

HAPPINESS ETHICS - HOW TO BE "A GOOD MOTHER" AND DO THE BEST FOR THE CHILD

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We make decisions based on our values and self-interest. In this article we are interested in motherhood and consumption. Today, fashion-interested mothers are active online sharing opinions and information on children's clothing (Friedman 2013). By examining conversations in an Internet forum for mothers about children's clothing the aim is to discover how they reason about motherhood and ethical values linked to their attempt to be good mothers in relation to gender norms and children's participation. As our theoretical framework we use Bourdieu and Goffman. Based on posted messages in a Swedish internet forum we identified how mothers in their self-presentations position themselves. Mothers create and develop different maternal identities through their discussions regarding consumption experiences (Goffman, 1959/2006).

Key Words: Motherhood, Internet Forum, Children's Clothing, Consumption, Ethic Values

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is common for mothers interested in fashion to communicate their views on children's fashion via personal blogs and other internet forums. Online communication in the form of mother blogs has increased significantly in recent years (Friedman 2013).

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Research shows that these blogs help mothers interpret and transform motherhood representations and that blogs are a source of both self-expression and collective identification. At the same time, this means that today's motherhood is no longer part of the private sphere (Lopez 2009). What was previously considered part of the private sphere has also been transferred to the public sphere.

Mothers who blog, change their personal narratives through interactive conversations with other mothers, which can challenge and change perceptions of motherhood (Lopez 2009). Gibson and Hanson (2013) argue that mothers' digital forums can support them in their role as mothers. Two different factors play a role in mothers' online communication. The first is that mothers, through online conversations, increase their self-confidence as mother. By seeking information and getting advice from others with similar experiences, the feeling of normality can increase at the same time as it provides a variation of the role of a mother. The second factor is to satisfy the need to be more than "just" a mother, to be able to preserve their own identity and stay up to date with what is happening outside the walls of the home and feel less alone.

Writing maternity blogs is described by Lopez (2009) as a radical act. The mothers develop their own voice when discussing motherhood and this is clearly different from the image of the good mother that has dominated the media. Orton-Johnson (2017) calls blogging "life writing," where motherhood is (re)constructed digitally. She sees blogging as an important cultural phenomenon through which we can reflect on modern constructions of motherhood and get a more nuanced picture: "Mummy blogs, as a form of life writing, have emerged in the blogosphere as an important cultural phenomenon and are a lens through which we can reflect on contemporary constructions of motherhood. Blogs have provided spaces in which

the experiences of mothering are represented, negotiated, and resisted” (Orton-Johnson 2017, p 1.)

Previous research has explored how women create and develop their own particular maternal identities, experiences and relationships through everyday consumption practices and rituals (Colett, 2005; Andersen et al., 2008; O'Donohoe et al., 2014). Children's clothing is an important category of expressing the mothers' identity and ideals of motherhood. The clothing style underlines parents' values and simultaneously shows their concern with shaping their children as unique individuals (Brusdal & Frønes, 2013).

Research on good mothering ideology maintains different themes of child-centeredness, self-sacrifice, and devotion (McNeill & Graham, 2014; Dedeoglu, 2006; The Voice group, 2010; Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006). Being perceived as a good mother is a central identity issue for many women (Colett, 2005). Andersen et al., (2008) found that the 'perfect mother's' interest in children's clothing is a result of her wish to show dedication and care for her child. The 'self-sacrificing' mother in turn cuts her own consumption of clothes in favour of vicarious clothes for the child making the child part of the mother's extended self.

Theoretical perspectives: The cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the social psychologist Erving Goffman are the theorists we use to interpret and analyze mothers' conversations. Both theories are considered useful in internet research even though they were developed during a time when the internet did not yet exist. Bourdieu's field theory and capital concepts are well suited for interpreting structural relations on the internet. Likewise, Goffman's social constructionist perspective is useful for understanding how people jointly participate in shaping the way relationships on social

media are perceived and constructed (Lindgren, 2015).

