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Becoming Respectable: Low income young mothers, consumption and the pursuit of value

Journal:	*Journal of Marketing Management*
Manuscript ID	RJMM-2013-0296.R4
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords (headings not selectable):	Identity < Consumer research, Consumer culture < Consumer research, Gender, race and sub-culture < Contemporary perspectives in marketing
Methodologies:	interviewing
Free Response Keywords:	Teenage mothers, Low income consumers

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Becoming Respectable: Low income young mothers, consumption and the pursuit of value

Abstract

Teenage mothers find themselves caught between two discourses: the irresponsibility of youth and the responsibility of motherhood. We unravel some of the complexities surrounding the performance of socially approved 'good mothering', from a social position of restricted resources. We demonstrate the relevance of Skeggs' (1997) notion of respectability in order to forge a deeper understanding of how young, low-income new mothers seek to secure social value and legitimacy via the marketplace. We identify a number of consumption strategies centred around identification and dis-identification, yet we recognize that young mothers' careful marshalling of resources, in relation to consumption, risk being misread and could leave young women open to further scrutiny and negative evaluation, ultimately limiting their opportunity to secure a legitimate maternal identity.

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

Statement of contribution

We contribute to work on less privileged consumers, specifically the consumption and associated value-accrual of low-income young mothers. We explore how young women negotiate teenage motherhood (and its associated stigma) and when faced with a social position of constrained resources and choices, seek to achieve a legitimate, valued maternal identity via identification and dis-identification consumption strategies. We frame our understanding using Skeggs' (1997) notion of respectability and our exploration of young women's consumer behaviours sheds light on issues of class and value within the realm of consumer and transformative research and marketplace interactions.

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Becoming Respectable: Low income young mothers, consumption and the pursuit of value

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

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Introduction

Debbie's narrative illustrates the dilemma facing young mothers caught between the discourses of the irresponsibility of youth and the responsibility of motherhood. Debbie's story firstly hints at the often judgemental discourses around young mothers and how Debbie seeks to counter views that she is too young to be a responsible mother. Secondly she illustrates the drive by a young, low-income mother to prioritize her baby's needs; and thirdly her narrative demonstrates the emphasis she places on expensive consumption in her drive towards respectability, in order to realize her goals of achieving a valued personhood (Skeggs, 2011, p.503).

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There are a number of studies within health, sociology and youth studies (e.g. Duncan, 2007; Ponsford, 2011; SmithBattle, 2000, 2005, 2006; Wilson & Huntington, 2005; Yardley, 2008) which focus on motherhood in a range of socio-economic circumstances and social positions. Apart from notable exceptions such as Hamilton and colleagues' research, there have been few studies focused on the consumption experiences of low-income families and mothers in marketing (Glass, Hamilton & Trebeck, 2013; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Hamilton, 2012). We explore how young women on low incomes respond to the challenges of mothering within the socio-economic and cultural contexts of their lives as new young mothers Our argument revolves around young mothers' positioning between two discourses: the irresponsibility of youth and the responsibility of motherhood (Breheny & Stephens, 2007) and how their 'public performance of oneself as a "subject of value"' (Skeggs & Loveday 2012, p.475), operates within the confines of an identity that has become delegitimized and understood as abject or value-less. Whereas for many women, their social position is reinforced by motherhood, for younger women with more limited resources, the intersection of their age with motherhood sets up a contradictory and more threatening social position. We briefly review research on motherhood and consumption, alongside the work of Beverley Skeggs (e.g. 1997; 2011).

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Literature Review

Motherhood in the UK and the context of young mothers

Motherhood is celebrated in many women's identity projects, and it is regularly positioned as 'women's supreme achievement' (Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991, p. 9) and a 'dominant, expected and glorified marker' (Martin, Schouten, & Stephens, 2006, p. 257). Yet views of motherhood are not always positive. Wilson and Huntington (2005) identify the 'good/bad mother dichotomy'; mothers who fail to meet normative expectations become

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positioned as deviant and unfit parents (p. 61). Dispute centres on the right age at which to become a mother, with contemporary views prescribing the ideal child-rearing ages as between 20 and 40 years old (Phoenix et al., 1991). Age can, therefore, outweigh the significance of motherhood as a potentially celebrated status; illustrated in our example by Debbie's desire not to be seen as a child.

Much criticism stems from a social construction that positions adolescent mothers as in the process of developing maturity, which is assumed to limit their mothering skills (Breheny & Stephens, 2007); society, young women and their children are all positioned as victims (Duncan, 2007, p. 307). This critique often derives from the choices that mothers are presumed to have made; younger mothers have chosen 'early motherhood', a path that is out of step with the 'middle-class script' (SmithBattle, 2005) that involves planning around education, career/income, finding a partner and then becoming pregnant. However, as Duncan (2007) points out, this view ignores the fact that many of these women are already 'off script' having experienced childhood poverty, lack of academic success, temporary and low-paid work. Early motherhood compounds these disadvantages and escape from poverty becomes more unlikely (Graham & McDermott, 2006, p. 22).

