“Avoiding Embodying the Negative”: the Dialectic Between Body Image and Negative Selves

Emma N. Banister, Department of Textiles, UMIST1
Margaret K. Hogg, Manchester School of Management, UMIST2

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15698/gender/v06/GCB-06

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
“Avoiding embodying the negative”:
The Dialectic between Body Image and Negative Selves

Emma N. Banister, Department of Textiles, UMIST
Margaret K. Hogg, Manchester School of Management, UMIST

ABSTRACT

We explore how the body is used as an important site for creating and maintaining identity in pursuit of the reflexive project of the visible self. We examine how consumers avoid ‘embodying’ the negative images and feelings that they have about themselves by actively managing the visible and public images which they project of their possible selves. We use three narratives to illustrate the agency of women consumers as they articulate a range of possible (physical) selves; and describe the impact of their negative self on their choice or rejection of clothing and fashion products.

INTRODUCTION

“In a consumer culture obsessed with appearance, the status of the body has been transformed from a fixed natural given to a malleable cultural product” (Tseelon 1995:4). The body then is capable of being fashioned to become a representation of the self, the signifier of personal identity” (Tate 1997:1). In this paper we explore how the body is used as an important site for creating and maintaining identity, following Featherstone’s view (1982) that ‘the body… has become a visible carrier of the self’ (Jagger 1998). Featherstone (1982:27) argued that: “within consumer culture… the ‘performing self’ places greater emphasis upon appearance, display and the management of impressions”. Within consumer behaviour research Schouten (1991) showed how the body was used as a site for negotiating identity and consumption by exploring how plastic surgery could be used as a permanent tool involving physical intervention to avoid negative images and feelings about the self; and for the management of self in the public arena. In contrast, our paper examines how more transitory and temporary tools, such as fashion and clothing, are used to negotiate identity and consumption. Thomas Carlyle (cited in Featherstone 1982:28) described clothes as ‘emblems of the soul’ as individuals “had now to decode both the appearance of others and take pains to manage the impressions they give off, while moving through the world of strangers. This encouraged greater bodily self-consciousness and self-scrutiny in public life” (Featherstone 1982:28). We examine how consumers avoid ‘embodying’ the negative images and feelings that they have about themselves by actively managing the visible and public images which they project of their possible selves via their choice and/or rejection of clothing and fashion.
Whereas much previous research about body imagery has focused on idealized body images and the impact that advertising has on (usually) women’s self-esteem and self-concept (Richins 1991; Martin and Kennedy 1993; Hogg, Bruce and Hough 1999), we concentrate particularly on women’s interpretation of their positive and negative selves and their management of the related body images within the public arena. We use three narratives to illustrate the agency of women consumers as they articulate a range of possible (physical) selves; describe different aspects of their negative or undesired self; and discuss how these impact on their choice or rejection of clothing and fashion products as they use their bodies as identity markers (Jagger 1998) in the public arena in creating the self. We see how the body acts as a constraint on choice in the marketplace; and we demonstrate the importance of invisible decisions i.e. the distastes (Bourdieu 1984) represented by the rejection of clothing and brands, in pursuing the reflexive project of the visible self.

We begin with a brief literature review, which covers the key themes of self as reflexive project; and body image and self esteem; describe our research design; and report and discuss our findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity and consumption: the self as reflexive project

Understanding how individuals define themselves through consumption is a central concern of consumer research (Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi, Rose and Leigh 1993; Levy 1959; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Within the sociology of consumption this is also echoed in the work of Beck (1992), Bauman (1988, 1990) and Giddens (1991) (cited in Warde 1994). Giddens (1991), for instance, argues that “in ‘late modernity’ the self has become a reflexive project: it is created and recreated through a plurality of consumer choices and lifestyle decisions” (cited in Jagger 1998:797-8) leading to the commodification of the self. This has clear links with this study where we examine how consumers navigate their way through the ‘plurality of consumer choices’ within the context of fashion and clothing to construct and embody the performance self (Featherstone 1982). However, there is also an important counter-argument (Warde 1994) within the sociology of consumption that must be acknowledged about the relationship between self and consumption, which is also relevant for the focus of this paper.

