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### **‘You're Never Going to Wear a Bikini Again, Just Deal with It:’ The Meaning of Motherhood in Exercise Infomercials**

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**Abstract:** Exercise and feminism have an ideologically ambivalent relationship. Exercise often has been seen as an attempt to meet an unrealistic, patriarchy-based definition of feminine beauty. Alternatively, the quest for fitness can be viewed as a means to self-empowerment or a necessary component of good health. This paper examines how motherhood--an identity uniquely linked to women--is presented in exercise infomercials. Using a sample of 20 exercise infomercials, I first identify how they establish a conflict between valorized elements of motherhood that stress a nurturance role and shunned elements that revolve around alterations to the body caused by pregnancy. Second, I underscore how exercise infomercials frame exercise as an empowering, transformative action to control the post-pregnancy body, but in reality actually reify women's traditional gender roles and values. They do so in part by ratifying a narrow and unrealistic standard for attractiveness. In the conclusion, I address how exercise infomercials reject mind-body dualism but, in the process, support consumerism cycles that emphasize the body as an ongoing project.

**Keywords:** exercise, motherhood, pregnancy, gender stereotypes

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**‘You’re Never Going to Wear a Bikini  
Again, Just Deal with It:’  
The Meaning of Motherhood in Exercise  
Infomercials**

‘I had a beautiful baby boy, and it was a great gift. But I was left with an enormous amount of weight.... Certainly after you have children your life doesn't get any less hectic....From a physical standpoint, I am strong and fit and healthy, but more importantly, I feel on the outside who I've always been on the inside. I'm comfortable in my skin, I'm confident with who I am. The *Spinning Program* transformed my life and delivered me into the body that I was meant to always be in.’

--Kris Rondeau, who lost 106 pounds, is a client profiled on the *Spinning Program* infomercial.

The above quote highlights two important influences on how women think about their bodies. The first influence is the culturally constructed concept of motherhood, valorized as a goal to which most, if not all, women should aspire (Morell, 1994). For example, although it is possible to debate where in the life cycle it is most appropriate to become a mother, the essential value of motherhood is rarely challenged (Perrier, 2013). In the quote, Kris Rondeau defines a child as a ‘beautiful...great gift.’ At the same time, she sees motherhood as a burden associated with an ‘enormous’ weight gain and ‘hectic’ lifestyle. As socially constructed, mothers doing motherhood are expected to selflessly give to their children, even at the expense of their own well-being (Bailey, 1999; Marshall, 1991). The failure to reproduce is stigmatized as a non-normative identity for women (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Shapiro, 2014). In the

present research, I explore how the conflict between the benefits and costs of motherhood is framed for women by using a novel but potentially rich data source: exercise infomercials aimed predominantly at a woman demographic.

Motherhood puts women's two major socially constructed roles (mother and sex object) into conflict. Whereas motherhood boosts a woman's performance of femininity by emphasizing her reproductive and nurturance capacity, it hinders her ability to conform to a strict standard of beauty framed as thinness and lean muscularity (Harrison, 2000). Motherhood places a significant demand on women's time for childrearing duties. For example, in a qualitative analysis of employed mothers in Sweden (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001), one theme that emerged was women's struggle to manage their time effectively to meet the needs of their children while also juggling workplace demands. A lack of free time also makes it more difficult to engage in body disciplining routines such as exercise and beauty treatments. Pregnancy has an effect on the body in the form of stretch marks, weight gain or redistribution, and abdominal muscle weakness (e.g., Jenkin and Tiggemann, 1997).

A second influence on how women think about their bodies is the strong relationship people perceive between their physical bodies and selfhood (Battersby, 1993; Lawton, 1998). That is, they reject the notion of mind-body dualism. Although the body is the physical locus of the person, it is not synecdoche for identity. It is possible to ask, ‘What is the relationship between a woman's phenomenological experience of identity and what she feels her appearance says about her?’ In the quote above, Kris Rondeau felt that her pre-*Spinning Program* body was not the one she was ‘meant to always be in.’ Her body-

identity relationship was dissonant and therefore distressing. Given societal pressures on women to appear young, fit, and toned (Markula, 1995) it is possible that the effects of pregnancy cause women to experience a disassociation between an inner identity and outward appearance.

I consider how infomercials frame exercise as the solution to women's problems derived from dealing with a post-pregnancy body. For example, according to the respondent in the quote above, exercise--in this case, the *Spinning Program*--provided a means to increase the correspondence between her experience of her body and her sense of identity. I also examine how exercise infomercials ratify feminine gender stereotypes and an unrealistic standard of attractiveness in the process of framing exercise in terms of pro-feminist empowerment.

