Green moms: the social construction of a green mothering identity via environmental advertising appeals

Lucy Atkinson

Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Moody College of Communication, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA

Published online: 05 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Lucy Atkinson, Consumption Markets & Culture (2014): Green moms: the social construction of a green mothering identity via environmental advertising appeals, Consumption Markets & Culture

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10253866.2013.879817

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Green moms: the social construction of a green mothering identity via environmental advertising appeals

Lucy Atkinson

Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Moody College of Communication, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA

This study explores emerging green motherhood discourse as framed by green advertising in pregnancy magazines. It takes an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on reflexive modernization, feminist studies and critical discourse analysis and reveals how advertising represents a double bind for mothers. Textual analysis of a sample of green ads in *FitPregnancy* indicates ads present expectant mothers with solutions for resolving the challenges of parenting in an age of widespread environmental threat, while simultaneously reinforcing those same lifestyle choices that are thought to exacerbate the environmental crisis. This green mothering discourse appears to empower mothers and offer solutions to the risks of pregnancy, while in reality relegating the mother to the sidelines, rendering her nearly invisible while the child is promoted as the primary subject and brands as sources of expert knowledge. These results speak to the broader ways in which seemingly neutral texts work to frame and reinforce certain ideologies.

**Keywords:** advertising; discourse analysis; gender; feminism; environmentalism; green motherhood

For expectant mothers, the transition to motherhood can be equal parts thrilling and terrifying. In an age of late modernity, characterized by pervasive risk and uncertainty, this is especially so. Pregnant women face bodily threats from consuming the wrong food, taking the wrong medication and wearing the wrong shoes. The threat from these perceived risks is compounded by the fact that they can change over time, with once-safe foods being reclassified as dangerous and vice versa (Food Standards Agency (UK) 2009). The path to a healthy pregnancy is riddled with uncertainty, and motherhood – although natural and biological – continues to be framed in contemporary discourse as skills that must be learned via external sources rather than discovered via innate wisdom. In this sense, motherhood is an identity that must be claimed rather than an expression of the quintessential self (McMahon 1995) and the ways in which novice mothers claim those identities suggests important political, cultural and sociological implications (Arendell 2000). In Westernized middle-class culture, the morally preferred form of motherhood is one that carries with it labor-intensive, time-consuming practices central to which is the acquisition of an extensive list of products and services (Avishai 2007; Buskens 2001; Collett 2005; Douglas and Michaels 2004). While other
mothering discourses exist, this intensive one dominates, rendering other parenting practices (i.e. single mothers, working mothers, lesbian mothers, etc.) as deviant and outside the bounds of what constitutes “normal” motherhood (Arendell 1999; Badinter 2011).

This “intensive mothering” ideology dominates and gives preference to some practices over others, such as breastfeeding over bottle feeding and cloth diapers over disposables. Many of these mothering practices are consumption based and for soon-to-be mothers, consumption offers a way to prepare for their new roles as mothers (Sevin and Ladwein 2008; Sørensen et al. 2010; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a) while simultaneously striving to protect their unborn children against the threats of the outside world – bisphenol A (BPA) in plastics, lead in paint and pesticides in food. One kind of consumption in particular, green consumption, offers mothers a way to cocoon their children from the risks threatened by the external environment. Green consumption – purchasing products and services that claim to be better for the environment – represents a growing segment of consumers, and mothers in particular are exhorted to shop in environmentally responsible ways (Prothero 2006; Sandilands 1993).

This study explores this emerging discourse of green motherhood (Badinter 2011; Logsdon-Conradsen 2011; Prothero 2006; Ray 2011; Sandilands 1993) as it is framed by green advertising in pregnancy magazines. It takes an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on theories of reflexive modernization and risk society, feminist studies and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to reveal how contemporary advertising messages relying on green appeals serve as a double bind for mothers (Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 2003b, 2006). Findings of this study advance this double bind by arguing that advertising texts suggest an emerging form of green mothering discourse that relegates the mother to the sidelines and renders her nearly invisible while promoting the child as the primary subject and advertising and brands as sources of expert knowledge. Not only do these advertising frames promote an untenable catch-22 of consumption that simultaneously encourages and condemns mothers, but they actually push the subject of the mother outside the frame, both literally and metaphorically. In so doing, these advertising frames set up a tension within mothering narratives. On the one hand, they promote the illusion that scientifically informed and ecologically appropriate products can free pregnant women to make better, safer parenting choices, thereby empowering them in their roles as expectant mothers. On the other hand, these labor-intensive, child-centered green mothering practices serve to reinforce their positions in the domestic sphere and a reliance on knowledgeable third parties while promoting a consumption lifestyle that is in contradiction to the idealized ecologically benign lifestyle of the green consumer. From a more generalized perspective, these insights speak to the broader ways in which seemingly neutral texts and images, such as those found in advertising, work to frame and reinforce certain ideologies.

This paper begins with a review of the relevant literature, focusing on discourses of contemporary motherhood against the backdrop of late modernity. It discusses intensive mothering and the role of risk surveillance and reliance on experts, particularly mass media, as a means of navigating motherhood. It then discusses green motherhood as an emerging form of contemporary mothering and the fraught relationship between mothers and environmentalism. Looking at the transitional stage of pregnancy, it explores how consumption has been used as a tool by mothers and marketers to establish and bolster a mothering identity. Following the literature review, this paper outlines
the methodological approach and describes the sample of advertisements that were analyzed. The final part discusses the major themes revealed by the analysis of green advertisements targeted at expectant mothers and the potential impact on dominant, middle-class narratives of motherhood. It does not presume that these advertising frames are received uniformly and without reflection by all audiences; nor is it assumed that all green advertising contents employ these kinds of frames. However, as Jette (2006) notes, past research has demonstrated that audiences who share similar social spaces and experiences tend to interpret texts in the same way and in a manner that reflects the dominant or preferred reading (Jhally and Lewis 1992; Lewis 1991; Wilson and Sparks 1999).