Warde (1994) challenges “these accounts of the impact of reflexive modernisation on self-identity” as “misjudged”. According to Warde’s (1994) interpretation of Beck’s (1992), Giddens’ (1991) and Bauman’s (1988) accounts of the relationship between consumption and identity: “Consumer choice is deeply implicated in the process of, respectively, creating a reflexive self, constructing a narrative of the self, or electing oneself to a shared form of identification”. However, Warde (1994) argues that “these theories about the relationship between consumption and self-identity” need to be modified. Firstly, Warde (1994) argues that: “the activity of consumption should not be equated merely with shopping; for it also includes… procedures like putting on one’s make-up, choosing which clothes to wear…Moreover, for much of the time spent in consumption, one is not choosing, merely enjoying the fruits of one’s choice…” In this paper we are specifically interested in consumption (rather than shopping) and the factors
that influence clothing choice, particularly in how the body acts as a constraint on clothing choice. In addition, whereas Warde mentions ‘enjoying the fruits of one’s choice’ (i.e. tastes), we are also interested in the enjoyment and pleasure which flows from knowing which clothing and fashion products were rejected, in effect the influence which distastes or the refusal of taste (Bourdieu 1984) have in the reflexive project of the self, in creating narratives about the self and in electing oneself to a shared form of identification (Bauman (1988), Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) in Warde (1994)).

Secondly, Warde (1994) identifies a series of ‘compensatory mechanisms’ (e.g. mass media and advertising; social contacts such as social networks, friends, peers, colleagues and family) that help and influence individuals make their consumption choices. In this paper we examine the influence of these external factors on consumers’ interpretations of body images – their own and others.

BODY IMAGE AND THE SELF

Body image plays a key role in public evaluations of self and is “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves” (Schilder, 1950 in Grogan, 1999). Body image “is a complex phenomenon with at least three aspects: perceptual, cognitive, and emotional” (Gallagher 1986) and includes several elements that have an impact on the way we view our physical selves, such as body size estimation (perceptions), evaluation of body attractiveness (thoughts), and emotions associated with body shape and size (feelings) (Fisher, 1990 in Cash & Pruzinsky 1990). Body image can be significantly affected by social (e.g. the cultural milieu) and environmental (e.g. advertising) factors.

BODY IMAGE AND THE SELF-CONCEPT

The body is the “visible carrier of the self” (Featherstone 1991) and thus is an important site for negotiating identity and consumption; although it can also be the site for stigmatisation (Turner 1994). Body image contributes significantly to consumers’ feelings about themselves and their self-concept – both positive and negative (Schouten 1991). Self concept is: ‘the totality of an individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object’ (Rosenberg 1979) and incorporates the ‘cognitive and affective understanding of who and what we are’ (Schouten 1991:413). The self-concept is regularly depicted as a combination of the physical and mental self, for instance James (1890) argued that the human person is composed of “soul, body and clothes”. We have taken James’ view as the starting point for our paper, concentrating in particular on the interrelationship between body and clothes because clothing links the body to the social world (Wilson 1985) and thus to public evaluation of the self (Turner 1994).

The role of different negative (or unwelcome) aspects of the self-concept in relation to body image in the (non) consumption of clothing has received scant attention in consumer research. This relative neglect of negative selves represents a significant gap in our understanding of consumers’ self-concepts and body images. In this paper one of our objectives is to examine how consumers create and interpret meaning about the negative aspects of their possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) in relation to the body as the ‘visible carrier of the self” (Featherstone 1982). In effect, how consumers avoid
‘embodying’ their negative possible selves.

Possible selves are presented as a set of imagined roles or states of being and can be either positive or negative (Markus and Nurius 1986). Negative possible selves function as incentives for future behavior, representing selves to be rejected or avoided (Markus and Nurius 1986). The undesired self (Ogilvie 1987) has been identified as one aspect of the negative self, and the push (of the undesired self) has been found to be more effective than the pull (of the ideal self) in terms of the standard for measuring one’s present place in life (Ogilvie 1987). This undesired self seems to be linked to feelings of repulsion, revulsion (Rozin and Fallon 1987) and rejection. (Bourdieu 1984:56). Consumers often have less difficulty articulating their distastes and dislikes than they do their desires (Bourdieu 1984:56), including in relation to the rejection of clothing products and brands (Wilk 1997).

BODY IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM

The self-concept, as the set of beliefs and self-images that we hold about ourselves, is clearly linked to self-esteem, which is the “...extent to which one prizes, values, approves or likes oneself” (Blascovich and Tomaka 1991 in Robinson et al. 1991, 115). Our level of self-esteem is the measure of how much we like and approve of our self-concept. Two types of self-esteem have been identified: global and specific (Blaskovich & Tomaka in Robinson et al. 1991). Global self-esteem is how much we like and approve of our perceived self as a whole. Specific self-esteem is the measure of how much we like and approve of a certain part of ourselves, including our bodies.