In the present research, I used the cultural constructions of motherhood and fitness to explore how women experience the embodied self. I chose to examine these ideas using infomercials geared toward marketing workout videos and fitness equipment for three reasons. First, with the explosive growth of cable and satellite channels, infomercials represent a pervasive share of what appears on television (e.g., Donthu and Gilliland, 1996). Thus, they have a potentially significant, but largely unexamined, influence shaping the nature of the preferred female body. Second, the format of infomercials includes testimonials from successful consumers of the product. While I recognize that these testimonials are mediated by the gatekeeper abilities of the infomercial producers, they still provide insight into how consumers think about their embodied selves. At the very least, they model a set of attitudes for women and men who consume the infomercial. Third, an initial, but informal, analysis suggested that women are disproportionately

represented as spokespersons for and consumers of fitness products on fitness infomercials. Thus, infomercials represented yet another potential, but unexplored, influence on women's dissatisfaction with their bodies.

### **Danger! The Blessings of Motherhood Ahead**

There are strong societal norms about the importance of having children (Morell, 1994; Ory, 1978) despite utilitarian considerations--such as financial costs--that would argue against it (Schoen, Kim, Nathanson, Fields, and Astone, 1997). Women often cite happiness and a sense of well-being as the motivations to have children (van Balen and Trimbos-Kemper, 1995). Mothers and women who are trying to conceive will voice their desire to have children, even when they cannot justify or even explain their motivations (Grewal and Urschel, 1994). Although people acknowledge the emotional and financial costs of parenting (e.g., Gerson, Berman, and Morris, 1991), in discussing the findings from her study of the voluntarily childless, Park (2005, 397) questioned whether 'there exist any socially acceptable motives for choosing childlessness.'

Callan (1985) and Mueller and Yoder (1997) demonstrated the existence of pro-parenthood stereotypes which associate being a parent with positive traits like emotional maturity and self-fulfillment and associate voluntary childless with negative traits like selfishness and individualism. The near-universal positive view of motherhood, which has been expanded to the point of creating parent-focused public policies, such as parental leaves and childcare services, has also been criticized for propagating a 'pronatalist' bias (e.g., Burkett, 2000; Heitlinger, 1991) which can, for example, frame having children as a patriotic act (e.g., Brown and Ferree, 2005). The urge to parent is sufficiently strong that

gay men will often go to great length and expense to acquire the opportunity to nurture children (Murphy, 2013).

Despite the 'near-hegemonic appeal' (Stanworth, 1990, 297) of motherhood, both mothers and non-mothers view motherhood as a causal variable with a detrimental effect on their abilities to achieve and maintain an ideal body. In interviews with new mothers, Bailey (2001) identified sensuality and shape as two elements of the gendered body important to women who had been pregnant. Further, she found that women reported that motherhood interfered with their ability to see themselves in sexual terms. Veevers (1980) reported that childless women were concerned about the physical consequences of childbirth--including a decrease in sexual desirability--that discouraged them from wanting children. She also noted that even women who did not personally view pregnancy as a stigma felt that other people, especially men, might view it as such (e.g., Draper, 2003; Taylor and Langer, 1977). From this perspective, then, exercise after pregnancy can be conceptualized as a means of resolving the socially constructed mutual exclusivity of women's roles as sex versus maternal object.

Dworkin and Wachs (2004) suggested that mass media frame pregnancy as 'shameful' for women's bodies and provide physical fitness as an individual-level pro-feminist solution. Women are sensitive to their postpartum bodies when they return to paid labor (Fox and Neiterman, 2015) and adopting strategies related to self-kindness can provide psychological benefit (Woekel and Ebbeck, 2013). Rather than shame, I adopt 'sacrifice' as an underlying construct to guide my analysis. I suggest that, as culturally constructed, becoming pregnant is associated with a requisite acceptance of inevitable damage to the youthful body.

Moreover, women also recognize and accept that motherhood will reduce their time and energy available to work on the body as a project (Brumberg, 1977). These sacrifices are justified by the unchallenged assumption that children bring joy and fulfillment to a woman's life and allow her to achieve a transformative identity unattainable by any other means.

Although it is generally agreed that motherhood represents an important transition for women, there is some disagreement regarding the extent to which motherhood changes identity. Some authors suggest that motherhood creates a permanent change in a woman's identity. Draper (2003) asserted that even before the baby is born, the state of pregnancy 'challenges the woman's concept of self, as the developing baby, contained deep within her body, upsets her understanding of where she begins and where she ends' (751). From this perspective, becoming a mother leads to a fundamental change in character because the child will always be with the mother, as a part of her life, even if adult relationships may come and go. Books about pregnancy frame having children as a rite of passage that requires the mother-to-be to put aside her own interests in favor of the welfare of the child, both before and after the baby is born (Marshall, 1991).

