Becoming Respectable: Low income young women, consumption and the pursuit of socially appropriate mothering

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Abstract

Teenage mothers find themselves caught between two discourses: the irresponsibility of youth and the responsibility of motherhood. We unravel some of the complexities surrounding the performance of socially approved 'good mothering', from a position of restricted resources. We demonstrate the relevance of Skeggs' (1997) notion of respectability in attempts to understand young mothers' management of a complex interplay of consumption meanings. Our informants seek to secure social value and legitimacy through employing a number of consumption strategies centred around identification and dis-identification. However, we recognize that young mothers' careful marshalling of resources, in relation to consumption, risk being misread and could leave young women open to further scrutiny and negative evaluation, ultimately limiting their opportunity for securing respectability in wider society.

Keywords: Teenage mothers, Low income consumers, Identity, Dis-identification, Consumption

Statement of contribution

We contribute to work on less privileged consumers, specifically low income young mothers. We explore how teenage mothers, when faced with constrained choices, still seek to achieve the tenets of 'good mothering' via identification and dis-identification consumption strategies. And yet, we recognize the dilemma for young mothers of wishing to be seen as good mothers, whilst not being judged as extravagant because of their patterns of consumption.

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...Now that I'm a mum, I don't want to be known as a child, even though I am, if you get me. I prefer looking older than I am and feel more older than I am. I know I have grown up quite quick with what I've been through, I've had to, I've had no choice... And I just want to feel that I'm older, not feel that I'm young and that people are going to look down at me because I'm a kid myself and I've got a baby and start doubting me, thinking I'm going to be a bad mum and everything. I want to feel more comfortable, I want to feel that people are not going to look down at me but you do get funny people round here.....I just get them bad days where I feel like a bad mum. I feel really crap and I feel like a bad mum. But then after I've calmed down, I start thinking well how can I be a bad mum? She's got expensive nappies, baby wipes, and her milk isn't cheap either. [Debbie, age 17, Interview 2]

Introduction

Debbie's story illustrates the dilemma facing young mothers caught between the discourses of the irresponsibility of youth, and the responsibility of motherhood. Debbie's story firstly, hints at the often judgemental discourses around young mothers; and how she seeks to counter views that she is too young to be a responsible mother; secondly, captures the drive by a young, low income mother to prioritize her baby's needs; and thirdly shows the emphasis she places on often expensive consumption in order to realize her goals of being a good mother.

In her study of working class women, Skeggs (1997, p. 2) notes that 'respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class' and applies a model of class based on Bourdieu's economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals (1997, p. 8). She identifies the limited opportunities for working class women to access or increase capital assets (1997, p. 9). In particular she identifies the strategies of dis-identification that these women use to distance themselves from stereotypes of working-class femininity, and to position themselves as respectable, because respectability was seen as 'a marker… a standard to which to aspire… to be not respectable is to have little social value or legitimacy' (Skeggs 1997, p. 3). In order to achieve distinction, women 'made investments in their bodies, clothes, consumption practices, leisure pursuits and homes. These investments indicated a strong desire to pass as middle class' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 95). Skeggs (1997, p. 74) argued that class 'was the structuring absence' for the search for respectability. 'respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class…[and] is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it' (Skeggs, 1997, p. 1)

Skeggs' (1997) sociological understanding of class combined with earlier research into the consumption experiences of low income women (Glass, Hamilton & Trebeck, 2013; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Hamilton, 2012) provides us with a starting point in order to explore how young women on low incomes respond to the perceived tenets of 'good mothering', within the socio-economic and cultural context of their lives as new young mothers. We therefore pose the following question: How does the positioning and classification of women as young mothers impact their navigation of consumer culture? Discourses around motherhood enable us to frame the wider social and political debates around young mothers; and then identify the gap in current studies of mothering and consumption. This research gap concerns the lack of research into how younger mothers,

faced with resource constraints, manage themselves in the marketplace as they seek to identify themselves with the responsibility and respectability associated with motherhood.

Literature Review

Discourses of motherhood and mothering

Motherhood is celebrated in many women's identity projects, and it is regularly positioned as 'women's supreme achievement' (Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991, p. 9). It is 'the dominant, expected and glorified marker of adulthood in a woman's life' (Martin, Schouten, & Stephens, 2006, p. 257). Expectations of motherhood are socially embedded and emphasized via prevailing discourses (Miller, 2007). Discourses are 'the historical, social, and political aspect of language and hence of subjectivity. The meanings of social reality that shape the way individuals interpret their lived world….' (Bristor and Fischer, 1993, p. 521). Discourses are promoted via a variety of channels (experts; media; family; peers; friends) and are often mediated by the marketplace (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). The main culturally pervasive discourse that affects women's identity as new mothers relates to self-management (Fischer, Otnes, & Tuncay, 2007, p. 433) and taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. The discourse of self-management encourages individuals to develop their own understandings and knowledge in response to the diversity of expert (e.g. medical) discourses, in order to develop the self-reliance necessary to 'evaluate, organize and sustain their efforts over time' (Fischer et al., 2007, p. 430).

However cultural discourses around motherhood are not always positive. 'Motherhood has long been a favourite target, with the good/bad mother dichotomy a key feature of maternal discourses. Mothers who fail to meet normative expectations of the role of mothering inevitably are positioned as the deviant "other" and considered to be unfit to parent' (Wilson & Huntington, 2005, p. 61). One area of dispute centres on the right age at

which to become a mother. Phoenix et al. (1991) reported that current views prescribe: firstly that the ideal child-rearing ages should be between 20 and 40 years old; secondly, that mothers should be married before birth; and thirdly, that mothers should stay married. Both younger and older mothers (e.g. Budds, Locke, & Burr, 2013; Phoenix et al., 1991; Ponsford, 2011) can thus find themselves the object of criticism for their mothering status, attracting negative comments around this celebrated aspect of women's identity on the grounds of their age – with their age outweighing the significance of their motherhood status, as illustrated by Debbie's desire not to be seen as a child.

