Experiencing Motherhood: the Importance of Possible Selves to New Mothers

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Our research examines the impact that women’s experiences of consumption choices have on the processes of their identity formation and stabilization as mothers. We report some preliminary findings wherein we identify some of the key choices that our participants made at certain stages of their pregnancy/motherhood and identify the role of possible selves: in terms of the mother/parent that they wanted to be (ideal), their thoughts about the kind of mother they did not want to be (negative self), balanced with the pressure to fit with others’ expectations (ought self).

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Long Abstract

Background
We report a small-scale exploratory study that investigated the interrelationships between consumption, identity and choice using the theoretical lens of possible selves. Mothers-to-be and new mothers are faced with important choices, as consumers, at a major transitional stage in their lives. We examine the impact that women’s experiences of consumption choices had on the processes of their identity formation and stabilization as mothers (‘the kind of mother I want to be’, ‘the kind of mother I don’t want to be’).

The transition to motherhood (Goldberg 1988:2) is a time when women learn about their new role and identity as mothers, experience changes in patterns of consumption as well as significant changes in their work/life balance (e.g. Fursman 2002). Identities may be challenged as different roles are experienced in competition (e.g. Fursman 2002), along with changes in women’s relationship with others (Smith 1999a; b) and difficult consumption decisions (Prothero 2002).

New motherhood as a transitional stage can be linked to ‘possible selves’, which describe future possibilities not central to our current identity (Antonucci and Mikus 1988:69-73). Possible selves provide consumers with goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats and the self-relevant information that individuals need to organize and give direction to their lives (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Women may have preconceived ideas about their ‘possible selves’ (Antonucci and Mikus 1988: 69-73) as they approach pregnancy and motherhood—‘what kind of mother do I want to be?’ and just as importantly, ‘what kind of mother do I not want to be?’ This study provided an opportunity to explore how women’s choices in the early stages of motherhood are used to manage this process.

Method
Women were recruited for a small-scale pilot study on the basis that they had recently given birth to their first child. We used semi-structured interviews to identify the main themes and patterns of interest, and explore the choices made by our participants and the context in which these decisions were made.

We plan to develop our methodology on the basis of this pilot study and use a quasi-longitudinal approach. We hope to recruit twenty-four expectant new mothers and interview them at key stages in the transition to motherhood. Our qualitative approach will also incorporate diaries and projective techniques. Using a quasi-longitudinal approach will capture experiences of maternity and support services, as well as evolving experiences of mothering linked to consumption and identity as they are made, rather than relying on retrospective accounts, which could provide inaccurate accounts of pregnancy.

Findings
Our preliminary findings identify some of the key ways in which women’s hopes, fears and expectations of mothering (possible selves) have impacted on the choices and decisions they made. We identify some of the key choices that our participants made at certain stages of their pregnancy/motherhood and identify the role of possible selves: in terms of the mother/parent that they wanted to be (ideal), their thoughts about the kind of mother they did not want to be (negative self), balanced with the pressure to fit with others’ expectations (ought self).

The issues explored included pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, attitudes towards immunization, specific consumption activities (for baby and/or for mother) and the interplay of actual experiences relating to new mothers prior attitudes and beliefs in the form of possible selves. New mothers’ hopes and fears were exhibited in consumption decisions such as whether to purchase particular products (e.g. dummies/pacifiers), and whether to fit in with society’s expectations (e.g. gendered products and colors) but also key experiences associated with motherhood such as the wish to breastfeed, yet the experience of difficulties in establishing breast-feeding. Our participants found themselves balancing their needs and expectations with those from a variety of sources (e.g. friends, family, work colleagues, health service professionals) and this was particularly challenging in some circumstances.

Discussion
The concept of possible selves provided a useful means to explore our first time mothers’ experiences and the way in which they negotiated their way around some key decisions associated with new motherhood. This approach provides the potential to highlight women’s expectations and the sources from which they take advice. Our research could demonstrate how women cope when their actual experiences of mothering (actual self) do not align with their hopes and expectations of mothering (ideal self), or the kind of mother I think I should be (ought self), and sometimes involve aspects of mothering they had originally hoped to avoid or reject (undesired self). These
hopes and fears can include consumption decisions such as whether to purchase particular products (e.g. pacifiers), and whether to fit in with society’s expectations (e.g. gendered products and colors) but also the kinds of experiences highlighted within this paper such as the wish to breastfeed, yet the experience of difficulties in establishing breast-feeding.

Many of the decisions which women face at this time are likely to be influenced by the ‘ought self’ which are informed by discourses generated by social networks and public policy campaigns/health care professionals about what constitutes ‘a good mother’ as well as family members and the social networks of new mothers. The discrepancies and psychological distances between a range of selves (e.g. ideal/actual; ought/actual and undesired/actual self—see Higgins et al. 1987) clearly had an influence on the consumption experiences of our mothers as well as their overall well being. The research contributes, theoretically, to our understanding of possible selves relating this concept to consumption choices into public services. It also contributes to our understanding of identity formation processes amongst new mothers—how identities are acquired or imposed; and the consumption practices in daily life (Reckwitz 2002; Warde 2003) which underpin the acquisition of the identity of mother.

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Beauty, Brains, or Brawn: Idealized Male Images in Advertising
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Extended Abstract
A number of researchers have examined the influence of the media, particularly advertising, on American perceptions of physical attractiveness and beauty, and the implications of that relationship on attitudes and self-perceptions. Most agree that advertising presents idealized images of individuals and the American lifestyle (Richins 1995). Enhanced by special effects capable of minimizing the least imperfection, many models and actors project virtually unattainable levels of beauty and physical attractiveness. Some even suggest that the thin and beautiful female model so pervasive in cosmetic and apparel advertising contributes to the development of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Richins 1991; Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, and Williams 2000).

Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) has been used to investigate the process by which people compare themselves with individuals in ads. Festinger (1954) proposed that humans have a drive to evaluate themselves through comparisons with others. Negative effects may occur when comparisons are made with others perceived as superior on a dimension of interest (upward comparisons) (Major, Testa, and Bylsma 1991), and these comparisons may be primarily automatic (Lyubomirsky and Ross 1997). Research indicates that for women, comparisons to idealized advertising images result in lower satisfaction with physical attractiveness (Cattarin et al. 2000; Richins 1991), decreases in self-esteem (Martin and Gentry 1997), and increases in moods such as depression and anger (Cattarin et al. 2000).

It appears that men as well as women make social comparisons to advertising imagery and that these comparisons impact male self-perceptions. Gulas and McKeage (2000) demonstrated that idealized images of financial success negatively reduced male subjects’ level of self-esteem whereas idealized images of physical attractiveness had no significant effect. It may be then that men are subject to upward comparisons when idealized images reflect relevant features other than physical attractiveness. For example, media images that portray desirable characteristics such as athleticism or intellect may be influential in affecting male self perceptions. The present study represents an exploratory effort to identify the types of idealized male images prevalent in contemporary print advertising from the perspective of the individual consumer, both male and female.

Method
Male fashion photos were chosen randomly by the researchers from recent issues of men’s lifestyle magazines and retail catalogues. The selected photographs featured full-color, full-body shots of a single model (no other people or animals). All commercial text and graphics, including background and brand names, were removed using photo editing software. Eighty-six pictures were included in the final set. Participants were asked to sort the photographs into as many piles as they deemed appropriate on the basis of similarity of