**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**


FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES


Geography and Environment

2014


**THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC ROLE OF NCT NEARLY NEW SALES**


Second-hand consumption and middle-class mothering



by


**Emma Jane Waight**

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Doctor of Philosophy

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NCT nearly new sales are held across the UK as a service for local parents to buy and sell second-hand or used baby clothes, toys and equipment. This thesis investigates the social structures influencing participation, individual consumption practice at the sales (and of mothers at home) and the social role of the sales. With an emphasis on mothers as co-consumers, the study utilised a mixed-method approach of participant observation, interviewing and a quantitative survey across 13 sales/branches in the UK.

Findings suggest that the typical middle-class demographic participating in the sales are not financially or socially excluded from conventional first-cycle retail but rather attend the sales in order to get the best value for money and to buy extra, non-essential baby goods, as well as for social and moral reasons of reciprocity. The thesis explores the tensions and responsibilities of motherhood as enacted through consumption practice and structured by the themes of social class, thrift and co-consumption. As a diverse retail space, attendees with higher levels of social and cultural capital benefit most from the sales and are able to mobilise the sales for both material and social/cultural resources as a space of bonding and learning. Whilst not common, the sales can encourage further involvement with NCT as a parenting charity and in local parenting networks.

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# Academic Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

I, Emma Jane Waight, declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

The Social, Cultural and Economic Role of NCT Nearly New Sales: Second-hand consumption and middle-class mothering

 I confirm that:

1.  This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;

2.  Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;

3.  Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;

4.  Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;

5.  I have acknowledged all main sources of help;

6.  Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;

7.  Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed:

Date:        14.08.2015

# Acknowledgements

Warmest thanks to my academic supervisors, Dr Kate Boyer and Dr Nick Clarke for providing excellent guidance and support throughout this project, pushing me to think in new ways and ultimately helping me to produce a thesis I am really proud of. I simply couldn't have asked for a better supervisory team.

Many thanks too, to Mary Newburn for acting as retail link supervisor between myself and NCT and advising on the progress of the project. Without the support of all at NCT this project would not have been achievable. I would also like to sincerely thank all of the NCT branches and volunteers who took part in this study for welcoming me into their teams, letting me observe what they do and ensuring I never left without tea and biscuits. I extend this thanks to the participants who gave up their time to be interviewed or complete a questionnaire, each and every one contributed to the outcomes of this project.

Last but not least, heartfelt thanks to my friends and family and to everyone I have met at the University of Southampton over the last three years. Geography and Environment has been a wonderful place to be; the opportunities available and people I have met have shaped me both personally and professionally and will no doubt continue to do so. For support and guidance in relation to specific aspects of this thesis thanks to Elaine Rust, Alan Smith, Grant Aitken, Ellie Tighe, Peter Dutey-Magni, Alice Windle and Jessica Seymour for providing extra hands in the field, advice on statistics or map-making.

I am very grateful to the ESRC for funding this project through the RIBEN scheme, and to Professor Neil Wrigley and Dr Dionysia Lambiri for hosting RIBEN at Southampton.

Emma Waight

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Document outline

This introductory chapter begins by introducing NCT (formerly *The National Childbirth Trust*) by providing context to their work and charitable mission. Within this, nearly new sales are introduced as a key service offered by the charity and a site of second-hand retail. This leads to an overview of the research context and development of ideas which evolved from readings, meetings and initial observations of the sales. The chapter ends by stating the research aims and questions, which are referred to again in the methodology chapter and in later chapters, where applicable.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the existing <u>academic literature</u> positioning the project in the context of broader academic work. After introducing the thesis by looking at the history of consumption and key ideas in consumption theory, this is followed with an overview of work on second-hand consumption and mothering and consumption, including the social role of retail spaces.

Chapter 3 outlines the PhD project <u>methodology</u>. It opens with an outline of the theoretical tools and philosophical assumptions ascribed to the study, before continuing with an overview of the research design. Each stage of the data collection process is explained, followed by a discussion of the approach to data analysis. Finally the ethical considerations of the research project are outlined.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report on the <u>project findings,</u> each chapter directly related to one or more of the research aims. As a mixed-method study, each chapter includes both qualitative and quantitative data enabling triangulation throughout. Each chapter builds on the last to build a picture of NCT nearly new sales and their social, cultural and economic role.

- Chapter 4 focuses on describing who attends the sales, and the social structures influencing attendance. It also investigates the reasons and justifications parents provide for participating in the second-hand economy of the NCT sale.
- Chapter 5 considers the NCT sale as an unconventional retail site, situating it within the literature on informal, second-hand consumption channels. The chapter explores the material culture of the sales, what parents buy and what they do with what they

> buy. This extends to domestic consumption practices in the home and how mothers negotiate risk in terms of consuming items with unknown histories.

- Chapter 6 investigates the social role of the sale, framed by the institutional narrative of NCT as a parenting charity. It looks at the role of the material in facilitating bonding, and the organisation of the space as a site of learning.

Chapter 7 is the <u>concluding chapter</u> of the thesis. Drawing together the previous chapters, this chapter includes a discussion of findings and an outline of research limitations. Ideas for future research are listed after key contributions are discussed. There is also a brief overview of policy implications for NCT, acknowledging that outcomes for NCT were different to the academic outcomes of the project.

## 1.2 Introducing NCT nearly new sales

NCT is the UK's largest parenting charity. They aim to support new and expectant parents and act as a voice to campaign on behalf of parents. NCT was initiated in 1956 when Prunella Briance, inspired by the writings of Doctor Grantly Dick-Read, placed an advert in *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* inviting interest in the formation of an association to promote and better understand the Dick-Read system of natural childbirth. The organisation grew to obtain charitable status in 1961, slowly increasing their geographical reach and service offering (Moorhead 1996).

NCT have a central head office, but most of their work with parents occurs through local NCT branches across the UK. Via more than 300 branches nationally, NCT offer antenatal and postnatal courses (with a cost attached), coffee mornings and baby groups, advice and information, and nearly new sales. Parents are invited to become NCT members for £40 per year (with discounts for volunteers and low income families) but membership is not obligatory to participate in NCT's activities which are open to all.

The charity has a limited amount of data on their members and customers. Online support offered by NCT reaches approximately 1.2 million parents each year and 450,000 have accessed the NCT's events and helplines (Newburn 2011). As part of NCT's 2010-2020 strategy, the charity aims to benefit 20 million parents by 2020 by focusing on 'more growth, increased thought leadership and developing new partnerships' (NCT 2011).

Nearly new sales tend to run biannually at each regional branch offering parents the chance to buy and sell second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment with a commission or fee paid by the seller to NCT. During 2009 565 nearly new sales were held across the UK, generating £1.02m for NCT (NCT 2011). In 2010 approximately 750 nearly new sales generated a turnover of £4 million, of which £1.4 million went to NCT. This income was approximately 10% of NCT's total annual revenue and is therefore a core fundraising activity for the charity (Newburn 2011).

Nearly new sales vary from branch to branch in their size, scope and organisation, and have altered and grown over the years. Each sale relies on a volunteer nearly new sale coordinator, the voluntary NCT branch committee, and an army of volunteers to assist on and immediately around the sale day. Most sales are held in local school halls, town halls or church halls each spring and autumn, and are open to the public for just two to three hours. Sales operate in one of two formats; table-top or ticketed/commission based. For table-top sales, sellers pay a set price for a table at the sale and sell their own items, taking home all of the money they make thereafter. The ticketed sales however, are favoured by NCT as they are more profitable and offer an efficient service to buyers. They operate through a more commercialised system whereby sellers price their own items but NCT take control of them once they arrive on site. In this system NCT take 30% commission on everything sold with the remainder going back to the seller. NCT also fundraise through the sales in a number of other ways, for example by charging an entry fee, running a tea and cake stand, and/or charging commercial advertisers.

NCT have limited resources to invest in research in-house yet they were keen to develop a greater understanding on the role of NCT nearly new sales. NCT staff suspected that a large number of nearly new sale customers are members of the public that do not engage in other areas of support offered by NCT. They also suspected that nearly new sales have more to offer customers than primarily cheap, second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment, such as a means to practice ethical consumption and a way to socialise with other parents (NCT 2011). It was these empirical issues that inspired the project and were then reinforced in line with the academic literature. This PhD project was

funded by the RIBEN scheme[1], an ESRC initiative with the aim of bringing together academia and the retail industry in order to further knowledge. NCT acted as sponsor to the project, providing a proportion of financial support as well as in-kind support in the form of access to participants, internal reports and face-to-face advisory meetings twice a year. Having introduced NCT nearly new sales, the next section further defines how they are used in this project as a case study of second-hand consumption.

## 1.3 Research context

> The place of mothers and motherhoods in commercial life represents one of the great under-told stories of consumer culture (Cook 2013, p.75).

As will be explored in chapter 2, mothers as consumers have been little considered to date, yet offer a wealth of opportunity to explore consumption in relation to personal identity, the lifecourse, co-consumption practice and debates concerned with consumer agency versus social conditioning. Little is known about NCT nearly new sales, yet they are a nation-wide phenomenon affecting a large number of parents and as such provide a case study for accessing motherly consumption practice, as well as being an interesting case to explore the intricacies of second-hand retail. Investigating their role has implications for both the academic literature on consumption and social theory, and NCT's charitable strategy and development.

Findings of this study were largely categorised into chapters according to the research questions and literature review, yet there are key themes linking the thesis throughout. These themes are defined in chapter 7 as thrift, social class and co-consumption and developed as the main themes, when considered collectively, as distinguishing NCT sales from other consumption sites. They are discussed in relation to existing academic studies as I later describe both complementary and novel findings to surface from this thesis.

The research project was proposed in agreement with the following contextual factors:

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[1] Retail Industry Business Engagement Network

1. **Academic Research**

Retail has been a strong research area in Geography for decades yet it is only within the last twenty years that research has expanded to cover sites of second-hand or informal forms of consumption. Studies on charity shops (Brooks, Crewe et al. 2000; Horne and Maddrell 2002), car boot sales (Gregson, Crang et al. 2013), retro/thrift shops (Gregson, Brooks et al. 2001) nearly news sales (Clarke 2000) and U.S. style garage sales or thrift shops (Belk, Sherry et al. 1988; Medvedev 2012) have shown that by studying these diverse sites of consumption and exchange we can explore the intimacies of everyday, mundane consumption by reflecting on class, identity and material culture. A further gap exists in the consumption research on mothers as consumers, with existing studies emphasising the mother's emotional attachment to baby things, but with little regard to how consumption reflects practice (Clarke 2000; Layne 2000; Miller 2004). At the time of developing this thesis, just one in-depth analysis of nearly new sales had been published but even then this did not focus on NCT sales (Clarke 2000).

2. **NCT Strategy**

As part of NCT's 2010-2020 strategy, the charity aims to benefit 20 million parents by 2020 through focusing on 'more growth, increased thought leadership and developing new partnerships' (NCT 2011). Statistics from the Office for National Statistics Census indicate that there are more than 4.6 million parents in England and Wales with children under the age of four, and in 2012 there were 729,674 live births in England and Wales, the highest figure since 1972 (ONS 2012)[2]. It is known that NCT is not currently reaching many young parents with low and average levels of education, who may benefit from NCT's support and information. The NCT's Diversity Working Group found that services substantially under-represented parents with low and average educational qualifications and mothers under the age of 25 (Taylor 2011).

Nearly new sales have been proposed as one means for NCT to reach a wider audience. Nearly new sales are public events; customers do not need to be an NCT member nor pay a substantial fee in order to participate. Equally, they do not have to commit to engaging with the charity for a sustained time period, or

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[2] In Scotland there were 58,027 live births in 2012, a fall of 1% from 2011.

engage with a group of other parents or NCT practitioner, as is the case with some other services. The sales therefore, have the potential to attract a diverse range of customers, who may then, if they experience benefit, feel motivated to engage with NCT activities that require more of a commitment in terms of time, money or personal engagement.

### 3. Changing social and economic norms

As with all social research this project cannot be held in isolation to changing social norms and the broader influence of the economy. The global economic recession of 2008 added to pressure on family finances in the UK, pushing parents to seek cheaper alternatives for baby clothes, toys and equipment. Although this thesis is not an economic impact study, such context should still be considered, especially as statistics suggest one in five parents bought more second-hand items for their children between 2008 and 2011 in order to save money (Mintel 2012).

There is also scope to consider the changing nature of second-hand consumption within societal norms. Indeed studies purport a decrease in the stigma attached to buying second-hand goods (Franklin 2011; Horne and Maddrell 2002) and an increase in politicised or ethical consumption (Brown 2013; Gold 2004). As such there seems no better time to explore the intricacies of second-hand consumption practice and the motivations there of.

This research aimed to investigate and explore what happens within the locale[3] of the NCT nearly new sale as a means of gaining a greater understanding of the motivations for purchasing second-hand baby items. The primary focus was the experiences of customers while a secondary focus fell to the experiences of sellers and volunteer organisers, recognising that participants often took on multiple roles. I was interested in gaining insight into the kinds of people who attend the sales and what motivates them to participate. I was also interested in the social, economic and cultural resources and opportunities they gain from participation.

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[3] 'Locales refer to the use of space to provide the settings of interaction, the settings of interaction in turn being essential to specifying its contextuality' Giddens, A. (1984). The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration. Cambridge, Polity Press.

## 1.4 Research aims and questions

This research aimed to identify who attends the nearly new sales and why they attend, as well as investigating what participants gain from attendance and engagement with the sales. The existing literature on social theory and consumption offered a number of themes to explore in this case, which will be fully explained later in the document. For now, the research aims and questions are highlighted to provide context for further reading.

1. **To identify the social structures and justifications leading to parental participation in NCT nearly new sales.**

    a) **What is the current NCT nearly new sale customer demographic and social reach?**
    b) **What reasons do customers give for attendance at NCT nearly new sales?**

2. **To identify the social, cultural and economic resources and opportunities gained by parental participation in the locale of the NCT nearly new sale.**

    a) **What do participants do at the NCT nearly new sale?**
    b) **What do customers purchase at the NCT nearly new sale?**
    c) **What do the customers do with the items that they buy?**
    d) **What do customers say that they gain from attendance to NCT nearly new sales?**
    e) **What can we infer that customers gain from attendance to NCT nearly new sales?**

3. **To evaluate the social role of the NCT nearly new sale.**

    a) **Do NCT nearly new sales promote and produce social inclusion and/or bonding and if so how?**
    b) **How do nearly new sales connect parents, if at all, to other NCT services and broader parental networks?**

## 1.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter has introduced the case of NCT nearly new sales, providing context for the research project and listing the rationalisations promoting its development. The research proposed aimed to investigate the role of NCT nearly new sales, with a focus on the social role. This follows existing studies

on second-hand consumption that note the social significance of such sites. The questions posed prompt investigation into who attends the sales and why, and what resources they gain from participation. This is novel research with implications for both furthering academic debates on consumption and social networks, and for NCT's policies. The next chapter reviews the existing literature, both empirical and theoretical, in line with these themes.

# 2  Review of the Literature

## 2.1  Introduction

> Consumption is simply a process of objectification - that is a use of goods and services in which the object or activity becomes simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct our understandings of ourselves in the world (Miller 1995, p.30).

Material anthropologist Daniel Miller (1987;1995b;1999) is a fundamental figure in highlighting the importance of everyday consumption as not just a market-led phenomenon but a crucial element of social life. More than simply an act of purchase, consumption is considered in this thesis a continuous *process* of consuming/partaking in/using up and disposing of a good or service. It is intrinsic to everyday life and a way in which we construct meaning, assert identities and even practice acts of love (Bocock 1993; Miller 1999). By studying consumption as a *social* process as much as an economic one, scholars can address various aspects of what it means to live, work and play in a society structured by social relations living in a capitalist system.

The research questions framing this doctoral project are structured around sites of retail, social relations and stratification and second-hand consumption practice, each situated within the context of parenting. This creates a vast spread of literature to explore. The first geographical approaches to consumption studies, in the 1970s and 1980s, took a spatial approach to the subject limited to distribution patterns and the corporate economics of retailing (Johnston, Gregory et al. 2000). It was during the 1990s however, that consumption studies took a stronger footing, both in Geography as the social and cultural sub-disciplines gained credence, and in the subject areas of Sociology, Anthropology, Business, Marketing and Humanities. The cultural turn in Geography thus paved the way for a study of consumption in light of wider social practices including gender, family and community. This review therefore focuses on consumption as a practice bound within other practices (Warde 2005) and treats it as such for the point of analysis.

As far back as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, economists Adam Smith and Thorsten Veblen, were exploring the role of consumption and its

influence on social stratification; placing it at the heart of a modern market society (Appleby 2003; Watson 2012; Veblen [1899] 1994). Consumption scholarship to date has considered the history of consumption and commodities (Miller 1995c; Trentmann 2004), global capitalist culture (Featherstone 1998), the symbolic value of commodities (Miller 1995a; Baudrillard 1998) as well as social class and distinction (Bennett, Savage et al. 2009; Bourdieu [1979] 2010), amongst other topics. Such research has found that unlike Veblen's (1899 reprinted 1994) rather pejorative positioning of consumption as socially divisive, consumption also has a pivotal role to play in globalisation (Ritzer 1995), can enhance socialisation and homophily between actors (Miller 1999; Crewe and Gregson 2003), and offers an opportunity for identity construction and self-expression (Friedman 1995; Barnett, Clarke et al. 2011). The review of the literature considered in this chapter therefore aims to provide an overview of this scholarship, situating the modern Western consumer as we know him or her in the twenty-first century, arguing that consumption affects construction of identity, formation of relationships, and framing of events, all of which are relevant when considering the topic of this thesis, NCT nearly new sales (Lunt and Livingstone 1992).

It is necessary to note that I chiefly situate this project in the consumption literature whilst drawing on debates from the broader retail literature and scholarship on material culture. The NCT nearly new sale can be considered a site of retail, albeit second-hand or 'alternative' retail. Retailing itself has changed dramatically over time and particularly for the UK during the last half a century, with the growth of covered shopping centres, out-of-town retail parks and the origin of internet shopping (Amazon.com launched in 1995), all spurred on by globalisation and a proliferating consumer culture. Retailing literature has tended to focus on spatial analysis, business, corporate structures and supply chains, although the 'new retail geography' of the 1990s certainly encouraged more consideration of consumption practice, theory and an awareness of the micro as well as macro space (Wrigley and Lowe 2002).

As an informal or alternative retail site, NCT nearly new sales are not structured by the same factors driving much of the existing retail literature (retail locations, corporate structuring, branding etc). Rather, the focus of this project lends itself to a cultural/social geography perspective, being interested in individual as well as collective consumption practice and considering the

continuous lifecycle of goods to include an investigation into how they are consumed in the home. Later in the thesis, in section 5.2, a table highlights the precise ways in which NCT sales are similar or differ to conventional retail sites.

The last decade has seen an increase in material culture scholarship led largely by the schools of Anthropology, Archaeology and Cultural Studies. Such work focuses on object analyses with an emphasis on cultural context (Meskell 2005). I draw on aspects of this work in order to understand the cultural significance of consumption, particularly work by Miller (1987; 1995; 1999), Appadurai (1986), Belk (1988) and other scholars who have since drawn on their theories.

With this in mind the rest of the chapter is structured as follows:

Part 2.2 – Starting with an exploration of consumption in context, I look at the way consumption is organised within capitalist societies from early commodity trade, through Fordism, Post-Fordism and the contemporary 'Postmodern' society. This is coupled with the establishment of a more complex engagement with material culture, charting the beginnings of sign-value understood as a fundamental characteristic of commodities and a way in which consumers use goods to construct their identity. This section ends by drawing on the literature concerned with social distinction, taste and socialisation, showing the way in which consumption plays a part in these social relations by relating it to empirical examples analysing home shopping parties.

Part 2.3 – Having provided an overview to consumption in context, part 2.3 focuses on the life-cycle of things post first-purchase. This section explores the recent literature concerned with second-hand retailing looking first at sites of second-hand consumption, particularly car boot sales, charity shops and nearly new sales, and followed by a look at second-hand consumption practice and the social lives of 'things'.

Part 2.4 – The final section of this chapter draws on the arguments posited earlier on consumption as an everyday practice and on alternative forms of consumption, by focusing on mothers as consumers and providers of care. I explore the gendering of consumption and commodities, focusing particularly on household provisioning and care work as both a form of consumption and

of unwaged-labour. Following this, I also look at mothers as 'co-consumers' and the love, anxiety and identity construction that can shape this practice.

## 2.2 Consumption in context

This section begins by charting consumption from a historical perspective, providing context to the theories and empirical studies described later in the chapter. First, let us consider the way consumption has been conceptualised over time. One could argue that all humans consume for a purpose, thus the role of consumption cannot be comprehended without some appreciation to the ends pursued through consumption (UNDP 1998). For social scientists this is no easy task, since the ends pursued through consumption vary and are difficult to quantifiably trace, being both socially and culturally situated as well as shifting over time (Bell and Valentine 1997). Without exception humans require some level of consumption in order to meet the basic physiological needs required for survival, but it is the consumption over and above this level that sparked widespread interest amongst scholars as an avenue for exploring identity construction, socialisation, social class and the relationship between people and material things.

Academic literature on consumption largely centres on the binary opposition of need and want. 'Need' in this sense originates from the Puritan-inspired utilitarian ideology, restricting consumption to the lowest level of consuming goods for their practical use-value; we *need* food in order give our bodies energy and we *need* clothes to provide warmth and protection from the elements (at least in temperate climates). In contrast 'want' or 'desire' emphasises a Romantic-inspired pleasure-seeking agent/consumer, consuming for reasons other than or in addition to the practical use-value of goods (Campbell 1998). It is often argued that much consumption in the modern Western world is driven by want/desire or 'false needs' rather than physiological need (Marcuse 1964). This form of consumption is labelled the contemporary consumer culture, a modern phenomenon often decreed excessive, or conspicuous consumption motivated by a complex web of provocations closely tied to societal norms (Trentmann 2004).

Whilst the notion of 'false needs' has positioned over-consumption in a negative light, consumption has long held a fundamental role in people's daily

lives. Indeed the ebb and flow of goods has been a feature of life for both the rich and poor in the UK and elsewhere throughout time (Lemire 2005). Smith (1776, 1, p.31), well aware of the mutability of used goods, described in the eighteenth-century a poor man's ownership of old clothes which, 'he exchanges for other old cloaths which suit him better, or for lodging, or for food, or for money, with which he can buy either food, cloaths or lodging, as he has occasion.' At this time, material goods were highly valued and used as currency for exchange in the absence of money. Clothing in its simplest sense serves as protection from the elements and guards one's dignity; its importance in society spans time and geography. Expensive to buy new, clothing commonly came second-hand at the time Smith was writing, having been passed down from the middle- and upper- classes to their servants, or more commonly, produced by hand in the home.

By the nineteenth-century the use of alternative currencies, such as bartering with clothes, was in decline; less frequently called upon within the middle-classes but still used by the working class who carried such goods as 'a substitute savings bank' (Johnson 1983, p.157, cited in Lemire 2005). Consumption could be considered highly socially situated at this time as the middle-class sought to create a permanent material world in their homes and in their dress whilst the working poor continued along a different path only gradually intersecting with fully monetized routes of exchange as industrialisation took hold (Lemire 1997; 2005).

The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries began to elicit a binary way of thinking between production and consumption. Where previously much of the household consumption was also produced in the home, society began to move towards a consumer culture where commodities were more regularly brought in from outside the home (McDowell 1999; More 2000; Trentmann 2004). Mass industrialisation made the production of commodities faster, easier and cheaper, and hence more jobs opened up in the manufacturing industry leaving workers more able to spend their wages on newly affordable goods (Gabriel and Lang 2006). This was the start of Fordism, initially the system of creating a sustainable marketplace by recognising the potential of workers (producers) as future customers (consumers). Although stemming from the automotive industry, Fordism as a system or concept would

be used across the manufacturing industry, in time becoming a way to conceptualise a socio-economic system of production (Allen 1992).

The era of Fordism has also been described as marked by, 'an homology between mass production, mass consumption, massified provision of public services and modernist cultural forms' (Burrows and Marsh 1992, p.5) and could be recognised also for its gendered division of labour. Yet in the second half of the twentieth-century, emphasis in the Global North shifted from a society based on production to a society based more heavily on consumer culture, as production moved to the Global South (Bauman 1998; McDowell 1999). The post-Fordist era emerged, characterised by the rise of service and white-collar workers, the feminization of the workplace, the growing Welfare State, mass consumption and postmodern cultural forms (Burrows and Marsh 1992; Slater 1997). It is difficult to do justice to this transformation in just a few paragraphs, indeed as Ash Amin (1994, p.1-2) writing two decades ago said:

> It seems that capitalism is at a crossroads in its historical development signalling the emergence of forces - technological, market, social and institutional - that will be very different from those which dominated the economy after the Second World War . . . The age of postmodernity will extend the frontier of consumerism into all areas of social and private life, including aesthetics, art, leisure, recreation and pleasure.

Consumer culture became synonymous with the postmodern era, and expenditure increased in line with a growth in consumer choice. Technological developments and a globalised workforce pushed the price of goods down, allowing consumption of goods to be more readily integrated into daily lives (Featherstone 1998).

The UK is now part of a global consumer society. Much has been written about this consumer society as it emerged in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century, focusing on the insatiable desire of agents/consumers and the role of advertising and branding in order to sell. Bocock (1993, p.54) argues, 'there is nothing natural about modern consumption' yet it has, arguably, become a customary act for so many in the Global North. Indeed the focus has shifted from a society consuming in order to survive, to a society desiring and consuming for a complex web of other reasons related to social pressures and

personal identity. This has been labelled the postmodern society, a cultural state following modernity which could also be referred to as the consumer society (Featherstone 1995;1998).  Postmodernity and postmodernism tend to be differentiated in the literature; both being open to ambiguity. Fredric Jameson (1988, p.193) describes postmodernism as a style, but also as new cultural normativity. It is:

> A periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order.

The emphasis here is clearly on the 'new', which could be said for any major shift in social and economic life. Postmodernism tends to focus on discussions surrounding literature and the arts, with postmodernity or the postmodern condition being used to reference the economic or cultural state of society more broadly. David Harvey (1989, p.vii) argued that:

> These changes appear more as shifts in surface appearance rather than as signs of the emergence of some entirely new postcapitalist or even postindustrial society.

Postmodernity then, is not a complete shift from what has gone before, but rather provides an opportunity to extend the definition of 'being' by placing more meaning on cultural influences. Therefore whilst the theoretical consensus on postmodernism/postmodernity is still in flux (more than two decades after Jameson and Harvey started theorising about it), perhaps one of its key features in light of a review on consumption is as an era breaking down dominant cultural norms, shifting from class-based consumption practices to consumption practices based more heavily on symbolic identity (Burrows and Marsh 1992; Hey 2005).

Whilst Karl Marx provided an early model for the analysis of capitalism and his theories continue to influence economic, political and social theory, he could not foresee the growth of consumer culture as it stands today (Bocock 1993). The postmodern consumer generally faces daily consumption decisions fed, we might argue, by a desire to emulate particular lifestyles (Bourdieu [1979] 2010). Rather than consumption based on needs and organised around the

senses, postmodern consumption is structured by fantasy and the semiotics of the retail environment and mass media (Campbell 1987).

There remains much theoretical debate over the agency attributed to individual consumers. The relationship between the encoded and decoded semiotics between media producer and consumer is complex and difficult to measure. In their book *The Unmanageable Consumer*, Gabriel and Lang (2006) position the consumer as 'game-player' seeking to 'win' (among other positions). The authors argue for consumers' adoption of risk-reduction strategies, as they choose products in order to position themselves socially. This is why, they suggest, brand identity and advertising have become so prolific in the postmodern society, as competition between brands has intensified and consumers look to names they trust and lifestyles they wish to emulate. Advertising and branding transforms what could be considered the mundane practice of consumption into the Romantic spirit of consumerism. Indeed Harold Perkin, quoted in Campbell (1987, p.19) decreed:

> If consumer demand was the key to the Industrial Revolution, social emulation was the key to consumer demand.

Campbell argues that Romanticism played a critical role in facilitating the Industrial Revolution and in shaping the structure of the modern economy. The consumer society has generated interest from social scientists precisely due to its ubiquitous presence in society as a whole. As Alan Warde (1994, p.71) posits:

> Consumer purchasing poses awkwardly the classic sociological dilemma, of explaining individual action that is in one sense highly autonomous, but where there are nevertheless powerful inter-individual patterns.

It is the complex motivations and justifications of consumer practice which most interest social scientists, along with the everyday, mundane, consumption practices that construct our daily routines and bring/bind people together (Shove 2009). Indeed, working from the discipline of Sociology, Warde has pushed for greater critical engagement with consumption and theories of practice, arguing that whilst the body of academic work on consumption is substantial, there still lacks a theoretical consolidation. A key concept I draw on from Warde (2005, p.137) is, 'consumption is not itself a practice but is,

rather, a moment in almost every practice.' If we adopt this view then the study of consumption becomes a means of studying all manner of practices, as most practices require some level of consumption. Drawing on Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, Warde (2005, p.146) positions consumers neither as 'sovereign choosers nor dupes' but rather as reflective agents able to manage their personal practices, which they do so on a daily basis as, the author argues, reflexive and routine practices of ordinary consumption co-exist (Warde and Gronow 2001).

Alongside Warde, Miller (1999) too emphasised the everyday nature of consumption, focusing through his work not on the spectacle of the retail site, but on the ordinary shopping and provisioning which take place at the supermarket and within the home. Miller goes beyond the historical dualism between subject and object, arguing instead for the relationship between people and things and the way in which social relations are created through consumption practice. In *A Theory of Shopping* (1999), Miller discusses an ethnographic study which he carried out on a North London street for a period of a year. He argues that everyday consumption practices are more than just fulfilling the most basic physiological needs, but are also linked to social relations, love and care. Rather than being an individualistic practice, consumption, according to this school of thought, is about acting out devotion for another; an idea particularly pertinent when considering mothers as consumers (Miller 2004). This type of provisioning had been previously neglected as a form of shopping, however Miller teases out the key acts of treat and thrift which constitute the modern household and shape their everyday consumption choices.

### 2.2.1 Symbolic consumption and identity formation

Having provided a brief outline of production-consumption theories to date and the shifting role of both in Western societies, I now wish to discuss in further detail the relationship between the subject and object. The way in which scholars view commodities and the system of exchange has changed over time. In Marxist economics, commodities are considered primarily for their exchange-value and use-value. Exchange value is the value that a commodity can be exchanged for other things, whilst use value considers the

usefulness of the commodity to the owner (Marx 1976; Beasley-Murray 2000); this is the simplest and perhaps most intuitive way of considering value.

Economic systems produce commodities with use-value in order to appeal to consumer needs and meet a specific requirement (Johnston, Gregory et al. 2000). This is the basis of the capitalist order, with the emphasis on production for exchange and profit. Initially Marx theorized that use determines value in the sense that commodities are only valued by consumers in relation to how useful they are. The gap between the commodity value produced by a worker and his wage is a form of unpaid labour and known as surplus value or market profit. Marx's labour theory of value argued that the exchange value of commodities should equal the labour time enlisted to produce them, yet other scholars rejected this, as did Marx by the time he came to publish *Capital* in 1867 (Keen 1993).

Inspired by the writings of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Marx began to part with his labour theory of value, contesting the notion that commodity value equals the labour time used in production. Marx ([1867] 1976) argued that the value of goods is not an inherent property of objects, but an evaluation made by subjects and is therefore susceptible to alteration across time and space. Moreover, Marx argued that markets tend to obscure the social context of value and semiotics that influence how much a consumer is willing to pay; he called this commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism transforms the abstract aspects of economic value into objective, real things which people believe have intrinsic value. Commodity fetishism prevents people from seeing the capitalist system for what it is, argues Marx, a system whereby the factory owners exploit the workers (the proletariat). The notion of commodity fetishism has proved inspirational for aspects of cultural theory concerned with material culture and the political economy.

Jean Baudrillard (1972) called on commodity fetishism to help explain the subjective feelings of agents towards consumer goods, developing the semiotic theory of sign-value. The notion of sign-value vastly altered the way consumer culture was theorised. Discontent with the notion of exchange-value and use-value alone, sign-value argues for the symbolic value of goods; the attributes of an object which enable the consumer to construct and display their personal identity. Breaking away from the Marxist model of capitalism, Baudrillard

adopted a structuralist approach to consider the use of language and signs to understand the rise of consumerism in the Global North (Bocock 1993).  The ability then, to consciously or unconsciously construct or express a personal identity through consumption relies on the availability of choice (Gabriel and Lang 2006). If we understand that all objects come with a symbolic value, a unique sign capable of carrying meaning, then we can begin to explore the ways in which actors harness their power to negotiate consumer choice in order to construct their own meanings (Baudrillard 1998; Amin and Thrift 2002).

The sign-value assigned to an object by a consumer is embedded within social and cultural relations, and structured within a particular setting. A retail site is full of signs and symbols inscribed in part by the brand or producer of that site, but open to interpretation by the consumer. Advertising and branding is heavily embedded with the signified, but as consumers have become more shrewd, advertising executives have had to change tack, digressing from a hard-sell approach in favour of appealing to human emotion to nurture a sense of belonging (Gabriel and Lang 2006). The message to consumers is often about striving for greater happiness and success through consumption (Durning 2006). As Mort (1988, p.215) suggests:

> Cultures of consumption are the point where the market meets popular experience and lifestyles on the ground.

That is, the symbolism entwined within contemporary consumer culture ensures demand continues to drive the market, as we strive to narrow the gap between aspiration and everyday life.

George Simmel (1978), building on the work of Marx, stated that we place value on objects that we desire, and that are not readily available.  Therefore, the financial cost of rare or covetable goods (in accordance with contemporary fashions) can be increased in line with consumer competition. Furthermore, objects which hold little financial value to most, may hold a symbolic value of great importance to one person; therefore value *is not* a given and *is not* permanently inscribed on a particular item. Indeed in material culture any one object can carry multiple meanings and evoke different associations for different individuals; so whilst meaning can be inscribed on an object, it is constantly negotiated by the subject.

Russell Belk (1988, p.1) considers material objects as the 'extended self'. He states:

> We cannot hope to understand consumer behaviour without first gaining some understanding to the meanings that consumers attach to possessions.

Belk's (1988) concept of the 'extended self' is fundamental to contemporary accounts of consumer behaviour, shifting consumer research from a dualistic market-consumer perspective, to a richer discipline of research focused on broader social/cultural structure and action (Crang 1996). A number of scholars around this time shifted their attention to the power afforded by material objects, reinforcing Belk's (1988, p.1) argument that 'we are what we have'. As such, use-value has been replaced in prominence by sign-value in academic accounts of consumption and an understanding of the symbolic significance of objects in building a particular cohesive lifestyle (Bauman 1988; Baudrillard 1998).

Evidence supporting the position that objects and possessions contribute to a sense of self and allow for continuing bonds is found in a range of studies including those on second-hand consumption, the reactions to loss of possessions, memorialisation, theoretical property rights and inheritance (Belk 1988a; Finch and Mason 2000; Layne 2000; Gregson, Brooks et al. 2001; Maddrell 2013). Indeed we can learn about and define ourselves, and project a sense of identity about ourselves through possessions (Belk 1988). As we shall see later in the chapter, a significant body of work on motherhood and identity has been explored in recent years, looking both at the role of consumption in the transition to motherhood and the continual role of materiality in nurturing the identity of the mother (Prothero 2002; Clarke 2004; Layne, Taylor et al. 2004). At pivotal points in the life-course, consumption practices have been found to help the transitional process, but they can also be responsible for provoking further anxiety as new identities are explored (Bailey 2001; Verplanken and Wood 2006; VOICE 2010). Again, such evidence supports the claim that consumption and material culture are closely related to identity.

At the theoretical level the close relationship between consumption and identity formation has been expressed by the likes of Zygmunt Bauman (1988) and Anthony Giddens (1991).  The freedom of choice offered by postmodern

consumer culture entails a commensurate element of personal responsibility and as with any choice, there is the very real possibility of making the 'wrong' one (Bauman 1988; Warde 1994). For Bauman (1988) this freedom and the subsequent threat against the construction of personal identity is a source of anxiety for consumers. As Bauman continued to publish into the nineties, his work focused further on highlighting the uncertainty of the post-modern condition, sketching out an insecure or frightening society for agents to negotiate (Bauman 1997; Kellner 1998). Such work followed the work of scholars who had been writing on the 'risk society' (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Giddens 1998).

The (anxious) autonomous consumer imagined by Bauman is to Warde (1994, p.71), 'over-individualised and under-socialised'. Indeed for Warde (1994) it is through socialisation and group identification that consumer anxiety can be managed. Tactics are appropriated to limit the possibility of making a mistake and for Warde these tactics involve information seeking and discipline of action. Warde (1994, p.896) goes on to explain, 'Those for whom choice matters are highly informed about the proper things to consume'. With strong links to Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, Warde thus suggests that for those most reliant on a particular identity construction in order to maintain social status, consumption decisions are given greater consideration, and through this consideration and subsequent mobilisation of human and cultural capital, consumption decisions can be better-informed. Therefore, consumers *most* threatened by the fear of self-sabotage, are the consumers *best* equipped to negotiate appropriate consumption practices. Whilst Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) created a complex class classification of consumers, Bauman (1988) distinguishes just two broad social categories – the seduced and the repressed.

According to Bauman (1988) the seduced are fully immersed in consumer culture. They have autonomy over the market, yet are susceptible to a yearning for the lifestyles depicted through advertising. Commodities play a central role in their lives as a way to construct identity and display status. In contrast, the repressed are those who lack the resources to enter the market as a free agent. Excluded from consumer choice, such consumers become intrinsically entangled with state institutions (Warde 1994). The seduced and the repressed can be categorised by their level of, and ability to mobilise, economic, social and cultural capital, the origins of which come from Bourdieu (1986). Such

categorisation therefore suggests consumption is both structured by and used to distinguish social class or status, the subject of which is discussed in the next section.

### 2.2.2 Social distinction, taste and social fields

As already emphasised, consumption over and above that required for survival is closely related to the symbolic value of goods, class and taste (Burrows and Marsh 1992; Longhurst and Savage 1996; Bennett, Savage et al. 2009). Bourdieu was one of the key contributors to this concept; his work regularly drawn on by contemporary scholars across disciplines (but particularly by sociologists, having been less popular with human geographers) (McKeever and Miller 2004; Reay 2004; Warde 2004). Bourdieu uses the concept of capital to explore the ways in which consumption practices reflect class. The concept of capital itself can be traced back to Marx and defined as, 'an investment of resources with expected returns in the market place' whilst social capital can be defined as, 'an investment of *social* resources with expected returns in the market place' (Lin 2009, p.19). Bourdieu (1986) uses economic capital as a metaphor to help understand social life. He argues that all capital is accumulated labour, and therefore takes time to foster and that, just as in the financial market, capital resources can be exchanged. The forms of capital can briefly be described as follows:

- Economic capital is what we might traditionally consider capital, as a resource directly convertible to money.
- Social capital is made up of social obligations and social ties - directly correlated to access to social networks and convertible to economic capital when mobilised effectively.
- Similarly, cultural capital can be used to access further resources and is also convertible into economic capital. It can be institutionalised as human capital through educational qualifications or similar (Bourdieu 1986; Grenfell 2008).

The accumulation of capital provides access to resources which can further one's place in society. Whilst Bauman (1987, p.1988) argued that people are no longer placed solely in society through lineage or class, (instead being responsible for constructing their own identity through practices of consumption), class and consumption still remain a fascination to scholars and fundamental area of research (Burrows and Marsh 1992; Crompton 1996; Skeggs 2004; Bourdieu [1979] 2010).

In *Distinction:  A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (originally 1979) Bourdieu asserts that the core mechanism governing the process of consumption is the struggle over class (or distinction) with the ruling class defining the boundaries of aesthetic taste. 'Taste' as represented in this manner, distinguishes the class levels of society, 'it functions as a sort of social orientation' (Bourdieu [1979] 2010, p.246).  Actors are categorised according to taste and attracted to those of a similar habitus to themselves (Bourdieu [1979] 2010; Rafferty 2011). Habitus (Bourdieu [1979] 2010) commonly refers to the habitual or typical condition of the body; the values, dispositions and lifestyle of a particular social group which in turn influence social practice. In this way, consumption practices are both structured by and reproduce class differences, as actors strive to reproduce identities and foster a sense of belonging through consumption practice (Bourdieu [1979] 2010).

Veblen ([1899] 1994) coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' in his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* as the lavish use of money to manifest status (i.e. consumption fuelled by desire) and the term has remained in use ever since. Veblen stated that class identity rests on patterns of consumption rather than occupation and that in every capitalist society there is a standard of wealth which confers prestige to those who surpass it and embarrassment to those who fall short. However, since the rise of postmodernism and the cultural turn across the social sciences, some emphasis has shifted to social distinction as displayed through cultural and social capital rather than economic capital. We should therefore consider Veblen's late nineteenth-century writings as historically situated before a post-Fordist era of mass consumption.  Veblen states (1994, p.105):

> Our dress, therefore, in order to serve its purpose effectually, should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labour.

The aim, as witnessed by the above quote, was to distinguish oneself above the proletariat through conspicuous displays of dress, dress being the simplest way of drawing such a distinction due to its ubiquitous and highly visible role in daily life. Bourdieu, in contrast, would argue that whilst distinction does occur through taste, this is not purposeful but rather an unconscious influence of the habitus.  Dress remains a conspicuous form of consumption in the

twenty-first-century, the difference being that with the growth of mass manufacture and mass consumption came wider access to new, fashionable clothes.  It is now easy to emulate the upper and middle-classes through visible displays of dress not least with the rise of counterfeit branded goods and affordable mass-produced commodities. This has led to groups of middle and upper-classes searching for alternative forms of distinction through consumption, often achieved by mobilising other forms of capital (Bennett, Savage et al. 2009).

Social capital is often studied in relation to social class and wider social stratification (Field 2003; Furstenberg and Kaplan 2004; Welshman 2006; Hulse and Stone 2007). Social stratification describes the systematic structures of inequality in society which structure opportunity, advantage and disadvantage (Crompton 1998). Whilst we have seen the ways in which consumption can be utilised for social distinction, it can also intensify social exclusion, as there must always be an excluded group in order to distinguish the eminent group.  Wilk (2001, p.246) declares:

> Consumption is in essence a moral matter since it always and inevitably raises issues of fairness, self versus group interests, and immediate versus delayed gratification.

These issues of fairness, self-interests and gratification relate both to the capitalist model of production-consumption and the stratification within consumption itself as an arena accessible via a hierarchical assemblage of accumulated capital. Certain forms of consumption are inaccessible to low income or otherwise socially disadvantaged groups, due either to a lack of economic capital available in order to exchange for goods and services, or due to a lack of social and/or cultural income accumulated, depriving agents of access to particular social fields.  The rise of the consumer culture has been accused by some as directly accountable for a loss of a community who historically relied on one another to assist with family provisioning and care work in times of austerity (Putnam 2001). Instead of sharing amongst the community, the contemporary consumer is more likely to pick up cheap goods of all kinds along with the weekly food shop. Lunt and Livingstone (1992, p.149) state:

> Because money allows the anonymous exchange of goods without dependency ties, it erodes traditional dependency ties within communities, and so market relations tend to take over communities and undermine existing cultural ties.

The erosion of these 'dependency ties' is not particularly new. The market was influencing local communities long before the First World War yet it is since the Second World War that the disintegration of the community has begun to concern scholars and policy makers (as opposed to being considered progressive) (Putnam 2001). Over the last fifty years our lives have become more disparate, rather than relying on neighbours and our local shops, we work further afield and consume shops and services from a wider geographical area, often prioritising the convenience of supermarkets to fill most of our consumer needs. In opposition to this Bauman (1988) argues that in contemporary postmodern society it is consumption itself that cements the social system and the everyday experiences of individuals. This supports Warde's (2005) claim that consumption is an ubiquitous feature of social practice. The existing literature would therefore suggest that consumption can be both socially divisive and socially cohesive in relation to the setting and to macro and micro scales.

As a third point and in addition to the overwhelming consensus that consumption plays a key role in social stratification, both structuring and being structured by class difference and taste, consumption can play an equally important role in encouraging socialisation between actors, being used as a tool to create bridging and bonding ties. Such socialisation is more prevalent amongst agents of a similar habitus, already able to occupy a shared field, yet the public nature of many retail sites create a condition for bridging ties by encouraging interaction across social groups (Watson 2009; Stewart, Browning et al. 2014).

I now wish to turn our attention to a tangible example of the way in which the theoretical tools described above can help social scientists explore the social role of consumption and the way in which sites of consumption are enacted via social networks. This is relevant to my study because I am interested in exploring the social role of the NCT nearly new sales to investigate the range of ways that the sales can/do benefit parents. Having read the literature on

home shopping parties I feel that they provide a useful case study in exploring the social role of consumption, women and consumption and non-typical retail environments.

Home shopping parties are fairly common amongst middle-class, and, to a lesser extent, working-class, consumers in the UK and the US. Predominantly attended by women, such events are led by a host or party planner and provide demonstrations and the opportunity to purchase clothes, make-up, lingerie, kitchen products and children's books, amongst other commodities, in a home-party setting, generally ascribed to one particular brand or theme. Like the NCT nearly new sale, home shopping parties turn a setting usually associated with some other use (i.e. the domestic home) into a temporary retail space. This form of consumption is explored by Storr (2006) through an ethnography of Ann Summer's parties and Clarke (1999) through an historical depiction of Tupperware parties. Both provide sanctioned all-female gatherings and offer a space for learning, social interaction and, of course, shopping.

These shopping parties are hidden from the public sphere and as such, attendance is entirely structured by social relations. The women (and in the experiences of Storr and Clarke it was women, but not forgetting that other parties may well include men) attending these parties belong to the same social network as the host, either directly or through a mutual social contact. This network is most likely to be geographically localised, with a basis in wage-labour relationships, cultural/institutional relations (school, university, religious or interest-group connections) or neighbourly ties. These are therefore spheres of consumption structured by social inclusion and exclusion, those included are simply those 'in the know' with the social networks in place to be granted an invitation. Similarly, the party host must mobilise her social capital in order to ensure the party is a success, relying on a strong social network in order to generate attendance. In sum, the field of consumption is arranged entirely by social networks.

For Clarke (1999) Tupperware parties in 1950's America offered a space for women to interact, relax and generally escape everyday domestic responsibilities (apart from the host who has guests to care for), under the auspices of home-making duties. The success of the parties, Clarke (1999, p.107) posited, was down to the way in which 'a woman could combine a

neighbourly visit with armchair shopping.' This suggests the way in which consumption through the home shopping parties enables socialisation, offering convenience as well as leisure and thus strengthening existing social ties. Such parties bring women together, facilitating networks of emotional support in an informal setting.

This is in stark contrast to the concerns of Lunt and Livingstone (1992) who discuss market relations in the context of undermining existing cultural ties. That said, the organisation of these parties do push women back into the home, a place historically regarded as the private sphere of the family (McDowell 1999). However rather than being the lonely, recurrent 'prison' of a home pronounced in early feminist critiques of domesticity (McDowell 1999, p.79), the home environment described by Clarke and Storr is supportive and societal. Shopping in this manner provides a tangible purpose for fostering social ties in women's otherwise hectic daily lives structured by care and provisioning duties. Through demonstrations and by using things as a vehicle to foster socialisation, women learn, share stories and swap advice, bringing everyday actions normally confined to the private sphere of the home to a wider audience.

Whilst Tupperware parties nurture an image of women as home-makers and care givers, Ann Summers parties encourage the sexualisation of women, in contrast to the domesticated Tupperware lady. Ann Summers launched the party plan concept in 1981 as part of a broader theme of women's liberation initiated in the 1960s. The parties enabled women to transgress social taboos in the safety of their own or their friend's homes and are still popular now (Storr 2003). Both of these shopping party examples facilitate the construction of femininity and prescribed gender roles through the symbolic value attributed to the commodities available, albeit capitalising on very different traits. The relaxed nature of the home shopping experience enables women to explore their identities through material culture as an experimental and experiential form of consumption. The women can try things out/on and discuss potential purchases with a group of friends or peers, in a way not always possible through the restrictions upheld in everyday life.

Whilst one could argue that kitchenware and underwear are useful, both party plans rely on appealing to consumer desire rather than 'need' in order to be

commercially viable. The host benefits from commission and/or discounted goods and the company has profits in mind, so whilst the parties may have positive (or negative) social outcomes for attendees, one could argue that the events are commercially driven. Therefore through demonstrations, literature and a well-rehearsed sales pitch, the parties encourage attendees to desire a particular lifestyle and offer solutions (in a material form) in order to move towards those aspirations. This can be perpetuated over time, as parties infiltrate social networks with each person wanting to benefit from the perks of hosting. These parties then, not only encourage socialisation and the benefits this accrues but also offer an opportunity for competition and a desire to 'keep up with the Jones' (Clarke 1999). This returns to the literature previously discussed, looking at the ways in which consumption practices can perpetuate social bonding *and* segregation.

To conclude this section, Tupperware and Ann Summer's parties provided two illustrations to highlight both the social role of consumption and the way in which consumption is used to construct, reinforce and nurture personal identities and gender norms (and the social competition this incites). These same features will now be explored in part 2.3 of this chapter which reviews the existing literature on second-hand consumption.

## 2.3 Second-hand shopping and 'alternative' consumption

The following section considers the cycle of commodities from acquisition, through use and to disposal, by providing a critique of the existing literature concerned with second-hand consumption and the flow of material goods. As stated in the introduction to the chapter, this literature review has been narrowed down to focus on the point of consumption rather than material culture per se however, as I am considering used goods with an object biography, consumption cannot be considered without at least some reference to the social context of material life.

The term 'second-hand' is used to describe goods which have not been purchased new from conventional retail outlets but rather have already been owned and used by another person (Gregson and Crewe 2003). Whilst second-hand is the term commonly used in the UK and adopted by key authors including Gregson and Crewe (2006) and Horne and Maddrell (2002) (also

'second-cycle'), in the US and other parts of the world the term 'thrift' is often appropriated and mirrored in the corresponding literature (Arnould and Bardhi 2005; Medvedev 2012). Thrift in this thesis, however, is used in the more general sense as a term suggesting resourcefulness and a skill in consuming more for less money.

The NCT nearly new sale is both a site of consumption and a site of disposal, facilitating the movement of used baby goods through communities. Baby and children's clothing and other baby goods are well-suited to second-hand exchange networks being little used before a child grows out of them (Gregson and Crewe 1998). Having provided context to the role of consumption to date, this section narrows the focus of investigation to consider theories of second-hand consumption and divestment relevant in helping to understand the phenomenon of the NCT nearly new sale.

Sites of second-hand consumption have seen significant growth over the last thirty to forty years as the stigma and shame attached to such exchange has diminished (Crewe and Gregson 2003; Franklin 2011). Although it could be argued that second-hand consumption was the original form of consumption fuelled by necessity, individuals now choose to consume second-hand goods for a wide range of reasons (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Crewe and Gregson 2003; Arnould and Bardhi 2005). The increase in environmental awareness has some part to play in this trend as a reaction to over-consumption, but there are many complex political, social, economic and moral contexts which emerge that will be explained in the following section (Franklin 2011).

Sites of second-hand consumption are commonly put into a category of 'otherness' distinct from first-cycle retail sites. With retail stores and shopping centres traditionally providing a basis for studies on shopping practice and consumption, periphery sites of consumption in academic scholarship include markets (Coles and Crang 2011; Watson 2009), charity shops (Brooks, Crewe et al. 2000; Horne and Maddrell 2002), car boot sales (Gregson, Crang et al. 2013), retro/thrift shops (Gregson, Brooks et al. 2001), supermarkets (Miller 1999) and the home (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Jayne (2006, p.93) cites these as 'inconspicuous consumption spaces' and whilst they may be structured by mundane, everyday consumption practices I would argue that not all of these forms of consumption can or should be labelled as inconspicuous, especially

as the likes of charity shops have become more closely aligned with conventional retail channels through the visual encoding of space and professionalization of the market, something which will be considered in more detail later (Horne and Maddrell 2002).

As indicated by the cited work, these studies have mainly been imagined since the late-nineties as a later addition to work on retailing and consumption, yet they have significantly added to contemporary debates on the social role of consumption (Belk, Sherry et al. 1988b; Watson 2009), social stratification (Williams and Windebank 2002) and the construction of identity through sign value (Gregson, Brooks et al. 2001). Furthermore, studies have travelled across time and space with Lemire (1997;2005) providing in-depth documentation of the second-hand clothing trade in the UK from as far back as the seventeenth-century and the likes of Brooks (2012;2013) exploring the journey of Western second-hand clothing to be traded in Africa. Whilst global movement of second-hand goods tend to flow from the Global North to the Global South, Norris (2005) charts a counter-flow in the market for old Indian sari fabrics entering the UK to produce patchwork cushion covers and blankets. In this instance, fabrics are reimagined as a new product, often leaving the Western consumer ignorant to the previous life of their 'new' commodity, according to the author. As a consequence of globalisation, the world is heavily linked through production-consumption networks and the flow of goods (Leslie and Reimer 1999).

Material flows are significant at both the household or community scale, and at the macro scale of global commodity networks. In the following text, I will be exploring the role of second-hand consumption within the context of the existing literature, focusing on the UK second-hand goods market, predominantly with empirical studies on charity shops, car boots sales and nearly new sales. After a discussion of consumer behaviour within these settings, attention turns to divestment practices and the social lives of things.

### 2.3.1 Sites of second-hand consumption

By their very nature forms of second-hand retail vary greatly, from the precarious bric-a-brac stand at the side of the road to the formal vintage shop carefully coded to encourage construction of a particular identity. Second-hand

retail sites are generally considered informal, exempt from many of the conventions influencing regulated shopping sites. Whilst some are situated within purpose-built shops, others are placed temporarily in alternative spaces – a playing field in the case of car boot sales, and school or village hall in the event of nearly new sales. Whilst these spaces might be described as 'alternative' retail sites, informal exchange networks are deeply embedded in the history of society itself. When commodities were hard to acquire, high in price due to their rarity, goods and in particular clothes, were traded through informal second-hand economies. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, 'Brogers' or 'pledge women' went from house to house, buying and selling clothes, textiles and homewares in British cities and towns (Lemire 1997, p.99). This was the easiest trade for poor women to enter, where the needs of neighbours and the ease of resale was guaranteed, where second-hand consumption was considered neither alternative nor irregular. It was simply a part of life.

Of course, social norms change over time and second-hand consumption is now either hidden through informal exchange networks, or compartmentalised within charity shops, second-hand shops and the like. Charity retailing is the most conspicuously placed form of second-hand consumption as charity shops have increasingly encroached on the UK high street (Owen 2013). Charity retailing can be traced back to the late nineteenth-century, when William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army organised for donated goods to be collected from well-off Victorian homes to then be sold at 'salvage stores' across London (Horne and Maddrell 2002). The primary purpose of this was to provide household goods and clothing to the poorest families but they have since been appropriated as a fundraising activity and way for charities to increase their public presence.

Charity shops as they exist today boomed in the 1980s and by 1997 there were more than 6,000 shops run by charities such as Oxfam, SCOPE and Age Concern England (now Age UK) (Horne and Maddrell 2002).  Stores have become more professionalised and more closely aligned to first cycle sites of exchange, borrowing many standard retail practices such as size ordering of clothes, mannequin displays and selling goods online (Gregson and Crewe 2003). A significant way in which charity shops are run differently to other retail outlets however is their strong reliance on volunteers (Horne and

Maddrell 2002). Charity shop volunteers alone contribute approximately £150 million worth of labour annually, calculated at the UK national minimum wage (Goodall 2000).