Academic approaches to understanding early motherhood have been criticised. For example health literature tends to focus on the negative outcomes of early motherhood and teenage pregnancy is understood as something to be assessed and managed (Breheny & Stephens, 2007). However, more recent academic studies have questioned these negative assumptions and focused more on the positive aspects for younger women of having children, making them 'feel stronger, more competent, more connected to family and society, and more responsible' (Duncan, 2007, p. 316). Mothering can provide an important catalyst for maturity, lending women a sense of purpose and meaning (SmithBattle, 2000, p. 35). Teenage mothers, themselves, position motherhood as a route to maturity (Banister, Hogg, &

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Dixon, 2012; Breheny & Stephens, 2007; McDermott and Graham, 2005; SmithBattle, 2005, 2006; Yardley, 2008). And Duncan (2007, p. 313-315) argues that any links between outcomes are based on correlation rather than causation and do not take account of the opportunities that young women see as offered by teenage parenting.

Consumption and motherhood

Maternal identities have attracted increasing attention within marketing (O'Donohoe, Hogg, Maclaran, Martens, & Stevens, 2013). Prothero's (2002) introspection about her consumption choices in approaching parenthood was followed by other studies concerned, broadly speaking, with examining how women develop a valued maternal identity (e.g. Carrigan & Szmigin, 2004; 2006; Jennings & O'Malley, 2003; Miller, 2013; Patterson & O'Malley, 2013; Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006; VOICE, 2010a; 2010b). These prior studies focused on middle-class participants from 'socially appropriate' maternal age groups who often fitted within the 'celebrated' ideal (Phoenix et al., 1991) of motherhood. But how do women outside these normative maternal identities accrue value?

Debbie's narrative suggests that consumption choices can provide her with important reassurances regarding her abilities as a good mother. Lawler (1999) positions working class women's concern with material things as political because of what it can represent: exclusion on the grounds of class and a yearning for legitimate cultural capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1987). If the working classes are excluded from many accepted routes to legitimate personhood, where does this leave young working class women when they transition to the potentially valued motherhood identity? Omitting younger, working class, low income women from marketing and consumer research studies focusing on the importance of consumption in women's maternal identities risks misrepresenting the wider socio-cultural context of what it means to be a mother in contemporary society (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). This study seeks to

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partially redress this balance and develop understanding of how young women, socially positioned as low income and working class, perform identity work through consumption.

Maternal identity work and class

Faircloth (2013) emphasises the importance of considering mothering as identity work in order to 'highlight the active processes by which identity is constructed' (p.31). There is a particular need for younger mothers to carefully manage their maternal identity work given their place at the intersection of motherhood, age and usually a lower social position (due to their limited resources). The interaction of different identity categories can result in complex and contradictory social positioning and associated identity work, contrasting with the reinforcing social positioning of middle class new mothers. Younger mothers are, therefore, vulnerable to stereotyping, stigmatization and deviancy discourses (Arendell, 2000), which largely focus on their assumed universal incapacity to do a good job (Ellis-Sloan, 2014).

Sociologists have problematized the 'normalcy' of middleclassness in the dominant symbolic order (Lawler, 2005), suggesting it fails to recognise working class value systems (Skeggs, 2004). Whereas in the past poverty and privilege were discussed primarily in terms of equality and wealth distribution, these debates have been reframed and now focus primarily on questions of individual life choices and conduct; the socially excluded are no longer seen as victims, but rather as failures in self-governance who have made poor life choices (Gillies, 2005). A number of critical social theorists see New Labour in the 1990s as a turning point, involving a pathologisation of working class parenting whereby those who do not fit with normative citizenship become scapegoats or 'revolting subjects' (Tyler 2013); this is also reflected in more recent policies and the language of austerity which distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor. Some New Labour initiatives, such as Surestart

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and parenting classes, implied that working class parents needed to be taught how to raise middle class children (Gillies, 2005). The popular press regularly feature women's maternal identities with particular attention paid to female celebrities' maintenance of a glamorous, groomed and composed image through pregnancy and motherhood. Captured by the term 'yummy mummy' (O'Donohoe, 2006), this aspirational and somewhat mythical status provides a stark contrast with a range of alternative stigmatised maternal identities. Negative maternal identities pertaining to younger women are exemplified by the Vicky Pollard caricature that appeared as part of a popular BBC comedy show 'Little Britain' (Tyler, 2008) and widely adopted terminologies such as 'chav' and 'pramface' (Nayak & Kehily, 2014).

In our opening example, Debbie is aware that she is being 'othered' an interpretation which reflects middle class identity work whereby 'looking down on people' is used as an important point of differentiation; that is 'not being the repellent and disgusting 'other'' (Lawler, 2005, p. 431). In Skegg's (1997) work around working class women, respectability is understood as one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class; it is positioned as an aspirational standard, essential for the pursuit of social value and legitimacy. Skeggs's (1997) theorisation owes much to Bourdieu's (1986) ideas around economic, cultural, social and symbolic capitals; which also reflect other feminist sociologists' discussion of class as linked to practices as well as its relational nature, involving "differentiation and exclusion… and… active identification" (Levine-Rasky 2011, p. 246). Skeggs (1997) identifies the limited opportunities that working class women have to access or increase capital assets (p. 9) when compared with a more easily available positive working class male identity (p. 74) and notes that those women positioned as abject lack opportunities for symbolic challenge (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012). Skeggs' argument around resources resonates with the cultural lens that Anthias (2005, p. 33) applies to interpreting social position as involving different levels of

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resources (e.g. Bourdieu's capitals) while 'social positioning' is about how we contest and challenge these social positions (Levine-Rasky, 2011, p. 247).