Contemporary motherhood: turning pregnancy into pathology

Becoming a mother can be a transformative process in which women are said to become morally improved versions of their non-mothering selves (McMahon 1995). Conceived as a biological, psychological and cultural process, becoming a mother entails the emergence of socially constructed identities and activities centered on nurturing and caring (Arendell 2000). Although motherhood is sometimes reduced to essentialist elements, motherhood is not an expression of quintessential womanhood (Blum 1993); rather, becoming a mother is an opportunity for women to produce an identity of their choosing and, among middle-class women in particular, can be a process of self-actualization, change and personal growth (McMahon 1995). As will be discussed in a later section, much of this identity work and self-actualization is accomplished and enacted through consumption.

This idea of motherhood as a produced identity, rather than an innate or intrinsic one, dovetails with claims made about late or high modernity and reflects notions of the self as a reflexive project (Giddens 1990). Self-identity unfolds and is determined by day-to-day questions about how to live. For mothers-to-be, those day-to-day questions about what kind of mothering style to adopt increasingly come back with a single answer: intensive mothering, an all-consuming form of mothering, also referred to as immersive mothering or the new momism (Arendell 2000; Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996; Johnston and Swanson 2006). This ideology of motherhood – which encompasses pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing – positions the good mother as self-sacrificing, child-centered and immersed in the mothering task to the exclusion of her own identity and desires. Intensive mothering insists that

no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 4)

This particular discourse of motherhood has been critiqued on several fronts. Intensive mothering is criticized for incorporating a false romanticism or “noble savage” perspective (Arendell 1999; Buskens 2001). It advocates childcare routines, such as babywearing, co-sleeping and cloth diapering, that are assumed to be “age-old,” “natural” or “traditional.” Far from embodying an authentic naturalism, however, this immersive view of mothering reflects a modern transition to a liberal free-market economy and the separation of public and private spheres. As Buskens (2001) has argued, with the advent of industrialization, women were displaced from the economic and social
worlds of the public sphere and relegated to the private sphere of domestic duties. Consequently, the task of being a mother also was transformed from a publicly visible component of one’s overall identity to a privatized, individualized “occupation called ‘Motherhood’” (Buskens 2001, 76).

The result, critics argue, is a hegemonic form of motherhood that reinforces traditional gender roles by elevating intensive mothers as the ideal and relegating non-conforming mothers as deviant or inferior (Arendell 1999; Johnston and Swanson 2003b). Alternative notions of motherhood, those “other mothers” (Downe 2001) including lesbian mothers (Kendall and Magenau 1999) and stepmothers (Downe 2001) are devalued and pushed aside. This discourse also fails to acknowledge the contributions of fathers, and those men who do play significant, equal parenting roles are marginalized (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013).

Even those women who represent the “right” socioeconomic status face marginalization for making the wrong lifestyle choices, for example, by choosing to formula feed instead of breastfeeding exclusively (Knaak 2005). Ultimately, the only choice good mothers have is to put their children’s needs ahead of their own. Intensive mothering is entirely and exclusively child-centered, with the baby holding physical and emotional claim over the mother and its needs superseding those of the mother (Arendell 2000; Knaak 2005). This perspective is based on an image of the child as innocent and blameless within a model of childhood that paints the baby as vulnerable and in need of protection (Cook 1995). Intensive mothering offers the only effective way for a baby to thrive and develop successfully (Lupton 2011). In this image of motherhood, the mother’s needs are absent, subsumed by the child.

Reliance on expert systems in an age of risk and uncertainty

Despite the fact intensive mothering skills are presented as traditional and innate, mothers are frequently exhorted to rely on expert, modern opinions rather than their own instincts to help them navigate the risks and uncertainties of childrearing (Sorensen et al. 2010). Modern conceptions of motherhood are the product of a long history (Greenfield and Barash 1999) and this reliance on outside experts has its roots in the medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth beginning in the 1900s (Barker 1998). This scientific approach to motherhood emphasized expert medical knowledge while denigrating traditional childrearing practices as insufficient and inferior (Avishai 2007; Barker 1998; Cook 1995). By emphasizing the need for medical involvement, pregnancy was recast in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a disease requiring medical intervention with doctors alone having the authority and expertise to make a diagnosis and prescribe treatment. Folk wisdom and traditional knowledge were cast aside in favor of scientific experts (Barker 1998). Although these technological advances might be viewed as signs of progress, they can also be read as mechanisms of disempowerment. By abdicating authority to the medical establishment, women end up not only devaluing their own mothering skills and maternal intuition, they also cede the right to define “motherhood” on their own terms.

Against the backdrop of late modernity and its concomitant risks and uncertainties (Beck 1986/1992; Connolly and Prothero 2008; Giddens 1990), contemporary pregnancy represents a continuation of this late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century scientific view of pregnancy, sitting betwixt and between health and disease, between normal and pathological, such that women are induced to rely on expert opinions about appropriate prenatal behaviors, about “legitimate and illegitimate maternal practices” (Burton-
Jeangros 2011, 3). Faced with a surfeit of pregnancy options – organic food or conventional? midwife or medical doctor? – expectant mothers navigate a litany of choices that must be made and adhered to, all with a view to limiting or mitigating risk. Pregnant women and mothers are keenly aware of the potential threats to their babies and attuned to the need to be vigilant in their surveillance of these risks (Burton-Jeangros 2011; Lee 2008; Lupton 2011). Failure to do so compromises not only the health of their offspring, but also their identities as good mothers (Collett 2005). Central to choosing a mothering identity and to avoiding risk are the twin forces of consumption and marketing. In the case of the intensive mothering discourse, consumption is central to its enactment (Hays 1996). Mothers can choose from a sea of ideologically preferred products and services in an effort to avoid risky purchases or lifestyle choices that would call in to question a mother’s identity.

