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## **Not Too Conspicuous, Mothers' Consumption of Baby Clothing**

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The study reported in this paper positions itself in the small but growing body of research on motherhood and consumption. The interest in this topic is warranted insofar consumption may be utilized as a resource for creating and maintaining new identities and positions. The present study explores the meanings attached to mothers' consumption of baby clothing, a product category we believe is particularly prone to provide insights into the identity work of (new) mothers. Findings from the study are presented and discussed, revisiting Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption as vicarious consumption.

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# Not Too Conspicuous, Mothers' Consumption of Baby Clothing

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we report the findings from a preliminary study on Danish women's consumption of baby clothes. The aim of the study is threefold: to provide insight into the possible ways in which motherhood identities are shaped and negotiated through conspicuous consumption, to show how this mode of consumption illustrates the relevance of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption as inherently *vicarious* in nature, and last, to point to the use of mothers' groups as a rich empirical source. These themes are highly interrelated, as should be evident in our presentation of the findings and the discussion below.

Within consumer research the topic of motherhood's impact on consumption has not until recently received much attention. From a market perspective this may wonder, since the consumption of items for both pregnant women and their newborn babies represents an incredibly lucrative market. In the UK, for instance, the costs of raising a child to the age of five have been estimated to be £52,000 (Ward, 2005). A consumption category that we believe is particularly prone to provide insights into women's attempts to create and maintain (new) identity positions in their role as mothers, is that of baby and children's clothes.

In popular and trade press it is recently claimed that the market of infants clothing is changing towards what looks like an appropriation of the fashion discourse already established for adults and teens (Pennington 2005). A local example: the Copenhagen trade fair of baby- and children's clothing, *CiffKids*, was until recently a small side show compared to the adult fashion fair, but only a few seasons back it exploded into a large venue in its own right with 180 companies displaying their designs (Jacobsen 2006). These trends are a signal that the consumption of parenting is a big and growing business, and perhaps also a sign that even mass consumption of infant wear is gradually becoming more symbolic in nature.

### Consuming motherhood

From a more theoretical perspective, a deeper interest in motherhood and consumption is warranted because of the long established link between consumption and role transitions (Shouten 1991), that is, consumption may be utilized as a resource for creating and maintaining new identities and positions (McCracken 1986; Kleine and Kleine 1999). Also within marketing literature it has been established that the periods of transition that occur within the family life-cycle, including that to parenthood, "may well be associated with major changes in consumption patterns" (Commuri and Gentry, 2000, p 8). Belk (1988) claims that the middle years of a persons life are likely to "involve the most extended concept of self" (p.148) as this period involves parenting (among other factors), thus the consumption of mothers is also a very appropriate way of understanding how consumers may create extended concepts of self through their consumption, and in this case even through the consumption on the behalf of their children.

Cook claimed in 1995 that "virtually absent from research about women as consumers is an examination of women as consumers *as mothers*—in other words, women who consume on *behalf* of their children" (Cook, 1995, p. 505). A growing but fragmented body of research on the topic of motherhood and consumption has since emerged, and here we see contributions on the transition into motherhood (Fischer and Gainer 1993, Jennings and O'Malley

2003, Prothero 2002, Carrigan and Sczmigin 2004, Thomsen & Sørensen 2006) as well as on the transition "out of motherhood", that is, into the empty nest stage (Hogg al. 2003/ 2004, Curasi et al. 2001, Olsen 1999).

In their conceptual work, Davis et al (2006) argue that consumption plays a critical role in the enactment of motherhood, and that consumption issues and activities are of great everyday concern to the individual woman who seek to define her role and worth as a mother. These everyday activities are, however, under strong influence from e.g. political and socio-cultural factors (ibid). Thus, ideologies of motherhood—what makes a 'good mother' versus what makes a 'bad mother'—seem to have a strong influence on the shaping of new mothers' identities and their consumption. Davis et al (2006) also suggest that new mothers are particularly aware how they are perceived by others and that they are more inclined to attempt to portray themselves as good mothers—and underplay or hide when they do not live up to the perceived, ideal state of being the perfect mother.