One of the important strategies proposed by Skeggs (1997), in the pursuit of respectability, is dis-identification; what Skeggs (2011) terms a defensive claim for value. Working class women use dis-identification in order to distance themselves from stereotypes of working-class femininity, which might incorporate consumption practices associated with clothing, leisure activities, homes and women's bodies (Skeggs, 1997, p.95). However, this understanding incorporates a belief that working class women wish to 'pass' as middle class, and class is therefore presented as a 'structuring absence' in women's search for respectability (Skeggs, 1997, p. 95). In later work, Skeggs (2011) took a slightly different stance. She builds on Gillies (2005) and depicts motherhood as a contested ground wherein working class mothers take a discerning approach to their quest for respectability. While they did not want to identify as working class, given the associated stigma, the women in her study also rejected the middle class position due to its 'lack of care for others' (Skeggs, 2011, p. 504). The women in Skegg's study therefore sought to shape the form that respectability took, producing alternative (local) circuits of value (Skeggs, 2011). Skeggs (2011) is, therefore, critical of Bourdieu's (1987) analysis of value-accrual, suggesting it does not allow for the formation of personhood and value for the working classes; those with the 'wrong' capitals. While the middle classes are seen to protect their interests through processes of 'symbolic boundary-marking' and exclusionary practices around high culture, Skeggs (2011) suggests that a more refined understanding of person-value would incorporate an appreciation that 'different material conditions offer different possibilities for value accrual' (p. 509). An example of alternative means for value accrual (e.g. in the site of motherhood) is the relevance of care, (Skeggs, 2011). Care is understood by the women in Skeggs (1997) to involve 'hands on' practices of care. This understanding allows working class women to

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engage in social positioning against middle class women who 'farm out' their children and are, therefore, understood to behave in an 'uncaring, unnatural and irresponsible' manner (Skeggs, 1997, p. 71). In this case value is generated through social connections and the prioritisation of others (their children) as opposed to 'investments in distinction and self' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012, p. 487).

Skeggs' (1997) understanding of class combined with consumer research into the consumption experiences of low income women (e.g. Glass et al., 2013; Hamilton & Catterall, 2006; Hamilton, 2012) provides us with a starting point to explore how young women on low incomes work towards the achievement of a legitimate maternal identity. Our study is framed within wider social and political debates and in particular, discourses around motherhood and young mothers. We identify research gaps, firstly concerning the lack of insight into how younger mothers, faced with resource constraints perform identity work through consumption, as they seek to identify themselves with the responsibility and respectability associated with motherhood; and secondly the relative absence of the perspectives and voices of young mothers themselves about their experiences of identity work as they manage their search for respectability via the marketplace (McDermott & Graham, 2005).

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Methods

We report findings from interviews with seventeen women (table 1), recruited via a National Health Service (NHS) antenatal service for younger women (below the age of twenty) in the north of England. Informants were interviewed twice; once during the third trimester of pregnancy and once during the early months of their baby's life. Unfortunately, despite a number of attempts to contact them, four of the original seventeen participants

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could not be traced for the second interview, reflecting the transient nature of some of their living arrangements. The researchers adhered strictly to University and NHS ethics committee guidelines. Prior to interviewing, all informants were briefed about the nature and aims of the study, such that they were able to give fully informed consent to participate. Informants received a small gift (vouchers) to thank them for their participation.

For the first interviews, the women's ages ranged from 17 to 19 years; 14 of the women were in a relationship with the father of the baby, one was in a relationship with a man who was not the baby's father and two of the women were single. Eleven of the women had been in education when they became pregnant, while four were employed (e.g. catering, childcare), and two were unemployed; many were living in temporary accommodation, and between three and five of our informants were officially categorised as homeless either prior to, or at the time of, the first interview (see table 1 for further details).

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours in length, with the average interview lasting one and a half hours. An interview guide was prepared with a number of topics/issues concerned with informants' lived experiences of pregnancy and motherhood. Rather than adhering strictly to these topics, as far as possible we pursued a conversational style in the interviews. Field notes were written immediately after each interview. These field notes were typically descriptive and focused reflections that might not be adequately captured within the interview data (e.g. living conditions).

Our approach to data analysis reflected hermeneutic concerns (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994) in order to engage with individuals' lived experiences, whilst recognising that these interpretations and understandings reflect 'broader cultural viewpoints that are implicitly conveyed through language' (p. 432). We pursued a part to whole strategy whereby our initial understandings were developed through an iterative process which involved

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moving backwards and forwards within and between informants' data (Thompson et al., 1994). Initially within-case understandings were forged across informants' transcripts and field notes. Transcripts were read and re-read in order to identify patterns, themes and higher levels of abstraction (Spiggle, 1994). A wide number of themes emerged as part of this process (such as body image, lifestyle changes, support structures, perceptions of health services). Attention then moved towards performing a cross case analysis. We moved back and forth between the data and literature in order to refine understanding, a process that reflects both emic and etic concerns, in order to further develop analytic categories. It was at this point that our particular interest in women's social positioning and classification as young mothers, and the impact this has on their navigation of consumer culture emerged, and our approach developed from open coding to something more akin to axial coding (Strauss, & Corbin, 1998). All authors then re-reviewed the analytic categories, revisited the data, and wrote an agreed interpretation of the data, including the primary and secondary themes that were uncovered.

