Catch Me If You Can: Rethinking the Relationship of Body and Self Through Pregnancy

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Present study examines the relationship between body and self through the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Unlike previous research that mainly examined body modification practices, I examined how consumers construct their selves when they experience rather natural, unexpected body changes. I did ethnographic in-depth interview with six Korean women who experienced pregnancy in the U.S. to collect data. Analysis was based on extensive coding and memo writing. For a guideline, the coding procedures of grounded theory were used. Through the analysis three themes emerged: 1) Disavowal of changed body from self making effort; 2) A paired identity and body project; and 3) Korean women situated in the American culture. By examining women’s pregnancy and childbirth experiences, this study showed the difference between consumers’ ontological self and epistemological self. In addition, the role of relational self in body project was revealed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The present study examines the relationship between body and self through the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Experiences related to pregnancy were considered an appropriate area to study due to four reasons. First, pregnancy is an epiphanic experience (Denzin 1989) that ruptures routines and lives, and provokes radical redefinitions of the self (Strauss 1959). Second, women tend to become more reflexive about their body when they are pregnant because they want to keep their body safe and healthy. In addition, they feel tension between their new self as a mother and the individual who is struggling to get a particular body and self back, and this makes them more reflexive about their body. Third, it should be noted that body changes accompanying pregnancy are not imposed by one’s own self concept but are naturally occurring. Finally, pregnancy usually leads to changes in consumption behaviors.

Several researchers were interested in body related consumer practices such as plastic surgery (Schouten 1991; Sayre 1999; Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 2002), tattooing (Watson 1998; Kjeldgaard and Bengtsson 2005) and consumers’ self-care practices (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). These studies have shed light on the dynamic relationship between body and self and showed the malleability of bodies to construct consumers’ self-identity. What is common in these studies is that the researchers chose body modification practices as their empirical setting. Body modifications are usually based on a consumer’s idea about ideal self. In other words, the consumer’s mind is the starting point of the bodily changes, and this choice of research settings tends to leave out naturally occurring body changes (e.g., changes caused by pregnancy, childbirth, and aging) in the discussion. Unlike in body modification, consumers don’t have a clear idea about what happens to their body during naturally occurring body changes. For instance, pregnant women expect that they will experience a certain amount of weight increase. However, they cannot know how much weight they will gain. Sometimes, unexpected changes happen in their body such as prenatal diabetes, which one of my informants had experienced during her pregnancy. So it would be natural to assume that naturally occurring body changes would evoke very different dynamics between body and self from those discovered in body modification practices.

Data was collected using in-depth ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979) with six Korean women who experienced pregnancy in the U.S.. Analysis was based on extensive coding and memo writing (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland 2006). For a guideline, the coding procedures of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 1998) were used.

Through the analysis, three themes emerged: 1) Disavowal of changed body from self making effort; 2) A paired identity and body project; and 3) Korean women situated in the American culture. The most notable thing in the informants’ experience of pregnancy was their refusal to accept their changed body into their self concept. They tended to think that their changed body was just temporary and could be restored to its condition before pregnancy. For this reason, most of them excluded their changed body from self construction efforts.

Second, the informants started to accept their changed body as inevitable emphasizing the importance of their baby and their identity as a mother. Their identity as an individual woman gave way to the identity as a mother, which cannot exist without being a pair with a child. They showed many behaviors of self sacrifice for their children. When they were confronted with the conflict between their personal desires and maternal duties, they almost always chose the maternal duties over their own desires even if there was an alternate option for them to use.

Third, the importance of social context in body project and self making discovered again as seen in previous research of body modification. Informants said that they might have behaved differently in terms of their bodily consumption if they were situated in a different social context.

By examining women’s pregnancy and childbirth experiences, this study complemented the research findings from body modification research. As consumers experience disturbing body changes, they did not accept these changes into their self concept due to their hope of getting back the body they had before changes. This disavowal of changed body led to delaying and degrading consumption showing the gap between ontological self and epistemological self. In addition, this study also illuminated the importance of relational self identity. Recognizing a new identity as a mother helped informants accept the body changes. Moreover, they sacrificed their desires and needs giving priorities to their child’s needs and wants. The role of a situated context of consumers also shed light on the relational aspects of bodily consumption.

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