

Rock-a-buy Baby: Consumerism By New, First-time Mothers

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ROCK-A-BUY BABY: CONSUMERISM BY NEW, FIRST-TIME MOTHERS

by

SARA AFFLERBACK
B.S. Florida Gulf Coast University, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts
in the Department of Sociology
in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Rock-a-Buy Baby: Consumerism by New, First-Time Mothers, is the first known sociological exploration of need-based consumption for babies, despite the baby gear industry being a \$6-billion-dollar business (whattoexpect.com). Data stemmed from qualitative, semi-structured interviews with new, first-time mothers (3 months – 1 year postpartum) conducted within participants' households. The insights gained from the present study tell us a great deal about the "needs" that predominantly white, middle-class mothers socially constructed in anticipation of their first child, and the consumptive behaviors used to accomplish these "needs." Respondents had turned to similar resources (other mothers, online forums, consumer reports, books, magazines, etc.) to help them construct "need" and formulate decisions among commodities. Provided they were relying on comparable, if not overlapping, bodies of knowledge, mothers' narratives about consumer "need" were often congruent. Additionally, the ways expectant mothers accumulated items are ritualized and made tradition. The baby shower and gift registration process (which all of my respondents participated in to some variation) are social constructions; these practices, which are so strongly tied to consumption, also constituted reality for mothers, and inevitably, their babies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

AP Attachment Parenting

BLW Baby-Led Weaning

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The baby gear industry is a reported 6-billion-dollar business (whattoexpect.com), and much of the consumptive behavior takes place prior to the baby's arrival, often in the form of rituals (i.e. gift registration, baby showers). No known sociological research to date has examined need-based consumption in preparation for a baby. My thesis, the first sociological exploration of need-based consumption for babies, reveals the "needs" women socially construct in anticipation of a baby, and the ways consumption is used by expectant mothers and their social networks to accomplish those "needs."

Data stemmed from qualitative, semi-structured interviews with fourteen new, first-time mothers (3 months – 1 year postpartum), followed by a more loosely-structured interview, in which the respondent was asked to photograph items she claimed were "essential" and "unessential" in her experiences as a mother. The visual component reinforced the women's constructions of "need." For the analysis phase of my research, I adapted a social constructionist theoretical framework to analyze the "needs" that mothers constructed in anticipation of their first child, both during pregnancy and within the first year. Examples of socially constructed "needs" included the "need" to create a space for one's child, the "need" to contain one's child, and the "need" to go natural. I then substantiated how consumerism and specific consumer items are used by mothers to accomplish said "needs." Interview excerpts are inserted throughout the analysis to support such claims. Drawing on elements of feminist theory, the study highlighted the gendered nature of respondents' baby gear, specifically the nursery decorations and clothing,

as well as the gendered division of labor in preparing for a child. However, my focus remained firmly on the process of reality-construction.

Keeping with the social constructionist approach, maternal perceptions of “need” are not inherent or intrinsic; meaning, consumptive norms were perpetuated by reality-constituting resources and reality constituting practices. As first-time pregnant women, my respondents became targets for advice. Katz-Gerro (2004) insisted that “consumption is central to the process by which social groups reproduce themselves” (2004: 12). This sample of predominantly white, middle-class mothers looked to similar resources (websites, books, magazines, other mothers, etc.) for knowledge regarding what their baby “needed,” and relied on similar practices (gift registration process, baby shower, hand-me-downs) for obtaining items to fulfill those “needs.” Knowledge that, in this case defined their consumptive behavior, all stemmed from these resources and practices; hence the prevalence of certain “needs” and parallel conversations about mothers’ consumer realities. Chapter Five consists of a table that illustrates the prevalence of each theme, or “need,” as it arose in the in-depth interviews.

Consumption has long been a topic of sociological inquiry; even the most recognized social theorists including Marx, Veblen, Bourdieu, and Baudrillard have made contributions to the sub-discipline. Much of the existing analyses, however, are specific to the social and environmental implications of production and consumption (i.e. unequal power relations, labor value, exploitation of resources, etc.). While these outcomes are what make consumption worthy of analysis, few scholars have redirected their focus to understanding the social factors that drive us to consume and/or influence us to make decisions among commodities. It is important to

understand consumer need or motives as to explain the pervasiveness of consumption in modern, Western society.

Overall, this thesis aims to contribute to the growing sociology of consumption sub-discipline by offering an analysis of one of the most pervasive social habits in our society, as it occurs in preparation for a baby. My research is a glimpse at how consumption manifests in the form of rituals, performed by the parents and their social networks, and how these practices, as well as the plethora of resources expectant mothers attend to, constitute the consumer reality for the mother and inevitably, the baby. The present study should fit into the existing sociological literature on consumption, particularly consumption for children (Campbell 1987; Schor 2004; Cook 2008), and confirm that consumptive behavior is always narrowed by culture.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding consumptive behavior is of multidisciplinary interest. Consumerism has been researched in economic studies (Racchetti 1998; Bianchi 1998), psychology (Gualerzi 1998; Loasby 1998), and minimally in sociology in the environmental and cultural subfields. A majority of the sociological literature on consumption examines either the economic consequences of an increase in material production (Miller 1987; Hearn and Roseniel 1999) or the environmental or social implications for overconsumption (Ritzer 2004). Marx (1848) handled each of these social critiques of consumption. While his theory is more specific to objectified labor and unequal power relations, his contributions were the first to shed light on cultural materialism. Marx's analyses highlight consumption as being so central to society that it separates classes of people and has led to cyclical patterns of oppression and revolt between those that have the power to consume, and those that want said power or ability (Marx in Elster, ed. 1986).

Fewer sociological theories are concerned with, or applicable to, need-based consumption. Scholars need to redirect their attention to "what consumers actually feel and are trying to do with their lives" (Gualerzi 1988: 55) when they actively participate in consumerism. Veblen (1902), also critical of capitalism, theorized that humans gradually accumulated an economic surplus, but do not consider utility when spending that said surplus; rather we consume commodities and leisure in order to impress others (Adams and Sydnie 2002). Thus, he perceived our consumptive behaviors as wasteful, even when they appeared to be useful or productive; an activity he referred to as "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 1902). In terms of how we come to a decision among commodities, Veblen proposed, "Preferences [for commodities] are

determined socially in relation to the positions of individuals in the social hierarchy” and that “individuals emulate the consumption patterns of other individuals situated at higher points in the hierarchy” (Trigg 2001: 99).

Contributions have also been made by contemporary theorists. Bourdieu (1971: 113), specifically, viewed consumer goods as “a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic object;” meaning, each object has a cultural value and a commercial value (Bourdieu 1971). While he asserted that cultural value and commercial value are independent of one another, it should be noted that “cultural capital becomes objectified in consumption objects” (Holt 1998: 5). Holt (1998) suggested that Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital be reformulated to consumption *practices* rather than objects of consumption and redirect attention onto *mass* rather than high culture, or what Bourdieu referred to as “cultural rarity” (1971).

Bourdieu was not the only theorist to frame materialism as a cultural advantage, specifically one that affects an individual’s cultural positioning or social distinction (Bourdieu 1971). Baudrillard (2001) proposed a system of *objects*, though he emphasized that *objects*, or material goods, are consumed as signs. That is to say, that objects are symbolic, and consumption “...is a systematic act of the manipulation of signs” (Baudrillard 2001: 25). In other words, humans use *objects* or (in the application of consumption, commodities) as props within their interactions with other humans to project the sign meaning that that given *object* signifies. It is also the case that an accumulation of *objects* demonstrates high social standing. Not only are individuals using sign value in objects to demonstrate their social status, but can also project, or even manipulate their status with an abundance of *objects*.

Karasek (1980) is credited for investigating need-based consumption, not in pursuit of “utility,” but rather what he calls “identity needs” (Gualerzi 1998). This economic theorist claimed identity needs are comparable to Maslow’s hierarchy (1968), recognized in psychology; that argued that identity needs are highest order needs and individuals strive for these needs to evolve their social identities (Karasak 1980; Gualerzi 1998). This is not the only theoretical position that suggests consumption is used for self-preservation.

From the symbolic interactionist perspective, humans assign meaning to objects and consequently, interpret and act toward those objects on the basis of the meanings (Blumer 1969). While this theory is not specific to consumption, few sociologists have examined how spending is used by social actors to construct and maintain identities based off the subjective meaning of objects. Impression management (IM) theory, attributed to Goffman (1959) is one symbolic interactionist explanation for consumption. This theoretical position, when applied to consumption, suggests that “an individual’s awareness that others will observe the individual’s decision induced the impression-management concerns that lead the individual to alter his or her consumption choices” (Aaker 1999; Ratner and Kahn 2002; Orth and Kahle 2008).

Keeping with IM theory, material objects contribute to this process of identity building. In other words, commodities are used as props to manage impressions. This application is an extension of the early sociological explanations of mass consumption (Veblen 1902; Bourdieu 1971; Baudrillard 2001) which disclose that consumption was a demonstration of status and/or one’s position in society. While the latter studies are dated, there is a pattern that identity is the ultimate determinant of a consumer’s motivation (Gualerzi 1998).

Aside from the minimal consumption research on the notion of identity construction, it remains unclear what drives individuals to consume. A more comprehensive sociology of consumption is needed, particularly in a society for which consumerism is at the core. The discipline requires a further general aim of how individuals come to a decision among commodities; that is, the social factors that fuel consumptive behavior. Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1989) argued for putting consumer experience back into consumer research. They stressed that the literature should supersede consumption-production social relations or environmental implications and seek to understand the social factors that drive individuals to consume and/or make decisions among commodities. This involves obtaining first-person narratives of consumer experiences (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989).

A social constructionist theoretical framework would be appropriate for explaining the social phenomenon of consumption and accounting for consumer experience. Berger and Luckmann (1966) claimed reality is socially constructed; that is to say, social “knowledge” is taken for granted to be inherent, intrinsic, and natural, when in fact “knowledge” (valid or otherwise) is just accepted as real and made tradition via social interaction. Doyle McCarthy (1996) defined “knowledge” as “any and every set of ideas and acts accepted by one or another social group or society of people—ideas and acts pertaining to what they accept as real for them and for others” (1996: 23). No known study has applied this theoretical framework to retail consumerism, particularly in preparation for a baby.

Past, relevant research on the culture of motherhood has adapted this social constructionist framework to examine the “ritualistic aspects of the journey into motherhood”

(Nelson and LaCoste 2006: 1); while this included baby showers, no known sociological study has yet to shed light on consumption as being central to such rituals. Nelson and LaCoste (2006) interviewed women on the social and cultural shifts that they experienced upon entering motherhood, as well as the relational aspect of pregnancy and child rearing (i.e. whom they relied on). Data from these interviews were oriented to a social constructionist theoretical framework, which revealed “women’s constructions and maintenance of sense of self-as-mother” (2006: 1). While the focus of their analysis is not on consumptive behavior, it is indicative that motherhood itself is a social construction. While Nelson and LaCoste (2006) applied the social constructionist theoretical framework to the child-preparation process, it was not critical of the consumptive aspects of this process. Research on the sociology of consumption for children has been executed, but none that adapt the social constructionist theoretical framework.

In view of our lifestyles being “...grounded in consumption practices” modern, western society qualifies as a “culture of consumption” (Gottdiener 2000: 16). The scope of what can be consumed makes consumption worthy of further analysis. Hearn and Roseneil (1999) went so far as to suggest birth, growing-up, holidays, marriage, houses, decorations, food and drink, sport, music, sex, bodies, clothes, pets, cars, care, people, and even death may all become objects of consumption. Furthermore, “Patterns of consumption are intimately related to patterns of family and household structure” (Jones and Martin 1999: 17), because families typically have a shared economic situation and it is normative for members within the family to share objects of consumption. This is especially true for children, who are financially dependent on the actions of their caregivers, and often mothers. Social theorists who have participated in the ongoing

dialogue about consumption (Marx 1848; Veblen 1902; Bourdieu 1971; Baudrillard 2001) have done so with hardly a mention of children.

Cook (2008) argued that consumption theory should be more inclusive of children and childhood, as well as mothers and motherhood. He did not argue for an alternative explanation of the consumer culture of childhood, but rather that the empirical literature on consumerism shed light on children and parents, given they are active consumers. Cook claimed that social scientists should begin to recognize children “not merely as ‘extra expenses’ or appendages to a household budget but as vital and integral to the creation and deployment of the varied meanings surrounding the world of goods, presently and historically” (2008: 221). While there is not yet a substantial body of knowledge or a field of study, some attention has been paid to childhood and consumerism.

The ‘architects’ of consumer culture, that is, “the companies that make, market, and advertise consumer products, have now set their sights on children” (Schor 2004: 9). According to Schor (2009), these corporations acknowledge that before television, the industry was approached primarily through parents, specifically mothers. Advertisers historically had to convince mothers that a given product was beneficial to their children’s well-being. In more recent years, marketing and advertising have been “influential in transforming children into autonomous and empowered consumers” (Schor 2004: 16). Children have become increasingly visible as consumers; while they remain dependent on their parents for money, they have a substantial influence over parents’ spending power. Schor (2004) conducted a qualitative investigation of advertising and marketing to children via in-depth interviews and participant

observation in the industry. Findings confirmed that advertisers now have direct access to children, however there needs to be an alternative explanation for consumption by parents *before* children have any autonomy. That is to say, a reproduction and construction of culture *by children* does not occur until children begin interacting with peers (Corsaro 1985; Thorne 1993). This highlights the role of parents in shaping a child's consumer reality in his/her first years.

Campbell (1987) refers to children as "recipients of culture," as opposed to producers of it. Consistent with this position is the argument that children rely on their parents (more often than not on their mothers). It is typically the work of the caregiver(s) to provide material goods for children. Parents engage in the "purchasing, preparing, gifting, and provisioning of goods and services often, as in the case of young children, without their knowledge, request or assent" (Cook 2008: 232). Fewer studies are concerned with the consumer culture of infants, before the child can express any wants, needs, or desires. While there is some overlap with the empirical research on children and consumerism, it is important to understand how parents determine what items a child or baby "needs" when that child or baby has no influence or input over his/her consumer reality, as this will tell us a great deal about the pervasiveness of consumption in society, particularly within the culture of predominantly white, middle-class motherhood.

Layne (2000) explores this notion of a child's identity being constructed entirely by parents and their social networks, before that child is born. In her qualitative study, she examined goods purchased for the child-to-be, preceding miscarriage, stillbirth, and early infant death. Additionally, Layne analyzes goods given to, or in memory of the 'baby' after its death. While the emphasis remained on 'would-have-been' babies and their worthiness of memory

(Layne 2000), the article sheds light on items that pregnant women and members of their social networks give to future children during or even in anticipation of, a pregnancy. One respondent, whose son died in utero, claimed he was a 'real baby,' because he had 'real baby things' (Layne 2000). This narrative, among others is indicative of expectant mothers trying to "construct the 'babyhood' of embryos/fetuses/neonates" (Layne 2000: 324) and trying to establish an identity for a child before that child is born. Examples of 'baby things' that expectant parents purchased prior to their pregnancy loss included blankets, toys, stuffed animals, baby food, decorative items, and especially clothing. In addition to purchases made by expectant mothers and fathers, gifts are also given to the babies-to-be at baby showers. These 'rituals of consumption' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979) are especially common for first-time parents, and confirm that possessions play an important role in a contemporary child's life. So much so, that "the inability to shop for one's child/ren is often explicitly mourned in narratives of pregnancy loss" (Layne 2000: 326).

Cook (2008) expands on this analysis of children being pre-figured as consumers (2008: 232). In other words, children are named and gifted commercial products well before they are born, in modern, western society. Likewise, it is normative for expectant parents to put significant effort into decorating a child's room or nursery before it is born. Cook refers to this practice as "defining a space ahead of any particular child, a space that it can inhabit culturally as well as physically" (2008: 232). During pregnancy, it is the expectant parents', or mothers' needs being targeted by retailers, as opposed to the anticipated child's need. From this perspective, neither the child nor the caretaker(s) can be looked at as "independent economic actors" (Cook 2008: 233) yet they are immersed in economic activity. The baby strongly

influences the mother's consumptive behavior and the mother influences or determines the baby's needs.

While the aforementioned research has enhanced our understanding of consumerism, this study contributes to filling the gaps in knowledge about the motives, goals, and desires of expectant parents. No research to date has used qualitative methods to understand how new or expectant parents determine which items they "need" for their children, the factors that drive the parents to consume or register for an item, and what consumer decisions have to do directly with the baby's "need."

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

My qualitative study focuses on new, first-time mothers and how they determined which items they “needed” for the child’s first year. The data collection process was designed to be exploratory and inductive. Rather than developing a traditional research hypothesis based on the existing sociological literature, I began by examining the social world, particularly that of first-time mothers, and in that process, I developed an explanation that was consistent with what I was finding (Esterberg 2001). A grounded theoretical approach was the most appropriate research design, given consumerism by new, first-time mothers is rather complex and has yet to be investigated sociologically.