This omnipresent risk is not unique to pregnant women and mothers, but is characteristic of late modernity and what Beck (1986/1992) calls the risk society. Late modernity is a time of uncertainty and ambivalence as society becomes more complex and socially disembedded (Boström and Klintman 2009; Giddens 1990). In all aspects of modern life, people require ever increasing amounts of expert advice about how to live their lives, to make better choices, to navigate threats and risks. Reliance on expert systems influences our daily lives and our acceptance of them becomes ingrained and unquestioned (Giddens 1990), and as a result, a form of social control a la Foucault (Lupton 2011; Ray 2011). In the case of motherhood and pregnancy, these expert systems are widespread and widely accepted. Although women do challenge them and put up resistance (Arendell 2000; Burton-Jeangros 2011), veering away from the scientifically accepted standards of maternal behavior and risk avoidance, for example, by drinking modest amounts of alcohol or caffeine, sets mothers up for social criticism and labeling as deviant or unfit (Lee 2008; Lupton 2011).

Internalizing these expert voices uncritically represents a point of tension within the intensive mothering discourse. On the one hand, women are seen as naturally and innately able to mother in good and desirable ways, yet they discount any instinctual or traditional knowledge about good mothering in favor of third-party experts. In a Foucauldian sense, this serves as a form of disciplinary power in which mothers pursue exceedingly difficult and oppressive standards of childbearing and childrearing that relegate them to a highly gendered domestic sphere at the expense of fulfilling their potential in the public sphere (Badinter 2011). At the same time, they accept the premise that their innate expertise regarding mothering is insufficient and potentially dangerous, and willingly defer to the authority of expert systems. Intensive mothering, according to some critics, represents a form of biopower, in which the state can constrain and regulate the population by controlling the bodies of its populace (Ray 2011). Power exists not as a force used to dominate others, but as a consequence of discourse, the production of knowledge and the authority to define what is acceptable behavior (Jette 2006). Mothers and pregnant women, faced with messages of natural, instinctive mothering coupled with overwhelming anxiety and uncertainty, freely acquiesce to the norms of intensive mothering.

Increasingly, this view of intensive mothering has incorporated an element of environmental responsibility. Not only are mothers charged with producing and raising successful children, now they are expected to do it while saving or at least not harming, the environment.
Greening of intensive motherhood

Women are seen as occupying a unique position in relation to the environment. Since the early days of the environmental movement, women have played pivotal roles in pushing for environmental conservation and ecological justice (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011). Motherhood is often seen as a motive and inspiration for environmental activism, with “mother” being used as a rhetorical device to frame environmental concern (Ray 2011). In their roles as nurturers and caregivers, women are assumed to have a close, natural connection to the environment (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011; Smith 2010). Although this ecological reductionism is not without critics (Sandilands 1993; Smith 2010), the presumed symbiotic relationship between mothers and the environment is facing renewed attention, this time in women’s capacity as consumers, notably green consumers (Bostrom and Klintman 2009; Ray 2011; Sandilands 1993; Smith 2010). As the chief “household purchasing agent” (Cook 1995), women are more closely associated with domestic provisioning than are men (National Public Radio 2006). This gendered division of household labor leaves women responsible for the majority of household purchases, including food, cleaning products, clothes, etc., a trend that becomes even more ingrained in women’s roles as mothers (Cook 2009). In contemporary mothering discourse, not only are mothers encouraged to consume, but they are also encouraged to consume in a way that combines concern for the child with concern for the environment (Prothero 2006; Sandilands 1993) regardless of the increase in domestic labor such purchases entail (Ray 2011; Sandilands 1993). Even women who have yet to have children are encouraged to think of themselves as “pre-pregnant” and to opt for organic food when possible (Green 2009; Smith 2010).

Environmentalists are co-creators of this salvation-through-consumption discourse, promoting a green strategy that entails, for example, buying energy efficient appliances or products in recyclable packaging (Smith 2010; Smith and Bortree 2012). Marketers have responded by relying on environmental frames or green benefits in their advertising messages aimed at women, particularly mothers. A 2010 study by TerraChoice showed that the number of “greener” products on store shelves had increased by 73% since the previous year. This rate of increase is even more pronounced among toy and baby products, which grew at a rate of 150% and 194%, respectively (TerraChoice 2011). Mothers’ green consumption is tied implicitly to concerns about environmental risk and threats to the baby. Mothers are continually warned about the risks inherent in exposure to chemicals, pollution and toxins while pregnant, such that the three trimesters of pregnancy represent a stage of heightened levels of anxiety and risk surveillance (Burton-Jeangros 2011; Lupton 2011). Expert systems, for example, in the form of medical advice and product labeling, are presented as valuable means of mitigating this risk, regardless of whether the risk is real or serious (Halkier 2001).

This focus on green consumption (and on sustainable consumption more broadly) as a solution to the threats raised by a risk society is not limited to mothers (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Sustainable consumption speaks to a growing concern about the state of the environment and the impact of contemporary consumer practices on future generations. Sustainable consumption also serves a communicative function, a means of signifying individual values and beliefs through the commodities we buy (or do not buy) (McNeill 1984). This symbolic function of sustainable consumption finds fertile expression in late modernity and the reflexive nature of identity (Connolly
Individuals can broadcast their sustainable orientation through the products they buy or companies they boycott.

