Materialities: Clothing, Reciprocal Appearance Management and the Mother-Daughter Relationship

Abstract

This paper explores the challenge to sociologists to think about material objects and their use within everyday situations. Considering clothing as a material object, it analyses the ways clothing objects are used by mothers and their adult daughters as a tool to monitor the appearance of the other. In exploring processes of reciprocal monitoring, the paper conceptualises reciprocal feedback processes as a form of appearance management related to the establishment and performance of identities in circumstances of relatively high co-monitoring. In expanding our view of appearance management practices, this paper aims to highlight the next juncture in understanding how clothing materialises and facilitates relationships and social life for women. Female children are primarily dressed, socialised into clothing practices and taught elements of femininity by their mothers. For most women, this relationship of reciprocal monitoring and co-evaluation persists into adult life. Ultimately, this paper seeks to provide the basis for a sociological examination of appearance management practices in relationships. More broadly, it allows for a reflection on how feminine identities are established within family and through the material medium of clothing.

Keywords: Appearance management, clothing, materiality, family relationships
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Introduction

During the past 30 years, material culture has gained momentum as a serious academic pursuit outside the realms of traditional archaeology. Along with Western developments in industrial production and proliferation of material goods, material objects are now recognised as an important part of our human, corporeal existence; we are embedded within material objects (Barthes 1957; Baudrillard 1968; Jameson 1984) and are constituted through our relationships with them. For example, we use objects to create specific environments, stylise our public profile or to mark a special occasion; we rely on objects throughout our daily life. This reliance on material objects means that they can influence all facets of our lives including relationships with others (Miller 1987, 1995, 1997). It is only recently, within fields such as science and technology studies, consumption studies and the new economic sociologies that sociologists have begun to seriously consider materiality.

Starting with the premise that clothing is an important area of materiality that is routinely negotiated by most women, this paper aims to expand upon ideas surrounding appearance management within the context of the mother-daughter relationship in order to expand conceptualisations of feminine identity construction. Traditionally, appearance management practices have been considered from the perspective of the individual only, or via the individual in relationship to social roles and norms of dress. Developing a different pathway to understanding the negotiating of gender identity as partly related to materialised performativity, this paper sets out
to expand ideas that surround a symbiotic relation between ‘self’ and ‘other’ as a way of managing appearances. Appearance management “encompasses all attention, decisions, and acts related to personal appearance” (Kaiser 1997: 5) and is defined as “all activities and thought process leading to the purchase and wear of clothing items, as well as processes of body modification” (Kaiser 1997: 5). This paper focuses on clothing items and the processes of dressing to account for practices of clothing assemblage. In using ideas around appearance management, relationships and identity, the aims of this paper are twofold: to highlight the significance of material culture, specifically clothing, to relationships while also working to expand our conceptualisation of appearance management by highlighting the neglect of relationships to these processes. The mother-daughter relationship provides a highly relevant context to explore the dimensions of negotiation that clothing facilitates while also allowing for discussions of identity development and maintenance.

In the social world, clothing is commonly recognised as a signifier of a gendered identity, the mother-daughter relationship is considered the primary source from which young girls learn how to ‘be feminine’ and present themselves as feminine to others (Chodorow 1999: 113). This is consistent with conceptualisations of gender from postmodern feminist theory where gender is seen as performative and gender reality is created through sustained social performances and repeated cultural discourse (Butler, 1993). Given the mother-daughter relationship is bound to a dynamic history, particularly in the realms of clothing, the voice of the ‘other’ is explored here as a significant monitor of the performative practices involved in presenting the self as woman. Thinking about appearance management practices as a co-monitoring system between mothers and their adult daughters, this paper seeks to
conceptualise practices of the self (dress) and the ways that the materiality of clothing is manipulated to present the self socially.

