

Embodied Communication in Pregnancy Cravings: Socio-Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions of Mother–Fetus Interaction in Indonesia

Maximus Mujur^{1*} , Deddy Mulyana² , Susanne Dida³ , Johanes Cornelius Mose⁴ 

¹ Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, INDONESIA, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6570-7812>

² Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, INDONESIA, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5271-4568>

³ Faculty of Communication Sciences at Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, INDONESIA, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0611-5020>

⁴ Obstetrics and Gynecology, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, INDONESIA, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4401-428X>

*Corresponding Author: maximus23001@mail.unpad.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Cravings during pregnancy are often understood biomedically as a consequence of hormonal changes or nutritional deficiencies. However, within the Indonesian cultural context, cravings carry a much deeper meaning—they serve as a form of symbolic communication between the mother, the fetus, and the surrounding social environment. This study aims to understand pregnancy cravings as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing biological, psychological, spiritual, and cultural elements. A qualitative approach was conducted at Borromeus Hospital, Bandung (May–October 2024), involving 30 pregnant women in their second and third trimesters. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and cultural document reviews, then analyzed using grounded theory to identify emergent patterns of meaning. The results show that cravings represent a complex expression of the body and mind of pregnant women. Biologically, they relate to hormonal changes and energy requirements. Psychologically, cravings function as a channel for expressing emotions, anxieties, and affection toward the fetus. Spiritually, cravings are interpreted as an “inner calling” or a signal from the fetus’s soul that fosters a transcendental closeness to the Creator. Socially and culturally, cravings are manifested in rituals, myths, and family norms that strengthen community solidarity and affirm the father’s role in supporting the pregnant mother. By integrating the anthropological theories of the body (Csordas, Turner, Douglas), this study emphasizes that the pregnant body is not merely a biological entity but also a space of cultural experience. Cravings embody the communication between the mother’s and the fetus’s soul, expressed through sensations, symbols, and actions. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial for developing maternal health policies grounded in local values and integrating medical approaches with the cultural and spiritual wisdom of Indonesian society. The findings of this study demonstrate that pregnancy cravings function as a cultural arena where social values—such as empathy, mutual cooperation, and gender relations—are renegotiated within families and communities. By positioning the pregnant body as a locus of meaning-making rather than merely a biomedical object, this research contributes to the discourse on decolonizing knowledge about pregnancy from a Global South perspective. The study shows that cravings are a form of communication that generates social change through the formation of more participatory gender roles and more egalitarian family relationships.

Keywords: Cravings, Mother–Fetus Communication, Anthropology of The Body, Cultural Health, Spirituality, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy, across diverse cultures, is not solely a biological event but a profound social and spiritual experience imbued with cultural meaning. In Indonesia, the phenomenon of *ngidam*—intense cravings for specific foods or objects during pregnancy—is often interpreted as the first form of communication between the mother and her unborn child. These cravings are not merely physiological responses to nutritional needs or hormonal shifts; they hold symbolic meaning as a language of connection between the mother and the life growing inside her (Weingarten & Elston, 1990; Orloff & Hormes, 2014; Hill, Cairnduff, & McCance, 2016).

Ngidam embodies messages that deepen relational ties between the mother's body, the fetus, and the surrounding social environment. The pregnant body can be understood as a field of cultural experience in which meaning, values, and social identity are inscribed (Csordas, 1990). Thus, cravings are not merely biological reactions, but a form of embodied communication—communication expressed through bodily sensations, emotions, and symbols (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1969; Nash, 2015).

This study originates from the need to understand *ngidam* not simply as a medical symptom, but as a multidimensional communicative phenomenon encompassing biological, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects. A biomedical lens alone tends to reduce cravings to hormonal changes or nutrient deficiencies. Conversely, a holistic perspective recognizes that cravings reflect emotional needs, cultural expectations, and spiritual interpretations of pregnancy (Adam et al., 2017; Bowman, Arany, & Wolfgang, 2021; Czernek & Vogel, 2020; Blau et al., 2020; Smith, 2023).

Positioned within the fields of cultural analysis and social change, this research argues that cravings are not passive biological events, but cultural practices with symbolic power to shape social relations, gender roles, and spiritual meaning. In Indonesian communities, *ngidam* becomes a mechanism for reproducing values—ranging from *gotong royong* (collective care), expressions of familial responsibility, to the affirmation of maternal identity. Through the pregnant body, cultural values are enacted, negotiated, and transmitted to the next generation.

Thus, this study aims to understand cravings as a form of communication between mother and fetus within Indonesia's sociocultural and spiritual context. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Identify the meanings and forms of pregnancy cravings experienced by Indonesian women.
2. Explain the social, cultural, and spiritual functions of *ngidam*.
3. Develop a theoretical understanding of embodied communication between mother and fetus.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Biomedical Perspective on Pregnancy Cravings

From a biomedical perspective, pregnancy cravings are understood as a physiological response triggered by hormonal and metabolic changes during gestation. Fluctuations in estrogen and progesterone influence the hypothalamic centers that regulate appetite, altering sensory perception of taste and smell (Hill, Cairnduff, & McCance, 2016; Bowman, Arany, & Wolfgang, 2021). These changes explain why many pregnant women experience intense cravings for particular foods—often those high in carbohydrates or fats—to meet the increased energy requirements associated with pregnancy. Within this view, cravings are considered an adaptive biological mechanism that supports the nutritional needs of both mother and fetus.

At the molecular level, research demonstrates that communication between mother and fetus occurs actively through the exchange of biochemical signals and extracellular vesicles (EVs) containing proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids (Adam et al., 2017; Czernek & Vogel, 2020; Buca et al., 2020). These vesicles function as carriers of “biochemical messages” that can influence maternal metabolism, including preferences for specific types of food. In this sense, cravings can be interpreted as a form of physiological communication within the feto–maternal system. The maternal body is therefore not passive; rather, it is part of a dynamic, interactive system that responds to fetal needs.