Making intensive mothers: motherhood discourse in mass media

The dominant mothering discourse is made manifest not only by the medical-scientific establishment, but is also promulgated by mass media, including websites, magazines, parenting books and advertising (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Collectively, they serve to reinforce a discourse of immersive motherhood that leaves little room for dissenting opinions or alternative knowledge (Knaak 2005) but instead reifies the idealized view of perfect mothers. Mainstream mass media actively promote a perspective of mothers as selfless, solely responsible for their children’s cognitive and physical development, altruistic and self-sacrificing in their care, and happily willing to forgo their own independence and individuality to nurture their children (Cook 1995; Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 2003b; Quirke 2006; Sha and Kirkman 2009).

Most mainstream mass media also present an image of motherhood that is antithetical to working outside the home. Ideal mothers are those who stay at home, whereas mothers who pursue careers must demonstrate they are still competent, successful caregivers (Thompson 1996). At the same time, while mass media messages present stay-at-home mothers as the preferred norm, they are also depicted as inept and frazzled at best, boring and unproductive at worst (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 2003b). It represents a tension or double bind, in which one type of mothering discourse is heralded as ideal while simultaneously being criticized for being incompetent. Stay-at-home mothers are praised for forgoing careers and embodying their maternal obligations while also being sanctioned by outside experts for not having the skill set or knowledge to properly take care of their children and shield them from risk (Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 2003b). Rather than drawing on instinct or traditional knowledge, mothers – even “good,” morally preferred stay-at-home ones – must rely on parenting guides, medical experts and consumer products to parent effectively.

Commercially available parenting tools and the advertising messages that promote them are seen as particularly egregious in their promotion of this double bind or tension. Although in an abstract sense, mothering advice and guidance would seem to be a welcome addition, in practice they are not value neutral. The expert voices that appear in advertising for products targeted at mothers and their children rely on particular frames that heighten fears about risk, reinforce anxieties about mothering expertise and emphasize social comparison and threats to mothering identities (Prothero 2006; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a, 2006b).

Although just one source of influence on maternal identity formation, magazines (and magazine advertising) are ubiquitous, holding a disproportionate sway over mothering discourse compared to other sources (Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 2003b; Keller 1994). This is not to say that advertising acts like a magic bullet or hypodermic needle, having uniform, powerful and direct effects on audiences. Rather, the sheer volume of messages and the way they project in unison a particular mothering discourse suggests that these advertising frames can instill a dominant and socially accepted view of appropriate norms of motherhood. Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al. 2002) offers a framework for understanding how the prevalence of intensive mothering-oriented advertising might lead to this widespread acceptance. Cultivation theory argues that the mass media help shape individuals’ perceptions of reality.
Originally examined through the lens of TV programming, cultivation theory argues that as a result of television’s ubiquity and its ability to cross barriers of literacy and mobility, everyone is brought together “into a shared national culture” (Gerbner et al. 2002, 44). While Gerbner and colleagues were initially concerned with depictions of media violence and its influence on heavy viewers of “mean world” perceptions, cultivation theory has since been applied to a number of different media and contexts, including depictions of sexuality (Netzley 2010) and alcohol use (Beullens, Roe, and Van den Bulck 2012). Like television, advertising is pervasive, such that it, too, may contribute to widespread beliefs of those values and orientations promoted by the persuasive message. In the case of motherhood, “[m]agazine discourse presents concentrated and highly seductive images and text that communicate cultural expectations for women’s maternal roles” (Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 24), roles that are inextricably tied to consumption (Hogg, Folkman Curasi, and Maclaran 2004). It is not enough to adopt the appropriate kind of mothering orientation – to stay home, to co-sleep, to wear baby in a sling – mothers must also do it with a stockpile of products and services (Cook 1995, 2009; Douglas and Michaels 2004; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a). Being a good mother means buying the right products (Dedeoglu 2010; Dobscha et al. 2010). Those who do not buy in (literally and figuratively) to this dominant social picture must accept a position outside the frame, as deviant or discounted.

Yet, the role advertising plays in fostering the intensive mothering discourse remains understudied (Dobscha et al. 2010; Douglas and Michaels 2004). Little attention has been paid to the ways contemporary media, especially advertising, construct motherhood ideologies and how consumption enters into it (Arendell 2000; Johnston and Swanson 2003a). Even less research has focused on the particular transitional stage of pregnancy and the way green advertising engages the dominant mothering discourse (Dworkin and Wachs 2004; Jette 2006; Sha and Kirkman 2009). Pregnancy is a rite of passage that represents a powerful moment during which a woman becomes a new person and adopts a new identity – that of a mother (Dworkin and Wachs 2004; Miller 1997). Consumption is closely connected with this transitional stage, offering new mothers a means of anticipating and performing their roles as mothers by buying particular products and brands (Sevin and Ladwein 2008; Sørensen et al. 2010; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a, 2006b). Indeed, babies represent a $28 billion industry and families spend an average of $11,000 on baby products during a baby’s first year (FitPregnancy 2012).

**Method**

To explore how green advertising messages frame intensive green motherhood, a textual analysis was carried out of one year’s worth of advertising appearing in the magazine *FitPregnancy*. Started in 1993 by Weider Publications, *FitPregnancy* is a niche publication with a circulation of about 500,000 including paid subscribers, newsstand sales and doctors’ offices (FitPregnancy 2012). It was chosen because its readership aligns closely with green consumers on key indicators, including higher levels of education, income and age (Boström and Klintman 2009). *FitPregnancy* readers have an average annual household income of $68,450, 84% have attended or graduated from college, 61% are employed, and the median age is 30 (FitPregnancy 2012). Although this readership profile misses out poorer, less educated and younger pregnant women, it speaks directly to middle-class women at whom the dominant mothering discourse is targeted. As well, the magazine’s narrower focus on pregnancy in particular, rather
than parenting in general, offers a useful way of understanding the connections between
green consumption and mothering discourse during life transitions. The majority of
readers are expecting their first child, meaning they are navigating this transitional
phase for the first time (FitPregnancy 2012). Consumption choices regarding what
kind of mother a woman intends to be are heightened during this never-before experi-
enced transition (Sevin and Ladwein 2008; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a).

