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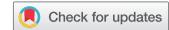
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A pen that 'looks like a CEO in a business suit': gendering the fountain pen

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the gendering of the fountain pen as a product category mainly used in the office environment. It draws on hobbyists' accounts and evaluations of fountain pen use from online forums. The accounts suggest that hobbyists perceive the fountain pen market to take executive men as its authentic user group, whereas pens that target women often reflect stereotypical femininities. At the office, this gendering process impacts users' everyday experiences especially with reference to the managerial norms that govern the use of suits and accessories, since the fountain pen is considered by its users as part of an array of men's status objects. The article contributes to the literature on the gendering of artifacts by describing a hegemonic manner in which artifacts are gendered, that is, as a range of products that target diverse masculinities and femininities in contradistinction to a single, masculine product type.

Introduction

How can an object that is as mundane and ubiquitous as a pen be made the subject of feminist inquiry?[1] Several decades of research across the social sciences have shown that artifacts bear cultural significance as commodities (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997), objectify social relations and identities as material culture (Miller, 1987), and shape, compel and forestall behavior as technologies (Latour, 1992). In the context of feminist research, the question of how the artifact is gendered – associated with femininities and masculinities – and how it reproduces or challenges prevalent gender norms are pursued here. In this paper, we show that a close study of an office tool, the fountain pen, is useful in revealing gendered relations at the office, as well as in discussing the ways an artifact can be a node on which a multiplicity of gendered practices intersect.

The paper starts with a review of how the gendering of artifacts has been theorized by feminist scholarship and then moves on to the case of the fountain pen. The empirical basis of the study comes from the thematic analysis of two major online forums for fountain pen users, Fountain Pen Network (www.fountainpennetwork.com) and FPGeeks (www.fpgeeks.com), as resources that provide first-hand accounts of users' experiences and their opinions as hobbyists. The data consists of forum entries dated between 2009 and 2016, comprising general discussions, requests for advice, pen and ink reviews, and technical discussions. In analysis, our first objective is to show that, purchased or gifted, carried in one's pocket or purse, used on one's desk or at a meeting, a fountain pen is experienced and narrated by its users as a gendered artifact. The more theoretical objective is then to outline the specific manner in

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which the fountain pen is gendered as not only a single artifact but a product category. This requires a detailed description of the ways in which it is perceived, purchased and consumed by its users, and especially how at the office it mediates and materializes gendered ideas, practices and relations. We conclude that the fountain pen is gendered in a peculiar, hegemonic, manner that diverges from similar accounts of other artifacts in the literature, as characterized by an ideal masculine pen for executive men gendered in opposition to a large number of other pens that represent alternative masculinities and femininities. In this, we emphasize the role of the ideal pen's association with gendered dress norms at work, specifically with the suit.

Gendering of artifacts: a review of literature

Studies that examine gender relations around artifacts have primarily been concerned with home and domestic technologies. Early studies from the fields of sociology (see e.g. Cowan, 1983) and design history (Buckley, 1986; Forty, 1986) have shown how technological artifacts entered homes by promising to lessen women's work, but instead produced new kinds of labor by increasing the standards of hygiene. Women were considered to be the sole users of household appliances who serve the other members of the family, yet not to possess the necessary 'male' skills to fix the same appliances. Considering that the technologists who developed these artifacts were also always men, feminist scholars have confidently concluded that 'it is men on the whole who are in control of women's domestic machinery and domestic environment' (Cockburn, 1985, p. 220).

Subsequently, domestic technologies attracted further attention by feminist technology scholars. The social constructionist conceptualization of gender as a social process rather than merely a property of individuals, has encouraged researchers to ask how artifacts can embody and convey gender relations (Cockburn & Fürst-Dilic, 1994; Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993; Grint & Gill, 1995; Wajcman, 1991). Informed by earlier studies, they uncovered the dualistic gender symbolisms through which these technologies become meaningful: The private domain and domestic technologies are associated with women and the feminine, the public domain and state-of-the-art technologies with men and the masculine. Design historians extended this list by adding form and ornamentation on the former's side as opposed to function and technology on the latter's (Attfield, 1989; Sparke, 1995). This body of work questioned the hierarchy inherent to the dualism, in which the associations of the masculine are always valued over the feminine, paralleling the privileged position of men in society.

