Using Consumption in Everyday Resistance Practices to Contest Negative Stereotypes: the Case of Teenage Mothers

Emma Banister, University of Manchester, UK
Margaret Hogg, Lancaster University, UK
Mandy Dixon, Lancaster University, UK

We explore the interplay between discourses, resistance and consumption, focusing on teenage mothers. Our findings show how consumption can be used in everyday acts of resistance to contest negative stereotypes, and that early motherhood can help some women from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds to develop a stronger and more mature identity.

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Emma N. Banister, University of Manchester, United Kingdom
Margaret K. Hogg, Lancaster University, United Kingdom
Mandy Dixon, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Media representations of younger mothers often allude to their inexperience and lack of preparedness for motherhood, and in particular, target young working class mothers for derision (Tyler 2008).

We pose three questions: firstly what do young mothers do with this stereotype of the teenage mother (and its associated discourses); secondly what role do the everyday practices of consumption play in young mothers’ attempts to distance themselves from the negative aspects of this stereotype and contest these discourses; and thirdly how do they manage an inconsistency between two aspects of their identity (age versus parental status) and what role does the marketplace play?

DISCOURSES AND MOTHERHOOD

Expectations of motherhood are socially embedded, emphasized via prevailing discourses (Miller 2007) and include a variety of publicly and privately-generated messages regarding good mothering and its reverse, bad mothering. The main culturally pervasive discourse that affects women’s identity projects as new mothers relates to self-management (Fischer et al 2007:433) and taking on the responsibilities of parenthood. Planned parenthood is one of the markers of ‘responsible parenting’ generated by societal and life-framing discourses. Motherhood when entered into at the ‘correct’ time is positioned as “women’s supreme achievement” (Phoenix et al. 1991:9) but young mothers are contradictorily positioned because they reach the same landmark which then becomes devalued because of their age. Children and adults are seen as separate categories, so instead of an achievement, motherhood is seen by many as a challenge to morality and the role of the family (Hunt et al. 2005).

CONSUMPTION, RESISTANCE AND MOTHERHOOD

We focus on individual (Penaloza and Price 1993), everyday (Reissman 2000) acts of resistance, rather than the political and collective action that has provided the focus for many consumer research studies (e.g. Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Resistance can be identity-based, focused on the resister’s “expected or attributed identity” (Hollander and Einwohner 2004:537). In this context, the expected and attributed identity reflects the expectations of teenage motherhood, informed by societal and life-framing discourses. Resistance can 2007; Wilson and Huntingdon 2005). In their attempts to be seen as a ‘good mum’ or ‘just a mum’ our informants abandon many of their previous notions of what it means to be young and use consumption as a means to demonstrate a ‘responsible’ approach to parenting. Participants produce a counter position, a positive young mothering identity that incorporates positive aspects of younger mothering. Participants were aware of the communicative properties of goods, particularly clothing, and sought to manage their identity via the consumption process. This concern with appearance also extends to participants’ babies. A recurring theme was the importance of not dressing the baby in particular fashions that participants saw as associated with stereotyped out-groups (White and Dahl 2007). Through their marketplace knowledge, women sought to differentiate themselves from the kind of person who would dress their baby in particular ways (Tyler 2008).

Participants turn to the market as a means to prepare for motherhood (Davies et al. 2010) and to demonstrate that they are good mothers and understand the important ingredients of good, ‘responsible’, mothering (being careful planners; systematic allocation of resources; thoughtful care of their new babies). A clear theme was the challenge of providing and preparing for motherhood on a limited budget, often through second hand items and hand me downs, which were interpreted in two ways. Some mothers positioned second hand items as an inexpensive means to prepare appropriately for the arrival of a baby within financially limited circumstances. For these young women, second hand items reinforced a positive image of prepared motherhood and thus reflected an adult approach to managing the allocation of limited resources. Second-hand goods were sometimes repositioned as ‘gifts for the baby’. For other participants accepting second hand goods was seen as an admission of failure; an acknowledgment of truth in the discourses surrounding young motherhood about a lack of responsibility in either planning to have the baby, or how to cope once the baby is born. Our mothers also made important associations between being a ‘good mother’ and consuming certain branded products (e.g. diapers).

METHOD

We use empirical data collected from a sample of teenage mothers to explore how resistance is deployed via consumption to contest negative stereotypes, and to achieve splitting i.e. separation of teenage [age status, negative imagery] from mother [parental status, positive imagery] in the identity frame. Qualitative data was collected via two phased interviews (prior and post birth) with seventeen new mothers who became pregnant between the ages of 17 and 19. We recruited participants via a National Health Service (NHS) antenatal service for younger women. Interviews were analyzed by the three authors: emergent themes were coded and then compared, along with the exchange of detailed notes and memos. An agreed interpretation of the data was written up.

FINDINGS

Our findings support recent research that suggests that early motherhood can help some women from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds to develop a stronger and more mature identity (Duncan 2007; Wilson and Huntingdon 2005). In their attempts to be seen as a ‘good mum’ or ‘just a mum’ our informants abandon many of their previous notions of what it means to be young and use consumption as a means to demonstrate a ‘responsible’ approach to parenting. Participants produce a counter position, a positive young mothering identity that incorporates positive aspects of younger mothering. Participants were aware of the communicative properties of goods, particularly clothing, and sought to manage their identity via the consumption process. This concern with appearance also extends to participants’ babies. A recurring theme was the importance of not dressing the baby in particular fashions that participants saw as associated with stereotyped out-groups (White and Dahl 2007). Through their marketplace knowledge, women sought to differentiate themselves from the kind of person who would dress their baby in particular ways (Tyler 2008).

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stereotypical negative images associated with an undesired self (i.e. teen mother = bad mother) are important components in the creation, appropriation and maintenance of identity projects as our informants embrace the positive imagery of motherhood and distance themselves from their teenage status.

REFERENCES

(Arnould and Thompson 2005).