

Embodied Consumers and Footwear: Mundane and Extreme Transitions

Feminist debates around fashion have struggled with concepts of structure and agency in relation to both the political concerns of the women's movement and a theoretical recognition of both patriarchal and capitalist structures. Within such structures, a concern with appearance has been seen as positioning women as 'cultural dopes', victims of a system wherein women are defined by how they fit a western, white and often middle class archetype of beauty. In the process, cultural, economic and body capital is accrued for their being the scrutinised subject of the male gaze. At one end of the historical spectrum, in the 1970s, in London, women's movement campaigners famously let loose white mice on the Miss World stage in protest about how women are defined by appearance and what they wear. In contrast, recent discourses can expound neo-liberalist notions of choice, 'girl power' and the freedom to produce a myriad of identities through an excess of consumer choice. This latter perspective has been debated by feminists, including McRobbie (2008) who, via theorists of the everyday such as de Certeau, takes issue with the notion that resistance and opposition to dominant ideologies such as patriarchal ones are automatically progressive. Instead, she argues that a 'cultural populist' vein, which effectively celebrates women's assumed capacity to subvert the world of consumer culture can lead to a culture of 'entitlement' with agency being misconstrued in the process.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that earlier feminist writing on these issues has always been either polarised, linear in argument or has not been nuanced enough to recognise how structure and agency combine in sometimes surprising ways. For example, Wilson's (1985) early influential text *Adorned in Dreams* sees dress as both sword and shield, as being a medium for ideas about both gender and status as well as allowing agency for protest and oppositional identity to represent itself through fashion. Later, however, with an emphasis on structure, Wolf (1991) argues that women compulsively pursue the 'beauty myth' in a way which is both consuming and destructive. She further contends that increased consumer power is falsely represented as a backlash against feminism, arguing, specifically in relation to shoes that

aspects of a working women's wardrobe, including high heels, have been appropriated as 'pornographic accessories' (45). To take these debates forward, it is necessary to pay attention to wider sociological theories on the agency/structure dynamic to explore this apparent dichotomy and its nuanced interaction. In addition, fleshing out these theories with the footprint of empirical data which describe the embodied and gendered consumer's relationship with shoes, allows the ideas of social theory to be more informed by the lived realities of people's social lives.

Missing from these debates is a recognition and focus on relationality and connectedness, or rather, a meso-level in between structure and agency, a level we both contribute to and are influenced by (for example, through the interaction the embodied human actor has with family, friends and colleagues). Moreover, the agency/structure debates do not recognise how the mundane/extraordinary (that is, the normal routines and relationships and the transformative aspects of existence) inflects everyday life (producing different kinds of femininity and masculinity, for example, as the same woman/man moves between different occasions and practices in both mundane and extraordinary situations). Recognising the importance of the mundane, or the everyday, has a long sociological history, being what Lefebvre calls the 'common ground' or 'connective tissue' of all human thoughts and activities. Whilst, Chaney (2002) suggests that the everyday acts a space for 'other ways of being' that can be envisaged.

Using data from a UK 3 year ESRC funded qualitative study of identity, transition and footwear we weave together these concerns. At the same time, we develop a more fine grained feminist and sociological understanding of consumer practices. Combining breadth with depth, we have carried out...focus groups, followed by year long case studies with 15 men and women, of different social backgrounds. These included using participants' own shoes to gain information and prompt reflection, filming the shoes being worn, for example, having a pedicure, at the gym and burlesque evenings, and accompanied shoe shopping trips.

Our approach to interpreting this data has been informed by Smart's (2007) work on personal life. Addressing the problematic practice of generating structural theories which are then applied with limited success to empirical studies, she argues for the need to make sense of personal life in terms of *connectedness*. Or, in other words, the meso level. Without this, theoretical understanding risks estrangement from people's everyday lives, and, moreover, the personal tends not to be seen as a reason for amending 'grand' theory. At worst, the richness and complexity of individual experience is reduced to mere illustrations of a dominant theoretical position. Our empirical work on shoes, for example, has made us increasingly aware of the deleterious effect of high heeled shoes upon women's feet. This has been revealed through our relationship with podiatrists and through listening to women speak with passion about the beautiful high-heeled shoes they desire so intensely and the pain they suffer wearing them. Yet, macro-level theoretical interpretations too readily reduce women to victims of a male gaze. Moreover, as Brannen and Nilsen warn: 'when theoretical concepts are not grounded in local contexts they more easily lend themselves to rhetorical purposes and can take on an ideological aspect ... when such theories chime with dominant political discourse, they feed back into society and gain even greater ideological and rhetorical power' (cited in Smart, 2007, p. 9). So if we perceive our participants as victims of oppressive gender hierarchies, we risk shoring up populist imagery that depicts women as helplessly insatiable consumers of whatever shoe designers choose to seduce them with. Such perceptions are indeed familiar to women themselves as evidenced by Luna, a 29 year-old BME female participant in our project. Talking of the hoof shoes that Lady Gaga wore, she said:

I saw Beyonce wearing them and that's what scared me, and that's, that looks like a bound foot, I don't know if you've ever seen what Chinese foot binding was like, it looks like a bound foot. And that scares me because I think to myself is that what we're going to be forced to wear next, do you know what I mean?

Elsewhere in her interview, Luna consistently described her determination not to wear shoes that damaged her feet, despite finding certain high heeled shoes 'absolutely stunning'. Yet in this extract, she expresses the belief that

she and other women could be 'forced' to wear something that evoked Chinese foot binding, a perception which in many ways echoes a macro-level sociological interpretation.