Through semi-structured interviews, I sought to acquire information on how mothers prepared for their first child, their experiences with consumption rituals (baby showers, the gift registration process), and the factors that drove them to consume baby products. Then, I conducted more loosely-structured interviews and observations in the children’s nurseries. For the second segment, I asked respondents to photograph the items they have found to be “essential” and “unessential” in their experiences as mothers; probing about specific items or assortments of items (e.g. clothing, toys, decorations) when appropriate. This data collection process gave me an understanding of the needs mothers have constructed for their child, the scale of consumption for the newborn, and the gendered nature of items.

Recruitment

Given pregnant women are protected by the Institutional Review Board, I considered it to be ethically appropriate to interview new mothers as opposed to expectant mothers. Postpartum women could also be considered “vulnerable” populations. Thus, I chose to include mothers who are three months to one year postpartum. Women within this time frame have had a few months trial-and-error period as parents and should be able to articulate which consumer items have been useful, and which have not been worked in to their childcare routines. Additionally, I selected the criterion of under one year postpartum, because I felt it was important to examine the consumer items purchased *before* the children can clearly verbalize any wants, needs, or desires to ensure the baby is not influential in his/her parents’ purchases. By including mothers who are under one year postpartum, my interviews should have successfully captured the reasons that parents and their social networks purchase the items they do, at a time before the child has any autonomy. It was also of interest to capture the parents’ baby gear before the child’s first birthday, as that milestone could potentially be a consumption ritual of its own. My other criterion was that interviewees be first-time mothers, because their consumer and child preparation experiences will be in recent memory, whereas those who are not first-time parents might have held onto objects and/or pre-constructed items as essential with their previous children.

Respondents were obtained using nonprobability sampling techniques. My first recruitment method was convenience sampling—that is, a reliance on available subjects that provided a meaningful representation of the target population, specifically new, first-time mothers (between three months and one year postpartum). I began by interviewing friends and

acquaintances who met the study criteria. After data were collected on the few individuals who qualified, I networked with mothering groups in the Central Florida area. I made announcements at a local breastfeeding class, asking women who qualified if they would be interested in participating and if I could contact them via email. The most successful recruitment method, however, was posting announcements onto social networking pages that were specific to various local mothering groups. As a result, several women emailed me with an interest in the study; I scheduled interviews with those who were willing to meet after hearing more about the research process. Often these women (whether they met the criteria or not) would re-post my information onto other parenting group Facebook pages or messaging boards, which would generate more interested individuals. At the end of each interview, I asked individuals for referrals of additional participants, in this case first-time mothers who were three months to one year postpartum. The sample eventually “snowballed” (Babbie 1998) as each of the interviewees suggested others.

A limitation to the present study is the convenience sample that was used to amass data. While this was the most appropriate and effective sampling technique for studying a loosely structured group with such specific criteria, interviewing mothers from the same geographic location and/or social circles can overwhelm, and thus bias the sample. This sample was not representative of *all* new, first-time mothers, rather it is a convenient sample of mothers from a similar geographical region (Florida) and quite possibly similar social circles (in this case, parenting groups or message boards). Likewise, this was a predominantly white, middle-class sample. It should be noted that roughly one-third of my respondents identified with the attachment parenting philosophy, a unique parenting style that encourages closeness and

attachment-promoting behaviors (Sears and Sears 1992). The principles of this philosophy influenced consumptive behaviors of the portion of my sample who identified with this parenting philosophy. Given my recruitment methods, it can be assumed that the proportion of women who so identified is greater in my sample than the general population. For organizational reasons, mothers who did not identify with this parenting philosophy will be referred to as “mainstream mothers” throughout the analysis to distinguish the remaining two-thirds of respondents from attachment parenting mothers. While findings cannot be generalized to the entire population, the qualitative aspect of the project is in-depth enough to tell us a great deal about the consumption habits of new, first-time mothers. I carried out fourteen interviews, lasting anywhere between one to two hours.

Data Collection

Upon receiving approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the study took place over a course of four months. The research involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews that centered around respondents’ child preparation and consumer experiences. All participants agreed to be interviewed in their home setting. I informed individuals on the details of the project and their rights as a participant before they consented to participate. I began by administering semi-structured, in-depth interviews following an interview protocol, derived from a grounded theory approach [Appendix]. Throughout the interview process, I referred to this list of questions and specific topics that addressed the interviewees’ experiences. The questions were open-ended and gave the interviewee a great deal of leeway in how to reply to elicit story-

like responses. Examples of inquiries included: “How did knowing the sex of the baby prepare you?” “Tell me about the gift registration process.” and “Did you turn to other mothers? What advice did they give you?” Additional subject matter often arose during the interview, allowing both the respondent and myself the flexibility to probe for details or discuss ideas that had not been anticipated as relevant beforehand. However, the emphasis remained firmly on the respondent, whereas I assumed a more neutral role in the interview process. This portion of the interview typically lasted around one hour.

The aforementioned interview was immediately followed-up with a more loosely-structured interview process that centered around interviewees’ baby gear. For this, I would hand my interviewees a digital camera and ask them to photograph the items they feel have been “essential” and “unessential” in their experiences as mothers, allowing them to base this on their own definitions of “essential.” This typically involved entering the baby’s nursery; mothers photographed items (first essentials, then unessentials) while I examined and inquired about the items or broad assortment of items that the parent(s) and their social networks had purchased for the child. By handing my respondent the camera, I was removing myself, the researcher, from interpreting any needs for them. For each item photographed, I would probe for details (Did the parent(s) purchase the item or was it a gift? Was this something they registered for? How did they hear about the item? Why did they think they “needed” the item? What do they use it for?, etc.). This portion of the interview process took an additional 30-45 minutes, depending on the family’s scale of consumption, and was also audio recorded, with permission. Photographs were taken (of objects, not human subjects) with a digital camera to document items and serve as supplementary data. The visual component reinforced the women’s discourse on “need.”

Likewise, photographs highlighted the scale of consumption for the newborn and the gendered nature of items.

Human Subjects and IRB

Prior to the interviews, I explained to each respondent, in detail, the purpose of the project, the process of interviewing, the expected duration of the interviews, and the possible risks and benefits of participating. Respondents were asked to read the Participant Informed Consent Form and discuss any questions or concerns she might have had with the researcher. If the individual decided to participate in the research project (all fourteen agreed), she was given a copy of the Participant Informed Consent Form for her records.

Interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder. Audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher using pseudonyms for each respondent. No one except the researchers had access to the identity of participants or audio recordings. When the transcription of the audio recordings were completed, the recordings were erased. Photographs taken of items were inserted into my transcripts, where appropriate.

Analysis

For the analysis phase of my research, I coded my raw interview transcripts using Microsoft Word documents for organization. I grouped excerpts of interviews into relevant codes, or categories, created during the transcription of data. Prior to coding, I made the decision

to approach my data using a social constructionist theoretical orientation (using elements of feminist theory). It had been apparent that these were not inherent needs of mothers, but ones they have socially constructed in anticipation of a child. Those “needs” that reoccurred in multiple interviews were turned into themes (e.g. attachment, wardrobe, sources of information). Any data, excerpts and photographs, that supported a theme, were grouped into the appropriate Word document. Once the initial line-by-line coding process had been completed on all transcripts, I conducted more focused coding to create a coherent outline and subsequent write-up of my findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Berger and Luckmann (1966) asserted that “reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which this occurs” (1966: 1). That being said, my empirical analyses shall attempt to explain the ways predominantly white, middle-class mothers participated in the formation and distribution of their perceived social realities (Burr 1995). In addition to uncovering the types of “needs” mothers constructed and the items used to accomplish those “needs,” interview data lent insight to the various *resources* from which new and expectant mothers are obtaining knowledge about a baby’s “need,” as well as the *practices* that consumption was concurrent with. I lead my analysis by explaining the *reality-constituting resources* and *reality-constituting practices* that reoccurred in respondents’ narratives as influencing their consumptive behavior. I then provide a breakdown of the social constructionist theoretical framework, before depicting each of the socially constructed “needs” that were prevalent in narratives of these predominantly white, middle-class mothers. This discussion consists of a table that illustrates the prevalence of themes, or “needs,” as they transpired in interviews.

Reality-Constituting Resources

New mothers exercised agency in determining their baby’s needs and the items they purchased, registered for, or consumed to meet those needs. There were plenty of instances where “knowledge” was being imposed on expectant or new mothers and they resisted and/or produced their own reality. As Cherrier (2006) suggested, consumers can be active,

autonomous, and empowered, yet they are also limited in that they obey cultural norms. April, the mother of an eleven month old son, demonstrated some agency in preparing for her son:

A lot of people were like “oh you need this, you need that.” A lot of friends who already have babies trying to give you advice. A lot of things you’re like “okay” and you just take it with a grain of salt and you learn it on your own, because what might work for them might not work for you.

Summer, the mother to a six month old son, had a similar experience during her pregnancy:

Everyone wanted to put their two cents in. But honestly I feel like I just had to experience it for myself. So even if anyone was like “oh this is going to happen, that’s going to happen” I was like “well, not everyone’s the same.”

Adriana, the mother of a six month old son, was skeptical acting on certain bodies of knowledge, because they were incompatible with other ideologies she identified with:

My best friend has three [kids] so I’ve always helped her out—even with her first one. Actually no [this did not help prepare me] because my style of parenting is really different from my friend’s. I’m more towards what they call “crunchy parenting” and my friends are more mainstream, you know? So I go through the attachment parenting thing, so I didn’t need a lot of the stuff they were already using with their babies, because we’re just now starting to get those things for him. Especially with foods and things like that, because I wanted him to be a strictly breastfed baby for as long as I could go. Then I would start to do those

types of things later, but I already knew about those things, but it's not what I was interested in teaching him so early.

These examples of agency are indicative that bodies of knowledge can be resisted or interpreted in multiple ways. Cherrier (2006) stressed this notion that consumers are “active agents who exercise informed and autonomous responsibilities in relation to their values and concerns” (2006: 515). It is important to note that “forms of knowledge are not inherent in the human mind but represent one of the many ways of being and thinking, one of the ways human beings carve out a reality” (McCarthy 1996: 4). These mothers might not embrace a particular body of knowledge, however whatever knowledge they do accept as real is too, socially constructed and always narrowed by culture.

While Gubrium and Holstein (1997) stressed that “...participants do not build reality from the ground up, as it were, on each and every interpretive occasion. Rather the interpretive work relies upon substantive resources for assigning meaning” (1997: 168). For new mothers, this means that their agency as consumers and decisions among commodities are still narrowed by cultural knowledge and made known to them by various resources. Expectant mothers turned to other mothers for advice on consumer items; this was the most common resource of knowledge. This was as simple as just recognizing items that friends, family members, and/or babysitting clients used with their own babies. April elaborated on this resource:

I also went off what I've seen other people I know use. Like the breast pump, I went off the same one my cousin used because I saw that it worked really well.

And like brands of strollers, stuff like that. I just went with the most popular brand.

Robin, the mother of a seven month old daughter, recalled working as a nanny years before. From this experience, she gained knowledge about the types of items she “needed” in anticipation of a child, but not the specific brands:

I had nannied when I was in undergraduate and graduate school. So I had some experience, but nothing very recent. So a lot of the items, I knew I needed a high chair, but which one? That sort of thing I had to do research on.

This narrative confirmed that while knowledge is habituated and made tradition, it is also shifting and never complete (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Thus, Robin’s experience as a nanny from years before was not as substantive a resource as it might have been for women who had exposure to the more current culture of motherhood. Though for several mothers, prior (and more recent) experiences with babies were influential in the items and even brands that they purchased or registered for. Emma, the mother of a nine month old son, mentioned her experience as a nanny and how this helped prepare her for knowing which items were essential or unessential:

I was a nanny for five years before I had Henry. So yeah, every time I give him a bath... or [am] making his food, anything like that I’ve done before. ...And I think that’s one of the reasons I realized at the beginning that we didn’t want to have a ton of stuff. Because I feel like, with my nieces, or with the children I had taken care of before, you know there’s like toy nightmare. Everything makes a

noise, everything flashes, everything's plastic, everything's made in China, and it just gets overwhelming and it's a sensory overload and they don't play with the stuff. So we just kind of decided it'd be better to just raise him with littler amounts of things.

Emma had years of experience caring for children a particular way. This familiarized her with the various items available to babies and infants and was somewhat influential as a resource, but did not necessarily dictate the items she selected, as she reported demonstrating agency in determining what her own son's "needs" would be.

Regardless of whether a respondent herself had prior experience with babies, much of one's knowledge about the culture of predominantly white, middle-class motherhood stemmed from friends and family members who had children. This is consistent with past research on the culture of motherhood that suggested relationships with other mothers were valuable to those who were first entering motherhood (Nelson and LaCoste 2006). This could be attributed to the willingness of other mothers to offer-up advice. Vera, the mother of a seven month old son, emphasized this pattern:

Mothers get *very* excited talking about their baby gear, which I'm sure you're figuring out. And they love recommending their baby gear, yes. Tons of moms recommended a lot of stuff.

Some mothers received detailed emails from friends with children and others had their direction throughout the course of preparing for a child. Adriana recalled her friend's input during the gift registration process:

My best friend—the one that has three kids—of course she was all over it, especially when we went shopping. She was like “oh you need this, you need that, you need this, you need that” every time. We would go out and I would come back home with a headache because it was *so* much information. She’s the one that did my baby registry with me. But definitely crib stuff, bedding and shower stuff, washcloths, and clothes for him, and things that I would need for the bottles, and the sort of milk and stuff like that. For his car seat, the head support stuff, and the bouncer chair and bassinette. So she pretty much helped me with everything like that whenever we went to the store. That’s where my best friend came in and she was walking in front of me going “this one, this one, this one, this one.”

This account confirmed that her friend, a mother, was an overwhelmingly influential resource in producing Adriana’s “needs” as a mother. Adriana did follow this statement up by assuring me that she was selective in choosing which pieces of her friend’s advice to follow or disregard when registering, thus demonstrating some agency in determining her own baby’s “needs.” That is to say, her constructions were influenced by her close friend, but she also resisted certain bodies of knowledge that her friend offered up. Aubrey, the mother of a five month old son, had a similar experience; she approached friends with children for feedback on her gift registry:

I went more with friends who had babies. I showed them actually my first baby registry, as well, and said “take a look at it” and “what’s missing?” So they filled in the gaps for me on what I was really missing. I asked two other mothers; one

has three children, one has one. And they're all fairly young, so I knew they'd still be kind of fresh with what they needed. ...Just some of the stuff to purchase or not worry about. She's (friend) not very kind of frilly extra stuff either, so it fit well with us.

In Aubrey's case, she was selective in the types of friends she approached, particularly those whose parenting styles meshed well with what she imagined for herself. Her strategy in seeking and interpreting advice could be described as "artful," however, it is important to understand that the women she did make a decision to approach were resources in determining her consumer "needs," or reality; meaning her consumptive behavior was still narrowed by culture, and even more by the parenting style she abided by.

Parenting groups were one way that mothers could find other mothers with similar interests and parenting styles. Given one method of recruitment for the present study involved contacting local parenting groups, roughly one-third of my respondents were affiliated with groups or meet-ups in the area, all with varying levels of participation. Parenting groups were not substantive resources prior to giving birth, but were helpful to mothers starting out. Emma's narrative supported this claim:

I'm in a lot of different mommy groups and play groups; that helps a lot. That helps *a lot*. I started going when—there's not very many places you can take a two week old baby or a three week old baby, you know? You're pretty much home bound. ...But [hospital name] has a breastfeeding lunch. ... I have met the most wonderful mothers. ...We talk about breast pumps and stuff like that. As

far as breastfeeding supplies or which bottle would be better. ...So, from other moms, I think is where the best advice comes from as far as buying stuff.

Although Emma did not have this resource available during the child preparation and gift registration process, she still admitted that parenting groups and the breastfeeding luncheons have been strong resources for her as a new mother, particularly for advice on consumption. This indicated that need construction continues to occur after the child is born. Not all mothers had the same positive experiences with, or perception of, parenting groups. Kristen, the mother of a three month old daughter, denied this as being a resource she utilized:

Ugh, the [neighborhood name] Mom's Club. But I don't go to meetings, because I thought we were going to go out and have martinis. They talk about parenting (laughs). You can bring your kids. Well that's... I thought we were not going to have our kids for an hour. I love her [daughter] to death, but you know, I thought it was a break. And it's run by one woman who—she's very set in her ideas. And she gives out a lot of medical advice, which I think we should have more than one opinion, especially when it comes to immunizations and stuff.

Clearly not all of those respondents who attended or were involved with parenting groups felt these were substantive resources for constituting their realities as mothers. Kristen actively joined this group, was exposed to the bodies of knowledge consistent with that group's core values, and chose not to accept these as real, thus, demonstrating agency. That is not to say her knowledge of consumer items or reality as a mother was inherent, but rather constructed from other social resources; for social reality always “transcends the individual” (Gubrium and

Holstein 1997: 170). It could also be said that these parenting group experiences still influenced her parenting approach and allowed her to define herself by what she, as a mother, is not.