While the key literature has been dominated by objects in the domestic sphere, a number of case studies have looked into other contexts of personal use. Design historian Pat Kirkham's (1996) edited collection comprises studies on bicycles (Oddy, 1996), hearing aids (Schwartz, 1996), a gun designed for women (McKellar, 1996), and children's toys (Attfield, 1996; Hendershot, 1996). In another edited volume, Lerman, Oldenziel, and Mohun (2003) presented studies of bras, closets, collars and bathrooms as feminine technologies that are related to the private sphere and the body (McGaw, 2003), and of the automobile as a strongly masculine technology (Oldenziel, 2003). Among these, the automobile is possibly the most prominent example of a masculine technology, having attracted much attention by feminist scholars (Kirkham, 2000; Scharff, 1991; Schwartzman & Decker, 2008; Styhre, Backman, & Börjesson, 2005). These studies show how the automobile, as a product and an industry, has reproduced throughout its history the assumption that men, in the roles of both designers/engineers and consumers, have an authentic relationship with cars, mechanics and industrial technology.

Another strand of research has utilized the concept of 'script' to describe the ways designers' anticipations regarding potential users' competences, responsibilities etc. are built into artifacts in the form of technical prescriptions with which future users are expected to comply (Akrich, 1992). Formulated as 'gender script', the concept is used by feminist scholars to study how gendered user representations shape end products (Berg & Lie, 1995; Rommes, van Oost, & Oudshoorn, 1999). Researchers studied a wide range of artifacts such as toys, bicycles and watches (Oudshoorn, Saetnan, & Lie, 2002) and various domestic appliances (Aaltojärvi, 2012) to produce inventories of gender scripts. Others concentrated on single cases, including electric shavers (van Oost, 2003), toys (Rommes, Bos, & Geerdink, 2011) and

mobile phones (Shade, 2007). Focusing on users as viewed from within design and technology development processes, this body of work has bracketed the technical qualities of artifacts as the principal medium of interaction between designers and users (van der Velden & Mörtberg, 2012), thus breaking with the tendencies in earlier work to investigate the larger networks of relationships at the expense of the qualities of the products themselves.

Our review of the literature shows that feminist scholarship has placed considerable attention on artifacts for domestic environments and personal use. Despite the growing body of work on the office environment, which is another strongly gendered domain of social life, discussions on the gendering of the artifacts at work seem to be limited to the physical environment and interior elements (see Acker, 1990; Kemp, Angell, & McLoughlin, 2015; Rutherford, 2001) or dress and appearance norms (see Dellinger, 2002; Lester, 2008; for an exception, see Lie, 1995, on computers).

Addressing this gap in literature, we suggest that the office represents an important context for feminist studies of artifacts, since everyday work life is patterned by a distinction between femininities and masculinities (Britton, 2000; Martin, 2006; Meyerson & Kolb, 2000). Drawing on the conclusions of the earlier work that artifacts play an important role in the construction and reproduction of femininities and masculinities, in this paper we explore the gendering of fountain pen as a personal object that is used primarily in the office environment. Our analysis is presented in two parts: First we outline how the fountain pen market is gendered from the point of view of hobbyists. In the second part, we look closely at the office as fountain pens' typical context, and describe how pens mediate and materialize gendered relations at work.

Fountain pen as a men's tool

The research here suggests that many women forum users find the current market gender-biased in that pens are designed and marketed with men in mind, starting with the shopping experience. They narrate how men's interest in pens is taken for granted along with a tendency to disregard women as customers in pen shops and fairs:

> More often than not, I get completely ignored when I go into pen stores alone. I get a polite smile, at most. However, when I go with my boyfriend or a male friend, the salesperson/people will always direct their question, 'How can I help you?' or 'Can I help you find something today?' while making eye contact with him. Then they seem surprised when I speak up.

A number of hobbyists suggest that current fountain pen designs also reflect this bias in the prevalent style, especially among high-end products. Some women writers argue that a masculine aesthetics dominates the market, denoting larger size and weight, dark colors and masculine forms – 'utilitarian and clunky' pens as opposed to 'slender, delicately-designed' ones. The epitome of masculine pens seems to be *Montblanc 149*, defined by one reviewer as 'an oversized, cigar shaped pen that exudes sheer majesty'. In fact, the term 'cigar shaped' describes a category of pens that look like cigars with their rounded edges, and has the self-evident connotations of wealth and manliness, which invoke occasional jokes on the forums that allude to the phallic character of the cigar form. Other pens that are counted as 'masculine' in the forums include the *Montblanc Thomas Mann*, which, it is said, 'looks like a CEO in a business suit', *Pelikan* pens, which have 'a macho vibe', and the 'obscenely big *Nakaya* desk pens'.