If somebody highly values a specific aspect of herself, her global self-esteem will be affected to a greater extent by the self-esteem she has on that specific area of the self. Research suggests that self-esteem correlates highly with body image. Mintz and Betz (1986), for instance, found a significant positive relationship between body satisfaction and self-esteem in both men and women, showing that for both genders feeling generally good about the self is linked with positive feelings about the body.

The linkages between bodies and clothing (Wilson 1985) indicate that consumers use clothing to express their thoughts and feelings about their bodies. For this reason, consumers’ discussion of their fashion and clothing choices provides an effective means by which to elicit consumer attitudes about their bodies. In addition, as clothing is worn ‘physically’ for functional reasons, but also for more emotional reasons (Evans 1989), it should be possible to elicit affective aspects of attitudes towards clothes which are purchased for both functional and symbolic/emotional reasons.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research objectives

There were three research objectives for the qualitative phase of the study; and these involved eliciting:

• firstly, self and brand / retailer connections;
• secondly, negative stereotypes of the rejected brands and retailers;
•thirdly the participants’ negative attitudes about rejected brands and retailers.

The exploration of the body and body imagery was not the original focus of the study. However the importance of body image to many of the participants was a
key emergent theme (Miles and Huberman 1994) in the subsequent data analysis. The body and its associated imagery provided an important and visible link between negative self-concept and negative symbolic consumption; and this was reflected in the data collected for each of the above research objectives.

Respondents

We adopted a theoretical sampling approach (Mason 1996:93; Silverman 2000: 105ff) combined with snowballing (Miles and Huberman 1994:28) for recruiting 30 participants (both male and female) between the ages of 19 and 30.

Research context

Clothing was selected as the product category because it is relevant to both product symbolism and congruency theory (Belk et al 1982; Holman 1981; Freitas et al 1997; Feinberg et al 1992; Kaiser 1997).

Method: Data collection

Qualitatively-based methods were used for data collection in order to facilitate understanding. The methods included an individually based projective exercise; and then interview friendship pairs. Each participant took part in both stages of the qualitative data collection to yield 30 collages and accompanying self-analyses; and 15 interview transcripts.

The projective exercise involved the construction of collages, and participants’ self-analyses of their collages. In the projective exercise participants were asked to map sports (trainer) brands and clothing retailers’ logos in relation to three different views of themselves (actual, ideal and undesired). For the self-analyses, immediately following the construction of the collages, participants were asked to talk through their decisions – why the collages looked like they did, why labels were placed in particular positions and so forth. During the paired interviews some set themes were covered, but the discussion was fairly unstructured, following the flow of the conversation. Visual stimuli were used to promote discussion about clothing and fashion. These consisted of ten photographs of same-sex models, considered to reflect a range of consumer images.

Method: data analysis

All interviews were recorded on tape cassette and transcribed in their entirety. Analysis was ongoing during the data collection, an approach recommended by Robson (1993). Spiggle (1994) distinguished between the analysis and interpretation of data, and argued, similarly, that the two phases do not occur in direct sequence, but are represented as iterative and interpenetrating.

The process of analysis is described by Wetherall and Potter (1988) to be not so much a process of following rules and recipes, more a strategy of following up hunches, developing tentative interpretative schemes, that may need to be continuously revised or even abandoned.

The transcripts were analysed through reading and re-reading, noting patterns and themes. Miles and Huberman (1984) argue that this is a process that the human mind is quite capable of, needing no 'how to' advice. The careful reading and re-reading entailed searching for "patterns and recurring organisations" (Wetherall and Potter 1988). Thompson and Haytko (1997) advised a similar reading strategy whereby researchers develop a holistic understanding of each interview transcript whilst also noting
similarities across the transcripts already analysed. This process allows earlier readings to inform later readings, with researchers recognising and exploring the patterns in the later readings that perhaps have not been noted in the earlier analysis.

The data was “inductively orientated” a design that is recommended when the area is unfamiliar and the intent is exploratory or descriptive (Huberman and Miles 1998). Patton (1990) describes a process of inductive analysis whereby categories emerge from the data. This approach was followed because there were research questions rather than hypothesis. An attempt was made to approach the interviews with a fairly ‘open mind’ (although informed by the extensive literature review) and categories and themes emerged from the data rather than being imposed. This was intended to reflect the importance that is attached to a set of techniques to help with the task of data management and analysis, but heeds Robson’s (1993:384) warning against “overly mechanistic” data analysis, which could have undermined the very strengths of qualitative research. "The overall goal is to openly present the entire reasoning process from data to conclusions" (Wetherall and Potter 1988).