Motherhood in the UK and the context of young mothers

Teenage motherhood is positioned as particularly problematic in Western/developed countries, by both media and government policies on the family. Adolescent mothers are socially constructed as in the process of developing maturity and this is assumed to limit their mothering skills (Breheny & Stephens, 2007). Both society and young women are positioned as victims: 'a pernicious social problem where mothers, their children and society generally will all suffer' (Duncan, 2007, p. 307); with the view that children of these younger mothers are likely to cause problems for wider society (e.g. requiring assistance from public welfare and educational programmes). The societal critique often derives from the choices that mothers are presumed to have made – younger mothers have chosen 'early motherhood' which is a path that is out of step with the 'middle-class script' (SmithBattle, 2005) of planned activities with a trajectory around education, career/income, finding a partner and then becoming pregnant. However, as Duncan (2007) points out, teenage motherhood often serves as a distinct and visible marker for those who are already 'off script'.

Caught up in notions of what it means to be a young mother are a range of additional factors which are seen to inform/impact women's ability to mother effectively. Women who

have faced particular challenges such as 'childhood poverty, lack of academic success at school, temporary and low-paid work' are most likely to become teenage mothers and 'early motherhood compounds these difficulties/disadvantages and it becomes difficult to escape poverty' (Graham & McDermott, 2006, p. 22). Health literature has traditionally focused on the negative outcomes of early motherhood for both young mothers and their children and the sense that teenage pregnancy is something to be assessed and managed (Breheny & Stephens, 2007). More recently academic studies in several disciplines have questioned these negative assumptions and have focused more on the positive impact that having a child can have for younger women, making them 'feel stronger, more competent, more connected to family and society, and more responsible' (Duncan, 2007, p. 316). A small-scale U.S. study argued that mothering was 'a powerful catalyst for becoming more mature, and for redirecting their lives in positive ways… [and that]... mothering potentially anchors the self, fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, reweaves connections, and provides a new sense of future' (SmithBattle, 2000, p. 35). Other researchers have suggested that teenage mothers themselves position motherhood as a route to maturity (Banister, Hogg, & Dixon, 2012; Breheny & Stephens, 2007; SmithBattle, 2005, 2006; Yardley, 2008). And Duncan (2007, p. 313-315), in turn, argues that links between outcomes are based on correlation rather than causation and do not take account of the opportunities that young women see as offered by teenage parenting.

Consumption and motherhood

Within marketing, and in particular within the consumer research literature, there has been a growing interest in mothers, evidenced by some of the latest work published about motherhoods and markets (O'Donohoe, Hogg, Maclaran, Martens, & Stevens, 2013). The transition to first time motherhood has attracted particular attention. Prothero's (2002) introspection about her consumption decisions and indecisions on the path to parenthood was

one of the first in a line of journal articles which have dealt, broadly speaking, with the role of consumption in the transition to motherhood (e.g. Jennings & O'Malley, 2003; Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006; VOICE, 2010a; 2010b).

The majority of these studies have focused on samples of consumers who fit within the 'celebrated' ideal (Phoenix et al. 1991). Previous studies considering the role of consumption and maternal identity during pregnancy (Carrigan & Szmigin 2004; Patterson & O'Malley 2013) and motherhood (e.g. Carrigan & Szmigin 2006; Jennings & O'Malley 2003; Miller 3013; Thomsen & Sørensen 2006; VOICE 2010b) have tended to focus on middle-class participants and 'socially appropriate' maternal age groups. In examining the importance of consumption in women's positioning as good mothers, the omission of younger and low income women from these studies means that research risks missing out on, or misrepresenting, the wider socio-cultural context of what it means to be a mother in contemporary society (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). In this article we focus on a segment of women who have hitherto largely been ignored in the marketing and consumer behaviour literature: young women on low incomes, in order to understand how they perform identity work through consumption.

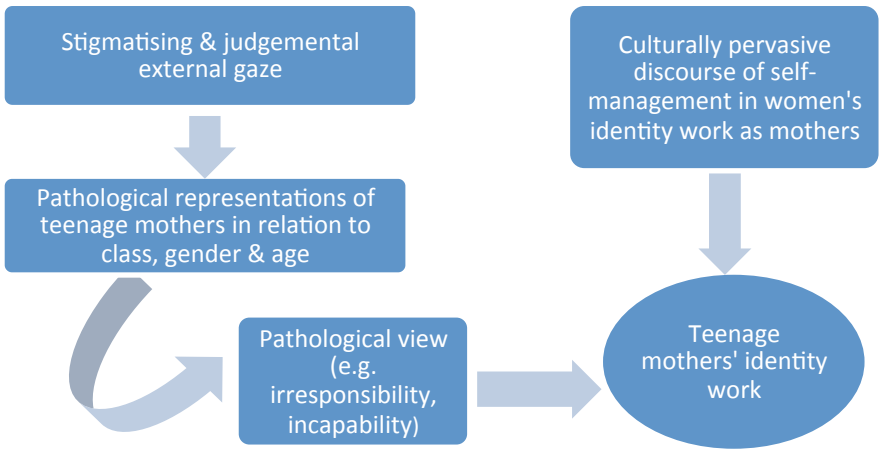
Contextual framework for teenage mothers' identity work

It has been noted that motherhood has only recently been an identity that women can work at (Arendell 2000). Faircloth (2013) discusses the importance of considering mothering as identity work, rather than identity per se, in order to 'highlight the active processes by which identity is constructed' (p.31). There is a particular need for careful management of maternal identity work for younger mothers, owing to the fact that they are positioned in relation to deviancy discourses of motherhood (Arendell, 2000) which largely focus on their assumed universal incapacity to do a good job as mothers. These

negatively framed discourses could leave young women with low expectations about their capabilities as mothers, which could be damaging to their maternal identity. Our starting point is therefore the recognition that 'young un-wed working class mothers have always been a target for social stigma, hatred and anxiety...' (Tyler, 2008, p. 26), with teenage mothers, in particular, 'portrayed as ignorant and irresponsible, or even immoral' (Duncan, Alexander, & Edwards, (2010).