### Conspicuous consumption of motherhood

Several implications of the original concept of conspicuous consumption of Veblen (1925[1970]) are important in relation to the construction of motherhood identity, when we invoke a perspective of consumption. Originally, the concept of conspicuous consumption was thought to be of a vicarious nature: *men* of the leisure class consumed through their wife (she should be the "chief ornament", ibid p. 126) who in turn consumed through others of the household (servants, children, friends etc.). In its most obtrusive form Veblen mentions the use of "spacious servant's quarters", but goes on to mention "[A]nother scarcely less obtrusive or less effective form of vicarious consumption, and a much more widely prevalent one, is the consumption of food, clothing, dwelling, and furniture by the lady..." (ibid p. 60).

In the Veblenian framework the function of the 'good mother' would be one that "in an especial degree put in evidence her household's ability to pay" (ibid p. 126). This pecuniary definition of social stratification has often been criticised (Trigg 2001), as well as the 'trickle down' model of tastes attributed Veblen, but more importantly in this case, the 'good mother' is seemingly one who should 'flash it-if she's got it'. The sole function of the woman (and her children) is to be her husbands 'consumption proxy'. The anachronistic insults to the women of the world aside, what happens if the 'consumption proxy' herself becomes less of an ornament and a working woman? One hypothesis could be that the 'good mother' would choose to live out vicarious consumption on behalf of her children, even very young infants, as the prime strategy for negotiating a motherhood identity.

### Symbolic consumption of baby fashion

In order to get a full grasp of the consumer behaviour of women trying to construct a motherhood identity through what is essentially a fashion discourse; the sociology of Veblen is too narrow. How mothers actually choose the right style, the right brands and appropriate the cultural meanings is likely to be as complex as the discourse they would have evoked for the consumption on their own behalf (Thompson & Haytko 1997). This explorative paper cannot go into depth with the complexity that might

prevail in these consumption practices (or whether these could best be described as 'trickle-down', 'trickle across' or 'trickle around' etc.), but what is being examined is rather the extent to which it may be taking place at all, and how this relates to the participating women's construction of motherhood.

## METHOD

The empirical design is qualitative group interviews of two pre-existing "mothers' groups". The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed in verbatim.

In Denmark (and other Scandinavian countries) the public health care system offers to set up "mothers' groups" to support the mothers in the time of their early motherhood, and most mothers choose to accept this offer, particularly if it is their first child. In the first year meetings are regular and often weekly or bi-weekly, and though most groups dissolve after a year or so of regular meetings, some women form long standing friendships with the mothers they meet in their mothers' group.

The mothers' groups are an important part of establishing and representing the 'motherhood' identity for the participating women, as the whole purpose of the groups are to develop and share the problems and progress of becoming a mother. The participation in mothers' groups in the Danish society is the norm rather than a choice representing a specific value system, lifestyle or ideal of motherhood. The women found in these groups may therefore be seen as reasonably representative of Danish mothers.

The methodology involved in the interviews of mothers' groups is quite similar to that of the focus group, as they were performed as very free thematic discussions. But there are a few important differences. The groups have met several times before and the initial 'forming' of the group could therefore be expected to have happened already in the past meetings. This could improve the probability of a relaxed and open atmosphere, as the participating women already know each other (if they did not feel comfortable in the group they would be likely to have left it before the time of the interview).

Importantly, the mothers' groups are a perfect and natural setting for exploring the construction of motherhood and the related consumption patterns, as the whole point of the group meetings are for the mothers to learn and compare their identities as mothers.

On the other hand the relationships between the group members are expected to continue after the session and there may therefore be group dynamics (ie. 'face-work' etc. (Goffman, 1990)) that are even more important in these groups than in the very short term relations in focus groups with unacquainted informants that do not meet again. It could however, also be argued that these relations would imply greater involvement and commitment for the participants in the mothers' groups than normal 'anonymous' participants in focus groups that may be more free to elaborate or speculate without the social pressure of commitment or consistency concerning the claims they make in the focus group. Not that the identity or claims made in the mothers' groups could be said to be 'the real truth' on the participating mothers, but it is probably more consistent with the roles and identity that they live in their everyday lives.

### The participants

As this paper is explorative in nature the sample of participating mothers is quite limited. In order to qualify the limitations of this, a brief outline of the conditions and setting follows.

The mothers' groups were situated in a provincial setting, group A based in a large provincial city, group B in a small provincial village. All women were living in stable relationships.

The participating women must be said to belong to the middle class, though with some differences in household income (see fig.