In contrast, Bailey (1999, 2001) found that pregnancy was not seen as producing a fundamental change in character. Rather, becoming a mother revealed different aspects of personality, but the core personality itself did not change. Just as a prism alters light by refracting—but not eliminating—it, pregnancy alters the relative importance of aspects of the self, but those elements do not disappear permanently. Instead, for a period of time, being pregnant allows a woman to put aside certain aspects of her identity. It is interesting that mothers

identify the importance of motherhood as a means to self-fulfillment, whereas the voluntarily childless cite the ability to achieve self-fulfillment as a reason *not* to have children (Houseknecht, 1987; Morell, 1994).

### **Health, Fitness, and Beauty: Competing Motives for Exercise**

Although exercise can be viewed as a means by which women increase their strength and muscularity, it can also be seen as a way in which women discipline their bodies to conform to unrealistic standards of thinness and beauty. As such, physical fitness and feminism have an ambivalent relationship (Collins, 2002). Often, feminist scholarship has focused on ways mass media ratify unrealistic standards of beauty that undermine women's self-esteem and self-confidence. Sociologists and feminist scholars have identified a wide range of contexts where women experience pressure to conform to unrealistic standards, including the consumption of skin lightening products (Glenn, 2008), elective cosmetic surgery (Gimlin, 2000), and aerobic exercising (Collins, 2002; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 2001). Researchers (e.g., Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Groesz, Levine, and Murnen, 2002; Hamilton, Mintz, and Kashubeck-West, 2007; Want, Vickers, and Amos, 2009; Wilcox and Laird, 2000) have documented the unhealthy psychological sequelae that derive from media presentations of unrealistic standards of beauty, a tendency that is probably exacerbated by a tendency to engage in social comparison with celebrities (Chae, 2014). Recent research has shown that exercise DVDs use slim models clad in revealing attire (Cardinal, Rogers, Kuo, Locklear, Comfort, and Cardinal, 2015).

On the other hand, feminist scholars have also proposed that the fit female body can challenge conventional representations

of women by illustrating a model of femininity that includes strength, muscular definition, or a more imposing physique. For example, Kagan and Morse (1988, 167) wrote, 'Searching for self-esteem through physical exercise is not a misguided effort...exercise...can indeed promote self-esteem in a powerful, coordinated body.' By this perspective, then, women who engage in body work can be seen as challenging conventional views of femininity.

Whereas sociologists and gender scholars have identified detrimental social and psychological consequences of the trek toward beauty and fitness, another group of scholars has focused on the physical, psychological, and social benefits that accrue to those who engage in body work. Health and sport scientists have promoted regular exercise as source of physical health, through lowered blood pressure and cholesterol and a reduced chance of heart disease or diabetes (e.g., Fontaine and Barofsky, 2001; Pi-Sunyer, 1999). The value of body work is often presented in tandem with demographic information that approximately two-thirds of adults in the United States are classified as overweight or obese (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, McDowell, Tabak, and Flegal, 2006), with about 400,000 deaths per year attributed to obesity (Sturm, 2002). Similar patterns are beginning to emerge in lower-income and transitional countries, as well (Popkin and Doak, 1998). In addition to health benefits, in a meta-analytic review, Blaine, Rodman, and Newman (2007) showed that weight loss is associated with an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in depression. From this health perspective, obesity is a national epidemic and a media focus on physical fitness is a valuable public service.

The present paper examined how fitness infomercials valorize an exercise system as the tool required to resolve the

tension between what are construed as incompatible motives of selfless motherhood and physical fitness. Unlike much of the literature on women and beauty I do not assume that the desire to exercise represents a *de facto* acceptance of a patriarchal conceptualization of beauty. At the same time, I also recognize that advocating exercise because of the health benefits (regardless of how medically justified) will influence the way in which people commodify their own and others' bodies.

### **Infomercials, Motherhood, and Identity**

Analyses of motherhood and exercise are often conducted from a common assumption: There is a causal relationship between the body and identity. As noted by Bailey (1999) in her study of mothers, the bodily changes women went through were seen as physical indicators of inner changes to the self. The idea that exercise and fitness are an expression of identity (Cole and Hribar, 1995) encourages the idea that altering the body will lead to subsequent changes in the self and self-concept. In speculating why weight loss is associated with increased self-esteem, Blaine et al. (2007) suggested the effect was due to the extent to which weight loss 'prompts us to internalize the more positive body-related appraisals we imagine others have of us' (75).

