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Women in Transition — Consumption Narratives of First-time Motherhood

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a life-course perspective, this study reveals four narratives of transition to motherhood and according changes of (non-) consumption patterns that liberate, constrain, support, legitimize, and perfectionize women's understandings of motherhood as 'a fairytale' coming true, as a 'dual-role narrative', as 'temporary motherhood', or as a 'turning point' in life.

INTRODUCTION

Transition to motherhood deeply affects women's lives as first-time mothers and consumers. Multifaceted and complex, motherhood is ideologized and mystified (Hager 2011), overburdened with cultural meanings (Arendell 2000; Atkinson 2014), perceived as great challenge, and characterized by anxiety and ambiguity due to its stressful and uncertain, but also happy and joyful nature (Carrigan and Szmigin 2004; Davies et al. 2010b). Accordingly, changes in women's self-understanding alter consumption patterns (Hogg, Piacentini, and Hibbert 2009), focusing on the child, on role-supportive consumption, and symbolic consumption aiding or aggravating the transition (Davies et al. 2010a; Sørensen and Thomsen 2006).

Current research on first-time motherhood and consumption is characterized by two main strands. While more micro-level studies are interested in symbolic consumption strategies as expressions of identity changes, conflict, and integration in transition to motherhood (Fischer and Gainer 1993; Cody and Lawlor 2011; Miller 2004; Ogle, Tyner and Schofield-Tomschin 2013; Pavia and Mason 2004; Thomson and Sørensen 2006a), others take a macro-level perspective and problematize social constructions of motherhood ideologies, and their amplification in the marketplace as being potentially harmful to identity construction of mothers (Thompson 1996; Davies et al. 2010; Dobscha, et al. 2010; Clarke 2004; Cook 2011; Prothero 2002; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006b). While studies related to identity construction make particular reference to transition and liminality, macro-level problematizations of idealized portrayals of first-time motherhood relate consumption to structural tensions between family life and markets, commerce and care (Cook 2011).

While demographic and psychological studies acknowledge life course related differences in transition to motherhood (cf. Clemmens 2003; Letherby 1994; Thomson et al. 2008), the life histories of individuals have largely been neglected in consumer research. Our study follows a recent call for auto-biographical integration of past and future into consumer narratives of transition (Rojas Gaviria and Bluemelhuber 2010). We investigate the lived experience of first-time motherhood not only as a socio-culturally framed transition but also as being embedded in mothers' life biographies. Attempting to highlight the contextuality of women's transitions to motherhood, this study adopts a life-course perspective and seeks to understand how women's consumption strategies bring their lives in accord with understandings of motherhood.

THEORY

A life-course perspective on transition to motherhood

The life-course perspective assumes that behavioral continuity or change depend on individuals' trajectories and the timing of transitions (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003). The life

course paradigm is defined by five central themes—agency, life-span development, context, linked lives, and timing (Elder 1994). Women's *agency*, that is, their freedom to decide upon and develop their self in transition to motherhood (Elder et al. 2003), is influenced by motherhood ideologies, which are "constructed from medical, legal, political, social, and cultural discourse and practices" (Davies et al. 2010b). Women's own understanding and knowledge might entail the necessity to resist, disengage from, or reconcile common discourses (Banister, Hogg, and Dixon 2010). 'Deviant' life courses of single, welfare, or adolescent motherhood, but also career-orientation might additionally fuel women's conflicting thoughts about motherhood (Thomson et al. 2008).

Self-negotiation in transition to motherhood is also influenced by *life-span development*, mirroring past, present, and future selves (Cody 2012; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfenbarger 2009). Individuals' life-span development needs to be evaluated with reference to the *local and temporal context* (Elder et al. 2003), and is frequently accompanied by a change in the more immediate social context, which manifests in a move from the public to the increasingly valorized private sphere (Elder 1994; Mayer 2003). Life-course literature relates to these important social networks as *linked lives* (Elder et al. 2003; Heinz and Krüger 2001), which mostly support but also hinder transition. In its most intense form, planned motherhood, for instance, is characterized by women as a matter of synchronization of individual, couple, and peer biographies (Thomson et al. 2008).

