

GENDERED PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTION IN THE EARLY AMERICAN HOUSEHOLD, 1750-1825

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ABSTRACT

Although consumer researchers have developed useful theories and measurement tools for studying household decision-making and purchasing behavior, current knowledge lacks robustness and may be culturally biased because of insufficient historical and cross-cultural grounding. In an attempt to overcome these limitations, this paper offers an account of how gender defined, and was defined by, patterns of consumption in the early American household. Issues examined include marital authority versus the real balance of power, home production and the division of labor, family decision-making and purchasing behavior, and the gendering of beverages, clothing, domestic goods, and political consumption. The concluding section discusses implications for consumer behavior theory.

Gender is a fundamental cultural category and an inherently historical concept clearly relevant to the household, to social relationships, and to the signification of power. Gender also has long been an important topic in marketing and consumer research. The historical period of interest, 1750-1825, is significant because the American economy was evolving beyond traditional agricultural and craft production and toward market- and technology-driven industrialization. Moreover, "modern" consumer behavior, defined as the endless pursuit of wants best exemplified by the fashion cycle, first took root among the American middle classes during this time.

MARITAL AUTHORITY AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

By current standards, early American life was highly patriarchal. Men received better educations than women and only men could vote for political candidates, hold office in government, and serve as ministers, elders, justices, and juries. A married woman could not own real or personal property and whatever she brought into the marriage became her husbands'. Wives could not make legally binding contracts; only widows and spinsters were legal individuals. However, society did expect a husband to take his wife's opinions and interests into consideration and, should he be prevented from fulfilling his role, his wife could stand in his place as a deputy husband.

Public ideals notwithstanding, the real balance of power between the sexes shifted from one sphere of life to another. New England women had primary responsibility for the policing of sexual conduct and, throughout the colonies, women controlled midwifery and made childbirth a communal event that excluded men until male physicians began to claim this area for themselves in the late 18th century. In addition, the relative influence of husbands and wives surely varied from one household to the next. Thus, public norms did not preclude female influence within the domains of consumer decision-making and private household consumption activities.

HOME PRODUCTION AND THE DIVISION OF LABOR

In early America, production within the household was extensive. Families raised more of their own food, sewed more of their own clothing, and fabricated more of their own furniture and utensils than they would after the industrial revolution. Spouses generally had distinct responsibilities. Husbands worked "abroad" in the fields and forests or at sea, while their wives labored in and around the house. Task management corresponded to the division of labor in that husbands kept records of their field products, labor, and obligations, while wives kept their own accounts in separate diaries and journals.

However, the degree of economic independence should not be exaggerated. For many of their needs, households performed just a step or two in the production process, relying on craftsmen or neighbors for the remainder of the work. After 1750, the market economy began to serve an ever-increasing proportion of consumption needs and, by the early 1800's, more and more production was occurring in factory settings. The decline of "putting out" manufacture took from married

women a source of income and independence and, hence, led them to specialize in purely consumption activities.

FAMILY DECISION-MAKING

Despite the ideology of male supremacy in the 18th and early 19th centuries, personal correspondence, published letters, court testimonies, and probate records do provide evidence of joint decision-making. The choice of consumer goods was particularly subject to female influence because, as a domestic matter, it came within the sphere of women's responsibility. Moreover, traditional rules and norms did not anticipate the onset of a consumer society with its profusion of new products for the household. Nevertheless, until more data are uncovered, the relative influence of men and women remains undecided.

ORDERING, SHOPPING, AND PURCHASING

Actual purchasing activities are much better documented than decision-making. For example, numerous account books show that upper-class males and some females requested, on behalf of their families, that their London agents buy household items. However, most Americans purchased what they needed through provincial channels of distribution. A chronic shortage of specie made establishing a good credit relationship with local shopkeepers essential to the viability of the household. Because it took place outside the household, arranging credit was one activity that generally devolved upon husbands, but wives, as well as single, widowed and divorced women, did have individual shop accounts. Diaries verify that some couples engaged in joint shopping expeditions and also that women spent hours "going to the shops" alone or with female companions. Eighteenth-century store ledgers further document women's purchasing, but do indicate that men were by far the most frequent store customers. Early 19th century drawings, advertising material, and genre painting suggest a growing importance of women in the act of purchasing.

THE GENDERING OF CONSUMPTION

Goods have many uses, from providing sustenance to maintaining social relationships to marking cultural categories, one of which is gender. American women developed a fondness for tea, whereas serious consumption of alcoholic beverages remained a predominantly male pastime. As material wealth accumulated rapidly after the mid-1700s, dress became increasingly extravagant for both sexes, but women's clothing and hairstyles aroused particularly strong feelings. Letters printed in newspapers and pamphlets ridiculed women for their excesses, partly as a criticism of perceived female pridefulness and also, perhaps, because of a perceived threat to male dominance. Indeed, the wider variety of consumer goods that began to flood the American market after 1750 might have enabled women to attach their own, independent meanings to things. Ironically, women often showed more enthusiasm than their menfolk for the boycotts and home production that characterized the "nonimportation movement" of the 1760s and 1770s.

IMPLICATIONS

This research has several theoretical implications. First, a public ideology supporting ultimate male authority does not necessarily curtail female influence upon household decision-making and purchasing behavior. Second, as early as two hundred years ago, American society began to define the buying and using of domestic goods as being within a woman's domain. Finally, a variety of domestic goods, clothing above all, seemed to have had more symbolic importance for American women than for men. Not only is household consumption gendered but, in many ways, that gender is female.