Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Consuming Ideal Images? Celebrating the Pregnant and Postpartum Body

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In this presentation we focus on the body as the basis for the evaluation of self in the public arena and explore women’s experiences of cultural ideals surrounding bodies, both during pregnancy and post partum. Pregnancy is often regarded as a state which frees women, at least temporarily from their concerns with their slender ideal self, allowing them to gain weight and change shape without the risk of attracting adverse evaluation from others; or feeling inadequate in social comparisons with idealized images of women and beauty. We find support for the assumption that pregnancy can represent a time and space for ‘free play’ of the embodied self. However, our findings also suggest that pregnant women can find themselves confronted with a different range of discourses, which are just as normative as those they experienced before pregnancy.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14726/volumes/v36/NA-36

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Then she began to look about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible. (Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass)

Legions of consumer researchers have examined the concept of beauty from such diverse perspectives as aesthetic ideals, body image, self-concept, self-identity, and specific industries including clothing and cosmetics. Nonetheless, a review of the beauty literature reveals a certain sameness to this research endeavor. This sameness has resulted from applying a single root perspective, leading to an oversimplified view of the phenomenon of beauty consumption. We believe that it is time to step up to the looking glass. First, to mirror the conceptualizations of beauty as they are currently perceived. Second, to go through the looking glass and explore alternative ways of seeing beauty, and thus gain new perspectives for understanding the consumption of fashion advertising, body ideals, and cosmetics purchases.

The researchers participating in this symposium are not naive about previously published research in this area, nor do they seek to overturn it. Instead, they seek to build upon it to present a more complex, more elaborated, and more nuanced explanation of the consumption of beauty. The first presentation examines the idea of aspiration as the driver of fashion advertising, and finds it lacking. The authors combine interview, content analysis, and survey data to uncover what fashion ads are really like, and the diverse ways in which women actually choose to consume them. The second presentation explores women’s embodied experiences of pregnancy and birth. Previous research implies that women are released from beauty ideals during pregnancy; but interviews with pregnant women suggest that body-image is much more multifaceted and mixed than a simple polarity between freedom or enslavement can explain. The third presentation investigates the common perspective that selling beauty products such as cosmetics subjugates women. A case study of the Avon lady in Africa suggests ways in which the cosmetic industry can be empowering for women, as it creates ties of economic health between them, while avoiding disastrous repercussions from the ruling powers.

All three presentations reflect current perspectives on beauty consumption and then go through the looking glass to reverse, expand, or embellish conventional wisdom and unexamined assumptions. Yet each addresses different areas of beauty consumption: fashion images, body ideals, and the cosmetics industry. In addition, each presentation relies on empirical data that have already been collected but not yet published. Consequently, these presentations form a coherent symposium containing new information of interest to a diverse audience of consumer behavior scholars.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“The Aspiration Assumption: Women’s Consumption of Fashion Advertising”
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Fashion is a process by which the latest aesthetic styles are introduced to the public through a system that structures the reception and consumption of those styles (Entwistle 2000). The fashion process relies on continual, regular, and institutionalized changes in dress, adornment, and decorative design (Davis 1992). Ever since Richins (1991) demonstrated that women compare themselves unfavorably to the models portrayed in clothing ads, the preponderance of academic papers examining fashion advertising has focused on representations of women—both their appearance and their roles—and compared them to some standard of “reality” (for a review, see Lindner [2004]). One of the key assumptions underlying such research is that all fashion advertising is rooted in a straightforward aspirational message showing a model to be emulated. That is, fashion advertising presents an idealized image that women are taught to aspire to. Consequently, consumer response to fashion advertising is must be simple as well: a woman can accept the idealized image and striving for it, or she can reject the idealized image and define herself in opposition.

By contrast, previous research in consumer behavior has demonstrated that the reading of advertisements is a complex task nuanced by personal life themes, goals, and projects (Mick and Buhl 1992, Mick and Politi 1989, Scott 1994), and may be conducted for many non-purchase reasons (O’Donohoe 1994). We also know that clothing choices are used to build identity within a local group (Elliott and Davies 2006) using fashion discourses from the broader culture (Thompson and Haytko 1997) while attempting to avoid negative associations (Bannister and Hogg 2004). Given these perspectives, it is difficult to believe that a simple interpretive strategy, such as “accept/reject idealized image” can effectively capture the reality of consumers’ readings of fashion ads.

