Physicaal Ppearance Nd Self Image: Women As Consumer and Product

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The link between products and a person's perception of self is a complex one. Products shape the consumer, both physically such as when clothing limits the wearer's ability to do certain things and symbolically as when a person gets behind the wheel of a red sports car and literally becomes a different person (Solomon, 1983). On the other hand, it is clear that consumer select products and services that symbolically complete them or express their perceptions of self (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). At the most personal level the product becomes a part of the consumer. Nowhere is this more true than in the products and services that help consumers gain dominion over their bodies through diet, exercise, cosmetics, adornment and cosmetic surgery.

Body cathexis (Rook, 1985) is a term that refers to the emotional significance certain body parts have for a person. Some body parts are more central to self-concept than others. Why do people develop extreme concerns about particular elements of their body and appearance? One reason may be that a person is trying to achieve an externally imposed standard of ideal beauty. Such standards are a product of a particular time and place and may vary dramatically. For example, in earlier times, when food was scarce, a robust or even plump form was the ideal of beauty. The current standard of beauty is most evident in the photographic models selected to appear in advertising. Female ideals of beauty may focus on lip size, breast size, hair style, skin tones, or overall build and musculature of the body (Solomon, 1992).

The current body of fashion is taut, small-breasted, narrow hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation; it is a silhouette that seems more appropriate to an adolescent boy or a newly pubescent girl than an adult woman. Bartky, 1988 p. 105

Feminists argue that the ideal of beauty is a weapon used to keep women in their place, that place being one of subordination and docility. It may also include being an adornment and a sexual object for the gratification of males. Feminists argue that women's self-esteem is diminished by their inability to achieve these artificial goals which are impossible to achieve. The pain that at least some women experience is as unnecessary as it is excruciating (Bartky, 1988).

SANCTIONS FOR DEVIATION FROM NORMS

Whether or not ideals of beauty are consciously or systematically imposed to subordinate women, it is evident that certain elements of appearance and grooming enhance the culturally defined "femininity"or "masculinity"of the individual. These include ornamentation of the body through make up, selections of jewelry and clothing. The impact of the adornment rather than the person can be seen when men cross-dress (as entertainers or as part of their identity-sexual orientation). They may appear more feminine than actual women. It is interesting to see the reaction of men who have been fooled by such artifice -- they are furious at being deceived by a wig and a little makeup. Women who choose not to conform to the expected regimen of ornamentation,
Depilation, and subjugation of the body are often derided. The recent focus on "Dressing for Success" is an indication of some of the other sanctions that may be imposed: refusal to hire, do business with, admit, or promote those who do not comply with accepted standards.

Though sanctions are rarely formal and public, feminists argue that they are systematically applied and severe (Bartky, 1988). A woman who defines herself differently may be refused "male patronage." In a world where men control political, legal, educational, and economic systems, this is more serious than the lack of a date on Saturday night.

Women may also punish themselves (Bartky, 1988). Their stories ring with anguish as they push themselves to achieve impossible goals. Not all women are consciously aware of these norms and their potential for oppression. Some successful women may be "reluctant to part with the rewards of compliance" (Bartky, 1988, p. 114). Feminist scholars, particularly marxist feminists, accuse them of false consciousness, in other words they have been lulled into a false sense of acceptance. In addition, for some women the sense of self is so tied to physical appearance that, according to Bartky (1988, p. 114):

"... attempts to dismantle the machinery that turns a female body into a feminine one may well be apprehended by a woman as something that threatens her with desexualization, if not outright annihilation."

**THIS SYMPOSIUM**

This symposium will address the efforts of individual women to comply with the ideals of beauty. How do women perceive their efforts of compliance or noncompliance? Do they feel pressures internally, from the men in their lives, or in the public arena, particularly at work?

Various scholars will address the following areas:

1. **Diet** -- including anorexia and bulimia
2. **Exercise** -- done for health, for appearance, for self-defense, or competition (female body building)
3. **Adornment** -- makeup, wardrobe, jewelry
4. **Cosmetic surgery**

Women's stories in their own words will form the heart of the presentation, both from interviews and published accounts. Survey data may be used to supplement these stories. These will be organized and examined in light of behavioral science and feminist theories. Ethical directions for advertisers and consumer behavior practitioners as well as possible policy ramifications will be given.

**REFERENCES**