However, purely biomedical interpretations tend to be reductionistic, focusing only on bodily mechanisms while overlooking the emotional, relational, and cultural contexts influencing craving behaviors. Phenomenological studies show that cravings are not always driven by nutritional needs, and may instead reflect symbolic or relational meaning for the pregnant mother (Weingarten & Elston, 1990; Orloff & Hormes, 2014). Thus, a more comprehensive understanding of cravings must integrate biomedical explanations with psychosocial and cultural dimensions, acknowledging pregnancy as an embodied experience involving body, emotion, and meaning.

Psychological and Emotional Perspectives

From a psychological standpoint, pregnancy cravings represent an interaction between cognitive processes, affective states, and embodied experiences that are closely intertwined throughout pregnancy. Meule (2020) explains that cravings often emerge through mental imagery mechanisms—vivid mental representations of pleasurable eating experiences—triggered by stress, anxiety, or unmet emotional needs. In this context, cravings function as a form of emotion regulation, helping pregnant women reduce psychological tension, create a sense of comfort, and restore emotional balance. Thus, craving behaviors are not merely driven by biological changes; they are also adaptive coping strategies that respond to emotional and psychological fluctuations during pregnancy.

Nash (2015) emphasizes that eating practices during pregnancy are embodied, meaning they are deeply connected to the woman's bodily experiences, moral values, and social norms. The food desired is not only understood physiologically, but also symbolically, representing affection, care, and relational connection. When a pregnant woman expresses a craving, it becomes a form of emotional communication—an invitation for involvement, support, and attention from her partner, family, or surrounding community. Cravings thus act as a bridge between the mother's internal world and her social environment, transforming eating behavior into an expression of shared emotions and relational meaning.

Furthermore, cravings illustrate how maternal identity is shaped through emotional experiences embodied in the body. The desire for specific foods is not an impulsive reaction, but an expression of love, acknowledgment, and connection with the fetus. When cravings are fulfilled, mothers often interpret this as a sign that the fetus responds positively, reinforcing an emotional bond between them. In this perspective, cravings serve as an affective communication medium, shaping the mother's sense of connection, acceptance, and attachment to the developing child.

Sociocultural Perspectives

Within the anthropology of the body, pregnancy is understood as a stage in which the female body becomes a medium for cultural and spiritual expression (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1969; Csordas, 1990). The pregnant body is not merely a biological entity undergoing physiological changes, but a symbolic space where values, norms, and social meanings are enacted. Every sensation, movement, and bodily change during pregnancy carries layers of meaning shaped by the culture in which the woman lives. Thus, the body becomes embodied culture—a vessel through which belief systems and social relationships manifest in lived experience. In this context, pregnancy cravings are not simply physiological symptoms, but cultural practices infused with social and spiritual messages.

Ethnographic studies in Indonesia reveal that *ngidam* is closely tied to cultural values and local social structures. Rachmayanti et al. (2023) found that among the Madurese community, cravings are perceived as a form of inner communication between mother and fetus, while simultaneously strengthening family solidarity. Family members often participate in fulfilling the craving, transforming it into a ritual of togetherness that expresses empathy and collective responsibility. Similar findings are reported by Smith (2023) in Yogyakarta, where *ngidam* is understood as part of a social support system that emphasizes harmony and balance within the family. In these contexts, cravings become a cultural expression of interconnectedness between the maternal body, family, and broader community.

Beyond emotional bonding, the act of fulfilling pregnancy cravings also functions as a social gesture with deeper meaning. Blau et al. (2020) argue that the family's or partner's involvement in obtaining the desired item represents affection, emotional care, and recognition of the pregnant woman's central role as life-bearer. In many communities in Indonesia, attending to the needs of a pregnant woman is seen as part of maintaining cosmic balance—a moral responsibility to ensure a peaceful and blessed pregnancy. Thus, *ngidam* positions the maternal body as a symbolic space that connects biological change with emotional, spiritual, and cultural significance, situating women at the center of social harmony and the transmission of cultural values.

Spiritual and Religious Perspectives

In Indonesian spiritual thought, pregnancy is not merely perceived as a biological process but as a sacred journey involving a relational connection among the mother, the fetus, and the Divine (Agustina et al., 2023). Within this context, pregnancy cravings are often interpreted as inner signs—a spiritual message signaling communication between the physical and spiritual realms. The sudden desire for specific foods or objects is believed to reflect the involvement of God in the growth of new life, with the mother's body serving as a channel for divine communication. This view reflects the inseparability of embodied experience and religious consciousness in Indonesian maternal culture.

Csordas (1990), through the theory of embodiment, argues that the human body is the primary site of spiritual experience, where belief, emotion, and existential meaning are physically enacted. In this framework, the pregnant woman's body becomes a spiritual space that bridges the biological process and divine presence. Every craving—hunger, aversion, or emotional desire—can be understood as a spiritual signal that strengthens the mother's awareness of being connected to a greater power. Through prayer, meditation, and inner reflection, the mother

experiences increased intimacy with God, demonstrating that spirituality is not abstract, but embodied through the physical transformation occurring in pregnancy.

The spiritual dimension of cravings plays an important role in shaping maternal character and spiritual maturity. Experiencing and responding to cravings teaches values such as patience, sincerity (*ikhlas*), and gratitude, which contribute to emotional stability and inner peace during pregnancy. These spiritual practices create psychosomatic harmony between the mother's mind, body, and soul, positively influencing fetal development (Buca et al., 2020; Bowman et al., 2021). In this light, pregnancy cravings can be viewed as a form of transcendental communication—a sacred dialogue that unites the mother, the unborn child, and God.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the anthropology of the body and the phenomenology of embodied communication, which view the body not merely as a biological entity but as a field of cultural and spiritual experience (Turner, 1969; Douglas, 1966; Csordas, 1990). Within this paradigm, the body is not a passive object of biological processes but an active site where meanings are produced, negotiated, and expressed. Through embodiment, the body becomes the locus where cultural values, symbols, emotions, and spiritual consciousness converge and manifest in lived experience.