Mothers' consumption can be categorised by their use of various capital, such as economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1995). Economic capital encompasses primarily material assets, whereas cultural capital includes good taste and cultivated style. Social capital in turn describes how social networks and contacts can be used as a resource within a certain practice, such as in this case of mothers' online discussions. Symbolic capital constitutes what is considered as valuable within a certain group in relation to economic, cultural and social capital and can therefore be related to social hierarchies within that group, in our case mothers' online discussions. Two other concepts are habitus and social fields (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus organizes and creates individuals' taste and lifestyle and can be understood as the embodiment of taste on different social fields. A social field is a group of people who are united through a common interest, i.e. mothers' online discussions on children's clothes, where taste becomes a way for mothers to position themselves and create similarity or distinction.

Another theoretical tool is Goffman's (1959/2006) dramaturgical perspective on social life where he uses the theatre-metaphors backstage and frontstage. Backstage an individual prepares for the role to be played when entering the frontstage. Even though Goffman's notion of social situations has been restricted to face-to-face interaction, some of his concepts are most useful within the context of mediated environments (cf. Rettie, 2009; Meyrowitz, 1985), for example, impression management and selective and indirect self-presentation. Impression management is the process in which we try to influence other people's perceptions about an object, event or ourselves. Selective self-presentation is the way we conceive

ourselves, and the role we are striving to enact. The indirect self-presentation is our use of associates for our own benefit (Goffman, 1959/2006; Colett 2005).

Research Methods: Our study is based on a large Swedish internet forum about mothers' views on children's clothes. The chosen threads and posts cover a period of eight years, 2010-2017, 61 threads and 4294 posts and comments have been analyzed through qualitative content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Langer & Beckman, 2005; Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). A thread is when a member's posting is submitted and multiple responses are posted to it, like an ongoing conversation between members in a forum. For this article, a selection has been made of subjects that deal with gender issues and children's participation in choosing clothes related to age.

All posts and comments have been printed, and the content analysis was carried out. They have since been coded. We have used initial and focused coding, an approach based on grounded theory. In the initial coding, the threads were first read carefully, and codes and main themes were summarized and written down at each thread's end. At this stage, we asked open-ended questions to the text, such as what is said, how is it said and who says what. We then went through the themes that emerged in the threads based on our purpose and issues from this initial and detailed coding. Using focused coding, we compiled the codes into more thematic categories that represented overall sections of the threads. Here we also used so-called memos, notes, and notes of concepts and categories that we defined for ourselves to be able to use later in the analysis (cf. Bryman 2018; Fejes & Thornberg, 2016). Finally, we went through the more general themes and what they could mean in relation to our issues and Bourdieu's and Goffman's theories.

RESULTS

Motherhood and gendernorms: According to the Swedish Gender Equality Agency the goal for Swedish gender equality policy is that women and men shall have the same power to shape society and their own lives. Sweden's government is committed to achieving this through a policy agenda that combats inequality and inhibitive gender roles and structures. Men and boys must be involved in and invited to participate in gender equality work. Gender equality must be central to all decision-making and resource allocation (www.jamstalldhetsmyndigheten.se).

Gender is the issue that has engaged mothers the most in terms of number of posts (2282), and has been included throughout the period 2010-2017. Most threads are about what clothes a girl and a boy should wear, often related to color and design. In the analysis of clothing as a gender marker, we found patterns in the argumentation that emerged in the discussions. Three types of arguments were distinguished; gender neutrality, gender-compromising and gender-preserving. Gender neutrality means that gender is socially constructed, while gender preserving emphasizes that we belong to one of two biological genders. Gender-compromising seeks to find compromises between these two perspectives.