The intuitive reading process was supplemented by Spiggle's (1994) framework of categorisation, abstraction, comparison and integration as the fundamental analytical operations. Spiggle (1994) encouraged the development of categories that were grouped into more general conceptual classes through abstraction. The differences and similarities were then explored through comparison, and the data was finally integrated to build a conceptual framework. Integration is the goal of analytical techniques whereby a theory is built that is grounded in the data.

The projective technique data was analysed in a similar fashion to the rest of the qualitative data. The collages provided visual accompaniments to participants’ ‘self analyses’. Some researchers advocate greater involvement by participants, including contributions to the analysis process (Yardley 1987). Yardley (1987:229) used the process of self analysis (along with a more traditional procedure involving drawing out themes from participants’ transcriptions) and admitted that without this dual-process of analysis, researchers often gather only a fraction of that which is relevant for their enquiry. The collages were kept with the verbal ‘self-analysis’.

Notes were collected at the time of the interviews and these notes were reviewed along with the transcripts throughout the analysis as recommended by Patton (1980).

Using narratives to represent the voice of the consumer is a relatively recent phenomenon. Stern (1998) states that no articles reported studies using this approach before 1987 in the important forum for consumer behaviour research represented by the Journal of Consumer Research. It is important to acknowledge that there can be problems associated with this form of interpretation and presentation, particularly because “researchers are empowered to represent informant voices in whatever way they please” (Stern 1998:61).

The presentation of the findings and interpretation drew on Thompson et al (1990) who selected just one informant to represent the analysis of the other (eleven) informants. In this study considerations about the body were evident in many of the discussions with
the consumers. However the narratives from three participants were chosen because, they were all influenced by considerations about the body, but each participant demonstrated very different attitudes to their body. The narratives were selected because they were considered be fairly typical, in their representation of different ways that consumers avoided embodying their negative selves, and thus manifested the dialectic between body image and aspects of possible negative selves, of the consumers we talked to.

FINDINGS

We begin by presenting the overall findings relating to different aspects of negative possible selves, as these provide the context for the discussion of the key emergent finding about the importance of body and body image to the presentation of the visible self for public evaluation.

Overall findings: aspects of the negative self

The wider focus of this research was the influence of negative possible selves on consumers’ rejection of products – in this case clothing. Three different components of the negative self were clearly identified: undesired, avoidance and irrelevant.

Undesired self “so not me!”

The undesired self was the most extreme of the negative selves. It was also the most clearly linked to distastes and rejection. Ogilvie (1987:380) first depicted the undesired self, as an “embedded and unshakeable standard against which one judges his or her present level of well-being” (emphasis added). In our study the undesired self (Ogilvie 1987) and its associated undesired end state (Higgins et al 1994) were represented by negative stereotypes of product-user imagery and embodied the most extreme notions of that which is ‘so not me’ and could be linked to feelings of repulsion (Rozin and Fallon 1987). A number of Ogilvie’s (1987) observations were supported by this research, particularly the experiential nature of the undesired self.

Avoidance “just not me!”

The avoidance self was less extreme than the undesired self and embodied less strong views, which could be linked to feelings of aversion and the avoidance of products/brands and product/brand-user stereotypes. Participants recognised the temporal nature of likes and dislikes (Wilk 1995) and the notion of changing desires and dislikes according to shifting circumstances. This is in direct contrast to the undesired self, which was depicted as a more fixed standard and supports Wilk’s (1994) claims regarding the importance of the social and temporal context of preferences (and distastes).

The avoidance self provided evidence that tastes could vary and change; and distastes were not necessarily all clear cut. Different styles and images could be appropriate for varying circumstances. Some products or brands could be considered to represent good taste on one individual yet distasteful on another. This less extreme nature was captured in the expression “just not me”.

Irrelevant self “meaningless to me”

The irrelevant self was associated with those images and items of clothing that were meaningless to consumers because of their lack of a ‘fit’ with consumers’ lives. Unlike the undesired and avoidance self, those images associated with the irrelevant self did not even enter into the consumers’ evoked set, because of their irrelevance.
Each of these negative selves have a number of criteria associated with them, and through the activation of these selves, consumers form dislikes and distastes and ultimately reject products and brands. Body image is a crucial feature of the self and relates to all three facets of the negative self, and the associated criteria. Consumers’ feelings and attitudes to their body provided an important explanatory link when seeking to explain consumers’ avoidance and rejection of clothing items and brands. Clothing represents one way of using the body to create and carry the visible self, as the body becomes an important identity marker (Jagger 1998) in the public arena.