FitPregnancy publishes six issues a year. For this analysis, six issues from July/
August 2011 to May/June 2012 were studied and each issue was first examined for
the presence of green advertising. An advertisement was classified as green advertising
if it met one of more of the following criteria established by Banerjee, Gulas, and Iyer
(1995, 22): “1) Explicitly or implicitly addresses the relationship between a product/
service and the biophysical environment; 2) Promotes a green lifestyle with or
without highlighting a product/service; 3) Presents a corporate image of environmental
responsibility.” Only those ads taking up a quarter page or more were retained. In total
31 green advertisements were identified.

The purpose of this analysis was not to develop a quantitative picture of green
advertising in magazines targeted at pregnant women. Rather, the goal was to generate
insight into the green mothering discourse these advertisements promote and reinforce
to their readers. For this reason, a formal coding guide was not developed; instead each
ad was analyzed from the perspective of CDA (Fairclough 1995). Textual analysis in
general and CDA in particular are widely used analytical tools to study the way
mothers and motherhood are framed in advertising and mass media (Barker 1998;
Cook 1995; Cross 2004; Dworkin and Wachs 2004; Jette 2006; Sha and Kirkman
2009; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006a). Advertising represents a valuable text to
analyze, since it offers unique insight into the ideology that dominates in a particular
culture (Cross 2004) and could be thought of as a pictorial album of society (Belk
and Pollay 1985; Commuri, Ekici, and Kennedy 2002). Messages “embedded in adver-
tsising constitute a large piece of the puzzle revealing values and motives of individuals
in 20th-century America” (Busby and Leichty 1993, 247).

Discourse is understood in this study to refer to the meanings embedded in a text, in
this case the advertisements and the text and images that comprise them. These mean-
ings “represent and structure the way we think about the objects they construct,” shed-
ding light on a culture’s values and norms (Sha and Kirkman 2009, 361). The discourse
conveyed through these advertisements implies a particular conception of motherhood
and helps establish a dominant, accepted mothering identity. Analyzing verbal and
visual components of a text yields insight into what that discourse is and how it
might normalize particular identities and social relationships (Brownlie and Hewer
2007; Fung 2002). Although texts can hold multiple meanings and reveal multiple
interpretations, it is generally understood that texts, especially sophisticated and profes-
sionally produced ones like advertising, are developed with a dominant reading and
preferred interpretation in mind (Jette 2006; Lewis 1991).

This study relied on discourse analysis to “identify the patterns of meaning and
socially constructed versions of reality that exist in a text but often remained hidden
to the casual reader” (Jette 2006, 339). CDA unveils the ways in which social
power, as exercised by elites, institutions and groups, reproduces through communi-
cation inequalities along gender, class and culture, etc. (Dijk 1993). CDA operates
by examining the different ways the advertising text is designed so as to present a par-
ticular perspective or framing (Huckin 1997). At the macro level, these framing devices
include the selection and placement of specific images and using headlines and bold
copy to emphasize particular aspects over others. At the micro level, CDA might focus on word choice, for example, the reliance on code words like “family values.” CDA does not involve exhaustive use of all these levels of analysis, rather each should be used selectively.

In keeping with CDA tradition, the 31 magazine advertisements were analyzed for the ways in which a particular mothering discourse was framed and emphasized. The analysis adhered to the guidelines established by Fairclough (1995, 2003) and Gee (2005). For each advertisement, the textual and visual content was examined at the intra-textual level as well as in terms of the broader social context in which it is situated (de Burgh-Woodman and King 2013). Although the analytical approach began with an examination of micro-level features, this study was focused more closely on analyzing the macro elements that contribute to a particular social world being created and reflected. The analysis had two goals: first, to identify patterns in the data of variability (differences) and consistency (shared accounts); and to understand these patterns in terms of function and consequence (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This approach has been fruitfully applied in other areas of marketing scholarship (Brownlie and Hewer 2007; de Burgh-Woodman and King 2013; Hackley 2002; Hirsto 2011; Kadirov and Varey 2012; O’Sullivan 2007; Schroeder and Zwick 2004). A final important methodological consideration regarding CDA is the goal with which it is used. CDA is not meant as a tool of discovery but of explanation. “In other words, CDA is not a ‘discovery’ mechanism per se; rather, it serves to confirm, explain, and enrich the initial insight and to communicate that insight, in detailed fashion, to others” (Huckin 2002, 167).

Findings

Several common themes emerged that serve to reinforce particular assumptions about motherhood, what constitutes the morally desirable maternal role and how “good” mothers ought to fulfill their obligations. The analysis offers new insight into how the green mothering discourse, as a subset of the immersive mothering discourse, represents an even more oppressive and restrictive view of the idealized mother. These dominant themes ran through each of the 31 ads in the sample, in varying degrees and in varying forms. For the sake of clarity and manuscript length, not all 31 ads are referenced individually. Instead, exemplars are used to illustrate the themes that emerged as a result of the analytical procedure outlined above. This exemplar approach has been used in other scholarship employing a discourse analysis approach (Brownlie and Hewer 2007; de Burgh-Woodman and King 2013; Hirsto 2011; Schroeder and Zwick 2004).