As noted by Fullagar (2002), the health movement has shifted the meaning of exercise from becoming physically fit to a means of self-expression. Lupton (1999) suggested that school exercise programs were being presented in terms of identity maintenance, ie, as means of building self-esteem, rather than purely in terms of the physical effects of exercise

Infomercials are an important tool for reaching the market for health and fitness products. Estimates (e.g., Donthu and Gilliland, 1996) place the revenues

generated by infomercials at over \$1 billion annually. Blaine and McElroy (2002) found that 53% of infomercials focused on improving physical appearance through body modifications such as dieting, exercise, cosmetics, or vitamin supplements. Another study (Elliott and Lockard, 1996) reported that 16% of infomercials marketed exercise equipment.

Infomercials are usually 27 minutes long and contain two distinct components (Hope and Johnson, 2004). In the direct response segment, detailed purchasing information is provided. The second component, the program segment, which is central to my argument, is a faux documentary that examines the 'true-life success stories' of people who have benefited from the product. I examined the persuasive messages contained in the program segments, especially with regard to how mothers negotiated between motherhood and the achievement of an idealized standard of feminine beauty as exemplified by Western images of actresses and fashion models.

A sensitizing concept can be viewed as a reference frame used by a researcher to interpret empirical data (Bowen, 2006). In my content analysis, I used the concept of sacrifice as a sensitizing concept to interpret women's statements regarding motherhood. I also used the concept of mind-body dualism to discuss how women described their experience of motherhood in terms of the consequences it had on their bodies. I considered the emotional states that women report in response to these bodily changes. Finally, I examined the way in which women present exercise as the cure for the ills to their bodies and minds created by motherhood.

### **METHOD**

Infomercials were obtained on Youtube by pairing the term 'infomercial' with the terms 'fitness' and 'exercise.'

Because of the huge number of potential infomercials available, I narrowed my search by using several criteria. Given the popularity of products like *P90X* and *Insanity* (Martin, 2011), I chose to emphasize workout systems developed by Beachbody. As such, I included infomercials for *Hip Hop Abs*, *Insanity*, *Slim in 6*, *Turbo Jam*, *10 Minute Trainer*, *ChaLEAN Extreme*, and *P90X*. To try to provide for a balanced perspective, I also included less popular products from other companies such as the *P.I.N.K. Method* and the *Spinning Program*. Because I was interested in exploring the representation of motherhood in infomercials, it did not make sense to include infomercials that did not touch on motherhood. Thus, workouts that appeared heavily geared toward men, such as *Body Beast*, where the emphasis was on building bulk, were not included. Only infomercials that featured exercise as a major component were included in the final data set. As such, I did not include infomercials where the focus was on dieting alone rather than exercise.

The full set of exercise infomercials I examined were: the *Spinning Program*, the *P.I.N.K. Method*, *Zumba*, the *Firm Wave*, *Hip Hop Abs*, the *Ab Coaster*, *Insanity*, *Slim in 6*, *Turbo Jam*, *10 Minute Trainer*, *ChaLEAN Extreme*, the *Air Climber*, the *Total Gym*, *Leg Magic Plus*, *Malibu Pilates*, *P90X*, and the *Ab Circle Pro*.

Given that the final data set could be viewed as a convenience sample, it is important to refrain from overgeneralizing the results. However, it is important to recognize that I made an effort to include a wide range of types of exercise products in the final data set. As a result, while not representative from the perspective of sampling theory, the wide sample of videos did possess at least a face valid high degree of representativeness.

I used an analytic inductive process (Miles and Huberman, 1984) to examine the contents of my sample of exercise infomercials. I used the concepts of maternal sacrifice and mind-body dualism as sensitizing concepts. In the first flow of data, I identified emergent themes in the customers' comments. In the second flow, I organized themes around the sensitizing concepts. I determined the extent to which comments addressed issues regarding beliefs about motherhood and femininity, beliefs about the benefits of exercise, and the degree to which exercise was attributed with the ability to change the consumer's identity. In the final flow, I examined the data again in order to verify my conclusions.

## RESULTS

### The Motherhood Dilemma

Motherhood was valorized in every infomercial I examined. A client in the *Spinning Program* infomercial stated, 'I'm really happy to be a mom. I've always wanted to be a mom. I've always wanted a little girl.' Part of the valorization consisted of mothers recognizing their own self-sacrifice. For example in talking about the *P.I.N.K. Method*, Jennifer Perkins defined motherhood as, 'you're giving, giving, and I love that. I wouldn't trade that for anything. But you forget about yourself....' A *Zumba* client--Chrissy P.--said, 'I was someone who always does--I do everything for my family. I love my family more than anything in the world.'