Turner (1969) introduces the concept of liminality, referring to a transitional state in which individuals exist “between two worlds,” neither fully belonging to the previous state nor to the next. Pregnancy represents this liminal phase: the mother's body exists between ordinary physical experience and the sacred experience of carrying new life. Physical sensations—such as nausea, cravings, or bodily discomfort—are not merely physiological reactions but are interpreted through social norms, cultural narratives, and spiritual beliefs. In this liminal space, meanings are renegotiated, rituals gain symbolic power, and the maternal body becomes a site for the expression of cultural identity.

Douglas (1966) emphasizes that the body serves as a metaphor for social order. Rules regarding food, behavior, and bodily conduct during pregnancy reflect cultural values and moral expectations. In this context, cravings are not random impulses but are shaped by collective meaning—what is considered good, appropriate, or taboo within the cultural system. Thus, cravings function as symbolic acts through which cultural norms regarding motherhood, purity, and social roles are reproduced.

Csordas (1990, 1994) expands this view by asserting that embodiment is not something a person has, but something a person is. Through embodied communication, the maternal body becomes an expressive medium through which experiences of the self and spiritual beliefs are articulated. Cravings therefore serve as a communicative process between mother and fetus, mediated through sensation, emotion, and symbolic interpretation. Meaning is not constructed cognitively alone, but through the body that feels, desires, and responds.

Nash (2015) and Blau et al. (2020) demonstrate that eating practices during pregnancy reflect emotional and relational communication, in which the body functions as an expressive medium linking the mother to her social environment. Smith (2023) further highlights that, in local Indonesian contexts, pregnancy and childbirth are deeply embedded in spiritual relationships, where bodily experiences also function as expressions of faith and cultural belonging. Synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study conceptualizes pregnancy cravings as embodied symbolic communication, integrating biological signals, emotional responses, social interactions, and spiritual interpretations into a unified communicative experience. The maternal body acts as a living cultural text in which meaning is written, interpreted, and transmitted through bodily sensations and actions.

In this framework, cravings are not merely biological urges; they represent a multidimensional communicative phenomenon that integrates biological, emotional, cultural, and spiritual meanings. Cravings emerge from hormonal and metabolic changes within the maternal body, while simultaneously functioning as an emotional and psychological response through which the mother seeks comfort, reassurance, and connection. At the same time, cravings are shaped by cultural interpretations—embedded in rituals, social norms, and gender expectations that assign meaning to the maternal body. Beyond these dimensions, cravings also carry spiritual significance, as they are often perceived as inner signs or subtle communication between the mother, the fetus, and the Divine. Thus, cravings illustrate the dynamic intersection of body, culture, and spirituality, where communication between mother and fetus is enacted through bodily sensations and interpreted within a wider cultural and spiritual system of meaning.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2006). This design was chosen because it enables the researcher to explore and generate theory directly from participants' experiences. Within the constructivist paradigm, meaning is not passively discovered but is constructed through interaction and interpretation between the researcher and participants. Thus, the research process does not merely

describe craving experiences (*ngidam*), but seeks to understand how bodily sensations, emotions, and cultural contexts shape the meaning of those experiences.

Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously through three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. These stages facilitated the identification of patterns and relationships among the biological, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of the craving phenomenon, leading to the development of a core category concerning mother–fetus bodily communication. Data credibility was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias.

The study was carried out at Santo Borromeus Hospital, Bandung, from May to October 2024. This site was selected because it serves patients from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, allowing a rich variation of craving meanings within different cultural and religious contexts. Participants consisted of 30 pregnant women in their second and third trimesters, selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria included willingness to participate, ability to articulate and reflect on craving experiences, and being in a physical condition that allowed for interviews. To expand the perspective, informal interviews were also conducted with family members and attending midwives.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (45–90 minutes), recorded with participant consent, and analyzed immediately after transcription. Triangulation was conducted by examining cultural documents (such as folklore, family traditions, or customary practices related to cravings) to ensure that the findings reflect not only individual experiences but also the sociocultural contexts that shape them.

All research procedures adhered to ethical guidelines for health research. Data collection was conducted after obtaining ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee – Sub-Committee of Health Research Ethics, Santo Borromeus Hospital, with Ethical Clearance Certificate Number: 026/KEPK/IX/2024. Each participant received detailed information about the study’s purpose, process, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Participant identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and data security. Thus, the resulting theory is grounded not only in authentic empirical data but also in ethical principles that respect the dignity, rights, and personal experiences of pregnant women as research subjects.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This qualitative study involved 30 pregnant women from diverse sociocultural backgrounds in Indonesia. Data analysis followed grounded theory procedures with three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The findings reveal that pregnancy cravings (*ngidam*) function as a form of symbolic embodied communication between mother and fetus, encompassing biological, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. The maternal body acts as a communicative medium, a cultural arena, and a living site of spirituality (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1969; Csordas, 1990).

Cravings as Symbolic Mother–Fetus Communication

Among the 30 participants interviewed, all stated that cravings were not merely an urge to eat or a result of hormonal changes, but carried deeper meaning. Twenty-six participants (86%) described cravings as an expression of emotional closeness to the fetus, while 22 participants (73%) interpreted cravings as a “message from the baby,” conveyed through the mother’s body.