More of my respondents participated in, or at least read up on, online parenting forums. This too, was a way of interacting with other new mothers, potentially ones with similar parenting philosophies. The more commonly mentioned online message forum, The Bump, was explained in detail by one of its members, Mia, the mother of a three month old daughter:

I'm also a member of an online community called The Bump. ...It's just a national board, so there's moms or moms-to-be from all over the U.S. and even outside the U.S. And they have different boards; one of their boards is nursery or baby gear. So people go on there to recommend, ask questions. Then there's also—they call them birth month boards. I was due in June, so I was a part of the June 2011 board. And just kind of online chatting, getting ideas from other mothers as far as what they're getting, why, what research they've done, you know what they can recommend.

The resourcefulness of this online community was described by Robin:

I was on The Bump a lot, which can be not so helpful because it's just other moms. But you do get a consensus on what other women are registering for—that sort of thing.

Robin acknowledged that the information on these sites may or may not be valid, but the social interaction on internet message boards reassured her that her reality was normative and

consistent with the current culture of motherhood. One mother described the bodies of knowledge on mothering forums as “the best advice” she received in preparation for her first child.

More generally, websites were a unanimous resource of knowledge for my respondents, particularly those with product reviews. Retail sites and consumer review sites were interpreted by several mothers as informative. Charlotte, the mother of an eleven month old daughter, claimed these sites were influential when looking specifically for an item, but also in giving her ideas of items to purchase or register for:

I did use, on the Babies “R” Us site, I read a lot of reviews. Each product has reviews, so Babies “R” Us for sure. There was one other website. And for the big items I would do random—whatever the brand was—reviews in Google search. But there was a review site that I think I bookmarked—Baby Gizmo. It’s just babygizmo.com, it has some reviews that I did go to.

Leah, the mother of a four month old son, also noted the Babies “R” Us website as influential in helping her determine “essential” and “unessential” items:

Especially on Babies “R” Us they give you the star rating and you can read what people [other parents] have given and they’ll go all the way down from the five star to the one star, they don’t take anything off. They have on there what people have said.

Her response, however, indicated that the bodies of knowledge about specific consumer items on these sites are produced by other mothers. Thus, retail and/or consumer review sites are a form of social interaction between new mothers and those mothers who have already internalized the cultural knowledge.

Other websites that reoccurred in mothers' narratives were babycenter.com and whattoexpect.com. Respondents primarily visited these sites in search of information on fetal development, pregnancy dos and don'ts, and the labor and delivery process. Though, mothers also relied on these venues for knowledge about a baby's "need" and consumer items to accomplish those "needs." Nora, the mother of a six month old son, relied on Baby Center more than any other resource:

I am a big fan of babycenter.com. So I read babycenter.com a lot... for everything. I didn't have time really... to do any fun reading. So I pretty much stuck to Baby Center.

This statement confirmed that websites were mechanisms in the distribution of knowledge regarding a baby's need. She did explain that information about consumer items was not readily available to readers on the main web page, but that expectant mothers have to search for a particular item to come across feedback. Regardless, she and other mothers looked to these sites for direction in their consumptive behaviors. Jamie, the mother of a four month old daughter, was one of the various new mothers that utilized the consumer reports for baby gear, stating these online resources "...gave reviews and (an) unessential baby guide—like what your baby will really need."

Books and parenting magazines were less relied upon resources than websites; however, they were still noted by several of my respondents. The most common book, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, was the foundation to one of the previously mentioned websites. This book was frequently referenced in interviews by mainstream mothers (and hardly by self-identified attachment parenting mothers) who read texts in preparation for their child. Those mothers who identified with the attachment parenting philosophy and/or assumed a more natural parenting approach recalled reading literature that was consistent with their ideologies. Aubrey, who described herself and her husband as “environmentally conscious and simple,” shared the materials she read in preparation for her son:

I read a lot. I received *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, but I thought that was a horrible book and kind of a stupid book at that. The questions and... so I found I didn't really follow that one. I read, it's called *Let's Raise Healthy Children* by Adele Davis. She's from the 1960s, she's a nutritionist. ...So that really guided me in the types of—she's a big protein eater and the types of protein and having a very mentally superior child. I read *Spiritual Midwifery* by Ina May Gaskin about natural childbirth. I read *La Leche League Book of Breastfeeding*. I read *Great with Child*, it's kind of a book of letters and stats, it was by Beth Ann Fennely and it talks about the joys of motherhood. There's a book called *Breastfeeding Café*, so mostly all of that. Things that dealt with breastfeeding and nutrition.

Aubrey's reading list varied greatly from the mainstream mothers that I interviewed, as did her parenting style, thus, suggesting reading materials can influence a new mother's reality (or that a woman's reality can influence the types of materials she chooses to prepare with). While the majority of these texts were not *specific* to consumption, Aubrey did admit there were messages throughout that were suggestive of food, breastfeeding products, carriers, etc. In reading *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, she found that book to be more blatant in suggesting mothers' consumer "needs:"

What to Expect When You're Expecting definitely talked about things you should have. I found though that it was just so... There was definitely a checklist.

The types of parenting magazines she selected also paralleled her natural style of parenting:

I was [subscribed] to *Mothering*. The rest of them I think are like *Cosmo* for mothers (laughs). What to do if my baby isn't as cool as the other babies (sarcasm)? ...At the back there's very earthy organic type (of ads). *Mothering* is no longer, they just got rid of their magazine, but in the back they'd have things like baby carriers and organic stuff to buy and things like that.

While a few respondents subscribed to parenting magazines, the majority reported receiving them without a subscription. Charlotte explained this phenomenon:

I do get some [magazines] now. Nothing I... They just randomly appeared when she was born kind of thing. I guess I get on some sort of list, so I don't choose to

subscribe to them, but I do get them. I think it's *Parenting* and *Baby Talk* magazines.

Leah had some idea of how these resources were being imposed on new mothers:

[I'm subscribed to] *American Baby*. They actually gave you that at Motherhood [Maternity] when you bought clothes there. They gave you a year's subscription just for shopping there.

Among other mothers, these respondents admitted to reading the magazines they received each month. Although they had not made the decision to subscribe to parenting magazines, they did make the decision to engage these resources, or bodies of cultural knowledge, as they arrived.

One parenting book, *Baby Bargains*, reappeared in new mothers' narratives and was specific to consumerism. Those who read *Baby Bargains* relied heavily on the bodies of knowledge within the book to determine which items to register for—a strong example of knowledge constructing a consumer reality. Charlotte recalled the role of this book in the gift registration process:

I did use a book called *Baby Bargains*, and that book is just about buying items. That helped me a lot. That's basically what I read to figure out what to register for. So that one definitely did [recommend items]. ...*Baby Bargains* was the one I used for everything, pretty much. ...And like I said *Baby Bargains* helped narrow it [list of items] down.

Given the book was intended to save expectant mothers money, it was just as influential in helping mothers determine which items *not* to register for. Leah credited the book for helping her spend less:

The *Baby Bargains* book, which tells us things that were worth buying versus not worth buying and what not to waste your money on. It helped a lot. ...I found *Baby Bargains* to be more informative [than *What to Expect When You're Expecting*] of what to buy and what things were used for, because I had no idea what things were. ...It would give you three different diaper pails and tell you to pick this one over that one and tell you why. It would have different star ratings and what people actually said about them. The same thing for the Pack-and-Plays and car seats, things like that.

Leah's explanation implied that *Baby Bargains* did not just suggest items to purchase, but provided details and ratings on specific brands and models of each item. Reviews were critical overall, particularly for larger-ticket items.

In narratives of the gift registration process, women frequently mentioned being given a "must have" registry checklist by the store they registered with. Aubrey described this list as being a conservative guide for expectant mothers:

You walk in there and they give you this huge pamphlet of things to buy and what you need. There was one sheet I remember kind of guided you around and said "Oh, in this section you need all of these things." We definitely did not follow that. I kind of skimmed it and would say "Okay, they say we need this, this, and

this, but nah we don't want any of this.” We kind of walked around and tried to think about “Okay, realistically what do we need? What are some of the things?” and people who are mothers looked at this list and said “Wow, this is the skimpiest list I had ever seen!”

Mia had a contrasting view of these shopping guides:

They give you these books of newborn essentials. And if you were to purchase or register for everything on that list, you would have no house left! I mean the amount they tell you to register for. I'm sure [husband's name] can attest to this. It's just insane everything they tell you that you need.

Some women regarded these guides as “skimpy” whereas others perceived them as overwhelming or excessive. This contrast is indicative that a baby's need is not “...inherent, inevitable, or determined by the nature of things” (Hacking 1999: 6).

In sum, my findings confirmed that new, first-time mothers drew from various resources to help them determine their prospective child's “needs.” Mothers sought out and were offered up resources which helped them define, redefine, or confirm their reality. Ultimately, resources were used in the production of their consumer realities. While these mothers were active and empowered consumers, they were simultaneously limited by the cultural norms of motherhood, particularly those norms disseminated by these resources.

Reality-Constituting Practices

The Baby Shower

As with any socially constructed body of knowledge, my findings suggest that the phenomenon of “need” is constructed, disseminated, accepted as real, and habituated through social interactions and social situations (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). In addition to reality-constituting resources, reality-constituting practices, such as the baby shower, also helped shape mothers’ realities. Respondents accumulated the majority of consumer items by way of family, friends, and co-workers at baby showers. Consumption was so strongly tied to these rituals that mothers reported waiting for, or relying on, the baby shower for the majority of consumer items. Brigitte discussed the sequence of her baby showers to her own consumptive behavior:

We were fortunate enough that a lot of the bigger-ticket items like the crib, the Pack-and-Play and the stroller, friends and family got for us. We registered for most things. ...But most things we registered for and what we didn’t get, we purchased.

Brigitte was one of the numerous expectant parents who waited until after her shower(s) to engage in shopping. Another mother, Kristen claimed only having to purchase a few items herself:

She has everything. You name it, she has it. [I got everything off] my registry. I had three baby showers. My entire registry was bought. I did end up purchasing

extra nipples for the bottles and I really think that's about it that wasn't on the registry. But now I got everything.

Respondents almost unanimously admitted to having their “needs” met through the shower. Mia recalled the overwhelming amount of items she was gifted in preparation for her daughter:

Oh my goodness, I probably have every piece of equipment known to man. I didn't really have to buy. I think the only things we actually bought [ourselves] were the crib and the stroller. Other than that everything else was gifted to us. We got the swing, the bouncer, a little Rock-and-Play, I mean, we got so much stuff.

Her recollection was congruent to Jamie's:

It's an enormous amount of stuff [gifted to her]. Anything from the crib, the bassinette, the car seats, the blankets. A lot of our needs were met through the baby shower. We had two. ...What we didn't get from the baby shower, we purchased after we had her. The things we found essential that we needed more of, we went and got. But a lot of our needs were met. I mean, it was really overwhelming the amount of stuff that you get.

Given the generous amount of items mothers received, the majority of “unessential” items that mothers came to own usually arose from these consumption rituals. When referring to a pile of “unessential” items, April declared that, at no time did she ever think these were items that she needed: “No! Never! They were gifts and there was nothing else I could do,” meaning

through the consumption rituals she was burdened with these items. Similarly, Jamie revealed a hidden stock pile of “unessentials.” Some items she admitted could/would be necessary in the future; meaning, they were not immediately essential to her. These, too, all stemmed from her baby shower:

A lot of stuff that’s in here (closet) is stuff that I got at the baby shower. That I’m either not using yet or haven’t used at all. ...And all of this stuff will be convenient for when it’s needed. ...I just wouldn’t need them yet and I have them. All baby shower gifts. And some of these things weren’t even stuff that I registered for. A lot of times people will buy you stuff thinking that you will need it eventually or “I found this useful so I’m going to get this for you.”

Provided other mothers were almost forcing their reality onto expectant mothers, it makes conceptual sense that the culture of motherhood is perpetuated through gifting. This was particularly true for the child’s wardrobe. Almost all of my respondents mentioned the abundance of clothing they received for gifts, a theme later explored.

Baby showers were traditionally held one to three months prior to the mothers’ expected date of delivery. Showers were hosted so far in advance because the mother’s feeling of preparedness was contingent on accumulating items, so that she can be equipped to meet the child’s “needs.” April gave her rationale for having hers months before her due date:

[I had mine] two months before. A lot of people do a month before or two months before. I don’t like the one month before because the baby can come at

any time and I didn't feel ready. So, I wanted to have it (baby shower) before then.

Often respondents recalled having more than one baby shower or celebration. For some, this seemed to be attributed to having more than one social circle (e.g. friends, family, co-workers, in-laws). Kristen implied that having three showers helped her meet her "needs" and that "...when that one [third shower] was done, so was our registry." In fact, mothers were not at all oblivious to the centrality of consumerism to their baby showers. Some mothers even exercised guilt that, in our society, the invitation to a baby shower involved the expectation of a gift. To counter this guilt, or eliminate the expectation for guests to bring gifts, a few mothers threw less-traditional showers. Emma described her unconventional baby "celebrations:"

Just a book shower and a baby celebration, but nobody was allowed to bring presents. The book shower my family did for me and everyone bought children's books. And then the baby celebration my mom had... the one at my mom's was all my friends. ...I just didn't want all the stuff. For my baby celebration... I didn't want anyone to bring anything—not even a book, because I didn't want my friends to feel obligated to bring me something. I'm having a baby. And I just feel like I want to have everyone I love together and I didn't want everyone to feel like that meant I wanted something from them. So we did the baby celebration and I invited people that I wanted to be there. That I wanted to give me a hug and wish me luck for the birth. I didn't want them to think that I wanted something

from them. And then for the family book shower, that was all family, so I wanted them to feel like they needed to bring me some books (laughs).

Emma subsequently revealed that, despite her instructions, she received gifts at this celebration and throughout her pregnancy. This is an example of participants being passive in the construction of their consumer realities. Likewise, it demonstrates that consumerism is core to these celebrations. Emma's guilt, yet appreciation, were made apparent: "Those were gifts we didn't ask for—again, so grateful. I mean anything anyone gave us I just felt so bad."

While showers were typically hosted by individuals close to the expectant mother, these rituals always involved the mother's participation, specifically in registering for items. Again, this is an example of the mothers being active in their reality-construction, yet narrowed by culture. Even the mother from the "unconventional" case had registered at a few locations, indicating that despite her resistance, she had *some* expectation for gifts. This is perhaps, because society "pattern[s] our actions and even shape[s] our expectations" (Berger 1963: 169). Almost all of the mothers stated that the majority of gifts were items they registered for. This demonstrated the relationship between the baby shower and gift registration process, another reality-constituting practice.

The Gift Registration Process

Respondents used knowledge derived from the aforesaid reality-constituting resources (other mothers, books, message boards, etc.) to determine which items to register for. Some

expectant mothers registered because there were “necessary” items they could not afford themselves, or because they wanted to dictate the items they received as gifts. Summer fell into both of these categories:

[We registered for] pretty much whatever we didn’t have that we were going to need. And some of the things like the high chair that was the more expensive stuff that we might not necessarily be able to afford. ...I wanted to give people ideas other than just clothes, because everyone wants to bring clothes to the baby shower. And we had so many it was like “please just bring something else.”

It makes conceptual sense that mothers registered to ensure that the items gifted would meet the “needs” that have been socially constructed for the baby. Likewise, the practice of registering is itself, a social construction. This process is not intrinsic, yet it has been made tradition within the existing culture of predominantly white, middle-class motherhood.

Mothers gave their rationale as to how they made the decision to register at a particular store, or stores, as some respondents had completed two or three different registries. The most popular retailer, Babies “R” Us was typically chosen for its vast selection of baby gear. Jamie even referred to this retailer as “the Mecca of all baby stores.” Vera stated:

[I registered at] Babies “R” Us because it was local and because everyone had access to it and because people who didn’t know where we were registered would probably guess we were registered there.

Other retailers, such as Target and Walmart, were typically chosen on the basis of convenience or affordability.

An emerging trend, which appeared in other aspects of new motherhood, is the reliance on technology. Nearly half of my respondents registered online or chose a store that made the registry internet-accessible. Online registration was convenient for mothers, Emma included:

I was working at the time that I made the registry. I just went on Amazon.com and I was able to do it really easily, rather than going around scanning stuff in the store. I didn't have time to do that.

Some mothers registered in-store, but were able to tweak their registry online. Charlotte explained this feature:

I registered at Babies "R" Us. I went into the store to register. ...I registered for some things in the store and then when I came home I actually went online and probably did most of my registering online. Even some of the stuff I registered for in the store, when I went online, like I said I read the Babies "R" Us reviews about it and I realized it didn't sound right, so I changed some things and so most of it I did online.

