

Mother, consumer, trader: Gendering the commodification of second-hand economies since the recession

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Abstract

In Western contexts, 'hand-me-down' and sharing economies of children's clothes, toys and equipment remain one of the most normalised cultures of second-hand consumption. This paper explores the strategies used by mothers to realise the most economic value from these economies in current austere times with the increased possibilities offered by the democratisation of informal buying and selling spaces. Drawing on an ethnographic study of mothers participating in nearly new sales in the UK, the paper outlines the myriad moralities influencing mothers' everyday consumption, use and disposal of children's goods. It argues that providing material goods for children is a thrifty skill with mothers thinking past point-of-purchase to the resale potential of second-hand items. This strategy of trading used children's goods is a practice to circulate resources in the family and keep up with the commodification of childhood.

Introduction

The cost of raising a child in the UK, from birth to 21 years, has been estimated to be £227,266, or more than £10, 000 annually¹. Since the first 'Cost of a Child Report' in 2003, this cost has increased by 63%, partly due to the rising cost of formal childcare as well as more mothers returning to work after taking shorter periods of maternity leave (CEBR 2014). The global economic recession of 2008 put pressure on many families in the Global North, not just financially but also psychologically, and shaped the much-quoted 'age of austerity' we find ourselves in today (Bramall 2013). A recent call to attend to the 'everyday practicalities and moralities' (Hall 2015: 148) of consumption in austere times has led to a growing body of work on the multiple ethics of consumption, thrift and frugality (Evans 2011; Hall 2015; author 2017) and sharing economies in times of crisis (Hall and Ince eds. 2017), with a renewed focus on everyday experiences of families and households (Cappellini and Parsons 2013; Pimlott-Wilson and Hall 2017; Hall 2016). This attendant focus on everyday material coping strategies within the home provides the context to this paper, which explores the role of second-hand economies as an opportunity for mothers to practice thrifty consumption and trade.

Baby and children's goods align favourably with second-hand economies because such goods are only useful to one family for a limited period of time. Although the routes for acquiring and divesting of these items may be socially, culturally and geographically moulded, the use and passing on of used baby and children's goods is

¹ This includes childcare, food, clothing, recreation, holidays, hobbies and school subsistence, but not independent school fees.

one of the most normalised of the second-hand economies, at least evidence by research in the UK (Clarke 2000; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Author 2017). As we have already seen, being a parent is also an expensive activity so it comes as little surprise that one in five parents bought more second-hand goods for their children in the early aftermath of the financial recession (Mintel 2012). The relationship between income level and participation in second-hand economies is not linear however. For example, it has been suggested that access to, and participation in, these networks is shaped by class, with working class mothers keen to distance themselves from second-hand goods (Ponsford 2014) and middle-class mothers participating not as 'excluded consumers' (Williams and Windebank 2002), but as thrifty social agents (Author 2017).

Despite there being a healthy body of literature on second-hand consumption and diverse economies in different contexts (although little, perhaps, comparative to the profusion of such economies in everyday life), scholars have traditionally placed less focus on the continual circulation of these things in and out of the home. A notable exception to this is work on consumption and divestment by Gregson and Crewe (2003). However, their research on second-hand cultures was completed before the 2008 financial crisis, and before mobile applications (i.e. smartphones and tablets) and online platforms (i.e. eBay, Facebook, e-commerce) democratised buying and selling practices. This paper argues that the trade of second-hand baby and children's goods is a strategy employed by parents, in this case 'squeezed middle-class' mothers, as a resourceful tactic in current austere times. Objects are thus commodified and considered at point of consumption for their innate exchange value (often relying on symbolic value) and not just their use value to the family. This strategy could be regarded as a rupture from the 'moral economy' of motherly consumption discussed to date (Miller 1999; Clarke 2000).