In considering clothing as an important object with which feminine identity is navigated, psychoanalytic concepts are introduced throughout this paper to allow for a greater interpretive understanding of the psycho-social processes that occur in constructions of the social self. Following the arguments of Vogler (2000) and Elliott (2008), a blend of sociology and psychoanalysis helps to explain those elements that are either overlooked or reduced entirely to the social. For example, the incorporation of Melanie Klein’s object-relations theory allows us to account for the significance of the mother-daughter relationship but also the role of everyday objects such as clothing within this relationship. The underlying contribution of psychoanalysis here lies in its ability to help us understand the relation between mental life and behaviour. In conceptualising material practices in the context of the mother-daughter relationship, I am not attempting to resolve larger issues around feminine identity or questions of cultural influence but, instead, shed some light as to how mothers and their daughters help each other to physically and psychically assemble identities using clothing.

**Clothing as Material Culture**

Individuals interact with and use clothing everyday, in various ways. Clothing is an object embedded within various meanings and when considered as a form of material culture, has a number of specific material proclivities (Woodward 2007). For example, the way it covers the body, the feel of the fabric and colour of the garment. The inclusion and use of the term clothing in this paper is taken to refer to *all items that adorn any part of the body*. Defining clothing in this way allows for a more
thorough socio-cultural analysis of the material culture of clothing in its assemblages but also avoids potential bias to certain items within the category, such as jewellery.

The materiality of clothing and the importance of understanding the meaning associated with clothing has been largely ignored in socio-cultural accounts of clothing (Crane & Bovone 2006). Often denigrated to accounts of the superficial and the ‘surface’, or too close to the practice of physiognomy, clothing has rarely been considered as a serious pursuit amongst sociologists. Some speculate that this avoidance from sociologists is borne from the synonymous linking of the fashion phenomena to clothing and the fickle nature of Western fashion itself, an industry that fails to provide a fixed image for itself (O’Connor 2005, p. 42). There have been a number of calls to look beyond this perspective in order to understand clothing as a material expression of the self but also the self as situated in social life (Crane & Bovone 2006).

The intimate nature with which we interact with clothing means that as a facet of material life and culture, we also perceive the world through clothing. Clothing is “… the main medium between our sense of bodies and our sense of the external world” (Miller 2010, p. 23). The intriguing dimension of clothing though is that whilst worn, clothing items become an extension of our bodies (Wilson 1987), we are also able to remove them from our bodies. On this point, Tarlo (1996: 16) concludes that clothing has potential for symbolic elaboration because of clothing’s close proximity to the body. Clothing as an object separate from the body thus has no meaning, but clothing in association with the body has ability to find a place in the symbolic order of social life. If clothing is considered a non-verbal form of language and communication, then
it is perhaps one of the most powerful material objects that we use on a daily basis. The very materiality of clothing means that we can manipulate what we want others to see of our bodies and our identities.

**Individual choices verses the voice of the other**

Establishing identity requires interpretation of the social world but also “…construction and repair of borderlines that define who we are and who we are not” (Freitas et al. 1997: 323). For most women, the materiality of clothing facilitates identity construction by allowing visual demarcations to the individual. Maintaining a tension between clothing as a personal expression of identity (Woodward 2007: 26-29) and clothing as a device for fitting in, women negotiate this component of life on a daily basis. In this way clothing provides a platform with which to understand the ways women socially present themselves but also in terms of the operationalisations of appearance management practices.

Appearance management acts as an umbrella term to encapsulate “all attention, decisions, and acts related to one’s personal appearance” (Kaiser 1997: 5). Clothing as a material object is tightly bound to considerations of appearance management as a visual and expressive outcome of censoring the self in terms of social expectations but also, social implications. For example, we often ask ourselves, is this really me? Will I be appropriately dressed for the occasion? Most research tends to address the circumstances surrounding the self-presentation of women from the perspective of psychology (Goffman 1959; Maddi 1996) or social psychology (Gangestad & Snyder 2000; Snyder 1987) such as the link of models of personality and the behavioural consistencies in self-presentation (Widner Johnson et al. 2007). However, in the
context of appearance management and the uses of clothing, the utilisation of measures and quantitative analyses here fall short in allowing for an interpretive explanation of these practices. It is argued here that an interpretive explanation would privilege a grounded and thorough understanding of the tangible and intangible components and outcomes of appearance management practices.