It is clear that technology defined Charlotte's experience. Her account further demonstrated this reliance on online resources that is becoming an emerging reality of parenthood.

Those who did register in-store had a shared experience. Respondents all reported being accompanied by their male partner or a close friend or relative. For some respondents, the clerk

was of assistance when requested, but otherwise mothers recalled being left alone for the gift registration process. While the store clerks were not typically influential in parents' decisions among commodities, the shopping guides (formerly discussed as a reality-constituting resource) reportedly were. Aubrey explained the role of the shopping list in this process:

You walk in there and they give you this huge pamphlet of things to buy and what you need. There was one sheet I remember kind of guided you around and said "Oh, in this section you need all of these things."

April further narrated the process of registering:

We went to Babies "R" Us and we sat down with them and they give you the whole spiel. They give you the little gun and you just walk around and register. It was very daunting. ... We talked to a person who was familiar with manufacturers there and got the best quality that we knew of.

April was not alone in perceiving this experience as daunting. In fact, an additional six of my fourteen respondents used the term "overwhelming" when describing the gift registration process. Jamie's description follows:

They give you this little gun and you walk around the store and to be honest with you... it's really overwhelming because you really have no idea what you need. So I remember being 5-6 months pregnant and almost having a panic attack walking into Babies "R" Us going "where do you start?!" Because it's huge. Just

the bottle and nipples and the whole feeding section alone is mind boggling. So we just did the best we could.

Adriana reported her registry to be minimal compared to other mothers:

What the lady said is I was one of the ones that had the lowest amount of gifts on their registry and I was like “I still got stuff I didn’t really need” and she’s like “people leave here with 100-200 gifts on their list” and I had 43 and that was a lot for me.

Her account demonstrated the abundance of items an expectant mother typically registers for.

The gift registration process was central to the child preparation experiences of the predominantly white, middle-class mothers in my sample. Registering for items gives the expectant parents the opportunity to request items that meet the “needs” they have constructed for their prospective child and thus, feel empowered as consumers.

Second-Hand

Katz-Gerro (2004) insisted that “consumption is central to the process by which social groups reproduce themselves” (2004: 12). It was surprisingly common for women to inherit second-hand items. Just as advice or knowledge about items was passed along from mother-to-mother, consumer items were often passed on from mothers to expectant mothers, thus generating similar realities and perpetuating the culture of motherhood. Respondents, when pregnant, came about owning various items that other mothers were done with. While second-

hand items mostly stemmed from friends and family, they were also passed down from friends or coworkers *of* people they knew, essentially acquaintances or strangers to these mothers-to-be.

Summer explained who some of her belongings were handed-down from:

[I received] mostly clothes. Hand-me-downs from—there's a woman at my mother-in-law's work that gave us some clothes. She's the one that gave us the swing. And my dad's friend... they gave us a bunch of clothes, socks... mostly clothes.

This narrative demonstrated the willingness of mothers to pass along items of their own, regardless of the strength or degree of the relationship between these individuals and the parents-to-be. Just as mothers were quick to offer-up information concerning items to strangers on websites or parenting forums, they were willing to pass along the actual consumer items, when they were no longer of use to their baby.

Interestingly, some mothers accepted, even sought out second-hand items that were very personal or intimate. Breast pumps, for example, were handed-down to two of my respondents.

Robin elaborated:

Yes, I got... a friend had given me her Medela pump which I know you're not supposed to do but give me a break. They're like 400 dollars, yeah. And looking back I thought the pump had died. It was really me beginning to lose my milk supply. And so somebody else gave me an Advent pump that she never used. And I had Advent bottles. So I'll probably use the Advent pump [for my next

pregnancy] because it pumps directly into those bottles. But yeah, that was an interesting process because those are really expensive.

Jamie actually purchased a second-hand breast pump from an acquaintance who no longer used hers, claiming “she sold it to me for a very reduced amount.” While this was not a prominent theme, it was also the case that mothers inherited second-hand cloth diapers. Mia lent insight to this occurrence:

Cloth diapers—I bought a lot of my cloth diapers used to save money. They were actually from a site called Diaper Swappers. [I heard about it] through The Bump, when people would ask “how do you sell” or “where do you sell your used diapers?” That was one of the sites that came up.

Her discourse, “to save money,” was a reoccurring justification for why women inherited or sought out second-hand items.

A majority of respondents shopped at second-hand stores or consignment sales in preparation for their baby, some of whom had not explored second-hand shopping prior to being pregnant. Provided this was a cultural phenomenon, several of these stores and sales were exclusively items for babies and/or children, or had “a whole section specific for babies.” Emma was one of my various respondents who paid visits to these retailers:

There are actual consignment shops for babies, children, and ladies. The one that’s still there, we’ll go there every now and then just to see. We’re not looking for anything in particular, but if we see something that might be fun, we’ll get it.

And also consignment sales that happen, only for like weekends—like the moms get together and all consign their stuff.

Similarly, she was one of several to mention consignment sales or yard sales—typically put together by parenting groups, churches, or other organizations. Vera recalled attending local consignment sales in search of second-hand items:

Oh and then recently... They had a lot of consignment sales because its fall and I guess they do them twice a year. So we got some toys and pajamas and things like that. The thing is, these businesses only open twice a year—like once in fall and once in spring. ...I mean, I wish that I had known about them when I was pregnant, because I would have bought a lot of our stuff there. You get it easily at 50 to 75 percent off retail prices. And you can get really nice, almost brand new stuff. Sometimes brand new with the tags still on it! So, it's pretty nice.

While consignment sales were not something she ventured until she was postpartum, this experience is still indicative that she is inheriting other mothers' consumer realities through taking-in their second-hand items. The culture of motherhood is reproduced through second-hand gifting. Additionally, these reality-constituting practices saved parents money and were less wasteful; especially considering mothers “can get really nice, almost brand new stuff” at these venues.

Readdressing the emerging reliance on technology, some respondents mentioned utilizing, or at least exploring the second-hand market via websites, specifically Craigslist.org for

the consumption of used and thus, affordable baby gear. Emma shared her experience using Craigslist to consume and sell second-hand items:

So we got everything in his nursery from Craigslist: crib, changing table, rocking chair. And then all the furniture that was in here (living room) coffee table, other chairs, we sold on Craigslist. The coffee table had pointy edges and the chairs were hard to clean under and deal with.

Other mothers referred to online second-hand sites as a “time-consuming endeavor.” As Vera stated, “Either you have to camp out on the site and wait for it to pop up, or it’s just kind of a free for all.” Yet she recalled using the site to purchase one “essential” item from a family that had outgrown it. It seemed that more women had luck selling their baby’s gear on these sites than they did successfully finding items for purchase. Regardless, this internet phenomenon is one way that items circulate, perpetuating the culture of white, middle-class new motherhood.

In addition to reselling items, mothers attempted to give them away, or planned to give them away, after their baby outgrows a given object. This was less common for mothers who verbalized their plans to have another child, but an occurrence nonetheless. Jamie explained:

We’re in the middle of growing-out clothes. So as you can see from the dresser, I have been organizing my clothes. We’re in the 3-6 month category now, so I’m trying to find someone to give her clothes to who are in the 0-3 months, because people did that for us, so it’s kind of like paying it forward.

Jamie's commentary illustrated the pattern of mothers passing along items; even the gesture of second-hand giving was made tradition or habituated as part of mothers' consumer realities. Summer mentioned weeding through the items that were handed-down to her, and planned on passing these second-hand items along to an additional family, possibly one in need:

I don't really know why we held onto it (hand-me-downs)... They gave us stuff, they were like "some of it you might not want." Whatever, we have still some boxes that we are going to give to charity. I was thinking maybe they have shelters for battered women that have children and stuff like that, so I thought maybe donating it there instead of just bringing it to Goodwill.

While some hand-me-downs were used by Summer in her childrearing routine, others were neglected. She verbalized her intentions of passing these items along to new mothers, but implied they were not all adequate for meeting her son's "needs."

It was not uncommon for mothers to express their discontent with using second-hand items on their first child. While this was a reality-constituting practice for the majority of my respondents, some respondents did not take in second-hand baby gear, and those who did were particular about the items they received new versus used. April provided an in-depth explanation as to how she approached hand-me-downs:

Yes, [I received second-hand items]! Bags, and bags, and bags, and bags—half of which, I threw away. People are like "oh, I have this!" and I'm like "okay", you know, because I will just take it, be nice, and go through it. But it became like my whole back bedroom was full of stuff. And then when I finally went through it

all, I began giving some away to other people who were having babies. But I did get a lot of toys. Really, pretty much all of his toys that he plays with right now are hand-me-downs from [husband's name] coworkers that have older children now. Like, I didn't buy him any toys, because he plays with all the ones that people gave us. But clothes and stuff? I'll pick through them, but some of them I don't like the really young baby look. I like the older baby look. The littler soft animals and stuff, I don't like that. ...I'm not a big fan of that at all. So, a lot of the stuff I didn't really want. But I still took them, just never put him in it.

Just as expectant mothers were particular about the items they registered for, they were also particular about the items they received used. That is not to say they were not grateful or appreciative of the hand-me-downs, but also felt obligated to receive. Respondents expressed that only some second-hand items were appropriate for their anticipated son or daughter and/or for meeting their self-defined "needs." April followed this up by demonstrating this obsessive concern with newness that reappeared in other interview narratives:

I don't ever do second-hand shopping just because it's my baby. So, I don't want to know it's someone else's stuff I don't want that for him. Maybe just because he's my first. Everyone always says you want new stuff for your child. Maybe the second child I won't care. Especially if it's a boy he'll have all his stuff. But I don't buy things second-hand. If it was given to me by someone I know then...

April's account confirmed the weight of consumerism in preparing for a new baby. There was a particularity for items, not only specific to the condition of items, but of their ability to

accomplish women's socially constructed "needs." Regardless of this particularity among used items, second-hand gifting and shopping were reality-constituting for the majority of new mothers.

The Social Construction of "Need"

Keeping with the social constructionist argument, knowledge about a baby's need or a particular consumer item is made available to expectant mothers, they accept this knowledge as real and behave, or consume, in a way that is consistent with the culture of (in this case) white, middle-class motherhood at present. As with other socially constructed phenomena, consumer need is taken for granted, that is, "need" appears to be intrinsic or inevitable. However, there are elements of my findings that suggest consumer "need," particularly in preparation for a baby, is produced and distributed via the aforementioned reality-constituting resources and practices.

There were few women who served as unconventional cases throughout my analysis, in that their consumer experiences were not always typical. One mother's minimal and conscious consumption was attributed to her economic circumstances; she lost her job after learning she was pregnant, moved in with her parents, shares a bedroom with her son, and raises him on her own. The second mother, an environmentally conscious academician, had less conventional consumer experiences:

We left after a month and we traveled for two months out west. So we went hiking and camping and we stayed in motels and things like that. So everything [items] kind of went away.

Aubrey reported having only brought two toys along to occupy their newborn for this two-month experience. Regardless of whether they were voluntarily or involuntarily simplistic, these mothers' cases are indicative that consumer reality, particularly the scope of consumption, is socially constructed. These negative cases, do not only serve to clarify the present argument, but allow us to think outside of, or understand a reality to which consumerism is not core.

Berger and Luckmann (1966), defined knowledge as "...the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics" (1966: 1). For the application of this study, the phenomena is "need" and the said characteristics are the patterns of white, middle-class mothers' "needs" that are accomplished via consumption. Although my data was inherently qualitative, Table A was drafted to illustrate the prevalence of each of the themes touched on in my analysis. An "x" denotes that the given interviewee mentioned a "need" and/or implied that one or more consumer items were acquired to accomplish that "need."

Table 1: Prevalence of "Needs" in Respondents' Narratives

| | Nesting | Gender | Save | Convenience | Natural | Health/Safety | Contain | Entertain | Attachment |
|-----------|---------|--------|------|-------------|---------|---------------|---------|-----------|------------|
| April | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Nora | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | |
| Emma | X | | | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Summer | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Jamie | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Adriana | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Charlotte | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Leah | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Aubrey | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Mia | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X |
| Vera | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Kristen | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Robin | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Brigitte | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | |

My interview schedule [Appendix] inquired about the various items purchased or gifted in preparation for the child, consumption rituals concurrent with pregnancy, and the factors that drove new parents to purchase or register for baby products. My questions did not, however, directly address any of the specific types of “needs” (e.g. the “need” for convenience, the “need” to contain the child, etc.). That is to say, any dialogue on these socially constructed “needs” arose organically in these women’s narratives about their child preparation process, or in their explanations of specific items they found “essential.” It is then significant that mothers verbalized such comparable “needs” for babies, though it makes theoretical sense, considering they are being exposed to similar reality-constituting resources and practices.

The “Need” to Create a Space for the Baby (*Nesting*)

The “need” to create and ready a space in anticipation of a child, referred to by mothers as “nesting,” was a reoccurring theme in mothers’ narratives. All respondents fulfilled this need weeks, sometimes months, prior to their due date. One woman *completed* the nursery as early as ten weeks into her pregnancy. This sense of urgency was typically attributed to the scale of the project. Here, April responds to my question, “At what point did you set up the nursery?”:

As soon as we could. I was panicking so I wanted it to be done, because babies are so unexpected—they come early, late, whenever. He was actually a week and a day late so I was well-prepared, but we wanted to have it done as soon as possible because we did all the cosmetic things, as well. It wasn’t quick ... We

redid his whole bedroom because it was carpet ...So we took out the carpet, put wood floor down, and painted the walls with crown molding ...I wanted everything done, ready, and I hired a cleaning lady to come in and clean everything really well before he came ...so it was perfect for when he came home.

Her account demonstrated both the sense of urgency in creating a nursery for their expectant child and the ways consumption was used in the complete remodeling of the designated space. Not only are expectant parents consuming baby gear, but they are also consuming home improvement and building materials to do cosmetic work to the nursery. Here, Jamie recalled her husband's efforts to create a space in anticipation of their daughter:

He gutted the whole room, he painted it, put carpet in there. It was just a home improvement project to the extreme. And he was happy to do it and so ready to finally have a baby.

Hers was also one of the many examples of the gendered division of labor apparent in preparation for a child. Male partners, if mentioned at all, were said to have been involved in respectively masculine tasks, particularly painting the child's room, assembling furniture, and carrying out home improvement projects. Otherwise, there was very little mention of the male's role in preparing. This finding is consistent with past research (Starrels 1991; Kroska 2003) on the gender-stereotypic division of labor, particularly in childcare and household tasks. Men were sometimes reported having been responsible for researching consumer safety reviews of larger items, specifically the car seat, stroller, and crib, and they accompanied about half of the

expectant mothers through the gift registration process, although they were referenced as having been “dragged along” or useful for “shooting the [registry] gun.”

Despite the extent of labor and consumption that was put into creating a nursery, few mothers defined this as a useful or frequented space. These women defined the nursery as “essential” when preparing, and even at the time of our interviews, but for most respondents it was not significant in their daily use. There was a consensus among women that the nursery was occupied for little more than changing the baby’s outfits and/or diapers, and usually as a space for the child to sleep. Though several respondents, specifically those who identified with the attachment parenting philosophy, do not even utilize the child’s nursery for the latter, given they engage in co-sleeping. “Co-sleeping,” as it is referred to by my respondents, or “sharing sleep,” as it is referred to by Sears and Sears (1992), involves welcoming the newborn into the parents’ bed. It is reported this arrangement “makes nighttime parenting easier and enhances the development of your baby” (Sears and Sears 1992: 9). Various parents shared their own beds, or at least bedrooms, with the newborn, yet they still constructed the “need” for a nursery. Of these mothers, few constructed a separate nook in their bedroom, in *addition* to the nursery, with a crib, play pen, or bassinette to facilitate co-sleeping. Only one of the 14 respondents did not prepare an entire nursery in anticipation of her child, however her simplicity was attributed more so to economic factors than a reevaluation of “need.” Regardless of her reasoning, this unconventional case is one indication that the “need” for a nursery is a social construct, perhaps a construction of who the parent(s) are. Patterns in my data suggest that nesting is a fundamental part of the culture of predominantly white, middle-class motherhood in modern, Western society.

Interwoven throughout mothers' narratives were their interpretations, often gendered, of the themes they selected for the nursery. Some themes, like the one Mia executed, were more loosely-based:

I wanted to do something serene and relaxing. And the decorations over her changing table—she's got these little rose balls I made out of crepe paper, and there's these little pom-poms, and her name is over her crib. Color-wise and such ...like turquoise, hot pink, and lime green. So yeah, it's definitely really girly.

Other themes, like the one April settled on, were more prominent:

He's named after New Orleans Saints players, so his room is all New Orleans Saints—from the rug, to the bedding, to the valence on the window, and the pictures in the room. ...It's gold on the bottom half of his walls ...As soon as we found out it was a boy, and we picked his name, we knew we had to do New Orleans Saints because he's named after them. ...So we found a lady online that custom makes the bedding. As soon as we found *that* we knew we could do it. And then we found the rug at Home Depot—they have it online where it's NFL and college football teams. So once everything started falling together we kept researching different things and once we started finding all the pieces, we were like “alright, I guess we can really do it [the nursery] Saints.”