Although the primary purpose of charity shops is to raise funds for the charity concerned, there is still a suggestion that these types of shops have a duty to provide for the less well-off in society (Chattoe 2000; Horne and Maddrell 2002). As a less formal retail space, charity shops have been considered more accepting of those on the margins of society, for example, welcoming in the homeless man who would likely be escorted out of the surveillanced space of the shopping centre (Horne and Maddrell 2002). The charity shop functions as a social space, where generations and ethnic groups mix through the practice of second-hand shopping (Brooks, Crewe et al. 2000; Crewe and Gregson 2003). This social role is mirrored in the literature on car boot sales, US garage sales and nearly new sales, all of which bring buyer and seller together to share anecdotes and information through the medium of the material (Belk, Sherry et al. 1988; Clarke 2000; Crewe and Gregson 2003). Such consumption activities have been found to play a recreational role in the lives of consumers, who enjoy the process of browsing and finding objects perceived to be a bargain or with nostalgic value.

Retro or vintage shops have an 'alternative' appeal with creative use of retail space coded to suggest visually specific readings of second-hand goods, for example, retro shops can look like curated galleries or alternatively, like an over-spilling wardrobe full of 'treasures' (Gregson and Crewe 2003). More so than charity shops or car boot sales, which are geared towards the cost-saving benefits of second-hand consumption, vintage or retro shops are heavily reliant on the symbolic geographies inscribed in the exotic nature of the past (Gregson, Brooks et al. 2001; Crewe and Gregson 2003). Such spaces allow consumers to explore and construct personal identities away from the market of mass consumption, yet despite the overt suggestion that they allow free and individualised identity construction, they are nonetheless still curated by those managing the shop, who display a selection of goods chosen for their perceived value to consumers. In profiling vintage fashion, DeLong et al. (2005, p.23) state:

> Wearing vintage is primarily about being involved in a change of status and a revaluing of clothing beyond the original time period or setting, and only secondarily about markets for resale of clothing.

Therefore the authors profile the vintage aesthetic within the sphere of personal identity construction and taste, rather than pragmatic, economic or ecological necessity. Vintage shops can vary in their level of exclusivity, relying on the commodification of history and rarity in appealing to consumer desire for distinction in an age of mass production (Dubin and Berman 2000; DeLong, Heinemann et al. 2005). As already stated, vintage shops are carefully curated much like a mainstream retail outlet selects their seasonal product line. As spaces heavily inscribed with the signified, they rely on the desire of consumers to part with their economic capital in order to acquire culturally symbolic commodities.

Figure 2.1 shows different forms of second-hand retail within a matrix of symbolic to pragmatic value, and expensive to cheap cost. This I drew based on evidence from the existing literature, yet it should only be viewed as a general guide to highlight the sharp differences across the various sites of consumption. In practice different sites vary within these types. Charity shops, for example, have been separated into high and low forms to show that there are both specialised vintage stores and very cheap local stores within this category. That said, the literature suggests that consumers are likely to frequent shops of charities they support, whilst ethically motivated consumers may shop in low level stores even if they are not excluded consumers. There could be more symbolism attached to charity shops then as opposed to nearly new sales and house clearance shops that tend to be focused on meeting a need. It is also important to note that 'pragmatic' refers simply to the symbolic value of the practice as opposed to the efficiency of the practice. Hunting around car boot sales, for example, can be very time-consuming.

Car boot sales sit far down the disposal continuum and as such tend to sell basic goods unless they are organised as collector's fairs. Indeed, car boot sales are a very British affair and have been studied to date for their social role (Gregson and Crewe 1997; 2003) and for their role in material disposal (Gregson, Watkins et al. 2012; Gregson, Crang et al. 2013). On a macro scale, car boot sales are heavily structured by regulatory power and actualised within

the limits of local planning practice and laws. Yet, on a micro scale, car boot sales can be a highly unregulated place of consumption, a breeding ground for crime and consumer deception (Crewe and Gregson 2003).

**Sites of second-hand retail**

Symbolic

Antique shop & high-end vintage

Low-end/thrift vintage

High end charity shop

Expensive ———————————————————— Cheap

Low end charity shop

Nearly new sale

Car boot sale

House clearance shops

Pragmatic
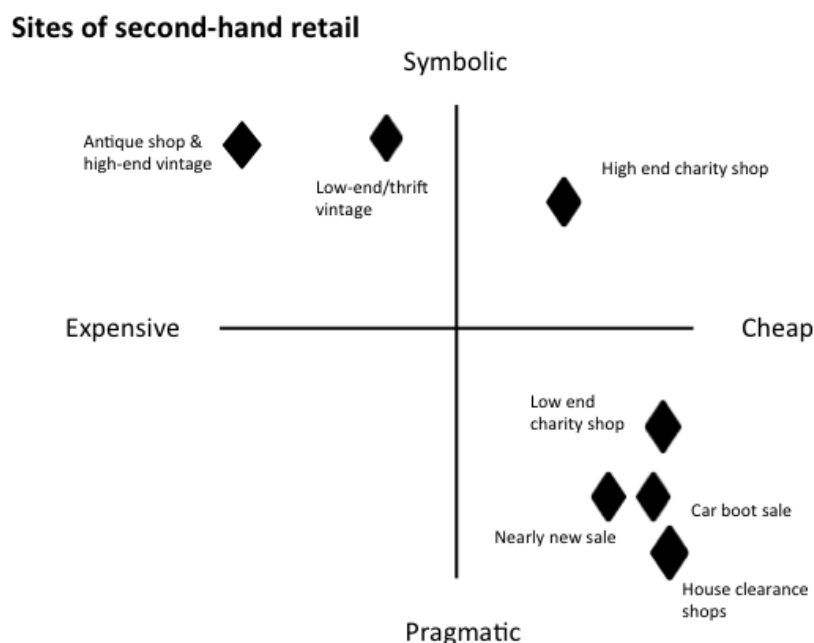
Figure 2.1: Sites of second-hand retail and types of goods sold

Despite this, consumers have been found to enact great skill within the space of the car boot sale in order to acquire the objects they desire at the best possible price, thus taking advantage both of the informal nature of the consumption space and the ability to liaise directly with the seller (Gregson and Crewe 1997). Emphasised too in existing studies, is the importance of learned consumer practice and the way in which success within this alternative economy is generated through an accumulation of knowledge grounded in participation (Crewe and Gregson 2003). This can generate economic savings through the mobilisation of a particular form of cultural capital.

Harrmann (2004) analysed the gender differences in haggling at the US garage sale, a process which provides both pecuniary and psychological empowerment by allowing the consumer to articulate their knowledge of material value and practice their skills of negotiation. Haggling, or bartering, can only be achieved

through buyer-seller interaction and as such enforces a social element to the transaction. Harrmann concluded that men were more likely to haggle than women, with women showing greater sensitivity to the process by considering the context of timing (women, Harmann found, are more comfortable haggling towards the end of the sale), the value of the item and whether the seller could afford to accept a lower price. Women too were more likely to be influenced by the sentimental value of objects allowing emotion to sway patterns of bargaining. The reasons for haggling were one and the same though, justified through the desire to save money and the personal satisfaction gained by saving money (Harrmann 2004).

Not far removed from the make-up of the car boot or garage sale is the nearly new sale, a term used in this instance to describe retail sites selling second-hand/used baby and children's clothes, toys and equipment. Clarke (2000) completed a research study on nearly new sales run by a North London mothers' group (not part of NCT) to explore their role in family provisioning, support and socialisation.  Clarke (2000) uses the term 'trafficking' to describe the movement of the children's wear from one family to another, colloquially suggesting an 'underground' form of consumption. Clarke (2000) finds that regular discussions take place on the 'sales floor' of the nearly new sale as buyer and seller exchange anecdotes and use the items for sale as mutual reference points to their own family life.

Entrenched in the material culture of children's wear are the identities of women as mothers who vicariously consume through their children. The bazaar-like atmosphere of the sale is shaped by friendship and solidarity as much as thrift, as the buyers and sellers feel united both as parents and members of the particular mother's group and as shared users of the field of the nearly new sale.  This friendship through association creates a greater level of trust than in other, less personally entrenched, sites of exchange. Notions of risk and consumer anxiety, a factor particularly prevalent in motherly consumption (Layne 1999; VOICE Group 2010; Afflerback, Carter et al. 2013) will be explored in the final part of this chapter.

## 2.3.2   Second-hand consumption practice and the social life of things

Consumption practice and the social life of things are intrinsically linked when considering second-hand goods due to the nature in which consumer decision-making practices cannot be separated from the knowledge that the commodity in question has a prescribed history of use by another.  There is increasing awareness and interest in the journey of new commodities prior to consumption, primarily linked to ethical concerns of worker exploitation and environmental degradation (Vitell and Muncy 1992; Brown 2001; Humphery 2011) yet here I focus on the social life of things after their first-cycle point of purchase.

The cycles of material culture as part of the social structure of society gained interest from scholars as a result of the cultural turn (Williams and Paddock 2003). Appadurai (1986) argued that important insights could be gained into the politics between exchange and value by studying the social life of commodities. He said that the meaning people attribute to material things is complex and shows great insight into the human and social context of things, which in turn tells us something about social relations. As an example, this is evidenced in part through gifting which acts as a social contract used to display love and symbolise gratification, but also used to manipulate and impose superiority (Sherry 1983; Mauss 1990; Wooten 2000). A gift, according to Mauss (1990), is never really owned by the receiver but instead continues to belong to the giver through the social contract of reciprocity it represents. Objects can therefore carry with them meaning, a reality considered either a worth or a limitation to ownership depending on what the consumer desires through the object.

Because objects are capable of carrying meaning, consumption is part of the ongoing process of creating and maintaining personal identity (Miller 1995b). This is as relevant for everyday goods and objects in the home, as it is for expensive conspicuous goods. McDowell (1999, p.71) citing Heidegger, says home 'is the key location in which a spiritual unity is found between humans and things'. This is due to the intimate manner in which people and things live side-by-side and interact in daily life. As the study on nearly new sales focuses on consumption of goods which will largely be used in the home, and certainly stored in the home, an awareness of the body of work on domestic

consumption is certainly pertinent (Miller 2001; Reimer and Leslie 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Casey and Martens 2007). Whilst mothers are co-consuming on behalf of another, it has been argued that the material culture of childhood offers an opportunity to explore the way in which children are viewed by, and socialised into, society (Hamlett 2013). This in turn is able to tell us something about the norms and expectations of childcare, and the identities of those responsible for childcare.

Whilst motherly consumption practices are viewed as conceptualising the present or looking ahead to the future (in terms of needs, desires and hopes for the child) historically inscribed symbolic meanings attached to goods are also used by consumers in a bid to materialise memory and/or create linkages with the past (Miller 1987; Finch and Mason 2000). Indeed Weiner (1985, p.210) states, 'the object acts as a vehicle for bringing the past time into the present.' This creates an element of nostalgia, as witnessed through the increased interest in vintage styles, the ability to return to an era that one could not partake in historically or to recall an era that one did live through and remembers fondly. In terms of vintage fashion or antique homewares, the consumer is able to draw on such items in order to construct a desired identity in the present. Other historically inscribed meanings however, relate to the desire to prolong a link to a particular identity, rather than work on maintaining a newly constructed one.

Goods can be inscribed with a personal symbolism related to previous elements of one's life and people who are no longer part of that life. The notion of inheritance for example, can consolidate family relations across generations, and objects can be materialised as a coping mechanism for bereavement. Maddrell (2013) looks at memorialisation and the way in which continuing bonds can be created by materialising the 'absence-presence' of the deceased. This symbolic value requires active cooperation on the part of the owner/consumer, as without a commitment to maintain the symbolic association of the material, the object becomes detached from its authentic biography which it has previously been ascribed (Finch and Mason 2000; Layne 2000). The meaning is therefore socially and culturally situated rather than an objective value of the item.

Whilst some objects may be passed down through family and friends without monetary exchange, others are purchased second-hand on the open market. The existing literature has consistently found a difference between consumers who choose to purchase second-hand and those consumers who are forced to by financial situation. Studies have labelled this latter consumer the 'excluded consumer' (Williams and Windebank 2002; Williams and Paddock 2003). In exploring the notion of the excluded consumer as a neglected aspect of social exclusion, Williams and Windebank (2002) identify heavy reliance on second-hand cycles of consumption in the lower income populations of their study cities, Southampton and Sheffield. In many cases they found that first-cycle mainstream shopping outlets were the preferred choice for purchasing goods but second-hand was all that many of the participants could afford. Of the six household goods that subjects were questioned on in the study, 61% had acquired them through alternative (second-hand) sites of exchange (Williams and Windebank 2002).

A growing literature however, suggests that motives can be more complex than financial necessity. An American study by Arnould and Bardhi (2005) suggested that second-hand shopping (thrift) combines both utilitarian need and hedonic treat. This can be related back to the Puritan 'need', Romantic inspired 'desire' binary introduced at the beginning of the chapter; second-hand consumption straddles both and as such it is difficult to tease out consumer motivations. Working on Miller's (1999) statement that there are two types of shopping, provisioning and hedonic, the authors argue that more than any other type of shopping, thrift straddles both of these constructs. The authors' research is based around a study of five thrift shops over the course of a year and interviews with consumers who shopped there. They found that thrift shopping is not planned according to seasons, being led more by opportunity. The practice of second-hand consumption allows shoppers to indulge themselves or others (hedonic benefit) with little financial impact (utilitarian need).

Guiot and Roux (2010) take this analysis a step further by attempting to identify the motivations for second-hand shopping, which has previously not been studied in any great depth. Their eight-point motivation scale identifies the diverse reasons why consumers partake in such an exchange. Guiot and Roux (2010, p.366) list these motivations as follows:

1) Search for fair price
2) Gratificative role of price
3) Distance from the system
4) Ethics and ecology
5) Originality
6) Nostalgic pleasure
7) Treasure hunting
8) Social contact

All of these reasons are touched upon in the previous literature, but this is the first time they have been collated in list form.  Although some consumers may buy second-hand items for moral reasons, to reuse goods and shun modern materialism, Guiot and Roux suggest that cost and value is the main motivation, a finding backed up in other literature (Williams and Windebank 2002; Crewe and Gregson 2003). Crewe and Gregson (2003) too, state that they have not, on the whole, found second-hand shopping to be a politicised practice (i.e. an environmentally or socially ethical act).  However, considering their research was carried out a decade ago this may have changed considering the significant increase in environmental and ethical awareness over the last ten years (Humphery 2011). As most of the literature on ethical consumption focuses on fair trade/Fairtrade or other forms of sustainable consumption, the notion of second-hand consumption as sustainable consumption requires further research (Brown, Flavin et al. 1992; Barnett, Carafo et al. 2005; Franklin 2011; Brown 2013). Indeed Crewe and Gregson (1998) do reference the 'moral economy' of second-hand children's wear, stating that mothers believe it to be wasteful (both in terms of money and broader resources) to not make use of second-hand goods when available, which are often seen as 'nearly new' in any case.

In considering consumer motivations, we must be reminded that 'risk' is an inherent part of purchasing second-hand goods. Whether this is culturally/socially imagined risk or real physical risk, it is a risk that all second-hand consumers have to negotiate. All second-hand goods have a past, and are therefore inscribed with biographies that consumers negotiate in different ways (Crewe and Gregson 2003). As already described, consumers attribute symbolic meaning to goods therefore, they can also postulate on the history of an object when they know it is not new.

Perceived risks are closely linked to cleanliness, both physical and envisioned, as well as a lack of product guarantee that the product is fit for purpose (Gregson and Crewe 2003). In contemplating the risk of charity shop clothes, cleanliness and indeed the threat of disease, is cited as a particular problem by potential consumers. The focus on bodily narratives relates to the way in which consumers view second-hand clothing as previously worn by another - the 'safest' clothes are those worn furthest from the body (Brooks, Crewe et al. 2000). The theme of risk and anxiety is particularly pertinent in considering the practice of consuming on behalf of someone else, bringing to light further moral debates within the practice of consumption. This is a point that will be explored in the final part of this chapter as part 2.4 shifts to focus on mothers as consumers.

## 2.4 Mothering and consumption practice

This final part of the literature review narrows the academic discussion further to explore the gendered role of consumption, and consumption as part of parenting practice. The emergence of literature concerned with motherly consumption is recent and whilst inroads have been made there remains scope for further study. After a brief overview of the consumption literature concerned with women and gendered consumption, discussion moves onto consumption as a form of care and provisioning, and the role of co-consuming in constructing mothers' identities. Links are made towards the role of second-hand consumption throughout and speculations towards contributing to this knowledge gap.

Shopping has long been considered a woman's activity and as such social scientists have recognised women as particularly involved in consumption as a social process (Bocock 1993; Dowling 1993; Domosh 1996; Nava 1997). The nineteenth-century department store was heralded a safe place for women outside the home to shop and converse, and was one of the first acceptable public places for middle-class women to visit without a male companion (Bowlby 2003; Lysack 2008). The department store has long been considered a space of fantasy and aspiration, with Victorian department stores in London and the US leading the way (Giorcelli 2012). This was largely revered as a time of gendered capitalism in Britain as men took an active role as producers,

whilst women were more commonly regarded passive consumers. Bocock (1993, p.96) described this period of modernity as:

> This gender division between mothering and consumption on the one hand, and production and making war on the other.

Whilst this may have been the social norm for many middle/upper-class families, it was also a time of change with more women entering the workforce, particularly with the strains of the First World War. As explored when charting the historical context of consumption in earlier sections of this chapter, post-war Britain saw great changes to the production-consumption process. Not only have women increased their earning power since the 1950's, but men have become more actively involved in practices of domestic and personal consumption. Thus the gendered role of consumption, whilst still pertinent, cannot be so readily prescribed in the twenty-first-century.

Whilst gendered consumption practices (Grazia 1996; Casey and Martens 2007) and parenting practices (Alwin 2004; Gillies 2008; Edwards 2010; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014) have been a focus of academic (and policy) debate for many years, few have connected the two to investigate mothers as consumers. Once revered as leisure shoppers, women have begun to be recognised for the acts of ordinary consumption and daily provisioning which take place as part of everyday practice (Miller 1999; Miller 2004). Yet, as Cook (2013, p.75) proclaims:

> The place of mothers and motherhoods in commercial life represents one of the great under-told stories of consumer culture.

With this in mind, Cook (2013) guest-edited a special issue of the *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 'Producing Motherhoods In/Through Consumption' as a way of recognising the insights to be gained from a greater engagement with motherly consumption. Exploring themes of identity, parental anxiety and social distinction, the special issue investigates the role of maternity clothing in shaping the liminal self (Ogle, Tyner et al. 2013), mothering through ethical consumption (Cairns, Johnston et al. 2013) and the transitional phase to parenthood through pregnancy experience (Layne 2013; Theodorou and Spyrou 2013).

The work of Ogle, Tyner and Schofield-Tomschan (2013) demonstrate the importance of things in the physical, social and emotional transition to motherhood through using the example of maternity clothing to explore the embodied state of pregnancy. The authors found that maternity clothing both aids and complicates the transitional state of the woman as a disruption to her 'usual way of being' (p.128). Some women utilised maternity clothing to help materialise their new selves by using clothes to sanction a transformation into the image of 'mother'. Others saw the need to wear maternity clothing as a disruption and source of frustration, feeling forced to alter their sense of self because they could not find maternity clothing that they considered appropriate to their sense of identity.

Particularly relevant to this doctoral study is Ogle et al.'s (2013) reference to second-hand maternity clothing which, state the authors, are commonly consumed by pregnant women due to the fact they are only used for a short space of time, inciting a desire to re-use rather than waste. Women are therefore torn between the desire to be thrifty and the desire to limit disruption to their self-identity (by accepting hand-me-downs women have little choice over what they receive therefore it may not be to their taste). The author's (2013, p.126) state:

> Although participants often expressed gratitude for the handed-down maternity dress they received, their accounts revealed that actualizing their commitment to thriftiness in their consumption of maternity dress incited various ambivalences, perhaps because this self-imposed frugality represented a contrast to the typical dress consumption patterns of the primarily middle-/upper-middle-class participants.

It is interesting here that the authors refer back to class, which seems to be speculation rather than based on what the mothers said verbatim. This 'self-imposed frugality' is likely fed by a host of obligations and moral ties which could fairly be attributed to class based on the class-based consumption literature outlined earlier in this chapter. The assumption from the authors therefore, is that wearing second-hand clothing creates a threat to one's self-identity, specifically in relation to conspicuous consumption within the social field.

Also in Cook's special issue, Cairns et al. (2013) discuss motherly identity and perceived responsibilities through the caring role post-birth. There are strong discourses surrounding suitable dietary consumption for pregnant women, which has long been governed by society and indeed the state through advice from health professionals (Lupton 1999). The authors (2013, p.97) focus on the dietary practices of mothers as they start to feed their babies on solid foods, stating:

> The organic child reflects the intersecting ideals of motherhood and ethical food discourse, whereby 'good' mothers are those who preserve their children's purity and protect the environment through conscientious food purchases.

Again, motherly concerns and obligations are plural, torn between the desire to provide the best for the whole family, retain the baby's 'purity' and be kind to the environment, whilst negotiating the practicalities (and time/financial limitations) that being a parent demands. The authors conclude that the classed nature of this form of 'ethical' co-consumption requires an investment of economic and cultural capital.

It is through motherly consumption that Warde's (2005) theory of consumer practice as a constituting element of wider social practice becomes particularly clear. Mothers consume on behalf of their children in order to provide care, love and provisioning, the act of consumption providing a vital constituent in the role of being a parent. Cook (2008) describes this motherly consumption as 'co-consuming' as women consume on behalf of another, negotiating and prioritising the needs of both her child and herself. Parents are increasingly held socially and morally responsible for their offspring and as such this has sparked an interest in exploring parental anxieties, social class and the role of 'good parenting', all of which can be linked to consumption (Hoff, Laursen et al. 2002; Rothman 2004; Cook 2013).

### 2.4.1 Gendered consumption

Once regarded as a single complete unit (particularly within economics) households are now recognised as complex social systems on a micro scale and as such, scholars have called for greater critical engagement with family structure and domesticity in the context of home-life (Pahl 1990; Bernardes

1997; McDowell 1999; Hall 2011). As previously discussed, middle-class women were historically regarded as consumers and homemakers rather than producers. The significance of labour undertaken in the home (e.g. childcare, cooking, and cleaning) tended to be cast aside. McDowell (1999, p.75) discusses this as follows:

> The home became associated, particularly during the nineteenth-century but also from an earlier date in Britain, with characteristics that were constructed in *opposition* to the developing capitalist economy . . . Housework and childcare in particular were seen as women's 'sacred' duty, they and the 'master' of the house being protected in this sphere from the harsh competitive world of capitalism.

Thus women were not seen to have a place of any significance outside of the home; the home being a place of love, emotion and empathy, but not a place of 'work'. Zillah Eisenstein (1979) published one of the earliest accounts linking capitalism and patriarchy. She suggests that women fulfil four major functions in capitalist societies; stabilizing patriarchal structures, reproducing new workers for the labour force, stabilizing the economy via their role in production, and participating in the labour market itself, but receiving lower wages than their male counterparts. Nancy Fraser (2014) argues too for an expanded conceptualisation of capitalism to incorporate what she describes as the 'background conditions' necessary for the functioning of the capitalist order. According to Fraser (2014) capitalism is dependent upon three non-economic background conditions; social reproduction, political power and the ecological condition. Fraser's view thus encapsulates broad feminist thought by considering the relevance of politics and the environmental conditions of society in structuring the capitalist order and not just the patriarchal impression of capitalism.

The theorisation of social reproduction as a background condition to capitalism is based on the belief that common exchange through social networks and the production of non-waged care work are vital elements in forming a social condition capable of economic production. This reproductive labour is hidden within the capitalist order and seen to be structurally subordinate to waged labour, and as such Fraser calls for an epistemological shift to recognise the longstanding value of social reproduction. Such advances

in the way we view society are critical to the way in which we consider the relationship between production and consumption. In calling for an expanded view of capitalism, Fraser and others are forwarding efforts for domestic consumption and second-hand consumption to be given greater significance in society, as part of these broader background conditions.

Studies of the home have looked at gender divisions in family responsibilities. Explorations of gender roles in the family and household economics, for example, cite women as the main purchasers of food, clothing and gifts – the everyday goods required for family provisioning, whilst men take financial control over the car, maintenance and meals away from home – ad-hoc purchases and items detached from the home (Pahl 1990; Whitehead 1995). As described previously, Miller (1999) was one of the first academics to shift from a focus on shopping as an event, to shopping as an everyday act of provisioning and love. Rather than depicting identity construction through conspicuous consumption, Miller found an everyday form of identity construction as constituted through ordinary consumption and familial care. For the typical family, such ordinary consumption is structured by a thrift normativity; the desire to provide the best for the family at the best possible price. The practice of being thrifty is evident for Miller across all social classes but manifest in different ways; middle-class shoppers, he suggests, are happy to visit charity shops but not frequent Poundland which is not part of their preferred social field.

Miller's (1998; 2004) overarching argument rests on recognising the subordination of personal desires in light of concern for others, implicitly legitimated as love. Similarly Cook (2013) posits that mothers defer personal gratification to their children's wants and needs, putting their children first wherever possible. Therefore, in order to analyse the consumption practices of mothers, we must disregard an individualistic framework of economic action and recognise the pluralistic nature of motherly consumption decisions (Cook 2008; Cook 2013). Furthermore, it is important to recognise the continuous cycle of consumption once any goods are brought into the home, the day-to-day sorting and circulation of children's clothes and objects is a significant element of care work and is often the responsibility of women, part of their emotional and physical labour (Clarke 2000; 2004).

Gregson and Crewe (1998) looked at the explicitly gendered locale of the car-boot sale as a contemporary and everyday example of gendered consumption in practice. Through ethnographic methods as well as a quantitative questionnaire, the authors found that men and women buy, sell, and look at different things. Women are more likely to purchase clothing for their family and themselves, toys and kitchen goods, whilst men are more attracted to DIY goods, CDs and things for the car. Gregson and Crewe state (1998, p.83):

> Despite being one of the most fluid and unpredictable spaces of exchange in contemporary Britain then, the car boot sale is reproductive of highly traditional constructs of femininity and masculinity.

This suggests that whilst conventional department stores, for example, are often regarded to be purposefully gendered in the way they are organised and designed, consumer and seller habits may be innately gendered even in highly unregulated, informal environments. The consumption practices of women, the authors find, are structured more by the symbolic value of goods (brands and particularly aesthetics). In contrast, the consumption practices of men are based on asking themselves particular practical questions, 'Does it work? Do I know someone who could get it to work?' Brands for men are therefore important in relation to quality:

> A quality assessment is made, usually understood in relation to brand and make. Thus, branded names such as Bosch and Spear and Jackson are valued over and above own labels such as Texas/Homebase (p.92).

As the focus of this study, I explore the gendered consumption practices of women (mothers), and will be able to test some of the finding of Gregson and Crewe (1998).

Whilst the domestic labour entailed in care work is largely hidden from public view, the outcome of that labour is evidenced externally through cleanliness of the self, clothing and visible health. Laundry practices are a form of inconspicuous consumption, structured by very personal routines. As Jack (2013, p.418) so nicely states, 'not washing is hidden, but wearing dirty clothes is visible'. There is a symbolic and social significance of being clean, yet routines of cleanliness are rarely discussed outside of the family and as such practices of cleanliness lack normative collective conventions although

are, no doubt influenced by external factors (Shove 2003; Shove, Pantzar et al. 2012). As part of the practice of parenting, mothers' everyday acts of provisioning and care might be influenced by external factors yet are bound within individual practice and general access to resources. These external factors are linked to popular discourse concerned with what it means to be a 'good mother'.

Referring back to Bauman's (1988) depiction that consumer choice leads to anxiety, this could equally be the case for mothers' consuming on behalf of their children. Indeed, Furedi (2001, p.26) writes, 'parents are bombarded with advice that demands that they create a risk free world'. The very notion of a 'demand' instantly suggests that parents are devoid of choice (or freewill); the highly personal and intimate act of parenting thus becomes a practice shaped by broader social and political narratives. This is worthy of consideration when investigating the consumption practices of mothers and has received little scholarly attention to date.

The emotional force of consumer risk is further heightened when the consumer in question is a parent providing for their child (Kehily and Martens 2014). In this instance one must negotiate in their own mind, and as a couple, what constitutes an appropriate level of risk when the baby itself is seen as intensely vulnerable (Furedi 2001). To help make this decision parents may look outside the household to family, friends and the media for advice. Women are particularly susceptible to consumer vulnerability in the liminal phase of becoming a mother, pressured by the desire to display good mothering and to live up to societal expectations and perfect media images (Geiger and Prothero 2007; VOICE Group 2010). Pressure is felt because consumption decisions are bound up with emotions linked to identity formation and social obligation, as discussed previously. This moral negotiation is a large part of a mother's co-consumption practice, influencing her choices and further practices.

### 2.4.2 Co-consuming and care work

The final section of the literature review aims to tease out the relevance of parental anxieties and consumption practice in light of 'co-consuming' practice. As previously stated Cook (2008) identifies the mother as a co-consumer, assuming both her own, and her child's, needs and desires. Putting

the lives, contexts and experiences of mothers at the forefront of investigation Cook (2013, p.76) states:

> One's attention is called toward the ways in which all consumption resides in relations of give and take, of identity and distinction, of transactions over time.

Motherly consumption cannot be regarded as a subjective, singular practice but as bound within a complex web of social norms, expectations, anxieties and desires. Changes in the labour market have influenced these norms and expectations in some cases. Women, more likely to be in waged-work than the generations before them, are expected to bring their corporate leadership and organisation skills into the running of the household (Cook 2013; Perrier 2013). Furthermore, elements of childcare have been outsourced to day nurseries as the most common form of formal childcare in the UK, second only to care provided by grandparents (Boyer, Reimer et al. 2012). This widening provision of care in part gives mothers more freedom, but can also aggravate anxieties structured around the desire to provide and be seen to provide good mothering, and the added social and institutional pressures of an increased visibility of care, for example pressures for clean, suitable clothing (Crewe and Collins 2006).

Such formal outsourcing of care has become more prevalent as the pattern of family life has altered. One in ten UK households move every year and our lives are increasingly dispersed both geographically and across different networks (Cass, Shove et al. 2005). This is particularly the case for the middle-classes and as such, support networks are more dispersed with less weight on the community (Boterman 2012). Gregson and Lowe (1994) investigated the geographic patterns of domestic work in its various forms, with an emphasis on class and gender. They noted the movement of young women from the North of England who were employed as live-in nannies by middle-class women in the South. Gregson and Lowe (1994, p.5) describe paid-for childcare as an emotive issue, stating:

> It is a phenomenon which appears to challenge the associations between all women and domestic labour and the assumption that domestic labour is an unwaged activity, carried out for love not money.

Work involved in caring for a child is a way in which women 'do' mothering. Consumption plays a key role in this, as a practice shaped by the practice of parenting/caring itself. In this manner, consumption has been identified for its crucial role in enabling the transition to first-time motherhood, constructing an identity of mother and child through the material before the child is even born (Layne 2000; Layne, Taylor et al. 2004). Indeed the arrival of a baby is commonly associated with the birth of a new/revised family unit, and consumer practice is a way of tracing a new cultural categorisation and transformation of self-identity in the transition to parenthood. Consumption of food during pregnancy is a bodily form of co-consumption, the expectant-mother carrying the responsibility of directly consuming for the child and the anxiety that goes with such responsibility (Afflerback, Carter et al. 2013; Theodorou and Spyrou 2013). Objects too, can take on an active role in the social process of mothering and making babies, negotiating expectation and preparedness. Baby showers and the receipt of gifts for the child provide the unborn baby with personhood as envisaged through the eyes of others (Clarke 2004).

Studies have looked at baby and children's food consumption as a particular way in which mothers try to retain control over their child post-birth, when the child is no longer an actual bodily extension of the mother (Miller 2004; Clarke 2007; Afflerback, Carter et al. 2013). This concept however, has been left underexplored when considering the material culture of mothering, food instead being a workable starting point for such analysis. Sugar is commonly regarded to be the enemy of middle-class parents who instead strive to retain the child's purity through organic foodstuffs (Miller 2004). This finding is confirmed by Clarke (2007) in her ethnography of children's birthday parties as she recounts the horror of parents whose children are lead astray at such parties by eating 'unnatural' foods. For Miller (2004) this marks the mothering phase of 'depressive position' where the mother has come to terms with the good and bad qualities of her child and starts the process of separation from the child as extension of the mother. Ideally the consumption patterns of infants, Miller (1998) argues, are closely aligned with nature to keep infants 'pure'. Miller found mothers to have an obsessional concern with the food, clothing and other items consumed by infants; with strict rules on what should be allowed and disallowed. Miller argues that this obsession over infant

consumption, particularly aligned with natural products, stems from a desire to retain a biological link to the child (Miller 1999). The mother, according to Miller (2004) must therefore get used to a series of defeats, as she comes to terms with the influence of external stimulus on the child.

Parental hopes for their children and the best approach to achieve these goals through parenting practice depend on a whole host of economic, historical, demographic, cultural, ecological and structural variables towards the practice of childrearing (Hoff, Laursen et al. 2002; Alwin 2004). Hoff and Laursen's (2002) study found that parenting practices are dependent on social class, and approaches to child-rearing vary across socioeconomic groups as already alluded to. As previously stated, social class cannot be deemed to be the sole cause of certain parenting practices but research does indicate a strong correlation. Hoff and Laursen (2002) found that parents of a lower social status are more concerned that their child conforms to society than parents of a higher social status who are instead more intent on depicting their child as special and unique, a point reinforced by Reay et al. (2011). Lower social class families, according to this study, also create a home where authority is granted by the parents, whereas higher class parents are more likely to encourage adult and child equality, where rules are discussed rather than enforced (Hoff, Laursen et al. 2002). Such class differences are more often used to consider the relationships between, and norms of, parents and children rather than new parents and babies in the existing literature therefore there is scope for further work on mothering and class.

Middle-class parents aim to encourage cultural cultivation of their child through consumption, in addition to consumption of material things (Perrier 2013). Reliant on parental care, children are ideal carriers of vicarious conspicuous consumption, with mothers using the child as an extension of their own identity (Bailey 2001; Thomsen and Sorensen 2006). As well as being responsible for consuming on behalf of young children, parents' consumption practices are intimately linked to the individual consumption practices of children as they mature, influencing the consumption norms of their offspring (Martens, Southerton et al. 2004). This raises moral issues as to the co-consuming role of mothers, and indeed to the whole family.

## 2.5 Concluding remarks

With consumption being so intrinsic to the everyday, and with a long history of scholarly interest, this chapter can only provide an overview of what is a complex yet central fascination of social life. The chapter provided context to the study of consumption (and production), outlining different schools of thought on the topic with a particular emphasis on alternative sites of exchange, second-hand consumption and motherly consumption practice. The NCT nearly new sales thus offer an opportunity to empirically explore some of these debates extracted from the existing literature within the scope of Cook's (2013, p.75) statement that mothers remain 'one of the great under-told stories of consumer culture'.

Earlier in the chapter I aimed to outline the difference between consumption and consumerism, describing the former as a long standing and intrinsic part of social life, and the latter as a more recent phenomenon affected by mass media, globalisation and mass manufacture. The study of consumption is unusual in that it has been approached by a wide range of subject disciplines. Historical theorists such as Marx ([1967] 1976) and Marcuse (1964) approached consumption from a wider capitalist perspective, Veblen ([1899] 1994) was one of the first scholars to consider the way in which consumption is used as a vehicle for social distinction, Bourdieu built on this understanding to consider the role of cultural consumption in social distinction and Miller and Warde drew academic interest to the everyday nature of ordinary consumption. Second-hand consumption is a relatively new interest to academics but offers a wealth of opportunity to explore the symbolic value of objects, the social role of consumption and the agency of consumers.

NCT nearly new sales are a particular form of second-hand consumption and display different attributes to forms of conventional first-cycle exchange. Part of this study will be to explore the ways in which the sales are seen to be 'different' by those who frequent them. Having considered nearly new sales, as shown in figure 2.1, to offer 'cheap' second-hand products in a 'pragmatic' rather than highly 'symbolic' retail setting, I will later return to this concept to see if data analysis alters this interpretation. Can anything be said to differ for the *NCT* nearly new sales, as opposed to nearly new sales more generally, such as the London-based mothers' group studied by Clarke (2000)? Having briefly

touched on the influence of branding and social emulation, as central to the modern consumer culture, could NCT in this instance be regarded a retail brand?

Existing evidence from NCT suggests that their services attract a particular demographic whilst failing to reach other groups in society, notably young parents under the age of twenty-five, and parents with lower educational qualifications (Taylor 2011). From this we might assume that social, cultural and/or economic capital contributes to the ability of parents to access and benefit from NCT services. Noting that consumption practices are regarded to be highly classed, this study aims to explore the class, tastes and demographics of those who attend the sale; an aim central to the methodology proposed in the next chapter. Are NCT nearly new sales as similar to the home-shopping parties I describe in 2.2.2 ? In essence, as an 'inconspicuous consumption' site (Jayne 2006, p.93) is attendance to the sales structured heavily by social networks?

Aside from these larger macro factors, studying nearly new sales offers the opportunity to consider second-hand consumption from a cultural geographer's viewpoint (and add to the literature therein), and to explore new ground in considering the intimacy of consuming on behalf of offspring. The inherent meaning of things and emotional attachment to objects has been widely discussed in the available literature (Belk 2004). Nearly new sales involve the transfer of objects which have had biographies inscribed in them by their previous owners, therefore there is also opportunity to study this area of material culture within nearly new sales. With this in mind I considered broader literature on the 'risk society' (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992), a further avenue to explore in relation to the buying and selling of second-hand children's wear and equipment as, despite the risks assumed, parents clearly do purchase second-hand goods from the NCT nearly new sale.

As well as economic gain, the literature suggests that other benefits are gleaned from practicing second-hand consumption. Whilst aspirations of authenticity and a connection to the past may not be primary motivations in this case, we might expect that parents acquire other resources from participation in the sales which act as a motivation and reason to attend. This

will be explored in light of empirical work to date and within the context of NCT as a middle class institution.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology utilised for this doctoral study, including a contextual discussion of the philosophical position assumed, a justification of method and sampling and an explanation of the data analysis methods prescribed. These methods were deemed appropriate for the topic at hand and in light of the literature review here noted.

# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This methodology chapter begins by contextualising the research study within the philosophical perspective employed. After framing the project by these theoretical concepts, the chapter goes on to explain the proposed research design which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. Stage one involved an ethnographic study of observation and participant interviewing, whilst stage two triangulated findings with an extensive survey study. The chapter ends by briefing the reader on the ethical considerations of the project.

## 3.2 Philosophical assumptions

It is important to outline the philosophical and theoretical framework adopted for this study in order to justify the methods employed and findings later presented. Any theoretical position rests on the two philosophical components of ontology (the theory of existence, or being) and epistemology (the philosophy of the theory of knowledge, or knowing) (Johnston, Gregory et al. 2000). Over the long passage of time, epistemological approaches have included the theological, metaphysical, positivist and constructivist, and more recently, the posthuman. Giddens (1974, p.1), citing the ideas of Auguste Comte, a nineteenth-century philosopher of science, explained:

> As Comte envisaged it, sociology was to be the very culmination of positivism: the science of man completed the historical evolution of the hierarchy of the scientific disciplines, and for the first time made possible an adequate understanding of that evolution.

Comte believed that by engaging with the methods of the natural sciences, sociology (and social science in general) could investigate the 'science' of the social world. Largely however, this positivist approach is no longer regarded to be an adequate way of understanding the social world (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Positivism neglects reflexivity and fails to acknowledge the researcher as part of the social world they are studying. In contrast, much ethnographic research in particular takes a realist position, but with an

awareness of the cultural, social and political limitations to knowledge (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Indeed ethnography is undermined by anti-realist arguments, being based on the belief that we can find out something about a phenomenon by studying it in an exploratory way (as opposed to testing hypothesis, or believing we cannot hope to access reality). I position myself within a realist ontology, on the understanding that such approach is compatible with reflexive theorising.

Theory can be used to provide a broad explanation for behaviour and attitudes, as well as being used to shape the types of questions asked and way in which data is collected (Creswell 2009; Bryman 2012). Beauregard (2012) argues that reflexive theorising leads to better critical scholarship, defining four types of theory: grand theory, critical theory, heuristic theory and inter-textual theory. Grand theorising, a post-positivist tradition, leads to formal arguments based on precisely defined concepts which create highly abstracted rules of reality. Critical theory is similar to grand theory but often derives propositions from Marxist theory, Feminist theory and other schools of thought, ending with arguments about causal logics.

Heuristics are more interpretive, less ideological and make room for intuitive judgements. A heuristic is a 'tool for discovering new ideas' (Beauregard 2012, p.481). A common, heuristic triad in Western social theory is 'race, class, and gender.' Implied is that the theorist should heed each. Whilst Beauregard relates this specifically to urban theory, race, class and gender are certainly intrinsic to analytical consideration in this doctoral project. Finally, inter-textual theory augments understanding through a critique of existing literature, recognising both differences and similarities in order to draw new conclusions or theory. Different types of theory can be combined for varying purposes and ends as long as they can be justified.

To some extent this research was engaged in theorising on all of these levels. The literature review utilised inter-textual theorising to critique the existing literature, drawing on similarities and differences in the findings to suggest themes to investigate through the research questions. The formation of the research questions and methodology equally involved heuristic theorising as I used the existing literature as a tool to base my study upon. In order to answer the questions of why people attend the nearly new sales and what they get out

of them, I did a modest version of grand theorising, developing and justifying my own theories to this end. I also however, drew on existing theories to develop my own so in this way engaged as a critical theorist too. The project at hand was broadly approached from the perspective of structuration theory which will be discussed next.

Framed by the research questions (outlined in the next section) I investigated who attends the nearly new sales and why, and what participants gain from attendance. This was grounded in a theoretical perspective based on a particular attentiveness to social structures and social action. The traditional spatial science approach to human geography suffered from a failure to see 'beyond the map' and did not acknowledge two crucial aspects of spatial patterns and processes; one being the deeper economic, social and political structures that condition the path of human existence, the other being the perceptions, intentions and actions of human agents (Cloke, Philo et al. 1991). It is these economic, social and political structures which play a key role in all of our lives. A key element of this project aimed to explore the social role of nearly new sales and in doing so, assumes that place-based events can produce social effects. This assumption seems reasonable in the context of structuration theory, a theory proposed by Giddens (1984) which seeks to understand the intersections between people and the social structures of which they are a part.

The relationship between agency and social structure has been much contested in social theory as academics debated the level at which individual actions may be shaped by society (Thrift 1983; Sewell 1992; Chouinard 1997). On one side of the argument, individuals were seen as 'homo sociologicus' determined by macro social structures and with little personal agency. The other view, antithetical to this, is that individuals are 'homo oeconomicus', which is, they can reflect on and consciously govern their surroundings at the micro level (Kirchberg 2007). Both such views were evident in the range of consumption literature studied in chapter 2. Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) for example, believes that actors are shaped by their habitus and do not act independently of the social field (at least not in the short term), whereas Warde (Warde and Gronow 2001; Warde 2004) argues that actors can and are reflexive with their social practices. This is relevant to the project at hand as I was interested in what

motivates actors to attend the sales. Was it due to structural conditions, personal agency or a combination of both?

Structuration theory developed in response to the inflexibility of agency and structure. Indeed, Kirchberg (2007) argues that rather than being contradictory concepts, homo sociologicus and homo oeconomicus, can complement one another. Kirchberg (2007, p.131) used the structure – agency framework to investigate why actors visit museums. He found that structure and agency are equally important and have a reciprocal relationship, stating:

> People decide voluntarily to visit museums because this activity fits their preferred lifestyle. However, these people also create a structured pattern by visiting museums repeatedly, and this pattern in turn structures their future activities. Repeated visits institutionalise museum 'structuring systems'.

This provides something to test in my own study using concepts developed by Bourdieu (2010) and Giddens (1984) who attempted to merge these two paradigms of structure and agency, each creating their own mid-range theories concerned with human action. Bourdieu (2010) believed that we are attracted to people of a similar standing to ourselves, and as such create social fields with those who share a similar habitus. Habitus and field are relevant to the study as they make room for an evaluation of social structures dependant on shared interests, values and levels of capital. Bourdieu may argue therefore, that the field or as Giddens (1984) would call, the locale, of the nearly new sale, fosters homophily - the gathering of people who share similarities. Syed and Juan (2012, p.1506) state:

> Homophily is purported to serve an important identity-related function, as peers are a primary source through which individuals receive support and evaluation to determine who one is and who one is not.

Indeed, we are likely to create and maintain friendships with people who have similar interests to ourselves, and share a similar 'taste' (Byrne 2006; Bourdieu [1979] 2010). The descriptions of the home shopping parties by Clarke (1999) and Storr (2003) depict a strong element of homophily, as the attendees share similar tastes and social networks. We might have expected to find that attendees share social networks (news of the sale will spread among members

of the social network) and that participation in the sales reinforces their place in such social networks.

Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital; economic, social and cultural were used to conceptualise the resources gained by participants through attendance at nearly new sales. Bourdieu argues that any form of capital is accumulated labour therefore social capital too needs to be accumulated (earned). He further asserts that it is impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world without considering these forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). Social capital has links too with structuration theory due to the way in which actors can mobilise their social capital within a locale (Mohan and Mohan 2002). Whilst a Bourdiesian perspective may place greater emphasis on social norms and networks influencing sale attendance, Giddens (1984) believes that whilst structure constrains action, it is also a medium through which action is enabled.

Whilst Giddens believes actors to be reflexive, leading to motivation for action based on a particular time and place, Bourdieu argues that this level of action is less conscious and more situated in past experiences. Giddens (1984) argued that structure only exists through the activities of human agents, as an active constituting process. Giddens (1984) argued for social theory to recognise particular features of the reality of social life as he believed that agents act in accordance to the locale in which they find themselves; they are, in essence, capable of reflecting upon and adjusting their surroundings.

'Structure' set forth by Giddens is the patterning of social relations; I use the term in this way throughout this thesis. Structure permits interconnectivity with human activity and the identification of the nature and characteristics of structures. Giddens believed that social structures are enabling as well as restrictive, therefore suggesting that agents can generate resources from such structures.  This is relevant because I approached the NCT nearly new sale as a locale, a 'setting of interaction' (Giddens 1988, p.118). Structuration theory assists in understanding what participants get out of nearly new sales because it suggests that locales offer resources of various kinds to individuals.

I therefore used structuration theory as a contextual framework to explore the social reach of nearly new sales. On the one hand I investigated how social structures may be shaping the actions of participants, whilst juxtaposing this,

considered the ways in which social action is continually interpreted, developed and changed by reflexive individuals independent of social structures. This has relevance for the ways in which nearly new sales are perceived as a phenomenon and the amount of agency participants are assumed to have. I further explored the range of resources participants gained from attendance. Other than the most palpable benefits of acquisition of goods (which fulfil specific needs) and increased economic capital (by selling goods, or saving money by buying items second-hand) the concept of social capital was used to investigate strong and weak social ties and networks which I may, or may not, find to be an additional role of the sales.

Using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field I may have expected to find a fairly closed social network of actors attending the sales, all drawn to the same locale due to their shared disposition and linked social networks. As found by Kirchberg (2007) and his analysis of museum attendance, this may pave the way for repeated visits, hence creating a structuring system. Attendees may benefit from this, by strengthening their social ties, bonds and support network, whilst excluding those who sit outside of the network. Through this research I therefore tested two broad philosophical approaches; on the one hand the realist, structuralist approach which argues social action is shaped by various macro factors, and on the other hand a constructivist, post-structuralist approach which argues that the factors shaping social action are continually interpreted, developed and altered by reflexive agents.

These theories as a broad philosophical position allowed me to explore the social significance of the sales, however I was also concerned with the other resources people gained from participation in the sales, and with the commodities customers chose to buy. The research design was developed with this in mind and will now be described in the next section.

## 3.3 Research design

There are broadly two types of research; intensive and extensive. Intensive research involves studying a large number of issues on a small number of individuals in an in-depth manner, whilst extensive research involves studying a large number of individuals but on a restricted number of issues (Cloke, Philo et al. 1991). This doctoral research involved both intensive and extensive

research, adopting a triangulated approach to data collection and analysis. Such an approach was used on the basis that extensive research alone does not permit identification of causal mechanisms, and lacks sensitivity to detail, whilst purely intensive research could not provide the policy-relevant statistics to validate the research for both NCT and the academic publications. The research design is further explained and justified in this section of the chapter.

To introduce the terminology, methodology and research methods are different concepts. Methodology refers to the overall design of the research problem, referencing the ideas and theories that shape the research perspective and process of data collection (Horrocks and King 2010). Research methods, on the other hand, are explained by King and Horrocks (2010, p.6) as 'the techniques or procedures we use to collect and analyse data'. Research methods therefore are the individual tools or instruments used within the methodological framework (Dilon and Wals 2006). This doctoral study utilised a mixed-method approach of qualitative and quantitative methods. I have already started to shape the methodology by outlining the realist epistemology I work within, I will now briefly define the two forms of method, qualitative and quantitative, before going on to describe the scholarly debates on mixed method research.

Quantitative (defined as numerical) research has the advantage of generating specific data results, usually on a large scale. The disadvantage of quantitative data is that the depth of knowledge is limited and does not necessarily correlate to 'real life' phenomena. Qualitative data can fill this gap by fleshing out the research, although qualitative research methods are always going to be more subjective, relying on linguistic representation of a phenomenon. Qualitative research involves an attempt to understand human behaviour and reasons for such behaviour and as such, is relevant for the social angle proposed for the research project (Berg 2007).

Silverman (2007) states that quantitative research involves inputs and outputs, but skims over the actual phenomenon existing between these points. This doctoral project opened with a qualitative study of the nearly new sales using observation and interviews to allow for an in-depth exploration of the social role of the sales (in a relatively inductive manner). Aware of the limitations of my subjective experience and in order to improve the extendibility of the

findings, a second stage of data collection involved a quantitative survey to test the prevalence of these reasons. There has been debate in the social sciences over what constitutes a mixed method approach as some scholars have pushed for mixed methods to be a field of inquiry in its own right (Gieryn 1983; Lamont and Molnar 2003). As a discipline, emphasis is placed on the science of mixing methods as an epistemological foundation rather than simply juxtaposing different methods.

Much of the literature on consumption and material culture described in chapter 2 were based on qualitative data, the methods for which enabled an intimate investigation of relationships, identities and practice (Miller 1999; Clarke 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Gregson 2007). A notable exception to this is the work of Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) who used extensive quantitative survey data to explore relationships between consumption, class and taste. Work on social stratification however, often lends itself to quantitative studies, making use of key variables to investigate social inequalities and causation (Li, Savage et al. 2008; Ream and Palardy 2008). Other studies have used mixed method techniques similar to those used in this study (Arnold and Reynolds 2003; Silva, Warde et al. 2009).

Opposing those who argue for mixed methods as a scientific approach unto itself, some scholars proclaim that the very concept of mixing methods is a contradiction (Smith and Heshusius 1986; Lincoln and Guba 2000). The crux of this argument revolves around the manner in which different methods are based on different understandings of truth; quantitative methods are based on the positivist tradition, whilst qualitative methods are hermeneutic (interpretivist) (Small 2011). I would respond to this critique by arguing that the mixed method approach can be applied to both data collection and analysis and thereby truth claims are based on the approach to analysis as much data collection. Furthermore, many social scientists align their view of the world somewhere along this realist-interpretivist continuum, which is compatible with a mixed method approach. I therefore felt that a mixed method approach was appropriate and beneficial for this doctoral study.

Within this, the research by default took on a case study approach as it aimed to develop a greater understanding of specific phenomena, the NCT nearly new sales. A case study can be described as an empirical enquiry which investigates

a contemporary phenomenon (Stake 1995). The nearly new sales were used as a case study of second-hand consumption, with a particular emphasis on social influences and effects. Stake (1995, p.2) explains:

> The time we spend concentrating may be a day or a year, but while we so concentrate we are engaged in case study.

Case study research relies on multiple sources of evidence form mixed methods which can be generated from interviewing, observation, textual analysis, survey studies and secondary sources to produce one structured source of knowledge (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). This project included the broad case study of the NCT nearly new sales, with individual branches/sales selected as case studies within that.

The research design appropriated an empirical scientific form of exploration, description, explanation and evaluation as described by Ruane (2005). There are a complex set of issues to consider when designing a research methodology, but fundamentally truth claims must be backed up with empirical, replicable evidence. For the research problem at hand, this evidence came from an observational ethnography, in-depth interviews and an extensive customer survey. Data collection was therefore split into two main stages, as shown in table 3.1. Stage one involved an ethnographic study of three NCT branches running nearly new sales in the autumn 2012 and spring of 2013 with research methods consisting of participant observation and interviews. Stage two comprised a large scale quantitative survey conducted in the autumn of 2013 at ten NCT branches.

The research methods were used to explore the following **research questions**:

**1. To identify the social structures and justifications leading to parental participation in NCT nearly new sales.**

  a) **What is the current NCT nearly new sale customer demographic and social reach?**

  b) **What reasons do customers give for attendance at NCT nearly new sales?**

**2. To identify the social, cultural and economic resources and opportunities gained by parental participation in the locale of the NCT nearly new sale.**

  a) **What do participants do at the NCT nearly new sale?**

  b) **What do customers purchase at the NCT nearly new sale?**

  c) **What do the customers do with the items that they buy?**

  d) **What do customers say that they gain from attendance to NCT nearly new sales?**

  e) **What can we infer that customers gain from attendance to NCT nearly new sales?**

**3. To evaluate the social role of the NCT nearly new sale.**

  a) **Do NCT nearly new sales promote and produce social capital, inclusion and/or bonding and if so how?**

  b) **How do nearly new sales connect parents, if at all, to other NCT services and broader parental networks?**

The table below describes the methodological framework, relating each research question to a tool of data collection.

| | Research Method | Research Tools | Answers Questions |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Stage One**<br><br>*Autumn/spring sales* | Ethnography<br><br>(3 branches, 30 interviewees across all) | Interviews with volunteers | 2a,2b |
| | | Participant observation of sales | 2a,2b,2e |
| | | Interviews with customers | 1b,2a,2b,2c,2d,2e,3a,3b |
| | Recruitment Survey | Quantitative survey | |
| **Stage Two**<br><br>*Autumn sales* | Large scale survey (n. 329) | Quantitative survey | 1a,1b,2a, 2b,2c,3a,3b<br><br>+ test generalizability of interview data |

Table 3.1: Research methods framework

## 3.4 Stage One: Qualitative study

### 3.4.1 Ethnography: Participant observation

Ethnography is the study of a community of people in their naturally occurring setting, carried out by a researcher who immerses him or herself directly into that setting (Brewer 2000). It is concerned with trying to describe phenomena as they are (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). It is therefore, by necessity, a type of fieldwork conducted over a significant period of time with an emphasis on exploring a particular social phenomenon in detail (Skeggs 1995). With this in mind, it was deemed a suitable approach to explore (inductively) the social, cultural, emotional, political and economic practices evident and resources gained by parental participation in NCT nearly new sales.

According to Silverman (2007) ethnography is about finding the remarkable in the mundane and searching for meaning in everyday life. Previous studies have found this a suitable approach for exploring the remarkable, everyday nature of consumption practice so I build on existing consumption studies using ethnographic methods (Miller 1999; Horne and Maddrell 2002; Gregson 2007; Gregson, Watkins et al. 2012; Medvedev 2012). Ethnography is used to

investigate localised cultures through 'in situ' observation, but within that there are a number of perspectives to approach this method of observation and analysis.

