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The Pink Tax

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The Pink Tax

Introduction and Rationale

The pink tax is a phenomenon where similar products, or in some instances the same product, are priced differently for women and men. During the early months of the SARS-COV-2 global pandemic, I developed “The Pink Tax” (TPT) to introduce students to this social phenomenon. Informed by a combination of feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1987) and inquiry-guided learning (Atkinson & Hunt, 2008; Lee, 2012), I explain how TPT is designed for students to discover a form of gender inequality in the social world – the pink tax.

Broadly, feminist pedagogy conceptualizes the classroom as a “liberatory environment” (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 6) where instructors and students challenge one another to think about larger issues in society relating to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. Inquiry-guided learning is a type of active learning where students investigate real-life issues in the classroom, consider multiple solutions, and raise additional questions about the issues under consideration (Lee, 2012). In keeping with both feminist pedagogy and inquiry-guided learning, TPT is designed for students to ask questions about, and apply social scientific explanations for, the pink tax and the consequences associated with this phenomenon in social life.

Learning Objectives

There are four learning objectives for this activity. By the end of this activity, students should be able to: 1) Describe the pink tax in their own words. 2) Collect and analyze data on the prices of selected products advertised for women and men from Walmart.com, Target.com, and Kmart.com. 3) Analyze the prices of these products by gender. 4) Explain observed differences in the data using one of the following concepts: sex, gender, gender as social structure, gender socialization, or the social construction of gender.

Explanation

Appendix A provides step-by-step instructions for students to complete TPT. Below, I provide five caveats when adopting this assignment.

First, I designed this assignment for an online, asynchronous, introduction to sociology class. This was the culminating assignment for students after spending two weeks learning about gender and sexuality. During the first week, I assigned students a combination of introductory readings and instructional videos

pertaining to gender and sexuality,¹ an article about the pink tax (Duffin & Smith, 2018), a general discussion board about the concepts listed in the fourth learning objective, and required them to complete TPT assignment at the end of the first week. During the second week, I assigned students an additional reading about the pink tax (New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015). During the middle of the second week, I required students to answer questions 3, 4c, or 4d from Appendix A on a discussion board forum and then respond to at least two posts made by a classmate.

Second, Appendix B provides a non-exhaustive list of potential items for students to research. This table is for the instructor only. Do not share this with students, or they will certainly be overwhelmed. Appendix C contains ten items I selected for students to research. This is the table you will share with your students. It is also what they will submit as part of this assignment so you can assess whether they have met the second learning objective. Even though Appendix B and C are presented as tables, I recommend that they be converted into Microsoft Excel worksheets. It will be easier for data entry and analysis.

Third, when possible, have your students find the exact same product that is marketed to women and men. For example, for product 1 in Appendix C, you could instruct your students to research a shaving razor from the same company that is marketed to women and men.

Fourth, make students aware of manufacturer marketing tactics before they begin researching the products online. Some manufacturers may specifically designate their products for “women” or “men.” If not, instruct your students to be aware of how the color scheme, diction, font, and other marketing ploys are used to denote gender.

Fifth, TPT is designed to provide a foundational understanding of the pink tax. Those wishing to teach a more complex understanding of this phenomenon could include an intersectional component. This could be achieved in the design of the activity. For instance, students could research products at upscale retailers or a different array of products (e.g., makeup items) to see how women from various racial, ethnic, or social class backgrounds experience the pink tax.

Debriefing

I begin the debriefing on the first day of the second week on gender and sexuality. I tally student responses to the first critical thinking question in Appendix A. I then make an instructional video sharing the overall results to this question so students can see which stores priced the items the highest and the differences in cost between products marketed to women and men at each store. This enables

¹ Specific materials available upon request.

students to see what the entire data set looks like and they can start to analyze the data for any discernable patterns. I then explain to students how the work they submitted at the end of the first week connects with the upcoming discussion board about the activity and the assigned readings on the pink tax.

The discussion board during the second week is when students discuss the pink tax, why it matters, and how it relates to our two units on gender and sexuality. Students will likely ask many follow-up questions on the discussion board. This is a good sign because part of inquiry-guided learning is to encourage students to raise more questions than can be answered in any one class period in order to promote future exploration and discovery (Atkinson & Hunt, 2008). At the end of the discussion, you could, for instance, guide students into considering how cross-cutting forms of identity (such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, or social class) contribute to the pink tax. Moreover, taking this intersectional perspective could lead students into considering how some women may pay more of a pink tax than others.

Additionally, this discussion connects with a foundational premise in feminist pedagogy. Getting students to examine the incongruities and paradoxes in everyday life, the complexity associated with simple things in life (like the way similar products are priced differently by gender), and seeing how gender becomes embedded in social relations and institutions are just a few of the hallmarks of feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1987). It is where, as the instructor, you are challenging your students to think about larger issues in society which relate to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. For instance, some students are likely to say that women are willing to pay more for “their” products, women “have” to buy more products, and that “biological differences” between sexes (unrelated to menstruation) are potential explanations and justifications for the observed differences. These comments are where you can unpack their responses and push them to think more critically about this assignment. For instance, how the manufacturing, marketing, and pricing of these items is one way that gender is socially constructed. Or, you could push them to think about the implications for people’s personal lives if women are paying more money for the same products as men, and how companies have an integral part in shaping our ideas about gender.