This statement is evidence that the theme itself, fueled consumerism. Parents consumed items, solely to build upon the theme of the nursery. Kristen's is one of the many examples of

expectant mothers purchasing an item only for aesthetic reasons and/or to contribute to the theme:

We ended up splurging and getting an actual recliner. This—I thought well, you know, it was modern, it would look good, and I sat in it for a few minutes in Ikea and thought it would work. But it's so uncomfortable for a baby. ...It just doesn't move enough to soothe him. So, it's in here for looks.

There were also examples of unessential items being gifted to mothers solely because they were consistent with the theme. Here, Kristen elaborates on this pattern:

Well, that was the problem that we even picked a theme. We probably shouldn't have even picked a theme, because it's not so much a theme as it's just that's what the bedding was. But as soon as people found out that was the bedding we chose, everyone thought "oh wouldn't that be cute if we get him something lamb." So, he's got about six different stuffed animal lambs, and toy lambs, pictures of lambs, little lambs that go on... so lambs got a little bit out of control.

Consequently, those with a more obvious theme seemed to have purchased or been gifted items specifically to support the creation of a themed nursery. Aubrey's nursery was evidence that themed nurseries are social constructions; something that need not be all that it is, yet is prominent in the current culture of white, middle-class motherhood.

I think we painted the yellow one day and the other day we stenciled. We have his name, we got big wood letters, and we painted his name and put those up. And we hung the tapestry and that was about it. I'm sure some people have really crazy baby nurseries, but I would say ours is not. There's some eclectic stuff. We took a road trip last fall—kind of because we were freaking out that we were pregnant—and we stopped at a Thai restaurant and there was some crazy origami fish. We bought that, but it's not yet hung in the bedroom. The other is a wall-hanging tapestry from Bali, and the other is a little frame thing that a friend made us. So no themes, no Pooh Bears or anything like that.

It could be interpreted that there was a subtle Asian theme or global theme, but it is constructed as a non-theme. This couple still engaged in nesting and painted and decorated the prospective nursery. However, they did consume significantly fewer items given there was not a coherent theme, especially one that is not popular among baby gear or nursery decorations. It is also worthy to note that the items they did recall buying, she reported being particularly meaningful to them.

Gender was influential in the selection of a theme. So much so that the aforementioned theme-less nursery was the only gender neutral nursery, with the exception of the two put together by women who did not know the sex of the baby at the time of nesting. Examples of themes constructed in anticipation of a son included New Orleans Saints, nautical or under the sea themes, and the jungle. Examples of themes selected in anticipation of a daughter included pink and brown teddy bears, and Suzie Zoo pink animated characters.

Most expectant parents held off on nesting until they learned the sex of the baby (around 18-22 weeks), as gender seemed to be the determining factor in the chosen theme, color scheme, and/or decorations purchased. In response to “How did knowing the sex prepare you?” Jamie replied:

Well, it definitely allows you to establish more of a baby’s room. The colors that you pick, the themes that you pick, as parents it gets you ready for what kind of kid that you’re going to have—if you’re going to have a rough-and-tumble little boy or a sweet princess little girl.

Her explanation suggested that nesting is necessary in that it “gets you [parents] ready” and learning the sex is necessary in beginning this nesting process. While there was a sense of urgency by mothers to prepare the nursery in advance, this process and thus, consumerism, was contingent on the revelation of the prospective child’s sex. Like so, the “need” to create a space for a child meshes with the “need” to gender a child.

The “Need” to Gender the Baby

Gender being a determining factor in the themes of the nurseries was just one indication of this “need” to gender their child. Just as the nursery themes were heavily gendered, baby shower themes, specifically the invitations and decorations of the consumption rituals themselves, were generally “it’s a boy” or “it’s a girl” themed. Though these were sometimes planned by friends, family, and/or co-workers, this pattern is still indicative of the pervasiveness

of gender in consumer culture whilst preparing for babies, right down to the party decorations. A review of, the sociological literature already informs us that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon that is central to our society (West and Zimmerman 1987; Lorber and Farrell 1991). My respondents' narratives highlight this emphasis on gender as it appears in the current culture of predominantly white, middle-class new motherhood.

While toys weren't as gendered as they might be later in childhood, there were already discussions of gender becoming apparent in the types of toys purchased for, or gifted to, the newborn. Vera's statement supported my claim:

I'm sure that [the child's sex] affected their decision to not give us things that were girly in nature. The toys that he's gotten have all been very stereotypical boy toys, you know, like trains, and automobiles, and stuff like that. And I'm sure that will just get more pronounced as he gets older.

Her dialogue, "girly in nature," implies that she views gender as an inherent reality—a justification for consuming items on the basis of the child's sex.

Women's discussions of the babies' wardrobes highlight gender as a socially constructed "need." When asked if the majority of baby shower gifts were items they had registered for, nearly all responded with a narrative consistent with Leah's: "Except for the large amount of clothes. I hadn't registered for any clothes and we just got tons of clothes." There was a consensus that clothing was the most gifted item, despite women having registered for little-to-no outfits. As an exception, Robin did not learn or share the sex of the baby during her

pregnancy. She reported receiving *no* clothing for the duration of her pregnancy, and thus, *all* of the items on her registry:

[I got] all of them [items on her registry]. Friends who knew what they were having tended to get clothes instead of what it was they were looking for. And since nobody could buy me clothes, they had to buy what I registered for, so I was like “phew!” There’s not a lot of gender neutral clothes either! So people *couldn’t* buy clothes—it worked out well. People like to buy clothes! I got very, *very* little clothes. So it forced everybody to get me things on my registry. It was fan-tastic!

Robin’s unconventional case confirmed that knowledge of the expectant child’s sex fueled consumption, particularly of clothing. This finding was especially worthy of analysis, because very few women labeled the wardrobe as “essential.” In actuality, more women referred to it as “unessential” in their experiences as mothers. Mia also verbalized that clothing was the most gifted *and* most gendered item:

I got *way* too many clothes. A whole bunch of clothes. And I think that’s one thing with the next one [pregnancy], I probably... if we find out the sex... I’m probably not going to share it, because we just got overloaded with clothes.

This obsession with gendering the child was so prominent that Mia considered not learning, or at least sharing, the sex during future potential pregnancies.

One respondent stated “There’s only so many unisex clothing that you can get,” building this assumption that perhaps the industry is generating “need” for mothers, specifically the “need” to learn the sex of the baby and the “need” to gender the baby. This illustrates a constraint on mothers and their social networks as consumers. Even Robin, the one mother who held off on knowing the sex, eventually accumulated a gendered wardrobe:

We did not know what we were having, so we had everything but some clothes. And then my mother showed up at the hospital with an entire pink and leopard print wardrobe (laughs).

This experience demonstrated the social limitations around generating a gender neutral wardrobe, as well as the obsessive “need” for social networks (friends, family, etc.) to immediately gender the child, even when the parents chose not to. This hyper-consumerism was especially evident for baby girls. As Kristen stated:

I have a girl. I mean, if it were a boy I would probably just have him wear onesies all the time. But with a girl, you can’t stop. Maybe *you* can, but I can’t.

Various respondents conversed about accessorizing their daughters, and/or future potential daughters. For example, one woman crafted her own headbands for her daughter to wear. The “need” to gender the child with accessories was less of a reality for mothers of sons. However, mothers of boys suggested they would have consumed significantly more items, had they been expecting a daughter. Summer, a mother of a five month old son, fell into this pattern:

A lot of them [moms in her online parenting group] make hair bows or photo prop kind of things. The little animal hats that sometimes the babies wear in pictures. Some of them, they do hand-painted, you know the letters you can spell the baby's name over the crib? Stuff like that—basically crafty things. And on there I sometimes like some of the stuff, but I generally haven't bought anything... But I think if I had a girl I'd be more likely to get hair bows and things.

It was made apparent that consumption creates gender, yet gender creates consumption. Vera seemed almost relieved that she did not “need” to consume for a girl:

It's probably a good thing we don't have a girl, because girl clothes, you could go *crazy* with them! There are so many accessories and stuff to lose and stuff to spend money on! So in that regard, I feel like we got lucky. He pretty much lives in onesies.

This hyper-consumerism could be attributed to this “princess craze,” described by Thomas (2007) as a “magical, glamorous lifestyle” marketed to young girls (2007: 136-137). While her analyses focused on lifestyle branding for toddlers and up, this princess-ing was apparent in Jamie's reference to her newborn daughter as a “sweet little princess girl,” as well as Brigitte's explanation of the gendered gifts she received for her baby:

My mother-in-law is very girly and princess and I'm not. I'm not anti-girl stuff; we have girl color things and I'll show you her room—but she got her ruffled

panties, like diaper covers, in every size. Like satin ruffles (laughs) and I haven't even put them on her.

These accessories were deemed “unessential” by respondents, thus indicating that the extravagant femininity (or masculinity) of a baby is socially constructed. Nevertheless, these commodities are still consumed.

Although there was an emphasis on gender in consumption for newborns, there were also various attempts by parents to be gender neutral (if not in the wardrobe and nursery décor, then in the general baby gear). Interestingly, the term “gender neutral” only arose in interviews with mothers of boys when describing some aspect of the baby gear or nursery. This was the case whether or not the items could actually be interpreted as gender neutral. For example, Nora framed her son's nursery as “gender neutral” and “ambiguous,” yet her description of the items suggest otherwise:

We talked about *not* being gender neutral, but then for practical reasons we decided to do blues and this-and-that. We did do his room kind of ambiguous; it's nautical, so it could work for a girl or a boy, so we did that. We painted it blue and brown. It could work for a girl or boy. And none of his crib or blanket stuff is obviously for a girl or boy.

Nora described the items as ambiguous and claimed they “...could easily switch it up if it were a girl.” Though she followed this statement up by admitting “...it worked better for a boy than girl.” *And* when asked if she would have chosen a similar nursery theme had she been pregnant with a girl, she responded:

No, I think now that it's there we'll make it work for a girl. Unless we want to totally redo the room, but I don't think that if we were having a girl first, nautical would have been our first jump.

Summer's experience in choosing a theme for her son's nursery was comparable:

Most of the stuff that we have is kind of gender neutral. Most of the stuff is kind of jungle pattern which would be okay for a girl, as well, even though it's green and blue.

Again, the respondent was framing more masculine items as neutral, or standard. Yet she too claimed she would have purchased different items for a daughter. Summer contradicted herself by calling the theme "gender neutral," because when asked if the child's gender played a role in the theme, she replied:

Maybe a little, because if we had a girl we would have gone for the typical pinks and things. ... Yeah, I think his gender probably did play a role, but not a significant role, because I wouldn't say that I would have a jungle theme for a girl.

Using elements of feminist theory, this pattern can be interpreted as indicating males, or masculinity, is seen as standard in our society, whereas women, and femininity, are viewed as other. Kessler and McKenna (1978) claimed that ambiguity "make[s] the dichotomous nature of the gender attribution process extremely salient," and that if gender is not obvious maleness is assumed. This theme was significant because mothers of daughters rarely described their

consumer items as gender neutral, and never claimed they would reuse the nursery theme for a son (with the exception of Robin, who held off on knowing the sex of the baby).

Attempts to be gender neutral were more so attributed to parents wanting to reuse the item(s) for future sons or daughters. This logic typically applied to larger objects that would be financially consequential to have to re-purchase. As April revealed:

I tried, when I was registering for my baby shower, to pick out neutrals anyways, because I want to keep the same stuff for my second baby. I don't want to have all girl stuff for my next child if it's a boy, or vice versa.

Leah shared this exact logic:

On our registry, everything we had picked was a pretty neutral color. So, we figure if we have another one we won't have to re-buy everything if it is a girl next time or vice versa.

These narratives implied that respondents sometimes consumed gender neutral items, not with the intention of refraining from giving their first children gender specific items, but with the concern that they could incorrectly gender the next child. This also supports my claim that masculine items are seen as normative, or standard. In sum, the consumption of both gendered items and perceived gender neutral items highlight the parents' "need" to appropriately gender their child. These narratives reveal that consumption was used to accomplish this "need."

The “Need” to Save Money

Perceived gender neutrality was *one* of the various ways that parents could increase the longevity or reuse a consumer item and ultimately, save money. Spending money to save money was a reoccurring “need” constructed by my respondents. My interview with Vera lent insight into new mothers’ experiences with saving money:

The kind of perspective I went with was that I wanted to save money. I wanted things that either had multiple uses or were reusable as opposed to things that were normally disposable. ...Even onto future children. I look for things where reviews would say “Yes, this is incredibly sturdy. It held up great through my child’s life. You could totally use this again or sell it at consignment.”

Non-disposable cloth diapers are one example of mothers spending to save. Here, Summer described cloth diapering and the economic benefits:

They [cloth diapers] look pretty much like a normal diaper. It has these little snaps. These ones, they’re one size, so you can use them from when they’re newborn until they’re potty trained. ...I only have twelve. And I do a wash maybe every second day, depending on how many diapers he goes through. ...And sometimes he’ll wear disposable, but still you’re not spending so much money on disposable diapers as you would if that’s all he wore. ...Basically for everything to first start is \$200, but then you never need to buy another diaper. So if \$200 is all you’re going to spend on diapers from the day they’re born until they’re just say, 2-3 when they’re potty trained, it saves a lot of money.

She proposed that the same diapers could even be reused on future potential children. Jamie seconded how cloth diapering involved spending a great deal up front, but would save money long-term:

There's a lot of up-front price, because your baby goes through seven to nine diapers a day. For cloth diapering, in order to get 7-9 diapers, you're going to have to up-front \$3-400. Now in the end will it save you money? Yes, because you're washing them and reusing them every single day. Though you also have to account for detergent, water, energy, all that stuff.

Diapers were among the many products my respondents purchased, particularly *because* they were reusable.

Even furniture was reportedly selected based on its perceived longevity. Leah purchased her son's crib from a Baer's Furniture, as opposed to the traditional baby store or department store, so that it could last:

It goes into a toddler bed; the footboard will come off, and the mattress will be a toddler bed. And we bought the rails to make it a full size bed once it becomes that. Hopefully he'll take it to college. Or my mom said if we have another it could be their set. We looked at Babies "R" Us, but we didn't like the quality. We figured after a couple years it was going to fall apart, but *this* [crib] is just so heavy.

Leah gave her rationale of why she decided on this particular crib among other pieces of furniture. Just in this response, she gave two (potentially conflicting) ideas of how she could extend the use of the crib. This is an example of the shared *knowledge* that mothers “need” to save money, and thus should purchase a durable and adaptable, yet more expensive piece of furniture.

Several women used this knowledge when evaluating the “need” for a changing table. While they all claimed that their changing spaces were “essential,” roughly one-third of the mothers, including Mia, used a dresser or other surface with a changing pad or mattress:

We have a little changing table on top of the dresser. I didn't buy a separate changing table. I tried to stick with stuff that she'll be able to use as she gets older—like her furniture—it will look good when she gets older. ...How long is that changing table, how long are you actually going to use that? I figure this way, when we're done with it, when she starts getting a little older we'll probably change her on the floor, and then she's got the dresser. One less thing to store.

Similarly, Leah purchased a changing pad, as opposed to the traditional changing table. Among other women, she referred to this as a “changing dresser:”

So the changing dresser is essential. That's what my mom told me—you don't need a changing table. You use it for so short of a time, then you have nothing to do with it after. This [changing dresser], when you're done, the pad comes off and it's still a dresser.

Longevity is one part of the culture of predominantly white, middle-class motherhood. This account confirmed that expectant mothers are receiving similar knowledge from other mothers, accepting it as real, then consuming in a way that is consistent with the culture of motherhood.

The changing-dresser is just one of the various examples of how parents purchased, or registered for items specifically for their multiple uses. Robin elaborated on the need for her 2-in-1 stroller and bassinette:

Our stroller also has a bassinette attachment. So it essentially was a 2-in-1. And the car seat clipped into it and that's pretty essential. That's one I got online.

It's one of the more expensive ones, but we walk a lot where we live so we got the macked out version.

Robin also went into detail about a 2-in-1 highchair and booster seat that again, use can be prolonged into the child's toddler months. Though, this pattern was not exclusive to her household. Leah discussed how a 2-in-1 car seat and stroller system was worth extra money, both for its longevity *and* convenience:

The car seat came as part of one of those travel systems. His [her husband's] car has a regular car seat in it. They said we could buy another base for this, to have it in each car, but the base was like \$60, where it was around \$85 to buy another car seat that goes up to 100 pounds, where this only goes up to 35 pounds. So, we ended up going for twenty bucks more and going with the other [additional] car seat.

In addition to the “need” to save money, this excerpt demonstrated the parents’ “need” for convenience. That is to say, this couple purchased an additional car seat to avoid having to switch it from the mother’s car to the father’s car, when need be. Both the “need” to save money (longevity, 2-in-1s, etc.) and the “need” for convenience were influential factors in expectant parents’ consumptive behaviors.

