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An existential trajectory of refracted self: the intersectionality of mothering, fashion and sustainability

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This working research has emerged after revisiting a previous empirical study from almost a decade ago: examining the existential lifeworlds of professionally working mothers as they negotiate the practicalities of their everyday duties, along with sustainable behaviour ideologies (Ritch and Brownlie, 2016). The aim is to explore how life stage impacts on fashion consumption and related practice, as well as the role of sustainability in informing ideologies and practice. As such, the research is grounded in an existential phenomenology, recognising that values are shaped through experiences and consciousness (Satre, 2003), that are subjected to changing conditions; therefore, the data provided a snapshot of a specific time and space which is constantly evolving. The research conceptualises mothering as a construct of self, illustrative of Giddens (1992) suggestion that self is a reflexive project, a socially influenced infusion that incorporates past and present.

In the original research, the participants described their lifeworld experiences as being imbued within the mothering role, work responsibility and related social experiences. However, this fell into two categories that represented existential concepts: totally focused on the internal family world (stay at home mum) and one foot in both the internal and external worlds (working either full or part time). Originally, this sample were selected as the extant literature had suggested that mothers were more likely to purchase sustainable food, and the research sought to explore if sustainable concepts could transfer to fashion consumption, for themselves and their children. Often, sustainability was a secondary consideration, albeit one that was sometimes a source of guilt, due to the abstractedness of the implications. The main consideration expressed by participants was that ideology and behaviours were idiographic constructions to manage their lifeworld, influenced by the resources (time, finances, etc.) available and the life stage of the family.

Sartre (2003) situated awareness of one's immediate surroundings is the positional consciousness of being before knowing. From this, it can be assumed that existential experiences have a greater influence over behaviours due to the immediacy of consequences. Analysis from the original empirical work revealed discursive fields of intersectionality, that were representative of social imaginaries that informed consumption practice. This included: identity constructs (represented in thoughts, behaviour and their appearance); their responsibility as a mother (caring for, nurturing and protecting their children); and, social status (reflected in value-signalling behaviours and appearance of the family). Consequently, sustainability was often reflective of caring and nurturing, as well as illustrative of good citizenship.

In revisiting five of the initial participants, this research builds upon the previous empirical study, by exploring existential trajectories of family life stage and how this shapes consumption ideologies.

Originally, two of the narratives were particularly pivotal in recognising the evidential impact motherhood had upon their conceptualisation of, and perceived ability to, integrate sustainability within their respective consumption behaviours. This coincided with their constructed perceptions of self, also a reflection of their family life stage.

Participant-1 was completely immersed in the family, she was on maternity leave and had three young children. Prior to having children, she purchased convenience food and led a hedonistic life. Yet, as a mother, she concentrated all her efforts on buying sustainable food and related child commodities (clothing and toys were second hand) to align with her emerging moral ideology for equity and sustainability. Her practice was influenced strongly by her husband who introduced media news gained externally from the home. Participant-1 put her own needs as secondary, particularly for fashion. Her body shape had changed over three consecutive pregnancies and reduced her self-confidence; therefore, she was less interested in fashion and her appearance beyond mothering.

In contrast, participant-2 had returned to education and described multiple identities and conflicting responsibilities where she sought belonging: as a student; a mother; as well as working in a professional occupation. Seeking 'belonging' was a way of bridging the contrast between those diverse roles, often to establish affinity with each cohort of peers; her external world, therefore, was more diverse and reflected divergent ideologies. To manage the intersectional experience of returning to education, alongside household responsibilities and part time work, she adopted a refractive approach; pre-children, she had been very 'right on', a vegetarian and engaged within human global rights issues, these were practices that were suspended to prioritise managing the household budget and nurturing the children.

Both participants provide illustrations of Giddens (1992: 75) assertion that '*lifestyle choices are constitutive of the reflexive narrative of self*'. What was evident here was that participant-1 was internally focused on the home, whereas participant-2 straddled both internal and external worlds. This had consequences for consumption, practice, self-construct and self-identity. As such, revisiting those roles almost a decade later provided an interesting perspective on the trajectory of self and the influence of family life stage.

The initial empirical analysis revealed that motherhood had altered identity perceptions depending on the significance of their role as mothers, whether it was the primary role or another competing responsibility. Bailey (1999) recognised changing perceptions of identity are not only physical due to changing body shape, but symbolically represent the responsibility encountered through motherhood, as embodying mothering abilities. Within this, Bailey (1999) posited that high and late modernity, as developed by Giddens (1992; 1991), enabled women to reconceptualise themselves within the boundaries of subjectification. For example, Bailey (1999) identified that pregnancy provided an opportunity for her participants to be excused temporarily from their previous notions of self. In a sense, this offers time and space for reflection, and to reconceptualise self. This was evident in the narrative from participant-1, where she saw the birth of each child as an opportunity to review the family practice. Giddens (1992) recognises that the fusion of self into family leads to adopting a sense of 'we', rather than 'I', a trait that was unique within participant-1's transcript.

The similarity between Bailey's research and this research is that motherhood extends post-pregnancy and is an on-going process as the children become more independent. This was evident as the participants reconceptualised their previous notions of pre-mother self within a competing discourse of moral sentiment, self-identity and familial provisioning. Renegotiating their self-identity throughout the family life stages included recognising the tensions which exist in a multi-faceted lifeworld, where egocentricity is compromised through merging the needs and wants of others in the family structure.

Follow up phenomenological interviews (Thompson et al., 1989) are ongoing and the two completed have lasted around 60 minutes. They began with the broad research questions of how has the fashion accessed for you and your children changed over the last eight years, particularly as the children will have developed their own sense of self identity, and how have your preferences for sustainability evolved? The initial interviews had included fashion labels that depicted sustainable concepts, however the follow up interviews include questions that were informed from the analysis of the previous conversation and are therefore unique to each informant.

The data was transcribed verbatim and analysed again using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), and each interview was analysed individually, then in conjunction to the informant's previous interview and finally similarities between all informants were examined. Preliminary findings have found that life-stage is an indicator of fashion involvement, as well as sustainability engagement, both of which are influenced by internal and external environments. For example, participant-1 was no longer immersed in her internal family nurturing lifeworld; the absence of her husband meant that she had to return to full time employment. This had a number of implications: she was more interested in her appearance and shopped more for fashion, both for work and her desire to be attractive to her new partner - her own needs were no longer secondary. She also relied more on convenience food and was no longer focused or sought information on sustainability behaviours. This could be rejection of her husband's sustainable ideology post marriage, or refractive coping strategies to manage work, home and childcare. Nevertheless, she presented with more confidence and authority than she had previously; no longer reliant on 'another' for financial support or information. Participant-2 no longer juggles multiple roles and had settled into a career. While she was still aware of the social signaling of her appearance, she now had the time and finances to include sustainability ideologies in her practice. She also presented self-confidence, no longer expressing guilt at the misalignment of ideology and practice.

The research contributes to understanding existential experiences of reflexive self, as narrated by participants at particular family life stages. While the main themes of self and family identity, mothering responsibilities and social status remained, those had evolved. For example, self-identity included participation, and contributions to, the external world. Status was sought outside the family, without guilt that family life would be compromised. There was also distance between the child's appearance and the family status, where previously this would have been reflective of family values; there was an acceptance that the child's sense of self was evolving. What this illustrates is that family life stages offer women opportunities to reconceptualise refractive self. As the children matured the mothering role evolved to allow for developed socialisation where both mother and child enjoyed bringing home new ideologies for experimental family practice. This situated awareness depicts that temporal experiences are existentially constructed to manage the evolving intersectionality of self.

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