Timing of transitions embeds motherhood into women's various life projects. While timing according to socially accepted norms "provides a sense of comfort, achievement and progression" (Shirani and Henwood 2011), mistiming might constrain the organization of envisioned life course trajectories (Pearlin and Skaff 1996; Shirani and Henwood 2011) and lead to a "cumulation of disadvantages" (Elder 1998). Identity conflicts become more serious when societal blueprints of becoming a mother at the right time and within the right family settings are violated. Adolescent mothers, for instance, often frame their status as childlike and mature at the same time, with pregnancy narrated as family drama (Clemmens 2003; Letherby 1994).

Consumption in transition to motherhood

During transition to motherhood, new consumption practices are adopted that play a "dynamic role ... in leading the individual into the resolution phase" (Pavia and Mason 2004). Following Davies et al. (2010a), consumption can support self-negotiation in transition to motherhood to cope with transition and manage role uncertainty, to achieve an ideal self, and to bridge identities (Cody and Lawlor 2011). Consuming supports the reconciliation and integration of multiple eventually contradictory past, present, and future selves (Ogle, Tyner, and Schofield-Tomschin 2013; Prothero 2002), and facilitates integration of the unborn child into mother's identity constructions (Cairns, Johnston, and MacKendrick 2013; Özhan Dedeoglu 2006). Consumption objects serve as manifestations for that integration (e.g., Clarke 2004; Cook 2008; Miller 2004), for acquiring and affirming the new mothering self (Ogle et al. 2013; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a), and maintaining a former dominant self (Ogle et al. 2013, 119).

While large parts of current theory on consumption in transition to motherhood highlight consumption's supportive function in

facilitating transition, critical voices raise awareness for the potential vulnerabilities related to transitional consumption. This vulnerability becomes most apparent when mothers-to-be try to make the ‘right choices’ (Prothero 2002; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a), impeding women to engage in ‘consumptive work’ (Clarke 2004) that positions them as ‘good mothers’. Similarly, the liminal inability of consuming in a self-supportive way can induce self-disruptions (Ogle et al. 2013).

Similar to consumption also the avoidance of consumption might facilitate or hinder transition. In a Japanese context (Houston 1999), abandoning the consumption of pain medication during birth facilitates self-changes towards a culturally idealized conception of motherhood. Consumption avoidance, however, can also set hurdles to the incorporation of the new identity when mothers refuse to consume social symbols of contemporary motherhood (Cook 2011). Further, avoidance might not always be a matter of free choice, and social expectations of self-sacrificing for the “good of the baby” (Carrigan and Szmigin 2004, p. 784) might weigh heavily on mothers-to-be.

Consumer research related to motherhood is replete with specific, transition-related consumption studies, related to baby products, fashion, or baby showers (Fischer and Gainer 1993; Katz-Wise, Priess, and Hyde 2010; Moisiu, Arnould, and Price 2004; Rojas, Gaviria and Bluemelhuber 2010) yet, the multi-faceted nature of women’s life course (Carrigan and Szmigin 2004) and concomitant radical changes in (non-) consumption patterns alongside transition to motherhood have remained quite untouched. This study aims to contribute to a more differentiated understanding of the role of consumption in transition to motherhood.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

According to Elder’s (1994) life-course principles, this study purposefully sampled 32 first-time mothers living in a European cultural context, with diverse life biographies before pregnancy. This sampling procedure attempted to consider timing, linked lives, agency, individual life span development, and the temporal/local context of transition. Accordingly, adolescent, single mothers, women with unexpected or well-planned pregnancies, women in relationships, married or separated, women living in urban and rural areas were

sampled according to the criterion of maximum variation. We further sourced women from 16 to 38 years of age, and typical cases of women facing more or less hardship regarding financial and relational support.

The study’s general approach is phenomenological since it focuses on women’s lived experiences (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Thompson 1997) and narrations of transition. We conducted biographical, narrative interviews using open, grand tour questions to encourage women to share their stories of first-time motherhood (Flick 2014). Grand tour questions inquired into women’s biographies, experiences of transition to motherhood, and the meaning of consumption and consumption experiences throughout the transitional process. Data analysis involved an iterative process of inductive categorization (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep 2006; Spiggle 1994). The three authors analyzed all interviews independently at first, and iteratively reflected and refined data interpretation together (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Kreiner et al. 2006). Constant comparative method (Charmaz 2008) informed theorizing about women’s narrative construction of identity and consumption during transition to motherhood.