The self-effacing mother

First, the sample of ads is noticeably child focused, almost to the exclusion of mothers. The 31 ads covered 20 different brands, the vast majority of which were for products related directly to the future infant, i.e. for products that would be worn, ingested or played with by babies, such as diapers, bottles and toys. Only six ads related to products that would be used by the mother, for example, multivitamins, nursing support or body lotion. As well, most ads featured a baby or toddler, but very few featured a mother. Those ads that did feature mothers positioned them facing away from the camera or cropped so that their heads were removed from the frame and only their bodies (or parts of their bodies) remained.
Analysis of macro-level elements of the texts reveals that in both a figurative and literal sense, the mother is removed from the picture. As a subject of the mothering identity, she is physically absent from the messages and in her place the child becomes the subject of the mothering identity. This suggests an interesting development in the subjectivity of women in their roles as mothers. With the advent of medicalized approaches to pregnancy and childbirth in the late 1800s/early 1900s, women’s instinctive and experiential knowledge was sidelined in favor of scientific knowledge held by physicians and other scientific experts. By turning pregnancy into a pathology and restricting knowledge to health professions, the pregnant woman was rendered an object while the physician became the active subject (Barker 1998).

I would argue that the motherhood discourse evident in this sample of green advertisements has gone one step further and rendered the mother absent while the baby has become the subject. No longer even an object, the mother, in a physical and metaphorical sense, has now disappeared. An ad for Mustela anti-stretch mark cream shows a pregnant woman with a very pronounced pregnancy belly standing on the left side of the image. Her hands are cradling her belly and she is wearing a white tank top on which is emblazoned a large number 9 (for nine months of gestation) with a purple starburst behind it. Her belly protrudes into the center of the image, dominating the ad, while the mother herself is truncated at the neck, her head cut out of the frame. The body copy of the ad touts the benefits of the skin cream, promoting its “patented active ingredients of natural origin” that are safe for the baby. The soon-to-be born baby is the central focus of the ad, while the mother is significant only as a physical carrier of the baby. As a good mother, her task is entirely physical: she is there to provide safe passage to her baby, to build a protective cocoon for the child, a barrier against the threats of the outside world. Little attention is paid to the mother as a subject, to her status as anything but a physical vessel.

Another ad for Born Free bottles similarly depicts the mother in a secondary role and in a disappearing manner. The ad shows a mother cradling her newborn baby. The center of the image is taken up by the baby’s head and body, naked except for a diaper. The mother’s hand supports the baby’s head and neck, while her own face, in profile, is tilted down, her cheek touching the top of the child’s head. The mother’s eyes are closed and her face is expressionless; she stands with a blank, passive air about her embodying Goffman’s (1979) idea of licensed withdrawal. The image is not intimate or affectionate; rather it is stilted and awkward, as though the mother is unsure about what to do next. And yet the copy on the top left of the ad admonishes her that “Every mom naturally wants what’s best for her baby.” The rest of the ad then educates mothers about what is best, specifically how Born Free bottles are the natural, right choice for feeding. Mothers may “naturally” want what is best for baby, but they do not “naturally” know what that is. The ad must inform her. It is significant that in this image, although the mother is more visible than in other ads, she is portrayed as awkward and unsure. While she ought to know what to do to take care of her baby, the ad acknowledges that she probably does not and goes about schooling her on the benefits of Born Free bottles. The image of the mother occupies that point of tension between innate but unreliable maternal instinct and proven expert advice.

An alternative reading of this ad might suggest that mothers, rather than being rendered invisible, are simply reflecting their status as taken for granted. This alternate textual interpretation, however, is less compelling given the preponderance of ads in the sample that relegate the mother to positions outside the frame. It is not just that
mothers are depicted as subordinate, but they are made physically absent or dismembered. This positioning of the child as central and prominent at the expense of the mother reflects the intensive mothering discourse in which the child subsumes the mother, perhaps even consumes her in the case of ads promoting nursing. Intensive mothering entails putting the child’s needs before the mothers. The self-effacing mother disappears in many of the ads, and instead, the infant is made dominant in the image, pictured full frame, facing the camera, with eyes squarely engaging the reader.

The disappearing intensive green mother reflects a collection of pressures and obligations that are more pronounced than those facing just the intensive mother. Intensive mothering brings with it the tacit acceptance of second-class citizenship compared to the child. While the child is put front and center, the intensive mother is forced to recede. I would argue that this retreat into the background is even more pronounced in the intensive green mothering discourse. The green mother is presented as a disembodied entity, idealized as a clean, safe environment in which to gestate a child. The mother who successfully embodies the ideals of green motherhood does so not just by putting her child before her, but by sacrificing her own subjectivity and right to physical space in a capacity other than that of a mother.

**Zero environmental impact**

The disappearing mother is exacerbated within the green mothering discourse. Not only is she rendered invisible in the image, the mother is also encouraged to make as little environmental impact as possible. As a mother and as a resident of the planet, she is exhorted to leave as little evidence of her presence as she can. She is pressed to think about her carbon footprint and to neutralize it, to eliminate her wasteful habits. For example, ads for Greenguard chide mothers for not safeguarding their children against dangerous indoor air and encourage mothers to buy cleaning products with low chemical emissions. Implicit in the copy is the idea that good mothers do not have an impact on their environment – household or ecological.

Ads for Seventh Generation, a green brand selling everything from soaps to diapers to wipes, tells mothers that “A green baby is a healthy baby” and lists ways mothers can take “baby steps to a better planet.” These steps, of course, involve buying Seventh Generation products but they also include some other recommendations, like line drying clothes instead of using the dryer, or paying attention to ingredients – not just what is included, but what is left out, too. These tips sound practical on their face, but in reality add a layer of burden to the already overwhelming list of mothering duties. How can a mother safely know what is left out of a list of ingredients? Where is she to find the time to put clothes on a line to dry – assuming she lives in the kind of housing that has access to one?