1). Please note the Danish context: the incomes should be considered in relation to an economy of very high taxes and living expenses.

### The group sessions

The sessions took place in the mothers' homes, as would the usual meetings. This ensured a relaxed and productive atmosphere. In the case of Group A, the mothers met without the children, (as the children were old enough to be left at home), and in the case of Group B, the meeting took place in the morning with the children present, but with an assistant looking after the children during the group session. Before the meeting the participants had filled out a questionnaire with details found in fig. 1.

The groups were presented with the themes and only gently probed. At the middle of the session the groups were presented with four ads, each representing different types of baby clothing: *Mads & Mette* (supermarket retail), *H&M* (inexpensive chain of clothing stores and mail order), *Fransa* (mid level clothing stores) and *DKNY* (global brand, upper level retail stores).

## FINDINGS

The participating mothers only need the cue 'baby wear' to spark involved, elaborate discussions. They are eager to talk about it, they have opinions about it (which they are more than happy to share) and they have great knowledge about it; knowledge in the sense that they are familiar with a great number of brand names and stores, in which these brands can be purchased. They are also very much aware of what kind of, and how much clothing is in the drawers at home. They convey the impression that they, by heart, know colours, shapes and brands of all the clothing. But not only that, they also attribute cultural meanings to the brands and the styles, to the correct level of 'styling' and the socially legitimate way of combining generic un-branded pieces with expensive branded clothing. The overall finding, which is expanded below, is that baby clothing is a very important category of expressing the mothers' identity, their ideal of motherhood, and also that this transition into a new mode of *motherhood* consumption is a very clear performance of *vicarious consumption*.

### The Perfect Mother

In their own opinion their interest in baby clothing is a result of their overall dedication to their children. It is very clear that they are striving towards becoming the best mothers possible, and, in their (new) role as mothers, a primary goal in life has become to do what is best for their children. As one of the mothers states it:

*But it is very much this thing, that you want to do it as good as possible, you want to do the best, right!* [Tina]

By providing the children with nice clothing, the mothers' express care for their children, and the mothers thereby experience themselves as good and caring mothers who show their children respect. It could be said to be a way of bonding between mother and child.

### Conspicuous motherhood

However, providing the children with nice clothing is not just a matter between the mother and child, and not just about love and tender care. According to the mothers in the study, children's clothing (and other goods around the child), plays an important role for the mother's ascribed status in society. They suggest that as a mother you are perceived according to the appearance of their children. They express high awareness of what kind of clothing they put on their children, as well as of the clothing that other mothers put

**FIGURE 1**  
Participant descriptions

	Mothers' group A			Mothers' group B		
<b>Alias of participants</b>	<b>Lise</b>	<b>Lone</b>	<b>Tanja</b>	<b>Anette</b>	<b>Marianne</b>	<b>Tina</b>
<b>Years of age</b>	31	31	27	30	27	30
<b>Children (gender, age)</b>	Boy 14 m.	Boy 5 y. Girl 13 m.	Girl 14 m..	Boy 7 m.	Girl 7 m.	Girl 7m.
<b>Employment</b>	R&D, University	Sales	Receptionist/ waiter	Chiropractor	Student of medicin	Schoolteacher
<b>No. of persons in household</b>	3	4	3	3	3	3
<b>Annual household income DKR (USD)</b>	700.000 (125.000)	700.000 (125.000)	550.000 (100.000)	4-500.000 (7-90.000)	4-500.000 (7-90.000)	700.000 (125.000)

on their children. This means, for the mothers in the study, that they are aiming to dress their children in clothing, which makes them appear like mothers, who take good care of their children.

*I guess, [...] that the way the children look, that is also often seen as how you are and how you function. I remember I saw this boy the other day. He was wearing a jacket that was all too big and all too thin, and it was perishing cold. I just thought I could see that there was no one who took care of him. I just think it signals, that he comes from a home with few reserves. And I think it is very much that thing I want to signal. That my child looks proper and that he has a good home. That means everything. [Lise]*

Subsequently, Lise also mentions that she finds it natural to be conscious of what other people may think of you. To her, this is valid not only in regards to her position as a mother, but in all aspects of life—and for all people.

Thus, the mothers in this study experience their own competence as mothers through the way their dress their children. This is perhaps not as surprising as the extend, to which the construction of motherhood identity is carried out through *vicarious* consumption, and also the degree to which these mothers are able to elaborate the meanings and rules that govern this mode of consumption.