There also exists a range of pens that specifically target women consumers. Forum writers typically mention high-end pens including *Montblanc Diva*, *Montblanc Princesse Grace de Monaco*, and *S.T. Dupont Liberté*, and less expensive examples such as the *Waterman Audace* series, all of which feature subtly curvaceous bodies. In addition, many low-end fountain pen models are produced in pink, pastel or glittering colors, or floral patterns, or combinations of white with silver or gold in attempts to suggest femininity. Vintage pens for women are also mentioned, a typical example being the *Lady Sheaffer Skripsert* series: cartridge-only, clipless pens, offered in textures that resemble jewelry or fashion textiles with matching purse cases.

Hobbyists tend to be critical of the ways fountain pens are feminized to address women users. One prevalent position is that all pens are – or should be designed and marketed as – unisex writing tools.

According to one woman user, specific references to women in the marketing of some pens can imply that the rest of the pens are by default for men: 'I find the concept of "ladies' pen" patronizing. I can't recall the last time I saw a company advertising a pen as a "man's pen"'. This criticism echoes the perception that men are target consumers of fountain pens in shops and fairs. An example can be found in the strong reactions against the *Pelikan Souverän Pink*, a pink-striped edition of the well-known *Souverän* series. Criticisms targeted the pen's presentation as 'Ladies' Collection'; the chosen shade of pink, which was found too saturated, reminiscent of *Barbie* and *Hello Kitty*; as well as its packaging – a gray cardboard box laced by a wide pink ribbon, which was commonly likened to a corset.

This process of feminization is similar to that found in many other pink products marketed for girls and women, from toys to consumer electronics (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Barker & Duschinsky, 2012; Ehrnberger, Räsänen, & Ilstedt, 2012; Kearney, 2010; Rommes et al., 2011). In these, men's products set the standard, to which women's products are designed as a variation – pink, often cheaper, versions in softer shapes, decorated with hearts, diamonds and flowers – so that the masculine product language, which is 'described with superior adjectives such as *professional*, *exclusive*, or *intelligent*', is transformed into a childishly feminine one (Ehrnberger et al., 2012, p. 89). Paralleling the feminist critique these products have received, forum writers expressed their dislike for the stereotypical 'girly' femininities that are commonly represented in today's fountain pen market.

As mentioned above, pen size is another topic of discussion around ladies' pens. In contrast with the masculine high-end pen, there is a widespread expectation that women's fountain pens should be smaller and lighter, ostensibly for use by their smaller hands. Several forum posts ask whether *Montblanc 149* is 'too big for women's hands' or a certain pen is suitable for 'a not particularly tall female', and are responded to by seasoned forum members that it is more a matter of personal preference than actual hand size. In fact, some women users express their dissatisfaction with the grip and balance of pens with reduced size.

A final and relatively less frequently voiced problem about fountain pens for women regards the way they are designed to be refilled:

> My greatest annoyance in the world of fountain pens is how a lot of cute little pens made for women are made to only use cartridges. (I'm especially glaring at you *Montblanc*. Your *Diva* line is only meant to use cartridges. Those are really expensive pens to only use cartridges. I'm also looking at you, *Conway Stewart*! Those *Nightingale* pens I have been looking at for the past seven years take only cartridges too).

The significance of the accusations can only be understood in the light of how, in various forum threads, enthusiasts compare ink bottles favorably over using cartridges for refilling their pens. It is agreed that the latter is more convenient, being easier to carry and cleaner to use. The former is found more economic, creating less waste and providing a larger variety of ink colors, therefore often presented as the better practice. Moreover, fillers that are used with bottles afford certain advanced practices such as 'flushing' the pen for cleaning, and bottled ink can be mixed to obtain custom colors. The higher sophistication associated with using bottles makes it the proper, even the more authentic way to refill. According to several forum writers, filling one's pen from the bottle is 'a ritual', 'old fashioned' and 'intimate', representing 'the way things are supposed to be'. In contrast, cartridges are found more suited to 'novice FP users' or 'students', who lack the know-how or dedication. For the hobbyist, it is 'like cheating', so much so that if you prefer cartridges, 'you prolly [*sic*] need something simple. Like a *BiC*'. As such, associating women users with the simpler, amateurish technique is taken as a sign that designers and advertisers, in one woman writer's words, 'think women are too fastidious to use anything that messy after ballpoints were invented' – incapable of or unwilling to deal with the more technical alternative.