Building on earlier research into the consumption experiences of low income families and mothers (Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Hamilton, 2012), we explore how young women on low incomes respond to the challenges of mothering within the socio-economic and cultural context of their lives as new young mothers. In particular we focus on the ways in which young women with low incomes frame their mothering and how the need to be seen as respectable (which in their mind equates to *not* being seen as a typical teenage mother) informs their consumption practices and allocation of financial resources in a way that strategically enables them to disidentify from the perceived flawed label of the teenage mother and enables them to identify with a respectable, responsible maternal identity. We summarize our line of argument in Figure 1, drawing on work from sociology, gender studies and consumer research.

Figure 1: Context for teenage mothers' identity work



Source: Amalgamation of key points from Breheny & Stephens (2007); Fischer, Otnes & Tuncay (2007, p.433); Skeggs (1997) and Tyler (2013, p. 172).

This framework (figure 1) synthesizes the key arguments from the literature review around two axes: first of all, vilification and the judgmental gaze; and secondly the culturally pervasive discourses about motherhood and mothering – and how teenage mothers find themselves caught between two discourses: the irresponsibility of youth and the responsibility of motherhood (Breheny & Stephens, 2007).

Methods

We report findings from interviews with seventeen women (detailed in table 1), recruited via a National Health Service (NHS) antenatal service for younger women (below the age of twenty) in the north of England[1]. Informants were interviewed twice, once during the third trimester of pregnancy and once during the early months of their baby's life. Unfortunately, despite a number of attempts to contact them, four of the original seventeen participants could not be traced for the second interview, reflecting the transient nature of some of their living arrangements. The researchers followed a strict ethical procedure, receiving advice from the NHS ethics committee and the university in which we were based. Prior to interviewing, all informants were briefed about the nature and aims of the study, such that they were able to give fully informed consent to participate. Informants received a small gift (vouchers) to thank them for their participation.

The women in our sample ranged in age from 17 at the time of the first interview to 19 years. Fourteen of the women were in a relationship with the father of the baby, one was in a relationship with a man who was not the baby's father and two of the women were single at the time of the interviews. Eleven of the women had been in education when they became pregnant, while four were employed (e.g. waiter and childcare assistant), and two were

[1] Please note that prior to this a variety of other methods of recruitment were used, yet they were all unsuccessful at reaching this population (e.g. adverts, leaflets, parenting websites).

unemployed, many were living in temporary accommodation and between three and five of our informants were officially categorised as homeless either prior to, or at the time of, the first interview (see table 1 for further details).

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length, with the average interview lasting one and a half hours. Although an interview guide was prepared, this took the form of a number of topics/issues concerned with informants' lived experiences of pregnancy/motherhood, rather than a strict guide to the content or structure of the interview, the intention being that as far as possible interviews would adhere to a conversational style. Field notes were written immediately after each interview. These field notes were typically descriptive and focused on, for example, the background of the informant, the interviewer's first impressions of the individual, their living conditions and other details or reflections which might not be adequately captured within the interview data.

Our approach to data analysis reflected hermeneutic concerns (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994) in order to engage with individuals' lived experiences, whilst recognising that these interpretations and understandings reflect 'broader cultural viewpoints that are implicitly conveyed through language' (p. 432). In order to achieve this we pursued a part to whole strategy whereby our initial understandings were developed through an iterative process which involved moving backwards and forwards within and between informants' data (Thompson et al., 1994). Initially within-case understandings were forged across the two transcripts (in the cases where two interviews had been conducted) and field notes. Transcripts were read and re-read in order to identify patterns, themes and higher levels of abstraction (Spiggle, 1994). A wide number of themes emerged as part of this process (such as body image, lifestyle changes, support structures, perceptions of health services). Attention then moved towards performing a cross case analysis. We moved back and forth between the data and literature in order to refine understanding, a process that reflects both emic and etic

concerns, in order to further develop analytic categories. It was at this point that our particular interest in women's positioning and classification as young mothers, and the impact this has on their navigation of consumer culture emerged, and our approach developed from open coding to something more akin to axial coding (Strauss, & Corbin, 1998). All authors then re-reviewed the analytic categories, revisited the data, and wrote an agreed interpretation of the data, including the primary and secondary themes that were uncovered.

Table 1: Table of informants

Name[2]	Age[3]	Partnership status	Living arrangements[4]	Work/study status[5]
Lucy	18	Engaged to father of baby	Lives with fiancé in rented house	College (childcare)
Jenny	18	Single	1. Homeless (living in a shelter) 2. Council flat[6] with partner	College (catering)
Rosanna	17	Has partner (not baby's father)	1. Homeless/ mother and baby unit 2. Council flat with partner	College (access to employment course)
Debbie	17	Has partner (father of baby) but very difficult relationship.	1. Classified as homeless, but staying with mother 2. Lives with partner in council flat, pregnant with second child	On incapacity benefit[7]
Tina	17	Has partner (father of baby)	1. Lives with parents 2. Lives with partner in rented house	College (childcare),
Darlene	17	Single (very problematic/violent relationship with baby's father and his family)	1. Lives with mother in rented house (homeless immediately prior to interview) 2. Lives with sister in own council house	College (dental nurse)
Amy	17	Has partner (father of baby)	1. Lives with partner in rented house (homeless immediately prior to interview) 2. Lives with boyfriend in rented house in new area	College (hairdressing)
Pamela	19	Has partner (father of baby)	1. Lives with partner in rented house 2. Lives with partner in another rented house	Employed (waitress)
Justine	19	Has partner (father of baby)	1. Lives with parents; 2. Lives with parents (and partner)	Employed (care assistant)
Leah	18	Has partner (father of baby)	Lives with boyfriend in rented house	Waitress & college (childcare course)
Tamsin	18	Has partner (father of baby)	Lives with partner in his parents' home	College (childcare)
Olivia e	17	Has partner (father of baby)	Lives with parents	College (childcare)
Jade	19	Has partner (baby's dad)	1. Lives with parents 2. Has own council house	Employed (child care assistant)
The following informants were only interviewed once: just prior to the birth of their child				
Steph	19	Complicated relationship with father of baby	Lives alone in friend's house (rented)	Employed (waitress)
Bethany	17	Has partner (father of baby)	Lives with partner in rented house	Unemployed
Laura	17	Has partner (father of baby)	Lives with parents	College (equine)
Amber	17	Has partner (father of baby)	Lives with partner in rented house	College (general studies)