Specific findings: body, clothing and negative selves

In presenting the specific findings on the emergent theme of the body in relation to the negative self, our research focuses on how clothing is used by individuals as an expression of their feelings about their bodies; the usage of clothing to disguise what are perceived to be negative attributes; and the usage of clothing choices (or non choices) to prevent the activation of any negative feelings that they might possess about their bodies and body imagery. We begin by discussing the gendered nature of body image and the way in which body image acts as a constraint through reference to three negative selves. We then present three ‘self narratives’ to demonstrate the different ways in which participants’ body image acted as a constraint on their clothing selection. For each respondent we link their feelings about their body image and clothing tastes/distastes with the different strands of the negative self identified in earlier research (Banister 2002).

Gendered nature of the findings

One important feature that emerged clearly was the gendered nature of the findings. Little information about body image was volunteered by the male participants. Discussions regarding the body were very limited amongst males, which in itself represents an interesting finding. None of the male participants discussed their clothing choices in relation to concerns about their body image. This could be because none of the male participants had ‘hang ups’ about their weight or it might be that men are not socialised to talk about their body image in the way that women do, or to think about it in relation to the clothing that they wear. Earlier research suggests that the differences between men and women could stem from how males and females are encouraged to view their bodies as children and the criteria that they use to evaluate them. Boys are encouraged to think in terms of physical effectiveness, while girls are encouraged to think about physical attractiveness (Jagger 1998).

One female participant talked about her brother who had struggled with his weight, and suggested that this was why he had worn some of the clothing that he had: “even when he has been very thin, he has spent two years wearing the same pair of jogging bottoms” (Debbie). However, the general impression was given that body image was a much more significant concern amongst the female participants and thus acted as a constraint on their clothing choices. Therefore, although there were equal numbers of males and females participating in the original study, for the purposes of this paper we will concentrate on the female participants.

Women’s responses

Among women respondents, body image emerged as an important constraint on
clothing preferences, operating in three primary ways: practical; psychological and physical; and emotional. Each of these can be closely identified with a particular dimension of the negative self, representing the irrelevant, avoidance and undesired self respectively.

Irrelevant self: Julie

Firstly, there was the body as a practical constraint on clothing selection. This was the main impetus behind the rejection of clothing based on consumers’ irrelevant selves. Consumers avoided (or did not even consider) the purchase of certain brands and retail brands, because they perceived them as clothing that would not fit or suit their body size or body shape. However, rejection on the basis of the irrelevant self did not evoke the same negative feelings about the self (which both the avoidance and undesired self did) and the body acted as a practical constraint on the purchase of clothing.

Julie was the participant who seemed to be most comfortable with her body image and her clothing. She was very matter-of-fact about the way in which her body limited her clothing choices and the body functioned as a practical constraint on her clothing choices. Julie gave the impression that items of clothing that were unlikely to fit or suit her would not be given much thought.

In spite of recognising the constraints of her body image (Julie acknowledged being a fairly large woman) leading her to reject certain styles, Julie also gave the impression that for much of the time she was happy with her body. However, there were times when she did not feel so content with her body image:

“...I have fat days and I just feel fat in what I am wearing...”

Julie also acknowledged wearing different clothing according to the circumstances.

“My dress is often linked to my mood and the weather”

“...in the evening... sometimes when you attract some really dodgy characters, you think ‘oh why did I decide I am going to be outrageous today?’ do you know what I mean... and it is always the ugly ones, and you think if [only] I had put on a shawl or something ..”

Her friend’s (from the interview pair) comments regarding Julie’s style of dressing indicated that she was someone who cared about her appearance, and made an effort to look good in the clothing that she wore:

“Julie always looks presentable and going out she always looks good. When she is going out she always looks sexy. ... sometimes I admire her because she is more daring than me. I am not as daring as I used to be. She always looks smart and presentable.”

The comments made by Julie’s friend also suggested that Julie had a high level of confidence in her appearance, which seemed to be a key element in the rejection of clothing on the basis of the irrelevant self. Although the body constrained the choices that these women perceived to be available to them, those women who rejected items on the basis of the irrelevant self did not feel that this was something they needed to address. They simply rejected the item(s) and made a more ‘suitable’ choice.

The women involved in the interviews seemed to be fairly consistent in the way in which they viewed themselves. However, there were also comments that indicated that this was not always the case. Even though this particular participant appeared to have a very positive body image, the body image could become relevant as a constraint on
her clothing choice if Julie was having a ‘fat day’.

