Gender and the politics of classification:
The organization of Shoppers Drug Mart and its beautyBOUTIQUE Cosmetics Brand
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Abstract
Classification can be a form of political discourse and is often used to create and reinforce categories based on hierarchical power structures. On a social level, this effect can be observed in how a culture both formally and informally classifies markers of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, religion, and age, creating certain categorical identities that are privileged over other identities. This form of discourse is so prevalent that it is embedded into our daily lives and the world is categorized in a manner that perpetuates classifications which serve to reinforce the cultural identities that are beneficial to those in power. This paper examines one such classification—the physical layout and organization of the store locations of the Canadian pharmacy Shoppers Drug Mart—and how it is used to perpetuate and profit from the anti-feminist Beauty Myth as described by Naomi Wolf.

Keywords
classification, discourse analysis, feminism, beauty myth, cosmetics, Shoppers Drug Mart
When one first encounters a Shoppers Drug Mart storefront, the red and white signage that adorns the front of the building should be a clear indication of what the store is meant to sell. One might expect that these stores would prioritize the sale of prescription drugs or other health products, but the organization of many of these stores belies a completely different purpose. In many Shoppers Drug Mart locations, the first thing a consumer will see is a large cosmetics section—branded beautyBOUTIQUE—that features cosmeticians staffing aisle after aisle of cosmetic products for sale. One might be forgiven if they assumed to have entered a department store instead of a pharmacy, given the dominance of the beautyBOUTIQUE branding inside the store. In locations that are organized in such a manner, it is nearly impossible to avoid the cosmetics section, and consumers are exposed to many cosmetic products they can potentially buy before seeing the rest of the store. This paper will explore why Shoppers Drug Mart is organized in such a manner and subsequently, proposes an alternative organization in the context of feminist theory and theories on the ethics of classification. That is, the suggested reorganization of Shoppers Drug Mart will be an ethical classification that addresses the feminist concerns raised with the current organization and will embody a moral dimension that Bowker and Star (2000) suggest is missing from many classification systems. Although this paper may not enact actual change in Loblaw Companies Limited and their business practices, this exploration of their existing retail model serves as an intellectual exercise that provides an opportunity to reflect on the social impact of classification and the importance that ethics play in designing classification systems.

With this context in mind, it should be noted that Shoppers Drug Mart locations did in fact sell cosmetics before the beautyBOUTIQUE branding and store reorganizations were introduced in 2003 (“About Us”, n.d.). In fact, in many smaller locations that exist today, the pre-2003 layout still exists, featuring a small counter staffed by a cosmetician near the entrance of the store. Even so, with 384 beautyBOUTIQUE locations (“About Us”, n.d.) and 1307 Shoppers Drug Mart locations (“Our Company”, n.d.), this means that nearly 30% of the franchise locations in the country have been reorganized to fit the model that is exemplified by the Toronto Eaton Centre Shoppers Drug Mart location (“Shoppers Drug Mart opens”, n.d.). One can assume that the trend will continue as the company sees success from this specific reorganization. Indeed, a survey conducted in December 2016 shows that 56% of survey respondents indicated that Shoppers Drug Mart is the store that they would regularly go to for cosmetics (“Personal care”, n.d.), putting it ahead of other retailers in the country and illustrating a clear capitalist motivation for pursuing this particular classification for store layouts.

In the context of classification and knowledge systems, it is useful to first consider why cosmetics are important, and why they are a driver of the reorganization of many Shoppers Drug Mart locations. Although feminist scholars might not consider beauty explicitly as a form
of classification, in the context of Bowker and Star (1999), or as socially constructed surrogate for the subjugation of the female body in the context of Davis, Schobe, and Szolovits (1993), parallels can definitely be drawn between feminist theories and theories of classification. When Friedan (2013) describes “The Problem That Has No Name” in The Feminine Mystique, she is implicitly describing a problem that exists in the manner that society classifies women: “Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training… how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting” (p. 2). Not fitting into this classification system means not being seen as a successful woman and implies the possibility of being ostracized by society. Wolf (2002) suggests that beauty itself is a form of political classification when she describes the beauty myth as a “social fiction[] that masqueraded as natural components of the feminine sphere” (p. 15), existing only to support “men’s institutions and institutional power” (p. 13). In this case, beauty is a classification system that divides women from men in order to perpetuate a social order that privileges men and subjugates women—particularly since men are not expected to conform to the same beauty myth as women. It should be noted that these issues can be further compounded by various intersectional stratifications of identity that exist in any cultural or social context; for example, black women in America face the double burden of conforming to white standards of beauty. Beauty reaches beyond gender and creates social hierarchies based on race, age, sexuality, and other markers of identity.