### Consumption by proxy

The women in the study claim that they no longer go shopping for clothes for themselves as much they used to. Instead shopping now revolves around the children. One of the mothers explains how she consciously has put aside her own needs in favour of her child's, and that she does not see this change as a loss, on the contrary. She explains:

*What strikes me most, is, how much you more or less disregard yourself and your previous shopping habits in favour of the new shopping habits that you have acquired. [...] It is much greater to buy something nice for your child than for yourself. It is much more cheerful, and you don't have the same need yourself as before. [Anette]*

It seems that the emotional gratifications connected with shopping for the child is much greater than what is achieved through shopping for herself. The 'self-sacrifice' of motherhood identity is clearly expressed in terms of 'disregarding' old patterns and needs, but very importantly, this mother do express positive feelings and experiences associated with her new vicarious mode of consumption.

In terms of children's clothing, this means that the clothing has to be something the mothers can identify with more directly. New baby-designer brands (for example MOLO, Katvig) utilize this in careful styling of 70'ies retro prints, allowing for nostalgic emotions as well as the symbolic expression of 'cool'. Practically, this is seen in the fact that the children are being dressed in "adult" clothing, that is, "adult", in the sense that it is styles and patterns, which the mothers (or their fathers) themselves could (and do) wear. The following quotes are examples of this tendency:

*Well, it is just so cool, that they can wear something that is a bit adult. It is the same thing about Amanda having a Brøndby [a premier league football team] shirt. [Marianne]*

*When you get those romper suits, you often get them from elderly people... when they had small children, that was what they would be wearing until they were one year old. But then I think... argh baby clothes! You should rather dress them up like a little adult. [Tina]*

The last quote implies that the consumption of baby clothing has changed since the grandparent generation. It could be that this is more than just a fashion cycle, and that the consumption on behalf of the very young infant has now been transformed from a basic, functional domain to a fully fledged *symbolic* mode of conspicuous, vicarious consumption.

The mothers do actually recognise a connection between the children's wear and their own identity. They are conscious of the fact that they dress their children in clothing, which resembles adult styles, in order to send the right message on behalf of *the mother*. One of the mothers explains:

*Well, he doesn't care. He is probably just as fine right now as if I had put some sort of a track suit on him. I just feel that I am not myself a track suit girl, so therefore he is not wearing a track suit either. [Anette]*

Furthermore, beyond regarding the children's clothing as a channel for signalling their own identity and their own taste and preferences, the mothers in the study also explicitly reflect upon the idea that children may be part of a mothers' extended self (Belk 1988). The following quotes are examples of how two of the mothers have made some thought of this:

*Well, I don't know if the children are some kind of extension of your self. They are in some sort of way. Sometimes you are like one person, or how you put it... [Lone]*

*Are the children not signalling your self? As long as they are small? [Tanja]*

### Being Perfect—But Not Flashing It

The mothers seem to put great effort into showing themselves and the world that they are good mothers. However, apparently there is a fine line between simply demonstrating that you are able to take good care of your children—and then flashing that you can. This distinction appears in the interviews. For example, one of the mothers presents the clothing, which her child was wearing on the particular day of the interview. She explains:

*[He] is wearing a stripy shirt... from Freoli, or whatever it is called. Then he is wearing a pair of brown trousers... from My Tune, or whatever it is called. Yes, and then he is wearing a pair of shoes... yes, that's what he is wearing. [Anette]*

From this statement it is clear that the mother is very aware of her child's clothing—she can name not only the patterns and colours but also the brands. However, her way of describing the clothing we find noticeable. She mentions the patterns and colours first and adds the brand, and then in the end, as a casual afterthought she adds "... or whatever it is called." This addition is a marker of the mother's insecurity, as she knows that she is not supposed to care *that much*; not supposed to know the brands by heart. It is however our strong impression, that this mother definitely knows, which brands she puts on her son. But by presenting the outfit like this, the mother does not flash that she dresses her child in high profile brands, which it actually is. In this way, consciously or not, she manages to present herself as a person who does not put too much thought into brands. She tries to make her conspicuous consumption look 'not too conspicuous'!