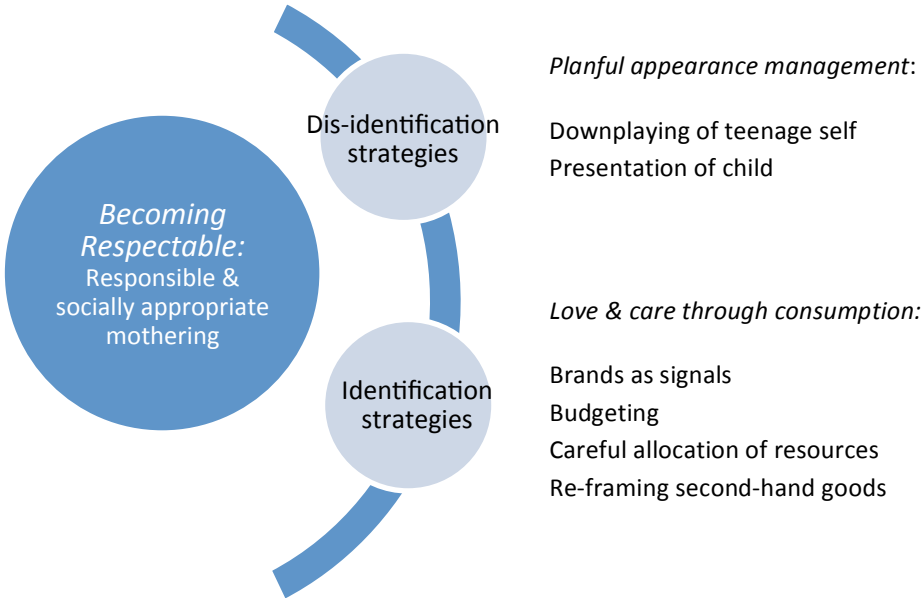
[2] All names have been changed (mother, baby, partner)
[3] Age at first interview
[4] First (1) and second (2) interviews (if different)
[5] Most of our informants had given up college/study in discovering they were pregnant and were receiving benefits at the time of the first interview, but this was their last occupation/course of study prior to becoming pregnant
[6] Public /social housing
[7] Welfare benefits/public assistance

Findings and interpretation:

Becoming respectable: consuming towards responsible and socially appropriate mothering

We began this paper with an extract from one of our informants who we feel encapsulates not only the issues faced by some young mothers (e.g. surveillance and judgement by others, feelings of conflict between their actual age and their status as mother, and an accompanying lack of confidence in their own abilities), but also a sense that the marketplace presents an opportunity to support or demonstrate (to others) how (well) she is doing as a mother. Embedded in this extract are two main approaches used by women in order to alleviate the conflicted status of young mother (as outlined in the literature review) and achieve respectability (Skeggs, 1997). These two approaches emerged from our data, yet are presented in brief – upfront - in order to help readers navigate the findings (figure 2). On the one hand young women seek dis-identification from the (perceived) flawed label of teenage mother. Consumption is key to this endeavour and helps young women to adopt an alternative, more mature positioning - a capable or good mother. In addition, consumption serves the function of aiding women in the demonstration of love and care which is central to the role of the good mother (identification strategy). So, in Debbie's case the purchase of expensive baby products provides support for her attempts to be seen as a good mother, both by herself and others.

Figure 2- Becoming Respectable: Working to produce a good mother identity



Strategies of Dis-identification:

Planful appearance management: the public presentation of the good mother

Prior academic work and media attention has focused on the pressure mothers face in maintaining a glamorous, groomed and composed image through pregnancy and motherhood – captured by the term 'yummy mummy' (O'Donohoe, 2006). However, this aspirational and somewhat mythical image incorporating an 'affluent, high-maintenance, high consumption lifestyle' (O'Donohoe, 2006) was not mentioned by our informants. Instead our informants seemed more motivated by the need to avoid negative imagery, which given their conflicted identity status (as *young* mothers) became centred on their relative youth. Informants used consumption choices around appearance and self-management to display a more mature image, informed by discourses of appropriate and normative maternal identities.

It became clear that certain styles of clothing were associated with young women by our informants. Here Jenny explains how her clothing and appearance has changed in an effort to present herself in a way that she (and others will) consider appropriate.

> I just cover up a lot more now. I don't wear all the low-cut tops and stuff that I used to... …if I was going round in low-cut tops and skimpy skirts and stuff... pushing the pram…people are going to look at me you know…. I wore make-up before and I don't wear as much now because I used to wear all brightly coloured eye-shadows and stuff like that but now I just stick to my browns and my golds and stuff. [Jenny, age 18,interview 2]

Jenny has changed her appearance to reflect an image she feels is more suited to parenthood and describes moving away from the 'young' and revealing clothes she had worn pre-motherhood and adopting a more sober colour scheme for her makeup. In describing how she

adapts her clothing and make-up, Jenny indicates an understanding of what she needs to do to present an 'acceptable' maternal identity. Her narrative reflects the concern demonstrated by Skeggs' (1997) informants who sacrifice a concern with 'fashion' for the sake of 'middle-class respectability' (p. 85). Jenny uses her clothing and appearance to dis-identify from the category of youth (Skeggs, 1997), aiming to 'mask' (Hamilton, 2012) her youthful (immature appearance) or at the very least deflect attention. Her efforts reflect the disparity between adolescent attributes and those attributes perceived to be indicators of *good* motherhood (Breheny & Stephens, 2007). The juxtaposition between her teenage self and the pram (a tangible marker of motherhood) she is pushing emphasises this. In fact this *incompatible* juxtaposition (child/adult role) has been picked up in popular vernacular and media, whereby the term 'pramface' refers to young mothers, or even those who look like they could be young mothers (as an insult) (Urban Dictionary, 2013). In attempting to present an acceptable maternal identity and avoid negative evaluation from others, Jenny seeks to 'pass' (Goffman, 1963) by constructing a more *normative* maternal identity. This is attempted through concealing the attribute which, in this context, leaves her most open to stigma and discrimination – her youth.