Avoidance self: Penny

Secondly, the body was also interpreted as both a psychological and physical constraint on consumers’ clothing preferences and choices. This constraint appeared to be closely connected with consumers’ avoidance selves. Consumers would reject clothing that they believed would be more suitable or flattering on people other than themselves. The interpretation of brands, items and retailers that evoked consumers’ avoidance self would depend on physical (i.e. body shape and size) and non-physical (i.e. character and personality) aspects of consumers. It was possible that the same item of clothing or brand might be interpreted positively on one person and negatively on another.

Penny as the oldest participant might have been expected to be the participant with the most secure feelings regarding her appearance. However, this was not the case. Towards the end of the interview Penny opened up and started talking about an eating disorder that she had had when she was younger. This clearly played an important part in many of her attitudes to clothing, her body and consumption generally.

“I was bulimic and had a very different self image, and even though I was seven stone and under, I was buying what I saw as things like size fourteens and they were really baggy on me.”

Penny did seem to have become more secure about her appearance in recent years. She seemed comfortable talking very frankly about her struggles with bulimia – but she still described herself as having, “repetitive dress syndrome” which she felt was a direct result of her body image and her struggles with her weight. She claimed that this eating disorder had an important effect on the clothing that she chose, and also her persistent choice of the colour black. The Nike ‘swoosh’ appeared on Penny’s collage, and she acknowledged that trainers were something that she was currently considering purchasing. Again she admitted to being influenced by her friends, who had told her that trainers would look good on her. A sense of a lack of self-confidence and dissatisfaction with her body crept in when she said:

“...but then if I tried them I would probably think ‘God I look so stumpy I won’t have them’ and then it would be like I don’t want any trainers and it doesn’t matter what brand they are”

Body image was a factor that was associated with the avoidance self and in this case was linked with age. Penny stated that many of the items in Mark One (and Top Shop) were “based on a more teenage age group than me” and she thought that this might explain why the sizing did not seem appropriate for her:

“.... Well I could take a size twelve in a more expensive brand and then in say Mark One or Top Shop might struggle to find my size...you know a fourteen might not fit me...”

Penny also mentioned Sisley, a sub-brand of Benetton, which is often sold in the same outlets. She rejected this brand for physical (body) reasons.

“.... Their shape, they are an Italian shaped person who isn’t English if you see what I mean in terms of their pear shape or hips, it is more difficult to find clothes to fit if you are looking for the bottom half”.

The avoidance self was manifest in the discussions of many of the participants, and for many of the women an important
aspect of this was body image. However, Penny seemed more conscious of her body than some of the participants and it is likely that her previous illness played a large part in this. However, many of the participants (who to our knowledge had not suffered eating disorders) seemed to be constantly comparing themselves (mentally) to other women, and gave an impression that the body shape was an extremely influential aspect of their decisions regarding what was, or was not ‘suitable’ dress for them.

Undesired self: Debbie

Thirdly, the body also generated an emotional constraint on clothing choice. When clothing evoked notions of the undesired self, this represented rejection ‘out of hand’ of items, styles, brands and retailer brands. Rejection of clothing on the basis of the undesired self was often because particular clothing styles or brands were felt to communicate what were perceived as negative messages regarding the consumer. The undesired self had connections with consumers’ notions or attitudes to the body generally, most notably with the affective aspects of attitudes and often fairly strong feelings of revulsion. The undesired self was often depicted in a concern for other people, and what they looked like in their clothing.

Debbie’s responses gave the impression that although her body operated as a constraint on her clothing choices, much of this could be explained by an attitude to the interaction of clothing and the body generally, not just her particular body shape or body image. Debbie discussed the body shape of other women, and even though she gave the impression that she considered them to have a body shape that she would be happy with, she considered certain styles of clothing to be ‘inappropriate’. She talked about one of her friends and the (in her mind negative) reaction that this friend received from men, which she considered to be linked to the clothing that this friend wore.

“...it is pretty full on like wow! Obviously I don’t have that kind of chest, but even if I did I think probably I wouldn’t wear that because she does walk around and she does get all these men saying “have you got the time oooer” I walked from the office to a pub with her and we were in the pub for about an hour, and at least four men made comments to her and stuff”

Reactions such as this were not restricted to the people Debbie knew. In reaction to one of the models included in the visual stimuli, while Debbie acknowledged that the model had a very good figure, she also indicated that even if her body was similar to the one in the photograph, it would still restrict her from choosing to wear that style of clothing. Her first reaction was that the model looked like a “hooker or something”. Expanding on this, Debbie described in more detail her thoughts on the matter:

“I think it is actually... well obviously she looks amazing in it because she is a model and everything and she has got an amazing figure, but I do actually think that is erring slightly on the side of tarty, because if you look at it, it is very very short...You’d have to have an amazing body... I am sorry, but look at this I mean it is a little bit; it is not leaving much to the imagination