The “Need” for Convenience

2-in-1 systems were also deemed “essential” for their convenience. The same mother who purchased multiple car seats added, “I ended up going out and getting another stroller for the car seat because it was too bulky to get in and out of the car,” again indicating that items were purchased for their ease.

Those with two-story homes typically had duplicates of items for both the upstairs and downstairs areas. Leah discussed how a downstairs Pack-and-Play with a diaper-changing attachment was convenient, in that it served as a second changing table:

This Pack-and-Play had the changer off to the side. That’s why I picked this one. The other ones, the changer was on top, so every time you put the baby in you have to fold the changer up. So, I was like, “Oh gosh, that would be a pain.” And this one actually had shelves for the diapers down here. I just didn’t want to go upstairs to change him every time.

Parents often purchased duplicates for other homes which they frequented (grandparents, babysitters, etc.). Essentially, parents and/or their social networks were paying for the convenience of having that item in more than one place, as opposed to having to pack and travel with the item each time they brought the child to said household. Jamie shed light on this trend:

My mom also purchased some things so that when she goes over to nana's house, nana's house is well-outfitted with all her needs as well. So my mom has a Pack-and-Play and a baby tub, and toys, and books, and clothes.

Some commodities were chosen among others for their perceived ease in traveling or storing. For example, Vera decided on a particular style of bathtub, because it was easy to break-down and store between uses:

This is how we've given him a bath since he was a few weeks old and his stub fell off. But it's nice because it's Velcro, which means it can go flat. You can store it easily in a closet or under a bed. ...And it means we can stand at the sink to give him a bath and not break our backs. So, I'm a fan of this.

Again, the perceived convenience was what ultimately drove Vera to make this purchase or register for this item, among others.

Similarly, April purchased a Pack-and-Play play pen during her pregnancy for its perceived ease in packing and traveling; she assumed it would be convenient:

It's a playpen. That's exactly what it is. It just folds up. They call it a Pack-and-Play because you can just pack it up and take it wherever you go. It's really not

the easiest thing to put together. [Husband's name] gets so frustrated putting it together. But, we've only used that when we were on vacation ...and they didn't have a crib for him to sleep in, and I didn't want him to sleep in the bed. So, we used that. And then, now he stays at my best friend's mom's house three days a week, because I went back to work. And so, he'll take naps in that at her house.

This excerpt suggested that the item was purchased for its ability to travel easily. Even though she and her partner do not agree that it is easy to bring along with them, they continue to use the item as if it were a convenience, because the item was originally purchased to meet that socially constructed "need" of convenience.

Mothers typically referred to items that accompanied them outside the home as "essential." These were not so much items that the mothers wanted to get from one place to another, but items that made traveling or leaving the home more convenient. Strollers and carriers were among the "essential" items that were purchased or gifted to accomplish this "need" for convenience. Emma mentioned her stroller among the essential items for mothers:

Oh, and our stroller, that's essential. And ours is awesome! ...The one that spins so you can push him either way. I do love that. I love that because I can face him toward me or [away from me] based on the sun.

This excerpt also suggested that certain *features* can make an item more or less convenient and thus, "necessary." However, some mothers purchased or registered for the most basic and inexpensive of strollers (lacking storage, shade, and/or the ability to rotate), signifying that my participants had similar, yet varying "needs." Regardless, the stroller was purchased or

registered for by the majority of respondents to meet the socially constructed “need” of convenience.

While selective women wore carriers, or slings, because it is consistent with the attachment parenting philosophy, a few women purchased them for the convenience of baby-wearing. Robin elaborated:

I did a lot of baby wearing because it was easy. ...Both [around the house and outside of the home]. Like if I’m just running to the grocery store now, she’s gotten to be big enough so I can wear her on my hip in the sling. So if you just want to go to the grocery store and you don’t want to pack up the stroller and unpack the stroller, you just want to go in and get diapers, they get really heavy if you’re carrying them. And if she’s in the sling on my hip, my hands are free. ...When she was really tiny, sometimes they’ll only sleep against the warmth of your body, but you want to get up and do something, so a sling is kind of a nice medium, because your hands are free.

This account demonstrated that baby-wearing can be an easier, or more convenient, alternative to even using a stroller.

Diaper bags are another example of a commodity that mothers “needed” to leave the home. In response to “Which items are essential?” Summer replied:

Diaper bag. But this bag... It's got these little pouches which are really handy because the bottles fit perfectly in there, so you don't need to dig around looking for it. It's a good size—not too big, not too small, whatever.

Her account recognized that, while a diaper bag is convenient and thus, essential, not all diaper bags will suffice to meet her particular “need” for convenience. The features of the diaper bag, more so than the bag itself, met mothers’ “needs.” Charlotte too, implied that particular types and styles of bags can be more convenient than others.

Diaper bags. Essential. I have it in the car, *because* it's essential. I registered for a diaper bag and got the diaper bag I registered for. After I started using it, I didn't really like it, so I actually bought this one myself from Amazon. ...I really wanted a backpack one. ...The backpack makes it so I have two free hands basically.

Although the majority of women classified the diaper bag as essential, some mothers made admissions similar to Robin's: “Actually, I wouldn't even call this [diaper bag] essential. If you have a big purse, you can throw shit in it.” This reevaluation of need was case-in-point that the “need” for convenience, specifically for a diaper bag, is socially constructed, and that new mothers required varying bags with varying features to accomplish said “need.”

There were various smaller items that respondents referred to as “essential,” specifically because they make mothering easier. These rarely overlapped in interviews, which supported the constructionist viewpoint that the items themselves are not inherent “needs,” but rather are purchased or registered for to fulfill a broader socially constructed “need”—in this case, the

“need” for convenience. Keeping with the topic of ‘leaving the home,’ Summer emphasized the need for a formula container:

These little formula things. These are handy for on the go. I use these all the time in the diaper bag instead of bringing the whole thing [of formula]. ...I use it every day when I take him out. Basically you just scoop in the formula and it’s premeasured. ...It’s pretty easy. It’s already measured out so you don’t need to fuss with it.

Her statements “It’s pretty easy” and “...you don’t need to fuss with it” implied that the commodity was purchased for its convenience factor. Summer, among other mothers, made other remarks throughout her narrative about purchasing convenience. For example, when making a decision among wipe brands, Summer claimed she would only purchase the brand of wipes where the next wipe comes up, because she doesn’t want to dig around for it. “So I probably recommend people buy those particular brands, just because it’s easier,” she stated.

Technological devices were also among the items purchased or gifted because they fulfilled the socially constructed “need” that is convenience. While baby monitors were almost always considered essential for safety reasons, handheld video monitors were used by several mothers. Nora elaborated on how a video monitor was not as sufficient as the digital handheld equivalent:

Baby monitor. We have the one that looks like that (points to colored-screen handheld monitor in husband’s hand). You can get sound and video, so that was

essential. On our registry we had only gotten... it looked like a mini TV. ...So we actually went out and got that [handheld] one.

Given other respondents did not own a handheld version of a baby monitoring system, it is evidence that the “need” for convenience, specifically for a handheld baby monitor, need not be all that it is. Robin also gave an example of how technology made mothering more convenient:

One more essential item—it’s called an Itzbeen, have you seen it? If you’re breastfeeding or you have a small infant, there’s a button on here so you can tell how long it’s been since you changed their diaper, how long it’s been since you fed them, how long they’ve been asleep, or if you gave any kind of medication. Because you’re so tired, you’re up all night, you can’t remember how long, and if you’re passing the baby off you pass them off with the Itzbeen and somebody can tell how long it’s been since you did whatever.

In a sense these technological items were being used to assist and/or remind mothers to meet the baby’s physical needs.

Other gadgets, particularly those items specific to the baby’s food and formula, were deemed “essential” by respondents. Brigitte, the mother of a nine month old daughter, considered her bottle sterilizer an essential commodity because “It’s convenient instead of running the dishwasher every time you need the bottles.” Similarly, Kristen discussed why she purchased a baby bullet instead of using a food processor. “The Baby Bullet comes with food storage containers that have dates and stuff on it, so I figured anything that can make it easier.”

Their dialogue suggested that these items, among other gadgets, were purchased for ease and convenience.

Some narratives lent insight as to how formula and food itself are sometimes purchased for convenience. When talking about the food she purchases for her son, Vera stated:

I did not get into the whole idea of making my own purees. I'm not a big fan of being in the kitchen. I'm okay with paying for convenience. So we probably did Beech Nut or Earth's Best (baby food brands).

She stated that purchasing packaged purees made the feeding process easier. While Emma pureed food for her son, she also has packets of baby food in her pantry. She too, suggested that the baby food she does purchase is for convenience:

We do buy some baby food—those packages are the easiest. ...Anything in a pouch like this. We only buy organic, but mostly I make stuff. But this (packets) is for the convenience moments. ...A lot of times it's easier for me to squirt it out of a pouch.

Mothers mentioned other relevant “needs,” such as purified water to mix with the formula.

Brigitte stated, “Instead of boiling the water, and using tap water (to mix with formula), we have nursery water to mix the formula with.” It became apparent that the “need” for convenience was influential in the feeding process. Nora implied that formula (versus breastfeeding) itself, is a convenience:

They make it so easy to get on formula. When I first had [son's name], I didn't even have to buy formula for the first few months because I was getting samples constantly in the mail. ...The other thing is I went back to work. I work in an office with a big window, so it's not like I can just breastfeed with a giant window. I'm not going to breastfeed or pump in the bathroom—that's disgusting.

Nora did go on to criticize the high cost of formula-feeding, however this excerpt demonstrated how convenience drove her to feed her son formula instead of breast milk. It was common for mothers to consume items because they were “easy,” sped up a process, or “gave [them] a break.” Perceived convenience ultimately drove mothers to purchase or register a variety of items; this “need” was evident throughout their conversations.

The “Need” to Go Natural

With the exception of the few mothers who formula-fed because it was convenient, or because their bodies could not produce sufficient amounts of breast milk, respondents primarily breastfed or at least attempted to breastfeed in the first weeks/months postpartum. Those new mothers who experienced troubles sometimes consumed items that would promote lactation. Nora, who breastfed for three months, eventually gave in to formula-feeding, because she “could not produce enough to keep up with [her son].” During the trial-and-error period she purchased supplements to assist with production:

This [Organic Mothers Milk Tea, Fenugreek Herbal Supplements, and Blessed Thistle Capsules] is supposed to help promote lactation. ...They tell you this stuff when you're trying to promote.

Nora, among other women, mentioned nipple cream, nursing pads, and nursing bras as being essential to new mothers "even if you're not going to breastfeed." However, mothers who did breastfeed made mention of consuming the aforementioned items. Evidence that although breast milk is natural and thus, free of cost, mothers constructed the "need" to purchase or register for additional items that facilitated this process.

Breast pumps are another item that mothers who exclusively breastfed consumed in order to provide their child with natural breast milk, at times when they cannot be present. Mia discussed the factors that drove her to purchase a breast pump:

She's only breastfed. ...I have it [a breast pump]. I don't really use it because I'm a stay-at-home mom, so it's not really necessary. ...And the reason I purchased that? I wasn't sure if I would be going back to work, so I wanted to make sure I had a quality pump just in case I wanted to go back to work.

Although Mia does not use the breast pump, she constructed the "need" to purchase it. She stood by her purchase, calling it "essential," because in the event that she cannot be with her daughter to breastfeed, the pump would allow her to exclusively feed her baby natural milk. The majority of new mothers had negative experiences with their breast pumps and/or with the act of pumping. Adriana fell into this pattern:

Unfortunately, I never got to use a lot of it [breast pump and storage containers].

I was unable to pump a lot after the first two months. I guess he adjusted the milk supply to whatever he needed. And even though I kept trying to pump, nothing would really come out.

Adriana and other respondents who were not satisfied with their breast pump still considered that pump to be “essential,” because the pumps are purchased with the intent to meet the socially constructed “need” that is, to feed babies natural breast milk and limit their exposure to manufactured formula. Summer also referred to breastfeeding products as “essential” because they were consistent with her values that children should be breastfed, even though she gave-up on breastfeeding early on:

I don't know if it would really be considered a parenting philosophy, but I really believe in breastfeeding and I just feel like it's a good connection with the baby. And also, you know, it's the nutrients and things the baby is supposed to get. And obviously for how long humans have been alive they've been breastfeeding and it seemed to turn out okay.

Summer was clearly exposed to bodies of knowledge that socialized her to believe breastfeeding is an important principle of motherhood. During her pregnancy, she consumed in a way that was consistent with this knowledge, yet within a few weeks postpartum she turned to formula. By continuing to advocate breastfeeding, it is apparent that the bodies of knowledge are what constituted her “needs” as a mother, not her experiences.

Other reoccurring items that mothers used, or at least owned, to facilitate breastfeeding included nursing chairs and breastfeeding pillows (e.g. Boppy and My Breast Friend). Emma interpreted her rocker to be the most “essential” item for a mother:

That rocker we got for twenty dollars on Craigslist. I didn’t know it at the time, but it reclines back and that is—oh my goodness—*huge!* If your rocking chair doesn’t recline back I feel really sorry for you. Plus it rocks and twists and everything. ...Oh, [I use it] fifteen times a day. I’ve slept in that.

Again, breastfeeding pillows were commonly used during nursing by several of my interviewees. Vera’s description of the Breastfriend pillow follows:

This [breastfeeding pillow], back when I was breastfeeding. Holy moly—rocked my world. He was four weeks old and I was seriously thinking about giving up at that point. And this was the My Breast Friend pillow. It look incredibly cumbersome, but it put him in the perfect position to breastfeed. Though it was worth the time it took to put on. Oh God, I love this thing, this is pretty good.

Additional respondents, such as Charlotte, gave positive accounts of the Boppy brand pillow:

Oh! The Boppy [is essential]! The Boppy pillow is very important to me. And that’s just again, I still use it—it helps for breastfeeding, but I also put her on there and rock her so I can get her to go to sleep. ...I registered for it, definitely.

Although she did not always use the breastfeeding pillow in traditional ways, her account suggested that she registered for this item specifically to facilitate breastfeeding. Nearly all of

the mothers purchased or had been gifted a breastfeeding pillow, whether they breastfed or not.

Though not all of the interviewees had positive experiences with these specialty pillows:

I didn't find that I actually needed a pillow. The boppy that I have is kind of just to plop her own. It not really... that's really all. There's a big debate. Do you want the Boppy or the Breast Friend? And I ended up getting both. I ended up getting three Boppies. Not much use. Everybody's like "you need more than one." You don't.

This unconventional case from a mother, Mia, who owned multiple breastfeeding pillows, supported the social constructionist theoretical framework by confirming the "need" to use such items in order to provide one's baby with breast milk, is one that is socially constructed. However, for several women, especially Attachment Parenting mothers, pillows helped them meet the broader "need."

An even more prominent theme was the "need" to feed one's baby organic food. Given the differences in ages (3 months – 11 months), not all of my respondents had introduced their babies to foods other than milk/formula. It was, however, *unanimous* that the baby food used, or planned to be used, "needed" to be organic. Lyons, Lockie, and Lawrence (2001) have attributed this growing demand for organic foods (for any age group) to the social and cultural meanings associated with "green" consumption movements. Knowledge about organic food is produced, distributed, accepted as real, and ultimately influences personal lifestyle (Lyons, Lockie, and Lawrence 2001). This "need" was apparent in mothers who purchased pre-made baby food, *and* for mothers who made their own purees or engaged in baby-led weaning (BLW).

Vera explained why it is important that she purchase organic foods:

I try to stick to organic because of the whole dirty dozen thing. ...I just figured they're little, they're growing super fast, let's take a little extra care with what we put into them, at least in the beginning. ...I'd have to pull up the [dirty dozen] list, but it's the twelve most heavily exposed to pesticides fruits and vegetables. I know peaches are on that list, I know grapes are on that list, but I can't remember the others off the top of my head.

April also elaborated on why it is essential for her to feed her son organic food. She reported purchasing Earth's Best organic jarred baby food and organic rice cereal:

These are the first foods that he's getting, so I'd rather it be extremely healthy than who knows what's in it, because they can't put organic on it unless it really is organic. So, that's why I choose to do that, because his health is the most important, if I can control it. ...I'd rather spend the extra money on the baby food knowing it is organic than Gerber or stuff like that.

This excerpt illustrated the "need" to promote health, and thus make sure the pre-packaged baby food her son consumed was organic. This also serves as an example of how April was an active consumer, though her conscious consumption habits are still influenced by certain bodies of knowledge because social reality is always narrowed by culture. Brigitte had constructed similar needs for her daughter, and consumed in a way that was consistent with those needs:

From the beginning we started with Gerber. The little packs of purees, because they have some that are organic. Some foods—which I only care about certain foods like carrots and apples—I think are particularly bad if they’re not organic for babies. And it was cheaper than Earth’s Best or some of the other organic [brands]. I was starting to really shop around between Target, Walmart, the Walmart Neighborhood Market, and Publix (grocery store) as to what was cheaper. And I did look into that [foods that you should buy organic], not just for babies, but people in general.