Another example is some of the women's description of mothers, who would dress their children in clothing from the brand: DKNY (Short for Donna Karan New York). The women in the study were shown an ad for DKNY children's clothing (amongst three other ads—see above). In their accounts they explain that mothers, who dress their children in very conspicuous brands (like DKNY), probably do it because they are eager to flash that they can afford it and because they want to pass on the habit of wearing brand clothing. The following quote expresses this in a projective mode with some distance and sarcasm in the tone of voice:

*[When talking about the type of mother who would buy DKNY for her child:] I would think, she would like to... you know, show that 'I can afford to buy such clothes. I like to dress up*

*my son in this. And I like to teach him those habits... that there can be some smart tag on it' [Marianne]*

In spite of the fact that these women have offered elaborate accounts on how much thought and effort they put into the clothing of their children and how important they find it to be seen as someone who are in surplus, they clearly distance themselves from those who send the same sort of signals in a way that is too obvious.

### Mother's Business

In spite of the fact that it is socially desirable in contemporary Western society to do parenting as partners, and maybe even more so in Scandinavia, it is striking how absent the fathers are in the women's accounts of baby clothes consumption. Probed directly, all women in the two groups claim to have sole responsibility for the purchases of baby clothes in their households. This could be a natural consequence of the fact that most of the mothers in the sample are still on maternity leave and therefore have better time than their working husbands for taking care of household chores such as making sure that their babies are equipped with appropriate clothes. However, the interviewer's expression of slight surprise about the women's declared sole responsibility is met with great laughter—and no further comments. To us this laughter suggests that the very idea that the fathers could take part in the purchasing of baby clothes is seen as almost ridiculous and not really worth commenting on. In the accounts of the women, decisions and motivations regarding baby clothes are solely attributed to mothers. We find only one explicit reference to a father's role in the dressing of the child:

*I put out the clothes for [my husband] every morning... the clothes he is supposed to give her on. Otherwise he will just take the topmost trousers and the topmost shirt. [Tanja]*

What Tanja says is that her husband is not competent enough to dress their daughter appropriately on his own hand. This disregard of the fathers suggests that the purchasing of children's clothes and the dressing of the babies may be regarded a mother's task; it is a field where mothers are to show—or prove—their competence not just at mothers but as—perfect mothers. And sadly for both fathers and mothers, this (albeit discursive) construction of motherhood is a very exclusive one; the mother takes it all. Perhaps because the mother knows she will be the one 'punished' for the potential 'flaws' or mishaps carried out by the father, as she still believes they will be ascribed to her, not the father.

### DISCUSSION

The above themes that we have elicited from the interviews indicate that children's clothing represents a field where mothers seek to show their worth and competence as mothers through the symbolic negotiations of conspicuous consumption. According to our interpretation of the accounts from the present study, fathers are more or less outmanoeuvred from this field, reduced to, at the most, order-executing child dressers. However, one should be vary of taking the account of absent fathers at face value, the actual consumption patterns and the fathers' perceptions could be quite different (which is a pertinent idea for further research). What matters is that the *construction* of motherhood seems to be somewhat based on the (almost hostile) exclusion of the fathers.

The women are very much aware of the signals they send to the surroundings through the clothing of their children, in fact, to a very high degree, they seem to consume through their children. This we also recognise as *vicarious consumption* (Veblen 1970[1925]).

They seem to do so at the expense of consumption directed toward themselves, and some of them wonder how easy it is for them to do so, but in fact they are just reproducing images of 'the good mother', as she is presented in Western culture: "identifiable by her self-sacrifice, her capacity to nurture, and her possession of moral goodness" (McDonagh 1999, p228). So when these mothers cut their own consumption of clothes in favour of clothes for their children, they simply reproduce a cultural ideal, but at the same time they are able to construct and negotiate their new motherhood identity through conspicuous consumption. A mode of consumption and identity construction that they are used to perform on their own behalf, perhaps as a more hedonic motive, now becomes even more gratifying as it becomes legitimized as vicarious consumption and enshrouded with the moral goodness of motherhood self sacrifice.

To spend time and effort on the child's clothes is a very visible way to identify the self in the role as a mother. 'Vicarious consumption' is a natural response to this ideal. However, to retain the aura of moral goodness and good taste, it is pertinent that the conspicuous consumption of motherhood is performed in a suitable manner, so that it becomes 'not too conspicuous'...

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