The empirical contribution to this paper draws on UK-based ethnographic research in and around the 'field' of nearly new sales, including thirty interviews with mothers (and expectant mothers). Nearly new sales host the buying and selling of second-hand baby and children's clothes, toys and equipment between parents and local others. The resultant discussion focuses on the way some mothers commodify this field as a particular coping strategy that moves beyond motherly practices of thrift seen before. To provide context to this discussion, two strands of literature are now considered. A review of second-hand economies juxtaposed with the historical gendering of production and consumption creates a framework where gender and consumption intersect.

The circulation of goods through second-hand economies

'Second-hand' is the term used to describe goods previously used by another or indeed, multiple others. Other descriptive terms include used, second-cycle, pre-loved and thrift. Thrift is often used in the US to denote second-hand goods (Arnould and Bardhi 2005; Medvedev 2012), but in this paper thrift is used in a broader sense to denote resourcefulness (to the point of competitiveness) in provisioning (Miller

1999). The growth in research on second-hand cultures stems from a call to engage critically with everyday consumption – to see the extraordinary in the mundane – and subsequent adoption of both practice theory and ethnographic methods. Where consumption research traditionally focused on the value of material goods, economically and symbolically; it now pays closer attention to what consumption can tell us about *social relations* (Hurdley 2006; Woodward 2007) on the premise that consumption is not a practice enacted in a vacuum, but rather a moment of almost every other practice (Warde 2005).

Studies of consumption and trade other than the traditional retail sites include investigations of British charity shops, (Gregson, Brooks and Crewe 2000; Horne and Maddrell 2002), car boots sales (Gregson, Crang et al 2013), markets (Watson 2009), eBay and online sites (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010) and nearly new sales of children's goods (Clarke 2000; Author 2015). Elsewhere in the world research has been conducted on thrift stores, outdoor markets and garage sales (Arnould and Bardhi 2005; Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988). The organisation of these sites differs according to how they are culturally and geographically situated, and vary in the way they overlap with, or deviate from, conventional first-cycle retail sites. The motivation for consumers to participate in these economies is equally complex. Whilst we can broadly place second-hand consumers in one of two categories, the 'excluded' (Williams and Windebank 2002), utilitarian consumer and the desire-led, hedonistic consumer, these categories are fluid. The social and financial disadvantage marking the excluded consumer leads to a stigma attached to second-hand goods (Williams and Windebank 2002; Ponsford 2011). For other consumers, those where second-hand economies are used to supplement more mainstream forms of consumption, participating in second-hand economies can be a form of politicised/ethical consumption, a way of differentiating oneself with personally curated artefacts and an enjoyable 'treasure hunting' activity reflecting the pleasure aspect of shopping theorised in mainstream retail (Guiot and Roux 2010; Gregson and Crewe 2003).

Divestment too, defined as entailing 'the separation of people from their things' (Gregson, Metcalfe and Crewe 2007: 187), can be linked to varied motivations. Gregson and Crewe (2003) largely conceptualise divestment as the 'ridding' of things to make space in the home. Through their own extensive ethnographic study in the UK, the authors evidence three 'disposal dispositions'; philanthropy, economic/political critique and money-making. Actors can be motivated by more than one of these dispositions with Gregson and Crewe (2003: 115) investigating 'the processes and mechanisms through which commodities cross the putative boundaries between different categories of value'. In their research, money-making is largely the domain of self-identified traders, whereas everyday consumers are more likely to donate items to charity, family or friends, simply to remove them from the house while simultaneously diverting them from the rubbish bin (deemed as wasteful). The topic of divestment has not been revisited in light of the 2008 global recession, a time when consumers tend to engage in practices of 'trading

down, staying home, eating in, and “making do” (Carrigan and Pelsmacker 2009: 677).

