habits. We conclude from our observations that men display behavioral patterns in brick-and-mortar retail stores that, despite being variable to a certain extent, generally differ from women. These behaviors include the avoidance of entire retailers or departments that are coded or explicitly marketed towards women, along with displays of passivity, reluctance, or frustration among those who find themselves in those spaces. We understand the observed behaviors to be a form of gender practice in the context of symbolic interactionism and social constructionist accounts of sex/gender. If gender practice is crucial to consolidating, internalizing, and naturalizing a masculine identity or sense of group membership, then the retail environment offers a context-specific rubric for consumption-based or accumulative gender practices.

The pronounced demarcation in men's gender practice between men's, women's, and unisex retailers indicates that the retail marketplace remains intensely gender-segregated. Because hegemonic masculinity is defined in part by the rejection of femininity, men remain resistant to engaging with feminine retail spaces and products. These findings contradict claims of a contemporary egalitarian market that transcends the boundaries of sex/gender. Though it may be true that men are displaying increased interest in fashion and grooming, we caution against interpreting this as evidence of the dissolution of hegemonic gender systems.

Connell (1995) may argue this merely represents a routine crisis tendency to which we respond by renegotiating boundaries in contemporary gender practice. This could take the form of defining “acceptable” and “unacceptable” hygiene products. The striking paucity of men in Bath and Body Works could serve as evidence of their products belonging to the latter category, for instance. The “masculinization of the luxury market” (Bain and Company 2012) to which researchers refer, therefore, may indicate a shift in how retail products and spaces are gendered, rather than a willingness by men to transgress current gendered boundaries. In other words, while it may be considered increasingly socially acceptable for men to be interested in fashion and grooming, it is only such insofar as these activities come to be associated with masculinity.

In order for men to identify spaces and products as “acceptable” or “unacceptable” in the first place, however, those spaces and products must themselves yield an intelligible gender practice. We outlined some of these institutional gender practices, such as staffing only women, using stereotypically “feminine” décor, and compartmentalizing men’s and women’s departments. In essence, the gender practices of capitalist institutions are dialectically related to individual gender practices. We contend the retail environment is not a passive platform through which essential gender differences yield setting-specific bifurcated behavior. Instead, persons and capitalist institutions reciprocally reinforce the dominant cis-hetero-patriarchal system of sex/gender and its construction as binary, mutually exclusive, complementary, and essential.

Our work builds on the previous marketing literature by using theories of sex/gender to suggest the retail

market *produces* gender-based differences in behavior as much as it reflects them. It also further extends a large body of research investigating the role marketing plays in constructing binary systems of sex/gender and hegemonic masculinities by arguing the retail environment itself provides a space through which gendered norms may be further perpetuated by consumer behavior; namely, that gender practice is effected through relations of production and consumption. Finally, the current study contributes to research investigating the intersection of gender and capitalism by looking “downstream” at the effects of gendered market segmentation on gender socialization. Our findings lend empirical support to the notion that gender norms are to a certain extent self-perpetuating. While power is certainly exercised downward by marketers and other capitalist technologies, as disciplinary models of power stipulate (Foucault 1977; Spade 2015), norms of “good behavior” for men in retail environments are also policed by other men. Foucault (1977) argued that with sufficient internalization of these norms, coercion is replaced by self-regulation, which explains the consistency we observed in men’s behavior in the absence of any explicit imposition of power from person-to-person. In Connell’s (1995) terms, the average male consumer exhibits a gender practice that most closely aligns with complicit masculinities—they may not be “hegemonic” in the sense that they are directly implicated in the subordination of other gender configurations, but they do little to challenge these normative practices, and often reproduce them. According to Butler (1990), repetition of gender practice is essential to its legitimation.

Acknowledging the multiplicity in masculine configurations of gender practice, particularly as they are in-

flected by other subjectivities, we searched for any differences in consumer behavior between men based on race/ethnicity and age. While we found no significant differences based on race/ethnicity, we did find that older men appeared to be more engaged when accompanying women. They touched products more frequently, separated from women more often, and displayed a calmer, more inquisitive demeanor overall. Younger men, in contrast, generally appeared more disgruntled, uncomfortable, and impatient. For example, an older man in his 60s entered Bikini Bay with a woman around the same age. While the woman tried on swimsuits in the changing room, he casually perused several aisles of women's swimwear. He spent a significant amount of time looking at a few pieces, touching the fabric, and checking the price tags. The pair spent about 20 minutes in the store, which is considerably longer than the average visit duration. Spector-Mersel (2006) suggests the temporal dimension of hegemonic masculinity has been neglected by gender theorists, and little consideration has been given to how the interaction between men and hegemonic masculinity changes across the lifespan. In addition to varying laterally based on race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and culture, the dominant form of masculinity may also vary longitudinally with respect to stages of the life course. One of the distinctive features of the masculine scripts unique to aging men, she argues, is that they are incomplete: while the models for ideal masculinity are clearly defined in young adulthood and middle-age, they become ambiguous later in life. This may be a result of the fact that aging is seen as paradoxical to a form of masculinity defined by youth and physicality. Consequently, men experience an "ungendering" later in life that forces them to either pursue identities consistent with a youthful masculinity that

denies the realities of the aging process, or accept the incoherence of these masculine scripts (Spector-Mersel 2006). In the latter case, this may lead to recognition of alternative cultural realities and a diversification of gender practice not seen in younger men.