FINDINGS

Analysis of first-time mothers’ biographical interviews distilled four dominant transition narratives that are deeply entangled with women’s upbringing, former lives, and current life contexts: (1) the ‘fairytale narrative’, (2) the ‘dual-role narrative’, (3) the ‘temporary mum narrative’, and (4) the ‘turning point narrative’. Whereas the ‘fairytale narrative’ most clearly reflects society’s scripting of the natural mothering role of women, the ‘dual-role narrative’ entails struggles with and emancipatory assumptions of women’s liberated existence that is separate from, but also underlies all forms and roles adopted in women’s lives. The ‘temporary mum narrative’, in contrary, temporarily separates mothers’ working lives and careers from motherhood, but most often succeeds in collapsing the ‘two lives’ and professionally ‘manage’ multiple roles. The ‘turning point narrative’ is the most differentiated and multi-faceted scripting spanning from adolescent motherhood drama to more subtle forms of motherhood as transitory and life changing. Accordingly, women’s narratives are replete with concomitant consumption strategies that differ significantly. Table 1 provides a summary of our respective findings.

Table 1: Dominant narratives of change during transition to motherhood

| | <i>The ‘fairytale narrative’</i> | <i>The ‘dual-role narrative’</i> | <i>The temporary Mum narrative’</i> | <i>The ‘turning point narrative’</i> |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| <i>Life course & change</i> | Educated, financially secure and settled | Self-assure and self-standing woman | Well-educated and -situated; career-oriented | Difficult, life-changing biography and/or financial constraints |
| <i>Type of transition</i> | Logical transformation | Duality | Gradual inclusion | Double/multiple-role transition |
| <i>Changes in consumption patterns</i> | From high self -and motherhood related investments to intensified and luxurified, compressed and postponed, highly relational and abandoned consumption | From highly experiential to relational and countervailing (liberating) consumption | From extensive experiential and materialist/luxury consumption to intensifying and luxurifying, relational, and countervailing consumption practices | From ‘careless’ consumerism to relational, ascetic, and postponed consumption and investments into the child’s and women’s own futures |

The fairytale narrative

Fairytale mothers typically engage in consumption that is helpful in becoming a mother, long before they actually conceive. A romantic notion of pregnancy and motherhood is consumed, which culminates in consuming a healthy child as an extension of women's self (Belk 1988). Women start early to construct perfect family life including anticipatory consumption of insurance, housing, household items, fitness and sports, nutrition and meaningful investments in personal relationships, marriage, and conception. Consumption rituals involve indulgence and step by step, incorporate others ritualistically in consumption of brands, fashion, food, special places and experiences, and the consumption of time. Consumption in the preparatory stage is not only liberatory in terms of freely consuming for oneself but also overwhelmingly intensified and 'luxurified'. Women prepare and consume their pregnant body with extended walks, indulging in wellness rituals; consume massages and hairdressing, leisure time, peaceful rest and sleep.

With giving birth, women's self-understanding shifts even more towards strong other-orientation, self-suppression, deactivation of a professional self, a decrease of the importance of other roles, and reinterpretation of the role of partnership. This deep entrenchment of the mothering self—although viewed as a better self—necessarily leads to attempts of liberation of other facets of self, ultimately integrating them into a renewed self-understanding. Past, present and future finally materialize into a coherent life narrative of the fulfilled, integrated self (McAdams and McLean 2013). '... *My life with child is beautiful; lots of fun. 'Everything for the child'—so to speak. Being a mother compensates for this deprivation.*' (Sarah, 29).