Finally, questions 4c and 4d in Appendix A will likely be the most challenging part of this activity for students. Students should clearly integrate and cite a theory, or related concepts from assigned coursework, into their responses on the discussion board for these questions. For instance, some of the concepts and theories students read in Chapter 8 of *Sociology in Action* before completing this activity were sex, gender, gender socialization, and the social construction of gender (Korgen & Atkinson, 2019). I looked for students to integrate some of these concepts into their discussion board posts. Specifically, these posts had to mention of one these concepts, provide an accurate description, and sufficiently

explain how they see it reflected in the activity. This statement, for example, illustrates a successful connection one student made between gender socialization and TPT:

The gendering of products, leading to “The Pink Tax,” comes from our gender socialization to believe that colors, scents, materials, and items are inherently masculine or feminine. While these applied differences may not necessarily be bad, they transform into ways of “othering” and reinforcing the social inequalities of gender and sexual orientation.

Assessment

The first learning objective asks students to describe the pink tax in their own words. To assess if students met this learning objective, you can evaluate their response to question 4a in Appendix A. Students should have a firm understanding of the pink tax because it is described in two assigned readings (Duffin & Smith, 2018; New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, 2015).

The second learning objective requires students to research and record the prices of selected products advertised for women and men from Walmart.com, Target.com, and Kmart.com. Although simple, this learning objective is designed to assess student ability in collecting and organizing data from the social world. It also implicitly teaches them about the importance of using data to illustrate what gender inequality looks like in the social world. To measure if students are able to achieve this goal, you can research the items yourself, require students to submit the data they imputed in the table in Appendix C, and then compare their responses to your own. This serves as a way to check that they correctly researched and recorded the prices of the selected products.

The third learning objective asks students to compare and contrast the prices of the researched products by gender. The critical thinking questions listed in Appendix A serve as a way to assess if students met this learning objective. Specifically, questions 1-4 require students to analyze collected data in order to answer questions about gender. If you research these items yourself before administering this activity, and require students to submit their tables after the activity is completed, you will be able to know if students were successful in drawing the accurate conclusions based upon the data they submitted.

The final learning objective asks students to offer social scientific explanations for any observed differences in the data. Students should clearly integrate at least one of the course concepts listed in the fourth learning objective into their responses for questions 2, 4c, and 4d in Appendix A. In doing so, you will be able to assess on an individual-level which students were able to demonstrate and apply their understanding of sociological concepts and theories to the real world.

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Appendix A

The Pink Tax – Assignment Instructions

Purpose: In this assignment, you will explore one implication of the social construction of gender – the pink tax. This is a phenomenon where women are charged more for the same product as men ([Here's a brief, 9-minute segment from NPR about the pink tax if you'd like to learn more](#)). For example, even though the design of a toothbrush is the same, toothbrushes marketed to men might be \$1.50 whereas those marketed to women might be \$1.75. While the differences in price might seem small, these differences compound into big differences in the money people spend *on the same products*.

Instructions: To see what the pink tax looks like, you will be doing some price comparison on the internet. Specifically, you will:

1. Look up the price for the list of products on the “Student Copy” table at Target.com, Walmart.com, and Kmart.com.
2. Record the price for all of the listed products in the appropriate spaces in the table.
3. Calculate:
 - a. The sum of the products marketed to women and men at Target, Walmart, and Kmart.
 - b. The sum of the products marketed to women and men *across all stores*. (e.g., the sum of products marketed to women at Target, Walmart, and Kmart)
4. Save and submit a copy of this table to the “Pink Tax Assignment” portal on Canvas.
5. Answer the critical thinking questions below AFTER entering all of the data. ***Be sure to reference the data you collected and course material when offering an explanation.***
6. Save and submit your answers to the “Pink Tax Assignment” portal on Canvas.

Critical thinking questions

1. When comparing the totals, identify whether women or men are paying more for these products at:
 - a. Walmart? How much more are they spending?
 - b. Target? How much more are they spending?
 - c. Kmart? How much more are they spending?

2. Even though these products perform the exact same function, why are they marketed differently to women and men? ***Be sure to apply course material in your explanation.***
3. Do you think the pink tax is fair? Explain your reasoning in at least 5-6 sentences.
4. There are 4 parts to this question. Make sure to fully address each part of this question in as many sentences as you need. Explain:
 - a. The pink tax in your own words.
 - b. Whether the data you collected does or does not support the existence of the pink tax.
 - c. How the pink tax relates to the social construction of gender. ***Be sure to apply course material in your explanation.***
 - d. How the pink tax illustrates how a form of gender inequality is created in the social world. ***Be sure to apply course material in your explanation***

Appendix B

Product List

	Walmart		Target		Kmart	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Hygiene/Personal Care						
Razor						
Razor Cartridges						
Shaving Cream						
Shampoo						
Conditioner						
Deodorant						
Perfume						
Body Wash						
Toothbrush						
Face Lotion						
Adult Clothing						
Underwear						
Pajamas						
Jeans						
Sweaters						
Jackets						
Dress pants						
Dress shirt						
Socks						
Child Toys						
Doll						
Scooters						
Bicycle						
Bike Helmet						
Toddler/Child Clothes						
Toddler Shoes						
Toddler Shirts						
Toddler Underwear						
Toddler Socks						

Toddler Jackets						
Toddler Pants						
School Items						
Notebooks						
Binder						
Pencils						
Pens						
Backpack						
Messenger Bag						
Miscellaneous						
Band-Aids						
Phone Case						
Laptop Sleeve						
Laptop Bag						
Total	0	0	0	0	0	0

Appendix C

Student Copy

Product #	Product list	Brand	Walmart		Target		Kmart	
			Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
1	Razor							
2	Shaving cream							
3	Shampoo							
4	Deodorant							
5	Perfume/cologne							
6	Face lotion							
7	Underwear							
8	Plastic doll							
9	Jeans							
10	Shirts							
TOTAL			\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$

Total for Women \$

Total for Men \$