As we have indicated in our literature review above, in addition to their color and form, products are also gendered through their technical qualities (Berg & Lie, 1995; Cockburn, 1997; Faulkner, 2001). Studies that examine the gender scripts of various products, have underlined how the enduring symbolic association of technical competence with men and masculinity is reproduced in product design via designers' preconceptions regarding potential women and men users. Women are constructed as technophobic users, who would have neither interest in, nor competence for, technical details (van Oost, 2003). Men, on the other hand, are assumed to have a natural affinity and pleasure with hands-on

'tinkering' work and technical hobbies (Kleif & Faulkner, 2003). As one forum user responded to a question about whether fountain pens are used more frequently by men or women: 'After all, as everyone knows, *real men* love tools!'.

In sum, the fountain pen as a tool and a hobby is identified principally with men users. Fountain pen design for women users tends to rely on gender stereotypes in their style and color, smaller size and lack of technical sophistication, parallel to the widespread feminine product language. The comparison of men's and women's pens reveal a hierarchy between the two product categories, identifying the former as both superior and authentic. In the next section, we evaluate the ways in which these observations impact the everyday experience of the hobbyist by referring to forum writers' accounts of pen use and display.

Fountain pen at work

As we demonstrate above, discussions on fountain pen forums indicate a displeasure with the gendered divisions implied by the design and marketing of existing pens, insisting that a hobbyist's choice of fountain pen is a matter of personal preference. Such insistence however can trivialize the extent to which the gendering of certain fountain pen designs can have an impact on everyday experience. For instance, some women pen users, as well as men, express their fondness for ostensibly feminine pens, yet not everyone can comfortably associate such pens with their gender identities. Regarding one pink pen, a forum writer joked that his wife 'would rather be seen with a *Rotring Core*' – a low-priced fountain pen whose unconventional design is much remarked upon on the forums. A woman writer responded: 'That thing [i.e. the pink pen] may write like a dream, but I'd use it only in the closet, so as to [*sic*] never to be seen in public with it'. Such anxieties can become pronounced at the office, where the fountain pen belongs as a professional tool. Complaining that she is not able to find high-end feminine pens to her taste, a woman user observed: 'There are pink *Pelikanos* and such, but I don't think corporate women would want to be seen with those'. Under the same forum thread, a user wrote:

> The very expensive 'limited edition' pens from most manufacturers are much more likely to be bigger and apparently styled for masculine hands. Is it because they think all women are in 'women's jobs' and can't afford a high-end pen? [...] Got [*sic*] news for you, pen manufacturers, a lot of us girls now make enough money to buy high-end pens for ourselves.

According to this argument, and paralleling our findings in the previous section, the association of managerial positions with men depicts them as the genuine consumers of high-end fountain pens. Though not widely echoed on the forum, the writer's reflection is significant on two counts. Firstly, it relates to an issue that is still questioned by gender scholars: The increasing employment rates of women does not seem to have a significant impact on the persistence of men's domination in positions of formal power, authority, high income and status (Ayre, Mills, & Gill, 2011; Cook & Glass, 2014; Nemoto, 2013; Pringle et al., 2017; Priola, 2007). Incidentally, whenever a forum writer mentions a boss with regard to his interest in fountain pens, it is a man. Secondly, the quote connects with the popular depiction of middle- and upper-class men as personal consumers of luxury products. Historical analysis of gendered consumption has demonstrated that since the mid-twentieth century, men's magazines have promoted an image of 'autonomous men of taste who expressed their identities and status through the purchase of distinctive goods and signifiers', which ascribe prestige and elite style to middle-class men's consumption (Osgerby, 2003, p. 57). Advertising has exploited the idea that consumption of status objects can be a source of reassurance to the transnational businessperson in managerial positions, whose job is patterned by high-stress and overtime work (Connell & Wood, 2005). The large amount of money that these men earn and are willing to spend on personal luxury products, such as prestige cars, clothing and accessories, is coupled with an elite taste to be exchanged with status, pride and self-esteem through consumption.