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Table 1: Table of informants

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

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

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Findings and interpretation:

Becoming respectable: consuming towards responsible and socially appropriate mothering

We began this paper with an extract from Debbie whose words encapsulate some of the issues faced by young mothers (e.g. surveillance and judgement, conflict between age and mothering status, lack of confidence in mothering abilities), and a sense that the marketplace presents an opportunity to support or demonstrate how (well) she is doing as a mother. Embedded in Debbie's story are two main approaches used by women to alleviate the conflicted status of young mothers, achieve respectability (Skeggs, 1997) and become a subject of value (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012). These two approaches emerged from our data, yet are presented briefly here to help readers navigate the findings (figure 1). On the one hand young women seek dis-identification from the (perceived) flawed label of teenage mother. Consumption is key to this endeavour and helps young women to adopt an alternative, more mature positioning – as a capable or good mother – essentially a means to perform respectability to a range of different audiences, some more public (e.g. wider community) than others (e.g. family, friends and peers). In addition, consumption serves the function of aiding women in the demonstration of love and care which is central to the role of the good mother (identification strategy). So, in Debbie's case the purchase of expensive baby products provides support for her attempts to be seen as a good mother. We frame these strategies within the sociology literature in order to contribute to understandings of how issues of class should feature within understandings of marginalised consumers' attempts to secure legitimacy via the marketplace, essential in their attempts to secure a valued maternal identity and social positioning.

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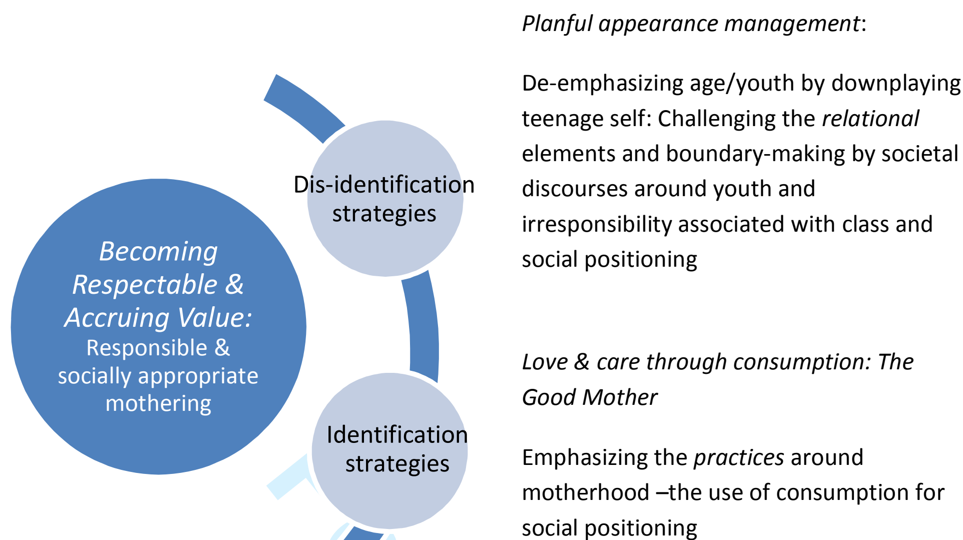
Figure 1- Becoming Respectable: Value accrual and the good mother identity



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Strategies of Dis-identification: Planful appearance management

Historically, appearance has been understood as an important cultural marker; 'the means by which women were categorised, known and placed by others' (Skeggs, 2004, p.100) and part of the boundary making that marks class as relational (Anthias, 2005). Our informants seemed aware of the classed nature of femininity and the importance of clothing as a means to demonstrate 'respectable' femininity (Skeggs, 2004). Given their conflicted identity status (as *young* mothers), and informed by discourses of appropriate and normative maternal identities, women used consumption choices around appearance and self-management to display a more mature image centred on the avoidance of negative imagery.

Planful appearance management: The public presentation of the good mother

Certain styles of clothing were associated with young women by our informants, but were not deemed respectable attire for mothers. Jenny explains how her clothing and appearance has changed since becoming a mother; reflecting an effort to present herself in such a way that she (and a wider societal audience, the local community) will consider appropriate.

> I just cover up a lot more now. I don't wear all the low-cut tops and stuff that I used to…if I was going round in low-cut tops and skimpy skirts and stuff... pushing the pram…people are going to look at me you know… I wore make-up before and I don't wear as much now because I used to wear all brightly coloured eye-shadows and stuff like that but now I just stick to my browns and my golds and stuff. [Jenny, I2[5]]