Interestingly, Gregson and Crewe (2003) position the money-making disposition as a masculine pursuit, arguing that pursuing capital from used goods, or trading to supplement low incomes, was bound within a masculine, functionalist discourse. This entrepreneurial practice can be juxtaposed against literature that argues women are more likely to sacrifice their own consumption, or ‘go without’, in times of scarcity (Cantillon and Nolan; Cappellini 2014; Valentine 2008) and more likely to engage in disproportion hours of unpaid domestic labour in the home (Boyer and Dermott et al 2017; Pahl 1983). A large part of this unpaid labour is linked to the circulation and use of things, washing, sorting and mending. Pink (2007: 170), for example, highlights the gendered nature of laundry as an everyday practice depicting ‘moral statements about the ‘right’ way to be a woman’. This has been extended further to demonstrate how the sorting, cleaning and mending of children’s clothes are shaped by a moral discourse of ‘doing’ mothering (Author 2015). Each of these studies sit within broader cultural and feminist research on the circulation and dwelling of things in the home, as before reaching the stage of divestment, objects must be moved through this sorting, cleaning, mending process (Gregson 2007; Hurdley 2013; Woodward 2015).

Gendering production and consumption

In the gendered labour market, 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 (1999:75) discusses this as follows:

The home became associated, particularly during the nineteenth-century . . . 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’. Since the early twentieth-century marketers have exploited and reinforced these gendered divisions by directing the consumption of food and children’s goods towards women (Schor 2004). Although women’s employment opportunities and earning power has increased greatly since the 1950s, and men have taken a more active role in the home, on average women still do a larger proportion of the domestic labour (Boyer and Dermott et al 2017; Morgan 2011). Rather than decrease domestic duties, and in line with the discourse of ‘intensive mothering’, it has been suggested that women are now expected to bring the leadership and organisational skills honed in the wage market into the running of a household (Hays 2006; Perrier 2013).

In the case of mothers, Cook (2008) identifies the mother as ‘co-consumer’, assuming both her own, and her child’s, needs and desires. Motherly consumption cannot be regarded as a subjective, singular practice but as bound within a complex web of social norms, expectations, anxieties and desires (O’ Donohoe, Hogg et al 2013; Martens 2010). Miller’s (1999; 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. 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).

Because women often take on the role of managing household finances and ‘co-consuming’ on behalf of others, it has been suggested they are more likely to bear the burden of economic crisis (Goode 2009; Hall 2016; Valentine 2008). In addition, although men’s opportunity in the labour market was hit hardest by the 2008 recession in the immediate aftermath, it is women who may have been disadvantaged longer-term. This is due to job losses and pay-freezes in the female-dominated service sector, reductions in part-time contracts and overstretched employers unable to live up to the call for greater flexibility in working hours (Boyer and Dermott et al 2017; James 2011).

Women have long sought ways to manage wage-work with domestic duties (Bell LaValle 2003; Duberley and Carrigan 2012; Ferber 1982). In the 1950s, Tupperware’s successful direct sales model enabled women to balance their domestic role with entrepreneurial activities at a time when women’s employment outside the home was assumed to have a variety of negative influences on marriage relations and child development (Hoffman and Nye 1974). For Clarke (1999) Tupperware parties 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. These and other direct-sales models (such as Avon and Ann Summers²) created flexible income-generating opportunities for women within the traditionally gendered practice of consumption (Storr 2006). Recently, attention has been focused on the controversially named ‘mumpreneur’; a category of female entrepreneurs co-called because they are motivated to set up a (small) business that enables them to manage paid-work with childcare responsibilities (Ekinsmyth 2011; Duberley and Carrigan 2012). Motivated by a range of push and pull factors, mumpreneurship is posited as a way for mothers to overcome the role conflict of managing wage-work with domestic responsibilities. This paper now continues by charting another way, albeit limited,

² Both of these companies work on a gendered business model of female representatives selling products through catalogue and party sales to other women. Avon sells beauty, personal care and household items. Ann Summers markets lingerie and erotic toys.

mothers adopt an entrepreneurial mind-set to bring motherhood and market together for their strategic advantage in the trade of second-hand children's goods.

Methodology

Approach to data collection

Ethnographic methods were employed as is common for exploring everyday, domestic consumption and divestment practices (Miller 1999; Horne and Maddrell 2002; Gregson and Crewe 2003). Ethnography is tasked with finding the remarkable in the mundane (Silverman 1993) by describing phenomena as they occur in naturalistic settings (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). In particular, I took a realist approach to the ethnographic task working from the ontological perspective of reality being 'out there' waiting to be discovered (Skeggs 1995). I am however, aware of the concerns situating the social constructionist argument and use this awareness to acknowledge my own positionality during data collection and analysis.