There are some notable limitations to the current study, the most salient being the inability to collect self-report data on participants' sex/gender as a consequence of relying entirely on non-participatory observation as a mode of data collection. As previously mentioned, this was done to witness gender practice as it occurred without relying on narrative description, which is a less appropriate method for understanding behaviors that are generally unreflexive. As a tradeoff, however, we were required to identify participants' sex/gender based on our own perception independent of how they actually identify. We acknowledge the contention surrounding this practice, especially with regard to how it legitimizes the cissexist practice of equating external gender presentation with personal identification. In West and Zimmerman's (1987) terms, this would constitute an "if-can" test of sexual categorization in everyday interaction, which stipulates that we categorize persons as men if the category feels appropriate and in the absence of contradictory evidence. The absence of self-report data also prevents us from analyzing differences in consumer behavior based on "invisible" or "partly visible" identities, such as sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or ability. We opine these strengths and limitations of non-participatory observation must be considered in future observational research investigating gendered behavior.

In addition to addressing the aforementioned methodological quandaries, future research would



benefit from a deeper investigation of the ways other power structures intersect with gender and masculinity to influence consumer behavior. In their study investigating whether men actually adhere to perceptions of stereotypical male behavior in retail spaces, Otnes and McGrath (2001) demonstrate that men behave in a diverse manner that reflects the heterogeneity of subjectivities encompassed under the umbrella category of men, and suggest that men's willingness to engage in shopping behavior is determined by the extent to which they are able to transcend traditional gender roles. Similarly, Holt and Thompson (2004) contend that the process of appropriating commodities for the purpose of personal identity construction is distinctly individualized, making it highly variable. Consistent with this line of thinking, it would be worth investigating to a greater extent how men's behavior in women's retailers varies based on sexual orientation, class/socio-economic status, age, et cetera.

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## Conclusion

While many studies have investigated sex/gender-based differences in consumer behavior, few, if any, have examined men's behavior in women's retailers to understand its role in the social construction of sex/gender. Using a symbolic interactionist approach that frames gender as being constituted by its signification (i.e., practice), we viewed men's avoidant and passive behavior in women's retailers to be part and parcel of a social milieu associated with hegemonic masculinity that involves a disaffiliation with femininity, an accentuation of heterosexuality, and a prioritization of homosocial engagement. Despite the fact that men are increasingly involved in the purchase of fashion products, cosmetics, and other luxury goods—items traditionally associated with femininity—they maintain a clear boundary at the ideological level between acceptable and unacceptable masculine behavior in retail spaces. The retail marketplace, therefore, is as involved in actively producing and reinforcing gender-based differences as it is in devising marketing strategies that capitalize on them.

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**Appendix A: Retailers Visited with Retailer Type and Store Description.**

RETAILER NAME	RETAILER TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Claire's	Women's	Jewelry and accessories
La Senza	Women's	Lingerie and intimate apparel
Bikini Bay	Women's	Swimsuits and accessories
Ardene	Women's	Clothing, footwear, and accessories
Cleo	Women's	Clothing and accessories
Aerie	Women's	Casual wear, shoes, accessories, loungewear
Charming Charlie	Women's	Accessories, jewelry, clothing
Stepping Out	Women's	Shoes and handbags
Laura	Women's	Clothing
Michael Hill	Gender neutral with feminine connotation	Jewelry, watches, charms
Pandora	Gender neutral with feminine connotation	Jewelry
Lush	Gender neutral with feminine connotation	Cosmetics, hygiene, spa products
Bath and Body Works	Gender neutral with feminine connotation	Cosmetics, hygiene, candles, home fragrances
Sephora	Gender neutral with feminine connotation	Make-up, fragrances, hygiene
Forever 21	Unisex with gender-segregated departments	Clothing, shoes, accessories. Some have menswear, but not all.
H&M	Unisex with gender-segregated departments	Clothing, swimwear, shoes, accessories
The Bay	Unisex with gender-segregated departments	Department store carrying clothing, handbags, fragrances, jewelry, toys, home décor, etc.
Sears	Unisex with gender-segregated departments	Department store carrying clothing, home décor, furniture, appliances, etc.

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