Jenny's concern with managing her youthful appearance contradicts the idealisation of youth found in other contexts (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006), but the source of the contradiction is her status as a mother. She no longer has society's permission to experiment with fashion, colour and skirt hem lengths as she is now in the fast lane to adulthood (Graham & McDermott, 2006; Yardley, 2008) and she has become focused on the need to fit in with society's conception of what a (good) mother should look like. Jenny's concern also reflects Breheny and Stephen's (2007) concern with the developmental discourse adopted by health professionals which is reflected in their treatment of young women as immature in their

outlook (and therefore unsuited to motherhood). Jenny's response to this potential stigmatisation is to appropriate items and meanings associated with acceptable mothering.

Other informants reflect similar concerns in their choices of clothes, as part of an endeavour to assume respectability in the eyes of others. However, it is also important to note that these appearance management efforts also reflect the impact of informants' cognitive age – that is the age they feel, rather than their chronological age (Guido & Amatulli, 2014). A number of our informants reported a disconnect between how they feel (since having a child), their age in real terms and the way they appear to others.

> Once you're a carrying a baby, you're not a child anymore. Sorry, I don't care, even if you're sixteen/fifteen, once you're carrying a baby you're not a child. [Pamela, age 19, Interview 1]

Whereas the concern with the public display of 'competent parenting ability' and the role of consumption choices in Ponsford (2011) focuses on the presentation of the child (see next section), our informants were very aware of the signals they transmitted in their personal choice of dress. They performed in line with a discourse which equated teenage motherhood with bad mothering and did what they could to distance themselves from what they saw as the typical image of a teenage mother, in order to seek a more respectable or legitimate mothering status.

Planful appearance management: Dressing baby 'appropriately'

Our informants' concern with appropriate appearances extended to their babies. Miller (1997) notes that at least in early motherhood the (middle class) mothers in his study took great pleasure in consuming for their children, and that this consumption 'should represent the stylistic aspirations of the parent' (p. 71). Presentable and well-mannered children are

taken to indicate that they are being brought up with care and attention (e.g. Hays, 1996, p. 84). Ponsford (2011) notes that for young mothers, in particular, the appearance of their children can provide 'a means of publicly displaying competent parenting ability and deflecting the negative value and pejorative judgement they feel is associated with youthful motherhood and poverty' (2011, p. 541). In the two extracts that follow, informants draw on the negative discourses surrounding young people and clothing choices, in order to seek differentiation from other young people. in the area in which they live. via their clothing choices for their baby.

> I don't want him in like tracksuits and stuff like that… because a lot of lads round here nowadays wear their tracksuits and I think it just looks tacky. [Jenny, age 18, Interview 1]

> My friend's got her son sort of like a fake Nike tracksuit and I don't like it.… he just looks like a little chav [laughs], I don't like it. [Tina, age 17, Interview 2]

Informants demonstrate their concern with consuming appropriately. For many this entailed not dressing their baby to look like a 'chav'. The chav identity myth (Cocker, 2013) was used as a form of distinction from negative youthful images of motherhood, an attempt to gain respectability (Skeggs, 1997). This represented a form of consumer protection or damage limitation, rather than the commercial myth making described in Thompson and Tian (2008). There were certain items (e.g. tracksuits) and brands (sports brands generally, but in particular Lonsdale) of clothing that emerged as associated with the chav image, and some women specifically channelled expenditure away from these items in order to differentiate themselves from the kind of person who would dress their baby in that way, which reflects the links made by Tyler (2008) between young mothers and the potentially stigmatising chav identity. These young mothers were effectively *othering* their peers in order to mark

themselves out as different – not *that* kind of teenage mother - practising dis-identification (Skeggs, 1997) in order to pass as a good, or socially appropriate mother. In so doing, our participants partially accept the chav label as applicable to their peers or the 'lads round here' (Jenny). That is, in steering away from consumer choices that may reflect a 'chav' identity, they become engaged in the policing of the *distasteful* consumption choices of *other* younger mothers (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition, through their emulation of what they perceive to be high-cultural capital consumption (i.e. not chav), they support and uphold normative middle-class standards of mothering.

So while we support prior work which positions consumption as a means of expressing love and care for their children (e.g. Miller, 1998; Ponsford, 2011) our narratives suggest the emergence of something more complex. Careful appearance planning helps young mothers to communicate, not just that they care, but who they are not, that is not *that* kind of teenage mother. While Ponsford (2011) sees consuming for the baby as providing a means to deflect signs of poverty, and poverty (and associated class status) may provide the structuring absence (Skeggs 1997), our informants perceived their youth as the most immediate threat to their attempts to become respectable (mothers) and consumed accordingly, deliberately avoiding signals which might associate them with other teenage mothers. Yet while consumption decisions are therefore positioned as important visible identity markers as to how well women are doing as parents, the reliance on consumer goods to achieve this risks excluding women (as low income, teenage mothers) further from that vision.