Skeggs (1995) describes the various modes of ethnography as follows:

1. Naturalist ethnographers stem from anthropology. They base their research on the ontological assumption that we only know about people through their natural setting.
2. Realist ethnographers work on the basis that reality is out there waiting to be discovered. They base their research on coherence, historical determinism and structure.
3. Modernist ethnographers focus their research not on the community but on identity formation across areas in relation to global issues.
4. Social constructionist ethnographers believe in the use of representation to construct the lives of the people they are studying.
5. Postmodern ethnographers prioritise discourse over text, emphasising the collaborative nature of ethnographic exchange.

Although most ethnographers lean towards one or two of these categories in the main, it is difficult to label oneself as the characteristics do overlap (Skeggs 1995). In the context of Skeggs (1995) assigned roles and as already described, I take a realist ethnographic approach, being closely aligned with structuralism. I am however aware of the concerns situating the social constructionist argument, and use this awareness to remain reflective of my own positionality.

In addition to the positions listed above, Skeggs is recognised as a feminist ethnographer which, she argues, also frames the context of her research (Skeggs 1995). On considering the way in which feminist perspectives effect geographical research Staeheli and Lawson (1995, p.321) state:

> The implications of attention to feminism in geography include a substantive focus on gender and its construction, concerns with the ways in which the relationship between researcher and researched shapes the questions posed, theoretical constructs, the nature of evidence, and the ways in all of these feed into political strategies to effect social change.

As emphasised in chapter 2, gender is central to this study, as a study of mothering and consumption, even when not explicitly brought to the fore. Indeed taking a feminist perspective opens up opportunities to build relationships of trust between myself and the participants, and makes room for

an emphasis on personal identity, wellbeing and social networks during the research process.

Skeggs (1995) reminds us that ethnographic research is ingrained in the process of representation; it is subjective yet should not be dismissed as trivial. All ethnographic research is influenced by the researcher's own history, biography and training so understanding a phenomenon from one perspective does not mean that it can be understood from all (Ruane 2005; Crang and Cook 2007). Skeggs (1995, p.196) states 'there is a built-in theoretical insecurity to ethnography' as the researcher is aware of their own limitations as an observer and documenter. This can be made manageable once the researcher is aware of his or her own positionality, an issue which although cannot be avoided, can at least be recognised (Valentine 1997). Aware of this throughout, I certainly felt the insecurity described by Skeggs (1995) as a researcher entering a new field where I was not a mother, like everyone else, but rather a young, single researcher. My motives for being at the nearly new sales were different to the other women and I feared they may see me as an outsider, or worse, an infiltrator sent in to analyse them. Such anxieties weakened over time as I found my place within the setting and learnt to trust those around me as they mutually learnt to trust me.

Systematically, ethnography is a three stage process involving gaining access, living and/or working amongst the community and analysing and theorising results (Cook 1997; Crang and Cook 2007). Access to a given community is the first hurdle to overcome when embarking on a research project (Cook 1997)Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Links formed with NCT, as sponsors of the project, assisted in leveraging access to the communities under study yet gatekeepers in the form of the nearly new sale volunteer co-ordinators had to be approached on an individual basis to gain access to their branch's sale. In these instances, I found the support of NCT (in the form of a signature from the research manager) very helpful in framing the study as an official NCT-sponsored piece of research, although I had to be careful not to use such backing as a tool for coercion.

From more than 300 NCT branches, two were initially selected as proposed sites for stage one of the research study. These were chosen by a combination of convenience sampling and stratified sampling in collaboration with the NCT.

A limitation of the sampling method however, was a lack of sufficient appreciation for the importance of the precise geographic location of branches within towns and cities. Whilst NCT branches are named according to geographical region (village, town, North/South of a city), it soon transpired on starting the fieldwork that the name of the branch may not correlate directly to the area in which the majority of that branch's activities take place. Therefore, my second case study site was selected for its central situation in a large, economically and culturally diverse Midlands city, yet the sale was held in an affluent suburb outside the city. Such a discovery, and a sense that I could not build a comprehensive account of the sales without greater diversity, led to a third case study branch being selected for the spring sale season of 2013. With the inclusion of this third branch I had a more varied sample for stage one.

The three selected branches included an historical and affluent small Hampshire city (CS1), a suburb of a large city in the Midlands (CS2) and a less affluent naval Borough town on the South Coast (CS3). All three sales were ticketed, commission-based sales rather than table top sales. Whilst stage two was initially focused on the quantitative element of the study, by travelling to another ten sales in order to conduct the survey it was difficult, indeed seemed careless, for my observations not to become part of an extended ethnography. I could not take such detailed field notes during these observations as I was focused on the survey, yet my presence at the sales enabled me to further explore the themes I had found in the intensive data collection linked to the three case study branches. With this in mind, figure 3.1 shows the locations of all thirteen branches (three case study, ten survey).
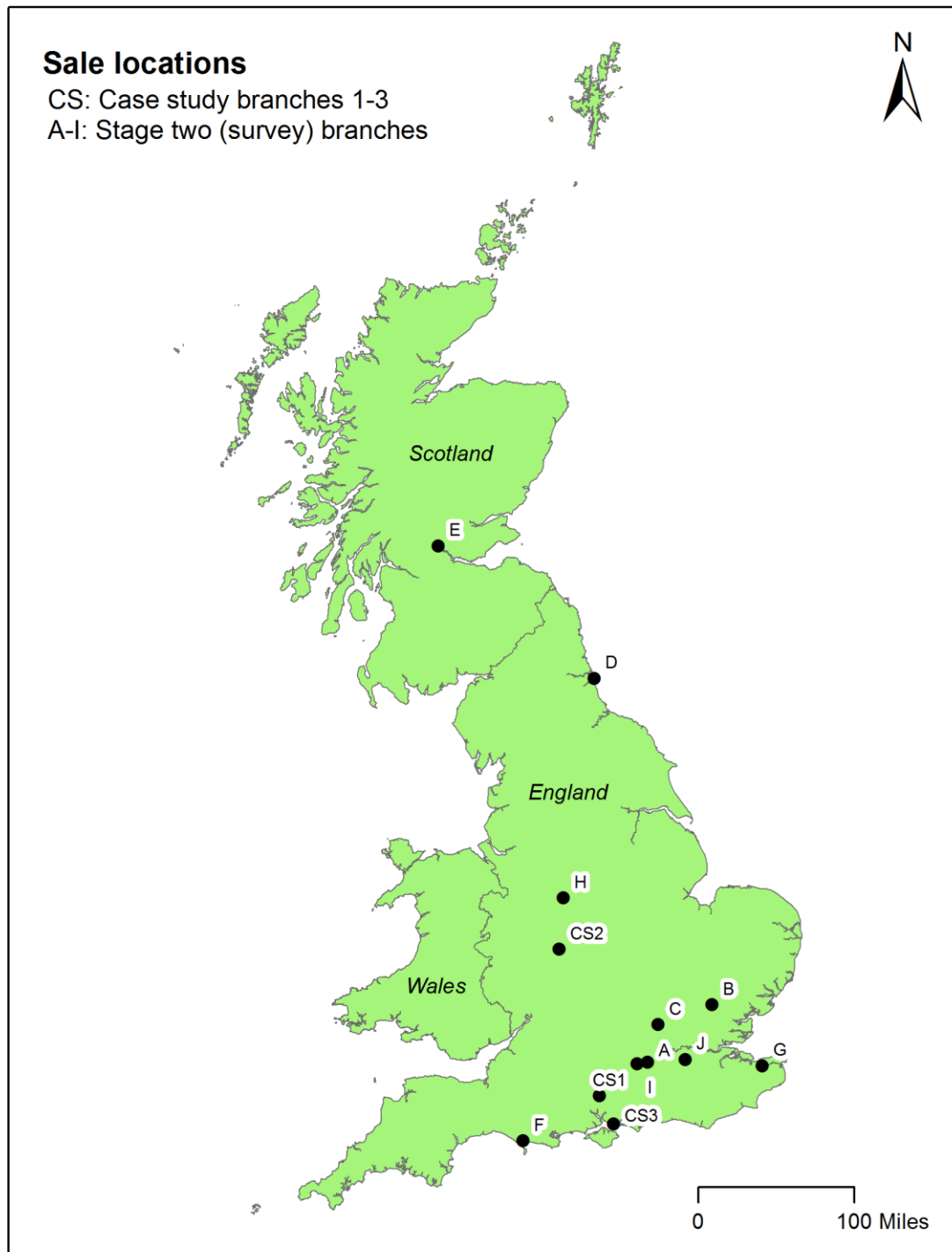
Figure 3.1: Map of sampled NCT branches for stage one and two

The ethnographic process began by making initial contact with branch volunteers, attending their group meetings and meeting the nearly new sale coordinator prior to the sale. Participant observation allowed me to explore research question 2a and 2b particularly as I could watch events unfold first hand as an outside observer. Otnes et al. (1995) champion 'shopping with

consumers' as a research method to investigate consumer practice. This involves shadowing participants as they shop, gaining more acute access, and having the ability to ask questions as the action is occurring. This offers unrestricted proximity to the consumer, but only allows for one customer to be followed at a time, which within the defined time and space of the nearly new sale, was not deemed appropriate.

So whilst being a worthy method for other consumption studies, the 'shopping with consumers' method did not assist this research, the purpose of which is also concerned with socialisation and not just with individual consumption practice. In contrast, I observed the sale as a participant. During the set-up time I was on hand as an extra volunteer, allowing me to mix with the other volunteers and build a level of trust. Some scholars believe that you can only understand a community fully by participation, but it could also be argued that participation distracts from understanding the workings of the wider phenomenon (Silverman 2011). In this case, participation allowed me to explore the workings of the sale more deeply, and talk to volunteers as they worked.

During Gregson and Crewe's (2003) fieldwork on second-hand retail they each volunteered in a charity shop for four months where, although other volunteers knew of their intentions, they watched and documented shoppers' actions covertly. Covert observation may lend itself to more naturalistic results because members of the community in question may feel self-conscious if aware they are being watched (Cook 1997). However, it is difficult for the researcher to act covertly and still generate rigorous data as notes and evidence will, in some way, need to be recorded. In the interests of ethics and to fulfil the requirements of NCT, I observed the sales *overtly*. For the observational data collection, I fixed a sign to the entrance detailing the nature of my presence at the nearly new sale. This sign informed customers on entering that I was observing the running of the sale and provided information and contact details on leaflets to take away in case they had any follow-up concerns or queries.

A field diary is usually used to record observations. Depending on the form of ethnography, this may be updated every hour or every few days (Cook 1997). I too used a field diary to make notes after meeting with volunteers and at

various stages of the sale set-up and live sales. I approached this task in line with the aims of the study. I looked for evidence relating to my research questions, whilst noting further thoughts, descriptions and themes. Geertz champions the role of 'thick description'; an anthropological method of explaining the reason behind human actions (Geertz 1973). Thick description is a necessary element of ethnography, explaining not just the action of participants, but its context (Geertz 1973; Ruane 2005). I also used photography to document the physical area of the sale and as a helpful reminder of the sales size and layout as well as doing my own drawings like that in figure 3.2.
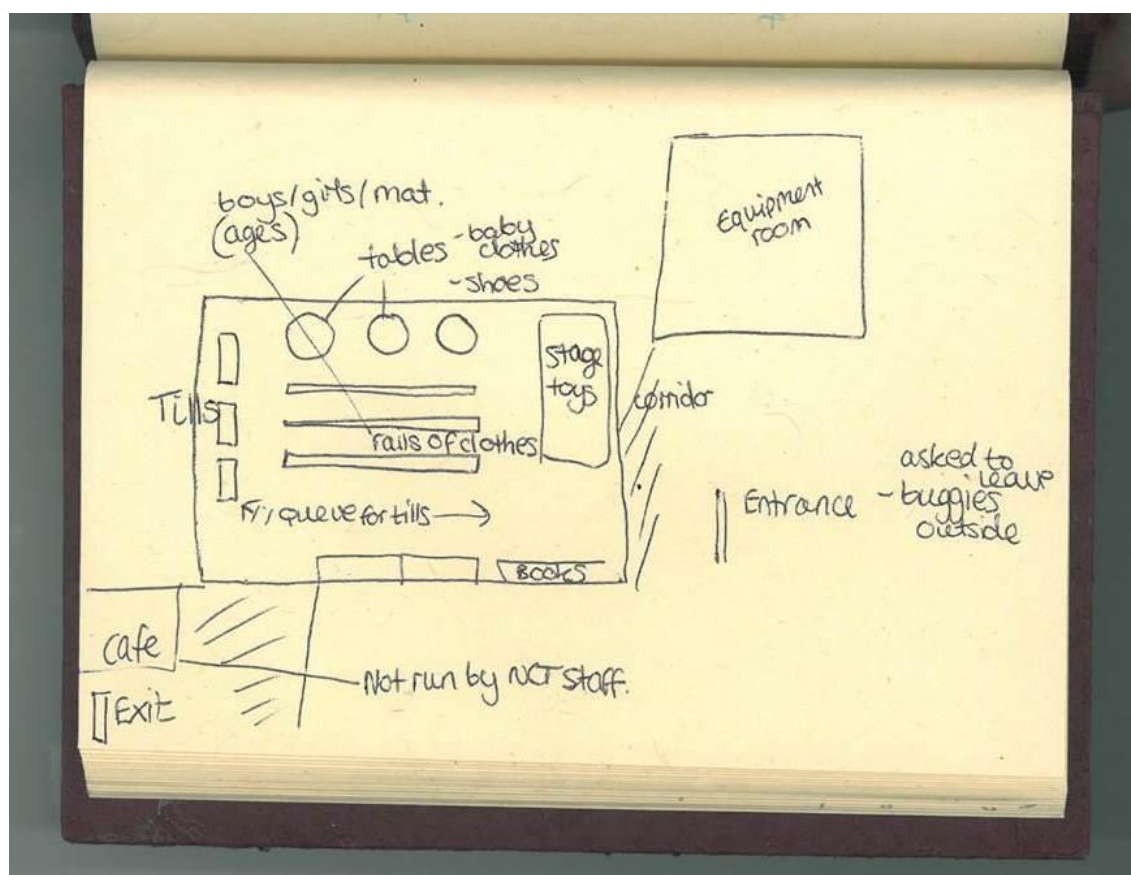


Figure 3.2: Field diary extract showing researcher's drawing of CS2 layout

Whilst participant observation was an appropriate starting point for the research, it was limited at giving an authentic insight into people's lives. The main way to achieve this further insight, according to Silverman (1993, p.91) is, 'unstructured, open-ended interviews usually based upon prior, in-depth participant observation'; a method also advocated by Glassner and Loughlin

(1987). Therefore, the second main tool of my ethnographic method comprised participant interviewing.

### 3.4.2 Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews with customers and volunteers were used to supplement observations in order to further investigate the research aims and questions, developing a greater awareness of individual practice. Customers/buyers were recruited as interviewees through each of the three case study sales using a recruitment survey (refer to appendix 1). All interviews were voluntary and interviewees were granted anonymity. A list of interviewees, using pseudonyms, and including basic information such as age, marital status and number of children can be found in the appendix 2.

The recruitment survey was designed to allow for purposive sampling of the interviewees, if sample size allowed. In order to compare and monitor social diversity, it was necessary to pose questions on age, education and occupation. Choosing a sample that is representative of the population to be studied is required to establish generalizable conclusions (Horrocks and King 2010). Indeed King and Horrocks (2010, p.29) state:

> The criterion most commonly proposed for sampling in qualitative research is diversity.

Customers were asked about their willingness to be interviewed whilst completing the questionnaire, and were later contacted through email or telephone. Whilst this background information helped me to select interviewees, in reality, I had to recruit those who were willing to volunteer so although there was some diversity I cannot claim to have a statistically representative sample for the qualitative study. Interviews were held in a place of the interviewee's choosing, such as their home or a cafe local to them. Face-to-face interviews usually lasted 40-60 minutes but some interviews were conducted on the telephone and these were significantly shorter.

Interviews allow for more in-depth data generation than questionnaires, because (as mine did) they tend to be unstructured or semi-structured, taking a conversational, fluid form (Valentine 1997). Interviews are particularly useful when researching previously unexplored areas because they are more open to

exploring new leads than a structured questionnaire (Adams 2010). Group interviews, in particular focus groups, were also considered as a research method, yet it was felt that interviews offer a more in-depth insight into people's lives than focus groups can often achieve.

Historically, focus groups have been used as a market research tool and as such, are often used in consumer studies (Wilkinson 2004). Whilst having their advantages, focus groups were avoided in this study as it was felt that the group environment may influence participants' responses, particularly those concerning socialisation and class, key topics of the study. Another concern with focus groups is that the researcher has less control, taking the role of moderator rather than interviewer (Wilkinson 2004). This causes problems when I had posed specific research questions to address, and had a limited amount of fieldwork time.

Recent concern in the social sciences has highlighted the conflicts involved in questioning subjects about their practices. Some human geographers have thus become hesitant in using the interview to understand more about their subjects. Although acknowledging the limits to such research, Hitchings (2012) argues that interviews as a method should be considered on a case-by-case basis, with suitability dependent on class, gender, education and the type of practice being discussed.  The author concludes (2012, p.66):

> Encouraging people to talk about their practices may not always be easy, but that does not mean it is not worth trying.

Hitching's key argument is that people can talk about their practices, although he does not differentiate between responses that he regards to mirror reality or those that construct it. Indeed it is hard to deny that people can talk about their practices, but whether their responses reflect the truth is another matter. I discuss this further in the next section on data analysis. I hold the position that people are able to talk about and reflect upon their practices but that such talk is still a representation of action and should be reflected on as such.

To limit unreliability, Silverman (1993) stresses the need to pose interview questions related to actual past behaviour, rather than hypothetical future situations. This is how I approached the interview schema, yet in practice found myself asking follow-up questions related to intended future action. This

I regard to be beneficial as it gave me further insight into the intentions of interviewees whilst recognising that such talk may not reflect actual future behaviour. In relation to the wording of interview questions, it is important not to coerce responses either intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, great consideration is required in structuring interview questions although the semi-structured nature of the interaction implies that not all questions can be pre-planned. Indeed sticking whole-heartedly to an interview protocol does not make the most of opportunities to generate the richest of data.

According to Adams (2010) a good interviewer requires empathy, knowledge of the subject, listening skills, time management and organisation; able to remain professional at all times, without appearing hostile. Whilst talking about consumption practice posed little threat to respondents, some topics were more sensitive. Discussions related to broader aspects of parenting and childbirth were emotionally laden and required sensitivity from myself as the researcher. Class too, as I tried to tease out socio-demographic difference or notions of taste, were sensitive issues. Sayer (2002, p.1.2) suggests that our reluctance to talk about class comes from raising 'issues of the relative worth of individuals' and is therefore something of a taboo subject. The topic must be addressed however to answer question 3a concerned with the social diversity of nearly new sale participants. Both class and gender are important for forming the habitus and personal identities and were therefore something I wished to explore (Sayer 2002; Bourdieu 2010).

Making a judgement on how many interviews to carry out is a difficult task because any number decided upon can often be arbitrary. A common view amongst scholars is that an appropriate number of interviews vary from study to study, but the shared concern is that interviews continue until the point of saturation (Baker and Edwards 2012). Saturation is the point at which no new themes arise from the interview data, and sufficient depth of understanding has been achieved on the topics of study (Baker and Edwards 2012). In *How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough?* (Baker and Edwards 2012) academic responses to this question range from twenty to seventy. The dilemma lies in generating enough data within a restricted time frame and budget. If this had been a purely qualitative study up to seventy interviews could well have been necessary, but as it utilised a triangulated method of participant observation, interviews and a quantitative survey, no single method needed be so extensive.

Miller (2012, p.31) adds justification to my mixed method approach by stating that conducting a survey with a further contingent of participants can 'help generalise' from a smaller batch of interviews.

I conducted thirty interviews for this project, at which point I felt I had indeed reached saturation, reporting no new main themes. I will now discuss my approach to data analysis.

### 3.4.3  Qualitative data analysis

This section discusses the approach to data analysis, with emphasis on the analysis of interview transcripts. I take the view that analysis is a continual process in ethnographic research. Such approach must therefore allow for a continuous evolution of ideas, rather than jumping to conclusions too quickly. As stated by Brewer (2000), ethnographic data are personal to the researcher in ways that quantitative data are not. This leads us back to the discussions at the being of this chapter, concerned with ways of seeing the world and different representations of reality. Whilst I remain committed to a realist epistemology, I work within 'subtle realism'; the view that situates understanding of reality as constrained by personal perspectives (Brewer 2000).

The challenge of analysing ethnographic data comes from the sheer volume of data collected. Ethnography can come under attack for not being a rigorous science, being always at least partly based on the researcher's own experience. It is for both of these reasons that proper and justifiable analysis, interpretation and presentation of ethnographic data is essential. Whilst the literature review helped to develop the research questions, and brought to light particular points to situate observations, I was not testing hypothesis as such, but rather simply familiarised myself with the relevant debates in order to generate my own theories from the analysis. Indeed thoughtful and rigorous analysis of qualitative data requires an appreciation of the current debates within the prescribed research topic coupled with being open to new findings (Bell, Caplan et al. 1993; Ellis and Bochner 1996).

This project took a mixed method approach, being reliant on qualitative data collection to develop points of interest and reverting to quantitative data to test the reliability and validity of claims. Qualitative data collection in this

instance makes use of interviews and participant observation, both through participating in the nearly new sales and through watching over events from afar (through the intranet forum and volunteer mailing list for example). This works together to build a holistic and integrated critique of the NCT nearly new sale as a form of second-hand consumption and local service offered to parents.

Participant interviews were conducted for this study on the belief that talk data is a tool for developing a greater understanding of what happens at NCT nearly new sales (and indeed of wider social life) (Valentine 1997; Horrocks and King 2010). Denzin (1998, p.313) argues, from the point of view of a postmodern ethnographer 'in the social sciences there is only interpretation' as nothing speaks for itself. Such a view devalues ethnographic techniques for being unable to say anything notable about the social world. Realist ethnographers, in contrast, 'disclose their understanding and explanation of the phenomenon using the single, authoritative author's voice' (Brewer 2000, p.122). Yet their written accounts can be criticised as little more than rhetoric with Clough (1992) asserting that ethnographic writing is no different to literary narrative; a constructed version of reality rather than a realist account.

I approached my own interview transcripts on the basis that they were not naturally occurring talk data, but rather constructed in a particular setting and for a particular purpose. I therefore acknowledge that talk is always situated socially, spatially and temporally and that interviews are engineered examples of talk but purport that such talk can give us some insight on reality. This interpretivist approach to data analysis permits awareness of human agency, consciousness and creativity in interpretation of findings within the perspective of subtle realism.

Data collection and analysis through the method of interviewing took the following structure:

1. Conduct semi-structured interviews – Note contextual points in field diary (location of interview, interviewees dress and tone, non-taped discussions, my thoughts and feelings).
2. Transcribe interviews verbatim – Note any thoughts/themes throughout.
3. Categorise interviews by interviewee demographics/variables.
4. Code talk data by research question (descriptive coding) – annotations in NVivo.

5. Code talk data by theme and sub theme (interpretative coding) – annotations in NVivo.
6. Write synopsis of each interview transcript, including key themes raised and any points relevant to discourse analysis.
7. Select suitable quotes to build an argument.

Interviews were recorded on a voice recording device with the permission of the interviewee. Further notes, including setting, time of day, body language and any disruptions were documented in my field notebook, although notes were brief rather than profuse. This was due to a desire to ensure the interviewee felt comfortable (rather than creating a sense of examination) as well as not missing anything the interviewee said in order to follow leads where necessary and respond to conversational cues appropriately.

I transcribed the audio interviews myself into written text. Although transcription can result in reliability problems if the person transcribing is different to the person who conducted the interview (Kvale 1996), I did both myself in order to minimise (hopefully eradicate) mistakes and misrepresentation of information. By transcribing the interviews myself I was still engaged too in the continual process of analysis, being a helpful exercise in familiarising myself with the data before initiating the coding process. According to Heritage (1984, p.238):

> The use of recorded data is an essential corrective to the limitations of intuition and recollection. In enabling repeated and detailed examination of the events of interaction, the use of recordings extends the range and precision of the observations which can be made.

Transcription is therefore necessary to generate the most reliable findings. It is important to note that transcription also involves ethical issues, specifically confidentiality. Names of people and places, where necessary, were altered during the transcription phase.

I took the view that interviewees are experiencing agents who to varying extents, construct their own social worlds and as such transcript data should not be regarded as facts about the world, but rather as one subjects experiencing view of it. According to Laurier (1998), there are geographies in talk; places are made, unmade and remade through speech. In light of this, consensual themes are bound to emerge across participants but other themes

may remain illustrated only by one subject. The qualitative analysis therefore, involved teasing out these key themes whilst retaining an awareness of individual difference.

Coding is the primary route to thematic analysis. The steps outlined on the previous page show the process used to analyse the interview transcripts. This process of analysis started at the point of conducting the interview, where I made contextual notes which would not otherwise be evident through transcripts alone, and continued throughout the coding and re-coding process. I used computer-assisted data analysis for the complete set of interview transcripts as I found it to be the easiest and most reliable way of organising the data. In particular, I used NVivo10 software, developing a set of categorical and thematic codes. Each transcript could be cross-referenced with the descriptive variables of the participants (reproduced in appendix 2).

Descriptive categorical coding deductively selected the sections of talk data in relation to the prescribed research questions. This ensured that I focused on answering the research questions as one element of analysis. Following this, a mixture of deductive and inductive reasoning occurred, drawing on themes of exploration brought to light in the existing literature whilst creating new thematic codes where necessary (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Brewer 2000). Examples of some of the codes are presented in figure 3.3.

There are two main ways to analyse talk data; conversational analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA). CA is more precise than DA, working on analysing the meanings of linguistics as much as the denotations of what is being said (Silverman 1993). CA assumes that talk has organised patterns, that speaker's action is context shaped and that analysis is data driven, using a prescribed set of transcription symbols to categorise talk (Heritage 1984). DA, in contrast, is concerned with a broader range of activities than solely the transcribed talk data, such as gender relations and social control. DA also works with less precise transcripts (Silverman 1993). In conducting one-to-one interviews, DA was satisfactory to draw out themes and so was deemed most appropriate.

| Coding approach | Code name (Node) | Example from transcript |
|---|---|---|
| Category code (deductive) | What they do there <br><br> - shopping | Yeah generally I have an idea, like I want certain types of clothes or I'll have a look through the toys. What did I buy, oh I bought some games at the last one because my four year old daughter is just getting into little card games and stuff so I bought a few extra of those. |
| Thematic (inductive) | Identity of mother <br><br> - fears | So I was very worried about her in, very anxious in the beginnings. I wasn't going to buy second-hand bumpers in the beginning so we bought new side ones which are quite good |
| Thematic (inductive) | Material culture <br><br> - risk <br><br>   - hygiene | I wanted that new, and I think it's just because you can take the fabric off and wash it which is what we've done now to put hers away, but its wicker as well and, it sounds a bit, well I've got cats but my cats don't go near her bedding but other people's cats maybe can. |

Table 3.2: Examples of qualitative codes

Gregson and Crewe (2003) write in detail about their approach to interview transcripts, stressing the importance in analysing talk data with care and consideration. They take an interpretivist view, not simply listening to (or reading) the words which are spoken but looking 'critically too, for the ways in which such stories are told' (Gregson and Crewe 2003, p.215). Through analysing talk, the authors were mindful to connect such discourse with practice. They state:

> Throughout this analysis phase we came to see the discursive as a key way of understanding the practices and material culture of consumption, to see talk as a citation of discourse, to connect talk with practice and to think about talk in relation to space and its production.

I too, tried to connect talk with practice by drawing on the observational data collected at the nearly new sales. Having experienced being in the same place as the interviewee at the same time I could, not only understand more clearly the stories and experiences of the participant, but validate their stories too (in part). Gregson and Crewe (2003) passed transcripts back and forth between themselves making notes on initial impressions, ambiguities, repetitions, connections and things they thought were surprising.

Unlike Gregson and Crewe I was not able to share the data analysis with another researcher. Such collaborative analysis is one way of improving the reliability of qualitative data as it enables multiple readings of the text. Whilst being aware of the limitations of my subjective position, I remained reflective of my positionality throughout. I was therefore able to feel confident in the validity of my interpretation of the data and furthermore tested some of these themes in stage two of the data collection process, which is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

## 3.5 Stage Two: Quantitative study

### 3.5.1 Survey study

The purpose of stage two of the research design was to test some of the themes unearthed in stage one for generalizability, based on the project research questions. Survey studies are used when information is needed directly from people, collecting their demographic information, values,

experiences and habits (Fink 2009). Surveys and statistical analysis can be used in addition to ethnographic methods to provide a wider socio-economic context (Skeggs 1995).

The aim for stage two was to generate as much data as possible on nearly new sale customers across the UK from as many different branches as manageable in the timeframe. Originally therefore, the intention was to sample at least twenty branches/sales to conduct the survey. Lacking the resources to attend all of these sales myself (as well as the fact that many sales across the UK happen simultaneously) I decided that the best way to conduct the survey was to ask the volunteers to run it within their own branch, sending all of the materials and instructions by post. Management staff at NCT consented to this method and were able to provide a letter of recommendation to assist with getting past the gatekeepers.

It was in doing the ethnographic fieldwork however, that this proposed method of survey implementation began to feel high risk. I knew, through working alongside and speaking to the volunteers, that the sale period was a busy time and that volunteers always had their own tasks to carry out. By placing a request on the volunteers to conduct the survey, I ran the risk of discrepancies across branches, unreliable data collection, or even a completely blank data set from sampled branches. As sales tend to occur just twice a year in the autumn and spring sale seasons, if data collected were not valid I would have to wait another six months before I could run the study again. A similar concern was evident when considering the use of an online survey; this was dismissed as I could not monitor respondents or be sure that they would complete it outside the locale of the sale. I therefore took a different approach to survey implementation, an approach whereby consistency was ensured by conducting all of the studies myself.

Quantity was sacrificed for quality, as I conducted the survey at ten nearly new sales across the UK. This still generated 329 usable questionnaires, a reasonable number for analysis (Ronald and Blair 2005). Travelling to another ten sales, including one in Scotland and one in the very north of England, also added to the ethnographic element of the study although I was not able to apply myself to this as is required to be a rigorous research method. Having

decided that ten sales were the maximum I could realistically attend in the autumn 2013 sale period, I then developed the sampling method.

Sampling refers to choosing a sample, or selection, from a total population to be studied (Parfitt 1997). In this case there were the ten individual nearly new sales which had to be sampled from the population, plus the population of customers attending each individual sale. There are very few instances where a complete census of a population is feasible therefore there is always a trade-off to be made. Dependent factors include time and financial restraints, as well as getting through the gatekeepers within the NCT. It was important that the survey study included a representative sample of all of the UK NCT branches therefore a stratified-random sampling method was employed (a form of probability sampling) (Ross 2005).

The stratified-random (or systematic) sampling method was based on a sampling frame listing all NCT branches. Branches were ordered alphabetically within regional strata. These regional bands were the NCT applied regions (e.g. London, East of England) and the sampling frame included branch name, region, number of members, cash, and sales figures from the previous two nearly new sales. This contextual information allowed any dormant branches, or branches not holding nearly new sales, to be removed from the frame. I used an online random number generator[4] to select the first branch and then selected each 30th branch in order to generate a sample of ten. At this point I had to find out the date of the next sale for each sampled branch (either online or by contacting the branch directly if information was not available online) and where any sales clashed on dates I sampled the next branch down the list for the second of the two sales.

I was left with ten sales between Saturday 7th September and Saturday 23rd November 2013, details of which are in table 3.3. Oppenheim (1992) stresses the necessity of piloting a questionnaire as many times as needed to ensure that the final survey is fit for purpose.  This involves all aspects of survey design including the question wording, question order, instructions, and method of conducting the survey. With this in mind I piloted the questionnaire in July 2013 at a sale on the South Coast. I had already piloted the process of

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[4] Random.org (number from 1 to 10 = 8)

data collection during the ethnographic fieldwork when I used a questionnaire to collect the details of potential interviewees, but the later piloting enabled revisions of the questionnaire.

Designing questionnaires can often work effectively back to front, so that the researcher decides on what he or she needs to find out, and writes the questions which will help to answer these (Parfitt 1997; Fink 2003). Indeed, I did not want to ask more questions than necessary as this ran the risk of participants becoming bored or running out of time and not completing the questionnaire. Too many questions could also lead to a plethora of data with little time to analyse. As described in table 3.1, the survey was designed in order to add to the evidence for all of the research aims, supplementing the qualitative data in an extensive quantitative format.

An appropriate survey design takes into consideration the respondent (Fink 2003). The process of interviewing then, without suggesting that all participants share the same characteristics, was, at least of some benefit in familiarising myself with sale participants and designing the questionnaire to suit them. The language and tone of the questionnaire must be appropriate, starting with simple questions and grouping questions accordingly. There are three main question formats which could have been used; open ended, closed ended, and scale response. Fink suggests standardising these, so that question formats are the same or similar for the whole questionnaire, rather than confusing respondents with too many question types as this could threaten reliability (Ross 2005). I therefore used closed ended questions throughout, as this simplified data analysis.

Where possible and relevant, the questionnaire made use of questions already used by NCT in their Diversity Monitoring Policy (Taylor 2009). The policy discusses the way in which demographic questions were formulated in a recent small survey study on diversity monitoring of NCT services, compatible with Census, ONS and local authority data collection techniques in a way which remains largely relevant to the PhD study. A final copy of the questionnaire can be found in appendix 3. The questions were focused on past behaviour and actions taken at the nearly new sale. The vast majority of questionnaires were completed and handed back at the sale, although three came back later in the post. Having selected ten sales in my sample, I then aimed for a population

census at each sale by giving the primary purchaser for each group/unit (one person or one family for example) a paper questionnaire. This is because I was equally interested in everybody attending, and as all customers arrived through the same one door it was easy to hand a questionnaire to everyone. Many of these questionnaires were handed out as customers queued to enter the sale (sometimes waiting for well over thirty minutes before the sale opened) providing a captured audience to explain my project to. Questionnaires were left in a sealed box by the exit when complete.

Whilst my presence encouraged customers to complete and return the questionnaires, not all customers preferred to participate or had time to complete the questionnaire. In this instance they were not forced to do so as completion of the questionnaire remained voluntary. A good response rate of 60 to 80% was achieved across the ten sites. Incentives were provided through the addition of a prize draw for NCT Shop vouchers[5] and by handing out sweets. The interviewees sampled in stage one of the study did not receive an incentive, relying on a personal desire to assist or general interest. I found that the incentives were beneficial as much for approaching the nearly new sale coordinators as for the survey participants. It was helpful, in initial correspondence with coordinators, to show that I could offer something to their customers and would not just be 'using' them to gather data. As it appreciated by the participants, prize draw was less of an incentive (as many participants did not leave their contact details in order to be entered into the prize draw). Figure 3.3 shows each of the ten survey locations proportional to the number of responses collected at each. Sampled sales were clustered around the South East as NCT branches in general are heavily clustered around the South. In the North West a number of branches originally sampled were dormant (an interesting finding in itself) therefore pushing my sampling further down the list to Sale H which ended up with the highest response rate.

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[5] Two £25 vouchers were available across the ten branches. The winners were selected on 9th December 2013 and vouchers were posted soon after.
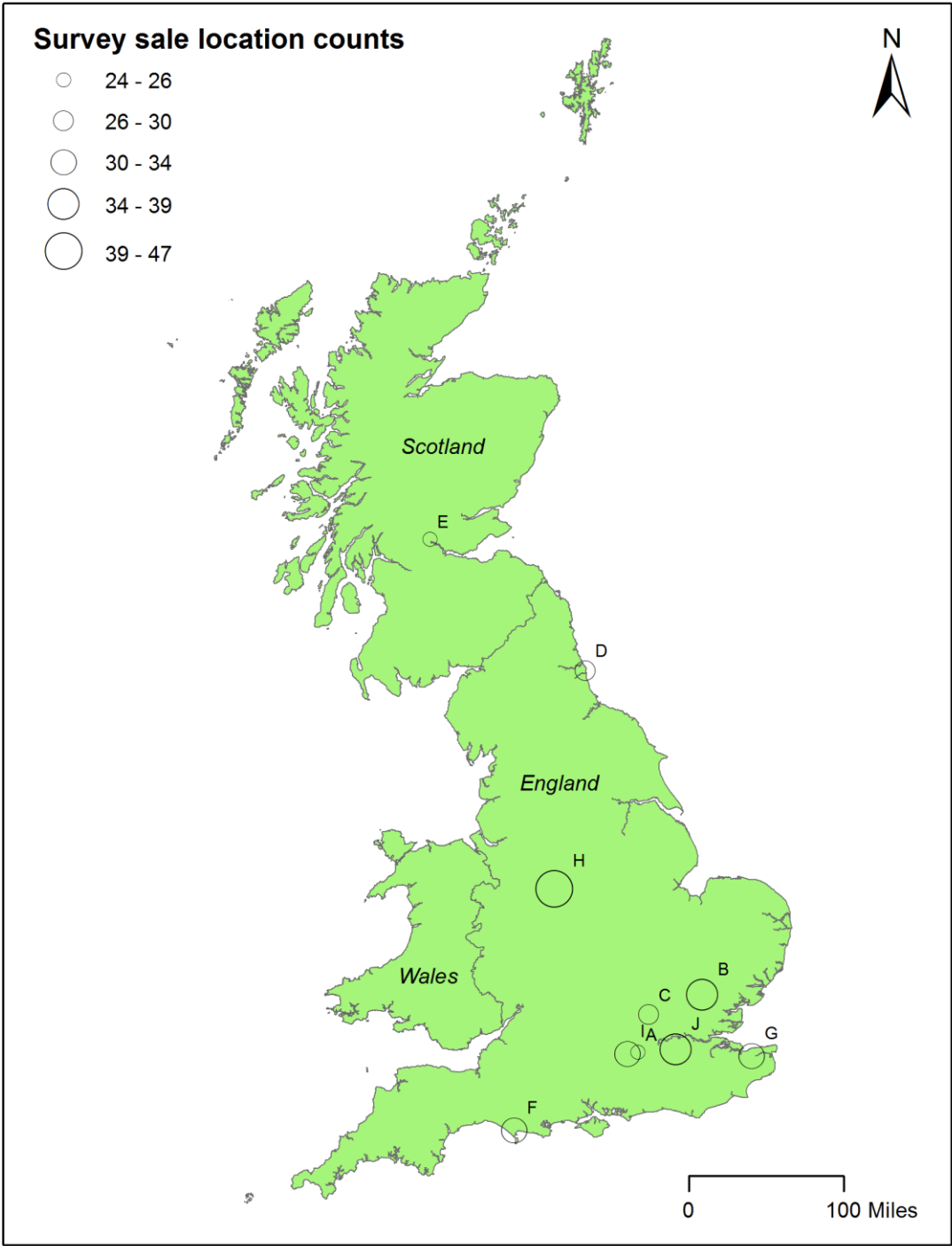
Figure 3.3 Survey counts by location

| Sale | Type | Details |
|------|------|---------|
| Sale A | Small Table top | Affluent village, small village hall, first sale in two years, no cafe, no advertisers. |
| Sale B | Large table-top | Suburban, well established, sports hall in leisure centre, cafe with seating, advertisers. |
| Sale C | Ticketed | Suburban, school hall, cafe with seating, advertisers, breastfeeding counsellor. |
| Sale D | Ticketed | Suburban (mixed private/council housing), church hall, two rooms, cafe no seating, no advertisers. |
| Sale E | Ticketed | Affluent semi-rural village, church hall, two large rooms, cafe with seating, advertisers. |
| Sale F | Large table top | Suburban, school hall, two large rooms plus corridor, seated cafe, bra-fitting, bouncy castle. |
| Sale G | Ticketed | Suburban, school hall, cafe with seating, no advertisers, no NCT literature. |
| Sale H | Ticketed | Semi-rural, school hall, cafe area with seating, advertisers. |
| Sale I | Ticketed | Suburban, sports centre, one hall, first sale in two years, no cafe, no advertisers. |
| Sale J | Ticketed | Suburban, church hall, large cafe area, advertisers. |

Table 3.3: Details of ten sales sampled for the survey

### 3.5.2 Quantitative data analysis

The survey generated a data set of 329 useable responses. A paper questionnaire was used therefore, data had to be prepared and entered by hand. Data cleaning was kept to a minimum, instead focus fell on ensuring the best quality data was collected in the field. Whilst I did not work with the participants to complete the questionnaire (unless requested), I was able to show them all of the applicable sections and how to complete them as I handed the questionnaire over, and in some cases check afterwards to see if it had been fully completed. Missing responses were left as missing as long as it was no more than 10% of the questionnaire. By far, the most common section left missing were the socio-demographic questions related to the respondents' partner (if applicable).

As the questionnaire was designed predominantly with multiple choice, closed-ended questions, the data collected were predominantly discrete/nominal data. Participants were also able to add qualitative responses to sections labelled 'other', leading to data which were treated differently to the nominal data. An Excel spreadsheet was developed to include all possible responses to each question. Responses were then coded, for example a positive response to a question was replaced with '1', a negative response replaced with '2' and a missing response replaced with '.'. Categorical data such as, '10. What is your ethnic group?' were given codes appropriately, in this case 1 to 5. The purpose of this coding was to prepare the data for analysis in SPSS. Each batch of questionnaires were inputted after each sale by myself, and care was taken to remain consistent in coding, data cleaning and accuracy.

Simple analysis of quantitative survey data involves descriptive statistics. This calculates means, medians and modes, proportions, percentages and ratios, and can thus provide a measure of dispersion (Fink 2003). Descriptive statistics are very helpful in looking at the findings as a whole, but cannot describe differences between groups. Whilst I considered comparing geographical regions or variables such as occupation or gender, I decided that this was outside the scope of the study which was more ethnographic in focus. To supplement the qualitative data, descriptive statistics were enough to validate the themes and provide evidence to aid NCT policy procedures. I therefore ran frequency tests in SPSS in order to count codes which could be

transferred into percentages. I then used another online tool[6] to calculate the confidence interval of a proportion in order to judge whether the data were statistically significant across the entire population. An example of this tool is shown in figure 3.4 below. The example shows that using the recognised standard of a 95% CI, I could be 95% confident that the true value (of, in this case graduate attainment of customers) lies between 59.64% and 69.96%.

## Calculator

| | |
|---|---|
| Enter Sample Size ❓ | 329 |
| Enter Observed Proportion (%) ❓ | 64.8 |
| Select Desired Confidence Level (%) ❓ | 95 ▾ |

Reset                                          Calculate

## Results

Sample Size: **329**
Observed Proportion: **64.8%**
Confidence Level: **95%**

Confidence Interval:

±5.16

Range for the true population proportion:
59.64% to 69.96%

Figure 3.4: Confidence Interval (CI) calculator for graduate level of respondents

## 3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations involve both empathy for moral and ethical rights and wrongs and adherence to institutional codes of conduct. For the doctoral

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[6] https://www.mccallum-layton.co.uk/tools/statistic-calculators/confidence-interval-for-proportions-calculator/

research in question these institutional codes of conduct were three-fold with the University of Southampton, NCT and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) each publishing their own ethical guidelines or holding research ethics committees. As an ESRC funded project there was full adherence to the ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (FRE) which has six key principles:

1. Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity, quality and transparency.
2. Research staff and participants must normally be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved.
3. The confidentiality of information supplied by research participants and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
4. Research participants must take part voluntarily, free from any coercion.
5. Harm to research participants must be avoided in all instances.
6. The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest of partiality must be explicit.

Participants were not forced to take part in the study and were fully briefed on what their participation entailed, how the data was to be stored and what the data would be used for. Branches selected for involvement were initially contacted by letter and with permission of the NCT. The letter outlined the subject of the research, what their involvement would entail and how the data would be used. The research protocol was available to all branches and participants on request and was available to branches on the NCT intranet. The ways in which participant consent was granted is outlined in Table 3.4.

| Research Method | How I informed participants | How I gained consent |
|---|---|---|
| Participant Observation | Sign fixed to the entrance of the sale sites detailed the nature of the study.<br><br>Participant information sheets, including further contact details, available to take away. | Observation is a recognised research method and carrying out observation in a public place is not an ethical concern. In entering the sale, participants give their consent to be observed. I collected written consent from any participants I photographed. |
| Interviews | Participants received the participant information sheet and full research protocol available on request. | Written consent collected on the interview consent form. |
| Survey | Participants given an introduction to the study on the survey sheet.<br><br>Further information and research protocol available on request. | Participants provided their consent by filling out and returning the questionnaire. |

Table 3.4: Participant consent methods for data collection

A University of Southampton Geography and Environment risk assessment was completed for the fieldwork; this covered risk and safety concerns for both the researcher and participants. The main risks identified were lone working and risks involved in travelling, steps were therefore taken to minimise these risks. Ethics assessments were also produced for the University of Southampton and NCT.

Participants were granted anonymity by using pseudonyms and destroying any information which could make them identifiable. Interviews in a family setting are very different to elite interviews which may be held in a business environment. As an interviewer entering someone's home I aimed to be friendly and approachable whilst not sharing too much of my personal information as this could influence the direction of the conversation. That said, the feminist perspective in which I approached the interviews allowed for a more relaxed two-way exchange. Audio files and transcripts will be held securely on my office based PC and a back-up saved on a disk in a locked draw. Data files were not removed from the office or taken home, nor shared

with other parties. Interviewees were provided with an interview protocol which lists all of this information.

For a final point on ethics, I approached this project in the spirit of collaborative knowledge creation between myself, the NCT and the study participants. Whilst not being a parent myself, I empathised with the participants as best I could, acknowledging the responsibilities this involved (many of the interviews were conducted with babies or pets present) and the emotions and tensions brought to the fore in discussing intimate family and personal practices.

## 3.7 Concluding remarks

This chapter has aimed to highlight the theoretical perspectives shaping the methodology and outlined the proposed research design developed to answer the research aims and questions. Sensitive to the notion of structuration theory, I was able to explore the structures and rationalisations influencing participation in NCT nearly new sales, and the resources and social networks that parents may gain from participation. This investigation was assisted by engaging with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and three forms of capital, and with Giddens' locale of structuring systems.

A triangulated, mixed method research design was utilised, using ethnographic observation and participation, participant interviewing and quantitative surveying. This research design was split into two main stages, initially using ethnography to generate key themes and categories, before conducting an extensive survey to test these themes on a wider scale. Quantifying the results in this way is particularly relevant to NCT to aid their policies, whilst furthermore providing strong evidence to my qualitative claims. I approached this research fully aware of my own subjective position but on the understanding that a realist view of social life is nevertheless valid. It is in this manner that I developed the following three empirical chapters, structuring key arguments in response to the three research aims by drawing on my own data analysis whilst linking back to existing debates in the literature.

# 4  Attending: Structuring Systems of Second-hand Consumption

## 4.1  Introduction

Nearly new sales are one of a number of services offered by NCT. In principle the sales are open to all and whilst NCT members will often be prioritised for early entry, no individuals or groups are formally excluded.  A key aim driving this research project was to better understand who attends the nearly new sales in terms of socio-demographic reach. This had not been studied nationally before although NCT had studied social variations of participation in their other services through a project run by the Diversity Monitoring Policy Team (Taylor 2009). The results of this survey suggested that NCT services (for example the antenatal classes) were not being accessed by a representative sample of the population, more often attracting parents with higher levels of education and professional employment, and underrepresenting those of a lower socio-economic status (Taylor 2011). This pattern was also echoed in the demographics of the charity's membership base. This doctoral research project therefore, aimed to investigate whether this pattern was imitated through the social reach of the nearly new sales or whether they attracted a more diverse group encouraged by the prospect of inexpensive, 'nearly new' used goods. This aim is reiterated by the first set of research questions as outlined in the introduction to this thesis and reprinted below:

1. **To identify the social structures and rationalisations leading to parental participation in NCT nearly new sales.**

   a) **What is the current NCT nearly new sale customer demographic and social reach?**
   b) **What reasons do customers give for attendance to the NCT nearly new sale?**

Responding to these research questions has importance both for forwarding academic knowledge on sites of consumption as social fields and in influencing NCT's diversity monitoring policies. As introduced earlier in the thesis, second-hand consumption is a marked practice of the excluded consumer (Williams and Windebank 2002), cut off from conventional forms of first-cycle exchange due to their limited access to economic, social and cultural capital. We might

therefore assume that excluded consumers comprise a significant segment of the participating population for nearly new sales, but this contradicts NCT's current known user and membership-base of parents with middle to higher socio-economic status. That said, the review of existing literature also poses consumer motivations for participation in second-hand consumption channels to be complex, evolving and difficult to isolate. Such form of consumption is not confined to the so-called 'excluded consumer', but evident across middle income levels. Second-hand consumption practices therefore, are not solely motivated by economic restrictions but bound within a range of social, cultural, political and ethical justifications (Crewe and Gregson 2003; Guiot and Roux 2010).

These justifications for engaging in second-hand consumption practices will be considered in light of key academic debates. Critically, I consider the social structures facilitating attendance to the sales, drawing on long-standing debates that focus on individual agency and the level at which individual actions are shaped by society (Thrift 1983; Sewell 1992). Whilst there is little space to engage with the philosophical epistemologies in this chapter, such awareness helps to structure my empirical analysis when attempting to explain participant attendance.

Secondly, I draw on the healthy body of work concerned with consumption and class, not least due to the fact that NCT itself is consistently presented as middle-class (Clarke 2000; Lewis 2010; Rock 2011), but also in light of the 'excluded consumer' theory highlighted above. To do this I draw on the conceptual tools of Bourdieu (Bourdieu [1979] 2010) who argues that the core mechanism governing the process of consumption is struggles over class/distinction (Bourdieu 2010). Finally, and juxtaposed against the theme of distinction, I consider the ordinary nature of consumption and the role of provisioning as a family-bound practice. I do this by drawing on the work of Warde (1999) and the second-hand consumption literature highlighted above (Gregson and Crewe 1997; Williams and Windebank 2002; Crewe and Gregson 2003).

The chapter begins by outlining the socio-demographic background of the participants involved in this study, first reflecting on the interviewees who provided the qualitative quotes referenced in this and later chapters, and then

reporting in detail on the quantitative survey results which together, build an image of the typical nearly new sale customer.  Following this, I discuss what these results mean for the locale of the nearly new sale and the social networks structuring attendance. The second part of this chapter explores the reasons customers provide for attending the nearly new sale and for purchasing second-hand baby goods, and tries to tease out some of the more complex justifications and motives for such participation by using the data to theorise on the role of the sales as a form of second-hand retail. Finally, I draw conclusions by identifying the social structures and justifications leading to parental participation in NCT nearly new sales as posed by the original research aim.

Within this thesis I refer to Giddens (1984) definition of social structure as the patterning of social relations. Social structures in this sense are more than simply social networks, although these play a key part; they are rules and resources that agents draw upon to act in society. For Giddens, social structures are enabling as well as restrictive, therefore suggesting that agents can generate resources from such structures whether they be social, cultural or economic.  I call on this term throughout this and later chapters in order to better understand and describe the role of nearly new sales and what facilitates their success as a site of second-hand consumption and NCT fundraising activity.

## 4.2  Who attends? Customer survey results

A mixed method approach was utilised for this study because neither qualitative nor quantitative methods alone were felt adequate in responding to the formulated research questions. Whilst the collection of qualitative data allowed me to explore, in a semi-structured manner, participants' practices, justifications and values, the quantitative data collection was most appropriate at capturing some of this information on a broader scale. Whilst I tried to achieve a diverse sample for the interview stage, in reality I had to work with the respondents who came forward and volunteered (through the three branches selected). Interviewees varied in age group from 20-24 to 40+ and twelve of the thirty fell into the 30-34 age bracket. Two were first time expectant mothers, the others all being mothers to one or two children up to the age of ten. Two thirds were educated to degree level, with six holding

postgraduate qualifications. All were white British apart from one respondent who was of Turkish origin.

At the time of data collection I felt that the interview sample may be biased towards a middle-class group who were more easily accessible, aware themselves of the process of interviewing for research purposes (from their own education and professional experiences) and encouraged by their peers to take part. I knew through attending the sales myself that younger mothers and mothers of different ethnic minority backgrounds did attend the sales, but in small numbers. As this extract from my research diary suggests, I was surprised when one of the sales, specifically chosen for its ethnically diverse location and high levels of deprivation did not come to reflect this at the sale itself:

> I had an idea in my head of [the city] as highly ethnically diverse and that had been my previous experience of the city so I was surprised that the sale didn't reflect that. There were a couple of Asian families – they came as a big family unit. One black woman stayed for nearly the whole two hours, they practically had to ask her to leave at the end. She had two children with her but no other adults and spent ages collecting goods in a corner, she was clearly price conscious and careful about what she was buying. She declined any help from the volunteers. All of the volunteers were white, most with a local accent (Waight 2012).

Stage one of the data collection, the ethnographic process of observation and interviewing, began to build a particular picture of the sales as similar to the demographic found by NCT's diversity monitoring group. That is, white British, educated and 30-40 years of age.  The purpose of the survey therefore, was to investigate on a broader scale by travelling to ten NCT nearly new sales across the UK to conduct a customer questionnaire. These ten sales were sampled using a stratified-random sample method spanning the thirteen UK regions identified by NCT. I will now look at these results, focusing on the demographic data which comprised multiple choice questions 8 to 12 on the questionnaire.

Questionnaires were handed out to each group or family unit attending the sale and a received a high response rate of 60-80% across the sites, likely because the design of data collection allowed me to be there in person

encouraging questionnaires to be returned. 329 useable questionnaires were collected. As participants were instructed that the person responsible for the shopping decisions that day be the elected respondent for the questionnaire, 92% were female. This correlates with existing studies that suggest women have the most responsibility for family consumption practices, particularly in regards to caring for children (Pahl 1990; Dowling 1993; Domosh 1996).