Consumption is subordinated to the enjoyment of having a child, which is fully leveraged by market possibilities to conspicuously exposing and signaling this enjoyment to family and the public (Sørensen and Thomsen 2006). '*Instead of buying something for me, I'd rather buy something for my little sunshine*' (Ines, 26). The market reflects these societal conventions by offering not only products for the perfection of baby's caretaking and nurturing but also for presentation and staging of the perfect outcome of mothering—the healthy child (Atkinson 2014; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006b). Self-leveraging consumption becomes important in later stages as a treat for the woman's self. Yet, in their attempts to idealize motherhood, women even negotiate and re-interpret self-sacrificing or reduced consumption as liberatory; (non-) consumption as access key to an enchanting mother role that gains much of its value from consuming motherhood and consuming the child.

The dual role narrative

The dual-role narrative involves intensive self-negotiations in transition to motherhood. Women are often well prepared to becoming a mother, but do not accord with societal constraints and to giving up their understanding of themselves as women.

Women's pre-transitory life is carefree; a life of lived freedom and independence, a materialistic lifestyle and mostly extensive consumption. Money, fashion and beauty, and travelling are important and self-defining. Individuality, becoming and being a professional woman in their jobs, a Western postmodern life is part of their dreamlike futures. Only late pregnancy provides these women with a relieving state of contentedness and joy, putting aside their consumption and life dreams. '*From time to time I asked myself whether I really want this and whether I am really ready. But these doubts decreased while my belly grew bigger.*' (Marion, 22). The actual birth of their child, however, hits some of them like a shock and makes them realize that life changes drastically. Motherhood is perceived as constraining and constantly negotiated with their past and envi-

sioned future (Wolf 2001). Reluctant to separate from their former lives and investing in sustaining the connection to their former life, transition to motherhood is complicated, full of consumption dreams and (re-) negotiations of womanhood.

Consumption supports dual-role mothers in sustaining their identity. Consumption is liberatory and self-leveraging, which frees them from solely being mothers. Even if consumption becomes restricted and necessarily other-oriented, reducing consumption is not entirely voluntary. Non-consumption is not a strategy but rather a consequence of the duties and necessities that come with motherhood. As consumption before pregnancy is considerably experiential, it is these experiences that are sought after most intensely, consumed during transition as last-minute refuge and recovered as soon as possible. Consumption is therefore also hypothetical and imaginative, postponing women's consumption dreams that relate in many ways to their aspired womanhood, engaging in sports, socializing, vacation, and other consumption experiences.

The temporary mum narrative

Temporary mothers slip into transition amidst of an exciting professional career. They perform the traditional mothering role to perfection, but only for a limited period of time. Strict role separation ultimately dissolves in an idealized 'easymix' (Maushart 2000), which blends professional, relational, and motherhood duties seemingly effortlessly into women's lives and idealizes the 'juggling' lifestyles between work and home (Thompson 1996).

Temporary mothers consume extensively. Their investment in children is as materialistic and important as is their own lifestyle consumption. During pregnancy, professional and relational demands still tend to dominate life. Sooner or later all women are forced into the new role by biological circumstances and radical body transformations. For them, priorities shift in a sudden manner from almost ignorance in the initial months of pregnancy to an increased sense of other-orientation in late pregnancy. Pregnancy passes quickly and pushes them into a relieving state of taking and having time for themselves—a break from work and consumption, thus liberating the mothering facet of self. With the birth of their child, women perform a total temporary role switch. This switch is radical and exclusive. '*The birth of my child then led to a 180° shift in my life. And everything I do is now focused on my child.*' (Anne, 38)

Women consume time for themselves and later, time for childcare. Consumption for the child now compensates for mothers' own inclination to buy expensive brands and luxuries. Consumption helps integrating the other in their lives, is other-oriented and unrestricted but still reduced to their new role as mothers as investments into their professional identities do not make sense to them at that time. Stressing the situation's transitory character is women's strategy to justify these radical changes. Consuming, similar to other motherhood narratives, becomes more experiential, and relationships more precious.

The turning point narrative

Turning point motherhood is characterized by hardship and radical shifts in life biographies of women. Women's naïve imaginations of a stereotypical, great dreamlike future, and idealized conception of family clash with a relentless reality that demands to be mastered and lived (Shirani and Henwood 2011). Pregnancy to these women constitutes a turning point in life, accompanied by extreme phases of struggling, but also includes the opportunity for huge personal growth (Clemmens 2003). Transition to motherhood is experienced as radical, positive for some, neutral or dramatic for others but entails a chance to maturing and making life more meaningful and better overall.