We can conclude that mothers who use gender neutrality arguments challenge the gender-preserving norm by addressing taken-for-granted notions of the two-gender norm. They strive to complicate the meanings of gender-marked clothes and the color pink in order to create new ways of thinking about gender. They want to recreate the meaning of girls 'and boys' clothes and the color pink. For those mothers who use gender-preserving arguments, gender-specific clothing, on the other hand, is not a dilemma. For them, pink clothes

are by definition for a girl and dark clothes for a boy. The same applies to the discussion about whether boys can wear a dress or not. They use the clothes as gender markers for impressions (Goffman, 1959/2006), in order for others to perceive the gender of their child. The mothers who use gender-compromising arguments, in turn, strive to move away from gender-stereotyped children's clothing, but do not avoid them altogether. At times younger boys can wear a dress indoors at home but not outside among people. This is an example of Goffman's (1959/2006) frontstage and backstage as well as impression control and selective self- presentation. What the child wears outdoors represents the frontstage, where it is important how the child is dressed since it says something about what impression the mother wants to make and how she wants to present herself and her child to others. Indoors, however, in the private backstage, the child is allowed to choose more freely since the mother can let go of the need for impression control. These mothers give each other advice on how to mix boys' and girls' clothes in order to make the clothing style more gender-neutral.

Additional factors that limit mothers are the gender stereotypical range in the stores, which is reflected in the clothes' size differences and design. This also reflects how cultural capital and different gender habitus related to fashion create a notion of what is masculine and feminine and takes the form of symbolic capital, i.e. values that are recognized or not recognized in different social contexts and societies (Bourdieu, 1995).

Motherhood and children's participation: According to the Swedish Child policy children should be listened to. Not only in family life, but government offices and companies regularly bring in young Swedes and listen to their concerns to create room for their influence. In Sweden children have strong rights. This is clear when you look at

the laws, government programs, and children's organizations that support children.

One of our issues deals with mothers reasoning about children's participation in the choice of clothes and based on their discussions, and we distinguish different views on children and childhood.

Most mothers in our study believe that children at an early age can decide what to wear. Many of their children are participating as early as at the age of two, or as soon as they start to show interest and become aware of choices. They argue that it is as part of the children's independence education. This view of children is in line with children's perception in the post-industrial society where the child's individual and unique potential is emphasized. A view of children which, according to Brusdal and Frønes (2013), can be explained by the view of children found in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the discourse on the competent child (Rubinstein 2000; see also Bartley 1998).

In the analysis of the mothers' self-presentation (Goffman, 1959/2006), it is possible to distinguish two motherhood images. One is the negotiating mother, and the other the authoritative mother. The negotiating mother emphasizes the education of independence, while the authoritative mother emphasizes the adult's economic power and authority and the children's dependence. These two categories of motherhood clearly indicate two different perspectives on children and childhood. One sees the child as an individual, competent to make their own decisions about the choice of clothes while the other has a more traditional view of children with the mother as the holder of financial capital (Bourdieu, 1984) and thereby the right to decide what the child should wear referring to dependence, obedience and control. The first perspective is more child-oriented and is very much

in line with what Johansson (2007) describes as the modern liberal family ideal where all family members are involved and active in the creation of the social construction family, while the second perspective is more adult-oriented and more grounded on traditional family ideals. In the former, we can distinguish two different types of arguments, partly rights arguments, the child's right to participate and make decisions, and partly consequential arguments that refer to good consequences such as encouraging the child's individuality and independence. In the second, it is more authority arguments concerning the adult's right to decide as he or she holds economic power.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that mothers strive to be seen as "the good mother" by doing what they believe is best for the child, which can be interpreted as a form of Happiness Ethics. However, the result also indicates that the mothers do not always agree on what a good mother is and stands for, they experience different dilemmas and argue for different opinions and views. The dilemmas mentioned include parenting and consumption of clothes and appear in discussions about how mothers should relate to the range of gender stereotyped clothes and children's participation and different ethical values. It is interesting to note that the mothers' discussions essentially follow the general public discourses in today's society in Sweden on gender equality- and family and child policy related to gender norms and democracy.

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