

FEMALE CONSUMERS: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DIY CONSUMPTION

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, women's financial contribution to the household was often considered vital to the family's economic stability. However, women were seldom in charge of funds (Silverstein and Sayre 2009). Many socio-economic changes during the past decades have transformed the dynamics of the gendered marketplace and put women in control of \$4.3 trillion every year (Silverstein and Sayre 2009). Females' enormous purchasing power has affected their decisions to enter the housing market and more women than ever are buying homes. The share of single female home buyers has also increased and makes up 20% of homes purchased (Joint Center of Housing Studies 2005). The role of women as home owners and heads of households has changed the dynamics in which women engage in do-it-yourself (DIY) behavior. Although limited research has addressed women's engagement in DIY activities, one recent survey reports that women are taking a greater share in home improvement, upkeep, and maintenance activities (MedeliaMonitor 2009). Also, home improvement giant, Lowe's, discovered that women initiate 80 percent of all home improvement projects (Lowe's 2003). This recent shift in female consumers DIY practices lead us to investigate the way women engage in DIY activities and the meanings they experience through their consumption practices. Initial informal dialogues with female DIY consumers lead us to the empowerment literature. The marketing literature addresses consumer empowerment in two ways. First, consumer empowerment is defined as giving consumers power through resources such as greater information or better understanding of processes involved in the creation of offerings (Harrison et al. 2006). Second, consumer empowerment is defined as a subjective experience caused by perceptions of increased control through choices (Wathieu et al. 2002). A central and interesting feature of empowerment is the close association with resistance to cultural norms. According to Shaw (2001) empowerment is a central characteristic of resistance that enables women to create new opportunities and identities, which are not automatically assigned by traditional gender norms. The concept of female empowerment has received little attention in marketing. The current study intends to fill this gap and explores the concept of female empowerment in the light of women practicing DIY behavior.

METHOD

This study utilizes a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). First, we conducted a dozen informal in-depth interviews with female DIYers at DIY retail stores to enhance our theoretical sensitivity and to finalize the interview protocol. Utilizing snow-ball sampling technique, sixteen formal interviews with self-professed female DIYers ranging from 45-75 minutes were then conducted. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Informants were asked to tell stories about their DIY projects. Data analysis began with open coding and we then grouped concepts into categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and theory emerged with the identification of variations of empowerment themes. Discrepancies in the coding were discussed and resolved by the three authors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of our analysis was to gain insight into women's DIY practices. The data highlights the importance of consumer empowerment in the consumption process—more specifically how women derive a sense of empowerment through consumption of DIY activities. Preliminary findings based on the data analysis revealed five sub themes that substantiate feelings of empowerment when undergoing DIY behavior. For example, informants communicated that their DIY behavior is negotiated and influenced by interactions and specific life events and situations, societal expectations, and resulted in feelings of empowerment. More specifically, we found that women's feelings of empowerment through DIY activities are derived (1) through project initiation, (2) production mastery, (3) by adding value to economic goods and services, (4) unleashing creative potential, and (5) through a sense of ownership. Our findings mirror the gender theory perspective, which states that household expectations and responsibilities are not passively stepped into, but are negotiated and renegotiated throughout interactions (Zvonkovic et al. 1996). With the overlap of the growing DIY market and the increasing role of women as primary or independent consumption decision makers, we posit that the area of female DIY behavior is especially relevant. Because DIY behavior is closely linked to people's homes, we suggest that the increase of DIY home remodeling and the consumption of related goods can be affected by gender behavior.

References available upon request.