So if we are wary of macro-level theorising, particularly its capacity to be appropriated for rhetorical or ideological purposes, how do our case studies of 15 *individuals* enable a meso level theoretical understanding that is truer to our participants' lives? What we've found is that their testimonies are *peopled*, with partners, parents, colleagues and others; and these are the advisors, sounding boards and audiences in relation to whom shoes are assessed and experienced. Rather than mechanically buying shoes featured in *Vogue* or *Bella* magazines, or generating pick and mix identities through quirky individualistic choices, our participants chose and wore their shoes with an awareness of their fit with particular *social* contexts and events. Indeed, they readily reanimated the voices of relatives and friends in relation to whom a pair had been chosen or worn. Utilising Goffman's work on the presentation of self and Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Jenkins (2004) refers to the improvisational nature of this kind of social interaction, a field within which habit, or the habitus, operates to make the presentation of self something that 'operates neither consciously nor unconsciously, neither deliberately nor automatically'. And, as he emphasises, the habitus is 'simultaneously collective and individual and definitively embodied' (20). :

Within this theoretical context, then, we're asking how footwear contributes to the dynamic process of identity formation. Led by the data, we start by considering some of its apparent contradictions, particularly our participants' concern both to avoid shoes that somehow single them out within a social context *and* their desire to look special and indeed to attract admiration. As Luna said of a pair of heeled, strappy shoes:

*I must have been having a, a sexy day that day [when I bought them].
[laughs] ... I really like these shoes, I think they look so like trendy but ...
these shoes are funny ... I put them on and I look at my feet and I love the
way that they look and then I take them off, it's not like they hurt ... more than*

any other types of heels but I think as I'm quite plain and simple most of the time I feel that they're a bit too much for me, but I won't get rid of them, I'll keep them.

Talking about how to interpret both individuals and society, Simmel refers to two antagonistic forces which act to mutually limit one another, arguing that fashion is one of the forms of life through which:

.. we seek to combine in uniforms spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change'
543.

Luna's wariness of shoes that are '*too much for me*' because she is '*quite plain and simple most of the time*', her case study data also reveal the social dimensions of her subjectivity; they point towards the influence of Luna's husband who urges her to wear high heels, her Fijian background where soft immaculate feet are prized and the critical gaze of her Muslim in-laws.

And by contrast we have Eve, white, female, 32, who says,

I'm not a wallflower, I don't want to be blending into the background but ... when I'm in my work clothes ... I am more invisible somehow, I'm never totally invisible with the (red) hair ...when I was a teenager, whenever I saw somebody else with red hair, it's my thing, you're not allowed to do it,

Alongside her work role, Eve is a DJ at a burlesque evening, a different social context, one where she relishes standing out among other extravagantly dressed women and men.

For some participants, wanting to fit in *and* to stand out is an ongoing push/pull experience. This is exemplified by Catherine, white, female, early 60s, whose foot problems make high heeled shoes very painful, yet who loves glamorous shoes. Catherine writes in her scrapbook:

Last weekend was my husband's seventieth birthday, most of our friends are at least ten years younger than us, ... all the women are attractive and glamorous, they are mostly very slim and wear clothes which are expensive and close fitting, their dresses are just above the knee and they accessorise them with high heeled stiletto shoes, they all can walk in them and they all look better in them than in low heels or flats, the calf muscle is put to use which improves the look of the leg, I felt quite envious of these friends, so I am more determined than ever to lose enough weight to make high heels a possibility, ...another week goes by and I am just the same, no thinner and still in pretend heels.

In this social context then, Catherine longs to fit in, striving to diet and so minimise the weight bearing down on her feet. Yet when she sings in a choir she wants to set herself apart:

I'm a soprano and I'm very proud of the fact ... I should really sing alto but I won't ...I'm not an alto in temperament ... I'm a soprano, for goodness sake, so when I go to choir I like to look the part ... not like all those ... middle aged women across there ... one woman wears like children's Clarks sandals and somebody else wears orthopaedic shoes ... there's all these lace ups and really unattractive old women's shoes ...so, I do, I smarten up when I go to choir, but, yes... if they hurt, you don't sing as well I think ...or maybe sometimes it sharpens you up so you're ... the high notes.

Of the 'soprano temperament, she says:

I think we tend to be more dramatic .. you have to be expressive, you're the person that everybody hears most ... if I sang a supporting role ... like the altos ... I'd probably go insane really, not a chance to show off ... I'm a born show-off really.

As Highmore (2002) reminds us, mundane or everyday experiences such as these can also be seen as extraordinary, that is, as subsuming the bizarre or mysterious (or even, as with some of the shoes referred to in this paper, exotic, sensuous and glamorous as well as pain giving). And it is this extraordinary element of everyday life which informs the paradoxical and contradictory nature of the mundane. Indeed, as our data demonstrate, the contradictions and ambiguities evident in people's relationship to their shoes

are played out and negotiated within their everyday wearing of them, in the context of mundane social environments and relationships. They are not necessarily expressed as extreme or 'peak' moments, even though our case study approach makes evident the presence of fears around ageing, being invisible, or finding oneself single. The meso level, can therefore, be seen as the site where the mundane and extraordinary interact, as well as where individuals' subjective and gendered understandings of their shoes are formed through the complex social contexts in which they make sense of contradictory elements of their experiences.

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