Although women expressed great joy that they had children, they also lamented the effects pregnancy and raising children had on their bodies. One of the bluntest statements came from Audra, on the *Zumba* infomercial. She said, 'I love my baby, but I do not like what she did to my body.' The adversarial relationship between motherhood and beauty, manifested in the form of weight gain, was presented as a

near universal consequence of pregnancy. In the *Firm Wave* infomercial, Emily Walsh, described as a Master Instructor/Firm gym owner, said, 'Like many of you, when I had kids, I put on weight....' Barbara Lindquist, in representing the *Total Gym*, stated, 'Since I've had the twins, as all women know, you put on your weight for the twins and all that weight is not gone when you give birth to them.' At one point in the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, the announcer said, 'No one struggles with their weight like new moms, so we put Shaun's program to the ultimate test with this group of new moms.' This is a rather bleak message for women with children. It implies that new mothers--as the ultimate test of a fitness system's potential benefit--have a harder time losing weight than any other comparison group in the world.

Infomercials present women who assume that their weight gain is permanent. In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, a woman said, 'I was enormous whenever I had my daughter...I gained like 44 pounds....I just kind of thought this is how I'm going to be forever...you're never going to wear a bikini again, just deal with it. It's just how it is.' A woman on the *Ab Coaster* infomercial bluntly said, 'After I had my son, I thought: This is it, you know. I'm stuck. I didn't go back to normal.' Alysia M., described as 40 years old, was shown in profile with an extremely large pregnant belly. In expressing her satisfaction with the *Insanity* workout, she stated, 'After having my twins, I never thought my stomach would be so taut.' The contrast between her pregnant body and her post-*Insanity* body is striking but her comment 'never thought' suggests that women believe the alterations to the body through pregnancy are permanent.

Infomercial clients also expressed their sacrifice in terms of the emotional

consequences of weight gain: sadness and self-consciousness. A woman on the first *Slim in 6* infomercial stated, 'With, you know, each pregnancy, I gained a little bit more, and then never lost it. Three kids in five years...It was a very sad time. Nothing made me happy.' Julie K., a mother of seven featured on the *Zumba* infomercial, said, 'After having seven kids, I was always very self-conscious about my midsection.'

Women nicknamed the weight they gained. In the infomercial for the *Firm Wave*, Karen Kaskal, identified as a mother of three, said, 'I had that mom pouch that everyone talks about....' *Turbo Jam* celebrity instructor Chalene referred to the 'dreaded pooch area.' Julie K., in the *Zumba* infomercial, referenced her 'post pregnancy pooch.' In the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial, Jan R. portrayed herself as having a 'busy mom figure' characterized by a 'kind of pear shaped body.'

The apparent antithetical nature of sexuality and motherhood was embedded in clients' surprise that they could be a mother and yet attractive. On the second *Slim in 6* infomercial, celebrity host Julie Moran said, 'I'm in better shape now than before I had my kids.' In the infomercial for *ChaLEAN Extreme*, Julie M. stated, 'A woman came up to me and said, 'I cannot believe you have a baby that old. How do you look like that?''

Clients described their post-pregnancy weight gain as a loss of control. For example, Lisa from the *Air Climber* infomercial stated, 'I felt like my weight was going out of control, especially after having a baby.' A respondent from the *Spinning Program* stated, '...when I got pregnant the second time, I thought to myself: If I add on another 60 pounds, I will be out of control....'

In addition to the deleterious effects on the body caused by pregnancy, motherhood--the inevitable consequence of

pregnancy--is portrayed as robbing women of the time they need to perform routine disciplinary body maintenance. Women recognized that the time constraint that motherhood puts on women is a disincentive to have children (e.g., McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, and Tichenor, 2008). Tanya, in the *10 Minute Trainer* stated, 'It's insane being a mom...for the average person, a busy mom, they don't have that kind of time. They need something...fast and...effective.'

Having created a perspective on pregnancy and motherhood that leaves women with the expectation that their weight will be forever beyond their ability to manage, infomercials then provide a cure: Buy the fitness product advertised as an easy and effective solution to your problems. In the first *Slim in 6* infomercial, Julie Moran said that in 'just six short weeks I got my body back' after being pregnant.