These findings support Csordas’ (1990) claim that the body functions as a medium of communication between biological awareness and social meaning. This aligns with Douglas (1966) and Turner (1969), who argue that the body is a symbolic space in which cultural values are articulated. Grounded theory analysis in this study generated three major categories:

Biological Signals and Emotional Responses — represented by changes in taste, nausea, or intense desire for particular foods, often accompanied by feelings of warmth and affection toward the fetus. This category supports Orloff & Hormes (2014) and Hill et al. (2016), who found that food cravings in pregnancy frequently coexist with emotional and affective needs.

Social Interpretation and Family Involvement — cravings are interpreted by family members as an expression of affection and participation in the pregnancy process. This mirrors the findings of Blau et al. (2020), who reported that craving experiences are influenced by social support and family meaning-making.

Spiritual Meaning and Self-Reflection — pregnant mothers associate cravings with signs of new life and a process of learning patience. This resonates with Csordas (1990), who conceptualizes the body as a locus of spiritual consciousness and reflective experience.

The core category that emerged is: embodied mother–fetus communication within a cultural context, where the body acts simultaneously as a biological transmitter, a translator of social symbols, and a spiritual medium (Turner, 1969; Csordas, 1990).

Table 4.1. Grounded Theory Categorization: Pregnancy Cravings as Embodied Mother–Fetus Communication

Analysis Stage	Major Category	Subcategory / Field Finding	Theoretical Meaning (References)
Open Coding	Biological signals and emotional response	Changes in taste, nausea, cravings for specific foods, accompanied by emotional warmth toward the fetus	The maternal body converts biological signals into emotional messages (Orloff & Hormes, 2014; Hill et al., 2016)
Axial Coding	Social interpretation and family support	Family members help fulfill cravings as an expression of affection	Bodily communication is translated into social action (Blau et al., 2020; Rachmayanti et al., 2023)
Axial Coding	Spiritual meaning and self-reflection	Mothers associate cravings with signs of new life, prayer, and patience	The body functions as a spiritual space (Csordas, 1990; Agustina et al., 2023)
Selective Coding	Embodied mother–fetus communication within cultural context	Integration of biological, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects	Cravings as symbolic communication reflecting mother–fetus connectedness (Turner, 1969; Douglas, 1966)

Based on Table 4.1, cravings are understood as **an** inner form of communication emerging from the mother’s bodily experience. Biological processes are socially and spiritually interpreted, constructing deep symbolic meaning in Indonesian culture.

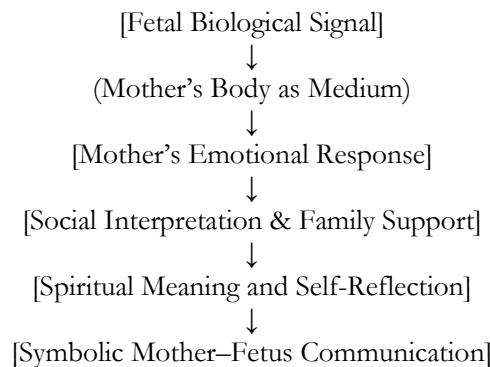


Figure 4.1. Dynamics of Embodied Mother–Fetus Communication

This model illustrates the layered process through which pregnancy cravings function as a form of embodied communication between mother and fetus. The dynamic shows how biological signals originating from the fetus are gradually interpreted and transformed into emotional, social, and spiritual experiences, eventually becoming symbolic communication that connects both beings.

The initial stage of communication begins with biological signals manifested through physiological changes in the mother’s body, such as hormonal fluctuations, metabolic shifts, and specific sensory impulses. In the context of cravings, these signals may appear as sudden hunger, an intense desire for particular foods, or an undefined sense of bodily discomfort. Field findings indicate that mothers frequently interpret these bodily signals as “messages” from the fetus—rather than merely physical needs—representing an early form of communication that demands attention and response (Adam et al., 2017; Buca et al., 2020).

The mother’s body serves as the primary communicative medium that receives, filters, and assigns meaning to these signals. Within the embodiment framework (Csordas, 1990), the body is not a passive recipient but an active interpreter of experience. Craving sensations carry interoceptive meaning—awareness of internal bodily messages that link biological processes with emotional and spiritual experiences. Thus, the mother’s body becomes a communicative space where fetal life and maternal consciousness intersect.

Once signals are embodied and experienced, an emotional response emerges, which varies from one mother to another. Feelings such as joy, anxiety, awe, or curiosity become part of how bodily signals are interpreted. According to Orloff & Hormes (2014) and Meule (2020), food cravings often reflect an attempt to regulate affect and emotional balance. In this context, cravings function as a mechanism of emotional regulation, strengthening the affective bond between mother and fetus and creating an intimate inner experience.

The next stage involves the social translation of cravings. The family’s response—particularly that of the husband or parents—in fulfilling the pregnant woman’s cravings expands the biological meaning into a social one. In many Indonesian cultures, satisfying cravings is understood as an expression of affection and emotional support toward the mother (Blau et al., 2020; Rachmayanti et al., 2023). This interaction reinforces family bonds, cultivates

empathy, and affirms the father's role within the pregnancy process. At this point, a private bodily experience becomes a collective social practice embedded with moral and cultural values.

Through social support and reflective meaning-making, cravings are then interpreted spiritually as signs of God's presence and expressions of divine love for the developing fetus. Many mothers perceive cravings as a "message from the baby," imbued with values of patience, gratitude, and surrender. This perspective aligns with the theory of spiritual embodiment (Csordas, 1997), in which bodily experience becomes a vessel of religious consciousness. The process reinforces the spiritual dimension of the maternal body, turning cravings into a medium of transcendental communication between mother, fetus, and the Creator.