[5] I1 and I2 refer to the first of second interview

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Jenny purposefully manages the potential conflict between age and motherhood, seeking to privilege the practices associated with mothering, by changing her appearance to reflect an image she feels is more suited to parenthood. In describing how she adapts her clothing and make-up, Jenny indicates an understanding of what she needs to do to present an 'acceptable' maternal identity. Her narrative reflects the concern demonstrated by Skeggs' (1997) informants who sacrifice a concern with 'fashion' for the sake of 'middle-class respectability' (p. 85); modesty is understood as 'central to the formation of middle-class femininity' (Skeggs, 2004, p. 100), and thus an important boundary marker for social positioning. Jenny is relearning feminine practices. She is using her new consumption practices of clothing and appearance to dis-identify from the category of youth (cf. Skeggs' [1997] participants' denial of working class forms of femininity), aiming to 'mask' (Hamilton, 2012) her youthful appearance, or at the very least deflect attention and contest a less favourable social position. Developing a revised version of femininity allows Jenny to avoid risking standing out due to exhibiting the 'wrong' tastes. Her efforts reflect the disparity between adolescent attributes and indicators of *good* motherhood (Breheny & Stephens, 2007). Her concealment of sexuality (e.g. adopting more modest styles of clothing, neutral colours) hints at an embarrassment about her fertility, which combined with her relative youth becomes a signifier of shame (Nayak & Kehily, 2014). However, the juxtaposition between her teenage self and the pram (a tangible marker of motherhood) she is pushing emphasises her youth and sexuality. This *incompatible* juxtaposition (child/adult role) has been picked up in popular vernacular and media, whereby 'pramface' is used as an insulting term to refer to young mothers, or even those who look like they could be young mothers (Nayak & Kehily, 2014). Jenny seeks to 'pass' (Goffman, 1963) by constructing a more *normative* maternal identity, through concealing the attribute which, in this context, leaves her most open to stigma and discrimination – her youth.

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Jenny's concern with managing her youthful appearance contrasts with the idealisation of youth found in other contexts (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). With the intersection of age and mothering status (as identity categories), she no longer has society's permission to experiment with fashion, colour and skirt hem lengths as she is now in the fast lane to adulthood (Graham & McDermott, 2006; Yardley, 2008). In pursuing a valued personhood, she has become focused on the need to fit in with society's conception of what a (good) mother should look like. Jenny's response to this potential stigmatisation is to appropriate items and meanings associated with acceptable mothering.

Other informants reflect similar concerns in their choice of clothes, in order to assume respectability in the eyes of others. These appearance management efforts also reflect the impact of informants' cognitive age, the age they feel, rather than their chronological age (Guido & Amatulli, 2014). A number of our informants reported this disconnect: '….even if you're sixteen/fifteen, once you're carrying a baby you're not a child' [Pamela, I1]. Our informants were aware of the signals they transmitted in their personal choice of dress and performed in line with a discourse which equated teenage motherhood with bad mothering and did what they could to distance themselves from what they saw as the typical image of a teenage mother, in order to seek a more respectable, legitimate and valued mothering status.

Planful appearance management: (Not) dressing baby (in)appropriately

Our informants' concern with appropriate appearances extended to their babies. In the two extracts that follow, informants draw on the negative discourses surrounding young people and clothing choices, in order to seek differentiation from other young people in the area in which they live, applying social categorization knowledge within the in-group (Park & Rothbart, 1982) and creating boundary markers to resist negative social positioning.

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> I don't want him [her baby] in like tracksuits and stuff like that… because a lot of lads round here nowadays wear their tracksuits and I think it just looks tacky. [Jenny, I1]

> My friend's got her son sort of like a fake Nike tracksuit and I don't like it.… he just looks like a little chav [laughs], I don't like it. [Tina, I2]

Jenny and Tina function as active subjects, seeking to distance themselves from the stereotypical consumption choices of white working class youth (Nayak & Kehily, 2014). For these participants, awareness of the chav identity myth (Cocker, Banister & Piacentini, 2015) informed attempts to forge distinction from negative youthful images of motherhood; an attempt to gain respectability and value through identity distancing (Skeggs, 1997). Certain items (e.g. tracksuits) and specific (generally sports) brands of clothing emerged as associated with the chav image, and while they were favoured by some young women others specifically channelled expenditure in order to differentiate themselves from this potentially stigmatising identity (Tyler, 2008; Nayak and Kehily, 2014). This illustrates the importance of the audience; these young mothers were effectively *othering* their peers in order to mark themselves out as different, not *that* kind of teenage mother. Women practised dis-identification (Skeggs, 1997) in order to pass as 'implicitly respectable' (Nayak & Kehily, 2014, p. 1337), which necessitated setting up boundary markers of inclusion and exclusion. Yet in so doing, our participants partially accept the chav label as applicable to their peers or the 'lads round here' (Jenny) and become engaged in the policing of the *distasteful* consumption choices of *other* younger mothers (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition, through their emulation of what they perceive to be higher-cultural capital consumption (i.e. *not* chav), they implicitly support and uphold normative middle-class standards of mothering (Lawler, 2005), signalling the importance of the relational elements associated with class and their own social positioning.

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Identification strategies: demonstrating love and care through consumption

In the opening extract, rather than looking to her competencies as a mother in line with markers of intensive mothering, (Hays, 1996), Debbie turns to her interactions with the market for proof that she is doing a good job as a 'competent carer' (Nayak & Kehily, 2014). Debbie's reliance on expensive products to achieve respectability stems from her feelings of being under surveillance (Kirkman, Harrison, Hillier, & Pyett, 2001; Ponsford, 2011), recognition that she risks being judged and criticised for failing to provide for her baby adequately. Her focus on specific categories – nappies, milk and wipes – demonstrates an emphasis on core items associated with everyday baby care. They are also categories where clear brand leaders (and associated advertising spend) exist, and consumption takes place in public environments where the threat of surveillance is highest. She addresses a range of audiences here; her own family, friends and peer groups, but also the wider community gaze (e.g. in the supermarket checkout queue). The focus on comparatively low individual cost items (but with a cumulatively high spend) could indicate an attention to items that offer her the highest returns with regards to identification; effective (identity) signalling yet with a comparatively small outlay.