Several of my respondents pureed their own baby foods as a way to make sure they knew exactly what was going into the food, and as a result, are accomplishing the “need” of feeding their baby organic. Nora admitted that the body of knowledge on pesticides or toxins could potentially be an exaggeration, yet she still consumed in a way that was consistent with that body of knowledge:

Just what is out there about pesticides on fruits and veggies—even if it is overblown as some individuals may claim—I don’t care. I’m going to air on the side of caution and am going to feed him organic food. Even if it’s not organic, just something... that’s not in the jar. Because jar food, it’s processed, and I don’t know what goes into making it. At least organic, or not, I know the fruit and veggies he’s eating, because I make it. I trust myself that I’m making it correctly.

She then referred to the Bullet blender that she used to puree her son’s food as “essential,” particularly because it allows her to meet the socially constructed “need” of feeding her baby

organic foods and promoting her baby's health. While Aubrey's son had not been introduced to food yet, she knew exactly which whole foods she wanted to start him on and the consumer items she would need to puree food herself:

I'm going to make it [baby food]. (laughs) I am not going to be buying baby food if I can help it. Yeah we're going to... we already have a food processor. I am probably going to start him on quinoa, slowly work into some wheat germ and things like that, and then introduce when it's right. I have a book that a friend gave me –Super Baby Food—and it talks about... because I do need *some* guidance of knowing when can certain foods be introduced. ...But it's all going to be natural products: fruits, vegetables, root vegetables, and whole grains.

For some mothers, pureeing required more than just a food processor. This technique involved freezing and storage and thus, ice cube trays and storage containers. Robin lent insight to the processes involved, and gave advice on how to spend less up-front:

I wound up making her food. So it's just as easy as you steam a vegetable and throw it in the blender and put it in the ice cube tray. Then you have twelve of whatever. So, I have a freezer full of Ziploc bags with various things. ...You can get it [ice cube tray] for four bucks at Bed Bath and Beyond and then you just pop em in. It costs three times as much if it is specifically for baby food, but it's the same item, you know what I mean? So baby food ice cube trays might cost 12 dollars.

While pureeing involves the use of various consumer items, it does save money and keeps mothers from consuming jarred baby food. Robin also elaborated on this:

We already eat a lot of whole foods and, you know, baby food can run \$1 to \$1.50 a serving, so I can put two sweet potatoes in that blender and have 30 servings for a dollar something. So, it's just cheaper. ...It's fresher, it's cheaper, and then I actually know what's in it.

While this method saves money, it is apparent that these mothers are making use of this process in order to provide their babies with organic, whole foods. Whether their knowledge about pesticides and toxins is valid, these mothers are acting in a way that is consistent with the body of knowledge they were exposed to as predominantly white, middle-class mothers.

A few of my respondents engaged in, or planned to engage in, baby-led weaning (BLW).

Mia described this best:

We'll probably do baby led weening, which is where you don't really do baby food. You kind of give them the same thing you're eating—the vegetables and fruits, as well. And they just kind of learn from there.

Vera also lent insight into the baby-led weaning technique:

We started doing baby-led weaning, which should really be called baby-led solids. So, every week we just feed him a new food and cut him up so it has a handle so he can hold it. But he's working on his pincer grasp. So we have to be able to cut things up into small cubes and he'll be able to put it in his mouth.

This method is evidence that food processors, and other items purchased to facilitate feeding, are socially constructed “needs,” not inherent ones, as there are varying ways to prepare baby food.

Emma noted her reevaluation of need:

Well, one thing people told me I was going to need that I still don't need is a baby food maker. You know, they have the ones? That's not really essential. I use ...a fork on a plate and mash it up. And hopefully we don't have to do baby food much longer. Hopefully he'll start to learn to move things around in his mouth and move right on to soft carrots and real food.

This organic trend was consistent whether mothers ate organic themselves and/or were knowledgeable about organic foods. Aubrey classified as the former:

We're very cautious and environmentally aware. And really try to, you know, belong to a community supported agriculture. And so we really want the local organic vegetables. Those will start coming in winter time. We take trips down to Whole Foods... Consumption wise we try to keep it as environmentally conscious and simple as possible.

This quote demonstrated that Aubrey's consumer actions were grounded in her and her partner's lifestyle. Thus, their “need” to feed the baby natural foods, is another way of meeting the “needs” of their philosophies. In other words, this “need” is a construction of who they are as parents. Jamie, too, was a conscious consumer, both for her daughter and herself:

When she's weaned, all natural foods and organic baby homemade foods and stuff like that are going to be key and essential. Definitely you know, positive parenting, really all natural parenting. Because we eat really healthy and go to the farmers market and get fresh produce. And it matters to me—pesticides and what they put into the food. For me, for her, I want to give her the best and make sure it's natural as possible and not, you know, give her stuff that I wouldn't eat myself.

Several of my respondents fed their baby organic, whole foods, but it was not a reflection of their lifestyle. Take Summer for example,

In general I would be the person that goes the grocery store like “oh, that looks good, I'm going to get that!” and basically buy a bunch of junk food.

This statement is evidence that natural, organic foods are not core to her values or central to her lifestyle. Yet, it is a “need” she has created for her son, based off the body of knowledge that was disseminated to her as an expectant mother. It is also worthy of analysis that the most “natural” items or processes that can be given to a new baby are still consumed and/or involve consumption.

The “Need” To Promote Health and Safety

It makes conceptual sense that the “need” to feed one's baby organic food and breast milk would fall under the “need” to keep one's baby healthy and safe, as this too, was a

prominent theme in my interviews. Just as mothers avoided foods that could potentially expose their baby to toxins, some mothers were cautious as to the types of furniture, clothing, toys, etc. they consumed. Aubrey's explanation of how she made decisions among commodities, mirrored those narratives that mothers shared regarding organic food:

We would go with the more sustainable, organic brand [of baby gear]. We would definitely try to pick things that seemed to have the least amount of bleach or toxins or whatever.

While sustainability was not as influential for all mothers, several mentioned this as being important for particular items. Nora shared the factors that drove her to purchase a particular brand of crib:

That was another thing we put thought into—we wanted solid wood, because his brother is an environmentalist, so he was telling us some of the particle board, when it starts degrading, it releases toxins into the air. So, we wanted something that was solid wood to avoid that. So, the crib was pretty expensive.

Other mothers purchased chemical-free teething toys. One toy in particular, Sophie the Giraffe, was spotted in several of my respondents' households and was often said to be "essential."

Adriana discussed these natural rubber teething products:

She [Sophie the Giraffe] is made with non-chemical products in the rubber. So, it costs a lot of money. Her [Sophie the Giraffe] and the teething ring that came with it. This [teething ring] is what he plays with. These little things have vanilla

scent, which are supposed to be soothing and relaxing, and these toys are made without chemicals.

These accounts were evidence that the “need” to promote health extended beyond the milk and/or foods mothers choose to give their baby. This “need” was influential in the type of consumer items mothers purchased or registered for, as well.

Various respondents purchased or registered for consumer items that are meant to manipulate the air quality for the baby’s nursery. Mothers referred to air humidifiers, air purifiers, and devices that monitor the temperature of the nursery, as being essential. Brigitte recalled how she came to own the air humidifier:

Oh this [is essential]. This is something we got. ...this actually keeps her from being congested, and so this helps. I guess the humidity in the air makes her breathe easier. I talked to a pharmacist at Target about which one I should get and he said they all pretty much do the same thing, just some of them have more bells and whistles. ...I definitely think it should go on a registry.

Using consumption to improve the nursery air quality was one way that mothers attempted to meet the socially constructed “need” of promoting health.

Women also mentioned trying to limit their baby’s exposure to fragrances in laundry detergents or soaps. Thus, several mothers purchase specialty soaps for babies. Related “essential” items were sunscreens, diaper cream, thermometers, gas relief, and other medicinal products. Mothers (some more than others) purchased or registered for these items to attempt to

control the health of their newborns. Several of the mothers admitted that these items had never been used, despite considering them “essential.” Jamie laid out various items (cotton swabs, diaper cream, etc.) that met this criteria—each of them still in their packages:

A lot of stuff that’s in here (closet) is stuff that I got at the baby shower. That I’m either not using yet, or haven’t used at all. ...I started stock piling stuff. All of this stuff will be convenient for when it’s needed. ...These are useful products. These aren’t the list of something I wouldn’t use. I just wouldn’t need them yet and I have them. [These are] all baby shower gifts and some of these things weren’t even items I registered for, but a lot of times people will buy you stuff thinking that you will need it eventually or “I found this useful so I am going to get this for you.”

Although she had not used, let alone opened, the “stock-pile” of baby shower gifts, she considered these items “essential,” because of the possible chance that her daughter would require one of these items to be healthy. Similarly, April referred to an entire first-aid kit as necessary for new mothers, however, only a few of the items from that kit were useful in her experience:

All these things [in the first-aid kit] are important, even though I haven’t used half of them, but some kids might have to use them. Like this is a pacifier you put medicine in if they won’t take it another way. He actually takes droppers really good—he always has. But this [pacifier], they could just suck it right out. So if

he ever needed it, it would be really helpful, but he never needed it, because he was good. That's a little kit you can buy. You can buy the whole kit together.

April pointed to the differences in “need” based on the child. In this instance, the “need” to uphold their baby’s health via consumption is one that is of such importance, that use value is irrelevant.

Mothers also purchased or registered for items that would protect their baby from potentially contaminated surfaces. Most respondents purchased or registered for tubs to fit within the sink or bathtub as a way of meeting this need. Nora explained why she “needed” a bath tub:

This is his little tub. Because I did not want to, you know, just thinking about what goes into our sink as far as meats and stuff. I didn't want to bathe him in that. So this is his little tub, that is definitely essential.

This demonstrated the “need” to place a barrier between her child and a surface that could very well hold bacteria. Another popular item that was purchased to meet this “need,” were shopping-cart or high-chair covers. Leah’s narrative captured why this item was perceived as “essential” to her:

This is a cart cover for when we go shopping, that we use when we go to Publix (grocery store). It just keeps him from being able to chew on the bars and everything... from other people... it is able to protect it. It fits on a high chair

too, when we go out to eat, so he can't chew on a high chair either. It just keeps the germs.

Only a few of my respondents owned these types of commodities, which indicated new mothers attempt to accomplish the socially constructed “need” of health through a variety of consumer products. Even if they have not been useful in their experiences as a mother, they are considered “essential” for their intention to promote health.

Just as the baby's health was a concern being addressed through consumption, the baby's safety drove new parents to purchase or register for items, as well. Baby monitors were one way that new mothers could attempt to control, or at least observe, the safety of their newborn. It could even be said that these are used to assist or remind the mothers of the baby's needs. The majority of my respondents had video monitors, which Aubrey referred to as “a 21st century convenience.” She stated:

I can flip it on and see—especially now—what he's doing, if he's crying, or could go back to sleep, or if I could get him. So that was one [essential]. She [friend's name] said “Trust me, you're going to want the video.” I agree with her. My mom says it's crazy. She says to turn the video off. But I can't help it.

Her mother's reaction to the video monitor, and her admission that it is a 21st century luxury implied that the monitoring system need not exist, but has become an asset for accomplishing “safety” in white, middle-class new motherhood. Summer's reevaluation of need supported this claim:

We really haven't used that [baby monitor] much. Just because our house is not huge and I don't like closing the doors all the way anyway. Just in case the monitor for some reason didn't work, I can hear him when I'm sleeping. I wake up without it.

Although Summer might consider the baby monitor "unessential" *because* of her living situation, it is still evidence that the "need" for one is not inherent. It could also be interpreted that the "need" for safety is so central to her mothering experience that she does not trust a consumer item to monitor the safety of her child. One mother was so concerned with the safety of her son, they utilized a SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) monitor. Leah described this device:

It's a SIDS monitor. He wears it every night. It goes on his diaper, right on his belly button. As long as he's breathing in and out it's fine. If he stops breathing, it sends a vibrate. Or if it doesn't feel him take a deep breath, it sends a vibrate to kind of alert him to wake him up. If he still doesn't start getting a deep breath, it alarms, so you know and you come to make sure he's okay. So he wears that every night.

While she was, at that time, the only one of my respondents to mention that particular item, she was one of many to suggest the "need" for safety or security, and thus, seek to accomplish that need through consumption. This monitor was one of the artful ways in which Leah sought to accomplish her "need" for safety, but the "need" itself is one that is socially constructed and shared among mothers.

The need for safety was also apparent in parents' methods of baby-proofing. Not all of the homes I entered had been baby-proofed, as this is not "necessary" until the baby is "mobile," one respondent informed me. However, even those mothers who had not yet baby-proofed their homes, referred to the items as essential. Each mother had varying types and amounts of baby-proofing items. For example, Brigitte installed gates throughout the home, which turned into a more elaborate project because they "couldn't figure how to install it without nailing boards to the walls." Likewise, she reported doing a significant amount of research on the safety of different gates to help make a decision among commodities. Emma, on the other hand, claimed that safety was the number one factor that influenced her to purchase an item. Yet she did not feel baby-proofing items were crucial to mothering:

And child-proofing stuff, I don't think that's very necessary. The only child proofing thing we have in the room is the chemical cabinet underneath the fridge, and then we have our outlets plugged. I think that's pretty essential. But as far as like, I mean you see, I just... anything he can reach he can take down, or whatever.

Emma's style of baby-proofing involved raising or removing any potentially harmful items from her son's reach. This allowed her to accomplish her "need" for safety, without having to consume additional resources.

Play mats were generally used for baby-proofing, as they were popular in houses with tile or hard floors. Summer explained how this consumer item was used to keep her baby safe for the first few months:

She [friend's name] got us a mat for him to play on the floor. ...We got him another one too. ...When he was first born it was huge—he was a tiny little thing on there. Now, he's starting to crawl and we have tile everywhere and this house is all hard floors. So we got this other mat from Ikea that is padded, as well. ...So we just put them on the floor together so he has more room to crawl around.

Nora used an alternative for a play mat that she purchased from a Sporting Goods store:

This [mat] I think is essential. This is the gym stuff, so if you're doing weights. ...It's made to handle big weights falling on it, so it's thick.. I guess that's essential if you happen to have tile.

While Nora still purchased and consumed this item, she took an unconventional approach, demonstrating her agency as a consumer. Crib bumpers also fell into the baby-proofing category, as they are supposed to protect the baby from hurting himself/herself on their crib. However, many women removed these from their baby's crib due to product recalls. The majority of my respondents were knowledgeable about the risk of suffocation, which demonstrated that these mothers are all being disseminated similar bodies of knowledge. Nora was the first to mention this recall:

I did do research on bumpers from Baby Center and I ended up taking them off from what I read. ...The bumpers usually moms freak out about. Everything I read, was that bumpers weren't necessary. That if anything, bumpers shouldn't be on the crib because kids can roll into it. When they can roll one way and not the other way back, they can suffocate. So yeah that is not essential.

Note the parallels between her narrative and Kristen's:

[The bumper is] absolutely unessential, because you can't even put them in their crib. They're smothering hazards. All you're supposed to have in the crib—she's a bit older, that's why the blanket is in here—but the crib shouldn't look anything more than this. Some people might even say this blanket is bad in here.

Given my respondents rely on similar resources for bodies of knowledge, it is evident these resources are powerful in determining mothers' subjective realities of what is "essential" and "unessential."

The car seat is one item that mothers generally referred to as essential, both to keep the child safe and because it is "mandatory by law." Respondents reported doing the most extensive consumer reviews on items such as the car seat, because of its value in keeping their newborn safe. It was one of the few items that mothers did not seem to rely on other sources of information (friends, family, books, etc.) for, as safety reviews ultimately drove them to purchase or register for a particular brand and/or model. One mother did not mention reviewing car seat brands, but selecting a car seat that was the Safety First brand, specifically because the word "safety" was in the product label.

Regardless of the item or its specific use, each of the mothers I interviewed seemed concerned about meeting the "need" to control their baby's health and safety. A few of the respondents stated that safety was the most important determinant when making a decision among commodities. Kristen reinforced this assumption:

I do listen to our pediatrician. I do a lot of research. It's a lot of trial and error. I won't ever do anything that has been deemed unsafe ever. ...I just play it safe.

Several mothers' narratives paralleled Kristen's statement, and their consumption habits confirmed that health and safety were shared, socially constructed "needs" among them. While it seems given that a mother would want to maintain her child's health and safety, the argument is that this process requires a varying scope of consumption.