The entire process culminates in the formation of symbolic mother–fetus communication, a holistic integration of biological signals, emotional responses, social support, and spiritual reflection. This communication does not rely on verbal language but unfolds through sensation, intuition, and symbolic actions—such as craving specific foods or changes in maternal behavior toward the fetus. This model demonstrates that cravings are not merely physiological phenomena, but a symbolic language of life that affirms the emotional and spiritual bond between mother and child from the earliest stages of existence.

Social and Gender Dimensions

Twenty-seven participants stated that their husbands played a direct role in fulfilling their cravings, while 18 participants involved extended family members. The act of "finding food to satisfy cravings" was viewed as a gesture of affection, solidarity, and shared responsibility.

This finding aligns with Rachmayanti et al. (2023), who observed that fulfilling pregnancy cravings within many Indonesian communities strengthens family social cohesion. In addition, Nash (2015) asserts that eating practices during pregnancy are an embodied process that reflects gender roles and social morality.

In several local cultural contexts, such as in Sundanese and Flores communities, craving fulfillment is carried out collectively as a form of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) and respect toward the pregnant woman. This illustrates that pregnancy is a social event in which roles between men and women are negotiated. Oliver (2010) and Blau et al. (2020) emphasize that the husband's involvement in the pregnancy process strengthens emotional bonding and creates a shared sense of ownership toward the new life.

Table 4.2. Social and Gender Dimensions in Craving Experiences

Analysis Stage	Major Category	Subcategory / Field Findings	Theoretical Meaning (References)
Open Coding	Father and family participation	Husband searches for food; extended family participates	Cravings as expressions of affection and responsibility (Blau et al., 2020; Rachmayanti et al., 2023)
Axial Coding	Gender role negotiation	Husband feels "pregnant together"; shared emotional roles	Cravings renegotiate gender relations toward empathy (Nash, 2015; Oliver, 2010)
Axial Coding	Social solidarity	Neighbors and family involved; mutual cooperation and shared prayer	Cravings strengthen social cohesion (Smith, 2023; Turner, 1969)
Selective Coding	Reconstruction of gender and social solidarity	Integration of care, responsibility, and cultural values	Cravings function as a collective social ritual (Douglas, 1966)

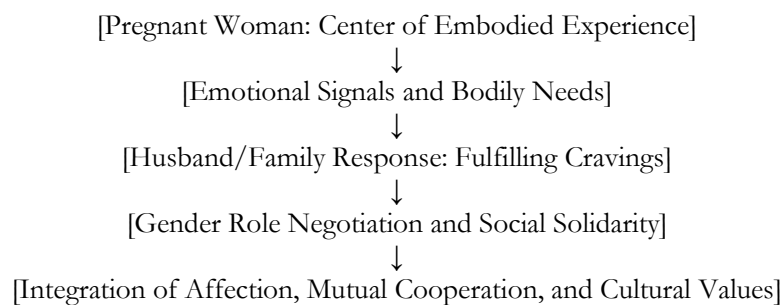


Figure 4.2. Social and Gender Structure in Craving Experience

This model explains how pregnancy cravings are not merely an individual experience of the pregnant woman, but also part of the social structure and gender relations embedded within Indonesian culture. Each stage demonstrates the interaction between women's embodied experience, family responses, and the development of cultural values that reinforce solidarity and affection within the household.

The first stage positions the pregnant woman at the center of embodied experience. The mother’s body becomes the primary locus of biological, emotional, and spiritual processes that occur throughout pregnancy. Cravings emerge as an expression of the uniqueness of the female body, which not only undergoes physiological changes but also interprets those changes affectively and symbolically. Within the framework of the anthropology of the body (Turner, 1969; Csordas, 1990), the female body is viewed as a cultural space where identity, social roles, and religious meanings intersect. Thus, craving experiences reflect the mother’s position as an active subject within the family’s social and spiritual network.

Cravings function as emotional signals and bodily needs that connect biological processes with the social world. When a pregnant woman desires something—whether food, attention, or a specific emotional atmosphere—these signals become communicative acts that invite the involvement of others, particularly the husband and family members. Psychologically, these signals help channel affective needs such as security, care, and affection (Meule, 2020). This process shows that the maternal body is not merely a biological system; it is an active medium of social interaction that communicates needs and meaning.

This stage highlights the social role of the family in responding to craving experiences. The actions of the husband and family members—such as searching for the desired food or fulfilling the mother’s requests—serve not only practical purposes but also symbolic ones. In Indonesian cultural contexts, these actions represent affection, respect, and emotional support for the pregnant mother (Blau et al., 2020; Rachmayanti et al., 2023). The fulfillment of cravings becomes a form of social participation that reinforces togetherness and empathy in maintaining the well-being of both mother and fetus. Thus, the maternal body catalyzes social practices that strengthen family cohesion.

Cravings also create space for the negotiation of gender roles within the family. In many cases, husbands take a more active role in supporting their wives, including household responsibilities and emotional caregiving. These actions demonstrate a shift from patriarchal relational patterns toward a more equitable partnership grounded in empathy and mutual cooperation. Anthropologically, cravings function as a symbolic arena in which values of equality, care, and solidarity are tested and negotiated through daily practices. Thus, craving experiences reflect not only maternal needs but also the social dynamics that shape gender relations within the family.

The final stage shows the integration of affection, mutual cooperation, and cultural values within craving experiences. Through collective responses to the mother’s needs, families and communities reinforce cultural identity rooted in empathy and care. In Indonesian society, cravings are often accompanied by traditional practices such as shared prayer, food taboos, or symbolic gestures that enhance the spiritual meaning of pregnancy (Smith, 2023). This process demonstrates that cravings serve as a social mechanism that nurtures love, solidarity, and balance between biological and moral responsibilities within the family.

Spiritual and Religious Dimensions

A total of 23 participants (76.7%) associated their craving experiences with God’s will or as a “divine message from the fetus.” Several mothers stated that they spontaneously prayed, recited *zikir*, or expressed gratitude when cravings appeared.