**Age**
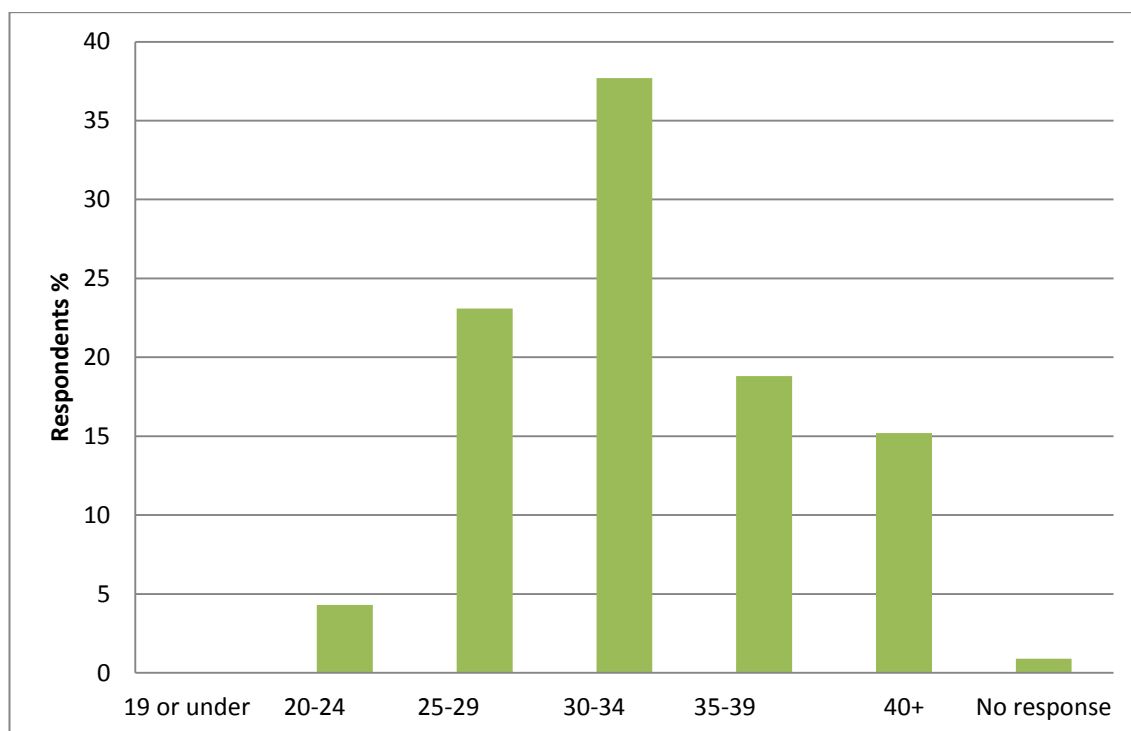


Figure 4.1: Respondents by age, n.329 (Q.9b)

In regards to age, the mode and median age fell within the 30-34 years bracket (Figure 4.1) and no respondents were aged 19 or under which suggests nearly new sales do not reach the youngest group of parents. This does however mirror the general trend in England and Wales as the average age of women giving birth in 2013 increased to 30 years, compared with 29.8 years in 2011 (ONS 2013). What the questionnaire fails to report on however, is the fact that a small but still significant proportion of customers surveyed were grandparents. I did not want to exclude this group because they were still customers purchasing baby items at the sale, however they are likely to have different reasons for attending to the parents I had interviewed during stage one, and the parents NCT are most interested in supporting. This information

could not be captured through the questionnaire in the way that I had designed it so it is helpful that I was able to conduct the survey myself and speak to many of the respondents whilst they completed it. It seems surprising now that this was not picked up on before despite piloting the questionnaire and attending six separate sales prior to embarking on the second stage of data collection. I do not feel that this has a detrimental effect on the results, but nonetheless is worth bearing in mind when looking at the results overall, and if the survey were to be repeated in the future a question could be added to capture this information.

**Marital Status**
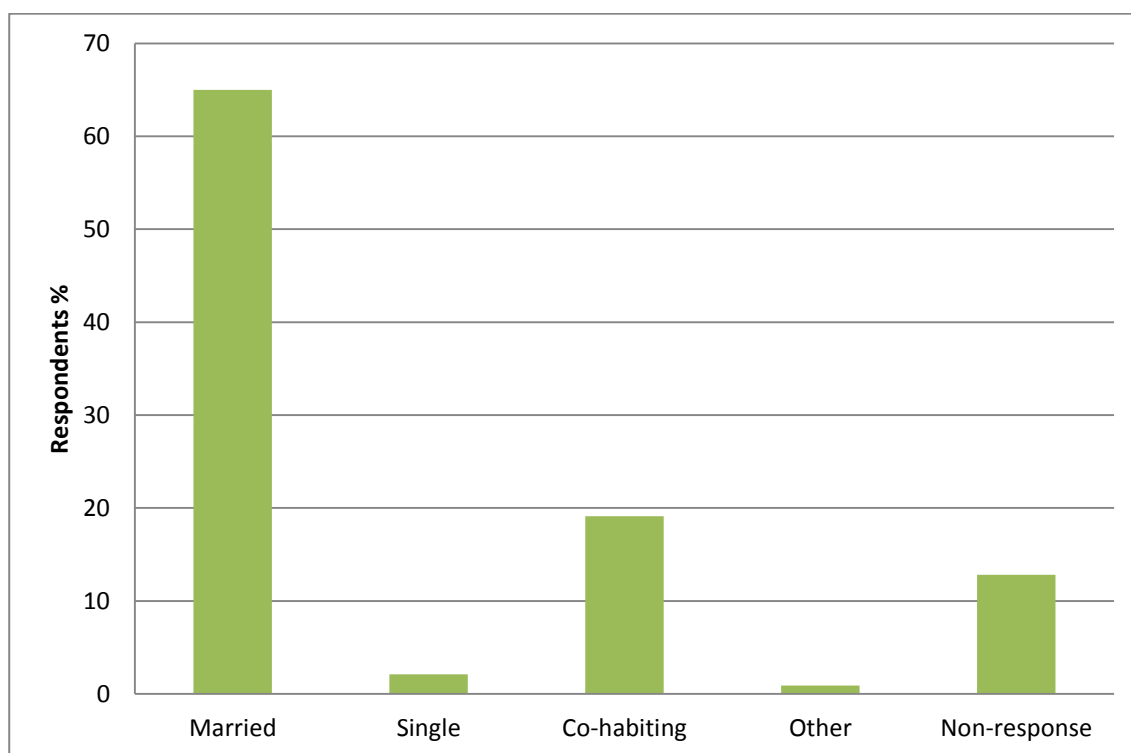


Figure 4.2: Respondents by marital status, n.329 (Q.9c)

As shown by figure 4.2, 65% of respondents were married and 19% were co-habiting. This proportion of married parents is significantly higher than the national average, with nearly half of all babies in England and Wales being born outside marriage/civil partnership (47.4%) in 2013. It is important to note that single respondents may or may not be NCT's target service users as some were grandparents or friends/relatives coming on behalf of new/expectant parents. This question had a reasonably high non-response rate compared to others in the questionnaire, at 13%. Due to the design of the questionnaire, it is unlikely

that this question was missed accidently if age and sex were provided as these three questions were clustered together. It is possible that some of these missing values were from grandparents, perhaps widowed, or individuals unwilling to share personal information. These results strongly suggest that customers attending the sale are in a co-habiting relationship and are therefore not single parents.

**Ethnicity**
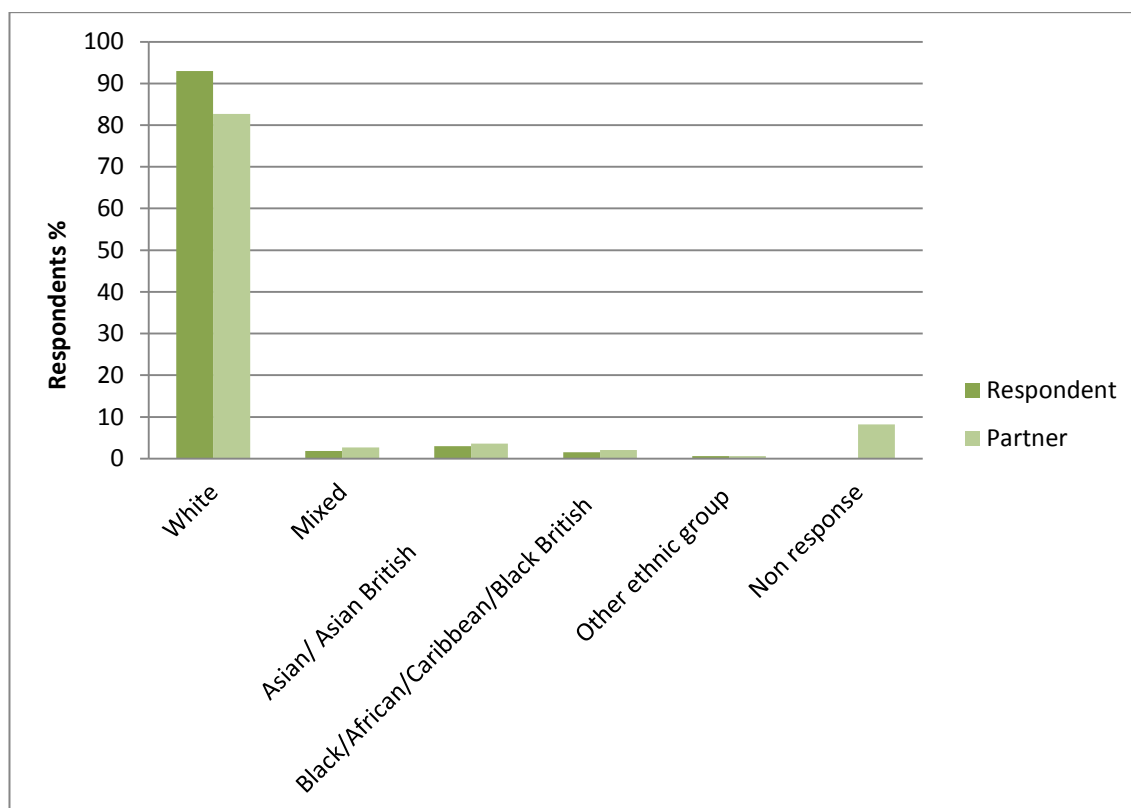


Figure 4.3: Respondents and partners by ethnic group, n.329 (Q.10)

As is clearly shown by figure 4.3, the majority of respondents and their partners were of white ethnicity. 93% of respondents were white compared to 86% for the national average (ONS 2012). Of respondents captured by the survey, 3% were Asian/Asian British and 1.5% Black/African/Caribbean/Black British. There was a non-response rate of 8.2% to provide partner's ethnic origin. I would suggest that this was due to a desire to complete the questionnaire quickly and that the proportion of white ethnicity for partners likely matches those of respondents. Overall, these results do not suggest great ethnic diversity, mirroring my observations found in stage one of the data collection and briefly discussed earlier in this section.

**Educational Qualifications**
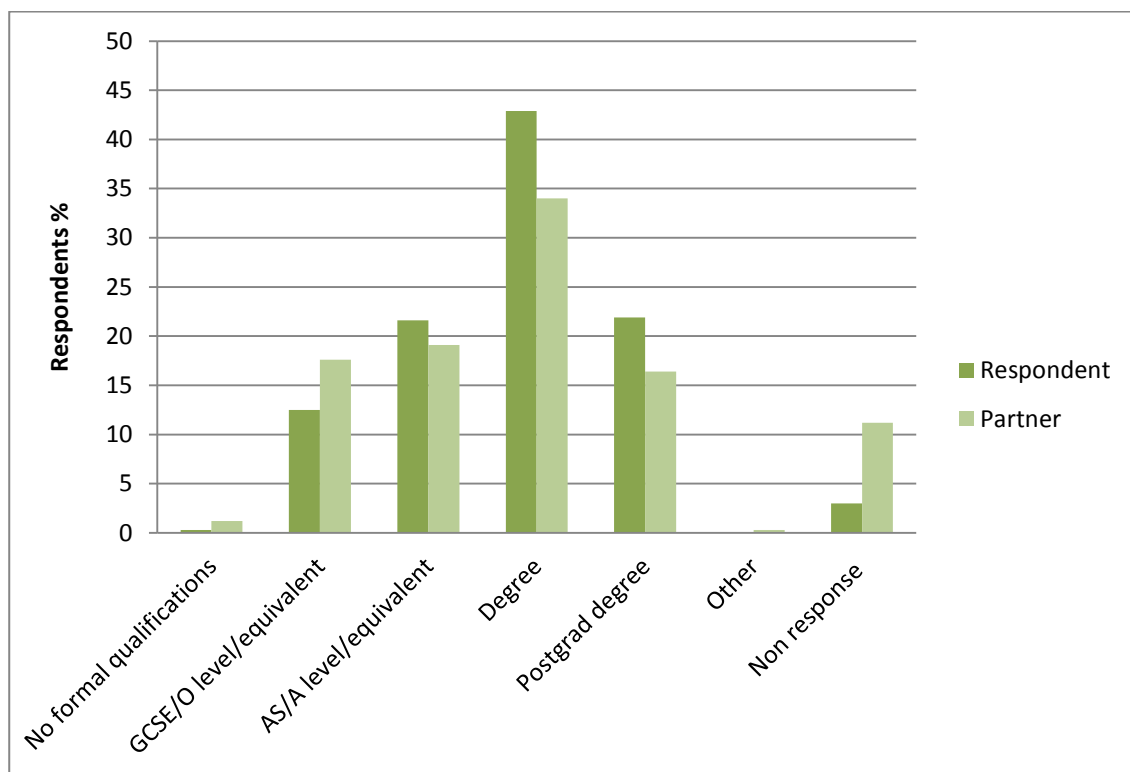


Figure 4.4: Respondents and partners by highest level of education, n.329 (Q.11)

Respondents demonstrate high levels of educational qualifications as shown in figure 4.4. 42.9% of participants stated that they were educated to undergraduate degree level and 21.9% to postgraduate degree level. This combined graduate level of 64.8% is 1.7 times the UK national average of 38% graduate attainment for working age adults (ONS 2013). This data therefore seems particularly significant as it varies so widely from the UK national average. In regards to statistical significance, running a simple confidence interval test suggests that the range for a true graduate population proportion lies between 59.6% and 70% with a 95% confidence interval. Therefore I can be 95% sure that the true value of graduate attainment for all nearly new sale customers lies between 59.6% and 70%. At the lowest level this is still 1.6 times the UK national average, therefore I can be confident in stating that nearly new sale customers are better educated than the average population.

As with the previous question on ethnicity, the non-response rate for providing data on partner's level of education is higher than that of the respondents

themselves. Assumptions cannot be made about where these true values lie because results are dispersed more widely than for the question on ethnicity. Results actually suggest that respondents (which as we have already learnt are mainly female) are better educated than their partners, however missing values for respondents equal 3% and for partners, 11.2% so unwarranted claims cannot be made.

**Occupation**
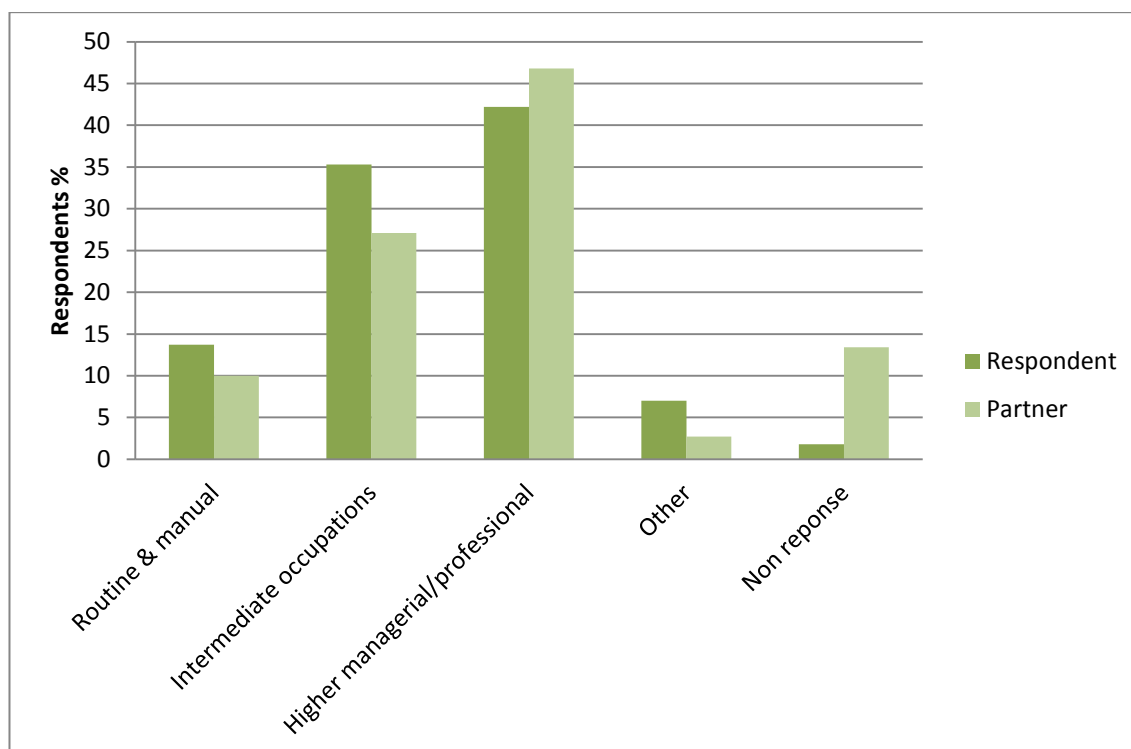


Figure 4.5: Respondents and partners by occupation, n.329 (Q.12)

Survey respondents were asked to self-classify their current or most recent occupation according to categories used by the Office for National Statistics and adopted by NCT in previous studies. Whilst this may result in opportunities for inconsistency, it was felt that they would be able to recognise which broad category best fitted their occupation, or else they could ask me, the researcher. A significant number of those who selected 'other' were in fact retired and part of the sample of grandparents already discussed. The same pattern of non-response for partner's occupation is found as per questions on ethnicity and education. Again, I would suggest this to be related to time restraints rather than any other form of bias. In a small number of cases, respondents selected 'other' but then wrote down an occupation which could be classified according

to the categories. In this case I altered their response, coding it within the category I believed it belonged.

Overall respondents selected occupational grades akin to the educational qualifications selected. Similarities between GCSE level of education or equivalent and levels of routine and manual employment for respondents is particularly striking, at 12.5% and 13.7% respectively (Figure 4.4 and 4.5). 35.3% of respondents were classified as being in intermediate level occupations (such as Newly Qualified teachers, admin assistants, supervisory positions, and skilled construction) and 42.2% were in higher level managerial and professional occupations (such as corporate managers, experienced teachers, and business and public sector managers). Overall, occupational levels selected are reflective of medium to high average income levels.

To conclude, the survey results suggest that the typical NCT nearly new sale customer is female, white, married, aged 30-34, degree level educated and in a corresponding professional level of current or recent employment. This mirrors the demographic previously found to be accessing NCT's services (Taylor 2011). Whilst I did not include a question on income for fear it was too intrusive, it seems reasonable to conclude from the information gathered that the typical nearly new sale customer is not an excluded consumer as defined by Williams and Windebank (2002). Rather, these results corroborate the qualitative findings gathered through participant observation and reflected by the interview process that the typical nearly new sale customer could be described as middle-class.

Defining class though, is a complicated matter, and a topic that many academics have dedicated much of their research careers to (Savage 2000; Bourdieu 2003; Skeggs 2004). Bourdieu (2010, p.100) argued the following:

> Social class is not defined by a property (not even the most determinant one, such as the volume and composition of capital), nor by a collection of properties . . . nor even by a chain of properties . . . but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices.

With this in mind it would be hazardous to categorise respondents according to class using the survey data alone as this data only describes properties

(education, age, etc). Social class is a much contested issue and something of a British obsession; no doubt it is for these reasons that class has always played a part in the discussion around this doctoral research. As Danny Dorling (2014, p.454) describes: 'class matters because it often feels as if it is the modern day truth of our identity'. It is more than a modern day truth though, as class has been the preferred way of grouping individuals for centuries, along with gender and race. Marxist theory orders class according to access to modes of production; the bourgeoisie are the capitalists who own the means of production, whilst the larger proletariat or working class only have their labour to sell. Indeed until recently, class was largely regarded to be the outcome of occupation (Savage, Devine et al. 2013).

The Erikson–Goldthorpe–Portocarero (EGP) model was developed in the 1970s and defined seven classes according to an individual's employment. This was to be the basis of the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) which has been used for all official statistics and surveys since 2001 (Savage, Devine et al. 2013). I used the shorter three-point version of NS-SEC for the customer survey conducted for this study, in line with NCT's own previous surveys. Whilst I would agree that occupation certainly can be a strong signifier of class, it is regarded by many to not be the singular route to classifying individuals.

As already alluded to Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) pioneered a more holistic approach to class which looked at the interrelationship between economic, social and cultural capital. Bourdieu was particularly interested in cultural consumption and what this says about an actor's social class. It is this more complex view of class that Savage et al (2013) took heed of when they published their new model of social class which drew on empirical findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey (GBCS) to outline seven contemporary classes[7]. Whilst this study received a great deal of coverage both inside and outside academia it is not without its critics. *Sociology*, the journal that published the original paper, ran a special commentary issue the following year (2014) providing a platform for Savage et al.'s contemporaries to critique the

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[7] The seven groups are: the elite, established middle-class, technical middle-class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, emergent service workers and the precariat. The BBC survey can be accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22000973

model on its sample size (Mills 2014), lack of attention to race (Rollock 2014) and conceptualisation of class itself (Bradley 2014).

Whilst scholars agree that an appreciation of social and cultural capital must come into a contemporary class schema, the GBCS is criticised for a latent disregard of occupation through the data collection process (Bradley 2014). Respondents were asked about the occupations of their friends but no question of their own employment status was included in the economic capital section, directly opposing the traditional Marxist approach to class. Such contradictory views amongst the establishment demonstrate that class is not a simple matter. Bennett et al. (2009) describe the way in which the middle and upper-classes have become increasingly transient in their tastes, able to move seamlessly from highbrow to lowbrow consumption. Peterson (1992) cites this as the 'cultural omnivore' and whilst this might be beneficial for the middle-classes, the working class have become increasingly excluded.

If I were to make grand theoretical claims regarding the class basis of NCT nearly new sales, I would have needed a far more detailed survey, one designed more directly for this purpose. As it was, I was interested in a number of factors linked to customer attendance and what happens at the sale, so an in-depth analysis of class was not viable. That said, I collected data regarding occupational categories and educational attainment in order to capture economic and cultural capital. The results suggest that the nearly new sale customer demographic is broadly middle-class, being both well-educated and in intermediate to higher levels of employment. Alongside the survey, the ethnographic research carried out for this study helps in fleshing out some of these background conditions which could be regarded as exemplifying the middle-class. The next section then, provides further evidence to support the socio-demographic claim stated so far by investigating the reasons customers give for attending the sales, and for purchasing second-hand baby goods. This and subsequent chapters refer to practices (social, cultural, economic) thus drawing on the rules of Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) to agree that class and practice are mutually supportive.

## 4.3  Structuring systems of attendance

Having found that nearly new sale attendees are unlikely to be excluded consumers but rather attract a more middle-class social group, it is now necessary to explore the structures leading to their attendance, both physical and social. Figure 4.6 reports on the survey respondents' previous involvement with NCT (they were able to select more than one option). Of all of the customers surveyed, just over half had previously participated in one or more of NCT's other services, including antenatal and/or postnatal classes, 'Bumps and Babies' coffee mornings or other social events. This still leaves 47% who had no other involvement with the charity. 35% of customers surveyed had previously attended NCT antenatal and/or postnatal classes, meaning that more than one third had shared a level of close interaction with the charity.

When it came to exploring how customers became aware of the sale, however, social networks and a previous awareness of NCT seem to be fundamental (Figure 4.7). 36% of customers surveyed heard about the sale they were attending through word of mouth, either as their only point of reference or combined with other sources (respondents could select all that applied). Furthermore, 32% saw the sale advertised on the NCT national website, which lists branch events throughout the UK on its events search pages. During the interviews many participants stated that they used the national website to search for events once they had become regular nearly new sale customers. They would check the website for dates of local nearly new sales when the spring or autumn sale season was approaching. Therefore, using the NCT website requires some prior knowledge of the sales and of NCT and suggests that customers using this option had previously attended the sales.

Reference points that remained separate to the NCT were less commonly cited as ways in which customers became aware of the sale. These include the large street banner placed outside the venue, local press, and flyers or posters situated away from the venue in playgroups or doctor's surgeries for example. Figure 4.7 therefore, strongly suggests that attendance to NCT nearly new sales is largely structured by social networks. Clarke (2009, p.414) defines a social network as:

> A spatial arrangement comprising individuals connected by contacts, relationships, or ties, along which tend to flow resources and opportunities, and also norms, claims, demands, and expectations.

The 'tie' linking the social networks attending the nearly new sale is the NCT itself (at branch level), as well as other parenting networks. This is because attendees to the sale share the experience (generally) of being a parent or expectant parent. We will see evidence later of the flow of resources and opportunities and of the norms, claims and demands of those involved in the sale.

**Have you used other NCT services before? (please select all that apply)**
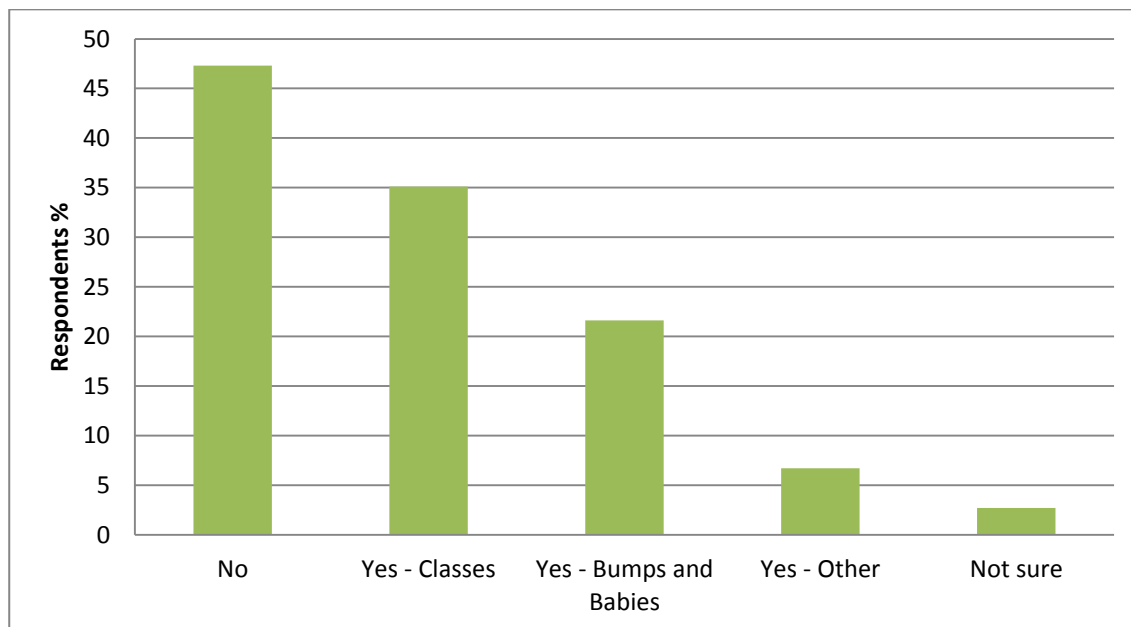


Figure 4.6: Previous attendance to NCT sales, n.329 (Q.3)
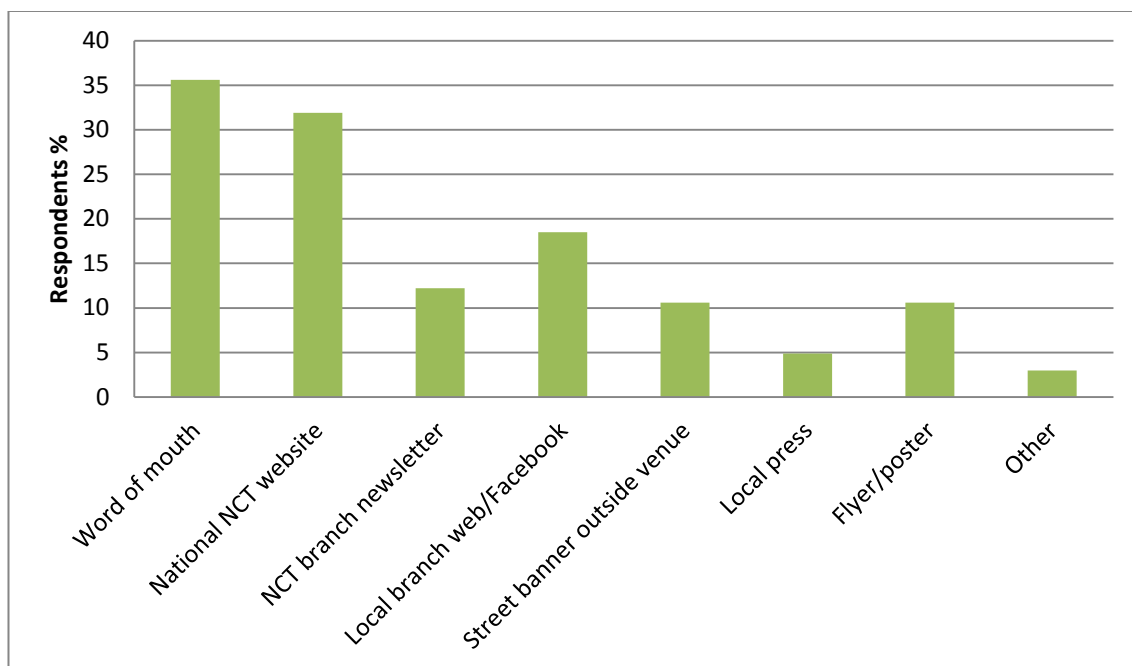
Figure 4.7: Routes used to hear about the NCT sale, n.329 (Q.5)

The very fact that nearly new sale coordinators placed advertisements in the local press, and posters in doctors' surgeries and nurseries, suggests that they are aiming to reach new groups outside of the existing branch networks. It was outside the realms of this research to monitor precisely where posters and advertisements were placed, but the level of publicity was found to vary across the branches. Certainly publicising through means unfamiliar to the volunteers requires a greater exertion of time and effort to publicising within one's existing networks. NCT provide branches with a template for publicity posters to ensure consistency across the UK. This is shown in figure 4.8, below.

Figure 4.8: Nearly new sale poster template provided by NCT marketing team[8]

The space left on the poster is for event information – the date, time and location of the sale. The name 'nearly new sale' is itself culturally situated. The images depict baby goods but the poster does not explicitly state that the sale offers an opportunity to buy second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment. Through my research I found that, for some, the association to NCT provides comfort and elicits trust, yet in one interview I learnt that the NCT association can also be detrimental to attendance. Indeed, one interviewee spoke of how she once believed you needed to be an NCT member in order to attend the sale. It was only through a friend that she discovered this to be a false assumption. If this was the understanding of one interviewee then it may be the understanding of others, particularly those sitting outside existing NCT networks for whom I could not readily access.

During the course of the interviews, participants often struggled to separate nearly new sales from the wider context of the NCT. Many wanted to discuss

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[8] [accessed via https://babble.nct.org.uk/info-resources/raising-money-events/nct-nearly-new-sales/nns-publicity-and-marketing-material]

their opinions on NCT, whether positive or negative, and tell me about experiences they had had through engagement with other NCT services. This is clearly evidenced by Mary (a pseudonym) at the end of her interview when I asked if she had anything else to add:

> P: NCT still seems to be quite white, middle class. Definitely still seems to be, which is a shame. But I guess probably that's a little bit why I joined, because there's a wonderful children's centre down the road and I don't go because it's on the edge of an estate. I suppose because I'm a social worker by background, I used to work with children and families, so child protection, and my brain still thinks like that so sometimes I'm at the health centre and you can hear people talking. Like, there was a young mum and she said I've got my meeting, and I know what meeting she's talking about, she's talking about her child protection review. So I know, I think a bit of me wanted to meet people I can be friends with. So I suppose I was probably looking for, not necessarily middle class, but mums who were my age who worked and I didn't think I'd get that at the children's centre. I thought I'd get younger mums, possibly don't work and possibly with child protection involvement and really I wanted to separate myself from that. The people I've met, we're all very similar in that sense (Mary: married, 30-34, social worker).

Mary's story is very typical to the women I encountered through the nearly new sales. The antenatal classes are set up as an educational space, a place to learn about pregnancy and childbirth, but they are commonly used as a social tool. The classes do not necessarily constitute a social space in themselves; because time is heavily structured by the antenatal teacher, but they are an opportunity to develop bonding social ties which expectant parents may choose to invest further time in outside the space of the class.  Many new mothers discussed the desire, or 'need' to meet other expectant parents prior to giving birth so that they had a support network in place before the transition to fully fledged parenthood. The NCT classes, therefore, were commonly used to meet like-minded individuals, as Mary describes.

The antenatal classes serve as a key access point for parental involvement in NCT. As we saw described in figure 4.6 35% of survey respondents had attended an NCT class and consumer attendance to the sale is heavily

influenced by an active involvement in NCT networks (as shown by figure 4.7). Nearly new sales can be described as not only one of NCT's services, but part of NCT as a social institution. Before embarking on this doctoral project, research had already found that NCT services and membership under-represents lower socio-economic actors (Taylor 2011). Nearly new sales follow this trend because they are bound within the physical and social structures of NCT, which as Mary explicitly states is 'quite white, middle class'. Therefore not only is the nearly new sale attendance structured by social networks, but these networks are situated within existing NCT parental networks which has a long established norm of attracting middle-class parents (Clarke 2000). This institutional norm can be traced right back to the charity's foundations. Conceived by Prunella Briance, a graduate and diplomat's wife, the first advertisement for what was to become the National Childbirth Trust was placed in the *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* in 1956 (Moorhead 1996). Despite altering their name to NCT and drafting a strategy to drive a more inclusive socio-demographic reach, NCT is still commonly referenced as a middle-class institution by the media (Rock 2011). One journalist writing for the Telegraph in 2010 opened her article with 'When a modern middle-class woman falls pregnant, the very first thing she does is join the National Childbirth Trust' (Lewis 2010).

In the literature review I outlined the ways in which social class both structures and is reproduced through consumption practice (Bourdieu 2010). So far I have found that attendance to the nearly new sale is structured, at least in part, by social networks and a previous engagement with NCT. I have also described how the nearly new sale attracts a particular social group. Bourdieu (2010) provides a helpful set of tools for theorising this social event. Within a Bourdieusian framework, the nearly new sale is thus a field, attracting people of a shared habitus; habitus referring to a particular set of shared values and dispositions in this case making up the exemplar middle-class lifestyle. The social field of the nearly new sale is nested within the locale of the sale itself. The position of each particular agent in the field is a result of interaction between the specific rules of the field, the agent's habitus and agent's capital. As such, an agent's social, cultural and economic capital needs to be mobilized in order to benefit most from the sale, a point which will be returned to in a later chapter.

Success in the field relies heavily on social and cultural capital because with no prior knowledge of how the sales work it is difficult for customers to prepare themselves. As previously stated, the nearly new sale is an alternative site of consumption and as such requires the enactment of different skills and practices to conventional retail sites. As an example, the sales are very popular and customers queue to enter up to an hour before the advertised opening time. They do so drawing on the knowledge that unlike conventional retail sites, the nearly new sale does not have duplicate items for sale and the availability of specific goods cannot be guaranteed. A customer attending the sale for the first time has no reason to think that attendees would be queuing to enter and would only know to arrive earlier than the advertised time if they had been told by someone.

The queue itself is a barrier to entering (although it quickly recedes once the sale starts). Another barrier is the entry fee; although described as a donation at some sales, it is rarely put across as such. The fee is usually £1 to £2 for a couple - not expensive but I witnessed a number of customers who came unprepared with change and had to leave the venue to go to a cash point or borrow money from a friend. Therefore, attendees benefit from the cultural capital gained by having attended before, and/or the social capital needed in order to learn from other's experiences. The following quote describes Melissa's first experience at a sale:

> P: I had no idea what to expect. I wasn't a member of the NCT then but I knew it had two queues so initial thoughts were, well I'll go a bit earlier I know it will be popular. So I'm in the non-member queue which is three times as long as the members queue, they get let in first, and there's people in front and behind me, they've gone with tactics, they've gone with strategies, they've gone with lists, they've gone with teams! I'm six months pregnant, quite emotional, waiting for some doctor's results and not really in the best frame of mind so I was a bit overawed (Melissa: married, 30-34, environmental consultant).

Melissa had an expectation that the sale would be busy, yet she still felt overwhelmed by the experience. Melissa was lucky, in that a volunteer recognised she needed assistance and helped her navigate the sale. This relied on Melissa feeling confident enough to seek and accept help, something that

not all attendees may feel comfortable in doing. Many interviewees did not have a positive first nearly new sale experience and some spoke of friends or relatives that had never been back. Unfortunately these are not the people I was able to access through my interviews, we might however assume that those who do not go back lack the social or cultural capital required to negotiate the space, or simply do not feel that the benefit of cheap goods outweighs the effort required to attend.

The geography of the sales is also likely to affect attendance. The name of the branch as recorded officially by NCT may not follow the geographical location of where the branch activities are situated. These activities tend to occur in and around the homes of the local branch committee. Whilst sale organisers did try to advertise the sales over a wide and varied geographical area, the situation of the sale itself no doubt influences attendance. We can see in figure 4.7 that 11% of customers were aware of the sale by seeing it advertised on a banner outside the venue, therefore directly influencing those living and working near the venue. Furthermore, having travelled to sixteen different sale venues myself during the course of this project, many rely on having access to a car in order to conveniently participate. The coordinator of one nearly new sale explains how she believes location impacts attendance:

> EW: Do you think when you changed venues there was much difference in the people who attended?
>
> P: Yes and no. I think in the town we probably had more passing trade being on the high street and we used to have volunteers on the high street handing out flyers and our new venue you do really need a car to get there, it's not really on a bus route so that might change people who come because it's more difficult to get there. But the parking is much better because at the old venue the parking was awful and it was always a really big issue. So I think the new venue has maybe attracted a different crowd (Helen: married, 30-34, full-time mother).

Helen thinks that a change in venue may have attracted a different crowd. By moving the sale away from the high street where it attracted passing trade, the sale was pushed further into this area of inconspicuous consumption, relying more on the previous awareness and active participation of attendees. Furthermore, Helen implies that the needs of shoppers with a car were

prioritised as they moved to a venue with better parking, seemingly aware that it was not on a bus route, thus excluding the less mobile local residents, whether it be because they cannot afford a car, cannot drive, or choose not to own a car. Such socio-spatial division of cities has been highlighted by Byrne (1999) who argues that the poor have become increasingly separated off due in large part to the availability of housing (or lack of). Spatial location determines access to crucial social goods, such as schooling, and in this sense NCT services.

This is not to say that groups from a lower socio-economic status do not attend, but rather that social structures and indeed physical geography do not always facilitate their involvement. This section has investigated, through triangulating observations, interviews and the survey data, factors leading to consumer participation in NCT nearly new sales. The next part of this chapter shifts from the macro level to the micro level, describing the reasons customers give themselves for participation in NCT nearly new sales.

## 4.4 Stated reasons for participation in nearly new sales

Data collected for this research suggests that nearly new sales do not, in the main, attract excluded consumers (Williams and Windebank 2002) as we might anticipate for purchasing cheap, used goods. Therefore, the rest of this chapter aims to build a picture of who the average nearly new sale customer is and what factors lead to their participation in the sales.

During the interview stage respondents were always asked what their main reason was for purchasing second-hand baby goods and in all bar two cases cost-saving was the primary stated motivation. Figure 4.9 provides further evidence to support this finding, expressing the results of the survey which asked the respondents to select their top three reasons for buying second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment.  On the questionnaire, respondents were able to distinguish between 'I can't afford new baby items' and 'to save money' when stating their top three reasons for purchasing second-hand baby goods. The vast majority of respondents (74%) claimed that they bought second-hand baby goods in order to save money as their primary cited reason. This is in contrast to just 11% who argued that they could not afford new baby goods as their collective first, second or third reason.

Similarly, whilst observation and interviews provided evidence for the nearly new sale as a setting for more than solely material exchange (discussed further in later chapters), the majority of customers do attend in order to shop. Figure 4.10 describes the top three reasons customers gave for attending the nearly new sale. 'To browse' and 'to look for specific items' are the top two reasons given. The fact that more customers cite browsing as their primary reason over and above looking for specific items, strongly correlates with the suggestion that the customers are not excluded consumers because they are not in need of particular goods to care for their child. Guiot and Roux's (2010) study of second-hand consumers in France identified the 'search for fair price' and 'gratificative role of price' as the top two reasons consumers cited for participating in second-hand consumption channels, based on a survey of 708 subjects. This desire to save money as a reason for buying second-hand goods has been found by other studies (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Crewe and Gregson 2003).

**Top 3 rated reasons for buying second-hand goods**
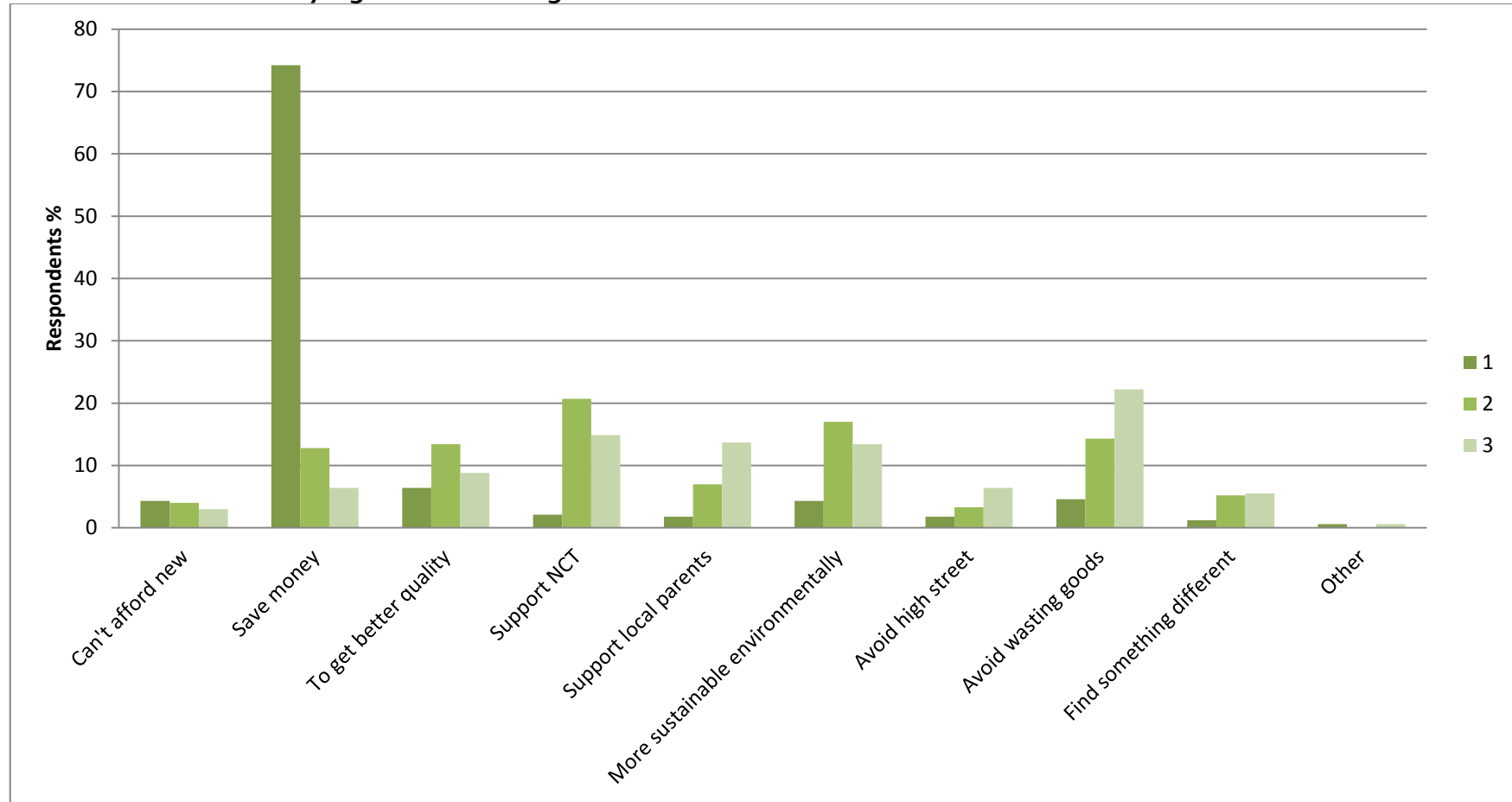


Figure 4.9: Reasons for purchasing second-hand baby goods, n.329 (Q.2)

**Top 3 rated reasons for attending the sale**
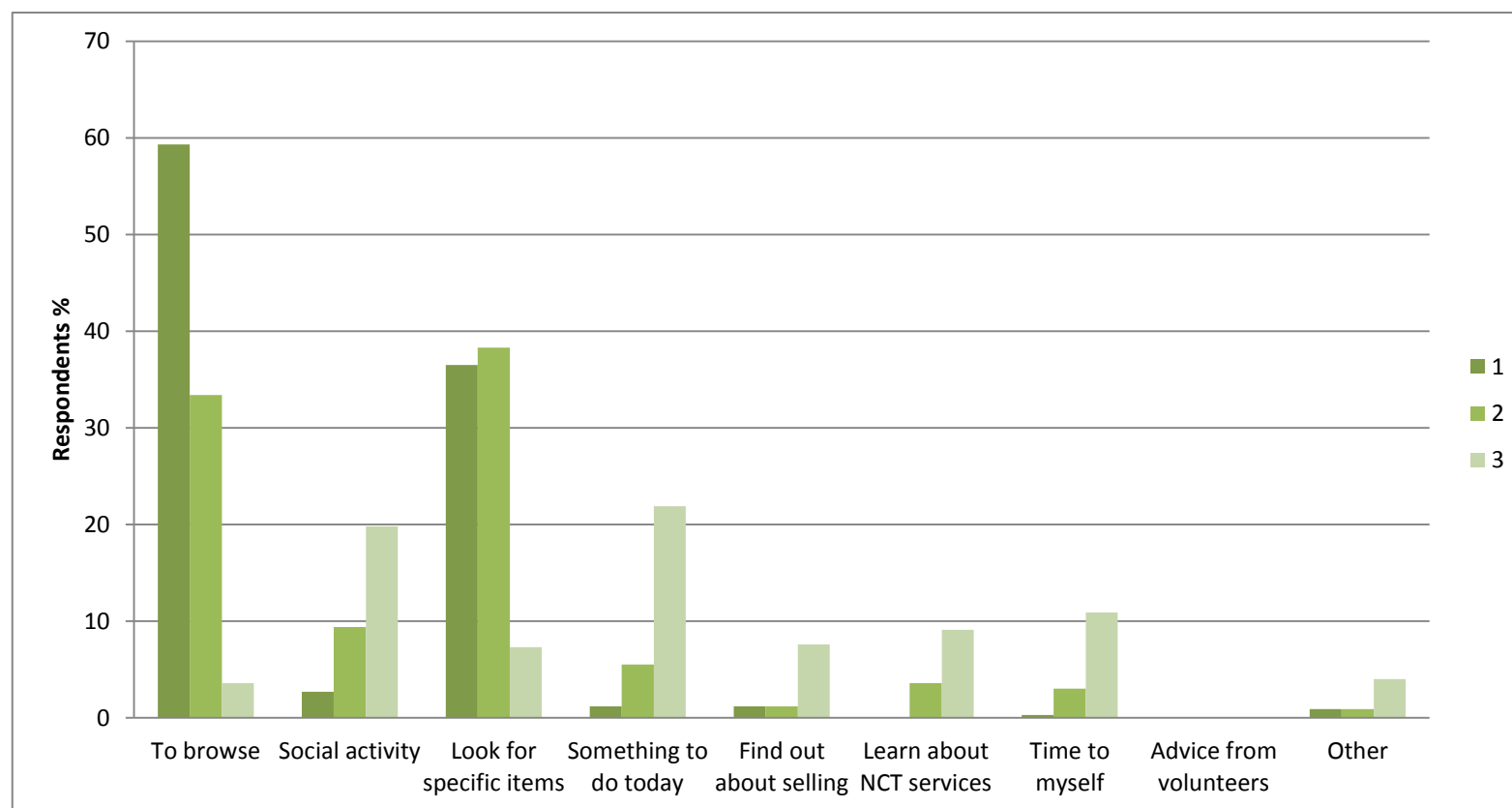


Figure 4.10: Reasons for attending the nearly new sale, n.329 (Q.1)

The key evidence found by the survey results expressed in figures 4.9 and 4.10 is that cost-saving is important to shoppers and influences their desire to attend the sale and purchase second-hand baby goods. All of the other reasons formulated as multiple choice options came to light through the interview process. Whilst it is interesting and important to look at the other results, it is impossible to know how many survey respondents would have considered these without having them put forward as possible responses. Options related to morals and ethics, such as the desire to support local parents and NCT and the practice of being environmentally friendly, may have been selected through a conscious awareness of being seen to do the 'right' thing.  That said, results do triangulate with the interview data, where ethical justifications were often cited as a bonus for buying second-hand goods and participating in the nearly new sales. Referring back to the interview data provides further context to the quantitative results so far described.

Stating cost-saving as a primary reason for buying second-hand baby goods can be juxtaposed against the finding that nearly new sale customers are not generally excluded consumers. This desire to save money whilst recognising that one was not an excluded consumer was explicitly stated by Angela:

> P: I kind of like a bit of a bargain. Otherwise we wouldn't go to charity shops because we could manage without going to them. It's not required, but it is fun (Angela: married, 30-34, teacher)

Here Angela is discussing why she buys second-hand children's goods in general. She said that she had attended five or six nearly new sales and popped into charity shops whenever she got a chance. Rather than attend the nearly new sale hosted by her local branch, Angela travels to one further afield where she knows she will find better quality goods and a higher proportion of branded goods due to its situation in an affluent market town. As her children have grown she has become less and less reliant on nearly new sales and is now very much an opportunistic social shopper, attending with a friend whom she competes with to find the best bargains. Because she is not reliant on second-hand goods, she steps back from the less pleasant aspect of queuing and shopping with the masses saying, "I've got to really, really want something to stand in the cold for half an hour first". Angela is still shopping to save money but her main motivation is the satisfaction gained from saving money

rather than the economic gains of saving money. Like many nearly new sale customers, she attends in order to be able to consume more than necessities; she buys consumable extras.

Interviewees spoke about buying extra clothes for playing in the garden or attending nursery, extra games and puzzles for further stimulation (building on the child's cultural capital) and extra equipment to keep at the grandparents' house. This participant discussed the need for three pairs of wellington boots:

> P: If they go to nursery they need a pair at nursery and then you never remember to bring them home, so you need another pair for home, you might have another pair at granny's house too so you end up with three pairs of wellies in the same size and they wear them for half an hour to splash in a puddle and then not again for a few weeks (Amanda: married, 40+, special needs teacher).

Amanda describes how the nearly new sales allow for her to buy extra goods to make everyday life easier. The ability to own such extras is not a luxury available to everyone and could be construed as part of the modern day economy of convenience. In such cases, when goods are little used, it is deemed foolish to buy items full price because children grow out of things so quickly and second-hand items still have plenty of use-value. This could be why customers cite cost saving as their primary reason for purchasing second-hand goods as they are saving money on the cost price of individual items. Looking at their consumption practices as a whole however, they are purchasing more than they need in order to clothe and care for the child, so it could still be suggested that in some instances they are spending more money by attending the sales than is actually necessary in order to provision for the family. As such, I would consider many of the customers to be opportunistic second-hand consumers typified by Angela, previously quoted.

Along with cost-saving, another key theme teased out in the interviews as a reason for purchasing second-hand baby goods was the desire to reuse things; the implication being that not reusing goods is wasteful. Such reuse makes for a resourceful consumer and a resourceful parent, a term used often by this young mum:

> P: So you can buy something brand new for half the price so it's just trying to be resourceful with what you've got (Tina: married, 20-24, dental nurse).

Tina is less well-off than many of the interviewees, and is also a young mother. Having little spare money meant that she put a great deal of thought into how she could provide for her expectant child. Tina was highly pragmatic in her approach and suggests that being resourceful involves getting the best value for money, the aim being to acquire everything you need as a mother by spending the least amount of money. Tina and her friend Faye (interviewed one after the other) stood out as most closely aligned to Williams and Windebank's (2002) excluded consumer from all of the interviewees. Both were heavily influenced by cost, having received a lot of goods free of charge from family and friends. Faye (co-habiting, 25-29, jewellery shop assistant) went on to explain, "When you have this little person you want everything to be new but you can't have everything new." This shows that Faye recognises brand new goods as preferable but understands the need to compromise. This preference for new goods coupled with lack of access was also found by Williams and Windebank (2002) as a characteristic of the excluded consumer.

Other interviewees however, recognised the environmental benefits of using second-hand goods. This was described by Karen, a keen environmentalist:

> P: My main motivations are environmental, and the financial, it's a bonus that things are cheaper. But I just like to not consume more than is necessary (Karen: 40+, homemaker).

Karen was unusual in citing this as her primary reason for buying second-hand baby goods but nevertheless environmental notions did surface in a number of interviews. In many cases this was not related to environmental concerns, but rather a general sense that the items themselves will 'go to waste' if they are not reused when they still have useful life left in them. There was also a sense that another child should have the chance to use an item, if it had been useful to the participant's own child, and/or gave them pleasure. These ethical and/or environmental concerns were regularly cited as secondary or tertiary reasons for buying second-hand goods as found in the survey, although as previously stated we cannot know how many would have responded in this manner in absence of a printed prompt. If we combine 'environmental sustainability' and

the desire to 'avoid wasting goods', 31% cited this as their secondary reason and 35% as their tertiary reason. This means that environmental sustainability could be an important factor for at least a third of customers.

The desire to reuse goods and not allow them to be discarded into landfill can be considered a practice bound within the moral doctrine of frugality. Frugality denotes 'moderation, temperance, thrift, cost-effectiveness [and] efficient usage' (Nash 1998, p.421) and is, according to Nash, one of the most neglected norms in contemporary ethics. Frugality conflicts with the oft-perceived role of contemporary consumption as a way of signalling social status as it relies upon making do with what one has rather than spending money and resources on lavish forms of consumption. Evidence from the interview transcripts suggests that mothers are torn between the desire to be frugal and the desire to practice 'good mothering' through their consumption practices. This notion of good mothering can thus be visually displayed by dressing the child in quality clothes (branded names or organic, natural fibres) and providing toys, books and games to invest in a 'good' childhood experience. Second-hand consumption then, provides a justification for this form of over-consumption. It allows mothers to feel more comfortable about consuming extra goods because they are being resourceful and frugal in this practice.

The findings of this study correlates with the work of Gregson and Crewe (2006, p.198) when they explain:

> Reuse then, was not – as we had imagined it to be – a politicised practice. Rather it was constructed more as a conservation practice, where preserving and/or extending the lives of things has come to matter rather more than thinking about the connections of such practices to the conditions of commodity production.

Whilst consumers argue that they attend primarily in order to save money, they could do this via a number of channels facilitating second-hand consumption. A narrative running through many of the interviews was the way in which nearly new sales differ to alternative forms of second-hand consumption, such as charity shops, car boot sales, eBay or classified advertisements. For some interviewees the conversation moved effortlessly from one channel of second-hand consumption to another. This indicates that they did not distinguish

between different retail sites but rather considered their second-hand consumption practices collectively. For many however, the nearly new sales were the only channel of second-hand consumption they regularly participated in and for some it was the sole channel they participated in other than the informal trafficking of goods between friends and family. It was generally felt that the quality of goods at the nearly new sales was higher than at car boot sales or charity shops. This was therefore cited as the main reason given for attending the sales to purchase second-hand goods.  This is described by Laura, who talks about quality here over the cost-saving benefits:

> E: What is your main motivation for going to the sales?

> P: Normally to get clothes or shoes, because I know normally you get quite good quality clothes and shoes, particularly the nearly new sales rather than car boots or charity shops. So the quality is normally really good (Laura: married, 35-39, mother)

Laura explicitly compares the nearly new sales to car boot sales and charity shops without being prompted by me. She has bought goods from charity shops and online classified ad sites but regards nearly new sales as offering the best quality. This comes up many times during the interviews and whilst good quality goods can readily be found at the sales, having volunteered at them myself I can report that low quality, even unwashed/dirty goods are just as commonly for sale. The suggestion therefore that quality is higher is likely situated within personal expectations and societal stereotypes of charity shops and car boot sales as dirtier places. Furthermore, I suggest that the greatest benefit offered by the sales to parents is the sheer volume of goods on offer. Because they are trading as a specialist retail site specifically to provide second-hand baby goods, unlike other second-hand retail outlets, they offer far more consumer choice and good quality goods are therefore more readily available. The final section of this chapter attempts to provide an explanation for the role that nearly new sales play in the classed provisioning practices of local communities.