Fieldwork largely took place within the 'field', to use Bourdieu's ([1979] 2010) term, of nearly new sales. I use the term field because I found that the nearly new sales had their own set of customs, rules and knowledges, distinct (although overlapping) from other first- and second-hand consumption sites. I also found that particular forms of social and cultural capital were key to success in the field, for example, the knowledge of when to arrive at the sale to get the best bargains, or having friends who may put items aside for one another. The field was also institutional in that all of the sales were affiliated to UK parenting charity; a national charity that supports and campaigns on behalf of new and expectant parents. Nearly new sales are one of the local services offered to parents through volunteer-led branches across the UK. My research was not only supported in-kind by this charity but was also financially sponsored by them as they wanted to know more about who attended the sales, for what purpose and in what way participants benefitted.

Within the above context I conducted in-depth ethnography at three nearly new sales; attending volunteer pre-sale meetings, volunteering at the three sales and using the sales to recruit interviewees. I attended a further ten sales across England and Scotland for participant observation purposes only. In addition, and as part of the ethnographic approach, I participated in meetings with head office staff (for example, the fundraising co-ordinator, volunteer co-ordinator and research manager) and immersed myself in online communications associated with the organisation of the sales (for example, the charity's own intranet and branch social media pages). A field diary was kept throughout the fieldwork period, supplemented by photographs of the sales. The three branches chosen for in-depth ethnography were sampled based on a mixture of convenience and purposive sampling with locations that were socially, economically and geographically varied yet convenient to access. These locations comprised a large, diverse Midlands city branch, an affluent, historical city in the South East, and a more economically deprived South coastal town. I conducted participant observation at each of these sales as a nearly

new sale volunteer. I also used the sales to recruit interviewees by conducting thirty in-depth interviews with mothers in the weeks and months following the sales. The fieldwork took place in 2012 and 2013.

Interviews

The interviews, most often conducted in participants' homes, provided further insight into the mothers' domestic consumption and divestment practices in a way inaccessible through the observation at the sales alone. As Silverman (1993:91) highlights, open-ended interviews, usually based on prior, in-depth participant observation' is a robust ethnographic approach enabling the researcher to triangulate their own observations with the words of those under study. Interviewees were recruited by distributing short paper-based questionnaires to all participants arriving at the three sampled nearly new sales. This approach was used to engage participants in the research process and prompt their interest in participating in a later interview. Those who wished to volunteer as interviewees were asked to leave their contact details on the questionnaire, allowing me to later approach a strategic sample by email or telephone.

Interviewees varied in age group from 20-24 years to 40+ with the most popular age range being 30-34 years (akin to the UK average³). Two (both in their twenties) 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. This means that the sample were nearly twice as well educated as the general working age population where 38% are graduates (ONS 2013). All were white British apart from one respondent who was of Turkish origin. Most were either married or co-habiting, one was divorced and living alone, another was in a relationship living alone. All of the interviews were semi-structured and lasted 40-70 minutes. Three were conducted on the telephone at the participant's request whilst others were face-to-face. Interviews were voice-recorded for transcription purposes.

Data analysis

Interviews were conducted for this study on the belief that talk data is a tool for developing a greater understanding of participants' lives (Valentine 1997; Horrocks and King 2010). I approached the interview transcripts not as naturally occurring talk data, but rather constructed in a particular setting and for a particular purpose, acknowledging that talk is always situated socially, spatially and temporally. An interpretivist approach to data analysis was therefore taken.

Interview data analysis took the following structure:

³ In 2015 the average age of all mothers to newborns was 30.3 years and the average age of first-time mothers was 28.5 years (ONS, England and Wales)

1. Conduct semi-structured interviews – Note contextual points in field diary
2. Transcribe interviews verbatim – Note any thoughts/themes throughout.
3. Categorise interviews by interviewee demographics/variables.
4. Code talk data by theme and sub theme (interpretative coding) – annotations in NVivo.
5. Write synopsis of each interview transcript, including key themes raised and any points relevant to discourse analysis.

