



A Case Study of a Nineteenth-Century Southern Planter Family's Female Members' Participation in Consumer Culture through Decorative Textiles and Personal Dress Items

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Over the past few decades, social, cultural, economic, and political historians have more frequently combined forces to explore and explain the history of consumer societies and their consumption behaviors (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Decorative household textiles and dress items easily conform to the consumption process when researching consumer culture. Kunz and Garner's (2011) clothing consumption process is a cycle involving five stages: acquisition, inventory, use, renovation, and discard. This cycle is exhibited in present-day consumption practices; however, not as much is known about American consumption behaviors before the introduction of mass-produced textiles and dress items. Besides the historic artifacts held at public institutions and in private collections, personal documents and records are some of the only remaining links to pre-twentieth-century American consumer culture.

This study's purpose was to expand the knowledge of Southern planter-class women's relationships to decorative household textiles and personal dress items through a historical lens. Guided by consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and past research on the home and its decorations and personal dress items as expressions of the self (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Sadalla, Vershure, & Burroughs, 1987), several questions were posed regarding: 1) the types of decorative household textiles and personal dress items that were purchased, created, or received as gifts; 2) the purpose for the purchase or creation of these textiles and personal dress items; 3) the memories or meanings assigned to textile and dress-related possessions; 4) the manner in which women renovated decorative household textiles and personal dress items; and 5) the method which women disposed of decorative household textiles and personal dress items.

As a case study, a content analysis was performed on the personal documents and records attributed to two generations of women from the Edward J. Gay family of nineteenth-century Louisiana, which are held in the archives of Louisiana State University's Hill Memorial Library. While reviewing personal communications, succession records, and purchase receipts, instances were recorded in which the women's participation in the consumption process of decorative household textiles and dress items appeared. Dates of recorded instances were also noted in order to track the frequency of the women's consumption behaviors over time. NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software was used in order to identify recurring themes in the collected data related to the types of decorative household textiles and dress items and the stages of the consumption process in which the women were involved.

A total of 273 personal documents and records were used in the data analysis, with the Gay family women's letters accounting for approximately 69% of the sources. The acquisition, use, renovation, and discard stages of Kunz and Garner's (2011) consumption process were

readily identified during analysis, with the women recorded as acquiring goods almost 35% more frequently than using or discarding goods. Thirty-one occasions of creation were recorded in which the women made decorative household textiles and dress items using new materials. "Creation" was identified as a potential stage that had not previously been included in Kunz and Garner's (2011) model. In addition, acquired goods were noted as possibly needing renovation before use, depending on their conditions upon acquisition. The identification of the "creation" stage and the reordering of the "use" and "renovation" stages leads to a proposed, modified model of the consumption process. In agreement with nineteenth-century gendered dress customs, dresses were the most frequently documented dress item that the Gay family women acquired, created, or renovated for personal or other female family members' use, followed by shirtwaists and skirts. The women often discussed the purposes or the meanings behind their decorative household textiles and personal dress items, with most acquisition, creation, and renovation efforts focused on themselves and their children and grandchildren. The women were prudent in their renovation and creation activities; yet, their consumption behaviors related to decorative household textiles and dress items appear to be an interesting exception to the known struggles that many Southern planter families experienced during the Civil War and Reconstruction Era because the Gay family actually thrived financially during these periods.

Conclusion

This research adds to the body of knowledge of Louisiana history and will help to fill part of the void in American consumer culture history prior to 1890 once other Southern planter family's personal documents and records are investigated. The nineteenth-century Gay family is known for its economic and political contributions to Louisiana via patriarch Edward J. Gay's sugar and cotton commission firm, in addition to individual family members' terms in the United States Congress. Prior to this study, little was known about the family as everyday consumers. Although some of the nineteenth-century Gay family women's decorative household textiles and dress items are held in Louisiana State University's Textile and Costume Museum, not much information regarding the artifacts' historic provenance has been recorded. The artifacts are evidence of the women as consumers of decorative household textiles and dress items, but little, if any, context relating to their acquisition, creation, or use is known. An examination of the historic, primary documents attributed to the women gives a better understanding of nineteenth-century Southern planter-class females' consumption of decorative household textiles and dress items, as well as supports the use of a modified consumption process model.

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