From a sociological perspective, Cooley’s (1902) concept of the looking glass self helps us to account for a reflexive self-concept however, the relevance of kinship ties are herein highlighted as something that may largely impact appearance management practices and identity expression. Other conceptualisations of appearance management account for ‘external cues’ from the perspective of the body and cultural ideals or expectations, particularly in terms of body modification practices or risky behaviours in terms of the body (Jones et al 2001; Neumark-Sztainer 2005; Rudd & Lennon 2000) such as, dieting behaviours or plastic surgery. In terms of interpersonal relationships associated with appearance management practices, a focus on kinship ties has largely been overshadowed by studies of romantic relationships. For example, research has focused on the link between preening behaviours and courtship practices (Aune & Aune 1994). Thus considerable gaps remain in terms of our sociological understanding of the effects that familial relationships have on appearance management practices.

When examined in the milieu of the mother-daughter relationship, clothing becomes a contentious everyday object. For a majority of women, the relationship most bound to clothing from early life is the relationship with her mother. Of all material objects, clothing is perhaps the most prominent that features throughout the biography of the
mother-daughter relationship. From birth, mothers typically impose the appearance of their daughters (Kaiser 1997: 156), choosing to dress her child in a gendered way and/or to dress her child in colours and textures that reflect her own taste and style. In an ethnographic study of North London mothers, Miller (1997: 71) contends that new mothers placed considerable pressure on themselves to ensure that their infant embodied “the stylistic aspirations of the parent”. Thus ideas and ideals of appearance management practices feature as part of the mothering role and the mother-daughter relationship from early on. As their daughters grow, mothers negotiate and facilitate elements of expressivity (identity) through clothing but also act as ‘gate keepers’ or monitors of what is appropriate (Rawlins 2006) where for most, clothing acts as a primary medium for the development of a gendered identity (Barnes & Eicher 1993).

How then do adult women continue to balance these expectations that they have been inculcated into by their mothers? What role does the mother-daughter relationship have in appearance management processes for the pair?

Closely tied to notions of the struggle between developing an autonomous self and a reliance on close relationships as a port for feedback, a reciprocal form of appearance management is proposed here where mother and daughter pairs supervise, advise, police, idealise and examine or control each other’s appearances. The concept includes providing clothing advice and the feedback that is freely given or requested by a person in terms of whole outfits, specific items of clothing, shopping excursions undertaken together or the management of items of clothing to be disposed of. For example, mothers may look to their younger, adult daughters for advice on the suitability of particular colours or outfits for a social occasion. While mothers may provide unwanted feedback to their daughters regarding the colour or cut of her outfit
choice. So while this relationship may be a primary source for interpersonal cues and feedback in determining a self-identity, the close proximity of clothing to the body holds for a complex dimension to the mother-daughter relationship. If a woman’s self-identity is expressed through clothing and defined by the relationships she has with the important people in her life (Woodward 2007:111), it is perhaps the mother-daughter relationship that defines and alters identity the most. When advice is given and taken on board, the outward expression of self-identity through clothing is countered by the mother-daughter relationship.