Field notes and photographs were not stored in NVivo, although they could have been. Instead, I referred back to this data for details about the sale before the interviews and used the data to list key themes that could be triangulated with the talk data.

Findings

Investing

The impression of saving money was the primary motivation for consuming second-hand goods for all bar one of the mothers interviewed. As I have explained elsewhere (Author 2013), the mother not primarily motivated by cost was instead motivated by ethics. This mother's consumption practices were largely shaped by environmental concerns; a concern that encouraged other mothers in the study but as a positive *consequence* of using second-hand economies, not a primary motivating factor. For all of the other mothers it was the economic aspect of utilising second-hand economies that was emphasised:

Interviewer: What would you say is the main motivation for buying baby items second-hand?

Sally: Cost really. And because people do buy things, not use them and sell them again. So you can buy something brand new for half the price, so it's just trying to be resourceful with what you've got.

Sally was a first-time expectant parent at the time of interview, busy preparing for the birth of her child. Sally was a young mum (aged 20-24), married, living in the South of England with a limited but comfortable income. She received many baby clothes and equipment passed on to her by friends and acknowledged that she felt happier receiving second-hand goods this way rather than purchasing them through unknown avenues. She is however aware that she needs to be 'resourceful' and highlights a 'common-sense' narrative expressed by other parents, that baby goods can be barely used by one family before they are moved on, and therefore these baby goods are well-suited to second-hand economies (Gregson and Crewe 2003). While Sally had yet to experience motherhood, most of the interviewees had one or two children and were able to discuss a range of avenues used for procuring second-hand children's goods, including eBay, charity shops, car boot sales, eBay and other online networks, and family, friends and neighbours. As one interviewee, a mother of two stated, 'it's saved me hundreds of pounds'.

Buying second-hand rather than new goods could therefore be described as a cost-saving strategy, although such thrifty practices have also been depicted as simply an excuse for over-consumption (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Miller 2012). Here I want to focus on particular thrift strategies I do believe to be an economic device. As part of the provisioning strategy of mothers particular skills are enacted; namely research and planning, to ensure cost-efficiency gains are made. One mother of one and children's centre worker, Tracey, describes how she rationalises how much she is prepared to pay for a second-hand item:

Because I know quite a bit about what things would be full price in the shops, through advising other people and, I generally, if I've thought of something like shape sorter I will check it out and see what's out there in the shops before buying a used one.

Other mothers mirrored Tracey's account of researching the cost and features of new, and indeed used, products in-store or online as part of the planning process before attending a nearly new sale. The assumption being that as new nearly sales are specialised solely on goods related to infants, children and maternity, there is a good chance they have a version of a particular item a parent could be looking for⁴. Gregson and Crewe (2003) previously identified this research practice as 'commodity knowledge', a form of capital critical to gaining from second-hand economies. As part of this 'commodity knowledge' approach, Tracey goes on to say:

I have looked at the price to see how much I could sell things for [at the sales] because he's in reusable nappies so I've had a look at packs to see what other people are selling them for.

At the time of the interview Tracey had yet to sell any children's things; her son was just five months old. However she shows signs of thinking ahead to the future, planning how she may be able to recuperate some of the cost of parenthood by selling her used goods on, in this case reusable nappies⁵. Tracey then was already looking at the resale potential of an item that currently had (immense) use value to her. For many mothers it was this resale value that actively encouraged an initial purchase of children's goods. Cathy, a mother of one in her late twenties, describes how the perceived innate value of particular goods influences what she buys second-hand:

⁴ At medium and large size sales, most items a parent could want are available, often in multiple versions. In this sense, nearly new sales have the convenience offered by first-cycle retail outlets and do not require the same time commitment for searching as charity shops or car boot sales.

⁵ Despite suggestions in the literature that certain intimate goods, and/or items worn close to the body, are undesirable in second-hand markets for fear of their contact with 'leaky' bodies (Gregson and Crewe 2013, Author), reusable, cloth nappies were a popular and commoditized second-hand product for many mothers.