## 4.5 Widening systems of provision

NCT nearly new sales commonly, but not exclusively, attract a middle-class second-hand consumer. The data collected strongly indicates that consumers are parents and attend in order to save money on their material consumption of baby clothes, toys and equipment, despite not being 'excluded consumers'. Further cultural, social and ethical reasons for such consumption practices are also evident even if not explicitly stated by the participants. These further reasons include a desire to get the most value from goods by extending their life once they become redundant for one's own family, the desire to be environmentally sustainable, the desire to support local parents and the desire to 'give something back' to NCT.

All of these reasons are considered beneficial to participation in the nearly new sales, yet literature examined for this study also outlined some perceived consumer disadvantages. Such disadvantages are centred on the notion of risk. Previous studies have found that consumers cite common risks associated to purchasing second-hand/used goods, these being that items are inscribed with an unknown biography and may be unhygienic or unfit for purpose (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Crewe and Gregson 2003). We might assume that such risks are unavoidable as an excluded consumer, but as this chapter has set out, many parents engaged with nearly new sales are participating through choice. These parents are not financially or socially excluded from conventional sites of retail but rather; make an active decision to negotiate these notions of risk in co-consuming for their child/ren.

Along with social networks, Bourdieu's concept of habitus and field help to explain the social structures leading to sale attendance, and I would like to continue this conceptualisation in order to explore why consumers return to the sales and why they might be prioritised over other sites of second-hand retail. In considering consumption practices more generally, Bauman (1988) argues that the freedom offered by contemporary consumer choice entails an element of personal responsibility and as such there is the very real possibility of making the 'wrong' choice. For Bauman this freedom and subsequent threat against the construction of personal identity is a source of anxiety for consumers. The consumers in this study have this freedom, because they are not commonly excluded consumers. As such, they could acquire all of their

children's goods through conventional retail sites, or they could participate in any of the many alternatives including car boot sales, online shopping, charity shops, markets or via friends and family.

Warde (1994; 2005) has dedicated much of his work to the sociology of consumption drawing heavily on Bourdieu to extend theories of social capital, distinction and everyday consumption practice. Warde (1994) argues that consumers can manage the anxiety expressed by Bauman and employ tactics to overcome it though socialisation and group identification. Evidence of this kind of social action can be found at the nearly new sale. I have already described how participation at the sale is structured in large part by social networks, which in turn are situated in fixed networks aligned with NCT. Many parents become involved in other aspects of the NCT because they wish to be part of this middle-class social group, they are looking for group identification. Indeed Bourdieu (2010) relays the claim that geographical space is never socially neutral; the sale is thus a field attracting a particular social group.

Mothers choose the nearly new sale over other forms of second-hand consumption in order to minimise the risks invoked by second-hand goods because they are engaging in such action as part of a group. We could consider this to be an example of 'embedded behaviour' (Trotter 1999, p.15). Embedded behaviour alludes to the belief that many human behaviours are not conducted alone, but rather are the result of interactions with other agents (or actors from a social network perspective). Behaviour exhibited at the nearly new sale is not a simple reaction, but an interaction between other subjects and objects. Trotter (1999, p.16) states:

> the more that can be learned about how behaviours are embedded in a network context, the more likely we will be to make significant strides to understanding human behaviour.

In the case of the NCT sale, human behaviour is embedded within the context of NCT and local parenting networks. It is this social network which distinguishes the NCT sale from another site of second-hand retail. Throughout this thesis I have situated the concept of second-handedness as undesirable by drawing on the notions of risk previously discussed. In stark contrast to this however, I was surprised to find that some parents viewed the fact that an item

had been used previously as a recommendation that it was in fact useful. This was described by Maggie:

> P: So as long as it - part of it if it's been used it's almost like a recommendation that someone else - if it's at the NCT sale it's like someone else is saying 'this is good, I've used this, this has worked' so that's better than buying blindly off the internet or going into Mamas and Papas, if you know someone else has had good use out of it. But at the same time you don't want it to look so battered, you know, you want it to be cared for at the same time (Maggie: married, 30-34, full time mum).

Literature to date focuses on the fact that second-hand goods have been disposed of by another; the concept of recommendation through re/use does not arise. It may be that Maggie's thoughts can only be applied to the nearly new sale (rather than second-hand retail more generally), where she sees items as coming directly from her peer group, as such she is putting implicit trust in the association to a group of people whilst in actuality she does not know where that item has come from.

If the nearly new sale is considered to be a field attracting parents of a shared habitus, this can be extended to the goods available for sale. Belk (1988) proffered the notion of the 'extended self' to describe an actor's relationship with material culture. Under Belk's analysis, objects owned by an actor are part of their 'extended self' and as such hold a symbolic value. Using this conceptualisation we can consider that all of the goods for sale at the nearly new sale were once, or are still part of, an actor's extended self (although they have chosen to dispose of them). This leads to the notion that the used goods at the sale have come from a home similar to the home of the customer, because the field itself is attracting a homophilious group, thus creating a greater degree of trust and familiarity with the goods. This is implied by Erin:

> P: I don't really buy clothes from charity shops, they look a bit more manky and dusty. The ones from NCT look like they've just come from somebody's bottom drawer, they've not been up in the loft and they don't look like they're at the end of their life (Erin: married, 40+, full time mother).

Erin implies that because charity shop clothes look more 'manky and dusty' they are not suitable, as presumably they are deemed to be unclean or unhygienic. Despite this, she still recognises that the NCT clothes have come ambiguously from 'somebody'. She does not know who, but in her mind they are clothes that have been cared for. The generalised nature of the comment further suggests that she is drawing more on supposition and fixed personal beliefs because in actuality few charity shop clothes are 'manky and dusty' as they have become increasingly professionalised in recent years (Horne and Maddrell 2002). Indeed other interviewees spoke of positive charity shop experiences. Furthermore, having volunteered at the nearly new sales myself, unpacking, sorting and repacking the goods, the quality of items varies greatly. Rather than quality being consistently high, it seems more likely that good quality goods can be found simply due to the sheer volume of goods available.

Figure 4.11 revisits the sites of second-hand retail matrix originally drawn in figure 2.1, adding the NCT nearly new sale as distinct from general nearly new sales. Whilst still cheap and practical, I argue that the NCT nearly new sale has greater symbolic worth to customers than nearly new sales more generally.

The notion of quality then comes from a range of sources, not least the name itself 'nearly new sale' and the association to NCT with its middle-class connotations. As a site of second-hand consumption, the space is regulated so that most ticketed sales will have a dedicated quality control officer. In reality, the informal nature of the space and the fact that it is organised by volunteers means that not all inferior goods are pulled out. In this manner the ticketed sales are more closely aligned to charity shops, where too are goods checked for quality, whilst the table top sales are more aligned to car boot sales, where individuals are responsible for their own goods.

**Sites of second-hand retail**
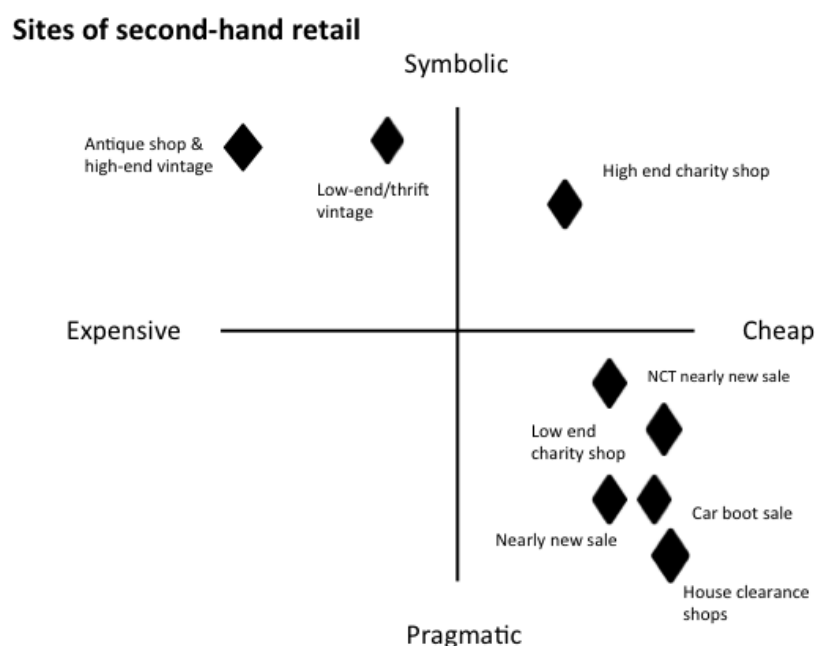


Figure 4.11: Distinguishing NCT sales in the sites of second-hand retail matrix

As part of the interviews, many mothers discussed how they disposed of their own unwanted baby clothes, toys and equipment, namely at the nearly new sales, by passing on to family and friends, through classified adverts and by donating to charity shops. This demonstrates the cyclical life of goods, and the way in which participants viewed them as residing in the home for a limited length of time. It is the mother who makes the decision of whether an item is no longer needed in the home and often goods lay dormant in storage (often packed away in the loft) awaiting the next sale. It is helpful to briefly consider the role of the sellers as well as the buyers in order to analyse the role of nearly new sales for family provisioning practices. Many parents will both sell and buy at a sale, creating a fairly unique system of exchange. Whilst involvement of sellers was not studied in-depth, data suggests that their participation is facilitated just as much by social networks and a previous involvement with NCT, if not more so. Having interviewed volunteers responsible for the sellers, I learnt that most are attached to an email list and contacted in the weeks before each sale. New sellers may come forward themselves after attending a sale as a buyer, or otherwise being connected to

the local NCT network but general advertising for seller recruitment rarely happens.

Sellers go about preparing the items for sale; washing, ironing, pricing and generally divesting them of their previous biography so that they are ready for a new owner. This in itself is a laborious process and a chore which has to be fitted in around the mother's existing roles and responsibilities as this mother explained:

> P: One motivation has been the money however I regard it as a very ineffective way to raise money because it's a huge amount of work to raise a small amount of money so it's irrational that I sell at the sales and I'm glad I'm now at the point where I don't feel obliged to. I used to feel like I ought to (Karen: 40+, homemaker).

Karen's concern that she ought to participate in the sales as a seller links back to the ethical and social obligations teased out partly in the survey when consumers cited a desire to support NCT and local parents by attending the sale. In arguing that the sales are an inefficient way to make money, or to produce economic capital, Karen is suggesting that the sales are part of an altogether different economy. Rather than considering the nearly new sales in purely economic terms, they can be conceptualised as a moral economy built on the mutual reciprocity of the community in giving and taking from the sale. The sale relies on this sense of reciprocity in order to be a success; otherwise it may lead to a disparity with more buyers than sellers. In this sense the sale semi-formalises the traditional hand-me-down culture, creating an efficient space for local parents to pass around second-hand goods.

The sales can be seen as deeply engrained in the community, locally situated and structured by social networks. The sales widen the system of family provisioning, giving parents more choice than they would have if they relied purely on goods handed down via family and friends. Drawing on a shared habitus and the notion that items for sale have come from a 'good' home I argue that the anxiety one may feel in consuming second-hand goods is weakened.

## 4.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored the demographic reach of the NCT nearly new sale by focusing on customer attendance. It concludes that the typical nearly new sale buyer is not an 'excluded consumer' as defined by Williams and Windebank (2002) but rather a middle-class second-hand consumer participating for reasons other than financial or social exclusion. After conducting participant observation at three sales and a UK-wide customer survey at ten sales, I can confidently conclude that whilst the socio-economic status of customers does vary across branches, customers are most commonly white British, well-educated and married or in co-habiting relationships. The majority are over the age of 25 and I found no young parents aged 19 or under despite the benefits that the sales may be able to offer to parents of all ages.

Whilst in principle the sales are open to all members of the public, in practice they are situated within existing local NCT networks as well as the wider institutional framework of NCT. This institutional bias facilitates the involvement of some parents whilst alienating others. Attendance to the sale is structured largely by social networks (i.e. word of mouth) creating this structuring system of attendance and socially excluding groups who may benefit most from cheap goods. Within a Bourdieusian framework therefore, the nearly new sale is a field attracting people who share the same habitus and as such there a belief that the goods for sale have come from a 'good' home, similar to ones own. By associating the nearly new sale with the parenting charity customers have a shared sense of identity and belonging at the sale, facilitated by social interactions and through the objects themselves.

Extending Warde's (1994) concept of group association as a tool for minimising consumer anxiety to consider consumption of second-hand goods provides some explanation to why many parents participate in NCT nearly new sales to a far greater degree than other second-hand retail channels. The mothers interviewed spoke about the nearly new sale as decidedly different to charity shops, car boot sales or eBay. Through enacting group identification towards the parenting charity, consumers feel less anxious about participating in these exchange networks. This theory is extended in chapter 5 in order to critically examine the role of the object in this risk-reduction strategy.

NCT Nearly New Sales

The sale is also an extremely efficient way to exchange used goods by providing an efficient semi-formal space to facilitate the flow of children's goods through the community, or what Alison Clarke (2000; p.86) has called trafficking of goods. Being situated as such in the community, and within existing social groups, the sale is more closely aligned with a traditional hand-me-down culture than the unknown space of the charity shop because it attracts a homophilious group nurtured through the association to NCT. This is particularly helpful for a changing family model where mothers are more likely than ever before to be out at work, thus spending less time at home in the local community as the sale semi-formalises a traditional sharing economy.

The sales do raise money for sellers (and the NCT) but economic gains for sellers are little considering the work involved in sorting, cleaning and pricing goods.  Mothers felt that by benefiting themselves from the sale, they had to give something back to local parents by making their disused goods available, the sale being seen as the most efficient way to do this. Rather than rely on economic capital, second-hand consumption relies on the mobilisation of social or cultural capital.  The sales semi-formalise the traditional hand-me-down culture traditionally held by all but the most affluent families and communities, reproducing this economy within a setting more aligned to conventional retail.

# 5 Purchasing: Material Value and Risk

## 5.1 Introduction

The NCT nearly new sale is organised primarily as a site of (second-hand) retail. As such, it acts both as a service for local parents and as a fundraiser for NCT. Whilst the sales also provide a site for socialisation and information exchange, the primary reason for attendance cited by the majority of customers surveyed is to shop (or consume). This we learnt in the previous chapter, when 96% of survey participants selected 'to browse' or to 'look for specific items' as their most important reason for attending the sale on the day they were surveyed.  The sale is planned and designed as a place to facilitate the exchange of second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment. This chapter therefore, explores the second-hand economy of the nearly new sale by situating it within the literature on sites of second-hand retail and consumer practice. The chapter responds to the research questions reproduced below, in particular 2b and 1c.

2. To identify the social, cultural and economic resources and opportunities gained by parental participation in the locale of the NCT nearly new sale.

   a) What do participants do at the NCT nearly new sale?
   b) **What do customers purchase at the NCT nearly new sale?**
   c) **What do the customers do with the items that they buy?**
   d) What do customers say that they gain from attendance to NCT nearly new sales?
   e) What can we infer that customers gain from attendance to NCT nearly new sales?

Whilst contemporary research has explored alternative and second-hand consumer practice, including the investigation of motives or justifications for such practice, the role of second-hand consumption remains under-theorised. Missing from the literature is a lively debate about the overlapping definitions of alternative, inconspicuous or informal retail sites and an exploration of the qualities that make these sites different to conventional retail sites, and indeed to each other. In the previous chapter I redrew the matrix of second-hand consumption sites, positioning NCT nearly new sales as different to nearly new sales in general. Such analysis is pushed further in this chapter to explore and

describe the precise ways in which the NCT nearly new sales borrow and depart from conventional first-cycle forms of retail.

In terms of parental participation in the sales, the previous chapter used the duality of structure and agency to explore factors facilitating attendance to NCT nearly new sales concluding that such participation is indeed socially structured. This chapter then, moves on to explore the notion of personal agency in relation to individualised consumption practices. Consumer agency is a much contested issue but recent literature argues that (postmodern) consumers have the capacity to be reflexive and sophisticated in their consumption practices (Warde 2005; Gabriel and Lang 2006; Bennett, Savage et al. 2009). I was able to explore consumer reflexivity not through the quantitative survey but through the interviews, providing a rich source of empirical evidence to build on the small but growing body of literature on mothers and consumption.

75% of customers surveyed cited the desire to 'look for specific items' as their primary or secondary reason for attending the sale. Through bringing in further qualitative and quantitative evidence, this chapter explores in more detail what these 'specific items' are and what it is about the NCT nearly new sale that makes it an appropriate place to find them. I particularly investigate the ways in which mothers as consumers weigh up cost-saving strategies within the concept of commodity risk, the idea that purchasing second-hand goods is 'riskier' than brand new. This relates back to the literature review, which outlined the ways in which second-hand consumption could be viewed as a 'risky' consumer practice, bound within notions of material biography, hygiene and fitness-for-purpose (Gregson and Crewe 2003).

Whilst much has been written on the 'risk society' as a condition of the (post)modern world (Beck 1992; Douglas 1992; Lupton 1999) such analysis has not progressed into the second-hand consumption literature despite consumption being regarded as intimately shaped by identities, hopes, fears, obligations and social norms. Towards the end of this chapter then, I move on from describing what consumers buy and the reasons they give for such practice, to begin exploring the deeper intricacies of motherly consumption within the locale of the NCT sale by drawing on the work of Belk (1988),

Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) and Miller (1999) to consider a new theory of the classed nature of co-consumption in this particular setting.

## 5.2  The retail space

This section looks at the organisation and use of the nearly new sale as a (/n unconventional) retail space. The sales are held in places such as school halls, village halls, churches and sports centres. These are not places traditionally designed to be used as a retail site (at least not to this extent). The geography of the locale then, is one factor influencing the way in which this form of consumption could be considered different. The rest of this section explores the concept of difference, providing context to the main body of the chapter which is focused on individual consumption practice.

Nearly new sales can be broadly categorised into two types; table top and ticketed. Table top sales allow sellers to pay for a table (usually £10-£15) and then sell their own goods directly to buyers, keeping all of the revenue they generate. Ticketed sales work differently in that the sellers price up their goods as appropriate but they do not sell them directly to buyers. Instead, goods from all of the sellers are collected together and reordered according to type and age range by the volunteers. Shoppers are then able to traverse the space as they would a conventional store, and pay for all of their purchases at the end. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show examples of these two sites. Whilst all three of my case study sales were ticketed sales, three of the ten sales visited during stage two of fieldwork were table-top sales.

Figure 5.1: (Sale A) Example of a small table top sale characterised by ordering goods by seller. The seller, seen wearing the apron, is speaking to the buyer whilst other buyers browse.



Figure 5.2: (Sale D) Example of a ticketed sale characterised by ordering goods by type (gender/age)

During the course of the interviews, participants described their first experience of attending a nearly new sale. Rose, quoted below, is typical in comparing the nearly new sale to other sites of second-hand retail:

> Emma: Do you remember what you were expecting before you went?
>
> P: I don't know, probably, it was generally like a car boot sale. I didn't expect it to get as busy as it was when we were there, I think my friend had been to one before and said it does get busy but the busyness is quite intense when you actually get there. I kind of expected like a car boot sale, stands. Which it pretty much is really. (Rose: married, 30-34, accountant)

Rose also explains how she had been warned by a friend that the sales get busy, but still felt unprepared for the intensity of this experience. Therefore she had an expectation of how the sale would be organised spatially, but less appreciation to how it would *feel* being in that setting. Rose like most of the nearly new sale customers, develops her own strategies for managing the environment. Examples of these strategies include becoming an NCT member to gain early entry, taking a friend/partner/family member to assist the shopping process, getting in the queue early, having (often a mental rather than physical) shopping list, researching conventional shop prices of goods before attending, heading straight for the most popular/most desired items first and gathering more items than required in order to whittle them down later.

Many of these practices are unnecessary in conventional first-cycle consumption settings because goods and time available are less limited (except perhaps during sale periods). In this sense, behaviour must be learnt through experience in the new setting. This is a marked practice found by other authors investigating alternative consumption spaces (Belk, Sherry et al. 1988b; Gregson and Crewe 1998; Gregson and Crewe 2003) and could be seen as a form of distinction because cultural capital plays a key role in a successful shopping experience.

Table 5.1 lists the ways in which NCT nearly new sales borrow and divert from conventional, first-cycle retail sites in the way they are organised. This list is based on the three case study sites used for stage one of this study (the

ethnographic fieldwork). All of these sites were ticketed sales, mirroring 70% of NCT sales nationally.

| Similarities | Differences |
|---|---|
| <ul><li>Goods are organised and spatially arranged into categories of type, including clothing/toys/equipment.</li><li>Goods are grouped by gender.</li><li>Clothing is ordered by size.</li><li>Signage is used to communicate with the customers.</li><li>Clothing is displayed on hanging rails where possible.</li><li>Customers are able to touch goods.</li><li>Goods are individually labelled with a fixed asking price.</li><li>Volunteers act as sales assistants.</li><li>Customers pay at the till.</li><li>Customers can pay by credit/debit card.</li><li>A cafe may be available.</li></ul> | <ul><li>Customers pay to enter.</li><li>Customers may have to queue to enter.</li><li>Goods for sale are second-hand.</li><li>Goods may not be packaged.</li><li>Goods are priced by an individual rather than a retail corporation.</li><li>Only one of each item is available (generally).</li><li>Goods do not come with a warranty/guarantee.</li><li>Signage is often hand-written.</li><li>There are no displays of mannequins or 'scenes'.</li><li>The assistants are volunteers rather than paid.</li><li>The sale is only open for two hours (time restricted).</li></ul> |

Table 5.1: Similarities and differences between ticketed NCT sales and conventional first-cycle retail sites.

The ticketed model allows the volunteers to visually encode the space as a retail setting more closely aligned to conventional retail outlets. In practice, this is heavily constrained by time restraints yet care is still taken to present the goods in the best possible light. Unlike certain thrift/vintage shops that capitalise on the vintage aesthetic as a way of enticing consumers and adding value to the goods (Crewe and Gregson 2003; DeLong, Heinemann et al. 2005), an attempt is made at the sales to disguise the fact that these are used goods. This is achieved by following quality control procedures; hence only 'nearly new' goods are permitted to be sold (although in practice quality varies greatly). Clothes are hung on hangers (see figure 5.3) and other goods are displayed neatly on tables or on the floor, creating an organised space which in turn enables the buyer to shop efficiently.

Figure 5.3: (CS2) Clothing ordered according to age and gender at a nearly new sale in the Midlands. Pink dominates the girls section.

Volunteers play an important role at the nearly new sale. Large sales can have up to a hundred people involved in volunteering prior to, during and after the sale (Todhunter 2011). It has already been noted that unpaid labour is a key feature of informal, alternative retail sites ( Horne and Maddrell 2002; Crewe, Gregson et al. 2003). Volunteers communicate directly with the buyers; therefore, they are fundamental in shaping the customer experience. Volunteers on the 'sales floor' often take ownership over a particular section. Furthermore, during the sale they tidy up behind shoppers, picking clothes up from the floor and ensuring everything is in its rightful place. Amanda has been a volunteer for thirteen years and describes the different roles she has had:

> P: I was bouncer on the door for quite a while - make sure people didn't exit without paying for things. Before that I just did general clothes. Toys - as your children grow you have certain things that you're trying to get rid of and I guess now its predominantly toys because now my youngest is eight, even the clothes he's grown out of are more than six so I'm now selling Playmobil and stuff so if I'm on the toys I can say 'well actually it's me who's selling that and its very good condition and you would like to

> buy it!' . . . Toys is nice and non-stressful and I quite like setting it up as well, all the baby stuff together, all the wooden toys together, all the pull along, dressing-up stuff (Amanda: married, 40+, special needs teacher).

Amanda describes why she likes working on the toy section; not only is it 'nice and non-stressful' (this suggests that other roles are deemed stressful) but also it suits her own buying and selling needs. As Amanda's children have become older she finds herself buying and selling fewer clothes but more toys. By working on the toy stall she feels like she has greater control over individual buyer's behaviour and can almost act as an agent to sell her own goods by gently manipulating the situation of working directly alongside the buyer. Later in the interview she explains how Playmobil is able to retain its value as a desirable second-hand item but the quote highlighted here further suggests that she utilises salesperson strategies in order to put forward the case that the toy is worth the asking price, saying 'it's very good condition'.

The volunteers then can influence the consumption practices of customers, either indirectly through the way in which they display the goods, or directly through face-to-face communication. The same could be said for table-top sales where the buyer can interact directly with the seller. We might assume from the existing literature that consumers would prefer to buy directly from a seller, uncovering the source of the goods (and thus reducing the risk associated with the unknown). Yet in many instances mothers preferred the anonymity of the ticketed sale as they felt uncomfortable browsing someone else's goods whilst being watched. Customers also prefer the efficiency of the ticketed sales and as such show a preference for second-hand retail sites more closely aligned to conventional, first-cycle stores. This is despite the fact that table-top sales provide the opportunity to barter for a better price (a practice not available at ticketed sales where the seller is not present). I will look in more detail at the social interaction between buyers and sellers in chapter 6, for now I turn to look at individualised consumption practice.

## 5.3 Items customers buy

The majority of nearly new sale customers leave with multiple goods, although on rare occasions shoppers can leave emptied handed. At the end of the sale, a proportion of goods are always left unsold. The survey conducted at ten nearly

new sales partly aimed to uncover what consumers buy and what they do with these goods. The latter question was primarily focused on whether shoppers procured items for their own consumption, whether they bought them as gifts for others, or whether they bought them commercially to resell.

Figure 5.4 displays the findings for what customers bought across the ten sales. These multiple choice options were based on responses given during the interviews, as well as through my own observation of the goods sold and bought at the sales. Customers were asked to select all that applied, but the survey did not capture quantities or money spent. 3% of customers surveyed purchased nothing at the sale. Of these ten people, I know at least one had entered the sale not realising that it was only selling baby and children's goods because she spoke to me as she left. She had wandered in off the street out of curiosity (and paid her entry fee). Others had attended in the hopes of getting specific items but not been successful and hence left empty handed.

Of the customers who were successful, baby and children's clothes and toys were the most popular items to buy as figure 5.4 demonstrates. 74% of customers left with children's clothes and 70% with toys. As Heather (married, 35-39, IT technical support), one of the interviewees said, "I think it's brilliant for clothes because they grow out of stuff so quickly". This attitude was echoed by other interviewees and as such it is of little surprise that clothing was the most commonly purchased item at the sale according to the survey data. Within this context however, we may assume that the types of clothing purchased by different consumers might vary depending on the motivations behind the purchase. This will be explored later in this chapter within the remits of consumer anxiety and risk as well as the different forms of value (use, exchange and symbolic).

**What did you buy at today's sale? (select all that apply)**
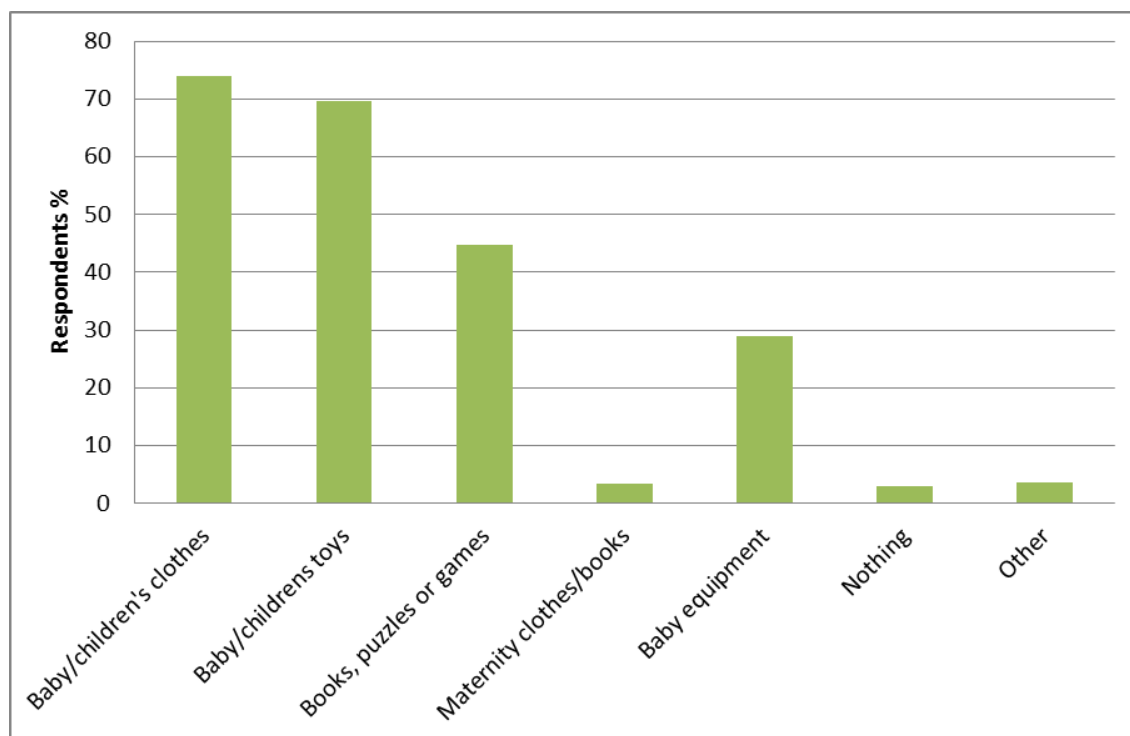


Figure 5.4: Items purchased at the nearly new sale, n.329 (Q.15)

45% of consumers purchased children's books, puzzles and games and 29% purchased baby equipment. Equipment could be anything from large items like cots and prams to smaller items like blankets and feeding bowls. Only 3% of customers purchased maternity clothes or books. The sales have a far greater focus on baby and children's goods rather than maternity items for expectant mothers. I also found through the interviews that a number of mothers did not attend the sales before they gave birth; indeed in some cases they were not aware of the sales until much later. This raises a question as to where they acquire their maternity clothes from, as Ogle et al (2013) found the mothers in their sample to be regularly consuming second-hand maternity dress yet the mothers in my sample do not appear to be buying maternity clothes at the nearly new sales. The survey did not capture specific details about the equipment purchased but again, the interviewees suggested that particular items of equipment are more popular than others. Helen, one of the nearly new sale coordinators explained:

P: The equipment always really goes especially high chairs and stair gates, pushchairs. Cots never sell, don't know why but people never buy second-hand cots at the sales (Helen: married, 30-34, mother).

Helen is only able to describe the trend found at her sale but many of the interviewees concurred with this statement. The cot in particular, is seen as one of the more significant purchases required in order to care for the child. There was also a pattern of grandparents buying the cot as a gift and therefore, interviewees did not need to be concerned with purchasing one themselves.

**What do you intend to do with these items? (select all that apply)**
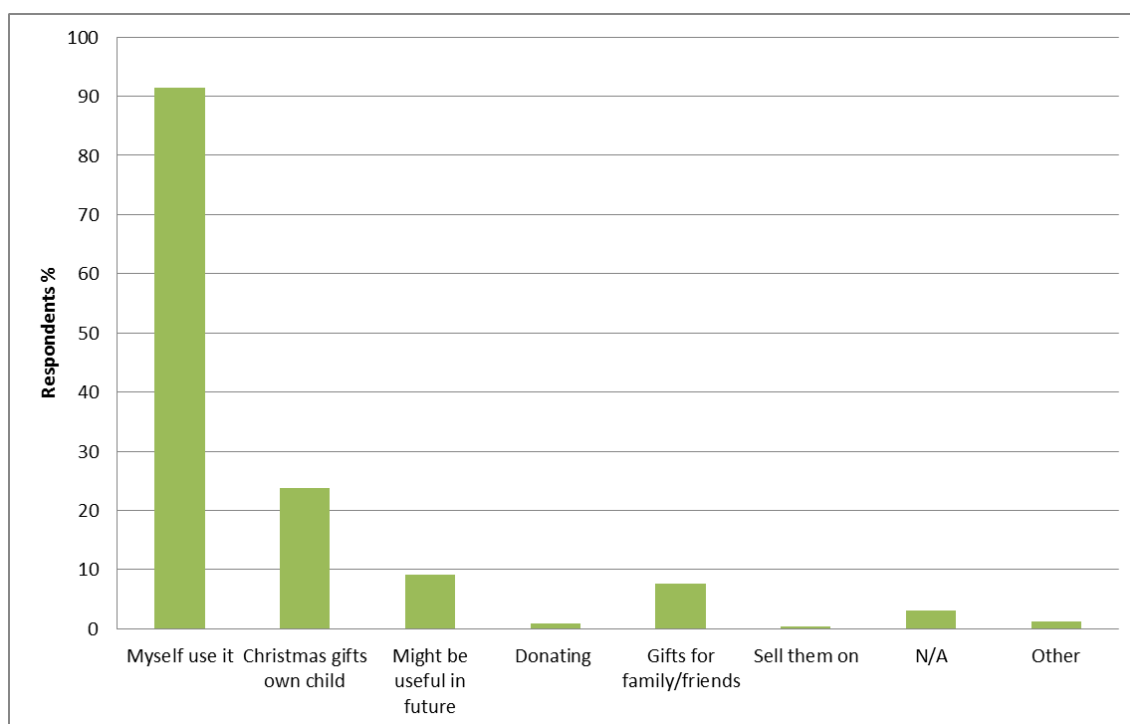


Figure 5.5: Intended use of items purchased, n.329 (Q.16)

As figure 5.5 demonstrates, the majority of customers purchase at least some of the goods at the sale for their own use/consumption. 92% of customers surveyed cited this as an intention. As noted, 3% of customers did not purchase anything at the sale; they appear in figure 5.5 as 'not applicable'. Of the remaining 5%, goods purchased are gifts for friends and family (we might assume some of these to be the grandparents found in the sample).

The sales sampled for the survey were all in the autumn of 2013. During the interviews it came to light that some mothers used the nearly new sale to purchase extra Christmas gifts, usually for their own children rather than for those outside the family. This pattern was found to be generalizable through the survey results, so that in figure 5.5 we can also see that 24% of customers purchased goods intended to be Christmas gifts. Had the sales been at a different time of year this result may have been significantly different. Indeed, nearly new sale coordinators used Christmas as a driver for publicity by advertising the sale as an opportunity to purchase inexpensive Christmas gifts. Equally, all of the sale coordinators I interviewed stated that sales in the months preceding Christmas were busier and more profitable than sales held earlier in the year.

Steph, quoted below, provides an example of the range of goods that customers can buy at any one sale:

> P: I bought books which I hadn't done before which are for my boy when he's much older. They were a good set of Usborne books. I bought bits and bobs for Christmas, both for my own children and for other people's children. I bought some wellies, a few clothes but not a huge amount. I bought more toys this year than clothes, whereas the year before was a lot more clothes (Steph: married, 30-34, civil servant).

Steph describes what she purchased and why. The Usborne books were not bought for immediate use, but for use in the future when her son is 'much older'. This practice of forward planning and the notion of the books as a 'good set' suggests that Steph regards the books as a rare opportunity, an opportunity that she cannot rely on being available in the future when she can actually make use of the books. Steph was a keen bargain hunter and enjoyed the thrill of second-hand shopping. Later in the interview she says that whilst she is content to offer gifts that were acquired second-hand to some friends and family, she felt she knew well for whom this would be an acceptable practice or not. Furthermore, Steph compares what she purchased at the most recent sale to what she purchased the year before. This provides clarification that her consumption patterns at the last sale were the exception rather than the norm, as she would normally buy more clothes (as we might expect after looking at figure 5.4).

A further intention driving this survey question (question 16) was the desire to investigate whether the sales were used commercially. In the initial meeting with NCT head office staff and two volunteer coordinators based in London, commercial buyers and sellers had been cited as attendees to the sales (Todhunter 2011).  In actuality this was not a significant group across the ten sales studied. 0.3% (one person) said that they intended to sell goods on elsewhere, although it may well be the case that commercial buyers would not admit to such practice. I also had one interviewee who described how she used the sales for commercial ends. Vicky scoured the sales for branded children's clothes and sold them on eBay, after realising, by buying items for her own children, that the sales were a good place to pick up quality pieces. As a sale veteran (seller, buyer and volunteer for many years) she knows how best to work the sales to her advantage. She said:

> P: I can look for those items at the NCT sale cheaper, and then sell them on eBay which is what I do. So I do make a little bit of money but then I think the NCT - the person has put it in with the label they want. The NCT are still making their 30% so if I see a Boden item for £3, I know I can sell it on eBay for 10. So everyone's a winner (Vicky: divorced, 40+, nursery nurse).

Her belief that 'everyone's a winner' quashes any suggestion that her actions are not ethical (if we take ethical to mean the utilitarian view of the greatest common good) and in fact, when the nearly new sale coordinators were interviewed they showed little concern for such practice as long as NCT and sellers still benefited financially. Vicky was tentative about sharing this information with me though, as it did not come up until near the end of a long interview (at 1:15 hours, it was the longest interview I conducted). This might suggest that she was unsure about how acceptable her actions were and perhaps only felt comfortable in telling me about it as the interview progressed. Or it might mean that she separates such practice with talking about her own consumption experiences.

Having looked at what customers purchase at nearly new sales, and for what end, section 5.4 further explores the retail space and the way in which consumers negotiate it as a site of second-hand consumption.

## 5.4 Hunting for bargains

In the previous chapter we learnt that cost-saving is a fundamental draw for customers to nearly new sales. We also learnt that, in the main, nearly new sale customers are not 'excluded consumers' (Williams and Windebank 2002) so whilst they cite cost-saving as a primary motive, actual motivations are more complex. This section of the chapter looks at how customers conceptualise different forms of commodity value and the strategies they appropriate in order to gain from this second-hand economy. I argue that consumer practice and the justifications for such practice are multi-layered. Indeed, recent literature has positioned the consumer as a reflexive agent, able to manage their consumption practices with some degree of purpose and reflexivity (Warde 1994; Warde 2005; Gabriel and Lang 2006). Such reflexivity is however, difficult to access and measure as a researcher concerned with practice. Drawing on observation and interviews, the rest of this chapter tries to tease out some of these justifications and reasons for particular consumption behaviours, drawing on key debates in the existing literature.

This section is titled 'hunting for bargains' because this was the overarching theme reoccurring throughout the interviews. There is a difference in this sense between saving money and hunting for bargains. Whilst they sound similar, in practice they are working towards a different end point, the former suggesting an overall decrease in capital spent, the latter, in increase in material goods gained for a minimal cost. Participants know how to spot a bargain because they have an idea in their head of what an item is worth new, and therefore what it is worth second-hand. An item is not a bargain just because it is cheap; it needs to be cheap in relation to an alternative (i.e. What that item would cost brand new).

Some parents do their research before going second-hand shopping, using the internet to check the going rate of particular items new and used. This mother described how she found a rocker for £20, even though she felt that £20 was a significant outlay for one item at the nearly new sale:

> P: His rocker we got for £20 and that would be £70 odd in the shops and it looks brand new, it has the packaging and everything (Rose: married, 30-34, accountant).

The rocker is deemed a 'bargain' because Rose felt that she had acquired an item in as good a condition as it would be brand new, but for a much cheaper price. In this quote Rose is perhaps justifying the cost both to herself and to me, the interviewer. This concept of getting a bargain is documented in two key ways. Some customers held the view that everything at the nearly new sale was a bargain. This relies on an understanding that as everything is second-hand, it is automatically priced lower than the new equivalent. This would not be the general assumption at an antique or vintage fair/shop, but it is a view tied up in the way the sales are presented and publicised; 'bag a bargain' is printed on the template sale poster reproduced in the previous chapter. Amanda, who spoke about her experience as a volunteer earlier in this chapter describes her observations of customers:

> P: It always amazes me when people don't check the prices. I think we're so conditioned to shops where everything is - you're looking at play-dough and every pack of play-dough is the same price and then you go to an NCT sale and of course it's all priced by different people. Sometimes you say 'you might like to buy that one, that one's cheaper than this one' 'oh but they're the same thing'. Yep but it's priced by different people. Some people's pricing is very low, it varies hugely.  . . and then there's some canny people who do check the prices. It amazes me that some people don't (Amanda: married, 40+, special needs teacher).

Amanda's observations could be seen to contradict the cost-saving motives expressed by the consumers themselves. Indeed the observation that many customers do not look at prices provides further evidence that these are not excluded consumers and are not motivated purely by money (or that NCT do not make clear that items are priced individually – another learned consumer practice understood through experience). Equally, Amanda goes on to recognise the 'canny' shoppers. These are likely to be either shoppers more closely aligned to the 'excluded consumer' demographic, or, simply consumers who are more familiar with the nearly new sales. I described before the ways in which consumers adopt strategies in order to gain as much from participation as possible. These strategies come from a learned consumer practice, an example of which is described by Mary:

> P: I was desperate to buy some sleeping bags for her . . . so I picked up two, and didn't look at the price because normally they're not expensive, nothings expensive.  So I pick them up and have a look at the price at the end because you don't think you pay more than a few pounds unless it's a big item like you know . . . so I got them to the counter and they were £10 each and I thought oh I didn't really mean to buy them for £10 and since then I've seen them in loads of sales . . . so I was a bit miffed I paid that much for them (Mary: married 30-34, social worker).

Mary described her frustration at paying over the odds for sleeping bags for her daughter. She recounts her experience in detail, as if to provide an explanation for her current shopping strategy of comparing prices and thinking ahead with the seasons. Whilst Mary paid less than she would have done new, the realisation that she could have saved money if she had waited for the next sale is a source of frustration. Mary says that she 'didn't mean to buy them for £10' which suggests that she did not believe they were worth £10 even before she realised how widely available they were. Sleeping bags were cited by other interviewees as a particularly popular item so it may be that they were actually priced appropriately at £10, indeed, it did not stop Mary purchasing them but presumably she felt uncomfortable objecting to the price once she had reached the till.

Participants often set a budget for the sales, although this practice has been undermined as more branches accept card payments. When branches just accepted cash, it was easier for customers to go with a budget and stick to it. Although this mother stated that she does not have a budget for the sales, she does in fact take a finite amount of cash and talked about taking a bit extra 'as spare':

> P: I don't have a budget no. I take cash and I normally take £40 but I don't spend that. I spend between £10 and £15 when I'm there. When he was little, we took about £30 or £40 and we were able to get a really good, solid bike and that was £15 so that took up a chunk of the money. So I always take £40 just in case we see something again like that (Maria: married, 35-39, teacher).

This participant has a pot of money for the purpose of buying things on her list, and a separate pot of money available for more opportunistic shopping.

These more opportunistic shopping practices are characteristic of the agency-driven, rather than excluded, consumer. The sales, as I have offered before, provide an opportunity to purchase extra items rather than necessities, or non-essentials rather than essentials. Therefore, whilst participants believe they are saving money, this is often a relative sum compared to the material consumption they actually need to get by.

Another theme emerging from the interviews, although not examined through the quantitative survey, was the practice of recognising goods not just for their immediate use-value but for their future exchange-value. This is demonstrated clearly by Kate:

> E: When you are looking at an item and deciding whether to buy it what is going through your head?
>
> P: The cost . . . and quality I guess. I look for good names because I wouldn't be able to buy them new, so GAP, Monsoon that sort of thing. It has to be good quality first, clean and then I see how much it is and whether it's worth the money. I haven't sold anything at the sales yet myself but I think if you buy brand names they will always sell on again if I want to sell them, which I will I think (Kate: married, 25-29, retail manager).

Kate cites cost as the first thing that comes into her head, or certainly the first thing that comes into her head when asked here. As a first-time mother intending to extend her family, she has yet to dispose of any baby goods but describes how she intends to sell goods on once she no longer needs them. In this quote, Kate does not refer to the direct use-value of the goods at all, but rather focuses purely on the commodity value. This is a strategy used by other mothers in order to justify the expense of consuming on behalf of the family. Brand names are considered to hold their value because they are good quality as well as retaining a symbolic value tied up in certain covetable labels.

## 5.5 Risk and social governance

In the previous chapter I explained the macro structures aiding participation in the NCT nearly new sale, despite the scholarly evidence that buying second-hand/used goods can be hazardous (Crewe and Gregson 2003). The chapter

concluded with Warde's (1994) argument that consumer anxiety can be reduced via group association, in this case an association with NCT as a trusted organisation and with other middle-class mothers participating in the system of exchange. Building on this argument, I now consider the individual consumption practices of mothers and the ways they negotiate risk related to both consumer and maternal anxiety. Whilst the interviewees highlighted here are talking about intimate consumption practices and practices hidden within the home, I used discourse analysis to gain a greater insight into their practices, as explained in the methodology chapter. This enabled me to tease out key themes whilst retaining an awareness of individual difference, along with triangulation of data (i.e. participant observation).

For some the NCT nearly new sale formed just one element of wider provisioning practices which utilised second-hand channels, whilst for others the NCT nearly new sale constituted their main or only 'alternative' retail channel. This had an impact on the types of items purchased, whether they used the nearly new sale to buy extras or whether it replaced the need to purchase as much from conventional shops. I have described the different forms of value which affect consumption practices at the sale, but further patterns were also found in what customers chose to buy or not buy. Justifications for purchasing practices ranged from personal negotiations of risk to compliance with wider norms and conventions. These negotiations centre on the fact that all used goods have an embedded previous history, a biography a new owner cannot access. A number of respondents recognised and commented on the fact that they were more comfortable in taking used goods from someone they knew rather than a stranger. Tina, the mother quoted above, was one of those respondents, she said:

> P: Baby bedding I'm sceptical about. I've been given some by my friend but that's only because I know her. My mum bought me a second-hand Moses basket but it had only been used twice. (Tina: married, 20-24, dental nurse)

Tina is an example of a mother's first tentative step into the vast second-hand economy of children's things and as such it is of little surprise that she lacks confidence. As Kehily and Martens (2014, p.239) states,

The new parent of today is confronted with a myriad of products that are designed to "safeguard", "guide" and "monitor" the young child and ensure its well-being.

The rhetoric of parenting advice used by the commercial world in order to sell baby goods is one of a number of external stimuli eliciting anxiety in new parents. Mothers spoke openly about the anxiety they felt as a first time mum and how this manifest in wanting to buy everything new and in keeping the young baby away from dirt, germs and harm. Tina also spoke of a preference for new but justified her consumption of the second-hand items described by explaining that she knows where they have come from, or in the case of the Moses basket, that it had been used just twice. Presumably this suggests that it has not been used enough to be permanently tainted or contaminated by a previous owner.

Despite a suggestion in existing literature that second-hand clothes can be seen to harbour 'traces of disease, death, sex and other bodily functions' of previous owners (Horne and Maddrell 2002, p.50) all of the mothers interviewed had dressed their child/ren in second-hand clothes, thus implying that the parents participating in this study did not have an issue with dressing their child/ren in clothing previously worn by another. Clearly, the mothers interviewed had all participated in nearly new sales and as such we would assume they are intent on consuming at least some goods second-hand. The survey results found that 74% of customers purchased clothing at the sale; a high proportion but not as high as found in the interviews (just one interviewee had not purchased clothing at the last sale). There were however, varying limits to this practice as nicely described by Melissa:

> P: I think clothes wise. It's a daft way of differentiating but anything that's going directly onto his skin so sleep suits, vests. Two reasons, one I'd rather know that they're fresh, pristine, and also muslins as well are something I'd bought new, and also for what they cost brand new in the shops, supermarkets always do good deals on bundles of vests whatever. They are something I always buy first hand (Melissa: married, 30-34, environmental consultant).

Melissa's comments match that of a number of interviewees for whom items like vests and sleep suits are so inexpensive to buy first-hand that the financial

gains of buying second-hand does not justify the risk of clothing the child in something unknown. Her practice is not as 'daft' as she cites. As young babies are seen to be particularly messy, such intimate items are commonly disregarded as suitable for second-hand exchange, often ending up in the bin. One mother even described the practice of exchanging used undergarments as "a bit gross". This aligns with much of the work by Gregson and Crewe (2006) and Brooks, Gregson and Crewe (2000) which argues that the 'safest' second-hand clothes are those worn furthest from the body[9]. I can therefore extend the claims already existing in the literature specifically to mother's co-consumption practices. If these mothers are representative of all middle-class parents, they are more likely to buy outerwear as second-hand baby clothing rather than intimate wear. This practice is susceptible to changes in the lifecourse however. Specifically, I found that first-time mothers were more concerned about hygiene and contamination than more experienced mothers, with this heightened anxiety influencing their consumption practices.

In contrast, whilst intimate clothing has more contact with the skin, outerwear has more contact with the outside world. This is recognised by mothers, but not as another challenge to negotiate in regards to risk and hygiene as we might expect. Instead, situations offering greater opportunity for external contamination are seen as the perfect place to utilise second-hand clothing. These situations include going to nursery and playing in the garden, as described by Gina (co-habiting, 40+, civil servant) who believes that second-hand clothes are well-suited to dirty activities and help her to relax as a parent "If she's playing out in the garden and it gets stained, I don't start worrying about it". This suggests that she buys clothing of little financial and/or symbolic value for such outdoors activities in order to avoid such value being diminished through contamination with dirt.

Textiles are commonly thought to harbour unfavourable histories more profoundly than other goods (Brooks, Crewe et al. 2000). This is not just evident through respondents' reluctance to buy second-hand vests and baby bedding, but also through less intimate items such as stuffed toys which were often cited as something mothers would not buy second-hand. Solid items

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[9] Interestingly a number of mothers bought second-hand reusable cloth nappies at the sales, a point that will be discussed in the next chapter.

such as plastic toys and books could easily be wiped clean; their history literally erased in one swipe of an antibacterial wipe. For many, washing and cleaning goods once home is part of a ritual, a process of divesting each item of its previous owner before it is welcomed into its new home. This practice is changeable however, and is often directly correlated to years of motherhood:

> P: I used to get the antiseptic wipes out, put everything in the washing machine, clean everything. I think the last one I got them home and thought, you know, they're going to playgroup two or three times a week with things that haven't been washed for three years. Generally I give things an antiseptic wipe over. (Erin: married, 40+, full-time mother)

Erin explained the way in which her divestment practices altered after her most recent trip to a nearly new sale. She reflects on the fact that she cannot control her child's experiences now that he spends time outside of the home at playgroup. It is a sudden realisation and self-reflection which allows her to relinquish some of that control. She still prefers to clean goods once in the home, but more from habit than anxiety. Mothers spoke openly about the anxiety they felt as a first-time mum and how this manifest itself in wanting to buy everything new and in keeping the young baby away from dirt, germs and harm. This demonstrates a clear link between motherhood and consumption practice, with consumption attributable to broader practices of care and the identity of the mother.

For some interviewees, it was the first time that they had reflected on their divestment practices. These were generally the mothers who did not have stringent divestment practices and had given little thought to the possibility of dirt or germs lurking on their new acquisitions. Therefore, in one or two cases, my questioning seemed to actually induce anxiety, a fear that perhaps they should be cleaning these goods before they come into the home. We can see again through these cases evidence of Miller's (1999) conceptualisation of consumption as a practice of care. In no other instance perhaps is this more applicable than in the consumption practices of mothers, who use shopping as a form of provisioning and nurture (Miller 2004).

For others, the practice of cleaning goods was seen as wholly unnecessary, because they looked and smelt clean already. This was the narrative of many

mothers but evidenced most strongly by Karen, the environmentalist we met in the previous chapter:

> P:  I bring them into this room and unpack the bags and just put them away. You can tell that they're all clean and ironed. They'll never be ironed again after that. You can tell that they are clean because they smell of the detergents that have been used, thinking about clothing, and the detergents I use tend to be pretty unfragranced so these smell much cleaner than our normal stuff and I don't iron so I certainly wouldn't wash them until they've been worn, I'll keep that washed and ironed smell as long as possible. (Karen: non-disclosed marital status, 40+, homemaker)

Karen states that the second-hand things she buys from the sales are actually cleaner than her normal children's clothes and she feels no need to further divest them of their previous biography. Karen understands second-hand exchange networks and for her they are part of a normalised way of provisioning (she is a moderator for her local Freecycle group). For others, the organisation of the sale as borrowing conventions from first-cycle retail outlets alleviates the risk of consuming second-hand goods.

Whilst some mothers practice divestment rituals as part of a habit to reduce anxiety, others do not see any risk attached to a second-hand object past that which is visible. For these mothers if it looks clean it is clean, and therefore poses little threat. Laura (married, 30-35, non-disclosed occupation) finds comfort from that fact that she is "buying something off a rack". Here, Laura is aligning her nearly new sale consumption practices more closely to conventional retail channels and whilst this clearly puts her at ease she is still aware that everything has been "worn and washed", putting her trust in the practice of washing (an assumed practice as she does not clean them herself) to eliminate any threat to the child. For some then, the appearance and smell of an object as 'clean' is enough to justify its purchase and use, whilst for others a further cleansing process is required once the goods are in the home.

The range of practices described here suggests that such consumption-divestment practices are not standardised. This corresponds with other literature which argues routines of cleanliness are rarely discussed outside the family and as such practices of cleanliness lack normative collective conventions (Shove 2003; Jack 2013). This has been alluded to also by Cook

(2008; 2013) when he calls for the need for further research on mothers as consumers. In order to analyse the consumption practices of mothers, argues Cook, we must disregard an individualistic framework of economic action and recognise the pluralistic nature of motherly consumption decisions.

The practice of washing and cleaning alleviates concerns of hygiene. Another concern of parents is that of safety, which has clear repercussions on second-hand consumption practice. Discussions on safety were overwhelmed by a narrative of governance, recognised both through NCT regulations and through wider recommendations from authoritative bodies. It is forbidden to sell car seats and mattresses through the NCT sales; a rule taken very seriously by the volunteers coordinating the sales. There are ways to get around this rule however, by advertising such items on a notice board at the sale. This means that such items are not sold within the locale of the sale, but indeed the process of exchange is still facilitated by the sale.

The theme of safety governance took two main guises. For some, the notion of using second-hand car seats and mattresses was personally recognised as unsafe. Their views were no doubt influenced by formal recommendations (although it would be impossible to untangle such interventions), but they displayed a sense of personal agency in choosing to follow these guidelines rigorously. For others, the boundaries of acceptability were less pronounced. These mothers were aware of the recommendations and what they should say or do, but showed greater flexibility in negotiating the risks involved. In response to being asked what she would not buy second-hand, Nicole immediately says that she would not buy a car seat, before realising that she actually nearly did:

> P: Car seats, I wouldn't buy a second-hand car seat. Although having said that we were looking into buying a car seat for my mother-in-law who has Katie one day a week. I called someone at the nearly new sale, because I don't think you can sell car seats there at the moment but they had written, privately call us and I did actually call a lady but it was the wrong size car seat, for a tiny baby, so actually I would have definitely considered buying that, I was going to have a look at it, so maybe I would have bought a second-hand car seat. Everyone says you can't buy a

> second-hand car seat! I think if you've got it from a trustworthy source,
> that's the thing (Nicole: married, 20-25, research assistant).

Nicole recognises that convention dictates not to buy a second-hand car seat because "everyone" says it, but she is clearly open to negotiating this risk and making the decision for herself based on whether she trusts the source. Her implication here is that a stranger she has been connected to through the nearly new sale is a trustworthy source. This correlates with the theory posited in the previous chapter that the nearly new sale is a socially homophilious locale built on a trusted association to the NCT.  All of the other mothers interviewed however, said that they would only consider buying or taking a second-hand car seat from a friend or relative for whom they knew throughout the period that the previous owner was using the car seat, hence they would have known, first hand, whether they had been involved in a traffic accident. Of course, Nicole suggests that in practice this is may not be the case. Nicole's story is a clear example of the way in which social norms structure many of the mothers' consumption practices whilst allowing for personal agency and reflexivity. This section has provided evidence therefore, that consumers can be reflexive and as such concurs with Warde (1999).