Fountain pens seem to be among such luxury products that are signs of wealth and refined taste at work. Responding to the previously cited comments regarding the lack of attention to women in pen stores, a man forum writer reflected that 'men are more likely to buy pens as a status symbol [...] like

the *Montblanc 149*', and that this made men 'more likely to purchase expensive pens', whereas women are more interested in pens' appearance and writing style. Such generalizing views, which are not scarce in the forums, can be argued to have a marginalizing effect on some users, including the many women who state their preference for such pens as the *Montblanc* for everyday use at work, and those whose requests for more variety in high-end feminine pens were already mentioned above.

Still, the fountain pen's significance as an object of status at work makes it expressive within corporate hierarchies. One forum discussion was devoted to the question of 'using fountain pen in front of your boss', in which a hobbyist related:

> I have just graduated a year ago. Unsurprisingly, I am one of the lowest level in my office. A week ago, I brought my *MB Starwalker* to meet my boss and I was struggling whether I should use it. I noticed my boss's pen is a *Pilot* … similar to *Vanishing Point*, but a 'ball pen' version [*laughing emoticon*]. At last, I decided not to use mine. [*sad emoticon*]

Most respondents encouraged the author not to worry, but to make use of his pen as a conversation starter. Nevertheless, their responses demonstrate that his valuation of fountain pens over ballpoint pens and of *Montblanc Starwalker* over *Pilot Vanishing Point* is meaningful for the community – so is the discomfort the author feels in front of his boss. Using a fountain pen, let alone a conspicuously expensive one, can easily raise questions of entitlement, as being a man may not be sufficient to be a credible owner of such pens; in some work settings, only executives of certain weight can display them without looking pretentious or overly ambitious. One response included an anecdote about a co-worker who hid his fountain pens 'not to offend anyone with his "arrogance" of using a fountain pen while everyone else uses a *BiC*'. Yet another warned that 'the *MB* is an expensive pen', and that one must be cautious, 'pulling out the big stick saying, "see what a big deal I am"'. Users also admitted in other threads to hiding, if not the pens themselves but, their price. The hierarchy between pens can become in this manner a basis for competitions between executive men over taste. One particularly illustrative account involved a forum writer recounting how he tried to impress one of his directors with his *Montegrappa Reminiscence*. The director 'looked amused' and showed him a 'Japanese, handmade, cigar shaped' *Nakaya* pen, challenging the author to find out its brand before the following meeting.

Being a status object for men in executive roles, the fountain pen is part of a repertoire of men's products that function similarly. In such discussions as above, *Montblanc* was compared to expensive phones, computers and cars, and to *Rolex* and *Omega* watches as opposed to *Seiko* and *Casio*. One man noted: 'I do notice nicer suits, ties, shirtings especially, cufflinks, watches, shoes and pens. […] I get noticed on my cufflinks more so than my watches, and my pens when I sign, I will get a question or two'. In this sense, fountain pens are not only comparable but complementary to these other products, being used – as one writer suggested – 'to complete the look'. At the office, the fountain pen does not merely exist as a single object, but within a structure of style, of which the pen is one element.

This formal style and associated taste, which provide a vehicle to especially men for competitions with an eye to managerial positions, is highly gendered. Indeed, as a component of contemporary business masculinities (Kang, Sklar, & Johnson, 2011; Styhre & Johansson, 2016), dress has been considered the most visible aspect of gendered work ideals (Dellinger, 2002; Kelan, 2013). Particularly the professional suit is a strongly masculine item with connotations of high authority, power and status (Collinson & Hearn, 2005; Simpson, 2009). Compared to more casual dress styles associated with less powerful masculinities and femininities, it endows its wearer with a sense of responsibility and trustworthiness (Kang et al., 2011), thus signaling his competence and suitability for managerial roles and positions (Kaygan, 2013).