We contend that the reading of fashion ads has been so stigmatized and denatured that the larger project of studying fashion image consumption has stalled. Women are too often forced into the narrow categories of fashion object or fashion victim, ignoring the fact that fashion is a culturally-situated practice resulting from the intersection of complex social forces and individual negotiation (Entwistle 2000). This presentation uses the perspective of consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) to examine how consumers’ motivations and interpretations frame their consumption of mass-mediated fashion images. Under consumer culture theory, marketing scholars accept that individuals consume the symbolic meanings of products along with a product’s physical characteristics. A fashion brand is just such a combination of the physical and the symbolic (Rocamora 2002). However, little research exists on how branded and heavily imaged products such as clothing come to be infused with symbolic meaning. “Lacking such knowledge, we can at best only form conclusions without quite knowing how we derived them; this is something we often have to do in everyday life, but it hardly satisfies the requirements of a science” (Davis 1992, 4). It is our hope to advance consumer science in the domain of fashion.

We will present a content analysis of three decades of fashion advertising in Vogue and Vanity Fair to demonstrate that fashion ads are not simple vessels of aspiration. We add findings from two surveys of the readers of fashion magazines to examine how women consume fashion magazines. Finally, the presentation reports the results of an ongoing set of interviews with “fashionista women” to develop a theory of why women consume fashion advertising as they do.
In this presentation we focus on the body as the basis for the “evaluation of self in the public arena” (Turner 1994) and explore women’s experiences of cultural ideals surrounding bodies, both during pregnancy and post partum. Pregnancy is often regarded as a state which frees women, at least temporarily, from their concerns with their slender ideal self, allowing them to gain weight and change shape without the risk of attracting adverse evaluation from others; or feeling inadequate in social comparisons with idealized images of women and beauty (Richins 1991, Wood 1989). Much consumer research has focused particularly on the psychological (negative) implications of cultural idealizations of beautiful and slender bodies, to the relative neglect of investigating occasions (e.g., pregnancy) when women experience positive feelings about their bodies. Pregnancy would seem to be an occasion when women can experience positive feelings about their bodies and celebrate their growing size. Our study links Duke’s (2002) consideration of consumption as a social and cultural process which involves the acceptance of, and aspiration to, the ideal, with the disciplinary gaze (Foucault 1979), that recognizes the individual as “his/her own agent of surveillance conforming to normative conventions” (Thomp-son and Hirschman 1995, 149).

We used phenomenological interviews to understand how the embodied self is articulated during pregnancy and early mother-hood; and how expectant and new mothers respond to a variety of discourses from society and the media about what constitutes an ideal body. Firstly for many women pregnancy represented a time and space for ‘free play’ of the embodied self, i.e., the feminist argument which describes pregnancy as “an opportunity to ‘step outside’ of the tyranny of slenderness…[and] enjoy a more embodied, subjective and maternal state” (Earle 2003, 250). Our data indicated that some expectant mothers experience release from the disciplinary gaze and societal expectations, which constructs the ideal feminine body in ornamental terms, and enjoy their bodies’ physicality without feelings of stress or guilt. However, it could be argued that these women are not so much freed from the disciplinary gaze, but are subject to a different disciplinary gaze or a different set of ‘ideals’, which constructs the feminine mothering body as productive, fertile and large. This represents a development of Earle’s (2003) point. She argues that because the pregnant body is temporary it offers women no reprieve from societal expectations. It is simply that the emphasis switches to an (often unspoken) interest in women’s bodies as functional-producers rather than as ornamental-seducers and women are instead presented with an alternative range of conventions around pregnant bodies and consump-tion, promoted via public policy statements, media and matern-ity interest groups.