## 5.6 Co-consuming identities and conspicuous consumption

Ever since Veblen ([1899] 1994) coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' in the late nineteenth century, consumption has been well-recognised as a mode of depicting social status. The term refers to the way in which goods can be inscribed with a sign-value in order to visibly display wealth and/or prestige. I turn now to sign-value in relation to conspicuous consumption and the ways in which mothering can be visualised through material culture. This section therefore, relies on the notion of the child as an extension of the mother, and argues that a mother's co-consumption practices can tell us something about the mother's own identity. I therefore divert from the concept of actual physical risk to consider the intimate relationship between people and things, and the subsequent risk to identity construction and status.

As has been emphasised before in this thesis, the mothers participating in nearly new sales are not to be generally regarded as excluded consumers

(Williams and Windebank 2002) rather they are middle-class, agency-driven consumers participating in the sales for a range of reasons. The reasons the participants cite most readily through both the interviews and the survey is a cost-saving motive. However, I argue that rather than striving for an overall cost-saving strategy in terms of minimising family expenditure, many of the attendees participate in order to purchase extra goods or better quality goods than they might afford new. Evidence for this has been shown already, when interviewees cite previous purchases as multiple pairs of wellington boots, branded clothing and books of a particular type. Whilst in part this could be related to convenience, these consumer practices could be viewed as a desire to be a good mother and be seen to be a good mother by providing the best for a child.

Brands and designer labels could be described as the epitome of conspicuous consumption. Such goods are highly desirable at the nearly new sales and can demand a premium based on well-known names. Mothers view particular baby goods as a commodity, considering their resale value as a factor in justifying the initial purchase. This is one reason they give for purchasing branded goods; the belief that they will hold their value. The second reason is in terms of quality, as described by Lynne:

> P: If I'm buying new, I'd tend to go to Tesco or Sainsbury or something but at the NCT I might pick up GAP, or NEXT or things like that which is possibly just because they're better brands and they wear better so they're more nearly new when you buy it (Lynne: married, 35-39, freelance journalist).

Like many mothers Lynne uses the sale as an opportunity to buy goods that she would not buy new, either because she cannot afford them new, or because she does not believe they offer value for money full price. Of all of the interviewees to speak about designer brands, it was always discussed in relation to quality and value for money. There is no reason to believe that this is not important for the mothers interviewed, yet such practices cannot be examined in isolation to the broad consensus found in existing consumption literature that consumption practices are heavily influenced by social distinction (Burrows and Marsh 1992; Bourdieu [1979] 2010). We might assume, based on this literature, that social distinction also plays a role in

purchasing designer brands at the nearly new sales. Indeed, children have been cited as ideal carriers of vicarious consumption, therefore they can be a channel to display a mother's own conspicuous consumption practices (Bailey 2001; Thomsen and Sorensen 2006).

Whilst mothers spoke about branded goods in relation primarily to quality, rather than status, the practices I observed at the sales suggested otherwise. This extract from my research diary describes the first visit to a nearly new sale at the affluent Southern market town:

> I watched this one pair of Boden trousers get picked up multiple times. It was a fairly scruffy pair of boys jogging bottoms – well-worn and made from basic navy cotton but people would say 'oh Boden'. They didn't look particularly desirable but I can only assume people kept picking them up for the label. One customer took them away in her bag and then brought them back 15 minutes later and said to me that they were too worn. Why did she take them in the first place then? (Waight 2011)

This example of commodity fetishism provides evidence to the subjective nature of value and the strength of sign value as opposed to use value. The label was clearly an attraction and enticed consumers but on reflection many consumers were able to move past this fetish in order to make the objective decision that perhaps they were not good value for money. That said, one customer did buy them eventually so in that regard they achieved the price prescribed to them.

It is not only branded clothing that can be used for conspicuous consumption. Thomsen and Sorensen (2006) wrote about the baby's pram as a 'four-wheeled status symbol'. Like a women's handbag, it can be used every day as a highly visible form of consumption. Data from the interview transcripts concur with Thomsen and Sorensen as the pram/pushchair is not commonly regarded as a desirable item to buy second-hand (unless it is an extra pushchair for occasional use, in which case, such cheap, lightweight pushchairs are in demand). Maggie, who I interviewed over the telephone, had not acquired any large equipment second-hand:

> E: Would you buy large equipment second-hand if it was available?

P: I guess so . . . I wouldn't be against it, but for a pushchair there's so many to choose from - it's like buying a car. So when you've decided what you want I wouldn't just buy one because I'd seen it at an NCT sale. I'd researched it so much so I wanted that specific one, if I happened to see that particular one at an NCT sale it would have to be so scrupulously clean and spotless and almost new anyway, so I think it would be unlikely I'd find what I was after. So I think it would have to be new, for things like pushchairs (Maggie: married, 35-39, IT technician).

Maggie literally describes the process of buying a pushchair as relatable to purchasing a car; another four-wheeled status symbol. She is not against purchasing one second-hand if it is 'scrupulously clean' but knows that realistically, the likelihood of finding the exact model she wants would be highly unlikely. The pushchair is regarded as a purchase laden with importance. Not only does it perform a functional purpose, it has also become a way of depicting status because it has the potential to be a very high-cost item. It could also be seen as a significant purchase in the transition to motherhood, and as such is heavily embedded in personal values and tastes. The pushchair becomes the main mode for facilitating travel outside of the home for many mothers with young babies, and could therefore be regarded as symbol of freedom.

## 5.7 The material habitus

I have used Warde's (2005) theory of practice to posit that consumption practices can tell us something about wider social practices, in this case what it means to be a mother (or parent). I have already described the way in which maternal anxieties and the desire to protect the child is evidenced through practices of material provisioning and negotiations of risk. Within this theme of risk and safety governance, I also tried to tease out the difference between individualised consumption practices and practices clearly structured by external pressures (social and/or institutionalised). In this section I further my analysis by theorising on the role of the material in bridging across time and space, that is, in linking people and aspects of their social lives. The material is given an agency of its own, shaped by the habitus and practices of actors who keep the item in the exchange network.

Belk's (1988) notion of the 'extended self' was fundamental in developing a cultural analysis of materiality. Belk (1988, pp.144-145) argued that:

> The feeling of identity invested in material objects can be extraordinarily high . . . having possessions can contribute to our capabilities for doing and being.

Belk believed that possessions were incredibly important in constructing and maintaining a sense of identity, and that they can, in effect, influence who we are (being) and what we do (doing).  In this chapter I have shown that through Cook's concept of co-consumption mothers consume on behalf of their children. If children are seen as an extension of the parents, and possessions are seen as an extension of the self, then children's goods are also part of the parent's 'extended self'.

By considering objects as dynamic, with a life and use of their own, objects can be given their own attributes and own sense of agency. As I draw on Bourdieu's habitus in this thesis, I would like to extend this notion to that of the goods available at the nearly new sale. Habitus is originally a Latin word referring to a habitual or typical condition (Jenkins 1992). It was appropriated by Bourdieu to consider the dispositions and values embodied in people. Habitus only exists inside the heads of actors, it only operates in relation to a social field and it disposes actors to do certain things (Jenkins 1992; Grenfell 2008; Bourdieu [1979] 2010). The habitus is a product of culture and is therefore a beneficial thinking tool in exploring the cultural significance of things.

When second-hand goods are considered for their past-lives, I would argue that mothers are as concerned with where those goods have been *socially* as where they have been physically. This relates back to chapter 4, which argued that nearly new sales are socially constructed as sites of 'middle-class' second-hand consumption. The habitus of those participating in the sale could thus be extended to the goods themselves to construct the view that objects for sale had come from a 'good' (middle-class) home similar to the buyers' own. This worked to alleviate the risk involved in consuming second-hand goods, the NCT sale being a trusted source.

'Material habitus' has been raised by Lynn Meskell (2005), an archaeological anthropologist, but otherwise left unexplored as a concept. Studies of second-

hand consumption provide an exciting platform to explore such a notion, as I have evidenced here the social constructs embedded in the material histories of goods. Goods can be 'classed' and they can be socially inscribed with the habitus of another. They therefore carry with them their own material habitus which gives objects great cultural significance in the social world. Like Bourdieu's habitus, the material habitus only exists inside the heads of actors (it is socially constructed), it only operates in relation to a social field and it disposes actors to do certain things. Whilst this needs further exploration as a concept, the notion of motherly co-consumption is a pertinent route to do so with children's goods readily entering second-hand economies and consumption practices being closely aligned with care.

## 5.8 Concluding remarks

This chapter has explored consumer practice within the locale of the nearly new sale, referencing individual action within the context of generalised consumption norms. As a site of second-hand retail, the NCT nearly new sale could be viewed as an 'alternative' or 'informal' retail site. This is not just based on the types of goods for sale, but also the setting (not a purpose built store) and the labour involved in running the sales (volunteers rather than paid staff). The definition of an alternative, informal, unconventional or inconspicuous retail site is unclear however, not least because such sites can vary greatly in their nature (Crewe, Gregson et al. 2003; Gregson and Crewe 2003). In this chapter I therefore describe the ways in which nearly new sales consent to retail norms, as well as they ways in which they differ. This chapter has particularly looked at consumption practice as shaped by the setting and by personal habitus, whilst chapter 6 will go on to further discuss the locale as a social site (broader social practices).

As an alternative or informal retail space, consumers gain the most from attendance if they are able to negotiate the space and adopt strategies in order to benefit. This learned consumer practice is gained through experience, as found in previous literature, and is predominantly focused on getting the best value for money (Belk, Sherry et al. 1988b; Medvedev 2012). As stated by Gregson and Crewe (2003, p.86) second-hand spaces allow women: 'to enact and subsequently display their shopping skills'. In this manner, such practice is considered with pride rather than shame. The nearly new sales thus provide an

opportunity for middle-class mothers to supplement their consumption practices in an efficient and affordable way.

This chapter emphasised the multiple layers of consumer practice. On the surface, customers attend the sale in order to buy cheap goods. This we learnt in chapter 4 when 74% of customers surveyed said that their primary reason for buying second-hand goods was cost-saving benefits. We might then expect all inexpensive, second-hand goods to be equally desirable but this is not the case as I argue that the social and geographical setting plays a fundamental role in consumer decision making. Narratives of second-hand consumption practice are closely related to quality, safety and class for the particular group of mothers (parents) participating in NCT sales. Whilst practical on the one hand, such actions are intrinsically shaped by the mother's personal identity and broader social norms.  This could be said for all consumption practice, yet motherly consumption practices have been found to be particularly shaped by the process of parenthood as a liminal phase of heightened anxiety (Cairns, Johnston et al. 2013; Ogle, Tyner et al. 2013).

The results of this study clearly highlight consumption as a practice bound within other practices. Warde (2005, p.137) pushed for this kind of critical engagement with consumption practice stating, 'consumption is not itself a practice but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice.' I have since described the ways in which mother's second-hand co-consumption practices can be correlated with parental desires to care and protect; this was evident through their negotiations of risk and safety governance. The practice of purchasing extra toys and games suggests a desire to invest in the cultural capital of the child, a practice bound within the role of parent as educator and nurturer.

The practice of conspicuous consumption discussed in the context of mothering relies on the conceptualisation of material goods as an extension of the self (Belk 1988) and as the child as an extension of the mother (Layne, Taylor et al. 2004; Miller 2004). This then regards goods used by the child to be an extension of the mother and as such can tell us something about her personal values and identities. We see this through the desire to be environmentally friendly by reusing goods, or by the desire to assert distinction through symbolically significant goods.

Theoretically I pushed this notion further to introduce the concept of 'material habitus'. The exploratory nature of this analysis is inspired by the work of Miller (1999) and Belk (1988) and considers the social lives of things in relation to mother's co-consumption practices of second-hand/used baby goods. As such, I forward Belk's notion of the 'extended self' to argue that second-hand goods come with a real or imagined connection to the previous owner, this makes up the 'material habitus' (Meskell 2005). This plays a part in the consumption decisions of the parent for whom acquiring second-hand baby goods from a trusted source (in this case a particular type of 'middle-class' nearly new sale) alleviates the risk of consuming objects with a past. Just like the human habitus, the material habitus is a 'product of history', it only exists inside the heads of actors, and it can influence practice. In my study this was evidenced through the cleaning/divestment rituals of parents, as they bring used goods into the home. Inspired by the 'new materialisms' perspective, the material habitus can therefore be used to give agency to objects and to further explore the complex relationship between people and things. I discuss this again in relation to avenues for further research in chapter 7.

Whilst this chapter concludes that motherly second-hand consumption practices cannot be necessarily normalised, there are key themes which both consent with and add to existing findings in the second-hand consumption literature. The next, and final, results chapter focuses on another way in which nearly new sales are different to conventional retail channels, as site for a particular type of socialising, bonding and learning.

# 6 Socialising: A Locale for Bonding and Learning

## 6.1 Introduction

The last two chapters looked at how customers arrive at the NCT nearly new sale and the material lives of the things that they buy there. This chapter, the last of the empirical chapters in this thesis, is concerned with the additional ways in which the nearly new sale is used by customers other than to purchase second-hand baby goods. The rationale for this chapter is based on existing literature which positions sites of retail as not only a place to acquire goods but also as an arena to facilitate socialisation, learning and the flow of information. This was found by Clarke (2000) in her ethnographic study of nearly new sales, arguing that the bazaar-like atmosphere of the sale is shaped by friendship, solidarity and expertise as much as thrift.  With this in mind, one of the aims structuring this doctoral project was to investigate the extent to which the NCT sale is used socially, including a consideration of groups attending the sale (family, friends, or alone), how different individuals and groups interact at the sale, and how the sale connects to other NCT and/or local parenting networks. This chapter responds to research aim 3:

3. **To evaluate the social role of the NCT nearly new sale.**

    a) **Do NCT nearly new sales promote and produce social inclusion and/or bonding and if so how?**

    b) **How do nearly new sales connect parents, if at all, to other NCT services and broader parental networks?**

Whether shopping plays a positive or negative role in Western societies has long been contested. Whilst some scholars position consumer culture as superficial and excessive, others believe consumption has a positive role in Western society, allowing for creative reworkings of the self (Johnston, Gregory et al. 2000). This chapter considers how the arrangement of the sale as a service organised through NCT facilitates social connectivity and information flows and ultimately argues that by subverting the conventional retail model, a unique experience is offered to customers. By drawing on these unique

experiences, I am able both to build on and to challenge the existing arguments shaping the consumption literature.

In chapter 4 I conclude that the NCT nearly new sale attracts a predominantly middle-class demographic. This is not for want of trying on the part of NCT local branches who open the sales to members and non-members alike, and advertise outside of internal NCT networks; yet it is a pattern of social life that like-minded people cluster together and frequent particular places (Trotter 1999; Bourdieu [1979] 2010). In the case of the NCT nearly new sales 93% of attendees in my survey sample were white and 65% were graduates. This compares to a national average of 86%[10] white ethnicity and 38% graduate attainment (ONS 2012; ONS 2013). Whilst non-white and less well-educated people are under-represented at the NCT sales, in terms of educational attainment (or what we might call institutionalised cultural capital) the sales are more diverse than the NCT antenatal classes which have been found to attract a graduate demographic of 87% (Newburn 2014).

Whilst much of the historically significant literature focuses on individualistic consumption practice (Baudrillard 1998) and consumption as a way of depicting distinction through class differentiation (Veblen [1899] 1994; Bourdieu [1979] 2010), contemporary debates have begun to investigate the ways in which consumption is used as a tool for socialisation (Miller 1987; Watson 2009) and collective action (Barnett, Clarke et al. 2011; Brown 2013). Drawing on the participant observation, interviews and customer survey conducted for this research, this chapter looks at the different ways in which the space of the nearly new sale is used by buyers, sellers and volunteers, but with an emphasis on buyers. Previous empirical studies concerned with sites of second-hand or alternative consumption have been keen to explore this social element of consumption practice. This is evident in Clarke's (1999; 2000) study on Tupperware parties, as well as her work on nearly new sales, in Watson's (2009) investigation of high street markets and in Gregson and Crewe's (1997; 2003) work on car-boot sales and charity shops.

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[10] According to the 2011 census, 86% of inhabitants in England and Wales are white, including 80.5% white British.

Alongside the consideration of the NCT sale as a social space, I also investigate the ways in which the sale is used as a space of learning, facilitated both through social interaction and through the material itself which, as discussed in the previous chapter, becomes a tool for social bonding. In addition to consumption debates outlined above, this theme draws on the literature concerned with neoliberal parenting and 'good mothering' which will be discussed in section 6.5 (Cairns, Johnston et al. 2013; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2014). In doing so it continues the theorisation outlined in the previous chapters that consumption is a part of the wider practice of mothering (/parenting) as well as expanding the notion of the sale to that of more than a site of material exchange. This responds in large part also to research aim 2, addressed in the previous chapter 'To identify the social, cultural and economic resources and opportunities gained by parental participation in the locale of the NCT nearly new sale'. Whilst chapter 5 focused on the material resources gained by participation in the sale, this chapter works to explore the social and cultural resources that may be gained through the process of socialisation and learning.

Finally, a key aim driving this project was to investigate the ways in which NCT nearly new sales link to other NCT services and broader parental networks if at all. This was based on the idea that local branches could utilise the sales (as a well-attended event) to publicise their other services and/or encourage NCT membership  (Todhunter 2011). My initial observations of the sales certainly found that leaflets for other NCT services were distributed at the nearly new sales; my aim therefore through further research to investigate the extent of which customers took note of these and whether attendance to the sale as a customer influenced later actions of the individual by introducing them to the NCT network.

Whilst the aim of this doctoral study was never to map or model social networks in a quantitative manner, as interesting as that may have been, I have continued to use the concept of the social network as an ethnographic tool for exploring the structures, relationships and information flows found within the locale of the nearly new sale. This relies on research which suggests most social or cultural groups interact within the context of events (Trotter 1999); in this case I outline the ways in which interactions at the sale are shaped by the situation of the sale itself, exploring how social networks are constituted

through space and time. This chapter begins by exploring the social action taking place at the sale including the notion of informal parenting support, before moving on to discuss more formalised parenting support offered through NCT and facilitated by the sale. Finally, I ask whether the NCT nearly new sale can and is used as a gateway to involve attendees further in the charity.

## 6.2 Networks and connectivity

The mixed method approach utilised for this study benefited all of the research aims but was particularly helpful in validating evidence of socialisation as a theme that could be measured quantitatively as well as observed. Indeed by attending the sales and conducting participant observation, alongside keeping field notes, I was able to validate the claims made by interviewees as well as contextualise the survey results.

The social network at the NCT sale could be described as a 'full relational social network' (Trotter 1999, p.6) – a naturally occurring social network that exists outside of researcher intervention that can be explored through observation and/or interviewing. A consideration of social networks within the context of the social role of the nearly new sales relies on the conviction that networks affect how individuals act. Social networks helped to explain why a particular 'middle-class' group structures attendance to the sales, but the concept can also help to explain the micro processes, looking at individual and group action within the locale of the sales. As social scientists from different disciplinary backgrounds have suggested, social networks produce bonding social capital and bridging social capital, the presence or lack of which help to explain social inequality related to themes of social welfare, economic prosperity and personal attainment (Clarke 2009). Much has been written about social capital in particular, and its role in contributing to social inequality (Furstenberg and Kaplan 2004; Halpern 2005), making it widely used as a conceptual tool across the social sciences. According to Mohan and Mohan (2002, p.192), social capital can be 'treated as a stock from which future benefits flow', not just for individuals but also for communities. Indeed a focus on 'trust, norms and networks' (Putnam 1993, p.163) has been argued as providing a basis for social integration and well-being. The role of social networks and social capital provide the conceptual framework to much of this

chapter in order to explore how attendees use the space other than solely as a site of material exchange.

It was through initial observation at the sales that I came to understand the myriad ways in which the sales were used as a social space, through interactions between buyers, sellers and volunteers, in the queue, in the retail space and in the cafe. A question was therefore built into the questionnaire as part of the survey (conducted at ten sales), to ask customers what they did at the sale they had just attended. I will start then, by outlining what customers claimed they did at the sales. It was important to encourage respondents to answer this question as they were leaving the sale to capture accurate action rather than intended action. The results of this are displayed in figure 6.1.

**What did you do at today's sale? (please tick all that apply)**
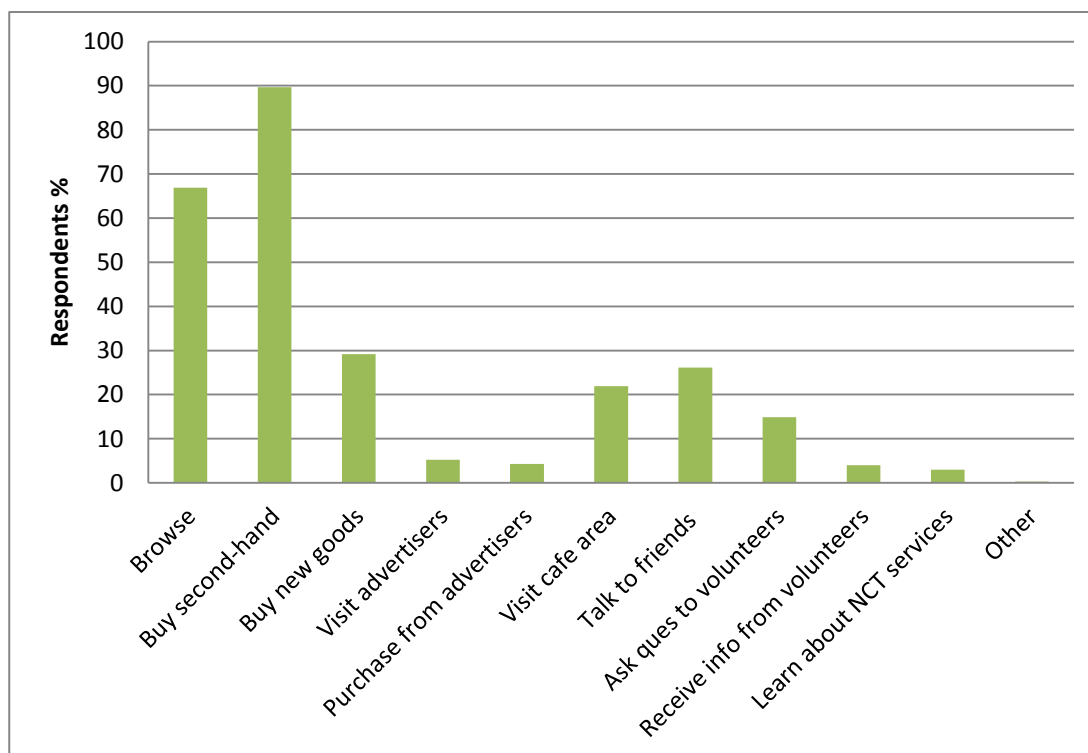


Figure 6.1: Activities/actions undertaken by customers, n.329 (Q.13)

In this question (figure 6.1) I am not so much interested in shopping practices (apart perhaps from the proportion of new/used goods purchased) but rather, in the other practices respondents claim to have participated in. In hindsight, the term 'browse' is quite ambiguous and I might have assumed that close to 100% would have browsed at the sale, or at least in the way I understand the

term (as perusing items available to buy). Some options were not applicable to respondents, a point made clear on the questionnaire itself, as some sales did not have cafe areas (one did not) or advertisers' stands. The fact that 5.2% visit the advertisers' stands and 4.3% purchase from them suggests a high conversion rate but we could assume that customers who walked past these stands and took a passing glance did not consider it a 'visit.'

22% of respondents surveyed visited the cafe area. Based on a 95% confidence interval, the true population proportion for attending the cafe lies between 17.5% and 26.5%. At some sales the cafe was a large area with seating (figure 6.2), sometimes in its own room, whilst at others it was just a stall selling drinks and homemade cake without space for seating (figure 6.3).



Figure 6.2: (Sale H) Tables set out for the cafe area situated after the tills.

Figure 6.3: (Sale D) Cafe area with no seating. The price list states that hot drinks cost 30p, juice 20p and a slice of cake 50p.

More than offer customers an opportunity to eat and drink, the cafe area was seen as a way to maximise revenue from the sale as all money raised went directly back to the NCT. Baking a cake provided another route for local mothers to participate in the organisation of the sale and 'do their bit'. Figure 6.2 and 6.3 highlight the two ways that branches offered refreshments, with the cafe at sale H prominently situated by the exit with seating, and the refreshments at sale D hidden in a side room with no cafe seating. A look at the survey results for each of these sales shows that 23.4% of customers surveyed at sale H visited the cafe, whilst only 17.2% visited the cafe at sale D. Whilst not a stark difference this suggests that customers are encouraged to sit, rest and indeed socialise (as found through my observations) as much as to simply eat and drink. The cafe area thus provides the opportunity for further socialisation and the ability to linger in the sale space, which in turn offers the branch an opportunity both to raise more funds (by selling refreshments) but also to provide more information about NCT services, for example by leaving leaflets on the tables. The cafe area is fundamental when discussing the social role of the nearly new sale, automatically changing the space from solely a site

of material consumption to a social space which offers the breathing room to converse with friends or new acquaintances.

Just over a quarter (26%) of customers at the sale claimed to speak to friends *other than* who they attended the sale with. Working with a confidence interval of 95% I can claim that 21.3% to 30.7% of all nearly new sale customers speak to friends at the sales other than those who they attend with. This seems a significant proportion if you consider the number of 'friends' or acquaintances you may bump into on a conventional visit to the shops. This clearly situates the sale within existing social networks, with many of the customers attending the sale belonging to the same local/parenting/NCT networks. By drawing on these established social networks, attendees are able to gain further resources by mobilising their social capital, including the ability to access information flowing through the network. I return to this point later in the chapter.

Finally, 15% claimed to ask the NCT volunteers questions whilst they were at the sale. Further details of this will be explored in section 6.6 however, it is necessary to point out that 60% of these questions were targeted towards practical information about the sale (e.g. the location of particular goods, the location of the toilets, etc). 3% of customers stated that they learnt about NCT services whilst at the sale, again this will be explored in more detail in the next section. With a confidence interval of 95% the true population proportion sits somewhere between 1.6% and 4.8%; a small but not necessarily insignificant proportion as it shows there is an opportunity for people to learn about NCT at some of the sales.

Figure 6.1 and the resulting discussion clearly suggest that the NCT sale is more than solely a site for material exchange; rather, it is also a site of social interaction and consumption of information.  The rest of this chapter will explore some of these actions and alternative forms of cultural consumption in more detail. I argue that the ability of an actor to use the sale as a site of socialisation and/or to acquire information relies largely on their accumulated levels of social and cultural capital. Drawing on the argument posited in chapter 4, that the NCT nearly new sale supplements or replaces traditional shared community provisioning in the context of the increasingly mobile life experiences of the middle-classes, the nearly new sale can be positioned within the context of the local community itself. It acts as a temporary hub for

existing local/parenting/NCT social networks and as such actors most embedded in these networks are able to gain the most from attendance (not least the opportunity to attend in the first place).

Whilst I have repeatedly made the point that the sales do not attract 'excluded consumers' (Williams and Windebank 2002) the concept of community provisioning is still relevant. Crow and Maclean (2004) argue that poverty necessitated close ties amongst the local community in previous generations, so that families could gain material assistance at times of hardship. The sales provide middle-class parents with the opportunity to mobilise their social capital in order to gain more from attending the NCT sales. This becomes more important as middle-class families move away from their hometown for education and work, and do not have the time (or desire) to integrate fully into their new communities. Families that succeed in mobilising social capital are the most successful, a trait we could argue for individual actors in any circumstance (Furstenberg and Kaplan 2004). With this is mind, table 6.1 outlines the three forms of capital as originally depicted by Bourdieu (1986)[11], highlighting the key empirical ways in which each form of capital is mobilised by participants to a greater or lesser extent within the locale of the sale.

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[11] Whilst many scholars have written about social capital, I use Pierre Bourdieu's famed three forms of capital as I feel they best represent the forms evident at the nearly new sale. Whilst not highlighted in this table, I also briefly refer to emotional and human capital later in this chapter.

| Social capital | Economic capital | Cultural capital |
|---|---|---|
| Belonging to a particular (local, middle-class) social network increases chance of attending sale.<br><br>Taking a 'team' of fellow shoppers increases chances of a successful shop.<br><br>Meeting friends and acquaintances at the sale can strengthen bonding ties.<br><br>Advice and information shared through talk.<br><br>Confidence to interact with peers at sale allows customers to gain further resources from the experience. | Need for economic capital in order to enter the sale (entry fee/donation £1-£2).<br><br>Economic outlay for NCT membership facilitates early entry to sale.<br><br>Need for economic capital in order to buy goods (credit cards often accepted at ticketed sales).<br><br>May need to spend money on transport to travel to sale (access to a car is beneficial). | Volunteers as part of organisational team are able to shop before the public.<br><br>NCT members gain early entrance to sale.<br><br>Learned knowledge of how the sales work through previous participation lead to developed consumption strategies.<br><br>Knowledge of objects for sale leads to best buys in relation to use and/or exchange value gained against economic outlay.<br><br>Need to read/speak English.<br><br>Local geographical knowledge required to know where sale is taking place. |

Table 6.1: Examples of the 3 forms of capital required to benefit most from participation in the sales.

Levels of social and cultural capital influence attendance to the sale, as we have already learnt that customers have a higher level of education (often referred to as human capital), on average, than the general population and that attendance is largely structured by social networks and a previous involvement with NCT. Weaknesses in any of the forms of capital may hinder participation in the sale, or exclude actors completely. For example, without the ability to read and understand the 'nearly new sale' advertisements (which are culturally embedded in a British way of consuming second-hand goods, not to mention the fact that NCT does not exist outside the UK) one does not have the cultural knowledge to participate. At the other end of the spectrum, an actor with high social and cultural capital, who includes the NCT as part of her social network, can easily find herself involved as a volunteer and then get first access to

goods as well as the opportunity to bond with fellow volunteers through the shared experience of organising the sale.

Of the thirty participant interviews conducted for this project, ten had volunteered at a sale (three were the sale coordinators) so the process of volunteering was discussed in these respective interviews. Each of the organisers said that they rarely had difficulty recruiting volunteers for the sales, although they did have more problems when it came to recruiting volunteers to take on the supervisory roles, which required more time commitment than simply volunteering for the day (e.g. vendor coordinator, seller coordinator, publicity coordinator). The use of volunteer labour is a key differentiator for 'alternative' retail spaces over conventional retail spaces (Maddrell and Horne 2002; Crewe, Gregson et al. 2003). Whilst this builds on a more informal retail environment, it certainly does not disadvantage customers, who instead gain from the knowledge and expertise of the volunteers, the vast majority of whom are mothers themselves (occasionally male volunteers were present but more often for the setting up/taking down of the sale rather than the actual sale time).

The single most important incentive to volunteer, as cited by the interviewees, was the desire to get first pick of the goods for sale. Indeed, volunteers would start to mentally shop whilst organising the goods. Whilst this was seen as the primary reason to volunteer, it became clear that volunteers gained further resources from participation including increased social and emotional wellbeing (Reay 2004; Silva 2007). This was expressed by Dawn, who was very involved with NCT having attended the antenatal classes before becoming involved with the nearly new sales:

> E: So would you say you enjoyed the process of volunteering?
>
> P: Oh absolutely. Made a lot of friends, and I think that's the social part in terms of when you're home alone with two children, you make friends with people as a volunteer that you wouldn't necessarily make. If you go to your local playgroup or whatever you actually make friends who are in different parts of the city and I think it's good. For me, being at home with two children although it was great, I needed something else to keep my brain going and keep me sane really and I think that was really, really helpful in lots of ways. I don't know if that's the same for everybody but

for me it really helped to have a focus other than the children and I couldn't afford to go back to work because if I worked all of my wages would go on childcare and more probably so it made no sense to do that but to do something which felt worthwhile was good for my sanity (Dawn: married, 40+, administrator).

Dawn describes how she gained a friendship group through volunteering which would become an important support network, but in addition, she gained personal satisfaction through taking on a volunteer role. This was a common theme, with interviewees using their role as a volunteer to fill the gap left behind after taking a career break. As stated earlier in the thesis two thirds of the interviewees were graduates (a smaller proportion than represented by the survey) and at least 60% were in intermediate or higher level wage work either currently, or in their most recent employment (with a further 23% positioning themselves as full time mother or similar with no reference to employment). The responsibility that comes with the role of volunteering then, is much relished by many volunteers who are used to the working environment but are currently confined to the home environment. Volunteering gives these mothers a chance to 'feel useful' in a different way. One of the coordinators explained how much she enjoyed answering emails, relating it back to the experiences she had in the corporate world. Another coordinator actually took on the role to increase her cultural capital, as she needed the experience to apply for a place to study for a bachelor's degree in early childhood studies. The emotional significance of participation at the sale, particularly as a volunteer, has an impact on personal wellbeing. As Dawn says, it keeps her 'sane'.

Figure 6.4: The inter-relations between the different roles at the sale.

Figure 6.4 shows the three roles filled by actors at the nearly new sale and aims to demonstrate the overlap between them. Linked to the mobilisation of social capital, the more roles employed by an actor the more they benefit from the sale. This is because they become a more central part of the network and benefit from access to information flowing through these multiple networks. In the centre of the diagram, an individual may be selling, buying and volunteering at the sale. Through taking on all of these roles, they are able to benefit from priority shopping, as well as ensuring their own goods for sale are marketed correctly. The pattern of information flow within networks is sometimes referred to as connectivity (Doreian 1974) and can be characterised by several factors including (Trotter 1999, p.31):

1. The amount of information that passes through a network

2. Identification of the people who are gatekeepers to the information flow

3. Measures of differential influence in the group

4. Measures of the probability that someone can or cannot receive information that is introduced into the network

The points listed by Trotter are reliant on the concepts of social and cultural capital and can be related back to my own way of measuring opportunity as highlighted in table 6.1. In this way we could conceptualise success in the field as the outcome of successfully mobilising connectivity; an actor is thus set to gain more from participation in the sale if they participate in (by give and take) the information flows.  Using Trotter's (1999) list, the 'gatekeepers' are the NCT volunteers or actors otherwise heavily involved in NCT for whom information flows easily from the volunteers. The probability that someone can or cannot receive information introduced into the network is structured largely by the social and cultural capital held by an actor (nearly new sale participant).

Led by the volunteers there is a sense of camaraderie at the sale; a shared purpose. This creates an affective atmosphere unique to the nearly new sale. This atmosphere can be summed up by Melissa: "It looks frantic but it looks a lot of fun." Melissa had yet to volunteer at the sales herself but based on her perceived idea of what the experience would be like, she expressed intent to volunteer at the next sale. This suggests that the atmosphere produced by the volunteers has an effect on the customers, who will now remain my focus for the rest of this chapter.

## 6.3  Socialisation and shopping for fun

Through the survey, I asked respondents to state who they had attended the sale with. The results are produced below in figure 6.5, bearing in mind respondents were asked to select all that applied. Figure 6.5 shows that 20% of respondents came to the sale alone. We previously learnt in figure 4.10, that when asked for their reasons for attending the sale 14% cited 'time to myself' as one of their three reasons (but not their primary reason). We might therefore assume that approximately three quarters of those attending the sale alone, do so intentionally.

32% of customers surveyed went to the sale with their partner and 26% with their children. Often, children had to come if both parents wished to attend; the 6% difference between the two therefore, is likely comprised of expectant parents (or grandparents completing the questionnaire thus calling the mother/father their child).

**Who did you attend today's sale with? (please select all that apply)**
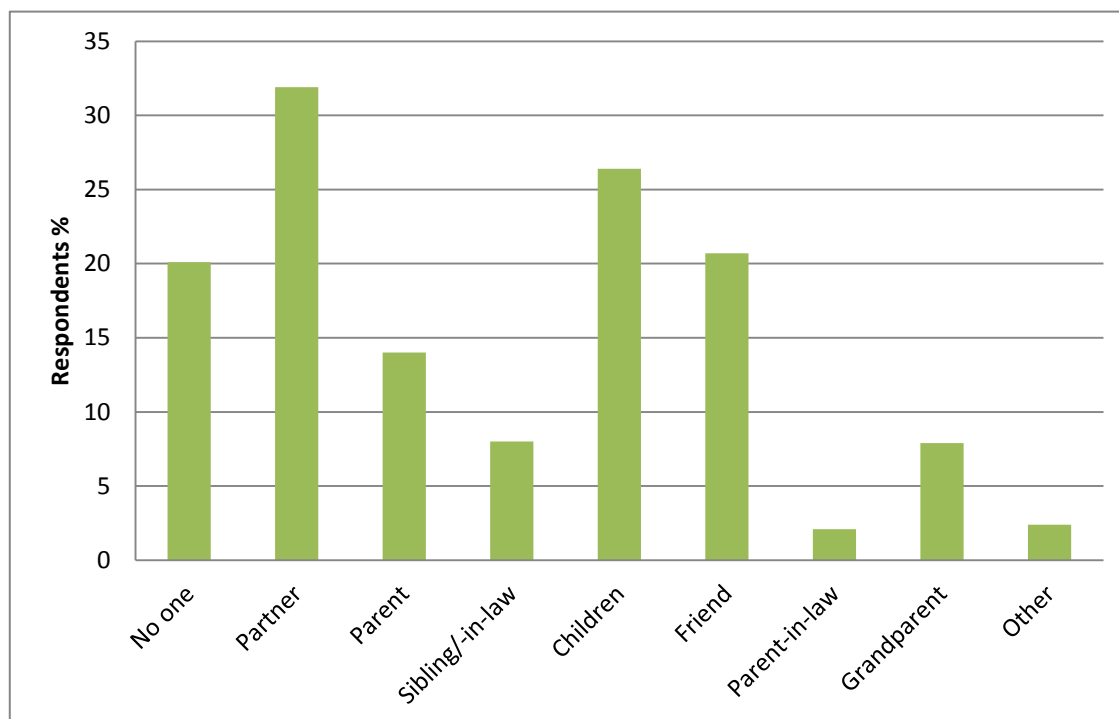


Figure 6.5: People accompanying customers to the sales, n.329 (Q.4)

21% came with a friend, an arrangement which will be demonstrated next through one of the interviews. This often allowed children to be left at home with the partner so mothers could shop with friends in a social way. 14% brought along their own parents. This notion of the grandparent attending the sale has been discussed before but it is unfortunate that none of my interviewees spoke about this.

Steph was one of the interviewees who discussed the way in which she uses the sale as an opportunity to have time away from the home. She always attends the nearly new sales with a friend, Angela, both of whom agree that they go for fun and for the satisfaction of getting a bargain rather than because they cannot afford to frequent conventional shops. The bi-annual trips to the nearly new sales have become something of a habit and as such they have their own familiar routine. Steph and Angela assist one another with their consumption practices, Angela says:

> P: We go round semi-separately and pick things up and then we have a
> sort at the end together and edit it down to what we actually need. We

make sure the other person ditches a few items, because sometimes you get a bit carried away on your own. If you have to justify it to someone else, you think yeah actually I don't need that (Angela: married, 30-34, teacher).

Angela's account of their shopping strategy suggests that as well as attending the sale as a pair to make it more enjoyable, they actually support one another through the process in order to ensure the trip is a success (i.e. they leave with appropriate items). The shopping comes first, before Steph and Angela go to the cafe. The practice of consuming goods is therefore important but this in itself becomes a collaborative practice. Through a shared understanding of one another's home life, they both benefit from each other's opinion. The fact that they split up in order to shop suggests that the trip is not just about a fun day out, consumption is still the underlying purpose and they each have their own family priorities to provide for in this limited time. There is both a collaborative element to their shared experience, as well as a competitive element, where they congratulate one another on their 'bargains'. The cafe then provides the space and time to bond away from the activity of the shopping environment and to prolong the social time they have together before returning to their respective homes.

E: Did you stay and use the cafe area?

P: Definitely, yeah because you're without your children so you stay out as long as you can.

E: Would you say the whole process is enjoyable?

P: Yeah, it's a morning out (Steph: married, 30-34, civil servant).

For Steph and her friend Angela, going to the sale is a social event and time to spend together away from their husbands and children. In this sense the sale becomes a social gathering and a form of escapism from the home but under the auspice of family duties. This mirrors the findings of Clarke (1999) when studying Tupperware parties; the role of domestic consumption gives women a way of justifying time spent with their friends where they can strengthen social ties and find social support. The nearly new sale therefore facilitates bonding between existing friendship ties by providing the space and time to engage with friends, even in the hectic shopping environment.

Friendship ties have long been considered important for social and emotional support, particularly in light of contemporary changing family models (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). I described before the way in which interviewees struggled to separate the nearly new sale from the wider remit of NCT through their narrative. That said, for customers the nearly new sale is not central to their social network but rather is one point in a wider network which may include other NCT social groups, local friendship groups or networks linked to local schools and clubs frequented by the actor's child/ren. Gina describes how she keeps in touch with the network of people she met at an NCT antenatal class:

> E: Are they still people you have contact with?
>
> P: Yes, the eight of us are still in touch. We have a Facebook group which is private to us so we can talk to each other. It's the eight families. The mums meet up every so often either as a big group or in smaller dribs and drabs, because I'm the only one who's taken extended leave from work, the others have gone back part time so not all the days off tally up but we do still meet up for either a soft play centre or swimming (Gina: co-habiting, 40+, civil servant).

Gina uses the online social network Facebook to manage the supportive social network that she made through NCT classes. She is able to call upon some of these parents for social and emotional support as individuals whilst others she only interacts with as part of a group. Earlier in the interview Gina had explained how she "went to the sale last year and bumped into a mum who I'd done a course with locally", thus indicating that the sale can provide a locale to reinforce existing social ties as one point within a wider social network.

Steph and Angela are just one example of the ways customers use the sale as a social activity and a form of escapism from domestic duties confined to the home (although they are still consuming for the family). So far, the socialisation I have described has been primarily reserved for bonding ties, with customers and volunteers from a similar social group (with a shared habitus) using the sale as a way of bonding. This might be through the shared experience of volunteering, or as a social activity for existing friendship ties. In addition, albeit to a lesser degree, the sale also facilitates the growth of weak or bridging ties which I will now discuss.

## 6.4 Bonding through the material

One of the aims driving this doctoral project was to investigate the process of socialisation at the sale. As an informal/alternative retail space, the nearly new sale offers a different environment to conventional retail spaces. This, I argue, encourages such socialisation. Sites of second-hand or informal retail have been found to bring together a wide range of people from different backgrounds because they lack the surveillance of formal retail sites and there are many different reasons attracting individuals to such sites (Maddrell and Horne 2002). In this regard, NCT sales are less diverse than some of these other sites because evidence collected suggests they are attended largely by a middle-class group. Being fairly inconspicuous in nature (hidden away from high streets and traditional shopping zones), and always with a 'door supervisor'[12], there are social, cultural and physical barriers to entry as already discussed. That said, once inside, the sale space does offer the opportunity for socialisation, a point which could be capitalised on by NCT as a policy. It can be stated that sale participants have a shared purpose, in that they are looking to consume second-hand baby goods, although their individual motivations for this may differ.

Sophie Watson (2006, p.viii) in her report '*Markets as Sites for Social Interaction*' concluded that for a market to function well as a social space various factors were significant. Essential attributes were as follows:

1) features to attract visitors to the site
2) opportunities to linger
3) good access to the site
4) an active and engaged community of traders

Other important, but less essential, attributes were as follows:

1) a well laid out site
2) connection with other retail outlets
3) effective management of the site

My findings for the NCT nearly new sale are much the same and in addition I argue that the informal nature of the sale encourages higher levels of

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[12] The volunteer (usually multiple volunteers) on the door, collecting the entry fee and handing out shopping bags.

socialisation than conventional retails sites. Actors need to be able to access the site and are encouraged by inexpensive second-hand baby goods (the feature attraction). Once there, the opportunity to linger in the cafe or areas such as the breastfeeding zone, offer a chance to bond with others. This is commonly confined to existing friends and family. An active and engaged community of volunteers create a positive affective atmosphere and encourage information flows which can potentially benefit customers.

Furthermore, socialisation is aided by a well-managed and organised sale, because as it is primarily a site of consumption, actors are less likely to socialise before their primary need is met (this was evident through interviewee comments that they were too busy shopping to speak to people that they knew until the end of the sale). What is missing from Watson's (2006) essential attributes is any reference to the material goods being consumed; the primary object attracting an individual to a market in the first place. In her work on farmers markets in particular, I would argue that the story attached to the provenance of farm foods plays a key role in the socialisation and interactions between actors (Weatherell, Tregear et al. 2003; Coles and Crang 2011). In the case of the nearly new sales, it is the intimacy invoked by the baby items for sale which create this similar level of interaction, as parents use the goods for sale to negotiate the complexities of parenting as a point of reference for discussion and to reflect on their own identity, values and practices. As Maggie describes:

> P: The lady who was serving us actually said that the rocking chair was hers and she was telling us how it worked, how to use it, so that was nice. It's very friendly really isn't it (Maggie: married, 30-34, full-time mother).

The rocking chair in this instance influenced the social interaction, initiating a discussion about 'how to use it', the implication being that the outcome of this conversation could be an influence on Maggie's parenting practice at home as she now has an idea of how another parent used the rocking chair. The suggestion for Maggie is that she appreciated this interaction, as she spoke about it in a positive light by using the word 'friendly'.

I have already described how the practice of consumption enables friends (like Steph and Angela) to bond, but the addition of the material as an object of interest, further facilitates bonding amongst actors who are not currently

friends. This is true in the case of the volunteers, for whom the shared experience of sorting and organising goods provides a basis for conversation as discussion shifts from what they are selling/hope to buy, to broader conversations about their family, home and career.

Earlier in this chapter, volunteer Dawn explained that 'you make friends with people as a volunteer that you wouldn't necessarily make'. This may be because individuals have a different background (perhaps of a different social class) and do not belong to the same social networks, or it may be that individuals do share a similar habitus, yet still belong to different social or local networks outside of the nearly new sale (Trotter 1999). Many interviewees described 'bumping into' friends or acquaintances at the sale, indeed we saw in figure 6.5 that 26% spoke to friends at the sale other than who they arrived with.  I asked Maggie, who said that she had been to three or four sales, if she ever bumped into anyone she knew:

> P: Yeah, yeah I have done actually which is nice and then they always say 'why are you buying that? You could have had my one!' so I wish I'd talked to them before.

Again Maggie appears to appreciate this social contact, saying that it is 'nice'. It is interesting that her primary recollection of these encounters is of bringing the conversation back to the material. This could suggest that with weaker social ties, the practice of consumption provides a bridging effect, facilitating conversation by providing a narrative focused on an object. Such conversations may be little more than small talk, but I often observed parents sharing anecdotes and swapping advice. One example of this was with reusable cloth nappies.

Considering the points raised in chapter 5 regarding maternal anxieties related to the intimacy of the body and heightened risk of contamination embedded in second-hand textiles, it was surprising to learn that at least five of the thirty mothers interviewed had used second-hand cloth nappies. This is antithetical to the literature on second-hand consumption related to risk and material intimacy (Brooks, Crewe et al. 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003) yet was evidenced through my interview, survey and observational data. Sue describes how she came to purchase second-hand nappies at the sale:

> E: Is there anything you wouldn't buy for them second-hand?
>
> P: Not really. I think I did the ultimate one which was buy second-hand reusable nappies which I didn't think I would do but to be honest it felt a bit better buying them at a nearly new sale, I wouldn't buy them off eBay. I actually met the person who was selling the nappies while I was there so it kind of encouraged me to do it but I think I wouldn't buy it from elsewhere (Sue: married, 30-34, full time mother).

Not only does this further support the claims raised in chapter 4, that the NCT nearly new sale is considered different and hence safer than other channels of second-hand retail, but by talking to the seller Sue was able to uncover the source of the nappies and learn from the seller's own experience. Sue went to the sale alone, and was already involved in the NCT network having attended the antenatal classes, therefore it is likely that as Sue belonged to this network already she felt comfortable in the space and able to engage in conversation with the seller (who was also a volunteer). In belonging to this shared network, information was able to flow from one actor to another - volunteer/seller to customer. In this instance the two were able to bond within this time and space, but we saw through volunteers and customers considered earlier in the chapter, that such bonds can grow if the actors continue to frequent the sale in the future.

The experience of the volunteers as parents themselves enables them to offer support to customers by sharing information. It is this social contact which provides a positive differentiator between the nearly new sales and conventional retail stores. Whilst sales assistants in a formal retail environment should be trained in the products they are selling, they may not be a parent and as such lack the experiential knowledge that so many customers at the nearly new sale are looking for. Furthermore, without the boundaries set by corporate training and surveillance in the formal retail sector, volunteer assistants (or sellers at table top sales) at the sales are free to express their own thoughts and dispense advice (despite NCT shying away from this term[13]).

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[13] NCT focus on information and support, and not prescribed advice. They "aim to give every parent the chance to make informed choices" (http://www.nct.org.uk/about-us-0; accessed 17/09/14)

Whilst products at the sale are regulated in some way by NCT (for quality, safety and to sit within NCT's organisational ethos), the volunteers are not given any training on how to interact with the customers at the sale. This allows for an informal and unregulated approach, more sincere perhaps than the customer experience in other settings. Of course, such sincerity may be compromised when the volunteer is also a seller, trying to rid of their own unwanted goods. Crewe et al. (2003) argue that it is the production of labour which acts as a key differentiator between conventional and alternative retail. I argue that not only is this very much true in the case of the nearly new sale, but it is this 'alternative' volunteer labour which is the unique selling point of the sales, and one of their strengths.

Counter to the benefits of bringing parents together at the sale and the social bonding which occurs, is the way in which such encounters encourage a critical reflection on the self. The conversational flows and intimate nature of the items available at the sale often lead to discussions focused on home life and parenting practice. Even without the presence of another actor, the objects themselves provide a lens through which to peek into another's family life. This was found by Mira, the Turkish mother I spoke to:

> P: I felt really bad because they are second-hand and they look like new, they were used by people, they weren't coming straight from the manufacturer and I was feeling bad what sort of babies do they have that they are keeping their items so good and well condition! [laughs] When Evie touches something, two days later it is old, old, old! Evie - see these babies there are out there! (Mira: married, 40+, associate lecturer).

Mira is bringing up two children in a very different environment to where she spent her own childhood. Away from family and childhood friends who are still in Turkey, we might suggest that Mira is more susceptible to social anxiety and social exclusion. That said, her tone of voice was light-hearted and playful, which suggests that whilst she took note of the differences between how her own children treat their toys and the norms of another family, she does not find this difference upsetting. Instead, it seems she was more interested in why these differences might occur.

Using the goods as a tool for comparison may elicit both social anxiety as well as a concealed form of social competition. Rather than the overt competition

between sale attendees as consumers looking for the best bargains, I suggest a quiet social competition between the attendees as mothers as they discuss their mothering practices. Such practice aligns with the literature on paranoid parenting which argues that social influences are key in shaping the experiences of mothering (Hoff, Laursen et al. 2002; Morgan 2011). Whilst existing literature on second-hand shopping refers to the embedded biography of an object and how this is considered by a consumer, the literature fails to consider how such biography encourages personal reflection on the self, other than as a threat to one's carefully constructed identity. Rather, the literature focuses on how an actor mobilises the symbolic value of goods in order to construct personal identity (e.g. vintage clothing or branded goods) instead of questioning the ways in which consumption of second-hand goods threatens the personalised norms of a particular practice, in this case mothering. We saw this in chapter 5 when I discussed the covert practices of washing and cleaning used goods and the anxiety caused by asking respondents to reflect on their own divestment practices. This particular form of personal reflection is less likely to present itself in conventional retail sites where objects are rarely considered for their past life.

This chapter to date has described the variety of ways in which the sale is used as a social space. The majority of customers attend the sale with somebody else, and engaging in conversation with friends and acquaintances once inside the sale is not uncommon. Particularly for actors heavily integrated into local parenting/NCT social networks, the sale becomes one point in their wider social network, largely shaped by their duties as a parent.  The NCT sales provide the space for interaction and cooperation. Whilst I argue that bonds are strengthened most keenly through existing social ties, there is potential for bridging social capital to be developed within the locale of the sale. At present however, the locale of the social is shaped largely by a middle-class group of parents with relatively high levels of capital who benefit most from the ability to mobilise said capital. As an informal environment, structured by a shared purpose and common experience as a parent, opportunities for further socialisation could be extended from the sale and built into wider local parenting networks, benefiting both individuals and communities within the regions NCT are present.

In addition to the informal support observed at the nearly new sale as a site to strengthen existing social ties and facilitate bridging ties through the material, this study also aimed to explore the way in which NCT institutionalise the space, using it as an opportunity to offer formalised parenting support. The next part of this chapter explores the presence of NCT at the sales, as an organisation set up to serve parents; positioning this within the politics of parenting literature. In this section I consider the way in which NCT currently use the locale of the sale to further their work in supporting parents, with the view that participation in the sale has the potential to lead to participation in further NCT activities and networks.

## 6.5 Moving on from consumption: the politics of parenting support

Recent UK policy has positioned parents as a group in need of education and support by so-called 'experts' (Edwards and Gillies 2004). Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) position this as a form of neoliberal educational restructuring, whereby middle-class ideals are imposed upon working-class parents as part of the professionalisation of parenting. According to this literature institutionalised interventions such as parenting classes aim to create normalised order, drawing on the belief that parenting practice plays a fundamental role in the cause and potential remediation of wider social ills. Such intent to shape parenting practice does not sit comfortably with the widely held sociological view that parenting is largely shaped by everyday experience, closely linked to social positioning and the available resources therein (Edwards and Gillies 2004; Edwards and Gillies 2005). NCT work to support all parents and whilst their institutional approach may be to remain non-judgemental, pro-information rather than pro-'advice', in practice a middle-class ethos of natural childbirth and natural parenting remains embedded within much of their outreach work (Lewis 2010).

I described in chapter 4 the ways in which social structures, the sociological approach of habitus, as well as local geography, affect attendance to the NCT nearly new sales. I have also described in chapter 5 the norms and social conventions ascribed to middle-class parents as evident in their material consumption practices (e.g. safety concerns). The NCT, along with the likes of

Sure Start[14] and the Parents Plus Programmes work to support parents, each with their own institutional ideal. Although many of the mothers included in this study spoke very highly of the support they had received through NCT, others were less positive. Gina spoke to me about her experience of NCT antenatal classes with great passion:

> P: Now maybe it was a feeling I had about my NCT teacher, she was very headstrong on natural birth. You'll have a natural birth, you'll have a natural birth, and in the back of my mind was I'm over forty, I'm over forty, I'm having an induction. If I'd said the word induction in the classroom I think she would have had a hissy fit about it, I avoided it at all costs (Gina: co-habiting, 40+, civil servant).

It is interesting that Gina uses the term 'classroom', a clear indicator of a pedagogical approach which in this case leaves Gina feeling inferior and uncomfortable (and on later reflection angry). Whilst the primary role of the nearly new sale is to provide an opportunity for parents to exchange second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment, the sale also provides an opportunity to support parents in other ways as part of NCT's service offering as a parenting charity. My observations of NCT sales across the UK found that branches utilised this to varying degrees.

Through empirical work investigating parenting support in the UK, Edwards and Gillies (2004) found that 50% of parents believed that parents generally received less help and support from their families than they did in the past. When class variables were compared however, 49% of the working class parents believed this to be the case, whilst 57% of the middle-class believed that parents now receive less support from family. So whilst it is the working class and ethnic minority groups who are singled out for needing interventionist parenting education, it would seem that it is the middle-class who feel that they receive less support from their family and thus still require

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[14] Sure Start centres are Government-funded community centres available across the UK. The centres are open to all parents, carers and children and many of the services are free, offering help and advice on child and family health, parenting, money, training and employment.

support from elsewhere. This builds a strong case for NCT, who as I have already described, predominantly service the middle-classes. The issues then are twofold; how are middle-class parents currently accessing parenting support through the nearly new sales and are there any opportunities for working-class parents to access the same support?