Turning point mothers extensively consume relationships and investments into their own future, such as education and consumption experiences with friends and partners. In their attempt to becoming a perfect mother, consumption is severely reduced and ascetic and serves to purchase what is necessary for the child, and perceived as necessary investment into a future bread-winning job. Whereas fairytale mothers aim to be good mothers, turning point narratives reveal especially young mothers' awareness of their imperfection, trying to fulfil their mother role as good as possible. The metamorphosis from a carefree and un-reflexive consumer to a responsible mother is accompanied by abandonment of consumption for themselves. Turning point mothers are both—responsible mothers and strongly dedicated to their own self-development. Consumption follows this path; becomes imagined and postponed, dreaming of a future of unconstrained but meaningful and experiential consumption for their child and for themselves. Consumption is symbolic for reassuring women of their matured personalities. Turning point mothers frame their decisions to reduce or abduct consumption as rather positive consequence of a renewed understanding of meaning in life. It seems as if this relinquishment in a Western world of abundance compensates for their imperfect life course and transforms them into good, really caring mothers (Thompson 1996).

DISCUSSION

This study makes important contributions to literature on consumption in transition. First, in adopting a life-course perspective, our study highlights four dominant narratives of first-time motherhood, based on a reading of women's narratives as biographical/developmental and fluid (Baumann 1996; Giddens 1991), and on women's reported self-understandings and societal conceptions of motherhood.

Second, our findings reveal distinct changes in consumption patterns that are related to women's motherhood narratives and seem equally fluid and liminal as their changing self-understanding. Consumption in transition is *compressed* and *postponed*, *intensified* and *luxurified*, becomes more *relational*, at times *ascetic* and *abandoned*; and support or *countervail* unwanted role constraints.

The four dominant motherhood narratives reveal interesting processes of compression of consumption, expressed through phases of 'last-minute' panicking and dense (experiential) consumption, as well as relaxations into postponement of consumption, or escapism into imagined and hypothetical consumption. Strategies of intensifying and luxurification somewhat resemble these practices but differ conceptually in that they rather leverage particular consumption experiences and purchases before and after child-birth. Women foresee a period of self-sacrificing their own wishes in their attempt to comply with societal conceptions of motherhood. Deep indulgence in decelerating consumption experiences, unrestricted consumption for oneself, particularly the bodily self, sustaining beloved consumption rituals exemplify consumption strategies of intensifying and luxurification. Corroborating and extending prior work (Epp and Price 2008; Thompson 1996) a third important dimension strengthens relational bonds to family and partnership but also friends and peers through relational consumption. Consumption is related to nurturing and integrating others into consumption, sharing (Belk 2010), but also purely other-oriented, strengthening linked lives.

Ascetic non-consumption is the most radical consumption strategy right before and after child-birth. Not always do women experience non-consumption as hardship but also as liberating a more altruistic facet of themselves, and as relieve from the strenuous life of a consumer. Women seek to engage in sustainable consumption and disposing of possessions that became incompatible with their new

self-understanding as mothers. Non-consumption strategies relate to fears of social sanctions, contestations of meaningfulness of consumption practices, or when consumption is practically impossible or inaccessible. Contrasting dominant market-induced risks of over-consumption in families (Thomas et al. 2014), non-consumptions practices socially legitimize women in their mothering role against markets and consumerism, and also rebuke luxurious lifestyles of the more privileged mothers.

Later phases in transition exhibit extensive, and more or less successful attempts of countervailing an excessive investment into others and divestment of consumption for the mother herself. Compensatory consumption, oscillating between phases of ascetic and indulging consumption, self-leveraging and liberating consumption strategies, as well as consumption that catches up with postponed or inaccessible pleasures bear witness of the perceived burdens of motherhood or hardship that comes with compliance to self-sacrificing or severe financial restrictions of single mothers. Reconsumption also promotes self-reflexivity and juxtaposition of roles, selves, and personal growth (Russell and Levy 2012). Overall, our study maintains that consumption in transition is fluid and liminal. Consumption is partly constraining, but also helps to liberate, support, legitimize and bring to perfection women's changing self-understanding and concept of motherhood.

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