These findings show that cravings function as a religious experience that unifies body, faith, and life (Turner, 1969; Csordas, 1990). As explained by Agustina et al. (2023), spiritual experiences during pregnancy help mothers internalize values of patience and gratitude. This aligns with Douglas (1966), who views the body as a sacred space that reflects moral and social order.

Thus, cravings are not merely biological symptoms, but a form of transcendental communication that strengthens the mother’s religious awareness and nurtures a spiritual connection between the mother, the fetus, and God (Weingarten & Elston, 1990; Orloff & Hormes, 2014).

Table 4.3. Spiritual and Religious Dimensions in Craving Experiences

Analysis Stage	Major Category	Subcategory / Field Findings	Theoretical Meaning (References)
Open Coding	Cravings and spiritual relation	Spontaneous prayer, gratitude, divine awareness	Cravings as a religious bodily experience (Csordas, 1990; Agustina et al., 2023)
Axial Coding	Cravings as spiritual practice	Patience, surrender, sincerity during pregnancy	Body as a medium for spiritual development (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1969)
Axial Coding	Body as sacred space	Mothers regulate behavior and food choices based on beliefs	Body as a locus of faith and morality (Agustina et al., 2023)
Selective Coding	Spiritual communication between mother–fetus–God	Integration of faith, love, and embodiment	Cravings as spiritual embodied experience (Csordas, 1990)

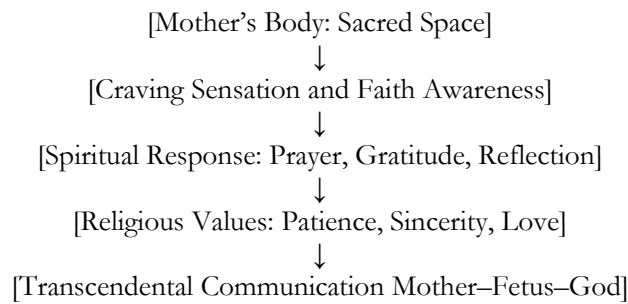


Figure 4.3. Spiritual and Religious Structure in Craving Experiences

This model illustrates how cravings function as a spiritual experience that connects body, soul, and faith. In this perspective, the mother's body is not merely the site of biological processes but a sacred space where an inner dialogue takes place between the mother, the fetus, and God. The process demonstrates that the religious dimension of pregnancy is inseparable from the body; rather, it is manifested through embodied experiences rich with meaning.

The first stage positions the mother's body as a sacred space where new life is conceived and created. In this context, the body is not merely a biological container but a spiritual locus that represents divine presence in human life. Within many Indonesian religious traditions, the mother's body is perceived as an intermediary of God's love—a place where life grows and is blessed. This awareness leads pregnant mothers to experience inner transformation—from being merely biological individuals to becoming symbols of life and the tangible grace of God.

The next stage highlights craving sensations as triggers for faith awareness. The desire that arises—whether for food, objects, or certain emotional experiences—is perceived by many pregnant women as a spiritual sign or inner message affirming their connection with the fetus and the Creator (Agustina et al., 2023). These sensations evoke a deeper awareness of the miracle of the body and the development of life. Thus, cravings become a living faith experience, in which the body functions as a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms.

At this stage, spiritual responses become expressions of faith manifested through prayer, gratitude, and personal reflection. Many participants associated cravings with the impulse to draw closer to God, pray for the fetus's wellbeing, and contemplate motherhood as a divine gift. Within the phenomenology of the body, these actions signify the embodiment of religious practice—spiritual experience does not occur separately from the body, but is enacted through sensation, action, and inner awareness. In other words, the mother's body becomes a “language of prayer” that communicates gratitude and hope to God.

The fourth stage illustrates how spiritual values grow out of craving experiences. The pregnancy process, with all its emotional and physical challenges, teaches the mother to cultivate patience, surrender, and unconditional love toward the fetus and those around her. These values are not only moral but also spiritual, as they reflect inner transformation—a deepening of faith and maturity. In this context, cravings serve as a spiritual learning pathway that strengthens maternal character and deepens women's spiritual awareness.

The final stage represents the culmination of the spiritual experience: the formation of transcendental communication between mother, fetus, and God. At this point, the mother perceives the fetus as part of a divine dialogue—a sacred form of communication that transcends language and rational logic. Cravings become a symbol of encounter between the created being and the Creator, in which the body functions as a spiritual bridge that unites faith and life. This process affirms that religious experience does not only occur in formal worship spaces, but also through everyday embodied experiences lived with faith consciousness.

The Mother's Body as a Cultural Space

The majority of participants (86%) associated cravings with moral and cultural values. The mother's body is perceived as a symbolic space that carries moral messages—such as hopes that the child will grow into a patient, honest, and dutiful person.

These findings support Douglas' (1966) theory that the body serves as a metaphor for social order—where every bodily practice, taboo, and ritual reflects cultural structures preserved by society. In this context, the mother's behavior during pregnancy becomes a reflection of community values and moral regulation.

Studies by Smith (2023) and Rachmayanti et al. (2023) likewise show that pregnancy in Indonesia is regulated by local norms and beliefs that reinforce the identity of women as guardians of family morality. Moreover, Blau et al. (2020) emphasize that social support for pregnant women represents solidarity and respect for women's reproductive roles.

Thus, the mother’s body functions as a **locus for the transmission of social, spiritual, and moral values**. Through cravings, the body becomes a living cultural text—rewriting meanings of fertility, affection, and human connectedness to life.