Although not specifically structured by any government or known entity, the classification of women as either feminine or unfeminine is a “site[] of political and social struggle[]” that has defined and continues to define women around the world (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 196). Much like the classification of race through Apartheid, Wolf, Friedan, and many other feminist scholars see the classification of women (into binary categories) as a system that has “become enfolded into a working infrastructure… more and more firmly entrenched,” so naturalized that it “becomes taken for granted” (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 196). Unlike Apartheid, however, there is no active system of political classification to necessarily rally against and challenge (p. 225). Rather, this classification forces women to conform to a certain definition of femininity in order to be considered successful members of society, first by taking themselves out of the workforce to be ‘perfect homemakers’ and then being driven by standards of beauty that are impossible to follow. These rigid definitions of womanhood and femininity allow men gain an implicit advantage over women in society. That is, although a governmental body has not created rules for classifying women as feminine or beautiful, these classification systems exist regardless. This is due to a social convention that privileges men over women that has become embedded and naturalized into broader social structures (p. 225). It is to the benefit of men, explicitly or implicitly through the privileges afforded by patriarchy, to see this classification as
natural, because it keeps them in the advantaged position. In fact, for Wolf (2002), this system of classifying women is doubly dangerous because it not only privileges men, but also forces women to divide themselves between those that conform to the beauty myth, and the “Ugly Feminist[s]” (p. 18) that choose to defy this patriarchal classification. Not only are men pitted against women, but women are pitted against each other.

Cosmetics, which was a “$20-billion” industry in 2002 (Wolf, 2002, p. 17), becomes one of the many surrogates of this particular classification system used to control women and their bodies. Davis, Shrobe, and Szolovits (1993) define a surrogate as a “a stand-in for the things that exist in the world” (Role I, para. 2); they note that surrogates depend on a set of ontological commitments to create a “focusing effect” that helps guide us in “deciding what in the world to attend to and what to ignore” (“Role II,” para. 3). It is in this framework that cosmetics serve as a tool to help highlight and maintain a classification system that categorizes the female body as either feminine or not feminine. In her discussion of the distinction between gender and sex, Lorber (1994) notes that “without the deliberate use of gendered clothing, hairstyles, jewelry, and cosmetics, women and men would look far more alike” (p. 19). In effect, the use of cosmetics is one of ways society focuses attention to a system of classification, demanding that gender and biological sex must be linked together. Or, as Butler (2004) might suggest, cosmetics serve as “a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance” (p. 43). They are a reification of the of gender norms born in the Victorian era (p. 48) that continue to support the regulation of gender and its classification to this day. In other words, the only way to be a woman is to appear like a woman, and cosmetics stands as one of the many surrogates of this classification system that women must impose on themselves in order to be classified as a woman.

With this context in mind, and given how the female gendered body is classified in society, the social and epistemological commitments behind the organization of Shoppers Drug Mart stores that privilege the beautyBOUTIQUE have become clear. As a result of the ubiquity of the beauty myth as defined by Wolf (2002), the executives at Shoppers Drug Mart have what Beghtol (2005) states as the “cultural warrant” (p. 904) to organize their stores in a manner that allows information seekers—that is, the large number of women who buy cosmetics to maintain their place in the overall classification of femininity—to find the cosmetics faster and in a more efficient manner. The cosmetician becomes a librarian of cosmetics, providing reference services to customers who are looking for cosmetics to fit their specific beauty needs. This organization of Shoppers Drug Mart is seen as a natural organization of the store, because it meets the larger goals of a social classification system that encourages women to meet a specific standard of beauty. If women are penalized for not meeting a specific standard, to be categorized as
feminine, then Shoppers Drug Mart is actually providing a useful service to help women who may not be able to meet this standard of femininity on their own. Of course, what is left unsaid is that, implicitly, the standard of femininity is impossible to reach without the help of cosmeticians and their products.

