Finding Ourselves: Women, Breast Augmentation and Identity

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Women, Breast Augmentation and Identity

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the experiences of consumers of breast augmentation, while examining the role that breast augmentation plays in the construction of female identities and in the creation of embodied capital. The results of phenomenological interviews with four women are reported.

We are and we have bodies such that they do not exist simply ‘in themselves’ but become the subject of enterprise, interest and reflection (Crossley 2001). The notion of bodies as unfinished projects is central to identity construction in consumer culture. Given appropriate levels of investment our bodies may be re-created to reflect a desired identity position, a position achieved primarily through the use of commodities.

IDENTITIES, EMBODIMENT AND CONSUMPTION

In the establishment and maintenance of our identities, our bodies act as tableaux upon which we inscribe many symbols and to which we attach meaning. In consumer society bodies are ascribed exchange-value; they are seen to possess embodied capital. That is, within particular social fields, embodied attributes such as aesthetic qualities, are assigned value and function as capital (Crossley 2001) which may be subsequently converted to economic, cultural and social capital. This value increases the closer those bodies approximate a social field’s normalized ideals (Featherstone 1991). Thus, women and men are persuaded to devote their energies to improving their bodies and maximizing their exchange value (Wernick 1987). The construction of identities can, therefore, be taken in a cultural context in which an individual will exploit embodied capital to ensure success or survival in her or his cultural environment.

In respect of the normalization of bodily ideals within social fields, the institutions of consumer culture play a central role. Images of beautiful bodies are their stock in trade, and they teach us how to care for and present our own bodies. A question arises, therefore, as to the degree of agency exhibited by women and men in the face of a pervasive beauty culture.
Morgan (1991) views women who opt for breast augmentation as victims of conformity to the norms of feminine beauty, and as a consequence, of hegemonic masculinity. Haug (1987:263) goes further by arguing that women’s “intimate relationship with their bodies - their struggle to conform to conventional standards of beauty...has been and still remains self-destructive”. Davis (1995) on the other hand, claims that cosmetic surgery allows women to not only take control of their bodies, but of their lives by empowering them as reinstated, knowledgeable agents. The subject/object dichotomy of identity construction through body re-construction remains important, therefore, to understanding the dynamics of breast augmentation. While some may argue that such surgery merely prepares women as objects of the male gaze, Nash (1996) suggests the voyeuristic gaze need not necessarily be controlling and oppressive. Indeed, those operating within the position of the desired object can generate a sense of empowerment and pleasure from that position.

The general aim of the research reported here is to examine further the relationship between consumption, embodiment and the construction of identities. As an investigative lens we consider how women construct identities and exploit embodied capital through their consumption of aesthetic breast enlargement. To this end we report the findings from four phenomenological interviews in an effort to make sense of the lived experience of women who have undergone such surgery.

REFERENCES


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