Brands as providing positive identity markers

The prioritisation of expensive brands was most noticeable in decisions around the purchase of nappies (Ponsford, 2011). The vast majority of our informants chose to buy the more expensive branded nappies (i.e. *Pampers* and *Huggies*), which they interpreted as providing the best for their children, deflecting signs of poverty and signalling that the baby is being well cared-for.

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> We buy in bulk [*Huggies*], so they're not that expensive when you buy in bulk. I don't really look at any of the other ones. We were in between *Pampers* and *Huggies* because we like to get her good ones. [Lucy, I2]

Lucy discusses the careful management of resources (e.g. buying in bulk, looking out for offers) which emerged not only as an essential skill, given her challenging financial situation, but also provided important signals of 'responsible' or more adult parenting. Being a good mother meant rising above personal financial circumstances and providing well for your child.

> She's got everything, I always make sure she's got nappies, milk, food, clothes, the lot, baby wipes, I always make sure she's got everything before I get anything. I always have done and always will. [Debbie, I2]

Debbie's careful allocation of resources and attempts to do the best for her child fits with notions of prioritisation and selflessness which are essential for a caring identity (Skeggs, 1997) and the demonstration of care through consumption (Pugh, 2002). Babies' needs were prioritised and met and if there was nothing left over mothers would 'go without' (Darlene). This is in stark contrast to the self-centred behaviour often attributed to young mothers (Breheny & Stephens, 2007) and fits more closely with Miller's observations concerning the selflessness of contemporary (new) mothers (1997) and Skeggs' (1997) emphasis on the caring self as a key signifier of respectability.

The consumption choices (e.g. focus on branded goods) of Debbie and Lucy function within working class value systems and successfully signal respectability to their peers, both as signifiers of quality products and a mother's commitment to her child. However, middle class women do not face the same pressure of negative evaluation on the grounds of consumption and level of expenditure, and their ability to meet the needs of their children in a

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financial sense is not questioned, they are able to seemingly cut corners yet achieve a valued personhood. Skeggs (2011) emphasises the relevance of varying material conditions in understanding the 'different possibilities for value accrual' (p. 509) or the social positions described by Anthias (2005). For younger mothers a demonstration of adequate financial means is necessary as it is often assumed that they have insufficient income to provide adequately for their children; consuming branded goods is perceived as an efficient way to dispel such assumptions and to challenge and contest the associated social positioning of being an inadequate mother.

Reframing second hand goods and accepting financial constraints

A point of complexity emerged around the acceptability, or otherwise, of second hand goods. For some women the use of second hand goods, particularly in the area of baby rearing, was perceived as an admission of failure, reflective of a lack of responsibility in planning and inadequate financial resources to provide for the baby and give it the best start (Ponsford, 2011), a measure of 'a fitness for motherhood' (Nayak & Kehily, 2014, p. 1341). In the following example, Debbie finds herself unable to associate second hand goods with the demonstration of love and care through consumption.

> My mum wanted me to get a second-hand pram and I didn't want a second-hand pram because I thought well someone else has used it, it's horrible and no, I just don't want it. [Debbie, I1]

In contrast, second-hand items could reinforce a positive image of being prepared for motherhood, reflecting an adult and practical approach to managing the careful allocation of limited resources (in line with a strategy of identification). Distinction was often made between those items with a known history (e.g. hand-me-downs from friends), and those where the history is unknown (Ponsford, 2011). This contrasts sharply with alternative

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contexts (e.g. some middle-class consumers) where second-hand goods are re-positioned as vintage or chic thrift shop finds, reflecting rich histories (as part of the appeal) and creativity and expertise on the part of the shopper who has managed to hunt down such finds.

Darlene discusses the imagery conveyed by pram choices, and suggests that her choice of a second-hand but 'decent' pram will contrast favourably with the prams that 'other' young mothers tend to use.

> I think when you have a pram, it tells you about the person.... I've noticed a lot of young girls don't really have nice prams. [I: When you say it tells you about the person, what do you mean?] Like cheap.... Because you can get a pram nowadays for £120 brand new, one of them prams that I've just been telling you about.... But I wouldn't have been able to afford a decent … a big … well I wouldn't have been able to afford a brand new pram, do you know what I mean? The one that I wanted, it was like £600-odd and I wouldn't have been able to afford that. So I just got one second-hand. [Darlene, I1]

In highlighting her consumption practices, Darlene differentiates herself from 'other' younger mothers; there is an interplay of strategies of identification (realistic assessment of her financial situation and sensible decision making) and dis-identification at work ('a lot of young girls don't really have nice prams'). Darlene consumes in relation to an audience (young mothers) who will read quality in the same way that she does. She prioritises the type of pram (cf. Thomsen & Sørensen, 2006) and its original price, and positions the second-hand nature of the pram as of lesser importance

In coming to terms with accepting second hand items, women embarked on a process of repositioning items as fit for consumption. Here Jenny describes her mother's advice to accept second-hand items.