Fuller (2003) notes that the beautyBOUTIQUE brand was in part co-developed by L’Oreal Canada, who created store designs for “three major drugstore chains, and gave them briefs identifying the key elements in keeping some consistency between the department store and drugstore image” (p. 49). The collaborative effort between Shoppers Drug Mart and a cosmetics manufacturer meant from the outset these stores would be designed specifically to encourage the sale of cosmetics and further enforce the overall classification system that categorizes women by physical appearance. There are ontological commitments to providing access to cosmetics as a whole, as “Beauty Boutique staff are known as beauty experts, and all are fully trained on all the lines in the store” (p. 50) and are meant to be product agnostic. The physical space is similarly designed to provide access to a wide array of cosmetic products meant to suggest accessibility, because “nothing is behind glass, not even prestige items - everything is on self serve walls” (p. 50). Fuller quotes Jason Goulding, the manager of the first beautyBOUTIQUE branded store, who suggests that “it’s a playground experience” (p. 50), equating shopping for cosmetics to a free form, unrestricted childhood experience. In effect, the store is organized so that female consumers will be pleased by all the cosmetics they are allowed to personally handle and can run through aisles like children. The store then is organized in a manner that reflects the classification of the female body seen in society at large, privileging a specific ordering of society that encourages women to classify themselves as feminine. They participate in an environment that makes such participation as frictionless as possible, and in effect, serves as a microcosm of the broader social issues regarding gender raised by Friedan, Lorber, and Wolf.

Given that Shoppers Drug Mart was an independent public company in 2003, and a wholly owned subsidiary of Loblaw since 2014, it is not surprising that the company would be motivated by a profit motive that purposefully exploits the need for women to fit into a specific classification of femininity. The fact that it is one of the first stores consumers think about when purchasing cosmetics is a testament to the effectiveness of the reorganization of their stores, and their use of the broader social trends regarding the classification of gender. It should be noted that soon after the acquisition by Loblaw, Shopper Drug Mart stores underwent another major reorganization, as many of the locations were redesigned to include fresh groceries and produce. The fact the groceries are placed near the exit of the store is not an accident either. Consumers are exposed to food items that they may impulsively buy on the way out of the store, much in the same way as they are exposed to cosmetics when they come in.
The cosmetics-based reorganization is also meant to provide direct competition to other retailers in similar sectors, and the notion of placing cosmetics near the entrance of the store was borrowed from department stores with similar store designs, such as The Bay, Sears, and Eaton’s. Since the department store model has largely failed in Canada, one could argue that the reorganization of Shoppers Drug Mart stores has been a success, fulfilling the profit motive purpose of a publicly traded company. Also, regardless of what feminist scholars might suggest about the construction of gender roles and the manifestation of these gender roles in surrogates such as cosmetics, there is a tremendous pressure to conform to the expected classifications imposed on all members of a society. In this case, Shoppers Drug Mart is helping to serve a community that requires easy access to cosmetics. By having an entire section of the store devoted to cosmetics, along with a dedicated brand agnostic cosmetician to help facilitate a customer’s search for a specific type of cosmetic product, Shoppers Drug Mart’s organization is in effect helping to serve its community—members of the Canadian public at large.

Although not discussed in full in this paper, the more recent reorganization of the stores to include groceries also serves the community by providing access to fresh foods in locations that may be underserved or not served at all by a grocer. The contemporary organization of the store may be completely different from the one that existed when Shoppers Drug Mart was primarily a pharmacy; however, the current configuration of Shoppers Drug Mart certainly meets a community need, even if it is potentially an unethical organization of the store. Indeed, even before groceries were introduced to the store, Sanati (2010) described Shoppers Drug Mart as a neighbourhood general store, suggesting that these stores serve as hubs in the community for people looking to shop for household goods.