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.

Generally it is the branded goods that mothers believe hold their value, as well as particular on-trend products such as infant sleeping bags. A number of mothers spoke about looking out for branded goods that they would not, or could not afford to, buy new. In ethnographic observations at the sales, volunteers were quick to pick out these items as something special. In interviews the desire for these goods was always constructed around pragmatic considerations; both that such items are of higher quality, 'they wash and wear well', and that they hold their value, as Cathy highlights above. Such practice was therefore always constructed as part of a thrift normativity and not linked to the symbolic significance of the brand although by mentioning particular brand names we can assume mothers are well aware of the symbolism attached to such brands.

Divesting

The nearly new sales provide a fairly easy route for parents to sell on their used baby and children's clothes, toys and equipment and realise some capital from these items. As an interview with the volunteer responsible for managing the vendors at one, average-sized, sale said, 'Some people made close to £200, I think most people make £50 to £60'. Some sellers, the interviewee acknowledges, made no money at all, but this she put down to over-ambitious prices or simply having a handful of items in the sale. Whilst some parents put items in to sell at the sales largely as a moral act of reciprocity (see Author 2017), others take a more systematic approach to realising the best financial value from their used objects:

Interviewer: What do you do with items that don't sell at the sale?

Lisa: I know now not to price stuff too high so 60-70% of stuff sells.

Everything that comes back that I don't sell, I sort out. Anything that I think well maybe the season wasn't right or I priced it too high, I'll put in the loft so I can just get them out at the next one [sale]. Anything I think, well maybe it's a bit tatty, I'll put in the charity bag.

Lisa, a divorced mother of two and nursery-school worker, demonstrates the way in which items end up in different second-hand economies depending on their value; either making money for herself or for a charity (which to her is mostly an easy route for disposal). Lisa situates herself as a knowledgeable and experienced consumer-trader of children's goods. By participating in the nearly new sales as a buyer and volunteer for three years, she observed a way to capitalise on her knowledge of, and access to, second-hand markets by adopting trade practices:

Interviewer: So what sort of things do you look out for for that [selling on]?

Lisa: High labels. High-end. I look for Boden, Joules, any designer label. You find that, I don't go and buy at [sale A] because those labels aren't there, but they are at [sale B]. I had a lady when I was a volunteer who used to bring her clothes to me and every item she had was Ralph Lauren, Boden and Joules, and I used to look at what she had, and she would put things in at £10 and she was selling all of it. So I was like, well that's quite interesting. So you can either, if I saw them in a charity shop I'd pick them up and put them into the nearly new sale and make a little bit of money. Or I can look for those items at the sale cheaper, and then sell them on eBay. So I do make a little bit of money but then I think the seller has got what they want for it, I know I can sell it on eBay for £10. So everyone's a winner.

Lisa is therefore buying and selling some children's goods purely to make money and not as a way to realise capital after using an object herself. Her belief that 'everyone's a winner' quashes any suggestion that this practice is not ethical, even though a key part of her business model is utilising the charity-run sales. She also had the 'geographical knowledge' (Gregson and Crewe 2003) as well as the social and cultural knowledge (or capital) to know how to best benefit from the nearly new sales in different regions. Lisa is effectively a trader, calling her eBay sales a 'sideline'.

There was evidence from meetings with nearly new sale volunteers that a very small proportion of those participating in the sales are doing so commercially. In the case of one London-based sale, they were happy to have a regular commercial seller attend the sales on the basis that funds are still being raised for the charity. In Lisa's case she describes how she had raised £150 selling second-hand children's clothes in the last two months and would use that money to pay for her daughter's seventh birthday party. Therefore her commercial sales can therefore be seen as a strategy to supplement her income with this extra money going back to the household/her children.

Lisa clearly describes the labour involved in her buying and selling practices. Other interviewees such as Kim, quoted below, highlighted this exertion of labour, but unlike Lisa, saw it as barrier to repeated participation as a seller:

I have sold loads in the past but it sort of takes over your life. The month before the sale you just spend every minute washing, ironing, labelling up, when I worked out afterwards how much time I'd spent and how much money I'd made it was about 25p per hour that I'd earned, so you'd probably do better on eBay. Particularly things which are more the designer end of the market.