Most authors tend to address the conditions affecting the mother-daughter relationship to clothing in terms of continued dependence for buying and sorting clothing (Corrigan 1989a, 1989b, 1995, 2008; Woodward 2007: 111), anxiety related to clothing choice (Clarke & Miller 2002), and similarities and dissimilarities in clothing choice (Bergman & Fahey 1998: 18-19). Here these treatises fall short in their treatment of feedback processes for mothers and their adult daughters with respect to the operations of material culture. For instance, Clarke and Miller (2002:196-197) discuss the case of Charmaine, a confident 18 year old woman who has a keen sense of style and knowledge of fashionable clothing however, when on a shopping trip with her mother to purchase a floral print garment, she cannot decide which to buy. Rather than report on what advice and feedback Charmaine’s mother provides in such a situation, the authors limit their interpretation of Charmaine’s indecision to ideas surrounding taste and navigation of the marketplace. I would argue that only half of the story is told here; the key to understanding Charmaine’s indecision may in fact be the voice or non-voice of ‘the other’ (mother). With acknowledgement of
outward appearance management cues as they are offered from Charmaigne’s mother, we may begin to understand Charmaigne’s indecision differently.

The expressive and intimate processes involved with the choosing and wearing of clothes means that we perceive the world through clothing. Clothing is “… the main medium between our sense of bodies and our sense of the external world” (Miller 2010, p. 23). Given the connection of clothing to mother/daughter that holds for many women, the feedback received from either party is likely to affect clothing choice in future. For example, if a woman receives compliments from her daughter about an outfit choice, she is likely to thank her daughter as if she has received a compliment about a real and intrinsic part of herself. Psychoanalysis provides us with an explanation of these processes through forms of internalisation, namely identification and introjection. Defined as: “those processes by which the subject transforms real or imagined regulatory interactions with his [sic] environment and real or imagined characteristics of his [sic] environment, into inner regulations and characteristics” (Winnicott 1956, cited in Chodorow 1999:43 italics added) and for mothers with daughters, felt relatedness and identification is stronger compared to identification levels for mothers with sons (Doane & Hodges 1992; Flax 1978). Psychoanalysis accounts for this with the concept of mirroring within the mother-daughter pair; the mother sees herself in her daughter and the daughter sees herself in her mother (Chodorow 1999). It follows then that the materiality of clothing can act as a means to facilitate identification by enabling the mirroring process to occur.

Thus if we apply the concept of identification to the case of Charmaigne and her mother, a more complex picture begins to develop. In trying on various floral print
garments for herself but also her mother, Charmaigne is negotiating expression of her self identity and where ‘she’ is situated in relation to the mother she has introjected; she is negotiating the feminine with the feminine ideals she has introjected over time. Thus, the feedback cues that Charmaigne is navigating and weighting up as she shops with her mother may in fact be the nucleus of her indecision. The process of appearance management then is a multi-faceted concept that encapsulates not only the individual’s expectations of social self-presentation but also, the introjected expectations of others and the feedback offered up by others whether requested or not. This form of appearance monitoring differs from traditional sociological concepts like the looking glass self (Cooley 1902) due the symbiotic, external and corporeal elements involved.

Conceptualising reciprocal appearance management practices as an area of social presentation and identity construction contributes to our sociological understanding of the operationalisations of the materiality of clothing, particularly in terms of relationships for women. The discussion presented here suggests that the relationship of women to clothing is socially mediated most by the adult mother-daughter relationship. For sociologists, this paper has attempted to highlight the importance of material culture to relationships and identity construction for women, while also discussing the role of the mother-daughter relationship for feedback regarding outfit assemblage. It is suggested here that this relationship is unique to processes of identity construction when considering clothing due to the symbiotic nature of appearance management practices.
In conclusion

This paper has argued for a symbiotic approach to understanding the feedback mechanisms that contribute to appearance management practices between mothers and their adult daughters. Using clothing as material culture, the struggle between development of an autonomous self-identity and the influence of close relationships has been discussed in the context of the adult mother-daughter relationship and its feedback mechanisms. A quite different way to proceed has been introduced here through the use of and incorporation of psychoanalytic concepts to a sociological view of the material practices that women engage with. While this paper has not resolved the grey area surrounding appearance management practices as a nuanced area of social life for women, it does provide a basis with which empirical testing can proceed.
References