However, there is a clear manner in which the stores can be reorganized under a different set of commitments that would be more suitable than the original. Beginning with Bowker and Star’s (2000) thoughts on the role of classification systems in society, they are a “form of technology… linked together in elaborate informatic systems and enjoining deep consequences for those touched by them” (p. 152). We can see that the current organization of Shoppers Drug Mart has failed to consider the consequences the emphasis on cosmetics has had on the people who shop at the store. Friedan, Lorber, and Wolf would all agree with Bowker and Star’s (2000) statement that:

The question of who controls any given filiation is vital to an ethical and political understanding of information systems whose categories attach to individuals. A first crude characterization concerns whether the filiation was chosen or imposed (an echo of the sociological standard, achieved or ascribed); whether it may be removed and by whom; and under whose control and access is the apparatus to do so. (p. 154)

While the question of who may be the one in control of the classification of sex and gender
may be one that is difficult to answer because of how broad and embedded this particular classification system is in society, it’s quite possible to identify the people who were in charge of the 2003 reorganization of Shoppers Drug Mart that has since been applied to nearly 400 other franchises. The “filiation” or the connection between a category and a person, as Bowker and Star (2000) put it, is between the organization of the store as it relates to the demographics of its shoppers. There is an assumption that women want cosmetics, and creating a dedicated department in the store to sell cosmetics to women is the best way to organize the store in order to better serve these customers and also increase profits.

Bowker and Star (2000) suggest that there are two questions that are raised when considering the relationship between a filiation and the person affected by it: “What will be the ecology and distribution of suffering?” and “Who controls the ambiguity and visibility of categories?” (p. 155). In terms of the broader question of the classification of women, Wolf (2002) would suggest that the cosmetics industry plays a part in perpetuating the myth of beauty through the current system of classification, in order to subjugate women and profit off of their suffering. Bordo (1992) notes that the medical profession has tried to pathologize eating disorders, categorizing these issues as medical rather than social, in part to dismiss feminist concerns about how the female body is depicted and categorized in the culture at large. In Bordo’s critique of this form of medical classification, the medical profession has failed to take into account issues such as “race, class, and gender… the particularities of individual identity” (p. 206) affects—whether a woman, who is disproportionately more likely to suffer from an eating disorder, will be affected by the social expectations of femininity imposed on them. If the organization of Shoppers Drug Mart is connected to the larger classification system in society that defines femininity, then certainly the same two questions should be asked about how Shoppers Drug Mart itself is organized.

If one were to begin the thought exercise of a reorganization of Shoppers Drug Mart that would address the role it plays in perpetuating the beauty myth and the harmful classification of women, one should first be mindful of the following: “every standard and each category [of a classification] valorizes some point of view and silences another… it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous—not bad, but dangerous” and “for any individual, group, or situation, classifications and standards give advantage or they give suffering” (Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 156). First and foremost, there must be a commitment to an organization that, at the very least, does not continue to perpetuate the broader social classification of women discussed above, if not help to end this classification altogether. In effect, the proposed new organization of a Shoppers Drug Mart store would be based on feminist principles, with the aim of contributing to the end the beauty myth and of gender roles as a whole. This commitment will hopefully give a voice to a feminist point of view that has been silenced, and perhaps provide some balance to the gender
roles ingrained in society so that women and men will be classified as equals. The reorganization should also take care not to create new systems of classification that necessarily reinforce other problematic forms of social categorization that would perpetuate the subjugation of other minoritized classes, including race and age.

With this ethical commitment in mind, the new layout of Shoppers Drug Mart would remove the beautyBOUTIQUE section altogether and not sell cosmetics at all. Instead, the store layout would reflect a new commitment that focuses on health and healthy living, encouraging a new system of classifying gender and the female body that is not based on the previous discriminatory and problematic classifications noted above. Rather than be confronted by hundreds of possible cosmetics products to purchase, customers would be greeted with health products that encourage healthy living such as vitamins, supplements, and other wellness products. The placement of fresh foods near the exit of the store would remain in place, as these foods would complement this reorganization, while the other gender-neutral, functional items such as medications, hygiene, and similar products would remain in the middle of the store.