It is interesting that Kim worked out her effective hourly-wage for a domestic practice that she may anyway, at least in part do, to prepare items for storage or to pass down to friends and family. A journalist by profession, Kim clearly feels that

her time is better spent elsewhere, but like other mothers acknowledged a moral obligation to pass items back through the nearly new sales because she herself has benefitted. As an economic decision however, Kim feels it is more efficient to sell on high-value goods individually (such as through eBay) and offer low-value items to charity shops. There is a limit to her moral practice therefore as she expresses a desire move away from selling at the sales now she feels she has done her bit to 'give back'.

Only once in an interview was there explicit mention to the 2008 financial crisis when an interviewee, both a sale volunteer and mother of two suggested:

I have noticed that, I don't know if it's something to do with the recession, but we used to get really quite nice, I wouldn't say designer, but brands like Boden, you'd get a lot of that in the sales but I think maybe people have had less money to spend on new clothes so that does seem to have had an effect on what turns up second-hand at the sales.

While it may be the case that fewer branded goods are being purchased new, evidence presented here also suggests that used branded clothes are being diverted through other, potentially more profitable avenues, such as eBay.

Discussion

As Cook (2013:75) 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, this paper sought to highlight the manner in which mothers commodify the market of second-hand children's things as a strategic device in household provisioning. This finding diverts from the moral economy of mothering discussed to date, as well as the moral sharing economy (Eden 2017), while simultaneously recognising the plurality of everyday ethics. Hall (2015: 140) calls for a conceptualisation of 'the ethics of consumption' to help understand the 'everyday realities of those individuals and groups hit by the impacts of austerity following the recent financial crisis and the ways in which austerity has reshaped everyday urban geographies of consumption'. This paper contributes to this approach by studying the way in which mothers exploit the second-hand economy to benefit their own family provisioning in the aftermath of the 2008 recession.

It is important to note that the mothers included in this study are not 'excluded consumers' (Williams and Windebank 2002) and although they may have talked about 'saving hundreds of pounds' through the sales, they were still actively engaged in forms of mainstream retail. Buying second-hand children's things enabled mothers to buy more than they would ordinarily, indulging in desire rather than need led consumption. Thrift as an opportunity for over-consumption has been conceptualised elsewhere in the literature. What singles out these participants, as a group of motherly co-consumers, is the way in which they aim to trace the future trajectory of second-hand children's things, envisioning how they may recoup some

or more of the value than they must part with to procure them. We saw this in the way mothers consistently identify branded goods (particularly clothing) as items that hold their value and are thus shrewd investment buys. Furthermore, we saw the importance mothers place on researching the market. This research fosters the kind of 'commodity knowledge' (Gregson and Crewe 2003) required to succeed in the field, with cultural capital exchanged for economic capital. In this sense the 'divestment' dispositions discussed by Gregson and Crewe (2003) are a consideration at the point of purchase. If mothers believe they can divest of an item successfully after use, then they are more likely to invest in that item in the first place.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the discourse mothers' used to describe the value of branded clothes is shaped by functionalist principles. Labels like Boden and Monsoon were depicted as above average quality, more likely to 'wash well' and hold their value. Taking solely this functionalist discourse, mothers are describing a desire for children's clothes that are produced to last; yet children's clothes, by their temporal nature, do not need to last. Although this discourse may be linked to the desire to pass clothes down to future children, and/or the manner in which children may not care for their clothes as adults would, it also hints at a consumption norm within children's 'hand-me-down' economies. This norm may be based on acts of reciprocity or on preservation practice but highlights the multiple obligations shaping motherly consumption, not just as a co-consumer within the household but as part of the broader moral economy of mothering.

