‘They Come, and They Are Happy’: A Gender Topography of Consumer Space in Dubai

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In 2004, several US-American newspapers published articles praising Saudi Arabia for a step towards women’s liberation. In Riyadh, a shopping center had dedicated an entire floor to women’s-only usage; women could take off their veils and shop without fear of interruption by male intruders. The *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Seattle Times* were unanimous in their approval of the Lady’s Kingdom shopping center. According to their accounts, it was a ‘liberated zone’ in the midst of a land, ‘where women are kept under wraps by packs of cane-wielding religious police.’ The *Los Angeles Times* article quoted the manager of a Giorgio Armani store, who reported that women storm the place, ‘they come, they take their “abayas” off, and they’re happy’ (Stack, 2004).

Judging from such writing, these US newspapers interpreted the women’s-only shopping area as a foreign and highly exotic phenomenon. The reports were able to combine two widespread clusters of social categorizations – that of a consumption-oriented, materialist woman and that of an oppressive, patriarchal Arabic society. As a subtle thesis underlying these constructions, they also recited popular ideas about the market’s liberating power, suggesting that women’s participation in the consumer market enhances women’s participation in society, and hence, their happiness.

Contrary to these accounts, women’s-only consumer spaces are not unusual on the Arabic peninsula, but their success is often limited. Five years before the introduction of Lady’s Kingdom in Riyadh, a women’s-only shopping center was introduced in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arabic Emirates. A local development firm introduced the space as a prototype for additional centers. If the project succeeded, they announced, thirteen additional centers in various Emirate cities would
follow (Khalili, 1999). The She Zone in Abu Dhabi comprised 33 stores, a mosque, a business center, coffee shops, a beauty and health center, a cinema and a children’s party space. The administration excluded males older than ten from the center. Shop assistants and security guards were all female and no surveillance cameras were allowed inside the center. Under these conditions, the center was able to provide women with the privacy and freedom to remove their black abaya robes and scarves without violating the tradition of covering one’s entire body, when leaving the private home. As the president of She Zone developer Mark Link Property Management explained to the Middle East newspaper, ‘Even in the US . . . you have women’s gyms and even cigar clubs. It’s all about specialization’ (Thomas, 2000: 27–8).

In Western history, the discursive association of consumerism and femininity has a long and resilient tradition. A wide range of voices, from popular market analysts to social scientists, have insisted on an innate link between these two concepts. As early as in the mid nineteenth century, when the first department stores were introduced, the public debate on consumerism focused on the danger as well as the potential of this relationship (Bowlby, 1985; McRobbie, 1997; Nava, 1997). According to popular accounts of the time, the hormonal turbulence which middle class women experienced on a regular basis caused an overall malleability and irrationality in the female mind, and destabilized her mental health, as well as her shopping habits (Abelson, 1989). In the late nineteenth century, social scientists also argued that women’s affinity for consumption was stimulated by middle class women’s duty to represent, or embody, the status of the family. In 1902, Thorstein Veblen (1953) defined women’s conspicuous consumption less as an issue of individual irrationality than one of collective labor.

Today, many of the popular arguments about women’s consumerism build on these two trajectories and assert the impact of manipulation and representation. At the same time, feminist studies associate women’s consumptive practices with processes of identification and signification. They are interested in reconstructing the cycles of production and consumption in everyday life. While these approaches also guided the 2004 US newspaper reports on the women’s shopping spaces in the Middle East, processes of othering and orientalism added another layer onto the already complex discursive convolute: that is, these reports attributed a uniqueness in constellation to a geographic environment which was then signed by a radical otherness. In the postcolonial world, the constructed difference between the West and the Rest is often projected onto women’s bodies. In this context, women have become powerful symbols