Identification strategies: demonstrating love and care through consumption

The opening extract by Debbie provides an example of the equation that is often made between expenditure and 'good mothering'. Rather than looking to her competencies as a mother (e.g. I give her lots of love, I play with her in ways that help her developmentally –

e.g. in line with markers of intensive mothering, (Hays, 1996)), Debbie turns to her interactions with the market to provide (herself with) proof that she is doing a good job as a mother. As already discussed, the extract illustrates her wish to dis-identify from the label of teenage mother, essentially a distancing strategy, but also incorporates consumption strategies of identification - in order to demonstrate capabilities as a good mother. In this section we will elaborate on this notion further, demonstrating how our informants used consumption to demonstrate their love and care for their child.

Identification: Brands as providing positive identity markers

Debbie's reliance on expensive products to achieve recognition of her mothering skills stems from her feelings of being under surveillance (Kirkman, Harrison, Hillier, & Pyett, 2001; Ponsford, 2011), a recognition that she risks being judged and criticised for failing to provide for her baby adequately, in particular given her low income and teenage mother status. Her focus on specific categories – nappies, milk and wipes – was common to many of the informants and demonstrates an emphasis on core items associated with everyday baby care. They are also categories where clear brand leaders (and associated advertising spend) exist, and are consumed in public environments where the threat of surveillance is highest. The focus on comparatively low individual cost items (but with a cumulatively high spend) could indicate an attention to items which offer her the highest returns with regards to identification – that is effective (identity) signalling yet with a comparatively small outlay (e.g. when compared with high cost baby equipment where buying a well-known brand can have much more of an immediately financial impact).

The prioritisation of expensive brands was most noticeable in decisions around the purchase of nappies (Ponsford, 2011). The vast majority of our sample chose to buy the more expensive, branded nappies (i.e. *Pampers* and *Huggies*) rather than cheaper supermarket own

brands. As illustrated in the following extract, the consumption of brands provides a visible sign of providing the best for their children, deflecting signs of poverty and signalling that the baby is being well cared-for, often following the example of their own mothers - thus once again challenging negative mothering stereotypes.

> We buy in bulk [*Huggies*], so they're not that expensive when you buy in bulk. I don't really look at any of the other ones. We were in between *Pampers* and *Huggies* because we like to get her good ones [Lucy, age 18, Interview 2]

Lucy also alludes to the careful management of resources (e.g. buying in bulk, looking out for offers) which emerged not only as an essential skill for our informants, given their challenging financial situations, but also provided important signals of 'responsible' or more adult parenting. In contrast to dis-identification strategies (distancing from teenage motherhood) this reflects an approach strategy – identifying with, and demonstrating, responsible parenting – and an essential aspect of becoming respectable. Lucy's careful allocation of resources and attempts to do the best for her child, fits with notions of prioritisation and selflessness (going without) which are integral to notions of being a good mother (e.g. intensive mothering (Hays, 1996)) and was one of the strategies through which informants were able to demonstrate care through consumption (Pugh, 2002). Being a good mother meant rising above personal financial circumstances and providing well for your child, as outlined here by Debbie:

> She's got everything, I always make sure she's got nappies, milk, food, clothes, the lot, baby wipes, I always make sure she's got everything before I get anything. I always have done and always will. [Debbie, age 17, Interview 2]

Informants describe the careful allocation of resources, in order that their babies' needs are prioritised and met. If there was nothing left over they would 'go without'

(Darlene). This is in stark contrast to the self-centred behaviour which is often attributed to young mothers (Breheny & Stephens, 2007) and fits more closely with Miller's observations concerning the selflessness of contemporary (new) mothers (1997) and Skeggs' (1997) emphasis on the caring self as a key signifier of respectability.

Brands could provide short cuts, both to identify quality products, but also as important communication tools, signalling a mother's commitment to her child. Paradoxically this finding contrasts with the actions of the primarily middle class participants in the VOICE (2010b) study who went some way to resisting the equating of 'good mothering' with expensive (and extensive) consumption and Miller's (1998, p.125) observation that materialism is the 'enemy' of middle class mothers. However, middle class women do not face the same pressure of negative evaluation on the grounds of consumption and level of expenditure, as their ability to meet the needs of their children in a financial sense is not questioned, they are able to seemingly cut corners yet still 'pass'. As such, this may lend middle class women the power to resist pressures to buy expensive new branded items (see next section). For younger mothers and mothers on low incomes, a demonstration of adequate financial means is necessary as the assumption will be that they may not have the income to provide for their children; consuming branded goods is seen as an efficient way to dispel such an assumption.

Reframing of second hand goods

A point of complexity emerged around the acceptability, or otherwise, of second hand goods. In many of the narratives, the importance of items for the baby (whether clothing or equipment) being new (or 'practically new' in some cases) was very important and reflected a reticence to purchase second hand goods, which has been noted elsewhere (e.g. Ponsford, 2011).

Second hand goods and hand me downs were interpreted in two ways by informants. Some women perceived second-hand goods, particularly in the area of baby rearing, as an admission of some kind of failure: an acknowledgement of a truth to the discourses surrounding young motherhood, reflecting a lack of responsibility in planning, the likelihood of the failure to cope, or of inadequate financial resources to provide for the baby and give it the best start once it is born (Ponsford, 2011). In the following example, Debbie finds herself unable to associate second hand goods with the demonstration of love and care through consumption:

> My mum wanted me to get a second-hand pram and I didn't want a second-hand pram because I thought well someone else has used it, it's horrible and no, I just don't want it. [Debbie, age 17, Interview 1]

In contrast to this, many of our informants re-positioned second-hand goods whereby they become valuable means by which low income women can prepare appropriately for the arrival of a new baby, practising responsible 'good mothering' on a tight budget.

A distinction was often made between those items with a known history (e.g. hand-me-downs from friends), and those where the history is unknown (Ponsford, 2011). This contrasts sharply with alternative contexts (e.g. some middle-class consumers) where second-hand goods are re-positioned as vintage or chic thrift shop finds, reflecting rich histories (which are part of the appeal) and expertise on the part of the shopper who has managed to hunt down such finds.