The complementary relationship of fountain pens with executive men's professional suits has direct implications on how the pen is used at work, specifically on the gendered ways in which men and women carry and display their pens. The standard fountain pen features a clip, which is typically used with shirt and jacket pockets. The powerful association of clips with shirt pockets have led forum writers to argue that the first shirt pockets were invented to hold fountain pens. Breast pockets also provide opportunities to showcase one's pens selectively, as demonstrated by how, in a forum thread dedicated to this topic, users mentioned which pens they would rather not display in this way: 'disposable pens

[including] *Pilot Varsity*' or an informal 'lime green *Pilot Prera*'. In contrast, women workers, whose office outfit typically lacks pockets, as well as workers of both sexes who do not work in corporate offices, have to develop strategies to tackle the problem of carrying their pens in a manner that keeps them safe and readily accessible, while simultaneously displaying them as accessories that communicate their user's taste and personal identity. 'Always jealous of the men who walk around with pens peeking out of their shirt pockets', as one woman user puts it, both men and women forum users have contributed to discussions on this topic, revealing a rich range of practices. Below we analyze the three most outstanding strategies – clipping elsewhere, using bags, and wearing around the neck – and how they are gendered.

Rather than shirts and jackets, clips can be attached to trouser pockets, and in the case of men who wear shirts without pockets, the undershirt or a button hole. Women can use the clip on the neckline, emphasizing the pen's character as an accessory, as one user does with 'a pen with a bit of gold showing to catch the light', or even wear it on their hair. All of these, however, are frowned upon as unsafe for the pens.

The purse provides the most straightforward alternative for women despite its problems. In order to keep the pens upright and so stop them from leaking and to make them easy to locate in crowded purses, pens are attached via their clips to inner pockets and slots, including those fashioned for pens and lipsticks. However, such pockets may not be large enough to hold thicker fountain pens. Pen cases are also commonly used to protect pens from scratches inside the purse. Many men hobbyists also use bags; yet whenever mentioned, 'man purses' trigger comments regarding their inappropriately feminine character. Similarly crossgender practices by women include wearing smaller size men's jackets, or using a 'belt case', which can be found acceptable if one is 'a bit butch'.

Instead of a clip, a number of vintage 'ringtop' pens feature a small ring on the cap that can be connected to a chain or a lanyard. These are mostly identified with women users, due largely to their visual reference to pendants. As with clipping the pen to neckline, users indicate their appreciation of the pen's secondary function as jewelry: 'an eye-magnet'. Hobbyists also report having attached chains or lanyards to regular pens to emulate ringtops, even though this can invoke worries lest the pen falls off. Moreover, as more than one woman user noted, hanging does not work with larger, heavier pens. More than one user indicated the inappropriate jokes a hanging pen calls for. The following comment illustrates such concerns, which involve the status-related and even sexual connotations of such pens as the *Montblanc*:

> One of my all-time favorite pens is [*Montblanc*] 149. Classic black. How about that hanging from my neck? All the clowns will be insulted, and I might get in trouble with my managers. You can't even imagine how dirty their minds are…

Overall, the array of strategies adopted by pen users for carrying their pens at work testify to how practical concerns of easy access, safety and display are dissolved in use experiences that are variously yet unambiguously gendered. On one hand is the choice of pen, whose both material qualities (size, weight and fragility, whether it has a clip, etc.) and cultural connotations (disposable and inexpensive as opposed to valuable and tasteful, shiny and delicate as opposed to manly and even phallic, etc.) have ramifications on that gendering. On the other, questions of where and how a user keeps their pen of choice, and of whether and how they exhibit it to their colleagues and superiors are in fact responses to a gendered dress code that is more or less flexible depending on one's work environment and the perception of others therein.

The forum threads cited here illustrate how forums can help pen users offset such difficulties by providing a place to share experiences and opinions. For instance, a generalizing argument that a pen is not suitable for women is openly contested, while users are encouraged to try and use larger pens regardless of the size of their hands. Advice and suggestions comprise a significant part of the forum threads. These are not only about purchase decisions or repair and maintenance of pens, but also towards better integrating the hobby into one's everyday life. In addition to the practices cited above, this fact is best illustrated by the range of do-it-yourself suggestions that are volunteered for the problem of carrying the pen. Ranging from sewing elastic bands to purses, jackets and coats to

making pen cases and 'cosies' that can be carried or worn, the solutions are sometimes presented with a maker's pride, sometimes in an apologetic tone, which indicates that the user would have preferred a mass-produced, branded solution over the hand-knit substitute.