Because motherhood is presented as a demanding, but critical, job, giving less than one's all could be perceived as being a bad mother. To combat the idea that exercising is a self-indulgence that keeps mothers from properly attending to their children, infomercials frame exercise as a form of self-care that, ultimately, makes a woman a better mother. Jan R. in the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial referred to exercise as 'a gift for yourself.' In talking about the *P.I.N.K. Method*, Jennifer Perkins said, 'I love my family...my girls...my husband, but I needed to do something to take care of myself.' She added, '*P.I.N.K.* helped me find me again.' While talking, she became teary and emotional. In the *Total Gym* infomercial, exercise and motherhood exist in a complementary balance through Barbara Lindquist, identified as a world champion tri-athlete. She stated that 'as a mother I want to be the best mother I can, and I've really realized

that to be a best mother I have to be a fit mother....I'm not training to be an elite athlete anymore. I'm training for life. I'm training to be the best mom that I can.' Similarly, in the *Leg Magic Plus* infomercial, Gloria, a grandmother 71 years of age, was presented as wanting to stay in shape in order to be able to play with her grandchildren.

The shame associated with failing to reach the socially constructed body ideal was intensified in some women who felt as if their weight interfered with their ability to perform the mother role. In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, Carol S. stated, 'I didn't play with my daughter...she wanted to get up and run around and play, and I just didn't feel good enough to get up and do it....' Ironically, although children are seen as the cause of weight gain, they can also become ultimately credited as the solution to weight gain. Carol S. attributed her weight loss to her daughter. She said, 'She asked me to make her a promise that I would lose weight and get healthy. I lost 80 pounds.'

Treating 'sexy' as an adjective for 'mom' suggests that under normal conditions, moms are not sexy. But infomercials position their exercise products as a means to create a linkage between the two, normally disjoint, concepts. A similar linguistic modification occurs with how women talk about jeans in exercise infomercials. Jeans are often portrayed as a casual but sexy form of attire. But when used to modify the meaning of jeans, 'mom' robs jeans of their connotative sex appeal. A participant in the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial described her weight loss as, 'No more 'mom' jeans for me.' The importance of clothing in defining the antagonistic relationship between sexuality and motherhood was illustrated by a client on the first *Slim in 6* infomercial who viewed maternity clothing

as a stigma. She stated, 'I was so big, I was so heavy, the only clothes that I could find that looked good on me were in the maternity section. And I was not pregnant...I'm proud of what I look like now in a bikini.'

### **An Unworkable Standard**

Whereas the post-pregnancy body is presented as anathema, the valued body in exercise infomercials is slim but muscular and shapely but firm (Markula, 1995). In the *Spinning Program* infomercial, the announcer defined a 'spinning body' as possessing an 'unmistakable look,' which can be characterized as 'lean and defined' with 'sleek, sexy legs,' a 'sculpted backside,' 'firm midsection,' and a 'toned upper body.' Similarly, the first *Slim in 6* infomercial promised that the system would reveal the 'long, lean, sexy body you've always dreamed of.' Carroll Krieff—creator of the *Malibu Pilates* chair—noted that her product works on 'areas that women care about the most. That would be the thighs, the hips, and the buns.' In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, a woman said about her weight loss transformation: 'I'm not a blob anymore. I'm finally somebody who actually has a waist.' The value placed on long, lean, and sexy makes people define alternative bodies as 'blobs,' a rather harsh self-characterization.

In infomercials, consumers are classified as 'before' and 'after' numbers: pre- and post-exercise weight and dress (or jeans) size. For example, in the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial, a 49 year old woman stepped from a dressing room, yelled, 'Size 4' and struck a muscle builder pose. The total pounds or inches lost are often splashed on the screen next to before and after pictures.

### **Exercise and the Reinforcement of Gendered Presentations**

Using exercise to take control of the

body after pregnancy could be viewed as a form of proactive empowerment. Some authors (e.g., Collins, 2002; Kagan and Morse, 1998) have suggested that exercise can be conceptualized as a form of empowerment-seeking that serves to dismantle, rather than reinforce, gender stereotypes. In practice, however, an empowerment perspective is nullified by the justifications women in exercise infomercials present for why they want to get fit. Most of the motives reify the notion that a woman's value stems from her physical appearance and the belief that women are consumed by being married and valued by a husband.

Pervasive stereotype reinforcement is illustrated by contrasting two customers of the *P90X* system. The significant age difference between Katie, 23, and Rod, 40, ratifies the notion that vigilance about appearance is a life-long obligation for women that begins at a very young age. Rod's profile featured pictures of him in military uniform. In explaining why he began the *P90X* regimen, he stated that he was 'probably in the worst shape of [his] life.' Having been a ranger and paratrooper, he lamented, 'Where did that discipline go?'