Since the project outset I have been interested in exploring how the nearly new sales relate to wider NCT services, and what resources attendees may gain other than material resources. With this in mind through the interviews and survey I aimed to better understand the information flows between parents and NCT within the locale of the sale. In figure 6.1 I visually described the results of survey question 13 'What did you do at today's sale?' Question 14 was intended to lead on from 13, and asked 'If you received information from NCT volunteers today, what was that information?' yet the results are inconsistent as only 4% in question 13 stated that they had received information from NCT volunteers yet 25% went on to answer question 14 which aimed to find out the details of that advice. The results can be found in figure 6.6.

In hindsight the questionnaire could have been structured in a different way in order to gain the information required. 'Practical information about the sale' could be considered for all manner of exchanges such as asking for the location of the toilets or asking when the sale finishes. Whilst any form of communication, however trivial, could be rendered important, I was more concerned with the wider support parents may have received.

**If you received information from NCT volunteers today, what was that information? (please select all that apply)**
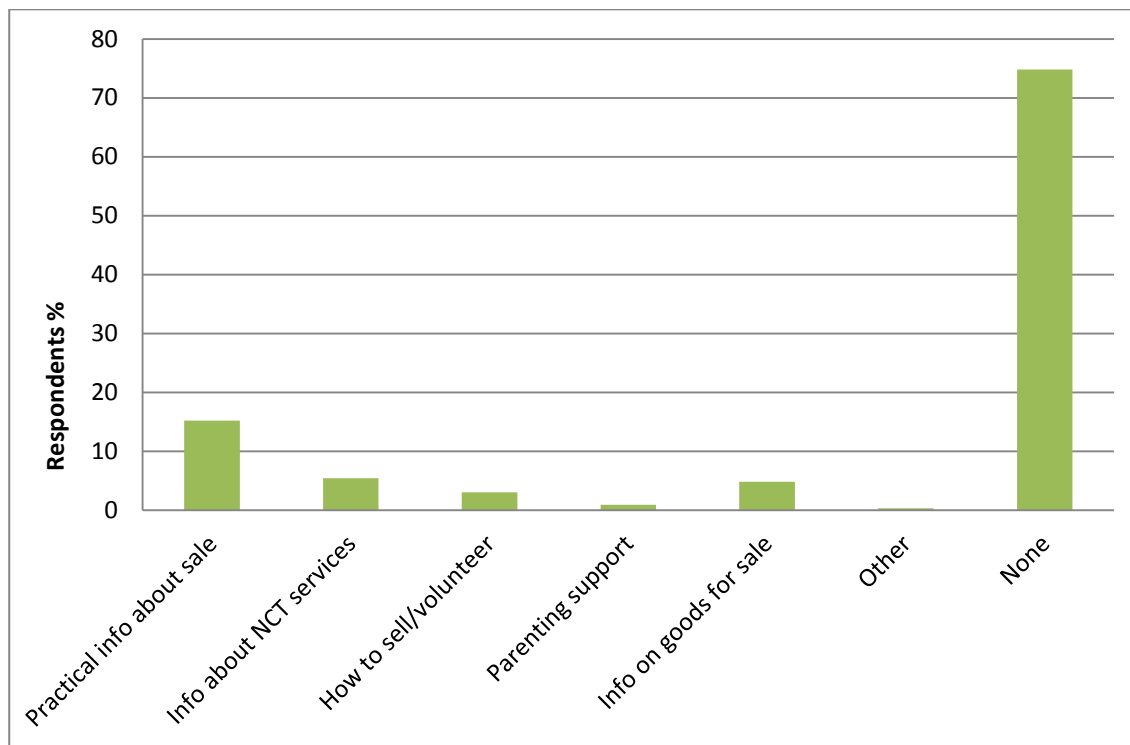


Figure 6.6: forms of information recieved by customers from volunteers, n.329 (Q.14).

5% stated that they learnt about NCT services; the wording of the question suggests that this information was received directly from volunteers, yet it may have been supplemented with leaflets and other literature for the parent to take away. 3% learnt how to sell or volunteer at the sale. This had come to light through the interview process as well as observation as individuals attended the sale for research purposes if preparing to sell their own goods. 0.9% (just 3 people) said that they received parenting support at the sale. Further investigation of the data shows that two of these had attended the same sale.

5% received information about the goods for sale, but from this data we do not know whether the volunteers providing this information were also the sellers of the goods described. The quantitative results provide evidence for the assertion that although the nearly new sale is primarily a site of consumption; participants do gain further resources from attendance including parenting support. Figure 6.6 shows that whilst the sale can facilitate formal parental support (institutionalised as opposed to peer group) it is not common and

therefore offers scope for volunteers to capitalise on at their sales. An example of what I deem to be a successful approach to offering parental support in the context of the NCT sale is to follow.

Branch C, the third study site for the survey, was situated in the South East of England. It is a large branch that runs two nearly new sales a year and has a thriving social scene with six different coffee morning groups. The sale I attended in the autumn of 2013 was held in an independent school. It was a table-top sale with a large seated cafe area and a prominent table of NCT literature to advertise local parenting events and national NCT services. Whilst I saw this sale as to be successful in offering a holistic service for shopping, social interaction and the opportunity to learn about NCT services, none of the three customers who stated that they received support from volunteers at the sale stemmed from this branch. However my observations of the attendees would suggest that they did so I feel that it is worth discussing.

Figure 6.7 shows the sign fixed to the entry point of the sale 'Chat to our breastfeeding counsellor today'. In a corner of the school hall where the sale was taking place, an area had been set up with chairs and cushions and NCT literature. It was 'marketed' as a quiet place for mothers to sit and breastfeed their baby but supervising the space was the branch's breastfeeding counsellor. The use of the linguistic imperative 'Chat to' is itself noteworthy as it grants authority to the NCT branch who are, in effect, telling attendees what to do. My survey table was set up just in front of this area, so I could watch the comings and goings of mothers who were pleased to use the space and engage in conversation with the breastfeeding counsellor (Waight 2013).

Figure 6.7: Display materials at the sale highlight services of breastfeeding counsellor.

Having this space gave mothers a practical reason to sit down and engage with the NCT, either through the materials strategically left on the table or by speaking to the breastfeeding counsellor. This space was protected from an otherwise hectic shopping environment and gave mothers respite, in turn giving them the opportunity to engage with another aspect of the service offered by the sale – parenting support. Breastfeeding support is one of NCT's key services, administrated via a support helpline as well as trained counsellors within local branches. Alongside the desire to help new mothers however, is the rhetoric of NCT's institutional ideal. The fact that feeding bottles are not

allowed to be sold at NCT sales because such practice conflicts with WHO advice about the health benefits of breastfeeding (Horta and Victoria 2013), demonstrates the subtle pedagogical devices used by NCT to encourage mothers towards this ideal. The chance to chat to a breastfeeding counsellor could be deemed another such device.

As well as offering immediate parenting support in the locale of the sale, there are also opportunities for NCT to reach out to parents attending the sale and encourage them to engage with other NCT services, or indeed join as a member. The interview data suggested that nearly new sale customers were often already involved in NCT before they attended the sale, yet I suspected that a counter flow could be found. Question 7 on the questionnaire asked 'Since attending NCT nearly new sales, have you done any of the following for the first time?' with the results displayed in figure 6.8. Respondents for whom it was their first visit to an NCT nearly new sale were omitted.

This question is limited in its reliance on the memory of the respondent however it does provide evidence that actors can and do become involved in other areas of NCT after attending the sale. 11.1% stated that they have become an NCT member and with a 95% confidence interval I can state that between 6.9% and 15.3% of sale attendees later pay for NCT membership having not been a member prior to the sale. This correlates with the interview findings which found evidence of customers paying to become NCT members so that they could gain early entry to the sale. 13.9% had sold items at the sale; with a 95% confidence interval I can state that the true convergence rate from buyer to seller therefore lies between 9.3% and 18.5%. This relates back to claims in chapter 4 which argued that participants may feel the desire or obligation to feed second-hand goods back into the nearly new sale economy either to raise money or in aid of reciprocity.

**Since attending NCT nearly new sales, have you done any of the following for the first time?**
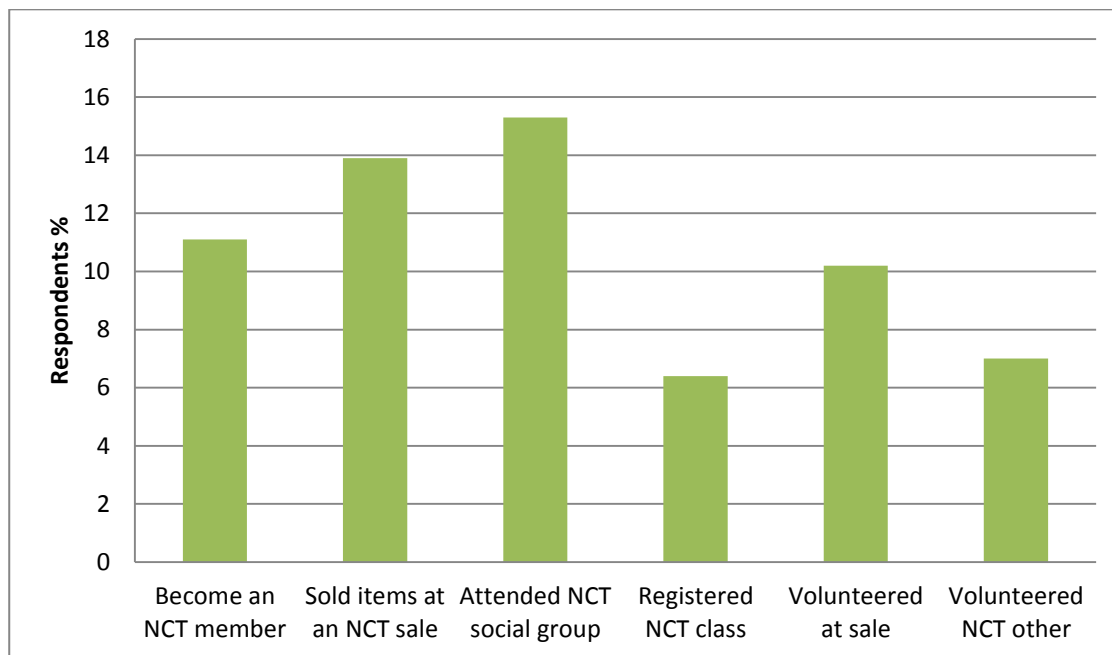


Figure 6.8: Actions claimed to be taken by customers since attending their first sale, n.216 (to omit first-time attendees) (Q.7)

15.3% of those surveyed state that they had attended an NCT social group (e.g. coffee morning or parent social). In addition 6.4% had registered for a class, bearing in mind that the antenatal classes are a key access point for the charity so many attendees may have already participated in those (35% answered earlier that they had previously attended an NCT class, meaning that the majority had actually not). 10.2% had volunteered at a nearly new sale and 7% had volunteered in another capacity in the NCT. Volunteering shows a particularly active involvement in the charity and the local NCT branch network.

Despite concerns that participants may not be able to identify the exact cause of their actions, the questionnaire went on to ask respondents 'Was this a direct result of attending a nearly new sale?' The decision to include this question relies on the understanding that actors do have the ability to be reflective and hence it was a worthy aim to explore this. The findings are displayed in figure 6.6 and are based on the 84 respondents who claimed to have participated in one or more of the actions listed in question 7.

**Was this a direct result of attending a nearly new sale?**
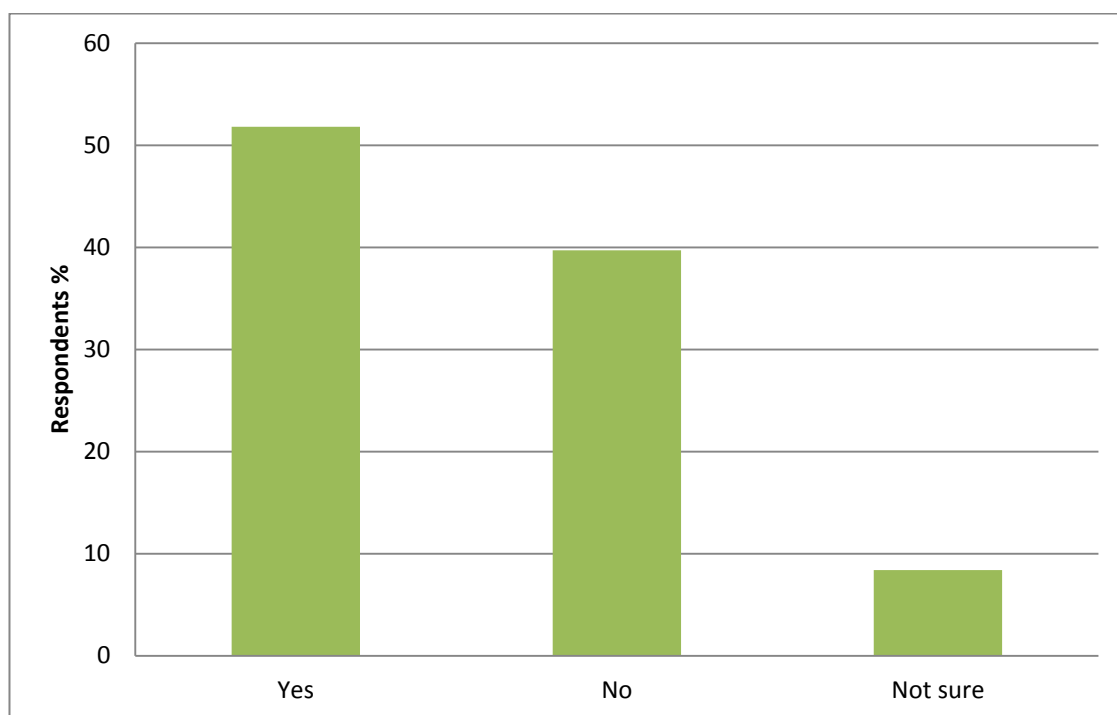


Figure 6.9: Significance of attending a sale for participation in future NCT activities, n.83 (Q.8)

Figure 6.9 suggests that more than half of respondents believed attendance to an NCT nearly new sale directly influenced their participation in other NCT activities or membership. Whilst I have outlined the limitation to this claim, it is clear that attendance to the sales can and has caused particular behaviour in attendees, including participation in social groups, volunteering or selling. That said, I was not readily able to find this element of causation in my interviews. All of the interviewees were either already involved in the NCT before attending their first sale, or else they were not interested in becoming further involved. This disinterest was often in spite of the fact that they held the cultural and social capital deemed necessary to easily access NCT's services. One mother, Kay, did show interest in attending the baby and toddler group offered by her local branch. She had one child but did not attend the NCT antenatal classes nor had been otherwise involved in the charity:

> E: Would you think in the future about joining any NCT groups?

> P: When I was at the sale they did give me a leaflet about a baby and toddler group that I was thinking about going to. It's on Friday mornings

> in the community centre, so I'm thinking about going to them when my baby's a bit older, because it's hard to get out for a certain time [in the morning] at the moment (Kay: co-habiting, 20-25, administrator).

Whilst there are clear limitations in questioning interviewees about their future intentions, Kay's comment does show that she took a leaflet home with her and digested the information as she is able to relay where and when the group meets. Kay is a younger mother, and part of the group NCT are keen to engage with further. Kay's story suggests that NCT could utilise the sales to diversify their social reach, yet whether she acts on this intention or not I cannot know without a follow-up interview. The social patterns identified in this study may suggest that Kay's lower levels of human/cultural capital hinder her from further involvement. Ultimately, whether she attends the baby and toddler group depends on her personal disposition, whether she feels comfortable attending the group and whether she feels the need or desire to widen her support network (which will require an input of time and labour).

At the very least information has been passed on from the sale volunteers to Kay through the locale of the sale. Kay has become part of this informed network. Figure 6.5 showed that 10% of the survey respondents had followed up such intentions and later attended an NCT social group. Further analysis of this data found that 66% of those who had attended a social group since first attending a sale were graduates. This correlates with the overall graduate attainment level of the survey respondents which settled at 64.8%, therefore, we can suggest that human capital held by a sale participant does not exert an influence on the ability to participate in local NCT social events once an actor has entered the sale (which I have strived to represent as a socially structured system). Whilst the numbers are small compared with the total nearly new sale customer population, this finding does suggest that once an actor arrives at the sale, human capital (otherwise known as institutionalised cultural capital) is not a barrier to further involvement. The term human capital is used purposefully rather than cultural capital, as I previously argued that cultural capital does play a role in an actor's success in the field. Institutionalised cultural capital is perhaps less significant if one is able to mobilise social capital. The next section concludes on this point.

## 6.6 Concluding remarks

This chapter aimed to evaluate the social role of NCT nearly new sales, based on the belief that retail sites have more to offer customers than solely material provisioning. Chapter 4 previously showed that sale attendance is structured in large part by social networks, with this in mind chapter 6 considered the sale to be one point within wider social networks.

Trotter (1999, p.32) states:

> The roles people play and the positions they hold in a network affect how communication flows in a network, because people who are more central to a network tend to have control over information.

Whether or not an actor benefits from the social resources available at the sale depends on her (/his) position in the network. As shown earlier, a sale participant may be a buyer and/or seller and/or volunteer. By taking on all three roles simultaneously, they instantly have access to three major communication flows and can use this to their advantage to get the best out of the sale, economically, socially and culturally. This model of connectivity makes the NCT nearly new sale unique as a site of consumption, so whilst in theory an actor needs little economic capital to participate, success in the field relies more on social and cultural capital.

The literature review found that consumption can be regarded as either damaging to people and planet (excessive, immoral and magnifier of inequality) or as a beneficial social tool for constructing identities and displaying acts of care. The NCT nearly new sales demonstrate a complex mix of the two, showing both social competition and collaboration. It is the informal, unconventional nature of the sale as a site of second-hand consumption, which drives both of these patterns. I argue, that what may appear to be a socially cohesive situation on the surface, is often motivated by a potentially competitive drive – a volunteer assisting a customer is ultimately quite keen to get rid of her own used goods that she has put into the sale to sell.  This again, is the result of the overlapping roles that so many of the parents partake in at any one sale.

Whilst such a reliance on social and cultural capital leads to social segregation, this is not particularly visible on the surface. New customers who may have spent up to an hour queuing outside the sale before it opened will not know that the volunteers have been busy shopping for hours. Inside the sale, whilst interviewees described the atmosphere to be a 'bunfight' I certainly never witnessed anything akin to conspicuous competition unless it came with an air of humour. The interviews themselves however, were littered with references of a competitive nature.

The prevailing ability of the sales to facilitate information flows is their strength. Such connectivity is encouraged by the very thing that Crewe and Gregson (2003) consider to be a fundamental feature of alternative retail spaces, volunteer labour. The NCT sale cannot provide a guarantee to customers that any particular item will be available at any one sale, but the environment certainly does have more to offer customers in terms of informal support and information flows. By drawing on the shared experiences of parenting (and indeed, of a middle-class lifestyle) the informal nature of the nearly new sale is able to offer access to more information, I would argue, than a conventional high street shop.

In this sense, NCT are able to offer support to parents and parents who attend are able to take more away with them than solely material goods. This is not so much 'official' support from NCT but more often the informal support offered by social interactions and a shared experience of so many of those attending the sale. Alongside this informal parenting support offered through peers, is the institutionalised parenting support offered by NCT. As the previous quote from Trotter alludes to, the people who are central to a network have the power to control flows of information. In this regard, the NCT volunteers have the power to control flows of information regarding formalised parenting support. NCT branches could do more to use the sales as a gateway to encourage a wider network of parents into other NCT services or membership.

I conclude this chapter by arguing that it is the people participating in the NCT nearly new sales, as much as the goods for sale, which makes it a diverse/alternative/unconventional form of retail. The reliance on volunteer labour means that no two sales are organised or executed in the same way and the retail space itself (with the cafe for example) encourages socialisation. Such

bonding is also facilitated by the goods for sale, as parents use the second-hand baby items to negotiate the complexities of parenting as a point of reference for discussion and to reflect on their own identity, values and practices.

# 7 Concluding Discussion

## 7.1 Introduction

This project was funded by the RIBEN[15] scheme, an ESRC initiative with the aim of bringing together academia and the retail industry in order to further knowledge. In this case the retail partner was a charity, the project comprising an exploration of NCT nearly new sales. Such investigation provided an empirical case to explore a range of themes relevant to furthering knowledge in human geography, namely consumption and parenting, drawing on and engaging with key debates in social theory. In addition, the research questions and methodology were developed, in part, to inform NCT's organisational strategy as they strive to provide support for new and expectant parents. The project should therefore be viewed within this dual framework, both as a piece of academic work and as a project with tangible benefit outside academia. It is important to note that the academic integrity of the project was not threatened by this relationship, with a separate project report being provided to NCT for their internal intelligence (details provided at the end of this chapter).

As the final chapter of the thesis this conclusion aims to draw together chapters 4, 5 and 6 by referring back to the research aims and key literature. Firstly I remind the reader of the context driving the project and the three research aims. This leads to a discussion of findings, briefly summarising the conclusions of each chapter and responding directly to the research aims outlined. From here, the key themes of thrift, social class and co-consumption are further discussed. I then explain how these findings contribute to and challenge existing knowledge in academic literature before outlining the limitations to this research and suggesting directions for further study.

The context for this research project was threefold:

1. There was a gap in the literature on motherly co-consumption practice, particularly in regards to second-hand and informal sites of retail.

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[15] Retail Industry Business Engagement Network established by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

2. As part of NCT's 2010-2020 strategy the charity aims to benefit 20 million parents by 2020. The nearly new sales are a key service offered to parents by the charity and therefore could play a strategic role in this aim.

3. Public awareness of environmental sustainability along with the impact of the 2008 economic recession may have influenced second-hand consumption practices. According to Mintel (2012) one in five parents bought more second-hand goods following the economic crisis in order to save money.

Three years after the project started these points are still applicable. The years since the recent recession have been turbulent for the UK economy, and despite seeing a recovery in GDP in 2014, the cost of living remains high as wages have failed to keep up with inflation. This impacts families at all income levels, from the 'squeezed middle-class' to the estimated 3.5 million children currently living in poverty (Dugan and Owen 2014). This research on nearly new sales is therefore situated within wider societal trends and reflects a timely need for further research in these areas despite the fact that 'excluded consumers' were generally not found to be currently accessing the sales.

There has been a growth in publications on mothering and consumption since the onset of the project, a fundamental addition to this being Cook's (2013) guest-edited special issue in the *Journal of Consumer Culture* 'Producing Motherhoods In/Through Consumption' and more recently the special issue 'New Parents and Children: Consumer Culture' in *Young Consumers* (2014, 15:3). This literature only works to reinforce the need for further engagement with mothers as consumers, arguing that consumption is fundamental in the transition to motherhood (/parenthood) as a way in which anxieties, norms, expectations and responsibilities are reproduced, reflected upon and enacted within a wider social framework (Cairns, Johnston et al. 2013; Theodorou and Spyrou 2013). This thesis contributes to this newly emergent scholarship using the NCT nearly new sale as a way of accessing and investigating mothers and their everyday consumption practices.

I take advantage of the progress afforded by the cultural and material turn (Coole and Frost 2010; Roseneil, Frosh et al. 2012) to conduct retail/consumption based research with the cultural significance of material

things at its centre. This allows for a rich and intimate investigation of motherly co-consumption practice by looking at the everyday and mundane rituals of provisioning and care as imperative to social theory debates. Finally this research added to the body of work on informal/second-hand retail sites, engaging with existing literature which suggests consumption has a social role and retail sites themselves can be a place of socialisation (Arnold and Reynolds 2003; Watson 2009). The three research aims were as follows:

1. To identify the social structures and justifications leading to parental participation in NCT nearly new sales.
2. To identify the social, cultural and economic resources and opportunities gained by parental participation in the locale of the NCT nearly new sale.
3. To evaluate the social role of the NCT nearly new sale.

I will now go on to discuss these aims in light of the research findings.

## 7.2  Summary of findings

The three research aims were discussed chronologically in chapters 4 to 6, beginning with an exploration of who attends the sales before discussing what attendees buy there, other resources they may acquire by participation and how the space is used as a locale for socialisation and learning.

In chapter 4 I argue that NCT nearly new sales are socially situated and provide an empirical case to the claim that consumption is shaped by class (Bourdieu [1979] 2010). In this way, class and taste cultivate the relative success of the sales, influencing the choice of stock for sale and the money fundraised.  Class was a consistent theme throughout the study with NCT commonly referenced as a 'middle-class' organisation attracting middle-class service users. This, I found, both aided and limited the nearly new sales in regards to social reach and fundraising ability. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu ([1979] 2010) and Warde (1994) I proposed that habitus and the institutional ethos of NCT itself allow customers to distinguish the NCT nearly new sale from alternative forms of second-hand retail by fostering a sense of belonging and trust in order to alleviate consumer anxiety. This benefits the typical middle-class consumer

attending but may alienate those outside NCT networks. The moral dilemma of this is discussed later.

Whilst cost-saving was found to be the overarching reason customers cited for participation in the sale (in-line with existing literature (Chattoe 2000; Guiot and Roux 2010) the rationale behind this was multifaceted and at some points contradictory. For example, often the sales were found to supplement rather than replace alternative channels of consumption enabling parents to buy extra goods and thus spend more money than they needed to in necessity terms. This can be situated within the contemporary consumer culture as outlined in the literature review chapter to this thesis whereby 'wants' are more prevalent than 'needs', at least in regards to the middle-class group found to be more widely accessing the sales than the poorer, working class (whose behaviour is more likely shaped by need).

In chapter 5 I outlined the evidence concerned with consumer behaviour at the sales; what individuals buy, what they intend to do with what they have purchased and how they negotiate risks and social norms through their consumption practices. This focused on the everyday nature of consumption and the idea that consumption is a consequence of social practice (Warde 2005). I looked at the mutually reinforcing relationship of the human to non-human focusing on two themes evident through the nearly new sales, namely the material as a tool for socialisation and learning and as an aid to protect and nurture the child. This chapter concluded that whilst strong themes could be found in the data, consumption-divestment practices could not be generalised as they varied across the participants. The most normalised practices however, relate to safety (actual) and safety governance with mothers keen to show an awareness and obedience of recognised health and safety advice.

To consider class and taste I found it helpful to draw on the work of Bourdieu ([1979] 2010; 1986) who also provided a theoretical framework for empirical analysis. Bourdieu argues that the core mechanism governing the process of consumption is struggles over class/distinction, and also relays the claim that geographical space is never socially neutral; both points being relatable to the phenomenon of NCT nearly new sales.  This helped to explain the behaviour of mothers at the sale, for whom taste and social acceptance was central to

consumption decisions (i.e. in leading them to the sale in the first place).  In addition, Veblen's ([1899] 1994) concept of conspicuous consumption encouraged an awareness of conspicuous co-consumption.

Although mothers typically positioned branded/designer goods as better quality and hence better value for money than supermarket brands, for example, I found it problematic to believe that this was their sole motivation for buying branded goods. Whilst the site of the sale could be regarded as an inconspicuous consumption space (Jayne 2006) as soon as goods left the sale they had the potential to be worn/used in public spaces. Existing literature has argued that parents conspicuously consume through their children, as ideal carriers of symbolic status (Thomsen and Sorensen 2006; Clarke 2007; Martens 2010) therefore a question mark remains over whether to believe what mothers said in the interviews, or whether to follow social patterns evident in the literature. There was a sense, indeed sometimes a direct response, from the more confident parents that they did not need to draw on the semiotic power of things to construct a particular motherly image.

Status also came via the notion of being a savvy shopper. The nearly new sales, being both affordable and efficient, were regarded as something of an exclusive space offering goods and other resources to those in the know, and predominately from middle-class circles. In this manner, second-hand consumption was not something to be ashamed of but seen as the common sense route of acquiring (and disposing of) baby goods which are used for such a short space of time. This is in contrast to Williams and Windebank's (2002) study of the 'excluded consumer', a term drawn heavily on in this thesis.  The 'excluded consumer' would much prefer to buy new goods from conventional retail outlets but exclusion from these consumption channels leads to a general feeling of being failed by society. This thesis contributes to the understanding of middle-class second-hand consumers (rather than 'vintage' consumers), but I feel there is a need for further exploration as sustainability and thrift continue to move into everyday discourse through lifestyle changes relative to shifting social norms.

Chapter 6 responded both to research aim 2 and 3 to explore the additional resources mobilised and gained by actors in the locale of the sale, by arguing for the sale as a site of socialisation and learning. This chapter concludes that

the organisation of the sale as an NCT service, structured by existing social networks, facilitates social connectivity and information flows and ultimately argues that by subverting the conventional retail model, a unique experience is offered to customers. The environment is therefore both competitive and collaborative; it favours those with higher social and cultural capital but does not physically exclude any individuals from participating. The social role of the sales is therefore complex and contributes to the understanding that social networks affect how individuals act.

For Miller (2001), household objects can embody aspects of family life, exercising agency to become part of social interaction. I found this at the nearly new sales, where goods for sale provided a bridging or bonding tool for socialisation. Without the object, many of the interactions observed and described through interviews would not have occurred. Whilst a particular toy/pushchair/jumper starts as the object of this exchange, it is simultaneously the subject as it has its own biography and stories to tell. Similarly, when mothers clean newly-acquired second-hand goods, the items become part of the mother's practice of care. The object too, just like the parents, is responsible for keeping the child safe from harm. This theme offers an exciting opportunity to consider through further ethnographic investigation, the ways in which objects and practices co-evolve through the stages/transitions of mothering, including that of the expectant mother. An outcome of this project, and in addition to the existing literature, was that some parents saw the fact that particular goods had been used by another family as a recommendation. The 'used' quality of the item then was seen as a benefit.

In arguing that social networks are integral to the working of the nearly new sales I also propose that NCT as an organisation is central to the outcome. The understanding of this for better or worse relies on the way in which the 'success' of the sales are measured. As outlined in the rationale, NCT wish to increase their population of service users and in particular of their service users within the specific socio-demographic group currently under-represented (working class, under the age of 25, ethnic minority). This is antithetical however to the reasons I suggest lead to the success of the sales as a field for actors with a shared habitus, and is therefore deeply embedded in moral debates on social equality. Many NCT services currently cater for a group of

parents whose very reason for participation is to meet 'like-minded' people; those we could argue share the same social class and hold similar values. This social structuring helps to position the nearly new sales as a safer and more desirable avenue for consuming second-hand goods and also facilitates the socialisation that adds to the experience of attendees.

Thus NCT could implement strategies in order to widen the social reach of the sales but this requires careful consideration as to how this may affect the experience of the loyal consumers already in attendance. This ultimately relies on whether NCT view the sales as primarily a fundraiser or a service (branch coordinators certainly consider the two mutually) and in what ways they feel they can best support parents. The prevailing ability of the sales to facilitate information flows within the most connected networks is their strength and could certainly be capitalised upon in order to reach parents with lower levels of social and cultural capital who may benefit from access to this information.

## 7.3  Discussion of key themes

Across chapters 4, 5 and 6, three key themes emerge. These themes are *thrift*, *social class*, and *co-consumption* and develop from the particular form of consumption being explored, that of mothers consuming second-hand baby and children's goods within in the space of the nearly new sale. Thrift is a key theme in existing studies on second-hand consumption (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Gregson and Crewe 2003) and also in work looking at the responsibilities of the mother-consumer (Miller 1999; Ponsford 2014). These studies recognised that a tension exists between the readiness of second-hand children's goods (specifically clothing) as items little used before becoming redundant, and the anxieties of mothers to protect the child from the 'unknown'.  Studying NCT nearly new sales thus offered a route to explore the tensions and responsibilities of motherhood, as enacted through consumption practice.

Miller (1999, p.132) states, 'thrift has been found to represent the central ritual in the transformation of shopping from spending to saving'. This suggests that consumers still desire to shop, but that the focus of their consumption is to spend as little money as possible in order to procure the things they desire. Earlier in the thesis I discuss 'frugality', using this as a way

of describing the moral economy of second-hand consumption practice. Frugality has been used for centuries as a way of denoting 'moderation, temperance, thrift, cost-effectiveness [and] efficient usage' and stems from a way of life based on purity and adherence to religious values (Nash 1998, p.421). Whilst we see consumption practices at nearly new sales shaped by thrift, cost-effectiveness and efficiency, there is little in terms of moderation. Indeed, as found by Gregson and Crewe (1998; 2003), consumption at nearly new sales, as at other second-hand retail sites, provides an opportunity for, and excuse to indulge in, overconsumption. That is not to say participants did not shop with a frugal mind-set, because I have previously discussed some who did, but that participants were overwhelmingly motivated by thrift as opposed to frugality.

If frugality could be considered a quiet form of consumption, thrift is loud and proud. Thrift is categorised by social competition, something Miller (1997) documents as far away as Trinidad, describing 'the rivalry between female relatives wanting to demonstrate their skills by buying the same goods cheaper than someone else'. This form of competition transpired through my own research with shoppers queuing long before the sale started in order to get ahead of the crowd and snag the best items. As described previously, much of the consumption that took place at the sales was about purchasing extra items rather than necessities. This allowed mothers to 'keep up with the Jones' without spending large amounts of extra money, although money is nevertheless being spent.

These observations directly correlate with Miller's (1999, p.137) early ethnography on family consumption. He says:

> There seems very little evidence to suggest that in most cases thrift is actually a means to save money. In many cases it is equally the justification for spending more money.

Thrift is central to household management as a way of justifying and moderating consumption. Where money is saved in one place, it is spent elsewhere. Thrift involves having knowledge of markets, demonstrated at the nearly new sales by the mothers who researched the going-price of toys, clothes and equipment both new and used, online and at the sales. I described earlier in the thesis the story of Mary (section 5.4) who felt cheated at paying

over the odds for sleeping bags. Thrift therefore, requires an element of skill and is a way in which women 'do mothering'. As a skill, it can be learnt and improved upon, shown clearly in the way participants spoke about the strategies they enacted at the sales, developed over repeated visits and through drawing on their social and cultural capital. Indeed, it is the mobilisation of these forms of capital that enable success within the field of the nearly new sale.

Income level and social class cannot be as easily correlated with engagement in second-hand economies (Horne and Maddrell 2003) or general thrift (Miller 1999) as one may think. This makes sense when thrift itself is considered a form of social competition as described above, and not necessarily a means to save household finances. A 'middle-class' narrative always structured the research as I set out to find whether those participating in the nearly new sales were the same middle-class group NCT openly described to have identified participating in their other parenting services. Through a mixed method approach I found that while the sales did appear to attract greater diversity in participation than NCT's paying membership, attendees were still overwhelming middle-class when education, occupation and cultural capital were considered.

Bourdieu ([1979] 2010, p.100), whose work has been regularly referenced in this thesis, argued that social class cannot be defined by a set of properties, but by, 'the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties' and the influence this exerts on practice. In chapter 4 I described the properties of the sale that might enable the attendance of particular groups whilst restricting the participation of others. Both practical issues, such as the need to have a car, and more theoretical considerations were discussed, concluding that social capital plays a strong role in facilitating attendance. Bourdieu locates consumption as a form of distinction and whilst the sales might not be used as a route for social positioning like a designer handbag may, we could certainly argue that the sales are socially positioned as a retail phenomenon (as shown by the matrix in figure 4.11).

Provenance and social capital are key in understanding the social significance of the sales. As like-minded parents of a similar habitus flock to the NCT sales, I argued (in 5.7) that this feeling of homophilly is extended to the goods for

sale. Previous studies argued that children's clothes rarely make it to charity shops because they tend to be passed through private systems of exchange (Horne and Maddrell 2002; Clarke 2000). This thesis argues that NCT sales expand this system of private exchange, so that those participating in the nearly new sales feel a social or cultural connection to the goods for sale, which they may not feel by frequenting a charity shop or car boot sale. As an expanded system of community exchange, participants also expressed an obligation to 'give back' to the sale, either by selling items there, or volunteering their time. Having felt a connection to the charity, mothers wanted to support the NCT, a finding supported by research on traditional charity shops (Horne and Maddrell 2002). They also wished to support other parents, or more specifically, to support other parents belonging to their social group.

Whilst thrift may not be socially definable, the individual practices of thrift and fields of enabling thrift certainly can be. Although it was outside the realms of this research to study mothers *not* attending NCT sales in order to explore reasons as to why, I am able to draw on other studies as a comparison. Studies by Gillies (2007) and Ponsford (2011; 2012; 2014) on working-class and/or young mothers work to reinforce thoughts developed in this thesis that could not necessarily be evidenced. In 4.4 I introduced Tina and Faye, the youngest mothers to take part in the interviews. They lived on limited incomes yet stressed, more than any other interviewee, a desire for everything to be new for their "little person" while recognising that they "couldn't have everything new".

Tina and Faye had met at NCT antenatal classes where they were the youngest members of the class, they told me. Now good friends, they had only attended one nearly new sale each but bought very little, preferring to take things offered by family and friends. In contrast, although many of the other interviewees did receive things from family and friends, many also described circumstances that hindered such exchange, either because they had moved away from close family or friendship ties or were the first of their peer group to have children.

Ponsford (2012) studied the consumption practices of mothers aged thirteen to twenty-one years through a period of extended ethnography on Mother and

Baby Units in the city of Bristol, UK. As a group of working-class young women, the study works well as a point of comparison and discussion with my own research. Like the NCT mothers, Ponsford (2012; 2014) found great skill enacted by the mothers in negotiating consumer markets. Both groups practice thrift, but for Ponsford the stakes were higher, as she describes women who:

> Seemed acutely aware of the canonical public narratives that painted young mothers as poor providers and immature carers. For some young women, the necessity to provide well for children was further exacerbated by the shame and humiliation they had experienced around "not having" as children themselves (2014, p.254).

Structuring parenting practices around experiences of the mother's own childhood was not a theme of my interviews. Miller (1999) describes the 'devoted mother' for whom the child becomes the ultimate object of devotion, sacrificing the needs of both herself and her partner. Indeed Ponsford (2014) concludes that the ability of young mothers to provide for their child/ren while managing on a low income provided an important basis of self-worth. In experiencing the anxiety of being, and being seen to be, a good mother, materiality is the main route through which mothers can display their competence publically. Ponsford (2011, p.541) clarifies:

> Consumption emerges as an important site for oppositional strategies through which the young women who took part in this study seek to re-image themselves as respectable carers and deflect negative associations of poverty away from their children.

These young women desperately tried to remain within known exchange networks, either informal (friends, family) or in purchasing items brand new. Second-hand goods from charity shops or similar were simply not acceptable, seen as a marked sign of poverty and bound by negative connotations of being teased during their own childhood (Ponsford 2012). In contrast, the practice of thrift clearly evident from the second-hand consumption practices of NCT mothers was a source of pride. Whilst still anxious to be a good mother, the NCT mothers do not place such high regard on displaying good mothering through the child's dress. Instead, they were more likely to use the sales as a convenient form of consumption and way of buying duplicates and non-necessities. The desire to invest in the long term cultural capital of the child

was a marked practice of the middle-class group in this study, as previously described in other studies (West et al. 2006; Gillies 2007). This I explained before through the popularity of buying books and games.

Finally, I wish to further define the nature of co-consuming, as used in this thesis. Cook (2008) developed the notion of co-consumption as a way of diverting from the economic model of the individualised consumer, instead recognising the broad positionality of the mother-consumer. Indeed co-consumption simply provides a tangible term for the practice described by Miller's (1999) 'devoted mother' for whom consumption decisions are made on behalf of the family with the mother sacrificing her own needs. Pellandini-Simanyi (2014, p.24), in discussing Cook's work, argues that 'most if not all consumption is co-consumption'. Her case relies on recognising the multiple rationalities and possibilities attending to any consumption decision. In a further statement Pellandini-Simanyi (2014, p.24) suggests the following:

> Ethical visions defining who to be and how to live that inform consumption norms are articulated in terms of relationships to other people: family members, peers and others in society.

Such argument posits a moral economy of consumption broader than that discussed in this thesis. That said, it was the case that participants spoke of buying things for their own children that could be passed on to others, or buying items for the grandparents house, expanding the notion of co-consumption further still. Such 'ethical visions' could be a factor influencing the disposal of redundant items too, as parents feel obliged to pass things back to the sale or onto other parents.

Within this thesis I discuss co-consumption in relation to everyday and mundane rituals of care, the desire to protect against potential threats and in the distinctive nature of conspicuous co-consumption. Each of these practices and rationalisations for consumption are shaped by both the common and singular needs of mother and child. Furthermore, as Miller (1999, p.141) states, 'shopping is not about possessions or identity *per se* but by using the goods.' In this vein I see the role of co-consumption as a continuous practice of mediation and a channel through which power and intimacy are enacted. Co-consumption may be evident in other close relationships of provisioning, for example, an adult carrying out grocery shopping for their elderly parent

however, it remains distinct to gifting which is based more on the theory of reciprocity (Mauss 1990).

In discussing these key themes further I have tried to describe NCT nearly new sales as a social phenomenon that cannot be held separate to broader social norms. The themes of thrift, social class and co-consumption have each transpired from this phenomenological analysis and hold the key to defining the ways and limitations in which this research contributions to existing literature.

## 7.4  Contributions to, and implications for, existing and further research

Having provided a summary of key findings, I will now discuss further how these contribute to existing studies and start to outline opportunities for further study. Throughout this project, the different ways of describing the nearly new sales – as informal, alternative, non-conventional – provided a perpetual state of unease. It is of course, a site of second-hand consumption, yet I needed a way to categorise it along with other retail spaces.  In recognising the long history of consumption and of second-hand exchange as an ordinary practice, I struggled with the notion of this being alternative or non-conventional.  It could be labelled informal, although still more regulated than other second-hand consumption channels.  Mark Jayne (2006) would label the sales an 'inconspicuous' consumption space and whilst I would argue that we should not essentialise all alternative sites of consumption as inconspicuous (markets and high street charity shops are very visible), nearly new sales are certainly a hidden economy.

One way of positioning the sales in relation to the wider economy is using the work of J-K Gibson-Graham (Gibson-Graham 2006; Gibson, Graham et al. 2010). Gibson-Graham argue that whilst capitalist firms, wage labour, and market-oriented production constitute the dominant discourse of the economy, a whole host of hidden labours and systems of exchange construct everyday life, thus constituting the 'diverse' economy. I find this a useful way of conceptualising the NCT nearly new sale, presenting further opportunities to investigate the ways in which participation in second-hand economies overlaps with other elements of a 'diverse lifestyle'.

Of course Miller's (1999) analysis of family provisioning places thrift at the centre of motherly consumer practice. NCT sales are one of a range of avenues for practicing thrift. The sales could be deemed diverse in that they happen only occasionally, and tend to attract a particular social group. Social networks are key in analysing the success of the sales, found to be a way of facilitating information flows. Other studies have emphasised the social role of second-hand consumption sites, as spaces where social and cultural capital can be more influential than economic capital (Clarke 2000; Horne and Maddrell 2002; Gregson and Crewe 1997). This was certainly found to be the case for NCT sales and I further contribute to these findings through the notion of the 'material habitus', which I conclude upon later in this section.

The main themes discussed in chapters 4 to 6 can be linked back to a range of moral debates, with various tensions evident throughout. These moral debates include social in/equality, obligation, gifting, parental responsibilities, environmental sustainability and the complex dichotomy of need versus desire in consumption studies. I have already outlined the social structuring of the sales and how, by being heavily reliant of social networks, the sales unintentionally overlook a particular social group. Inequality continues to interest scholars and policy makers in the UK and beyond as an intensifier of a range of social ills (Cohen and MacCartney 2004; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). The social stratification evident through the sales then raises a key moral debate about accessibility and opportunity, arguing that the geography of the sales influence accessibility. As a retail site the sale is 'branded' by NCT and as such appeals to a particular market segment of middle-class parents who benefit from the flow of information and supply of cheap goods.

Another moral debate is evident through the manner in which the sales encourage over-consumption in ways otherwise unavailable to parents. Whilst mothers showed a desire to divert goods from landfill and make use of them until the end of their product life, much of the consumption evident at the sales is, I argue, shaped by the 'desire' principle rather than 'need' (Campbell 1998; Trentmann 2004). These principles could be seen as socially constructed with 'needs' in the context of a middle-class family in the UK, different to the 'needs' of a family elsewhere. Many items bought at the sales however, are deemed by the parents themselves to be non-essentials. As such whilst the sales provide an environmentally sustainable and financially acceptable way of

acquiring these extra things, such practice is still shaped by commodity fetishism and the desire to acquire branded goods, and more toys and books than that which is essential. This directly adds to early work by Miller (1999) on family thrift, as discussed in 7.3.

The ethic of frugality could be helpful here, enabling the obligations and responsibilities of parents to be considered within the role of provisioning to demonstrate ways of making resources go further in the family. Part of the moral economy of care, mothers were quick to highlight the sense in reusing goods that had plenty of life left in them, the assertion being that this was better than being wasteful. This adds to the examples from Hitchings et al. (2013) who conceptualise the home heating practices of older people and mundane disposal practices of young people as 'inadvertent environmentalism'. I found that the interviewees participating in second-hand economies were essentially practicing sustainable consumption, but with little regard to the environmental benefits (although this did get selected on the questionnaire, it rarely came up in conversation without prompt). Although they might have been acquiring a lot of extra stuff, these items always re-entered the system of exchange to be reused and repurposed. This adds to the argument of Hitchings et al. (2013) who state that sustainable policy interventions should focus on the 'action-value opportunity' rather than continuing to problematize the value-action gap.

In this project I also bring together the work of Bourdieu ([1979] 2010), Belk (1988), Cook (2008), Warde (1994), and Miller (1999; 2001) amongst others to consider the cultural significance of things as an extension of the self, in this case as a way of negotiating the risks ascribed to second-hand goods by mothers as part of their co-consuming practices. Recent scholarship has gone beyond considering objects as just carriers of semiotic meaning to consider the agency attributed to things through their influence on everyday practice (Miller 2001; Shove, Watson et al. 2007). This moves beyond stating that objects construct and perform personal identities to argue that such objects become part of an embodied practice and as such enable or restrict physical action. As Shove (2007, p. 2) states, 'ordinary objects are extremely important in sustaining and transforming the design of everyday life'.

Similarly, in arguing that the sale attracts parents of a shared habitus and that objects are an extension of the self, I extend Bourdieu's concept of the human habitus to the 'material habitus' to argue that the biography of the goods (i.e. the social life of things) at the sale is a weaker threat than objects procured through the relative unknown generally ascribed to other sites of second-hand consumption. This I argue, is one of the main contributions of this thesis and is based on the understanding that items have come from a similar 'good' home to one's own.  Like the human habitus, the material habitus only exists inside the heads of actors, only operates in relation to the social field and disposes actors to act in certain ways. The material habitus is therefore socially-constructed, yet is open to the object exerting its own agency (for example, in prompting conversations between parents at the sale, or encouraging parents to alter their cleaning practices). This theory relies on the three key themes discussed in the previous section: thrift, co-consumption and class. Second-hand economies provide a fruitful point of analysis in theorising on the material habitus, and could lead to greater insight into the relationship between people and things.

Sympathetic to the 'new materialisms' perspective prevalent in contemporary cultural studies, the object, as I allude to in this thesis is not just an extension of the self but is mutually supportive of the self, working within an on-going process of becoming through practice. Informed by posthumanist debates, research in this area seeks to recognise the affinity between subject and object by diverting from dualist ontologies (Braidotti 2002; Coole and Frost 2010). Second-hand consumption, along with motherly co-consumption practices provide a rich empirical basis for theorising on new materialism I argue, due to the notion of the intimate, ordinary and liminal characteristics of both.

A final key theme emerging from this thesis and closely related to the material habitus is that of risk. This was based on the belief that all second-hand goods are 'riskier' than new goods and that this sense of risk could be heightened when consuming on behalf of a vulnerable child. Risks associated with purchasing second-hand goods for children were largely the same as those described in previous studies for second-hand clothing more broadly. These findings centre on the concern with 'leaky' bodies, death and disease (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Horne and Maddrell 2002). That said, participants involved in this research described buying second-hand cloth nappies from the sale, a

practice we might consider to conflict with their concerns. This could be related to a number of points, perhaps the knowledge that nappies are washed many times, that their purpose is in itself dirty, and that buying them from the sale is like taking them from a friend if we consider the social homophilly I have tried to stress.

This thesis considers the cultural/symbolic notion of risk in the social lives of things and the governmentality of risk as evidenced through prescribed parenting conventions. This work could also be related to the 'risk society' (Giddens 1998) whereby parents are acutely aware of threats against child safety from the outside world (Scott, Jackson et al. 1998; Pain 2006). Kehily and Martens (2014, p.239) described the manner in which new parents are 'confronted' with products 'designed to "safeguard", "guide" and "monitor" the young child'. Considering this, in chapter 5 I explored the way in which mothers negotiate risks through practice, often adopting a ritual of divestment to cleanse second-hand goods brought into the home. The goods then, become an active part of the practice of care and protection. As the research process focused more on the site of the nearly new sales, rather than domestic consumption practices (an insight to which was only accessible through interviews) further investigation is needed to build on this analysis.

This thesis has considered both individualised consumer practice and studied the NCT sales as a phenomena in themselves. By considering the nearly new sale as a diverse economy, it is modelled as a route for semi-formalising the traditional culture of hand-me-downs in order to fit within the contemporary middle-class lifestyle. As the sales attract parents of a similar habitus, the oft-perceived precarious act of second-hand consumption is diverted away from the unknown and pulled back into the community. Horne and Maddrell (2002) found a form of consumer loyalty in the social field of charity shops, with volunteers and customers most likely to donate their time and goods to charities they feel a connection to. This thesis suggests that such a trait can also be found around sites of consumption that only 'pop-up' twice a year due to the links with broader social and institutional networks.

The material then, provides a route to bond otherwise disparate community ties; a practice described by Clarke (2000, p.85) as 'mother swapping'. Despite the labour involved in preparing goods to put back into the sale, the thesis

concludes that the moral practice of reciprocity ensures that such diverse economy continues.

## 7.5 Research limitations

Research projects always have limitations. In the case of this project, these limitations mostly related to resources as I worked alone in collecting and analysing the data, as is characteristic of a doctoral project.  I was also limited by the finances available to travel for fieldwork and by the nature of the sales themselves as they were only held on certain dates over the year. Working within these unavoidable restrictions, the methodology was designed to encourage a robust exploration of the topic and valid basis for knowledge claims. A mixed-method approach strengthened the data analysis, providing a way to triangulate the data in order to improve the validity and reliability of results.

I have been engaged in an ongoing process of ethnography as I attended meetings with NCT, spoke to volunteers face-to-face, via email and over the phone, volunteered at nearly new sales, observed nearly new sales and interviewed attendees. In addition I regularly received comments and anecdotes through friends, family and acquaintances, all feeding into the understanding that second-hand shopping, parenting and NCT are evocative themes present in everyday life.  As 'hidden', temporary, informal events, ethnography provided the best tool to investigate the sales in an exploratory in-depth manner. On entering this new world of NCT at the start of the project, I was very aware of the fact that I was not myself a mother. I was concerned that this could hinder my access to the 'truth' because I could not share in all of the experiences, despite being an active volunteer at the sales. I was also concerned that the participants may treat me differently and hold back information that they felt I could not empathise with or understand. As it was, I relaxed into the environment and often found that those around me (who did not know I was a researcher) assumed that I was a mother. I also became more knowledgeable on NCT and on the various baby paraphernalia and this boosted my confidence in conversation. It was beneficial then, that I attended two sales before embarking on my official data collection period as a way of orientating myself.

In considering the reliability of the data collected, NCT nearly new sales are a vast enterprise and I was only able to access a few sales to draw my conclusions from. However, in utilising qualitative and quantitative techniques I was able to 'test' the themes drawn out from stage one of the project by conducting a quantitative survey at ten sales across the UK. Whilst great care was taken to select a diverse sample based on branch size and the socio-demographic population range of the area, it was still a restricted view of a UK-wide phenomenon. Stage one affected the design of stage two and so it is possible not all responses would have been captured in the survey. The sampling for the survey however, was UK-wide and included a branch in Scotland and a branch in the North of England.

As is always the case, I was only able to access participants who wanted to be accessed. This limitation was felt particularly in the interview process with busy working mothers unable to find the time to participate and working-class mothers perhaps more anxious/sceptical about the interview process. A small number of interviews were conducted on the telephone which obscures part of the process as I could not gain a perspective on the participant's home life and living environment, and also often cut the interview short compared to interviews conducted in person.

Despite piloting the questionnaire, it came to light that it was not designed for all eventualities. For example, a proportion of the survey respondents were in fact grandparents so whilst still a customer of the sales they did not fit into the new parent demographic assumed to be accessing the sales. Initially a larger survey was proposed on the understanding that nearly new sale volunteers within the branch would conduct it themselves, however, on seeing how stretched for time volunteers were, it was felt to be more reliable for the researcher to carry out the survey in each branch. The project was indeed a learning process, and I am now able to take forward the experiences and knowledge gained to design research projects in the future.

## 7.6 Directions for further study

> There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be the beginning (L'Amour [1980] 2010; 2).

As alluded to through discussions earlier in the chapter, this project has raised as many questions as it has answered, if not more so. These fall into two main sections; empirical problems directly related to NCT and the nearly new sales, and broader theoretical questions linked to shifting debates in social theory and policy.

Empirical:

- In line with increased competition (particularly from commercial nearly new sales) and in order to ensure the success of NCT nearly new sales, further research is required to explore the experiences of *sellers* in order to understand what motivates them to sell and how the process of selling could be improved. In addition, such research could add to the understanding of the social lives of things which come through the sales. Interviewees described a sense of obligation at times to sell goods via the NCT sales, in order to 'give back' yet I suspect a group of sellers were inaccessible through the interviews I conducted, those who do not buy at the sales, or those who use them commercially.

- As has been repeatedly stated, the majority (but not all) of the participants involved in this study were middle-class mothers. It is difficult to claim particular 'middle-class' consumption practices as rooted in classed ideals without a case for comparison. Class has, to date, been a neglected aspect of second-hand consumption which has focused more on identity and culture. With parenting routinely considered a classed practice, an exploration of working-class mothers and their co-consumption practices could provide a rich basis for conceptualising social norms, habitus and the influence of social networks.

- Based on evidence from this project that volunteering adds to the social and emotional wellbeing of mothers, as well as increasing a volunteer's cultural and human capital in order to aid workplace re-entry or even change career path, further research is needed to explore the benefits gained for NCT volunteers within a wage-work/domestic life context. This could add to a body of work on

volunteering as well as providing NCT with an insight into the experiences of volunteers which in turn, could be used to encourage volunteer recruitment.

- Finally, I propose a study to investigate the impact of researcher intervention on domestic practices. By revisiting participants recruited for this doctoral project and inviting them to be interviewed, I could explore the changing nature of their practices over time. Focusing on divestment/cleanliness practices related to material culture, this study would explore participant's reflexivity and aim to find out whether being questioned on their consumption practices incited a more conscious awareness of material histories.

Theoretical:

- Work on diverse, alternative, non-capitalist economies is growing but more consideration is required as to where second-hand economies fit within these. New or renewed forms of non- or more-than-capitalist economic practice have surfaced, working to challenge or destabilise the 'norm'. This includes feminist post-capitalist critiques (Gibson-Graham 1996), everyday moral economies (Wilson 2013) and the sharing economy (Gold 2004). Second-hand exchange networks play a key role in these economies, encouraging sharing, sustainability, frugality and a detachment from the corporate economy.  The way we consume is forever altering in the twenty-first century, based mainly on advances in technology and second-hand economies are no exception therefore there is a need to investigate the impact of these economies on everyday life and how they fit within wider contemporary culture. How does second-hand consumption relate to other 'diverse' or 'alternative' ways of living?