In another ad, New Chapter vitamins tells mothers about the “Whole Truth” of prenatal vitamins and promotes ones that are organic, not made with genetically modified organisms, probiotic, whole food and naturally pure with “100% wild-caught extra virgin Alaskan salmon oil.” They are packed with “20 cultured, organic fruits, vegetables and superfoods your body easily recognizes and absorbs, so it’s easy to digest – even on an empty stomach.” The vitamins’ advertising appeal is so natural, so nonpolluting, so noninvasive, so nonthreatening, so innocuous that any mother who eats them could become one with the environment, disappearing into the fields and oceans from where the ingredients were sourced.
These appeals to a mother’s obligation to leave a pristine external environment while maintaining a pure internal environment in her womb speak directly to the view of women as caretakers of nature and guardians of the future. Under the logic of maternal feminism (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011), women are assumed to be uniquely suited for nurturing roles, to be naturally more empathetic and to be predisposed to care for the environment (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011; Smith 2010). The image of a zero-impact mother finds resonance with views of women as natural environmental activists who want to leave the planet a healthy place for their children (Prothero 2006). Living “by this new ‘kinder to nature’ code means something significant to saving the world for the children, something that springs ‘naturally’ from women’s supposedly traditional behaviors” (Sandilands 1993, 47). Yet it is one that feminist critics say sets up an inherently contradictory message that empowers women as the natural saviors of the environment while simultaneously reinforcing gendered stereotypes about unpaid domestic labor (Ray 2011; Sandilands 1993; Smith 2010). As Sandilands (1993) convincingly argues, when green consumption promotes earth-friendly products or practices, they tend to mean more labor for women: household cleaners that are not as effective as their more toxic counterparts, cloth diapers that have to be laundered, homemade organic baby food that needs to be prepared from scratch. The added labor of this green “third shift” serves to make women even more removed from the public sphere by requiring them to spend more time in the domestic one while leaving no trace that they were ever there to begin with.

In this way, the pressures women face to be intensive green mothers, not just intensive mothers, represent a ratcheting up of these expectations and demands. It puts green mothers in a particularly difficult double bind. On the one hand, in their capacity as women they are appealed to as natural environmental stewards, who by virtue of their gender, have an intrinsic, biologically encoded sense of obligation to protect the environment (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011). On the other hand, they are roundly criticized for exacerbating environmental problems by reproducing (thereby adding to their carbon footprint) and encouraged to rectify this damage by becoming better, environmentally conscious consumers (Ray 2011). Yet this green consumption represents a form of entrapment and by consuming differently, but not less, green mothers do little to alleviate environmental problems or to loosen the binds that tie them to the dominant mothering discourse.

**Brand as expert**

Finally, this sample of green advertising messages targeted at expectant mothers emphasized the role played by expert systems (Giddens 1990). In keeping with other media messages that promote the discourse of intensive mothering, green advertising reinforces the idea that women are reliant on outside sources for knowledge, advice and expertise. Their own instincts and intuition are insufficient to protect their children from the risks that threaten them every day. But unlike other messages promoting this discourse, the experts in green advertising frames tend to be the brand itself. Rather than resting in the medical or scientific establishment, the authority for claims about managing and avoiding environmental risks rests with the corporate source of green advertising.

Analysis of the texts revealed this brand-as-authority theme in several ways. First, many of the ads incorporated a logo or emblem touting specific environmental claims. The claims ranged in credibility and meaning. Some referenced vague, unenforceable
claims, such as gDiapers’ claims to be “earth-friendly” or Aveeno Baby’s claim that its sunblock contained “Active Naturals.” Other brands touted more specific scientifically informed benefits, such as Piyo Piyo’s claims that its baby food processor was BPA-free or Seventh Generation’s claim that its Free & Clear diapers are free of chlorine processing and petroleum-based lotions. Across the continuum, however, rarely were scientific agencies or real medical associations referenced to validate the claims. Instead, the source of authority rested with the advertising, or more specifically, the brand name.

Second, in contrast to the missing or truncated mother, the brand logo or package was front and center in these green advertising texts. Although the majority of green advertising texts did not include a mother in the frame, all of them incorporated a brand name, an image of the product packaging, and in the case of bottles, pictorial directions on how to assemble and use the product. If content is king, then the product and brand name reign in these ads. For those ads that did incorporate the body of the mother, the brand name, logo and packaging still dominated. For example, the previously mentioned ad for Mustela anti-stretch mark cream includes the brand name in the lower right corner, above which are positioned eight different packages of Mustela creams. While there is no room in the ad for the mother’s head, there is ample room to depict the multiple forms of packaging and product shapes and sizes.

This pattern reflects broader trends in mothering identities in which consumption becomes a primary means through which the identity of mother is anticipated, adopted and adjusted (Carrigan and Szmigin 2006; Cook 2009; Halkier 2001; Thompson 1996). From the perspective of maternal risk and everyday anxiety, consumption is seen as playing an instrumental role. If consumers are presented with the “right” information about how to mitigate environmental threats, then they will make the “right” consumption choices (Halkier 2001, 2004). The source of knowledge about what is right increasingly rests with marketers (Boström and Klintman 2009; Halkier 2001).

