GENDERING SERVICE RESEARCH

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The present paper investigates how gender is performed in service theory and it seeks to contribute to recent discussions on the role of marketing in the construction of gender in the marketplace (Bettany et al. 2010). While previous research has stressed the gendered nature of marketing theory (Arno et al. 2015), particularly in relation to consumers’ identity projects (cf. Hearn and Hein 2015) little research has engaged in theorizing gender in the field of marketing (cf. Arsel et al. 2015) and particular in the area of service marketing.

Accordingly, there is a need for feminist theorizations of marketing thought and a particular focus on how marketing discourse reproduce structural inequalities in service marketing and management. Service marketing represents one domain within marketing that has surprisingly few critically oriented studies (cf. Fougère and Skålén 2013, Skålén et al. 2006) and in which gender and feminist theory remain startlingly absent. Moreover, in light of the development of ‘transformative service research’ and how service may improve consumers’ life quality and wellbeing (Anderson et al. 2013) the importance of a gender and feminist perspective on service becomes even more actualized. Not at least in emphasizing a transformatory agenda concerning the status of women (Catterall et al. 2005, Gurrieri et al. 2014).

Seeking to advance gender and feminist theory into service research, the present paper aims at exploring the gendered nature of service marketing thinking and more particularly how the value co-creation discourse frames gender. There are different strategies of ‘gendering theory’ (see e.g. Squires 2013, Sainsbury 1994) which, however, involve identifying central assumptions that may undermine or hinder the development of a more equal and feminist-driven knowledge development. The present study, therefore, departs from a deconstruction of the value co-creation, which has become a central and dominating principle in contemporary service research. While several critical voices have been raised in relation to the principles of value co-creation (see e.g. Zwick and Bradshaw 2016, Cova et al. 2011, Arvidsson 2006, Zwick et al. 2008) few
studies have scrutinized the foundation of value co-creation from a feminist perspective.

Value co-creation has become a central discourse in contemporary marketing management thought, as a result of the diffusion and adoption of service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004) and service logic (Gronroos 2006). Central to this discourse is an understanding of human capabilities, typically described as operant resources (e.g. knowledge and skills), as immaterial assets (Campbell et al. 2013) and consumer agency as a potential source of competence for value to be created in the market. From a critical point of view, value co-creation discourse emphasize consumer agency as a source of competence to be employed by corporations for generating service efficiency and improve their economic outcome (cf. Cova and Dalli 2009). Thus, consumers’ meaning-making processes and individuals’ self-realization processes are emphasized as central for the productive process of creating value (see e.g. Grönroos 2011, Vargo and Lusch 2008). As a reaction to towards this, a number of studies have highlighted problems with how value is conceptualized (Echeverri and Skålén 2011, Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006) while others have more explicitly problematized the political ‘neoliberal normativity’ associated with SDL (and the notion of value co-creation) and how this means a neglect of power structures in contemporary society (Hietanen et al. 2017). Or how value co-creation promotes neoliberal principles in terms of responsibility and choice, which results in a problematic framing of consumer agency due to that self-realization only can be accomplished through consumption (Arvidsson 2006, Zwick et al. 2008).

Accordingly, it is essential to consider the political side of marketing discourse and how marketing is aligned with a neoliberal governance of people’s lives (Yngfalk and Fyrberg Yngfalk 2015, Gurrieri et al. 2013). From a feminist point of view, marketing implies to a large degree the management of woman’s identities, lives and bodies. Thus, in order to respond to principles of the entrepreneurial self, consumers, and in particular women, are conducting self-assessment and improvements by constantly conducting prudent consumption choices. Something that tends to result in increased levels of stress and anxiety (Yngfalk and Fyrberg Yngfalk 2015, Gurrieri et al. 2013). Hence, consumption is used for compensating for experienced shortcomings, which often are related to patriarchal norms and principles. In order to scrutinize how value co-creation frames gender and the implications this have on peoples life and wellbeing (Anderson et al. 2013) it is, however, not enough to
highlight neoliberal governance in more general terms but also to scrutinize how service marketing and value co-creation discourse are entangled with contemporary male dominant systems or neoliberal patriarchies (cf. Campbell 2013) in contemporary society.

REFERENCES


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