Acceptance of financial constraints

Second-hand items were used by some informants to reinforce a positive image of being prepared for motherhood and thus reflected an adult and practical approach to

managing the careful allocation of limited resources (in line with a strategy of identification). Within this context second-hand goods were deemed to be financially practical and purposeful.

Darlene discusses the importance of the imagery conveyed by pram choices, and suggests that her choice of a second-hand but 'decent' pram will contrast favourably with the prams that 'other' young mothers tend to use. In highlighting her consumption practices, Darlene attempts to differentiate herself from 'other' younger mothers so there is an interplay of strategies of identification (realistic assessment of her financial situation and sensible decision making in the light of this) and dis-identification at work ('a lot of young girls don't really have nice prams').

> I think when you have a pram, it tells you about the person.... I've noticed a lot of young girls don't really have nice prams… that's a nice pram. [I: When you say it tells you about the person, what do you mean?] Like cheap.... Because you can get a pram nowadays for £120 brand new, one of them prams that I've just been telling you about.... But I wouldn't have been able to afford a decent … a big … well I wouldn't have been able to afford a brand new pram, do you know what I mean? The one that I wanted, it was like £600-odd and I wouldn't have been able to afford that. So I just got one second-hand. [Darlene, age 17, Interview 1]

Darlene equates a 'decent', 'big' pram, with one that is expensive and implies that it is this (expensive) kind of pram that is needed in order to achieve the status of a good mother. She acknowledges that to buy a brand new pram of this description is out of her reach; however in buying a second-hand version she is able to attain a 'decent' pram, within her financial constraints. Moreover, Darlene positions this strategy as favourable compared with buying a new and cheaper pram, which she implies is not a decent or acceptable model. As such, she

prioritises the type of pram and positions the second-hand nature of the pram as of lesser importance. Through this, Darlene demonstrates responsibility and careful thought and planning into providing the *best* for her baby despite limited resources through turning to second-hand goods. Note here firstly, the similarity with the study of Danish mothers and their emphasis on the symbolic meanings associated with the choice of travel systems; and yet secondly also the contrast that can be drawn between largely privileged Danish women and these less privileged low income women (Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006) in the allocation of resources to expensive branded goods.

In coming to terms with accepting second hand items, some women embarked on a process of repositioning these items as fit for consumption. Here Jenny describes a conversation she had with her mother, whereby she was advised to accept second-hand items for her baby.

> My Mum turned round to me and said you want to take anything that you get given because you know, if you don't have the money to get it, then you're buggered basically. So anything that anybody's wanted to give me, anything, I've just took it...At the end of the day, it's things for her. I see it as people have given it to her, I don't really think of it as second-hand. [Jenny, age 18, interview 1]

Here, Jenny takes a fairly rational approach to the acceptance of second hand goods, one that is legitimized by her mother and acknowledges her difficult financial position. She also identifies the prevailing needs of the baby and positions the goods as gifts to her baby, which of course she will accept without question. In redefining the items as 'gifts', Jenny implies that she had an obligation, rather than a 'choice' to accept them – it would be unthinkable not to accept gifts for her baby. As such, she effectively removes the decision from herself – these are items that people have given to the baby, and not to her, so she is not in a position to

choose whether to accept them or not. Moreover, in framing the items as 'gifts' rather than as second-hand, she is able to side-line some of the negative connotations sometimes associated with second-hand items, such as poverty and prioritises her baby's needs.

Using an alternative repositioning strategy, a wicker baby basket is re-framed as a family inheritance. Tina uses terminology – 'heirloom' - which captures the informant's emotional attachments with the item, and therefore is endowed with all sorts of positive meanings, including tradition and sentimental value, which contrast with what could often be considered a more practical concern.

> I've got a wicker basket, which… it's sort of like a family heirloom sort of thing; I was in it when I was a baby and my sister's been in it and it's 43 years old because my Dad was in it when he was a baby. [Tina, age 17, interview 1]

The idea that these mothers reframe second-hand goods as gifts to the baby, family heirlooms, and as savvy ways to give children the best within a budget speaks to the various ways teenage mothers negotiate their identities using counter narratives and their need to justify the choice to consume second hand goods. Through constructing the cot as a family heirloom, rather than something that is 'second hand', Tina is able to reject the potentially stigmatizing nature of accepting second-hand goods – as an indication of not being able to adequately provide for her baby. This reframing of consumption meanings fits with the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) agenda of emphasising the productive aspects of consumption and the way in which 'consumer culture theory explores how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871).

Discussion

We began this paper with an extract from Debbie, a young woman on a low income, who, in questioning her proficiency in her new role as a mother, reveals the importance she attaches to choices around consumption and expenditure. The way in which Debbie navigates consumer culture and prioritises her spending speaks volumes about her (felt) positioning and classification in society. Skeggs (1997) identifies respectability as a concern only for those who do not have it: 'it is rarely recognised as an issue by those who are positioned with it, who are normalised by it, and do not have to prove it' (p. 1). Those who lack respectability are identified as lacking in social value or legitimacy (Skeggs, 1997). Our informants' (potentially positive) status as mothers is devalued with the teenage prefix, and marketplace responses are produced which aim to amplify love and care through consumption (Miller 1998) - a strategy of identification (with good/ socially appropriate mothering) - alongside distancing from the potential threat of the teenage mother, akin to the dis-identifications of working class women in Skeggs' (1997) study. Within this context, acts of consumption may be viewed as maternal identity work (Faircloth, 2013), providing young women with the means to demonstrate their competence in providing for their infants, a move towards respectability. We provide support for Ponsford's (2011) findings, that material culture and consumption is of value to young mothers as it provides them with a means to both demonstrate competence as a parent and also to deflect potentially negative evaluations of poverty or a presumed inability to adequately provide for their children. In short, it becomes a means through which these young women are able to demonstrate a caring self (Skeggs, 1997) through consumption (Pugh, 2002).