Although the preponderance of green advertising in this sample promoted a discourse of intensive, green motherhood that made the child the subject, the brand the expert and the mother invisible, it is important to note that not every advertisement conformed to these patterns. There were some clear exceptions. For example, one advertisement for gDiapers (part disposable, part reusable) depicts a father bending down, helping his toddler balance on her knees. This ad is notable for several reasons. First, the ad associates the father with a product and a caregiving routine (diapering and toileting) that are usually associated with mothers. Second, the father appears to be non-white and has tattoos down both forearms. He is engaging with his child (who we are to assume is a girl based on her pink, floral-patterned diaper cover) with confidence and the giggling child seems blissfully happy and at ease. This image suggests a mothering/parenting discourse that runs counter to what critics have called the hegemonic discourse of intensive mothering and in so doing represents a deviancy discourse (Arendell 1999). But it also serves to reinforce the dominant discourse of intensive green mothering that promotes the child and the brand as subjects and experts at the expense of the mother. The fact that this deviancy discourse stands out as atypical and “deviant” underscores how normalized the intensive green mothering discourse is and how uncritical we are of it as consumers. Only when presented with an ad that challenges the accepted norms and established identities of the intensive, green mother do we realize how ubiquitous and powerful the discourse is. From the more critical perspective of late modernity, we could also interpret this
outlier image as a simulacrum (Beaudrillard 1994/1981), an image without referent created solely to persuade and sell the product. The image of the father here has no substance, no relationship to the historical and morally preferred definition of motherhood. Instead, it is used to dazzle the reader, to distract her from what it hides, that being the dominant labor-intensive, child-focused view of motherhood.

Discussion and implications

Although late modernity implies the freedom to choose an identity and that the self is a fluid and constantly changing project, the discourse of intensive mothering, especially as promoted by green motherhood, suggests the freedom is a false one. Although women may choose what kind of mother to be, mass media messages, advertising in particular, promote a singular kind of mothering project. The only legitimate identity for contemporary mothers is one that sacrifices the self for the child. This is a particularly white, middle-class image of motherhood but one that dominates mass media such that any other form represents a deviancy discourse (Arendell 1999, 2000; Douglas and Michaels 2004). It might be fruitful to explore how alternative forms of motherhood (single mothers, poor mothers and less-educated mothers) engage with notions of environmentally responsible motherhood. How do mothers with less economic and social capital understand their “green” obligations? In what ways do they adhere to or subvert these expectations? In the case of fathers, how do they navigate their roles as involved parents given the stigma that comes with such choices? Past research has shown consumption plays a vital role (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013) and it would be useful to understand how green consumption and green advertising are involved.

Adhering to the intensive mothering identity requires careful adherence to the wisdom and knowledge of experts, which are increasingly being represented by marketers and brands rather than medical or scientific experts. Mothers are advised that their own intuition is insufficient. They must rely on a storehouse of products and services that can only be acquired through the marketplace. From bottles and breast pumps to shopping cart covers and car window shades, the list of items new mothers must acquire is staggering. Some commercial websites offer pre-filled registries or new parent checklists, with as many as 139 items on them (BuyBuyBaby.com, Giggle.com and Toysrus.com). It is only by ticking off these items on the list that mothers acquire security and reassurance that their baby will be safe from risk. The advertisements in this study reflect this enforced reliance on products and brand names rather than maternal instinct in risk avoidance. Not all brand names carry the same cultural force or credibility and future research should examine which brands are more believably associated with the green mothering discourse and how mothers themselves evaluate and incorporate these brands and their authority into their roles as mothers.

Not only is innate maternal know-how relegated to the side, the mother herself is also positioned at a remove. The advertisements analyzed in this study rarely if ever included an image of the mother; those few that did only showed partial bodies or averted eyes. In her place, the baby is put front and center. Clean, well dressed, seemingly happy and serene babies dominate the advertisements. The implication is that by deferring her judgment to the marketer’s superior knowledge and buying the advertised product, a mother can improve her chances that her baby will also be as safe and blissful as those in the ads. The advertising messages suggest that by sacrificing her own agency, by removing herself from the frame, women can exchange their autonomy
for a healthy, picture-perfect baby. An expectant mother can trade away the potential risks and threats that might plague her unborn child in late modernity for the small price of her own subjectivity and authority.

Conclusion
By eliminating the mother from the picture and establishing the child and the commodity as central, green motherhood sets ups a double bind for mothers. On the one hand, intensive mothering discourse promotes a particular ideal of motherhood, one that is self-sacrificing, altruistic, child-centered and relegated to the domestic sphere. It heralds mothers’ work as morally superior and sanctions as deviant those who adopt different approaches. At the same time, mothers are encouraged to enact their maternal identities and fulfill their mothering responsibilities by relinquishing authority to outside experts and buying the kinds of products and services that support intensive mothering (cloth diapers, educational toys and baby slings) and are ecologically friendly. The discourse of green motherhood in particular exhorts mothers to be noble consumers and shop their way to a healthier planet. On the other hand, though, mothers are roundly criticized for being the source of environmental degradation. By reproducing (children put additional strain on already over-extended natural resources) and consuming (since the dominant green mothering discourse is one that promotes consuming differently, not consuming less), mothers are the most egregious of environmental sinners. To compensate for these environmental sins, mothers are encouraged to adopt practices and product choices that add labor and cost to the task of parenting.

This dominant mothering discourse sets mothers up to fail from the start. By adding the aspect of green mothering, I would also argue that it sets mothers up to disappear. Green advertising, by making the child the subject and the brand the expert, moves the mother outside the frame. Indeed, emphasis on environmental neutrality leaves her with no other role but to minimize or negate her environmental footprint, and consequently her entire existence. She strives to exist as the ideal (earth)mother – deferring to others’ expertise, sacrificing her subjectivity for her child’s, reducing her impact to a whisper – while knowing that to do so threatens her very existence as a rational, agentic individual. In a Foucauldian sense, she is complicit in her own subjugation. It is a particular form of domination, one that mothers are willing to engage in. In defense of their children’s present and their ecological inheritance, mothers self-regulate and silence themselves, colluding in their own disappearing but under the assumption that they are enacting a form of mothering that is morally superior, socially desirable and beyond reproach.

References


Green, Alan. 2009. “5 Foods Every Woman Should Eat Organic.” *Glamour*, April, 144–150.