Conclusion

To sum up, the accounts show that current fountain pen designs are perceived by their users to be biased in favor of executive men particularly through the association of the most prominent, high-end products with that target group. Pen designs that explicitly target women users are often found to reflect the more stereotypical femininities with their connotations of 'girliness' or 'fashion' and with their reduced sizes and technical complexity. In the work setting, too, the experience of using a fountain pen can be strongly gendered with particular reference to the managerial norms that govern the use of dress, especially the suit and its accessories. Gendering of the fountain pen at the office starts from choosing which pen to purchase and which pen to carry, on to everyday decisions while using it, including whether or not one writes with it in other people's presence, how one refills it, how and where one carries it, displaying it either as a fashion accessory, a status item or a technical tool. In these choices, the user is navigating the fountain pen market by engaging in constant comparisons between pens regarding their style, price, brand, usability, etc. The navigations outline a range of gendered identities for the fountain pen user: By reviewing the quoted material, one can note women who associate themselves with pink or 'girly' femininities, corporate women who seek high-end pens with a sophisticated feminine style, men who compete at work through their pens as well as suits and watches, women who use men's jackets for their pockets, men who express their love for the fountain pen as a superior tool, and women who wear their pens as pendants or sew their own pen cases to match their purses. Within the diversity, a specific form of business masculinity associated with executive men is constructed as more authentic in their adoption of fountain pens, echoing the tendency the users observe in the current designs. In this picture, the cultures of consumption fostered in hobbyist communities such as the online fountain pen forums do contribute in the production and dissemination of these dualist discourses, yet at the same time help users with their gendered confrontations at the office and elsewhere by providing them with opportunities of socialization as well as advice on purchasing decisions, technical problems, even relationships at work.

The key implication of these findings is that categorizing whole product categories as either men's or women's products may not prove appropriate for the gendering of every product category. While drills, as an example, are considered a man's tool as a whole category (Ehrnberger et al., 2012) or shavers, as another example, seem to be strictly divided into those for men and those for women through both their styling and their technical features (van Oost, 2003), the fountain pen provides a third alternative: There is an overwhelming variety of choices especially if one takes into consideration vintage pens that are still in use today among enthusiasts. Alternatives include pens marketed to women and men, smaller and larger ones, with or without clips, and an astonishing range of colors and textures. Still one can gather from many hobbyists' comments that the contemporary pen market takes executive men and masculinities as its genuine consumers, in so far as the most expensive and paradigmatic fountain pen designs of today target that user group. What we might call 'lesser' pens – that is, lesser in size or price, or marginal in style or availability – target diverse femininities, as well as masculinities that might be called subordinate to the executive masculinity. These observations outline a hegemonic form of masculinity in the context of the fountain pen market (Connell, 1987). As such, fountain pens represent a *hegemonic* gendering structure for artifacts whereby *the prototypical member of a product category is strongly gendered in contradistinction to a sheer variety of alternatives*.

We need to underline two points regarding this conclusion. Firstly, even as we describe fountain pens' gendering as hegemonic rather than simply dualistic, we do not disregard the importance of the key dualisms that underlie any such gendering process. Secondly, we find it reductive, and perhaps too optimistic, to assume that domestications of gendered products in sites of consumption always confront and resist the gender scripts that have shaped those products in sites of production and mediation.

Consumption practices can very well reproduce, even improve upon the marketing strategies that shape the product's perception in the first place – as can be seen, for instance, in how the hobby group itself designates, through repeated references, the *Montblanc*, a product that is considered to be highly masculine, as the prototypical fountain pen, thus influencing the gendering of the whole product category.

This leads us to a methodological suggestion that expert users' accounts can be helpful for studying the gendering of products, even as we are interested in the qualities of the artifacts themselves and how those qualities mediate and materialize gendered relations. Whenever available, users' assessments of individual products, the market and consumption practices can help us focus on those design features that have actual influence on use experience, map out the market with its lacks and focal points as perceived by the current and future consumers, and collect stories, observations and educated approximations of use from users with expertise and experience, so that we can realistically evaluate the impact of gendered design across the lifespan of the product.

Note

1. An earlier version of this paper has been presented at the *Knowledge and Politics in Gender and Women's Studies Conference*, 9–11 October 2015, METU, Turkey.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

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