The discussion with her interview partner that followed, encouraged her to talk about a work colleague who she also thought made mistakes in terms of the interaction between her body and her clothing:
There was a girl at work in fact who was wearing a nightie type dress the other day, and I saw her, and I actually did a double-take, thinking “what the bloody hell is she wearing?” and I saw her and said “oh that’s a nice dress” and she was saying that a bloke had been saying ‘have you come in your nightie?’ and I was thinking well it is a bit... I would never wear anything like that to work.... well I would never wear anything like that full stop because it wouldn’t suit me”

Many of Debbie’s remarks suggested that there were certain items and styles of clothing that she considered unsuitable, whatever the circumstances, representing the ‘out of hand’ rejection of the undesired self. However, she did acknowledge that what she termed a ‘good body’ could be more forgiving to the choice of clothing.

“...You can get away with wearing cheaper clothes and it will look sort of better”

As well as the undesired self, Debbie’s responses indicated that the avoidance self played a large part in her consumption decisions, and sometimes it became difficult to distinguish between the two, suggesting the existence of strong links between the two sources of rejection. Debbie referred to aspects of her body that she felt very self-conscious about, and indicated that she would reject clothing that drew attention to these aspects, or did not flatter them.

“Obviously I wouldn’t wear like a cropped top or anything that exposed ones’ midriff”

“There is nothing worse than a big arse in tight jeans”

Like many of the participants, Debbie saw a difference between herself and those people who she thought were able to ‘get away’ with wearing certain fashions. The ability to look good or ‘appropriate’ in outfits partly depended on the circumstances, but to a large extent was dictated by the body shape of the individual. Debbie voiced despair at the coverage of fashion in women’s magazines (a subject close to her heart as she was a features writer for a women’s magazine):

“I don’t like to bang on about this but a lot of it is just geared towards very thin people and I just think ...ugh sod that.”

Many of Debbie’s comments were directed at consumers other than herself. Some of Debbie’s responses suggested feelings not dissimilar to ‘disgust’ when discussing clothing and aspects of the body, a feeling that was often associated with the undesired self.

“... those peddle pushers completely trendy at the moment, there are quite a lot people at work wearing them who really shouldn’t be wearing them if you know what I mean...people with big arses basically is what I am talking about. “...Unless you are very, very thin, then I really don’t think they [peddle pushers] look nice, as my mother says “it hits you in all the wrong places” and I have never tried them on. There is one girl at work who I am extremely fond of, and I think generally she dresses very nicely. She does wear sleeveless dresses, I mean I would not wear anything sleeveless to the office, I don’t know why, maybe if I had slimmer more toned arms I would but I feel a bit uncomfortable about it. But she will go in wearing various things sort of thing I would maybe wear to a garden party or something, if I went to a garden party. Normally she looks lovely, I mean she is quite big but she is very pretty and she is like a really nice person. She wears bright colours and she is not
on a particularly good wage but she dresses well, she always looks nice, and she came in wearing one of those tops and a pair of peddle pushers and frankly she just looked terrible, and I remember thinking I wish she wasn’t wearing that because she looks awful, but I wouldn’t say anything to her”.

Most of the participants incorporated aspects of the irrelevant, undesired and avoidance self into their evaluations of clothing. The responses of Debbie demonstrated the potential connections between the undesired and avoidance self, and sometimes it was difficult to separate the source of the rejection. For Debbie, more than any of the other participants, she seemed to have an opinion about the body and clothing which went beyond considerations of what was suitable for the circumstances or the individual (including their body shape), and incorporated feelings about women’s bodies generally, which had almost ‘moral’ undercurrents.

DISCUSSION

Joy and Venkatesh (1994:336) argued that consumer behaviour had paid little attention to the human body in its research programme. However it is clear that other areas of social science research into consumer culture have recognized the importance of the body, seeing it as an important site for display (e.g. Featherstone 1982) and performativity, described by Butler as “a culturally induced, restricted effect produced on the surface of the body” (Dunn 1997:694). For Butler, “The body is the site at which the ‘discursive’ becomes ‘performativ[8]e’, that is, the signifying practices of the normativizing culture operate through bodily behavior, or ‘corporeal signs’” (Dunn 1997:694).

In this paper we took Featherstone’s argument that the body was the visible carrier of the self as our starting point for examining how consumers use their bodies as sites for creating and managing meaning about self and body (image) in the public arena (Turner 1994) and in ‘anonymous public spaces’ (Featherstone 1982:19). Research has demonstrated in a number of different areas how clothing and fashion can be used for articulating aspects of the self (Lurie 1992). Our study focused particularly on fashion and clothing in relation to the ’performing self” (Featherstone 1982:27) as reflexive project because “Individuals …[have] now to decode both the appearance of others and take pains to manage the impressions they give off, while moving through the world of strangers.… individuals… become encouraged to search themselves for flaws and signs of decay” (Featherstone 1982:28).