Secondly, the environment became a source of unwanted comparative ideals (Wood 1989). Expectant mothers can find themselves confronted with a different range of discourses, which are just as normative as those they experienced before pregnancy. During pregnancy, women face the challenge not so much about what they consume in order to create a sexually attractive body but rather how they discipline their appetites in order to develop and maintain their bodies as fitness machines for pregnancy and birth (e.g., eating the right foods; taking the appropriate supplements; giving up smoking and alcohol; avoiding smoky atmospheres). This theme suggests that women’s bodies are just as strongly policed within the context of pregnancy as in their non pregnant states where they feel themselves subject to another range of disciplinary discourses.

A third key theme revolved around retrieval and control, and social comparison plays a vital role here as women called on their past (pre-pregnancy) self as a source of comparison as well as the idealized images that abound in media and society. New mothers faced a difficult balancing act. As new mothers they are expected to retain the functional role of their body, including the strength to care for and nurture their child; whilst also regaining their past non-pregnant self. However, our participants did not lack agency in asserting their own independent views of their bodies, illustrated by these women’s construction of their bodies as a source of strength and control; and by their discussions which centered on regaining or retraining their bodies to be ‘fit’. Stories revolved around various constructions of ‘fitness’ in relation to various selves e.g., fit enough to be effective mothering selves (e.g., breast feeding: body finely tuned for production); fit enough to climb ladders and regain competence as the DIY self (body as agile machine); fit enough to power dress within the business world to regain the professional self (body as power engine); fit enough to regain a young, svelte-like feminine self (body as female).

Critics of consumer culture have often focused on cosmetics as the nadir of the wasteful, oppressive ethic of the market. Recent historical works have suggested that this view needs revision. One particularly contradictory aspect of the historical record is the way that the beauty industry has created opportunities for women with little education or capital to achieve economic autonomy. Big names like Elizabeth Arden, Estée Lauder, and Helena Rubinstein testify to the power a small investment, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a flair for style can have in a market for goods aimed at a female constituency. However, larger, less spotlighted groups have also been served by the trade between women as consumers and women as sellers. From the corner beauty salon to the local “Avon Lady,” history has given us many examples of the way cosmetics consump-tion can be parlayed into an economic empowerment tool for women.

The premise of this study is that the historical power of the beauty industry to quietly create incomes for women could be harnessed to fight poverty in developing nations. One of the oldest female trading networks in America, the Avon Company, has already experienced significant growth in the poor nations, with more than half of their sales now coming from developing markets. Surprising as it may seem today, Avon’s historical market was among factory girls and rural farmwives in the United States—so they have a long-established track record for building businesses among poor women’s existing trading relationships. Since the networks are female and the products feminine, the men in such settings seldom take notice of what can be a very healthy income stream. Indeed, anecdotal evidence coming in from Brazil or Thailand suggests that not only are Avon representatives building good incomes in unlikely places, but they may be doing it without the disapproval and even violence that often comes from patriarchal cultures when women are empowered. So, this line of goods may offer a potentially safer venue for women to improve their status, which, in turn, is now seen as a central key to developing national economies.

This presentation will report the first phase results of a three year, multi-site study in South Africa, being conducted under the auspices of the Department for International Development and the Economics and Social Science Research Council (United King-dom). We are using several methods to examine the potential for trade of these manufactured cosmetics to alleviate poverty and...
foster empowerment among African women. As unlikely as cosmetics may seem as a vehicle for development, direct sales of beauty products appear to offer low risk opportunities for women to become entrepreneurs, even in regions where capital, infrastructure, and institutional frameworks are weak.

First phase results suggest not only interesting findings on the practices and benefits for Avon representatives but surprising feedback from consumers of the product. Buyers of Avon are clearly imbedded in a web of trade relationships in which they not only buy cosmetics from a friend or relative, but also sell other goods to that “Avon Lady” in a reciprocal arrangement. Patterns of purchase reflect historical African aesthetics that focus on lotion and shiny skin, but also more recent and global aesthetics involving “glamour products” like lipstick and eye shadow. Further, consumers, especially in very poor areas such as the squatter’s camps outside Johannesburg, show both a proclivity to reinvention and a shrewd attention to maintaining a balance between “necessities” (lotion, in this culture) and “luxuries” (mostly perfumes). Thus, the study presents some interesting learning about hybridization, global versus local culture, and consumer adaptation, in addition to contradicting most contemporary thinking about the political status of cosmetics.

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