In line with the outwardly facing role of mother as consumer, we cannot discuss brands in purely functionalist terms. Although mothers did not discuss what they may gain, at the individual level, for consuming and thus dressing their children in branded clothes, it seems reasonable to interpret that they do place some social semiotic importance on the 'brand'. Brands and designer labels could be described as the epitome of conspicuous consumption (Veblen [1899] 1994). Such goods are highly desirable at the nearly new sales and, as trader Lisa highlighted previously, can demand a premium in other second-hand economies. Children are ideal carriers of vicarious consumption, therefore they can be a channel to display a mother's own conspicuous consumption practices (Bailey 2001). In this case then, mothers may wish to dress their children in branded clothes as a sign of their own 'good mothering', signally an ability to provide the highest standard of material care, even in austere times. With much of the labour conducted by mothers invisible outside the home, the way the child is presented to the external world is a key tactic to display parental competence (Ponsford 2011).

A final point I wish to discuss is the way mothers use the commodification of second-hand economies to recast the boundaries between productive and reproductive work. This paper's literature review highlighted the gendered nature of production and consumption where historically (women's) domestic labour in the home has remained subordinate to men's wage-work. Despite the progressive weakening of this binary, women remain the primary domestic workers responsible

for unpaid childcare and housework. Based on the findings of this paper, mothers are using second-hand economies in order to recoup some of the labour and provisioning costs associated with caring for a child. We saw Kim, for example, drawing a direct link between domestic labour (the sorting and cleaning of children's clothes to pass on) and earning per hour. Kim came to the conclusion that her earnings per hour were not enough to sustain a selling practice, yet Lisa, the trader, generated enough money within a few weeks to pay for her daughter's birthday. Although Lisa was aware of the ethical tensions surrounding her exploitation of the sales to procure stock to sell on eBay, her practice fits within an expanded notion of the moral economy of mothering where she is simply trying to 'get by' and provide for her family. As a divorcee living alone in the household with her two children it may be that Lisa had to find more creative routes to boost her income in austere times.

Conclusion

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in and around the field of 'nearly news sales' across the UK. Affiliated to a national parenting charity, these volunteer-led sales offer the opportunity for parents (and others) to buy and sell second-hand baby and children's clothes, toys and equipment. In particular this paper draws on evidence collected through thirty semi-structured interviews with mothers in the South East and Midlands in 2013, five years after the global financial crisis. Previous research has highlighted the pervasiveness of second-hand children's things and how they circulate around local communities (Clarke 200; Crewe and Gregson 2003), yet this paper provides an update to this phenomenon within the context of the democratisation of retail through online platforms, and times of austerity.

Findings from this research indicate a number of strategies employed by mothers to make use of second-hand economies to provision for their children. First, the consumption-divestment binary is weakened as data suggests mothers meditate an items divestment potential at the point of purchase. In doing so, commodity knowledge (Crewe and Gregson 2003) or cultural capital (Bourdieu [1979] 2010) is key in order to gain success in the field. Branded children's clothes are considered 'good' purchases because they hold their value and can be sold back into the second-hand economy after use. In one case an interviewee had successfully utilised her commodity knowledge in order to become a trader of second-hand children's goods, buying and selling branded clothes that were never worn by her own children. Such work recasts the boundaries between productive and reproductive labour where mothers are able to generate an income (albeit very small) from the skills and knowledges acquired through mothering. Money raised by selling, rather than gifting items back to the second-hand economy, always go back into the household, usually for purchasing other items for children.

As a limitation to this study it is important to note that those attending the sales, and thus those recruited for interview, were part of the 'squeezed middle-class' and not excluded consumers. The commodification of the market of second-hand children's things is not then, for this group, an absolute necessity. Largely it seems to be a tactic so that children continue to have access to plenty of unessential, material things when household budgets are squeezed. Considering the rising cost of bringing up a child in the UK and elsewhere, the buying and selling of second-hand things is a strategy to help household finances go further. It is also necessary to note that these mothers were already engaged in the economy of second-hand children's things as this is how and why they were recruited for study. Findings cannot therefore be generalised to all mothers but still provide a new insight into the way some mothers use second-hand economies as a marketplace in household provisioning.

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