- Linked to the previous point, further work is required to expand the definition of ethical/moral/sustainable consumption and the differences between these terms, if indeed there are any.  Ethical consumption is often considered in relation to fair trade or organic goods (new) goods, but ethics are broader than this. Reuse of goods could be considered sustainable, but more often emphasis in society is placed on recycling

rather than direct reuse (Brown 2001; Manno 2002). Similarly, the obligations of parenting concern ethics of care and a need to provide. In this sense ethical consumption for the family can be linked to making resources go the furthest. This study has found that middle-class parents show characteristics of Hitchings et al's (2013) 'inadvertent environmentalist' depicting mundane consumption practices which are sustainable but not environmentally motivated. Such work could be used to forward the notion of 'action-value opportunity', a different approach to theorising on the value-action gap.

- As previously described, more empirical research is required on the concept of risk in society. Whilst a number of studies have considered risk in relation to parenting and child care (Lupton 1999; Pain 2006; Afflerback, Carter et al. 2013) there is an opportunity to theorise on this further using Cook's (2008) concept of motherly co-consumption to investigate the ways in which mothers negotiate risk within a new materialist perspective. How does the agency of things, together with practice, limit risk? What is the relationship between embodiment and risk?

## 7.7 Policy implications for NCT

At the end of this project NCT were issued with a report outlining the key findings and recommendations. Such report is to be used for internal NCT intelligence, across the research, fundraising and marketing teams. Following a similar format to the thesis but with a focus on market intelligence, the report took the following outline:

1. Executive summary
2. Project background and rationale
3. Review of the academic literature
4. Research aims and questions
5. Research design
6. Survey results
7. Discussion of themes
8. Recommendations
9. Competitors
10. Limitations and suggestions for further research

The report outlined the key findings and themes to emerge from the research as well as offering potential recommendations based on NCT's aims. These recommendations included ways to improve the experience of buyers/sellers/volunteers, ways to make the sales more profitable as a fundraiser and ways to use the sales as a route to provide parenting support. Competition with the potential to affect NCT nearly new sales was a concern for the charity both at branch level and within head office. A particular concern was the threat of commercial nearly new sales which were often being held more regularly than NCT sales, and in some instances offered a better deal for sellers. With this in mind, and using the data I had collected I listed all of the advantages and disadvantages for each form of second-hand retail to provide a basic competition analysis. NCT will use this information to communicate back to their volunteers.

## 7.8 Concluding remarks

This chapter has outlined the key findings of this research project focusing on drawing together the main themes found in the chapters 4, 5 and 6 in light of the project rationale and existing academic literature. In doing so it provides an overview of the implications of this research for both social theory and policy, and proposes ways for both to move forward in the form of ideas for further research.

My fundamental contributions to the existing academic literature are thus:

1. I utilise the work of Bourdieu ([1979] 2010), Belk (1988) and Warde (1994) to consider the cultural significance of things as an extension of the self, in this case as a way of negotiating the risks ascribed to second-hand goods. By arguing that the sale attracts parents of a shared habitus and that objects are an extension of the self, I extend the concept of human-habitus to the material-habitus to argue that the biography of the items available at the sale is a weaker threat[16] than objects procured through the relative unknown generally ascribed to other sites of second-hand consumption. As the sales attract parents of

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[16] I consider both physical threats/risks, e.g. hygiene and fitness-for-purpose and threats to one's identity, e.g. social positioning and class

a similar habitus, the oft-perceived precarious act of second-hand consumption is diverted away from the unknown and pulled back into the community.

2. I further the relatively new body of work on mothering and consumption, using Cook's (2008; 2013) concept of co-consumption to consider the role of consumption in broader parenting practice. As stated by Miller (1999) consumption becomes a way in which mothers practice care, in this case I consider the practice of sorting, cleaning and disposing of baby items as part of mothering. I argue that consumption-divestment practices cannot be generalised apart from when related to safety governance. I do find however that justifications and reasons for parental second-hand consumption practices are very similar to those found to be true for personal second-hand consumption practices.

3. I argue that not only does the NCT sale provide evidence for the suggestion that consumption has a social role to play, but argue that it is precisely the informal nature of the sale which encourages socialisation, along with the importance of social networks in structuring participation. The organisation of the sale and reliance on volunteer labour facilitates information flow, as do the objects themselves which become tools for both bridging and bonding ties. The sales, I find, are both a site of social competition and social collaboration and the effects are most pertinent with those possessing the cultural and social capital required to mobilise the opportunities the sales have to offer.

4. Finally, furthering the work of Gregson and Crewe (1998; 2003) who argue that nearly new sales provide an opportunity for over-consumption, I argue that many of the mothers included in my study practice 'inadvertent environmentalism' (Hitchings, Collins et al. 2013). This suggests a moral tension in the economy of second-hand baby goods, and posits that thrift, although not directly described as such, is a key underlying factor influencing motherly consumption decisions.

# 8  Appendix

## 8.1  Recruitment survey (Stage 1/interviewees)

## Customer Survey

**Study title**: The Social Role of NCT Nearly New Sales (PhD)
**Researcher name**: Emma J. Waight
**Ethics reference**: 3558

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey study. Your participation will assist my PhD research at the University of Southampton in collaboration with the NCT. All of the information you need should be available on the Participant Information Sheet however, if you have any further questions please feel free to contact me, Emma Waight (07846 963704, e.j.waight@soton.ac.uk) or my academic supervisor Kate Boyer (02380 593261, l.k.boyer@soton.ac.uk).

1. Gender: Male, Female
2. Postcode:
3. Age Bracket: 19 or under, 20–24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40+
4. Work status, are you?
   Full time mum
   Seeking work
   Full time employed
   Part time employed
   Freelance
   Student
   Retired
5. Is your current occupation? (if not applicable then previous occupation)
   Higher managerial, administrative, professional
   Intermediate/supervisory
   Routine, manual
   None of the above
6. How many children under the age of 8 do you have in your care?
   0
   1
   2
   3+
7. What is your ethnic group?
   White English / Scottish / Welsh / Northern Irish /Irish
   Asian
   Black
   Other
8. What is your highest level of educational qualification?
   No formal qualifications
   GCSE / O Level / Standard Grades or equivalent

AS Level/ A Level or Scottish Higher/ Advanced Higher or equivalent
Higher education degree or qualification (for example BA, BSc)
Postgraduate degree or qualification (for example MA, Phd)
Other

9. Have you been to an NCT nearly new sale before?
Yes
No
Not sure

10. How did you hear about this NCT sale?
Word of mouth
Email
NCT website
Other website
Flyer/poster/street banner
Newspaper advert
Other

11. Have you attended any other NCT events, classes or services?
No
Yes – Bumps & Babies group
Yes – Antenatal classes
Yes – Postnatal classes
Yes – Breastfeeding support
Yes - Cheeky Monkey Tea Parties
Yes - Baby First Aid
Other


My research requires a sample of follow up face-to-face interviews. These will last no longer than an hour and be held in a suitable and convenient location of your choosing. If you are happy to be provided with further information about these interviews please leave your email address and contact telephone number. This information does not obligate you to take part in the interview sessions.

Email:
Telephone number:


Many thanks for your time and co-operation.

Emma Waight

## 8.2 Interviewee details

| Pseudonym | Code | Age Bracket | Branch | Children | Country of Birth | Gender | Highest level of education | Marital Status | Occupation | Occupation Classifica | Volunteere |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mary | B01 | 30-34 | 2 | Two | British | Female | Postgraduate degree | Married | Social worker | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Helen | B02 | 30-34 | 2 | Two | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Mother | Not Applicable | Yes |
| Elaine | B03 | 30-34 | 2 | One | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Children's Centre Health | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Rose | B04 | 30-34 | 2 | One | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Accountant | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Mira | B05 | 40+ | 2 | Two | Not British | Female | Postgraduate degree | Married | Part time lecturer | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Maggie | B06 | 30-34 | 2 | One | British | Female | AS level/A level/Scottish I | Married | Mother | Not Applicable | No |
| Sue | B07 | 30-34 | 2 | Two | British | Female | Unassigned | Married | Mother | Not Applicable | No |
| Kate | B08 | 25-29 | 2 | One | British | Female | AS level/A level/Scottish I | Married | Shop manager | Intermediate | No |
| Kay | G01 | 25-29 | 3 | One | British | Female | AS level/A level/Scottish I | Co-Habiting | Administrator | Intermediate | No |
| Linda | G02 | 30-34 | 3 | One | British | Female | Postgraduate degree | Married | Mother | Not Applicable | Yes |
| Gina | G03 | 40+ | 3 | One | British | Female | Higher education degree | Co-Habiting | Civil servant | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Maria | G04 | 35-39 | 3 | One | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Teacher | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Laura | G05 | 35-39 | 3 | One | British | Female | GCSE/O level/Standard g | Married | Mother | Not Applicable | No |
| Tina | G06 | 20-24 | 3 | Pregnant | British | Female | GCSE/O level/Standard g | Married | Dental nurse | Routine and manual | No |
| Faye | G07 | 25-29 | 3 | Pregnant | British | Female | AS level/A level/Scottish I | Co-Habiting | Jeweller | Routine and manual | No |
| Roxanne | G08 | 20-24 | 3 | One | British | Female | AS level/A level/Scottish I | Co-Habiting | Nursery staff | Routine and manual | Yes |
| Sarah | G09 | 30-34 | 3 | Two | British | Female | AS level/A level/Scottish I | Co-Habiting | Administrator | Intermediate | No |

| Jessica | W01 | 35-39 | 1 | Two | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Marketing | Higher managerial, a | Yes |
|---------|-----|-------|---|-----|---------|--------|------------------------|---------|-----------|---------------------|-----|
| Vicky | W02 | 40+ | 1 | Two | British | Female | AS level/A level/Scottish I | Divorced | Nursery staff | Routine and manual | Yes |
| Lynne | W03 | 35-39 | 1 | Two | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Freelance journalist | Higher managerial, a | Yes |
| Amanda | W04 | 40+ | 1 | Two | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Special needs teacher | Higher managerial, a | Yes |
| Melissa | W05 | 30-34 | 1 | One | British | Female | Postgraduate degree | Married | Environmental consultant | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Heather | W06 | 35-39 | 1 | One | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | IT Technical support | Higher managerial, a | Yes |
| Nicole | W07 | 25-29 | 1 | One | British | Female | Postgraduate degree | Married | Mum/temp research assis | Higher managerial, a | Yes |
| Angela | W08 | 30-34 | 1 | Two | British | Female | Postgraduate degree | Married | Teacher | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Steph | W09 | 30-34 | 1 | Two | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Civil servant | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Erin | W10 | 40+ | 1 | One | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Mother | Not Applicable | No |
| Anna | W11 | 30-34 | 1 | One | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Head of Risk, Finance | Higher managerial, a | No |
| Karen | W12 | 40+ | 1 | Two | British | Female | Higher education degree | Other | Mother | Not Applicable | No |
| Dawn | W13 | 40+ | 1 | Two | British | Female | Higher education degree | Married | Administrator | Intermediate | Yes |

## 8.3 Final survey (stage 2)

## Customer Survey

**Study title**: The Role of NCT Nearly New Sales (PhD)
**Researcher name**: Emma J. Waight
**Ethics reference**: 6753

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey study. Your participation is voluntary, and data will be used anonymously. Your participation will assist my PhD research at the University of Southampton in collaboration with the NCT.

1. Please rank your **top three** reasons for attending today's sale, where 1 is your first and most important reason, 2 is your second reason and 3 is your third reason.

| To browse items | | As a social activity with friends/family | |
|---|---|---|---|
| To look for specific items | | It was something to do today | |
| To find out about selling my own stuff | | To learn about what NCT offer locally | |
| To have time to myself | | To receive advice from NCT volunteers | |
| Other (please state) | | | |

2. Please rank your **top three** reasons for purchasing second-hand baby toys, clothes and equipment, where 1 is your first and most important reason, 2 is your second reason and 3 is your third reason.

| I can't afford new baby items | | To save money | |
|---|---|---|---|
| To get better quality than I can afford new | | To support NCT charity | |
| To support local parents | | It's more sustainable/environmentally friendly | |
| To avoid high street retailers | | To ensure useful items aren't wasted | |
| To find something different to what's available on the high street | | Other (please state) | |

3. Have you used other NCT services before? (please select all that apply)

| No | | Not sure | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yes – Antenatal or postnatal classes | | Yes – Bumps and Babies or similar NCT coffee mornings | |
| Yes – other (please state) | | | |

4. W are you attending today's sale with? (please select all that apply)

| No one, I came alone | | Child/ren | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Partner | | Friend | |
| Parent | | Grandparent | |
| Sibling/step-sibling/sibling-in-law | | Parent-in-law | |
| Other (please state) | | | |

5. How did you hear about today's sale? (please select all that apply)

| Word of mouth | | National NCT website | |
|---|---|---|---|
| NCT branch newsletter | | Local branch website/Facebook/twitter | |
| Street banner outside venue | | Local press | |
| Flyer/poster/banner (situated away from venue) | | Other (please state) | |

6. How many NCT nearly new sales have you attended previously?

| None, this is my first (please move to question 9) | | 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | 4 | |
| 2 | | 5 or more | |

7. Since attending NCT nearly new sales, have you done any of the following **for the first time**? (if the answer is no, please move to question 9)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Become an NCT member | | Registered for an NCT class | |
| Sold items at an NCT sale | | Volunteered at an NCT sale | |
| Attended a local NCT social group (eg. Bumps and Babies, Mum's meet-up, Coffee group) | | Volunteered in another capacity in the NCT | |

8. Was this a direct result of attending a nearly new sale?

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | | No | |
| Not sure | | | |

**Please complete the following information about yourself**

9. Are you . . .?

Sex
Age bracket
Marital Status

| □ Female | | | □ Male | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| □ 19 or under | □ 20-24 | □ 25-29 | □ 30-34 | □ 35-39 | □ 40+ |
| □ Married | □ Single | □ Living with a partner | | □ Other | |

| Please complete the following information for you and, if applicable, your partner | | |
|---|---|---|
| | You | Your Partner |
| 10. What is your ethnic group?  *(Please note that we are asking about the broad ethnic group that best describes your ethnic origin; not your nationality, place of birth or citizenship. These categories are based on the 2011 UK census.)* | □ White   □ Mixed  □ Asian/ Asian British  □ Black/African/Caribbean/Black British  □ Other ethnic group *(please describe):* | □ White   □ Mixed  □ Asian/ Asian British  □ Black/African/Caribbean/Black British  □ Other ethnic group *(please describe):* |
| 11. What educational qualifications do you hold? | □ No formal qualifications  □ GSCE/ O level / Standard grades or equivalent  □ AS level/A Level/ Scottish | □ No formal qualifications  □ GSCE/ O level / Standard grades or equivalent  □ AS level/A Level/ Scottish |

| (Please tick all that apply) | Higher or Advanced Higher or equivalent | Higher or Advanced Higher or equivalent |
|---|---|---|
| | □ Higher Education Degree or Qualification (e.g. BA, BSc) | □ Higher Education Degree or Qualification (e.g. BA, BSc) |
| | □ Post graduate degree or qualification (e.g. MA or PhD) | □ Post graduate degree or qualification (e.g. MA or PhD) |
| | □ Other/unsure *(please describe):* | □ Other/unsure *(please describe):* |
| 12. To which category does your current, or most recent, occupation belong? | □ Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations *(eg. corporate managers, experienced teachers, business & public sector managers)* | □ Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations *(eg. corporate managers, experienced teachers, business & public sector managers)* |
| | □ Intermediate occupations *(eg. NQ teachers, admin assistants, supervisory positions, skilled construction)* | □ Intermediate occupations *(eg. NQ teachers, admin assistants, supervisory positions, skilled construction)* |
| | □ Routine and manual occupations *(eg. retail assistants, care workers, construction labourer)* | □ Routine and manual occupations *(eg. retail assistants, care workers, construction labourer)* |
| | □ Other (please state) | □ Other (please state) |

**Please complete the following questions when you are ready to leave the nearly new sale**

13. What did you do at today's sale? (please tick all that apply)

| Browse | | Purchase second-hand items | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Purchase unused/sealed items | | Visit advertisers' stands (if applicable) | |
| Purchase from advertiser's stands | | Visit the cafe area/tea and coffee stand | |
| Talk to friends other than who you came with | | Ask questions to NCT volunteers | |
| Receive information from NCT volunteers | | Learn about NCT services | |
| Other (please state) | | | |

14. If you received information from NCT volunteers today, what was that information (please tick all that apply)

| Practical information about the sale | | Information about other NCT services | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Information on how to sell or volunteer at the sale | | Parenting support | |
| Information on specific items for sale | | Other (please state) | |

15. What did you buy at today's sale? (please tick all that apply)

| Baby/children's clothes | | Books, puzzles or games | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Baby/children's toys | | Maternity clothes/books | |
| Baby equipment | | Nothing | |
| Other (please state) | | | |

16. What do you intend to do with these items? (please tick all that apply)

| Myself and/or my child/ren will use it | | I am donating them to another cause | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Christmas/birthday gifts for own child/ren | | Gifts for wider friends and family | |
| I won't use it now but thought it might be useful in the future | | I plan to sell them on | |
| Not applicable | | Other (please state) | |

If you would like to be entered into the prize draw for a chance to win one of two £25 NCT shop vouchers*, please leave your contact details below in block capitals:

E-mail:
Telephone number:


Many thanks for your time and co-operation.
Emma Waight

If you have any questions concerning the project and how your data will be used please contact myself, the researcher, Emma Waight (07846 963704, e.j.waight@soton.ac.uk) or my academic supervisor, Kate Boyer (02380 593261, l.k.boyer@soton.ac.uk).

**Please return to the marked and sealed box by the exit, or back to myself**
**Or if preferred post back to: (and label with the sale location you attended)**

**Emma Waight (PhD)**
**Geography & Environment (44/1077)**
**Highfield**
**University of Southampton**
**SO17 1BJ**

*The prize draw will be selected on 9th December 2013

## 8.4  Published papers

## open space

# Second-hand consumption among middle-class mothers in the UK: thrift, distinction and risk

Emma Waight, Geography and Environment, University of Southampton, UK
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With the arrival of a new baby comes the need for a lot of extra 'stuff', namely clothes, toys and equipment. Traditionally, baby goods have been prime for the second-hand market as children grow out of things quickly while the objects themselves still hold a use value. According to market research agency Mintel (2012), one in five British parents have utilised second-hand channels to procure baby items since the onset of the 2009 financial crisis, no doubt due to the fact that second-hand goods are cheaper than their new counterparts. Juxtaposed with this advantage, however, is the oft-perceived disadvantage of a second-hand item being inferior quality, unclean or tainted by a previous owner (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). It seems reasonable to assume therefore that a parent must weigh up a number of factors before choosing to engage in second-hand consumption practices, not least because they are consuming on behalf of a small and vulnerable being who relies on a parent or carer to nurture and protect them (Furedi, 2001).

The second-hand consumer has been rarely studied to date, leaving room for further investigation. Common second-hand retail channels include charity shops, car boot sales, online auction sites, classified advertisements, commercial second-hand shops and specialised pop-up sales. Pivotal studies have been completed by Clarke (2000), Horne and Maddrell (2002), Williams and Windebank (2002), Gregson and Crewe (2003) and Guiot and Roux (2010) – Clarke (2000) being the only academic to have published a study specifically concerned with mothers as second-hand consumers. Existing literature consents that second-hand consumption practices are primarily financially motivated yet there are a myriad of ulterior motives related to personal identity and values, depending on the type of product being consumed (Gregson et al, 2001; Guiot and Roux, 2010).

Even when financial motivations are key, consumers can be divided into two groups:
- those who choose to use second-hand consumption channels because they enjoy the process or simply want extra things (as opposed to necessities);
- those who are *forced* to use alternative consumption channels due to financial hardship (Williams and Windebank, 2002; Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Williams and Paddock, 2003).

This latter consumer has been labelled the 'excluded consumer' (Williams and Windebank, 2002) and for the one in five children in the United Kingdom (UK) living in poverty, the daily need to provide for them can become a desperate and anxiety fuelled concern for their parents and carers (Miller, 1999; Cohen and MacCartney, 2004; DWP, 2013).

In contrast to this demographic, my own research on this topic has been focused

not on excluded consumers but on the 'squeezed middle class'. Thirty mothers were interviewed (commonly found to be both the main consumer for the household and primary caregiver), accessed through nearly-new sales run by UK parenting charity NCT. While participants consented with the existing literature by primarily citing financial motivations, the way in which they discussed their consumption discussions and justified second-hand practices said much of their identities as mothers.

Participation in second-hand consumption practices rewards consumers in a number of ways. The process of engaging in second-hand consumption is very different from mainstream retail and consumption. Many second-hand consumers have been found to be decidedly 'middle class' and yet the practice can still be attached to a stigma (Clarke, 2000; Horne and Maddrell, 2002). Indeed, when supermarkets and discount stores can offer prices to rival those of many charity shops, there must be more to the act than simple economic gain (Dunant, 2012). The thrill of a bargain provides a sanctimonious boost to the ego, as does the satisfaction gained from the process of investing time to hunt down and procure such items. Furthermore, ethical gratification can be gained through shunning a materialist culture and ensuring that items are used until the definitive end of their life. This ethical motive of re-using goods came up time and again in my own interviews even when participants did not relate it to a sustainable end. It has been suggested that ethical consumption is the new form of conspicuous consumption for the middle classes: as such this group retains a sense of social superiority for being seen to do the 'ethical' thing, a narrative hinted at by some mothers (Franklin, 2011). Finally, certain sites of second-hand consumption have been found to offer increased socialisation opportunities such as buyer–seller interaction (Belk et al, 1988). This is a narrative found by Clarke (2000) through the role of nearly-new sales, which offer a localised space for parents to convene as buyers, sellers and volunteers.

Clarke (2000) witnessed discussions on the sales floor (a church hall) as buyer and seller exchanged anecdotes and used the objects for sale as mutual reference points to their own parenting practices. This environment, like many other social arrangements for parental networks, is an opportunity to publically display 'good' or 'appropriate' parenting and mothering. Clarke (2000: 88) suggests: 'Entrenched in the transactions and material culture of the second-hand informal economy of children's wear are the identities, knowledges and formations of women as mothers.'

Indeed, an increasing body of work has begun to look at the way in which consumption practices both produce and are reproduced by personal identities and values. Miller (1999) argues that rather than a simple act of acquisition, consumption acts as a form of love. In no other instance perhaps is this more applicable than in the consumption practices of mothers, who use shopping as a form of provisioning and nurture (Miller, 2004). Once a child has outgrown an item, it is usually the mother who makes the decision of whether that item continues to hold a use value for the family. Often, goods lay dormant in storage for some time before being disposed of in bulk. During this time such goods are not in use, but are still deemed to hold a use value, otherwise they would simply be thrown away. In the case of the NCT sale, mothers go about preparing the items for sale: washing, ironing, pricing and generally divesting them of their previous biography so that they are ready for a new owner. This in itself is a laborious process and a chore that has to be fitted in around the mother's existing roles and responsibilities.

Second-hand consumption, while generally labelled an alternative form of consumption, is a common form of provisioning for many mothers. The practice of donating clothes to charity shops or passing them on to friends and family, allows the mother to prolong the life of an item and ensure that items used by their own child can be useful to another family and may even generate an income if goods are

resold (Crewe et al, 2007). Clarke (2000) adopts the word 'trafficking' to describe this divestment and acquisition of things, whether bought, gifted or borrowed, thereby suggesting an 'underground' or 'risky' activity. While rarely given a second thought by the mothers themselves, day-to-day sorting and circulation of used children's clothes and objects are a significant element of care work, bounded within emotional and physical labour (Clarke, 2000, 2004).

The concept of 'risk' is much alluded to in the existing literature (Gregson et al, 2000; Horne and Maddrell, 2002; Gregson and Crewe, 2003). A used item may be damaged, unfit for purpose or be tainted by the biography of a previous owner; a mother does not know where it has been or who has been using it. In contemplating the risk of second-hand clothes, the safest clothes are those worn furthest from the body because they have a less intimate relationship with the bodily form (Gregson et al, 2000). Clarke (2000: 87) alludes to the unease that mothers feel at offering their children second-hand clothes that have been worn by someone else, talking about 'the intimacy invoked by the practice' of imagining your own child's clothing worn and used before in unknown ways. Despite this, parents continue to participate, suggesting that they believe the advantages to outweigh the disadvantages.

The role of the mother as a second-hand consumer offers a wealth of themes to explore. In buying baby clothes and toys, a mother is consuming on behalf of another person. Often, the mother makes the majority of the consumption decisions for the entire household and is the first to go without in times of austerity (Pahl, 1990; Wilson, 1995). The mother as the second-hand consumer faces the same concerns as any other second-hand consumer, except they are heightened due to the desire to nurture her child/ren, keep them safe and well cared for. A mother must weigh up the risk inherent in buying second-hand goods with the duty to take care of family finances. My initial research suggests that mothers develop their own means of negotiating the second-hand market and are savvy consumers, keen to get the best deal for the family without compromising their role as carer and protector. Motivations are complex, particularly for parents not considered excluded consumers. Further work is needed to explore these themes, building on the literature framed around both second-hand consumption and domestic consumption, to develop a greater understanding of maternal motivations and rationalisations for participating in second-hand consumption practices and how this links to their identity as a parent, mother and consumer.

## Acknowledgements

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# Eco babies: reducing a parent's ecological footprint with second-hand consumer goods

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**Abstract:** This paper argues for the direct reuse of products as the most sustainable form of consumption, over and above recycling and the use of greener technology. Baby clothes, toys and equipment are perfectly suited to entering the second-hand market as their useful life often extends beyond the needs of one family. One in five parents have acquired a greater number of second-hand items for their children since the onset of the 2009 financial crisis; therefore, parents are engaging in sustainable consumption practices. This empirical study investigates the extent to which mothers engage in second-hand consumption practices and the environmental impact this has. Thirty mothers were recruited for in-depth interviews. Whilst primary justifications were almost universally found to be financial, participants showed a strong ethical desire to reuse items which, by their very nature, had not reached the end of their useful life before being made redundant by the family.

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## 1 Introduction

The future environmental security of our planet is greatly threatened by two interlinked factors: escalating population growth and unsustainable consumption. The former is of grave concern for the poorest countries across the world, whilst the latter virtually comes as standard across the developed world where consumption is closely linked to economic models based on growth. The debate remains open as to which of these factors should be prioritised globally. The global population reached 7 billion in 2011 and the United Nations predicts it will grow to between 8 and 11 billion by 2050 (The Royal Society, 2012). Whilst the rate of population has slowed in many parts of the world, the overall population is still increasing. Approximately half of the world's population is currently under the age of 25 and their fertility choices will determine which population model will be met (Mazur, 2009).

The UK is experiencing a baby boom of its own, with 2013 set to see the highest birth rate for Britain in 40 years (Lennard, 2013). Indeed data from the Office for National Statistics showed that there were 723,913 live births in 2011, up from 594,634 in 2001, marking a 22% increase (ONS, 2012). A recent report from The Royal Society cited

the number one priority in creating a green economy, as the need to lift the 1.3 billion poorest people of the world out of poverty. The second priority, the report ascertains, falls to the developed and emerging economies where consumption urgently needs to be reduced to more sustainable levels (The Royal Society, 2012). Every new person who arrives on Earth is a new consumer and whilst growth is manageable in most developed industrialised countries (in some countries it is falling) those living in the industrialised countries, use approximately 32 times the resources and emit 32 times more waste than those in the developing world (Mazur, 2009).

The rise in consumption has created a multitude of environmental issues such as resource depletion, the proliferation of non-degradable waste, and the release of toxic chemicals into the environment (Brown et al., 1992; Milani, 2000). From an environmentalist's perspective, sustainable consumption is considered to be a practice of consumption to meet our basic needs and bring about a better quality of life, whilst minimising the use of natural resources and waste outputs across the whole life cycle to avoid jeopardising the needs of future generations (Seyfang, 2004). Defra (2003, p.10), elaborates on this stating that sustainable consumption is the, "continuous economic and social progress that respects the limits of the Earth's ecosystems". This echoes the approach historically taken by the UK government, that stable economic growth is compatible with effective environmental stewardship.

Concerns centred on a growing population create a new dilemma for the most ethically conscious of adults worried about becoming part of the problem through the desire to have children of their own (Lennard, 2013). According to Dobson's 'ecological footprint' metaphor every person takes up a certain amount of ecological space on the planet, including resource use and production of waste. A parent or carer of a young child is directly responsible for not only their own ecological footprint but also the ecological footprint of their dependent; they are consuming on the behalf of another person. With this burden comes a number of options for alternative ways of living, and this paper concentrates on one of those options, the acquisition of baby clothes, toys and equipment through second-hand retail channels. Whether a primary motivation or secondary outcome, the acquisition of second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment in place of new items is a form of sustainable consumption and creates a new breed of sustainable consumer before they can even make consumption decisions themselves. Through this practice, parents may have the power to influence the consumption norms of the next generation.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the ways in which new parents can practice sustainable consumption by purchasing second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment. The product category of children's clothes, toys and equipment, the paper proposes, is particularly compatible with second-hand forms of exchange, as these items are rarely used by one family until the end of their useful product life. It also (generally) provides the further welcome advantage for consumers of saving money. Whilst the 'hand-medown' culture is nothing new, this study focuses on more formalised sites of second-hand exchange, by interviewing 30 mothers accessed through three separate 'nearly new sales' which are organised by the UK parenting charity NCT. These nearly new sales are commonly held two times per year in schools and community halls, a retail site transitory in time and space. These discussions correlated with much of the existing consumption literature, whilst providing a new case for the parent as a decidedly engaged and motivated second-hand consumer.

According to Mintel (2012), one in five parents has acquired a greater number of second-hand items for their children since the onset of the 2009 financial crisis, in order to save money. Financial benefits are widely found to be the main motivation for using second-hand retail channels (Williams and Windebank, 2002; Crewe and Gregson, 2003; Guiot and Roux, 2010) yet the practice also has environmental paybacks. When an actor goes through significant times of change and/or disruption in their lives, habits which were once the norm are more susceptible to alteration. The impact of the recession left many families with less disposable income, perhaps due to redundancy, leading to what Verplanken and Wood (2006) calls 'downstream-plus' habit intervention. This concept

identifies times in the life cycle when an individual's or families' consumption practices are more susceptible to change, and new habits, such as acquiring more items through alternative means of consumption, may become the new norm.

A number of studies have attempted to profile the ethical consumer leading to the creation of decision-making models such as Hunt and Vitell's General Theory of Marketing Ethics (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Vitell and Muncy, 1992) and models developed from the behavioural theories of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) and Ajzen (1988). These studies aim to explain the values, beliefs and rationalisations, which lead to ethical consumer behaviour, yet little consideration has been given to consumption practices where sustainable or ethical outcomes are produced as a secondary ends rather than through moral reasoning. This paper looks at second-hand forms of exchange as an alternative route for acquisition of baby clothes, toys and equipment in current times of austerity and heightened environmental concern. The study set out to explore if and how parents considered issues of sustainable consumption through their parenting role, and what their motivations were for purchasing or acquiring second-hand baby items.

## 2 Literature review
### 1.1 Sustainable consumption

Pre-industrialisation it was the norm to be self-sufficient in the UK, with production and consumption closely intertwined. Yet at the time of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century, a binary way of thinking emerged between production and consumption (Hopkins, 2000; Trentmann, 2004). There was approximately a 25% growth in income per person across the British economy between 1780 and 1831, which together with the growth of industrialisation fuelled an increase in consumption (More, 2000). Following the dip of the Great Depression and Second World War, consumerism boomed in the mid-twentieth century, creating a new consumer society across the developed world (Milani, 2000). The geographies of production and consumption have changed in a relatively short space of time, so that now the majority of that consumed in the household is produced hundreds or even thousands of miles away.

Whilst the terminology of sustainable consumption might be new, we can see that we had been practising it for thousands of years until the steely power of the consumer culture took over (Jackson, 2006). Consumption patterns have changed in the developed world in response to changes in labour markets and employment, brought about through industrialisation and global communications (Crompton, 1996). Whilst consumers have the democratic freedom to shop where they will, this is strongly influenced by geographies of retail and demand. Individual consumption decisions are based on taste and societal norms (Bourdieu, 2010), and situated within an overarching tradition through which actors make sense of themselves and their society (Trentmann, 2004). In this way, consumption is not a self-contained practice, to the extent that specified social groups (an actor's peers) exert an influence on consumption decisions. In the case of sustainable consumption, this has been found to have beneficial impacts, as information gleaned from peers promotes a positive effect on the likelihood of choosing environmentally friendly products (Salazar et al., 2013). Despite the many economic and social benefits of consumption, such practices create wasteful outputs, both through the process of production and at the end of life stage when products are deemed no longer useful. Waste is an obsolete term in the natural world; however, where process by-products are simply a useful input for another process (Milani, 2000; Manno, 2002; Braungart and McDonough, 2008). Sustainable consumption is often broken down into the four Rs: reduce, reuse, recycle and recover (Manno, 2002). In this list, reuse comes over and above recycle as a preferable practice, yet the UK government does little to foster this approach, instead focusing much of their efforts on local and national recycling schemes. Although recycling is beneficial, direct reuse sees more benefits gleaned as the process of recycling requires further input of energy and materials, whilst direct reuse, apart from the transportation footprint, does not (Brown, 2001). Reuse could therefore be the primary consumption method for a greener economy with the aim of minimising the number of transformations, reducing the speed of resource flow through the economy (Milani, 2000; Lang, 2011). This is a logic supported by the school of green economics for the purposes

of creating a truly sustainable future (Kennet and Heinemann, 2006).

### 1.2 Second-hand consumption

In product design, Manno (2002, p.67) describes the need to aim for high consumption efficiency, defined as, "the level of social welfare and personal satisfaction obtained per unit of energy and materials consumed". Ensuring that consumer products with High Commodity Potential (HCP) continue to stay within the consumer market through the practice of reuse creates this consumption efficiency (Lang, 2011).

Second-hand consumption can be found in a number of different contexts, including car boot sales, charity shops, auctions, online auctions and seller websites, vintage or other second-hand shops and nearly new sales or bric-a-brac stalls run by charities or non-profit community organisations such as churches and schools. Guiot and Roux (2010, p.356) define second-hand shopping as the acquisition of second-hand objects 'through methods of exchange that are generally distinct from those of new products'. Despite the previous affirmation that the UK Government has failed to effectively relay the benefits of second-hand forms of exchange in contributing to the green economy, non-profit organisation WRAP (funded by Defra and other Governmental bodies) recently published the study titled 'Study into consumer second-hand shopping behaviour to identify the re-use displacement effect' (WRAP, 2013). This study surveyed more than 3100 second-hand consumers and found that 27% of second-hand purchases directly replaced the purchasing of new products (whilst the remaining we can assume are 'extras').

Second-hand consumption is described in the literature as a niche form of consumption, a deviation from the norm (Crewe and Gregson, 2003; Williams and Paddock, 2003; Seyfang, 2005). Seyfang (2005) lists second-hand consumption under the umbrella of 'non-market exchange mechanisms' arguing that these informal exchange networks are still an important part of the economy in industrialised nations. It should be noted that there is a difference between those consumers who choose to purchase second-hand and those consumers who are forced to by financial situation. Studies have labelled this latter consumer the 'excluded consumer' (Williams and Windebank, 2002; Williams and Paddock, 2003). The former, those who choose second-hand channels of consumption, are still likely to be motivated primarily by financial returns whether this be the satisfaction gained from finding a bargain or the ability to stretch family finances in order not to 'go without' in other areas of domestic life (Crewe and Gregson, 2003; Guiot and Roux, 2010).

Through their research on second-hand cultures in the UK, Crewe and Gregson (2003) identify three paths for disposal of objects. They state that the primary reason for disposing of items is to make space and de-clutter, listing the disposal dispositions as philanthropy, economic/political critique and money making. Philanthropy principally concerns donating goods to charity shops and it has been found that even those who do not shop in charity shops may be happy to donate to them (Horne and Maddrell, 2002). Donations may be given to a particular charity in which the donor wants to support for personal or general reasons, indicating that individuals consider the wider value of their commodities and the impact that they can make (Horne and Maddrell, 2002; Crewe and Gregson, 2003).

Economic or political critique of consumption is a more recent phenomenon as consumers have become more aware of the negative social and environmental effects of manufacture, materialism and waste (Franklin, 2011). There is also a growing awareness of the built in obsolescence of products, 'that manufacturers deliberately made things that would quickly become obsolete' and thus the need to more regularly be replaced (Franklin, 2011, p.159). This leaves consumers feeling deceived and taken for granted, so they aim to make sure their unwanted items are reused. Similarly, this provides a motive for purchasing second-hand items (Crewe and Gregson, 2003; Franklin 2011). Through extensive qualitative empirical research, Crewe and Gregson (2003) argue that second-hand consumption is not only about exchange of money and goods, but also

about exchange of knowledge, stories and practical information. This is particularly true in the case of the car boot sale, where buyer and seller can meet face to face. Linked to this a significant reason for some individuals to avoid a charity shop is fear of the unknown. This idea is reinforced by Horne and Maddrell (2002, p.50) who say that: "A significant proportion of shoppers resist all sales of second-hand goods, particularly clothing, because of fear of previous owners – or fear of their traces of disease, death, sex and other bodily functions".

There is no reliable data on how large, or small, a proportion of the population regularly buy second-hand items, yet this inherent risk factor is consistently cited as a reason not to procure second-hand items (Brooks et al., 2000; Crewe and Gregson, 2003). The risk factor is heighted when not only is an individual consuming on the behalf of someone else, but that other person is a small, fragile (or seen to be fragile) or child. Being a parent is a social as well as biological construct (Alwin, 2004) and as such is wrought with emotional dilemmas based on acceptable and unacceptable norms of childrearing. This in turn has an impact on parental consumer rationalisations (Alexander and Higgins, 1993; Theodorou and Spyrou, 2013).

In the wider retail market trends have played a part in altering perceptions. The idea of buying cheap, second-hand goods may be perceived with a stigma, but attitudes to buying second-hand clothes in particular have become significantly more positive in recent years, partly due to the increased fashionability of vintage styles (Dubin and Berman, 2000; Franklin, 2011).

### 1.3 The second-hand consumer

The literature concurs that the primary motivation for purchasing second-hand items is financially determined (Brooks et al., 2000; Crewe and Gregson, 2003; Williams and Paddock, 2003; Guiot and Roux, 2010). Yet, it has also been suggested that motives can be more complex than pure financial necessity (Belk et al., 1988; Guiot and Roux, 2010). A study by Arnould and Bardhi (2005) suggested that second-hand shopping (thrift) combines both utilitarian need and hedonic treat. Working on Miller's (1999) statement that there are two types of shopping: provisioning and hedonic; the authors argue that more than any other type of shopping, second-hand consumption straddles both of these concepts.

Guiot and Roux (2010) attempt to identify the motivations for second-hand consumption. Their 8-point motivation scale identifies the diverse reasons why consumers partake in such an exchange. Guiot and Roux's (2010, p.366) motivational findings are as follows:
1 Search for fair price;
2 Gratificative role of price;
3 Distance from the system;
4 Ethics and ecology;
5 Originality;
6 Nostalgic pleasure;
7 Treasure hunting;
8 Social contact.

The primary motivations centre on financially economic gains, as previously suggested. Ethical or politicised motives are listed third through the desire to distance oneself from the capitalist system. Note that this socially politicised motivational factor comes before environmentally politicised factors. These are followed by reasons which it could be argued are both socially and personally motivated, the desire to look or be different, and the pleasurable act of searching for second-hand items itself.

Within existing literature on second-hand retail, there is a lack of studies focusing on second-hand consumption and the retail of baby things. Mintel (2011) found that three in ten parents were happy to buy baby items second-hand, and we might safely assume that many more accept such items as 'hand-me-downs' from family and friends. Clarke (2000) uses the term 'trafficking' to describe the movement of the children's wear

in second-hand markets, suggesting perhaps an 'underground' form of consumption. Indeed as second-hand exchange has previously been described as a 'risky' activity; this is perhaps exaggerated when the items in question are as intimate as clothing for a young baby. Clarke (2000) studied a nearly new sale of second-hand baby clothes and toys and found that regular discussions took place on the sales floor as buyer and seller exchanged anecdotes and used the items for sale as mutual reference points to their own family life. The bazaar-like atmosphere of the sale is bounded by friendship and solidarity as much as thrift as the buyers and sellers feel united as parents and members of the particular mother's group. This friendship creates a greater level of trust than in other less personal sites of exchange and buyers feel more comfortable purchasing second-hand items that have previously been used. No other studies have specifically focused on mothers' of young babies in studying second-hand consumption, yet I believe they offer an interesting channel of research in order to see how ethical consumption can begin at birth.

## 3 Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers to explore their motivations for acquiring baby clothes, toys and equipment through second-hand channels. Participants were not probed on sustainability issues unless they failed to initiate such a discussion once the first set of questions had been posed. Thirty interviews were carried out in total, the majority of which were face-to-face but some were over the telephone. All interviewees had at least one child under the age of eight and most had young babies. Participants were identified through three separate nearly new sales of baby clothes, toys and equipment run at local branches of a national parenting charity. Many of them had also acquired second-hand baby items through eBay, charity shops, specialist secondhand baby clothes shops, car boot sales and freecycle. Two sites were situated in Southern England, in neighbouring counties, and one was held in the Midlands. I carried out participant observation at each sale and collected contact details of those attending as customers, to then follow up with invitations to take part in the interview study. 20% of participants were aged 20–29, 57% were 30–39 and 23% were over the age of 40. Five participants were co-habiting, one divorced, one declined to state, and the rest were married. 66% of interviewees were educated to higher education level, and half had occupations which could be classified as 'higher managerial or professional' not including those who stated that they were a full-time mother/housewife and thus previous occupations are unknown. The proportion of interviewees with a degree is more than double the UK national average of 24% and supports the general assumption that many of the parents involved in the parenting charity are aligned to the middle class.
All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim before being thematically coded.

## 4 Findings

It can be stated at the outset that only two participants cited environmental motivations over and above financial. One mother was a moderator of freecycle and fully adept at making ethical consumption decisions. Of the remainder less than half referenced the environmental benefits without prompt but virtually all of the participants acknowledged the wider benefits of reusing items; it was generally seen to be a common sense issue. In previous consumer studies older and more highly educated individuals, and females rather than males have been found to be slightly more likely to be ethically conscious in their consumption decisions (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005; Bray et al., 2011). With this in mind, we might safely assume that the sample chosen for this research has a higher likelihood of being involved in ethical or sustainable consumption practices as all were female and two-thirds were university educated.

### 4.1 Reuse

Interviewees were quick to talk about the benefits of reusing baby clothes, toys and equipment. The consensus was that it 'makes sense' to reuse these items because as a consequence of babies and young children developing so quickly, they grow out of things before those items have reached the end of their useful life. As one mother explained,

'They grow up so quickly that sometimes there's no point buying new clothing when he grows out of it in a couple of weeks'. Participants are keen to stress the desire to reuse things, with the implication that not reusing goods is wasteful. Such reuse makes for a resourceful consumer and a resourceful parent, a term used often by this young mum, 'So you can buy something brand new for half the price so it's just trying to be resourceful with what you've got'.

The interviewee suggests that being resourceful involves getting the best value for money, the aim being to acquire everything you need as a mother by spending the least amount of money. Indeed it was often implied that it was foolish to buy new items for your children, particularly with things which are seen not to be used very often like wellington boots or special occasion dresses as another mum stated,

*If they go to nursery they need a pair at nursery and then you never remember to bring them home, so you need another pair for home, you might have another pair at granny's house too so you end up with three pairs of wellies in the same size and they wear them for half an hour to splash in a puddle and then not again for a few weeks. So that size welly they might wear for three hours in total. You can't just throw it away.*

In the example above, the mother describes how little used some items are, but also shows that second-hand retail channels are used to acquire additional items which may not be necessary but make life easier, therefore they are 'extras'. Alongside praising the practice of second-hand consumption, many mothers were equally quick to confirm that their children did have new things too, as this second-hand shopper stated, 'It's not like I never buy them anything new but if I can find it at the sale and it looks nice and I think they'll wear it then I'll buy it'. This mother also talks about new items her children had been given as gifts from family and friends, a common narrative in the data. Indeed, it was often felt that they had been given enough brand new items as gifts, and therefore it was acceptable to top up with second-hand things. Mothers were keen to show that their children did not go without. In fact the opposite was often true, that the mothers I spoke to used second-hand channels to buy extra things for their children, a countless supply of different clothes to dress them in, and new toys, books and games to keep them entertained. They could do this without drastically damaging their bank balance or engaging in the mainstream consumer culture. This mother described her charity book habit, which she engages in for both herself and her children, 'I have a complete charity shop book addiction, or just cheap book addiction. There's something very satisfying about buying cheap books from a charity shop'.

Charity retailing allows this mother to satisfy her cheap book addiction without buying up brand new books, she is reusing items. Whether she is saving money is open to debate because she may not buy the equivalent in new books as an alternative; however, her admission that it is 'very satisfying' suggests that she gains more from the practice than financial gains; that she also derives pleasure from such financial savings as suggested by Guiot and Roux's (2010) 'gratificative role of price'. Whilst participants may not have explicitly cited environmental concerns, there was certainly a strong desire to ensure that items are not wasted and if they could get something second-hand, which may even look as good as new, then this was the logical thing to do. Many participants explained that they bought a higher proportion of new items for their first child, and then proceeded to buy more second-hand items once the child was older, or when they had more children. This was for a number of reasons:

1 *Financial motivations*: all of the mothers either cut down their working hours substantially after having their first child, or did not return to work at all; therefore, they had less disposable income. Furthermore, if they had gone on to have more than one child finances had to be shared across a larger family.
2 *Motherly protection*: new mothers were more likely to have concerns about hygiene and safety and were therefore less likely to be comfortable giving their children second-hand things. As they settled into their role and responsibilities, mothers relaxed and became less protective.
3 *Desire for new*: some mothers just wanted new things the first time around, almost as

a rite of passage. Shopping around for the perfect pushchair or cot became part of the process of preparing to be a mother.

4 *Lack of opportunity*: some mothers explained that they did not know about the opportunities available to buy second-hand baby items. The nearly new sales that they had all attended were the perfect example of this. They provide an opportunity to acquire many of the items a new mother needs, all under one roof, yet many new mothers were not aware of these sales until they had given birth and joined a 'mummy network', whether formal or informal.

## 4.2 Disposal

Family homes are often tight for space. Participants cited this as a reason both to oust items and to avoid bringing bulky items (toys, equipment) into the home in the first place. In disposing of their own redundant baby clothes, toys and equipment, all of the mothers interviewed stated they preferred and aimed to ensure that their items found a new home with another family. Many mothers sold items at the nearly new sales which they also frequented as a buyer; others with much younger families noted an intention to do so if and when they no longer had a need for such baby things. Mothers make the decision of whether an item is no longer needed and often goods lay dormant in storage (often packed away in the loft) awaiting the next sale. During this time such goods are not in use, but are still deemed to hold a use value, otherwise they would simply be thrown away. The nearly new sales were actually seen to be a fairly inefficient mode of disposal because of the time commitment required to prepare items for sale, and the fact that some items were always returned unsold. Mothers go about preparing the items for sale; washing, ironing, pricing and generally divesting them of their previous biography so that they are ready for a new owner. One single mother described her frustration drawing on the emotional labour which went into selling items at the local nearly new sale,

*It's irrational that I sell at the sales and I'm glad I'm now at the point where I don't feel obliged to. I used to feel like I ought to. I found the labelling of the items very onerous and I did it because I felt I ought to be able to do that and it's an extra task to fit in the week or so before the sale. I thought if other people were able to do it, I was able to do it but I found it challenging and very time consuming and not really worth the income, that doesn't exactly explain why I did it does it?*

This mother's participation as a seller is clearly influenced by external social pressures. She feels that having taken from the sales, she should give something back. If items were not sold at the nearly new sale they were taken to the local charity shop; the joy of the charity shop being that the only labour involved was bagging up items and transporting them to the store. Unlike the nearly new sale, there was no danger of said items reentering the home. Some mothers were frequent sellers at nearly new sales and had a regimented system of keeping track of items. Some sellers may put items through two sales before giving up; others would spend a significant amount of time researching the best price. It was often felt personally insulting, and certainly disappointing, when items deemed by the seller to be useful, high quality and good value for money, failed to sell. The primary mode of disposal, however, whether considered by the participant's a form of second-hand exchange or not, was very often passing on to family and friends. In the case of close family and friends this would be free-of-charge, but in the case of acquaintances, or perhaps with very expensive items, money was exchanged. Other mothers kept hold of items in the hope or expectation that a close family member or friend would have a baby of their own soon, and therefore the participant looked forward to helping them out by offering items they needed.

## 4.3 Financial motivations

Financial motivations were, generally, reported to be the primary motivation for buying items second-hand. Within this category, participants were divided between two streams (although some teetered on the boundary). Approximately one-third of mothers felt that they could not afford to buy certain items new, at least not the quantity or quality of items that they preferred. The other two-thirds were more opportunistic second-hand shoppers,

making purchases as described previously, which were deemed as extras, not necessities. The former were far more likely to have acquired large nursery equipment second-hand as well as clothes and toys, the latter were more likely to buy new nursery equipment, but second-hand designer/branded clothes and countless books and toys to keep their children engaged and stimulated.

For mothers with greater financial restrictions, second-hand retail channels provide a lifeline and they weigh up every penny. For others, buying items second-hand is more of a pleasurable and social activity. This mother of two regularly shops for second-hand items with a friend and said, 'Me and my best friend frequently shop second-hand, in fact it's become a competition. We revel in it, it's part of the game to spend as little money as possible, but there aren't many people like that'. According to this study (and other existing studies) there are, in fact, a number of people like that. These consumers derive pleasure and satisfaction from getting a bargain, or in the case of freecycle (occasionally used by the mothers), something for nothing. Often they are proud of showing off their bargains, as this mother describes being praised by her husband, 'My husband actually said, you know, you've got a really good bargain that's a really lovely toy'.
This clearly gave the participant satisfaction, knowing that she had done a good job for finding this toy. Participants know how to spot a bargain because they have an idea in their head of what an item is worth new, and therefore what it is worth second-hand. Some even do their research before going second-hand shopping, using the internet to check the going rate of particular items that they want to find cheaper through alternative channels.

## 4.4 Environmental awareness

Sometimes it was clear to see that financial motivations prevailed over environmental, as evidenced by the following short quote, 'If I think it's nice but its 7 quid, I could buy something down Sainsbury's for that kind of money, I wouldn't buy second-hand for that'. This mother is not alone in her view and as mass-produced basics like simple cotton baby-grows can be bought so readily and cheaply in the supermarket or on the high-street, many mothers would choose to buy these items new. In this particular instance, this is deemed to be the 'common sense' thing to do, whereas for more expensive items it is seen to be most sensible to sacrifice the new for better value for money.
As previously stated, the majority of participants see the ethical and environmental benefits in reusing items whether explicitly stated or not. They may not relate this to environmental concerns, but rather a general sense that the items themselves will 'go to waste' if they are not reused when they still have life left in them. There was also a sense that another child should have the chance to use an item, if it had been useful to the participant's own child and/or gave them pleasure.

Participants also demonstrated ethical motives in describing the manner in which buying second-hand items can support a charitable good cause. As one mother explained,

*I like supporting charities. I've just finished working for a charity; I never*
*really have enough money to donate money. I never really have enough money*
*for that, so I tend to buy my Christmas cards from charity shops and tend to buy*
*books from charity shops.*

This was also part of the case for attending the nearly new sales, which as a charity fundraiser, were seen to be a way of helping the charity and indirectly, other parents and babies. As part of the desire to be a green parent, a number of participants used reusable nappies. On four occasions this was brought to my attention because the participant explained that they had acquired these nappies second-hand. This was also followed by a justification for why they would buy them second-hand, as they clearly felt this practice needed to be defended. Often, they had been purchased from the nearly new sales and as such, participants had used the sale environment to receive advice from others about how to use them.

Other participants talked about ways in which they had 'failed' to be a green parent. As this mother of one explains,

*I'm trying to send back the Johnsons baby wipe packets because they say if you keep them and you send them back they recycle them. Well I haven't managed to send them back yet, there's about three in there and a full one and like twenty others. My family are getting fed up with me. I tried reusable nappies but I just couldn't cope with it. I literally couldn't cope with anymore washing than what I do already so we do use disposable nappies so you're filling up the landfills, so I'm trying to do my little bit towards the world and haven't quite managed it. Trying to do my little bit but I'm not doing wonderfully.*

Being a green parent tended to be considered an extra burden. It was more expensive, or more time consuming, or more work. With the practice of buying, or otherwise acquiring, second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment, however, came often a greater number of advantages to outweigh the disadvantages. Parents could pick and choose what they chose to buy new and what they chose to acquire second-hand. Second-hand retail channels saved parent's money and a number of alternative channels were available to them.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

This study identified a number of overlaps with the existing literature on second-hand consumption, suggesting that motivations for buying second-hand items are the same, whether a consumer is consuming for themselves or on the behalf of someone else (a dependent child in this case). As found by Guiot and Roux (2010) for second-hand consumers more generally, mothers too are primarily motivated to buy second-hand items for financial gains. This has become a greater motivation as time has passed over recent years, whether this is due to the impact of the economic recession or because many mothers were earning substantially less than they had been before becoming a parent. Williams and Windebank (2002) previously identified the 'excluded consumer' as someone who, through financial hardship, had been excluded from conventional channels of retail and hence had to resort to alternative forms of exchange, namely second-hand exchange. Whilst this study did identity consumers who said that they simply could not afford to buy new items, it was felt that the consumers identified by Williams and Windebank were far more deprived than anyone who took part in this study. All participants actually talked about the satisfaction of acquiring cheaper goods through second-hand channels and certainly did not appear deprived. This was partly due to the sampling frame, as participants were recruited through just one type of retail channel, nearly new sales.

This satisfaction or gratification of price is again a point previously found in the existing literature (Brooks et al., 2000; Guiot and Roux, 2010). Indeed this study comes very closely aligned to WRAP's (2013) findings that 27% of second-hand purchases directly replaced the purchasing of new products. These were necessities, whilst the other two-thirds were additional extras, bought second-hand as an impulse buy. Many mothers showed evidence of this through buying additional books and toys to stimulate their children, even though they knew they had 'enough' of these items in actuality.
All participants agreed that it made practical sense to acquire items second-hand if they were good value for money and fit for purpose. This is because children generally grow out of clothes, toys and equipment, long before those items have reached the end of their useful life. Mothers strived to ensure that items were not wasted and that redundant items of their own went on to provide pleasure or assistance to other families. This may not have always been related explicitly back to environmental issues, but there was certainly an ethical motivation in getting the most out of items which had been purchased. For this ends, mothers looked for high-quality items and brand names (which were deemed to be high quality) with the expectation that they would last long enough to be reused by multiple families. Participants were searching for what Manno (2002) would call High Commodity Potential (HCP) goods. Items which provided the greatest social satisfaction per unit of energy and materials used, i.e. good quality goods, which could be reused a number of times.

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on sustainable consumption by

highlighting the potential advantages of consuming second-hand baby clothes, toys and equipment. Such items are well suited to these exchange networks because they are used relatively few times, due to the restricted time period for which they are useful to the consumer. Second-hand consumption is seen to be the ultimate in sustainable consumption because it requires no further resource use and diverts products from landfill. Social differences in consumption practices were touched upon in this study yet require further investigation. In terms of how parents can shape the consumption habits of their offspring, a recommendation for further study would be to interview parents of older children and the children themselves, ideally utilising a longitudinal study using parents who currently make environmentally conscious consumption decisions on the behalf of their children to see how this impacts the children's choices as they grow older.

## Acknowledgements

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