The Convenient Mother: Myth Or Reality

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This paper explores how the ‘paradox of convenience’ affects mothers’ lives. We present the results from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six mothers in order to explore their sense of fragmented time and their relationship with convenience goods. We question whether convenience is ‘convenient’ for every mother and investigate its advantages and disadvantages. As such, the paper underlines the disparity between the notion of convenience as inevitably beneficial and the lived experience of such convenience.

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the acquisition and usage of prams and their potential in the construction of mothering identities.

In the eyes of most Danish parents and parents-to-be, a pram is considered a necessity. The pram is usually acquired well before the birth, and in many cases it represents the most expensive single item acquisition. For roughly the first three years the pram functions as the child’s second bed. Beyond this, the pram also represents a means of transportation. It is a very visible consumer good, consumed in the public space and subject to the public gaze. Therefore, in our preliminary understanding, the pram is a vehicle for identity construction. And for the mothers/parents to be, its acquisition represents a sub-process in the transition into the new role of mother/parents.

In the empirical work reported here we explore the potential of the pram as a source of meaning in identity construction. We take a phenomenological approach, investigating women’s lived experience of the transition to motherhood and how this is supported through product symbolism. The research involves the collection of written accounts and depth interviews. Written accounts from approximately 30 women with small children were gathered in the form of email-correspondences. The women were recruited via the authors’ personal network, via posters in relevant chat groups on the net, and via the snowballing principle (Miles & Huberman 1994). The round of depth interviews will include 4-6 women selected among the contributors of written accounts.

In the analysis of the material and of how symbolic consumption meanings can be vehicles for the acquisition of the role of a mother, we will employ a framework that integrates the idea that objects can take on a value as a ‘signal’ or an ‘experience’, and that these meanings can reside in a ‘common’ domain-or in a more ‘private’ domain.

“The Convenient Mother: Myth and Reality”
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In a society characterized by increasingly busy family lives, time has become a critical resource for parents. Marketing has offered a solution in the form of convenience products which supposedly enable us to better manage that precious quotient. Paradoxically, no matter how many timesaving inventions are purchased, consumers, and particularly mothers, often perceive themselves to be time-poor and dissatisfied (Southerton et al 2001; Reeves 2003). Partly, the explanation for such dissatisfaction lies in the complexity of modern lives and relationships; merely achieving ‘time-saved’ is an unsatisfactory and often ineffective solution for the temporal demands that mothers juggle on a daily basis (Thompson 1996). At the same time marketers’ understanding of convenience and its meaning for consumers has been equally simplistic, often leading to enigmatic research findings (Yale and Venkatesh 1986; Darian and Cohen 1995; McNally and Brown 1998). Marketers tend to hypothesize that consumers with the greatest time constraints (i.e. in their view ‘working’ mothers) are going to buy convenience goods, yet the research implies a more complex connection (Yale and Venkatesh 1986; Maher, Marks and Grimm 1997).

This paper explores how the ‘paradox of convenience’ affects mother’s lives. We present the results from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six mothers in order to explore their sense of fragmented time and their relationship with convenience goods. Given that the importance of convenience is likely to increase in parallel with the complexity of modern family life, this work is a timely and topical contribution to our understanding of family consumption behavior. We question whether convenience products alleviate or exacerbate the complexity of their lives. We show how mothers employ the convenience products they choose, and why they reject others. Warde (1999) argues that given the problems many people have in juggling time, the ability to organize time for your own personal purpose is a mark of privilege, and one that can be ‘bought’ with hypermodern convenience devices. There is no doubt that for many consumers convenience does deliver benefits. But there are other aspects that sit more uncomfortably with many mothers, characterizing for some the use of convenience products as being tinged with moral disapproval. A tumble dryer will eliminate wet washing, pegging out and, even ironing, but it involves considerably more energy use, and is arguably less eco-friendly than traditional drying methods. Impregnated, disinfectant floor-wipes kill germs and reduce cleaning times, but potentially introduce carcinogenic chemicals, and contribute to landfill problems in a way that traditional ‘mop and bucket’ cleaning never did.

Almost 20 years ago Yale and Venkatesh (1986) made suggestions for future research into convenience and, while some progress has been made, there remain huge gaps in our understanding of what convenience means to consumers in general, and mothers in particular, both in terms of products and services, and desired outcomes. Is convenience ‘convenient’ for every mother? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Are there moral implications? The marketing ideology that assumes mothers perceive convenience as inevitably beneficial is fundamentally questioned in this paper that presents the experience of convenience as essentially flawed.

SELECTED REFERENCES