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> My Mum turned round to me and said you want to take anything that you get given because you know, if you don't have the money to get it, then you're buggered basically. So anything that anybody's wanted to give me, anything, I've just took it...At the end of the day, it's things for her. I see it as people have given it to her, I don't really think of it as second-hand. [Jenny, I1]

Jenny's approach is legitimized by her mother and provides acknowledgement of her difficult financial position. She identifies the prevailing needs of her child and positions the goods as gifts to her daughter, which she accepts without question. In framing the items as 'gifts', Jenny implies that she is acting under obligation, rather than 'choice'. She side-lines some of the negative connotations sometimes associated with second-hand items, such as poverty, and prioritises her baby's needs in such a way that is necessary to achieve respectability.

Using an alternative repositioning strategy, a wicker baby basket is re-framed as a family inheritance. The terminology adopted – 'heirloom' - captures Tina's emotional attachments with the item and its endowment with positive meanings, including tradition and sentimental value.

> I've got a wicker basket, which… it's sort of like a family heirloom sort of thing; I was in it when I was a baby and my sister's been in it and it's 43 years old because my Dad was in it when he was a baby. [Tina, I1]

In constructing the cot as a family heirloom, Tina is also able to reject the potentially stigmatizing associations of accepting second-hand goods. The reframing of second-hand goods – e.g. as gifts to the baby, family heirlooms, and as savvy ways to give children the best within a budget - speaks to the various ways teenage mothers negotiate their identities using counter narratives, their need to justify the choice to consume second hand goods,

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create alternative routes to value accrual (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012) and respond to varying audiences (e.g. peers, family, others) with potentially different class infused value systems.

Discussion

We explored how young women negotiated teenage motherhood (and its associated stigma) and when faced with constrained choices, worked to develop a valued mothering identity. Skeggs' (1997) notion of respectability, as well as her later work which encourages fuller understandings of the formation of value-accrual and personhood in alternative material conditions (Skeggs, 2011), framed our understandings of issues of class and value within the realm of consumer research. Our opening story featured Debbie, who, in questioning her proficiency as a mother, reveals the importance she attaches to choices around consumption and expenditure and their role in value accrual. Debbie navigates consumer culture and prioritises her spending in such a way that highlights her social positioning and classification in society. Skeggs (1997) identifies respectability as a concern only for those who do not have it: 'it is rarely recognised as an issue by those who are positioned with it, who are normalised by it, and do not have to prove it' (p. 1). Yet those who lack respectability are identified as lacking in social value (Skeggs, 1997); value that is accomplished through the assignment of legitimacy (McKenzie, 2015). While motherhood is marked as a particularly important site for value production, teenage mothers are often positioned as subjects without value (e.g. Tyler, 2008; Nayak & Kehily, 2014): 'abstract and irresponsible, ungovernable, dirty white, pointless and useless… a drain on the nation' (Skeggs, 2011, p.502). This illustrates how something of value (motherhood) can become illegitimate (McKenzie, 2015) and how complex and contradictory the effects on social position and social positioning can be when multiple structures intersect (Anthias, 2005; Brah & Phoenix, 2004). In our case we

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focused on the intersection of age and motherhood within a sample of young low-income women, yet we acknowledge that the picture is more complex than this focus suggests. This focus could be usefully widened to incorporate more consideration of other socially and culturally determined structures such as gender, education, work and marital or relationship status, reflecting that individuals are positioned at the intersection of multiple identity structures and categorisations, which can bestow advantages and disadvantages on individuals' social position (Gopaldas, 2013). Our interpretation is based on this group of young, financially constrained young women yet, for example, a young woman from an obviously middle class background and/or with family support/independent financial means may be perceived differently and therefore experience motherhood differently.

Our findings demonstrate support for Skeggs and Loveday (2012) and the importance of developing class-based understandings of value. We identify two main consumption strategies employed by young women in order to adopt (mothering) performances worthy of respect from the dominant social order. Firstly, women practice distancing from the potential threat of the teenage mother, akin to the dis-identifications of working class women in Skeggs' (1997) study. The stigma associated with teenage motherhood seemed to be present both within informants' direct circles and also when exposed to additional audiences – for example while out shopping in the city centre. Secondly, women aim to amplify love and care through consumption (Miller 1998) - a strategy of identification (with good/ socially appropriate mothering). This understanding of good mothering seems to be primarily informed by our informants' families and local communities (not withstanding high marketing spend by many brands), hence the focus on branded goods such as nappies, that many young women have seen their mothers use. This emphasis contrasts with the reported disdain for materialism expressed by the middle class mothers in Miller (1998). These two overall consumption strategies (identification and distancing) contribute to women's identity

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work (Faircloth, 2013), allowing young women to demonstrate their competence in providing for their infants, a move towards respectability. The young women in our study pursue legitimation which necessitates a repositioning or reimagining (Nayak & Kehily, 2014) of themselves; the pursuit of value via respectability despite their exclusion from the many forms of capital that have previously been presumed necessary for value accrual (Bourdieu (1987).