In contrast, Katie V. described her motivation for doing *P90X* as, 'I want to look good in my wedding dress. I don't want the dress to look better than me.' She also expressed assurance that doing *P90X* would not transform a woman into a body builder. 'I still looked feminine....So on my wedding day I felt empowered, and I felt like this is a day to celebrate...It's day 90, it's my wedding day, and I look great.' For Katie, empowerment took the form of conforming to two distinct forms of hegemonic oppression. The first was to adhere to one of the strongest cultural pressures operating on women: to become a wife. The second was to ratify a deeply

ingrained norm about physical appearance: to 'look great,' which took the form of slim muscularity.

Other women in infomercials explained their motives for exercise in terms of meeting their own marriage expectations. Tammy, a client on the second *Slim in 6* infomercial, said, 'A big highlight for me after doing the program was, um, I could wear my wedding ring. I hadn't worn it for years because it didn't fit. And my husband would ask, 'why don't you have your wedding ring on,' and I would make an excuse....So after I did the program and everything was big and all my clothes were falling off...I put it on and it slipped right on, and it was...a great day for me.' Rather than have the ring sized to fit, she chose to view her inability to wear her wedding ring as evidence of failed femininity. The message of the infomercial was that by exercise and weight reduction, she was able to reassert a proper femininity. For Kari, a client of the *Ab Circle Pro*, empowerment took the form of a favorable reflected appraisal from others. 'With my upcoming wedding it was very important for me to lose the weight and the inches because I wanted to have that 'wow' factor when I walked down the aisle.'

Men's opinions matter to the women who appear in infomercials. One important man in the lives of these women is a husband. Although women are sensitive to other women's level of physical attractiveness (Bleske-Rechek and Lighthall, 2010), within infomercials, acceptance through appearance was also manifested by being noticed by a spouse. Kristy Holman, of the *Firm Wave* infomercial, lost 41 pounds while her husband was in Iraq. 'When he got off the plane from Iraq, I blew him away. He picked me up and twirled me around and he just couldn't take his eyes off me. It was great.' Tanya, in the *10 Minute Trainer*

infomercial, said, 'My husband is so excited. Every day he sees me he's like, 'oh, my gosh, you look so beautiful,' and he's definitely loving what he sees.' Similarly in the second *Slim in 6* infomercial, one client said, 'My husband just can't seem to keep himself off of me...it's great having all the attention.' Lori, a client featured in the *ChaLEAN Extreme* infomercial said, 'My husband is just really loving the way I look.' Cindy's husband, also featured in the *ChaLEAN Extreme* infomercial, stated, 'It's been fantastic for our relationship.'

A theme that emerged in infomercials was a sense that weight gain represented a failure to meet a contractual obligation. By gaining weight, a woman has let down her husband. In the second *Hip Hop Abs* infomercial, Carol S. said, 'When I met my husband, I was a size 4...we get married and I instantly start gaining the weight. Within six months, I've already gained 60 pounds...I felt really bad about that...you want your husband to be attracted to you....' Although a husband represents an important other in a woman's life, infomercials suggest that women should derive validation of their own identities on the basis of random attention from men. For example, Kerry, 50, who was on the *10 Minute Trainer* infomercial said, 'I feel good about myself. And I get a lot of compliments and a lot of looks from gentlemen these days.' In the currency of the infomercial, the cat call becomes a badge of honor rather than a form of sexual harassment.

In contrast to an empowerment perspective that suggests exercise represents a way for women to challenge existing norms about and images of femininity (Kagan and Morse, 1988), infomercials present women as supportive of the *status quo*. Women in infomercials want to maintain their femininity and repeatedly stress that hormones prevent

women from developing muscles akin to men. Embedded in Katie V.'s assertion 'I still looked feminine' is the worry that the muscles exercise can produce will interfere with the performance of femininity (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

### CONCLUSION

Most of the infomercials I examined marketed an exercise product or program that would improve fitness, defined in terms of cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, or flexibility. The better programs included all three components, as well as providing sound advice on healthy eating. The infomercial stigma may create an impression that these exercise programs are 21st century versions of snake oils, but the better products emphasized hard work and daily commitment. Anyone who does a balanced workout of cardio, resistance, and flexibility training an hour a day for three months will show a significant change. It's exercise science, not magic.

But it is essential to recognize that exercise infomercials do more than market a fitness product; they frame fitness as a means to a variety of ends, many of which reflect psychological, rather than physiological, results, and, in the process, construct and advocate meanings for a woman's body. Pregnancy is portrayed as a necessary evil, a liability that damages a woman's body, but is mandatory to achieve the master status of mother. Motherhood is described as joyful self-sacrifice. These conflicted meanings portray women as ambivalent and confused about their own goals and identities as women.