However, we were particularly interested in understanding how consumers’ distastes were made visible via their rejection of clothing products and brands. In this way the body became a site for inviting consumers to articulate how they used clothing and fashion to contribute to creating the self in the public arena; thus surfacing the aspects of consumer choice (distastes, the refusal of tastes, and rejection of goods and services) that usually remain invisible and inaccessible to the normal view. We explored how consumers use clothing choice to render some aspects of the visible body less visible, if not invisible. At the same time, the choices which consumers make in rejecting products, which are essentially invisible distastes and dislikes, are made explicit here and are thus rendered ‘visible’.

Jagger (1998) argued men and women “can be seen as rational consumers engaged in the process of constructing
the self”; and that “in consumer society self-identity is inextricably bound up with the body”. Jagger’s (1998) research confirmed her prediction that men, as well as women, “were likely to see their bodies as important identity markers when marketing the self”. Both men and women were equally likely to refer to their bodies in the advertisements, though the emphasis varied. Women tended to stress their ‘physical attractiveness’ whilst men tended to stress their body size and height.

Our paper concentrated on how consumers negotiate meaning using their bodies as visible vehicles for evaluation of the self in the market place, using fashion and clothing. Our data suggested that men demonstrated less overt signs of concern with body image as conveying aspects of their selves, compared with women. A potential limitation of our study was that our data did not produce narratives from men, however we would recognize that it would undoubtedly be valuable to undertake additional research to establish the place of the body image in men’s views of their possible selves, including their negative self especially in the light of the finding that “the body has become a mark of selfhood for men as well as women” (Jagger 1998). This provides considerable scope for exploring how men use fashion and clothing on their body surfaces in their adornment rituals.

In our study, women demonstrated considerable degrees of agency in managing their body images via their consumption choices in terms of fashion and clothing. Some consumers found it difficult to find clothing that fitted or suited their body size or shape (Campbell 1996). In fact the body functioned as a constraint to a greater extent than simply its size or shape, but also of importance was the body image that consumers had. This image formed the basis of a ‘physical self’, which together with the mental aspects of the self, led to decisions based on the suitability of items of clothing.

**CONCLUSION**

The main interest in our overall study was in the negative self, and how this was linked to dislike and distastes. Thus our paper looked at how clothing and fashion is used by individuals as an expression of their feelings about their bodies, which are often expressed in negative terms; their use of clothing to disguise what are perceived as negative attributes of their physical selves; and their use of fashion and clothing to prevent the activation of negative feelings about themselves and their bodies.

What clearly differentiated the undesired from the avoidance self was that the latter incorporated images that were negative when individuals applied them to themselves, but these images could be viewed positively on someone else. The findings identified the importance of considerations regarding the ‘feared’ self, and the associated images that accompanied these thoughts (Oyserman and Markus 1990). These associated images were reflected in the mini-consumption stories that outlined participants’ ideas regarding the typical consumers of products and brands.

It became apparent that the participants channelled a lot of time and energy into the creation of fairly distinct identities. It was clear from the interviews that in order to maintain a positive self-image, those with a predominantly negative drive attempted to conform to an acceptable or normative (Miller 1999) ‘standard’, and that this involved avoiding standing out to any extent. Understanding how they do not want to be perceived is essential for consumers,
and fitted into the self-concept formation principles of reflected appraisals (the self formed around the perceptions of others); self attribution and social comparison (Rosenberg 1979). The specific purpose of this paper was an attempt to explore the constraints that consumers’ body images placed on their clothing choices. It is proposed that these constraints can be explored effectively with reference to consumers’ possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986), specifically their negative possible selves. Fashion is an ideal means by which to express physical and psychological aspects of the self; and significantly contributes to our understanding of consumers’ reflexive and embodied selves.

REFERENCES


Clothing, Group Distancing and Identity … Not!,” *Sociological Inquiry*, 7, 3, 323-335.


---

1 Emma N. Banister is Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Consumer Behaviour and Marketing in the Department of Textiles, UMIST, PO Box 88, Manchester M60 1QD, England; e.banister@umist.ac.uk

2 Margaret K. Hogg is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Consumer Behaviour in the Manchester School of Management, UMIST, PO Box 88, Manchester M60 1QD, England; m.hogg@umist.ac.uk