We provide support for Ponsford's (2011) findings, that material culture and consumption potentially provide value to young mothers; both as a means to demonstrate competence as a parent but also to deflect potentially negative evaluations of poverty or a presumed inability to adequately provide for their children. In some cases women attempt to 'pass' (Goffman 1963), through constructing an acceptable, more conservative and normative (and therefore potentially legitimate), maternal identity (e.g. through presentation of self). But their consumption also makes acquisitive claims for value, a means through which these young women can demonstrate a caring self (Pugh, 2002; Skeggs, 1997). This focus on consumption as caring could provide an example of women generating alternative notions of what it means to be a 'subject of value' and demonstrates the complexity of young women's identity work given that value is 'what matters to people' (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012, p.475). Women face the challenge of performing to a range of audiences with varying notions of value (e.g. differing interpretations of sports brands). This tension has been picked up elsewhere (e.g. Wilson & Huntington, 2006) and is reflected in the derogatory use of the term *chav*, used to demonstrate excessive consumption yet aesthetic impoverishment (Hayward & Yar, 2006). There is a danger that in seeking to demonstrate respectability (Skeggs 1997) to one audience (e.g. peers) some young mothers try, yet fail, to enact scripts associated with higher cultural capital, akin to the challenges faced by other lower cultural capital informants (Ustuner & Holt, 2010). Our findings, therefore, illustrate the challenges of communicating

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by consumption due to different understandings of value (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012). While some consumption practices may be legitimised within the context of their peer group, young women could be left open to further scrutiny and negative evaluation by society, whereby their consumer behaviour and consumption practices may be *publicly misread*, given middle class value systems which assert that money should not be wasted on expensive possessions (Ponsford, 2011). Further to this potential misreading of consumption signals, low-income women are susceptible to branding and advertising, as they struggle to consume to be a *good* mum, and this could risk increasing their vulnerability in the marketplace (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg 2005).

It is clear that young women feel the need to deflect attention from their youth, given the stigmatising effect of the intersection between age and motherhood. However, there is a danger that in doing so, the normative middle-class ideal of motherhood is upheld and privileged. In this sense consumerism and the marketization of motherhood contributes to existing social barriers which prevent young low income mothers from feeling valued beyond their peer group, in the production of positive mothering identities (Glass et al., 2013). From a Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) perspective (Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, 2011), the motherhood ideal needs to be challenged and dismantled in order to support low income mothers and for *alternative* maternal identities to emerge, be accepted and celebrated, allowing young mothers to be positioned as subjects of value (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012) and legitimised (Tyler, 2013). There is also the danger that instead, the roles associated with the *good* mother will continue to expand (Hays, 1996; Furedi, 2008) so that an *acceptable* or *good* maternal identity becomes increasingly distant from the realities of young or low-income women. Activities and experiences (e.g. baby massage classes, swimming lessons and music classes) are likely to be far beyond the reach of the young mothers in our sample, yet these more experience-based expenditures and time spent with

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parents are known to make more of a contribution to children's development and well-being (Ipsos MORI & Nairn, 2011) than the consumption and display of goods and its equation with good parenting. Very recent debates highlight the importance of the first five years to child development through play (Malik, 2013) and from a policy perspective it is important that this message reaches young and low income mothers, but getting that message across could risk stigmatising young mothers further and projecting vulnerability, which in itself can cause harm and denigration (Baker et al., 2005).

Given that many of our informants' interactions with older adults (outside the family) are likely to be with professionals in support capacities (e.g. health, housing and social services) it would be naïve to claim that we successfully dealt with perceived power imbalances or all fears associated with presumed authority or disclosure (Ellis-Sloan, 2014) in our research approach. This may have impacted on the detail of some of the responses, and provided a reason to present 'a self that did not tap into negative stereotypes' (Ellis-Sloan, 2014, p.4). There were also a number of challenges associated with keeping track of our informants, many of whom were living in temporary accommodation at the date of the first interview (see Table 1). While work in rural studies points towards links between residential locations and middle class performances of class and gender (Butler, 2007; Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst, 2005; Stockdale 2010), our sample seemed very mobile (or even 'placeless'); while we followed one set of voices we lost track of a small number of our participants. We may have inadvertently prioritised the voices of those women who were more likely to engage with normative ideals of motherhood and who were largely successful in their attempts to work towards a legitimate maternal identity (e.g. increased stability in their living situations; engagement with the NHS teenage midwifery service), as opposed to those who had less opportunity to mobilise the necessary resources and had lower levels of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Our study suggests the need for a careful and detailed reading of what

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might initially be seen as 'homogeneous groups' and the development of understandings that reflect the socially embedded nature of consumption experiences (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

We recognize that in our roles as researchers we offer interpretations based on our lens and location (e.g. class) and our access to different forms of capital and knowledge (Skeggs, 1997). However, we believe we have progressed towards forging an understanding of the consumption experiences of these women living in very different circumstances from many of the consumers featured in earlier consumer research studies (e.g. Thompson, 1996). Glass et al. (2013, p. 207) refer to 'cultural fraud': the encouragement (through upward comparisons) of aspirations and goals that are unhealthy because they are unattainable, which in legitimising particular identities and versions of personhood reflects a form of symbolic violence (McKenzie, 2015; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). The element of sacrifice that is so core to contemporary models of motherhood (e.g. Hays, 1996; Miller 1998) is played out in these young women's narratives via the prioritisation of consumption around the baby and informs an emergent mothering identity: 'young mothers re-image themselves as respectable, good providers and "good mothers"' (Ponsford 2011, p.556). Yet it is this very act of re-imaging and the counter narratives (Arsel & Thompson 2011) which are forged, that could leave young mothers with low incomes open to exploitation by marketers (Baker et al., 2005; VOICE 2010a). The very pursuit of value and respectability and women's commitment to prioritizing socially acceptable mothering, via consumption practices, may have the effect of marginalising young women further, within the market place and wider society.

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