Table 4.4. Respondents’ Perceptions of the Mother’s Body as a Cultural Space (n = 30)

Cultural Aspect of the Maternal Body	Field Indicators	Number of Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)	Theoretical Meaning (References)
Body as a medium for moral values	Cravings associated with hopes for the child’s character (kind, patient, generous)	26	86.7%	Moral values embedded in bodily experiences (Douglas, 1966)
Body as a medium of social communication	Cravings invite family/neighborhood involvement	28	93.3%	Body as the center of social interaction (Smith, 2023; Rachmayanti et al., 2023)
Body as a spiritual space	Cravings interpreted as signs of new life	24	80.0%	Body as a space for faith and life (Csordas, 1990; Agustina et al., 2023)
Body as affirmation of feminine identity	Cravings reinforce the mother’s role as guardian of family harmony	27	90.0%	Women’s bodies as the cultural center (Turner, 1969)
Body as a symbol of social order	Food taboos and behavioral norms regulated by tradition	25	83.3%	Body reflects social order (Douglas, 1966)

CONCEPTUAL MODEL: THE MOTHER’S BODY AS CULTURAL SPACE

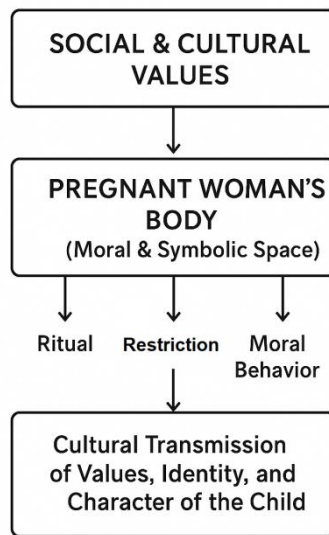


Figure 4.4. Conceptual Model: The Mother’s Body as a Cultural Space

This figure illustrates how the pregnant mother’s body becomes a cultural space in which social values, norms, and symbolic meanings are embodied and transmitted to the next generation. At the highest layer are the cultural and social values that shape the framework of meaning for experiencing pregnancy. These values include belief systems, traditions, and moral expectations that regulate how pregnant women should act, speak, eat, and interact. In other words, the mother’s body operates within a collective system of meaning that symbolically governs behaviors and pregnancy-related experiences.

At the middle layer, the pregnant mother’s body is understood not only as a biological entity but also as a moral and symbolic space. Within this space, bodily experiences become the meeting point of cultural teachings, spiritual values, and personal reflection. Pregnant women internalize social and cultural norms, which are then expressed through concrete actions—such as responding to cravings, regulating emotions, participating in rituals, and engaging in prayer. The body thus becomes a point of convergence between biological and cultural dimensions—a symbolic arena where personal life intersects with social order.

From the mother’s body as the center of experience, three key cultural expressions emerge: rituals, restrictions, and moral conduct. Rituals include prayers, blessings, or ceremonial acts that reaffirm the sacredness of pregnancy

and seek protection for the mother and fetus. Restrictions refer to prohibitions concerning food, activities, or behaviors believed to influence the child's well-being in the womb. Moral conduct reflects how pregnant women are expected to manage their speech, thoughts, and actions as expressions of purity, care, and emotional balance. These three dimensions do not operate separately; instead, they reinforce one another in shaping the spiritual, social, and emotional equilibrium throughout pregnancy.

This entire process culminates in the transmission of values, identity, and the child's character within the socio-cultural structure. The child does not inherit only biological traits from the mother, but also the moral and spiritual values the mother internalizes during pregnancy. In this sense, the mother's body serves as a transgenerational medium through which culture and ethical principles are carried forward. Pregnancy becomes a social event that extends beyond the individual body, because through the mother's embodiment, the community's values are enacted and passed on to future generations.

Thus, the conceptual model emphasizes that the pregnant mother's body is not merely a biological container for fetal development, but a symbolic space where culture and spiritual life deeply interact. Through the maternal body, society instills noble values—such as love, patience, and responsibility—that eventually shape the identity of the child. The mother's body becomes a bridge between the physical world and the world of meaning, between personal experience and cultural tradition, between bodily sensations and the spiritual dimensions that surround them.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that pregnancy cravings (*ngidam*) function as a multidimensional form of symbolic communication between mother and fetus, encompassing biological, social, and spiritual dimensions. These results demonstrate that the maternal body serves as the primary medium that bridges physical, emotional, and transcendental aspects of life. This concept aligns with Csordas's (1990) theory of embodiment, which posits that the body is not merely a biological object but a locus of culture in which social and spiritual meanings are materialized through lived experience.

In line with embodiment theory (Turner, 1969; Csordas, 1990), the pregnant body operates as a communicative medium between two biological consciousnesses—the mother and the fetus. Biological signals such as cravings or bodily sensations are interpreted by the mother as emotional messages from the fetus. This reflects an intuitive, non-verbal communication that occurs through bodily sensations and interoceptive experiences, echoing symbolic interactionism described by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and the psychological significance of food cravings identified by Orloff & Hormes (2014).

The phenomenon illustrates that the body is not a passive biological object, but an active communicative subject that integrates physiological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of life. As noted by Douglas (1966) and Nash (2015), the pregnant woman's body becomes a vessel for moral and cultural meaning. Thus, cravings can be understood as a form of embodied communication, in which symbolic messages are transmitted through the body and interpreted within cultural and spiritual frameworks.

Another important finding of this study concerns the fulfillment of cravings by husbands and family members, showing that pregnancy is a social event that renegotiates gender roles and power relations within the household. This collective involvement creates a space for men to emotionally participate in the pregnancy process and express affection toward both the mother and the fetus. Through this interaction, pregnancy becomes a shared emotional and relational experience, reaffirming social cohesion and family solidarity. These findings are consistent with the article "What About Me? Theorizing Power and Refusal in Advancing Marginalized Identities" (Schley et al., 2019), which demonstrates that marginalized identities are negotiated through interpersonal relationships and everyday practices within structures of power.