However, it is important to note the potentially problematic nature of these women's orientations towards 'good' mothering through consumption, particularly the purchase of expensive branded items. Women's susceptibility to branding and advertising, as they

struggle to consume to be a *good* mum, could risk increasing young mothers' vulnerability in the marketplace (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg 2005). Moreover, as argued by Ponsford (2011), whilst these consumption practices may be legitimised within the context of their peer group, paradoxically young women could be left open to further scrutiny and negative evaluation by society, whereby their consumer behaviour may be *publicly misread* and they may 'become the subject of a different moral judgement which asserts that they should not "waste" money on expensive items that they cannot afford' (p. 556). This has been picked up elsewhere (e.g. Wilson & Huntington, 2006) and reflected in the derogatory use of the term *chav*, used to demonstrate excessive consumption yet aesthetic impoverishment (Hayward & Yar, 2006) and as our findings demonstrate, this threat can be felt from both within and outside young mothers' immediate peer groups. Therefore, in seeking to become respectable (Skeggs 1997) some young mothers try, yet fail, to enact scripts associated with higher cultural capital, akin to the challenges faced by lower cultural capital informants in Ustuner and Holt (2010).

The means through which the young mothers in this study deployed various consumption strategies in order to 'pass', in Goffman's (1963) sense, through constructing an acceptable, more *normative* maternal identity is also potentially problematic. Whilst it is understandable that young women may feel the need to do this in order to deflect attention from, perhaps, their most stigmatising attribute as a mother – their youth - in doing so the normative middle-class ideal of motherhood is upheld and privileged. In this sense consumerism and the marketization of motherhood contributes to existing social barriers which prevent young low income mothers from feeling valued beyond their peer group in the production of positive mothering identities (Glass et al., 2013). From a Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) perspective (Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, 2011), the motherhood ideal needs to be challenged and dismantled in order to support low income

mothers and for *alternative* maternal identities to emerge, be accepted, and celebrated. In contrast with this endeavour there is the danger that the roles associated with the *good* mother will continue to expand (Hays, 1996; Furedi, 2008) so that an *acceptable* or *good* maternal identity becomes increasingly distant from the realities of young or low income women. Activities and experiences (like the baby massage classes, swimming lessons and music classes that are referred to in VOICE Group, 2010b) are likely to be far beyond the reach of young mothers, like those in our sample, yet these more experience-based expenditures and time spent with parents are known to make more of a contribution to children's development and well-being (Ipsos MORI & Nairn, 2011) than the material consumption discussed in our study and the Scotland/Northern Ireland based study of Glass, Hamilton and Trebeck (2013) where 'the purchase and display of consumer goods seems to be equated with good parenting' (p. 201). Very recent debates have highlighted the importance of the first five years to child development through play (Malik, 2013). From a policy perspective it is important that this message reaches young and low income mothers, but getting that message across could risk stigmatising young mothers further and projecting vulnerability, which in itself can cause harm and denigration (Baker et al., 2005).

Our paper builds on earlier research focused on the consumption experiences of low income women (Glass et al., 2013; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Hamilton, 2012). Despite a burgeoning interest in the *doing of family* (Epp & Price, 2008) and motherhood in a range of socio-economic circumstances elsewhere – for example in health, sociology, youth studies (e.g. Duncan, 2007; Ponsford, 2011; SmithBattle, 2000, 2005, 2006; Wilson & Huntington, 2005; Yardley, 2008) - there has been relatively little within the marketing discipline focused on those who do not fit the preconceived notions of typical mothers or consumers (with the important exceptions of Kathy Hamilton and colleagues). The dearth of material, within consumer research, focused on young and low income mothers is not surprising. The

informants in this study fit within the terminology of 'difficult to reach' research participants (Abrams 2010). For this present study, access was acquired through a long NHS ethics procedure which meant we could secure the help of a teenage pregnancy advisor for recruitment. However, once the study was explained to informants and access and informed consent secured a number of difficulties emerged, not least the challenge to physically keep track of our informants, many of whom were living in temporary accommodation at the date of the first interview (see Table 1). Unlike our prior work, which like much of the extant marketing/consumer research into motherhood tended to use more convenience based sampling methods and thus attracted mainly middle-class participants, the informants in this study were drawn from a different demographic and gave shorter, and sometimes more faltering narratives. We tentatively suggest that this could indicate struggles with the notion that they had something to say of interest to an academic researcher, but any reticence to engage more fully could also reflect other issues such as age or power imbalance or fears associated with presumed authority or disclosure. However, we believe we have gone some way towards forging an understanding regarding the consumption experiences of these women whose lived experiences reveal very different circumstances from many of the consumers in earlier studies (e.g. Thompson, 1996). However, it should also be acknowledged that one possible limitation in accessing our research informants using these means of recruitment is that we involved women who at least had some sort of support network (i.e. the NHS teenage midwifery service) and were happy to engage with an academic research study. So although their socio-economic circumstances were fairly typical of new mothers in this age group, in our account we may have inadvertently privileged the stories of those who were more likely to engage with normative ideals of motherhood than others in their peer group; and talked to those with higher social capital (in terms of being

embedded in supportive social networks) compared with women with lower levels of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Future research could explore just why the consumption element is so important to young mothers. Glass et al. (2013, p. 207) refer to this as 'cultural fraud', the encouragement (through upward comparisons) of aspirations and goals that are unhealthy because they are unattainable. The element of sacrifice that is so core to contemporary models of motherhood (e.g. Hays, 1996; Miller 1998) is played out via prioritising consumption around the baby informing an emergent mothering identity: 'young mothers re-image themselves as respectable, good providers and "good mothers"' (Ponsford 2011, p.556). Yet it is this very act of re-imaging (Ponsford 2011) and the counter narratives (Arsel & Thompson 2011) which are forged, that leave young mothers with low incomes open to exploitation by marketers (Baker et al., 2005; VOICE 2010a). The very commitment that our young low income mothers demonstrated to prioritizing socially acceptable mothering, via consumption practices, may have the effect of marginalising them further, within the market place and wider society.

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