This reorganization of Shoppers DrugMart would be similar to the one that Dove underwent in the past decade, choosing to actively advertise women’s bodies that differ from the norm in terms of size, shape, and skin tone (Millard, 2009). As with Dove’s choice to defy standard forms of classifying women’s bodies that include “airbrushing and digital alteration” (Millard, 2009, p. 160), the act of reorganizing Shoppers Drug Mart becomes a political statement about women’s bodies that advocates for a new classification that does not silence the voice and perspective of women who “suffer”, as Bowker and Star (2000) suggest, under the current classification. Not only does the new organization reflect the new set of commitments proposed above, it answers Bowker and Star’s (2000) two questions posed above (p. 15) as follows: the distribution of suffering is diffused equally among all genders, and by rendering the cosmetics section invisible, the new organization makes the greater classification of femininity more visible and vulnerable to critique.

Indeed, Mai (2010) encourages a principle of transparency that “says any classification should make available to its users statements about the basis on which the system is designed” (p. 638), and the complete absence of a cosmetics section would very much be in line with his assertion that transparent classification systems display clear “ontological statements about the world and the relations among entities of the world” (p. 635). There is no question that such a reorganization is an ontological statement in and of itself, because it would challenge the very notion of beauty and the beauty myth, and it would set itself apart not only from its previous organization but also from the organization of competitors’ stores. When Frohmann (2008) writes that “we need an information ethics that acknowledges how information processes and technologies are implicated in making up people” (p. 273), the implication is that classification
systems are in part responsible for how the social world and the people who inhabit it use these classification systems to configure themselves. In this respect, the old organization of Shoppers Drug Mart contributes to the broader problematic classification of gender and femininity in society, while the new hypothetical organization attempts to contribute to a new classification system everyone will want to embrace.

In effect, the immediate real-world consequences of such a reorganization, if it were actually implemented, would be to ask consumers to question the old organization and how it served to categorize women into classes of femininity. Even if there are no explicit signs or instructions that clearly explain the ontological commitments made regarding the ethics of a reorganization, removing the beautyBOUTIQUE department, the absence of a cosmetics section in the store would mark a whole new form of classification that invites consumers to critique the old one. Perhaps some customers might simply seek out another store to buy their cosmetics, but others might pause and reflect on why they wanted to buy cosmetics in the first place. There might be an understanding that being properly classified as a successful feminine woman in society need not depend on physical appearance and beauty, but could instead be based on health and wellbeing. In a broader context, perhaps if the 20-billion-dollar cosmetics industry were to disappear completely, the money and time spent on cosmetics could be used to improve other aspects of women’s lives. While the consequences of this thought exercise are merely speculative, such a large-scale change in how women are classified, and how they choose to classify themselves, could fundamentally change how society operates when it comes to the relationship between the genders.

Through an examination of Shoppers Drug Mart’s organization, this paper has explored the ethical concerns raised by the act of classification through a feminist lens. Even though the layout of a pharmacy may seem rather innocuous, it is clear that this organization reflects a broader social classification system that negatively affects more than half the population in Canada. Bowker and Star, along with other information theorists, make an important point in raising the question of ethics and morality in classification systems. From the thought exercise conducted in this paper alone, it is clear that classification and organization has a direct impact on the lives of everyday people. These classifications do not have to be formal classification systems imposed on society, such as Apartheid in South Africa, in order for the members of a society to feel its impact. By maintaining the status quo and accelerating the adoption of the beautyBOUTIQUE format in its stores, Shoppers Drug Mart is indeed a microcosm of the larger classification system in society that, in Wolf’s eyes, privileges men over women. Even if the executives at Shoppers Drug Mart or Loblaws are not actively intending to perpetuate this gender-based classification system, they are definitely contributing to it. This is a lesson we information professionals must take seriously and understand: the act of classification can touch
the lives of many people, whether we are conscious of it or not.
REFERENCES