These findings are consistent with Nash's (2015) analysis, which argues that pregnancy is an embodied practice that reinforces togetherness and emotional sharing within the family. Oliver (2010) further highlights that the experience of pregnancy expands the understanding of maternal and paternal roles as an empathic and mutually supportive relational dynamic.

In addition, studies by Blau et al. (2020) and Rachmayanti et al. (2023) demonstrate that in Indonesian cultural contexts, the act of fulfilling pregnancy cravings is viewed as an expression of affection, moral responsibility, and social solidarity. Thus, *ngidam* becomes a site for the reconstruction of gender roles and the strengthening of social networks rooted in values of cooperation and collective care (Smith, 2023).

The experience of *ngidam* also reveals a strong religious dimension, whereby the pregnant body becomes a "sacred space" in which faith and life intersect (Douglas, 1966). As articulated by Csordas (1990), the body serves as a medium for spiritual actualization, enabling individuals to experience a transcendental relationship with God through embodied experiences.

Within this context, ngidam emerges as a form of spiritual communication between the mother, the fetus, and the Creator. Many mothers in this study described their cravings as “divine messages” that teach patience, sincerity, and gratitude. This aligns with Agustina et al. (2023), who assert that religious practices during pregnancy strengthen maternal psychological and spiritual balance.

Thus, the maternal body is not only a biological medium, but also a vessel of worship and self-reflection that deepens the relationship between human beings and God. This is consistent with Turner’s (1969) view of the body as a site of ritual and sacred meaning, balancing social structure and the spiritual dimensions of life.

The phenomenon of ngidam reinforces the anthropological view that the female body is an arena where culture is enacted and given meaning (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1969). In Indonesian society, behavioral rules and prohibitions during pregnancy are understood as social mechanisms for maintaining moral balance and communal order (Rachmayanti et al., 2023; Smith, 2023). This is in line with the article “Disentangling Individualism: Towards a Heuristic Tool for Cultural Analysis of Self and Society Evaluations” (Keere, 2018), which explains that Western cultures shape bodily decisions based on the logic of individualism and personal control, in contrast to collectivist cultures that emphasize relational orientation, as reflected in the context of ngidam.

The ritual of fulfilling pregnancy cravings, collective prayer, and the involvement of family and neighbors illustrate how social values such as affection, mutual cooperation, and gratitude are reproduced through the pregnant body. This aligns with Turner’s (1969) concept of the ritual process, which argues that every ritual action serves to reinforce social solidarity and connect individuals with the symbolic order of culture.

As articulated by Csordas (1990), the body is the site where social and spiritual experiences are enacted in concrete form. Ngidam can therefore be understood as a holistic cultural event—linking biology, morality, and spirituality into a unified embodied experience. This view is reinforced by the article “Views of Cultural Sociology: A Response to Thorpe’s Cultural Sociology of Representation” (Prior, 2024), which asserts that cultural practices must be interpreted within their historical context and through processes of value transformation.

The findings of this study have significant implications for maternal health policy. By understanding ngidam as a cultural practice infused with social, spiritual, and gendered meanings, maternal health services should move beyond a purely biomedical paradigm and adopt a model of culturally responsive maternal care. This involves not only addressing the physical needs of pregnant women, but also acknowledging the symbolic and emotional significance embedded in the experience of ngidam. Such an approach may include educational interventions that involve husbands and families, integrating cultural narratives into health communication, and developing midwifery guidelines grounded in local wisdom.

In this way, ngidam can serve as an entry point for strengthening family engagement, enhancing emotional support for pregnant women, and fostering more egalitarian gender relations in caregiving. A culturally grounded maternal care model not only improves maternal comfort and satisfaction but also represents a strategy of health equity that respects and affirms local knowledge and community values.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of ngidam illustrates how social transformation can emerge from the most intimate bodily experiences. When husbands and family members participate in fulfilling pregnancy cravings, traditional gender roles are renegotiated. The experience of ngidam becomes a site for the socialization of new values: empathy, emotional involvement of men in reproductive processes, and the recognition of women’s authority over decisions related to their own bodies. In this sense, ngidam is not merely about food preferences, but a cultural practice that generates transformation in social relationships within families and communities.

This study concludes that ngidam represents a biopsychosocial–spiritual phenomenon reflecting the integration of body, emotions, culture, and faith. Through the process of craving, the maternal body functions as a symbolic medium of communication between the mother and the fetus. The body does not merely perform biological functions; rather, it sends and receives messages imbued with emotional and spiritual meaning. The desire that emerges during ngidam is not simply a physiological urge, but a symbolic expression of the intimate bond forming between mother and child. Thus, ngidam becomes an interoceptive experience that unites biological dimensions with the spirituality of life, wherein the mother perceives the presence of the fetus not only physically but also existentially.

In a social context, ngidam serves as a mechanism for strengthening family bonds and community solidarity. The response of husbands, family members, and the social environment to the mother’s cravings is often interpreted as a gesture of care, affection, and emotional support. The act of fulfilling cravings becomes a symbol of collective involvement in safeguarding the new life growing within the mother. These traditions and practices reinforce the mother’s position as the center of life and moral balance within the social structure. Culturally, ngidam reflects local knowledge about the maternal body and women’s morality—knowledge passed down across generations as part of a broader value system surrounding purity, affection, and responsibility.

Understanding ngidam from socio-cultural and spiritual perspectives carries significant implications for midwifery practice and maternal health services. Integrating medical approaches with local cultural values results in care that is more empathetic, contextual, and centered on women's lived experiences. Midwifery practices that recognize the symbolic and spiritual meaning of ngidam enable health professionals to approach pregnant women more holistically—not merely as biological subjects, but as individuals with depth of meaning and belief. By adopting culturally responsive and spiritually attuned care, maternal health systems can transform into more humane and holistic models that align with Indonesia's cultural wisdom.

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