

CHAPTER 2

WOMEN'S CONSUMPTION FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: ENABLING OR CONSTRAINING?

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between gender—more specifically, women—and consumption has been one of the central issues in research on consumer culture. Historical, political, and cultural approaches to consumption have viewed women as the main consumers in society. Recent scholarship suggests that this relationship between women and consumption was established during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Lubar, 1998). As Andrews and Talbot (2000) argued: “in westernized capitalist societies it [consumption] is an inevitable experience that is part of being female” (p. 1). There are certain ways in which production has been assigned to men, whereas consumption has been assigned to women. The underlying assumption was that buying and arranging domestic objects were women's tasks, as the domestic sphere belonged to them (Lubar, 1998). However, the identification of consumption with women is not simple and straightforward. This is because consumption involves “not only...[the] purchasing and using up of items produced by the commercial world but also bringing meaning to items, appropriating them, making them, indeed taking them, as one's own” and “consists of representation, identity, consumption, production, and regulation” (Andrews and Talbot, 2000, p. 2). Furthermore, consumption is a “sphere where femininity is performed, where versions of femininity are legitimated and negotiated, or contested and rejected” (Andrews and Talbot, 2000, p. 1).

Whether the access to goods, sites, spectacles, and services empowered women is one of the issues regarding the relationship between women and consumption. According to some feminists, consumption has empowered women (De Grazia and Furlough, 1996). After being a part of consumer culture through department stores and other centralized institutions of shopping, women could appear in downtown commercial districts and other spaces from which they were previously

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