Promised salvation from the deleterious effects of motherhood comes in the form of exercise. As valorized in infomercials, the benefits of exercise stem from its ability to give women a valued physical shape. This privileged physical shape, in turn, allows women to become consumers of new products--skinny jeans

and bikinis--that glorify their new slender body but ultimately act to further reinforce women's marginalized status. Fitness infomercials present exercise as a means to empowerment using appealing concepts like gaining control of one's life. In the process, fitness infomercials use feminist terminology to maintain the *status quo*. Rather than promote empowerment, exercise infomercials reinforced gender stereotypes of women as fat-obsessed, overworked mothers who fail to satisfy their husband's sexual interests by gaining weight.

It is important to recognize that the diametric opposition of the roles of mother and sexualized woman is a socially constructed dichotomy. It is only by the apotheosis of the young, slim, and muscular body that the pregnant--or heavy--body is viewed as antithetical to sexy. Given the essential role that sexual activity plays in the act of becoming pregnant, it is possible to imagine an alternative--better informed--cultural context where the pregnant body is viewed as sexually charged.

Infomercials illustrate a convoluted consumer cycle. Initially, weight serves as evidence that infomercial clients are guilty of excessive consumption in the form of eating and excessive slothfulness in the form of inadequate exercise. Fitness infomercials promise a new and better consumer cycle: Consumption of the infomercial's product will lead to weight loss, due, in part, to a restriction of consumption (that is, by eating less). The ultimate reward of this caloric restriction, however, is a new consumerism construed as a reward for losing weight: A new wardrobe, a new romantic relationship, or even a new life. Ironically, the consumer cycle is perpetuated in a way that resembles the unrestrained eating of a bulimic: binge then purge. Only now, instead of food, the object of excessive consumption is a

constellation of exercise products, such as workout videos, exercise equipment, comestibles such as protein powder, vitamins, and energy bars, and a new wardrobe. Whereas consumerism is often construed as a form of excess and gluttony, the message in infomercials is that by consuming the exercise program, one will become smaller, and slimmer, and therefore appear less gluttonous. The reward for restriction in one area is the liberation to consume in another area.

Although widely accepted that exercise has health benefits few would dispute, infomercials spend very little time describing those benefits. Only rarely was an effect like lowered blood pressure mentioned. Rather, infomercials promote exercise for its effect on physical appearance and its ability to influence mood and self-esteem. Exercise is presented as a cure for the ills of motherhood.

Infomercials repeat images of women holding up too-big-now jeans and feature testimonies of satisfied customers who state that through exercise and weight loss, they discovered a 'true self,' a 'real self,' or the 'self they were meant to be.' Although finding one's true self would seem to be the very definition of an empowering action, it is also possible to view this supposed quest as conforming to standards maintained by women in the discipline of other women's bodies (Li, Smith, Griskevicius, Cason, and Bryan, 2010) that could stem from their treatment as adolescents or teenagers (Lunde, Frisén, and Hwang, 2006). Further, as actualized by the fitness infomercial, this empowerment quest becomes a doctrine of conformity to patriarchal standards.

The emphasis on finding a true self through exercise positions the underlying philosophy of the exercise infomercial against mind-body dualism. Many of the clients featured in infomercials express a belief that by altering the body, an

individual can create a change in the mind, specifically in terms of greater self-confidence and enhanced mood. Exercise is elevated from a means of transforming the body to a process of self-discovery by reflexively recreating the self.

But the new self most often reifies a traditional image of women. A woman with children can use exercise to travel back in time to her pre-baby body. By slimming down, a married woman can rekindle the romance she had ten or twenty years earlier. An unmarried, unattached woman can finally catch the attention of a suitor and transition from singleton, to girlfriend, to wife. The paradoxical conclusion suggested by my analysis is that enlightenment comes by embracing the superficial. Change what you look like in order to conform to a mass media ideal and you will improve who you are. The search for meaning becomes reduced to a quest for visible abs.

Whereas it is easy for feminists to criticize infomercials and the products they hype for promoting a 'cult of thinness' (Hess-Biber, 2007), it may be more important to focus on their more covert messages. In the present research, I identified pronatalism as a value that would seem to uniquely benefit women. But as my analysis has demonstrated, within exercise infomercials, motherhood is used to promote and exploit anxieties women may have about their bodies. Pronatalism is reduced to a value used to sell exercise products by ratifying patriarchal views of women.

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