The "Need" to Contain the Baby

Another theme among "essential" items is that they frequently contained the child. It makes logical sense that this "need" to contain the baby is an extension of the abovementioned "need" to keep the child safe or secure. Evidently, mothers viewed the item as important, *because* the child "cannot hurt [her or] himself" or "get into things" when she/he is contained by a given item. Brigitte, among other mothers, referred to a high-chair as a "need." In her case, it was so essential that she purchased a duplicate for her mother's home:

The high chair became essential... it was useful to strap her in and just kind of really narrow her. Restrict the movement. Even at my mom's house we just have the Bumbo to feed her and it's too much. So, I went to Walmart and bought a cheap high chair.

This excerpt illustrated that the high-chairs were essential for restricting her daughter's movement during the feeding process.

One of the reoccurring explanations for “needing” items that contained the baby was that they gave mothers a break from having to hold or intently watch the child. Before the baby is mobile, mothers would rely on less restrictive items, such as play mats or specialty pillows to meet this need. As Robin noted:

This is an item I got on Amazon. They’re called Baby Loungers. See that it’s elevated in the back? ...she could sit in the middle and be inclined. A lot of people would use their Boppy (breastfeeding pillow), but this was nice because you could put her in it and go get a cup of coffee and she wasn’t going to go anywhere. Now she’s seven months old and can roll around, so she might be able to roll out of it, but for a newborn, you could just put them down. And sometimes, too, you just want to like go to the bathroom, so I call that essential.

Just as Robin stated, as the child becomes older and thus, mobile, more elaborate items are “needed” to contain the baby. Items such as the Baby Lounger or Boppy, allow the mother to meet her own physical needs or perform tasks that are essential to her. April referred to her Jumperoo as a “necessity,” because it allowed her to shower, get work done, etc.:

Oh, this jumper thing is a freakin’ necessity. This thing, Oh my God, would get me to... it allows me to take a shower without him. I have two of these. One went to work with me. It’s the same exact one. ...So that while I was working, he could play in something. But this, I would put him in this, turn on the TV, and go take a shower real quick, because he can’t get out of it. So, that’s the only way, being home alone, that I could take a shower, because he would be awake.

Her dialogue "...because he can't get out of it" demonstrated the importance of relying on consumer item(s) to contain the child. Jamie boasted about a similar item:

I think this is really essential for when you're cooking dinner or taking a shower—anything to keep the baby secure. And also happy, because it vibrates and has music. It's really essential.

This narrative also highlights the socially constructed importance and "need" in containing or securing the child, as it allows the mother to take a break from holding and/or watching the child.

Carriers were often used to fulfill this "need" to contain. Rather than relying on an item where the parent "...can put [him or] her in and leave for a couple minutes and do something," a sling, or carrier, allows the mother to hold the baby, but "...get up and do something..." because "...your hands are free." Vera was among the mothers who justified the purchase of a carrier or sling for this reason:

Now it [the sling] is just the reason I can get through a trip to Target. He's pretty happy in this sling. We used to do the newborn hold where he's all tucked away in there. Now we do front carries and hip carries and he's pretty happy in there.

Again, these women assured me that these consumer items are what allow them, as mothers, to shower, eat, work, shop, use the bathroom, etc. They are not confident they can meet their socially constructed "need" to contain their baby without some or all of the aforementioned items.

This finding was even consistent among mothers who identified with the attachment parenting philosophy. For these mothers, it is ideal that the mother (or father) and baby be constantly interacting and bonding, as the first few months postpartum are considered a “high-need stage” (Sears and Sears 1992: 11) in attachment parenting. Emma, a mother who heavily subscribed to this philosophy, gave into purchasing various items that contain the child even though they contradicted her parenting ideologies:

I was convinced that my son was not going to be in a stroller, and that he was not going to need a Pack-and-Play, or a swing, or a bouncy seat, or anything, because I was going to hold him and we were going to be mother-baby really close. And so, it was probably that he was two weeks old that I was like “wow, I would love to push him in the stroller and get around a little bit.” So we went down to a consignment shop and got a stroller. ...And then I was like “wow, and maybe he would like a swing” and “maybe I could put him down while I take a shower” or you know, things I didn’t think about. I had this idea—mommy-baby chest-to-chest all the time—and so I don’t want to be, and I still don’t want to be, the mom that’s like put him in the Pack-and-Play and go do something for myself. We’re very connected and always playing and engaging and close. So I tried not to have all these contraptions and plastic things to put my baby in. But there were some things I had to go back to the consignment shop and get.

Emma’s account demonstrated that even she, as a subscriber to attachment parenting, conformed to the cultural reality of containing one’s baby. It eventually became a “need” of hers to own

items that allowed her to take periodic breaks without having to worry about her child's immediate safety.

The crib was another item that new mothers viewed as “essential” because it contained the child. Each one of my respondents owned a crib, meaning at some point during their pregnancy, they constructed the “need” for one. Some mothers did not use the crib in the earlier months, but found it to be useful (or predicted it to eventually be useful) in later months. Aubrey explained this shift in need:

The crib I would definitely [call essential]. I guess before—prior to him being able to roll—it was not essential. But the crib now, definitely essential, because otherwise he's all over the floor.

Again, this pattern was even consistent with attachment parenting mothers who engaged in co-sleeping, which again, is a sleeping arrangement that promotes nighttime closeness between parent(s) and the baby. Jamie co-slept with her daughter, but still “needed” the crib to facilitate this process:

At first she was in a bassinette because she was little enough. And recently we actually moved her crib in there [master bedroom]. At night she normally falls asleep in our bed with us, or in our arms rocking her, and then we'll put her in her crib. So she's there right with us, and in the middle of the night if she cries or fusses and needs something, then we're right there to be able to take care of whatever her needs are. So we can meet her needs.

Another attachment parenting mother, Adriana, referenced the crib as “necessary,” however, her son only occupied the crib for a short time each night:

At night time he’ll go down, when I first put him down he’ll go down in the crib.

But once he wakes up and wants to start breastfeeding again I just find it easier to bring him into the bed because that way he’s right there next to me. I don’t have to keep getting up a thousand times.

Both of these accounts revealed the “need” to purchase or register for a crib, was even consistent among women in my sample who sleep with their baby throughout the night. Despite owning the item, a few women admitted that the crib was not “necessary.” Mia fell into this group:

Basically that crib is a waste of money. I got that a lot and I’m like “Oh, no it won’t be.” Yeah, it totally is so far. ...The crib is unessential. ...[I’m] trying to get her to take a nap in there once a day, but it doesn’t always happen.

Sometimes it does, but I’d be perfectly fine with putting her in the Pack-and-Play.

While this was one of the more important items for other women, her excerpt implied that the “need” for a crib and thus, to contain the child is socially constructed. While it makes conceptual sense that *some* place for the baby to sleep is an actual need, the device(s) that best meet that “need” are social constructions—possibly constructions of whom the parents are, what their parenting philosophy is, and/or the household dynamic.

Items that contained the newborn were especially valuable to mothers if they had features that entertained or distracted the child. Jamie explained how these features were influential when making a decision among commodities:

Did it have vibration? Did it have music? Did it have things that hang down for the baby to play and swat and bat at? ... Depending if they (bouncy seats, etc.) have vibration, or music, or hangy things, this is something specific we looked for at Babies "R" Us and Target to try and find the best one.

April, too, discussed the importance of choosing an item with these interactive features available to keep the baby busy or distracted:

We searched high and low, because a lot of them don't have a whole lot of toys on there for them to play with. Like, there's stupid ones, but this has a lot of different interactive toys for him to play with. So, that's why we got it, because some of the other ones were really stupid, but this one has a lot of things. And he likes to flick... so he uses his motor skills.

Summer also talked about the importance of owning walkers or bouncers with music, sounds, rattles, etc. to "keep [her baby] pretty entertained." Here, she described an item that did not have any of the aforementioned features:

He sits in here [Bumbo seat] and he tries to throw himself over the back or over the side. He's a really inquisitive baby, so I feel like maybe he's interested in

other things. A lot of people love them [Bumbo seats], but it doesn't do it [because it doesn't bounce] ...or entertain him.

This excerpt suggested that an item is consequential and thus, “unessential,” if it does not have features to entertain or keep the baby occupied. That is to say, not only were items consumed to accomplish this “need,” but often items were framed as “unessential” for not accomplishing the “need” of containing the child *and* his/her attention.

The “Need” to Entertain/Occupy/Relax the Baby

This “need” to own items that occupy the baby’s attention, was not specific to commodities that contained the child. Though, there was a definite pattern of items meeting both criteria. When explaining her Jumperoo, April referenced both “needs:”

I didn't realize how important the Jumperoo—it's called a Jumperoo—how important that would be, because I didn't have that until he got older and he wouldn't stay in one spot anymore. He wouldn't stay in one spot. ...But the Jumperoo is great, because I would bring him to work with me and it really helped me out a lot having that. It would keep him entertained and I wouldn't have to worry about him. When he was little, I had him in the bouncer on my bed and he would just fall asleep in that, but as he got older, it got much harder to keep him entertained while I would take a shower.

April claimed this item was essential because it allowed her son to “stay in one spot” while it would simultaneously “keep him entertained.” Summer similarly classified an item as “essential” for its ability to meet both needs:

I really like this—it’s a walker-bouncer. ...It also has little music and it has little sounds on there so he can play. It keeps him pretty entertained. It has this little rattle he likes to chew on so it’s kind of convenient. And he can’t really hurt himself while he’s in there.

Again, my respondent reported this item to be essential for two reasons: “It keeps him pretty entertained” and “he can’t really hurt himself while he’s in there.” This account, among others, supported my claim that consumptive behavior in preparation for a baby is often fueled by the “need” to contain and entertain a child.

The “need” to entertain or occupy a child’s attention was apparent in narratives of additional consumer items. Mobiles were one of the more common items that were mentioned for their ability to distract or entertain one’s baby. Summer described the various features that her son’s mobile offered:

This one [mobile] has sound, a little projector thing, and the things spin around. When he is older you can take this part off and it will project on the ceiling. So when he’s not a baby-baby and that [spinning] is not interesting.

She stressed the importance of having features to keep her son interested at various stages of development. April presented a similar “necessity,” a glowing, musical aquarium crib attachment:

And this thing [musical crib attachment] keeps him entertained. ...If I need him to sit in here [crib] for a minute, sometimes I’ll turn it on. But now in the mornings when he gets up, he turns it on himself, and that’s how I know—if I’m out here and not in my room with the monitor—that’s how I know he’s awake, because I hear this thing playing.

Jamie referred to a pile of stuffed toys as “necessities,” for their stimulating and/or calming abilities:

This is stuff we bought—these are baby toys. This one specifically she likes now because she can hold things and grab them. Rattles, noisemakers, and the ears crinkle. This one is more to help her fall asleep. It plays music and lights up. So it’s almost like a nightlight as well when she’s in the crib, but it’s also like a buddy. It’s her little buddy.

One mother, Emma, avoided purchasing any of the aforementioned items. However, she referred to music, specifically her CD player, as “essential” for entertaining her son. The CD player she used was something she had since college; she did not purchase one in preparation for her baby, however this required her to continuously purchase children’s music or classical music:

The kids' CDs, all of that together is very important. Music is like *huge*. We play it during the day, we put lullabies on at night. All of it is children's music ...some of it is classical.

Related, some mothers purchased white noise machines for a similar outcome. Adriana described this necessity:

This little thing right here, as far as noise is concerned—this one has different sounds. It has a heartbeat, and the ocean, and rain, and music. And then it has a little projector.

Vera was another respondent who emphasized the importance of a Sleep Sheep, a white noise machine used to help the baby relax or sleep.

Oh, Sleep Sheep! The Sleep Sheep with his white noise. This is how my baby slept for a good while. God, everything is about baby sleeping. It's part of the routine: Bath, Book, Bottle, Sleep Sheep.

This, among other responses, demonstrated the “need” for the predominantly white, middle class mothers in my sample to use consumer items to help their newborn sleep. Other mothers occupied, even relaxed, their babies with other methods and thus, consumer items. Leah reportedly put her son to sleep by playing Baby Genius videos on a wide screen, mounted television: “He loves Baby Genius—he watches it on the TV to fall asleep. He loves the music. ...I think he associates it with nighttime.” Vera also followed an elaborate nighttime routine in her first few months postpartum:

Dr. Harvey Carp. ...He created the Five S's. So what is it? Let me see if I can remember. First one is swaddling. So he recommends that you get swaddling blankets. The second one is shh-ing, so "shhh!" Third one is swinging, which sounds violent but actually it's just that light head jiggling. The fourth is... I think the fifth is sucking, so pacifier, bottle, or breast. What is the fourth? Oh well, he doesn't use it now anyway, so we're good. But of all those the gear that they recommend is swaddling blankets, pacifiers, bottles, and you can get a swing. We got a swing.

This is one mother's example of the variety of items "needed" to help relax or put a new baby to sleep.

April's admission made it clear that it not be absolutely "essential" that mothers purchase items to entertain or occupy their baby. April and her husband purchased, or were gifted enough toys to fill a spare bedroom, yet her narratives indicated that her son could be, and preferred to be, occupied by random, inanimate household items:

These are all boxes that he plays with while he's up here, while I'm changing him. ...I give him the box, so it keeps him entertained. He would rather play with everyone else's stuff than his own. If he sees a laptop, he's pulling on it, your cell phone? He wants everyone else's stuff besides his own. ...Everyday he finds something new.

In fact, during the course of our interview, her son was more impressed with the felt case for my audio recorder, than he was any of the interactive toys put in front of him. Adriana showed me a

homemade, interactive toy that involved the consumption of a few items, coupled with items she found around the home. While she was hesitant to call this toy “essential,” she did admit that her son took a greater interest in it than any of his store-bought toys:

We made this light table. I’m not sure whether it’s needed or not needed, but it’s something fun. It’s a clear plastic box with Christmas lights in it. You turn it on at night time and put clear, different colored beads on it and he goes berserk over it. He loves that stuff. That was \$13 and this (bouncer) was \$45, and he plays with that (lightbox) more than he plays with this. ...I got it [the idea] at this websites from a friend on Facebook called Play at Home Moms—they’re all about creative thinking and they call this the light box. It’s a really fun website with all kinds of ways for you to use things leftover behind at home to make things to play with for sensory or touch and using color and lights and stuff like that. That’s what I like so far as toys.

Both narratives are indicative that the “need” to entertain or occupy a new baby with consumer goods, and for their intended purpose, is one that is socially constructed. These accounts confirm that the “need” to entertain could also be achieved with items found around the home or items that are not specific to babies.

A number of respondents turned to books, both at night and throughout the day, to stimulate and/or entertain their babies. Jamie mentioned how books are incorporated into their routine:

I really enjoy reading to her. I read to her when she was in utero. She likes it now because she gets really, really, really entertained. And she likes to hold the books, touch them, and play with them.

Books differed from the other commodities used to fulfill this need, in that they required the mother's (or other individuals') participation; that is, the items are still used to accomplish this "need," but are not being relied on to take the place of interaction of supervision. Emma's account lent insight to this trend:

There are some moms I know that have babies at nine months that have books that fit in one of those little baskets. That's all they have is maybe twelve books. Oh my gosh, I read twelve books a day! You know, I would go crazy if I only had twelve books. And I still want more books. We have all these books in the playroom and all these books in the nursery and I still want more books, because we read a lot. ...throughout the day. It's not really part of a bedtime routine, it's more of me passing the time. I don't want to sit there watching him do something, I'd rather be doing something too to make time go. We just read. We read.

Emma, and another mother, Aubrey, considered reading so essential, that they hosted "book showers" instead of, or in addition to, the traditional baby shower. Emma explained this phenomenon to me:

I intentionally did not want a shower—a baby shower—because I didn't want stuff. So we did a book shower and a lot of people brought children's book. We

really wanted that, because I figure you can't have enough children's books, but you can have enough Fischer Price whatever.

Aubrey, a literature instructor, also explained her book shower:

The [baby shower] theme was your favorite book. Bring your favorite book as a child to give to him. So I got a lot of used books at that.

Throughout Aubrey's interview, she stressed the importance that she and her husband place on reading to their son:

It's a very quiet household. We're both literature teachers, both literature majors, so we read a lot. Honestly all of these—I call them stupid little books, but I'm sure they have a purpose—all these really baby ones, which I know he engages more with, he looks at the pictures and things like that. All of these (baby books), are from the baby shower. All of the more literary ones are all ours or old books from my husband's childhood, you know *Treasure Island*, *Robertson Caruso*. We read him some of these (baby books), but we also open up some of the stuff that's not and just read it to him. Throughout the day we randomly read to him. We were reading *Tales of Pooh*, and he likes that, but he also likes *Moo Moo Baa Laa Laa*, so it doesn't matter. But we just read to him as much as we can and we know that makes a huge difference.

Her account demonstrated the importance that reading has in some households, as this satisfies the “need” to entertain or occupy the child's attention. The “need” for books, is essentially a

construction of the parents' identities, the values of the household, and/or the expectations for the child. Not all of the interviewees mentioned books as being essential to them or their baby, though some mothers interpreted books as essential to meet various other needs (i.e. attachment/bonding). Regardless of whether the item(s) involved parent interaction or allowed parents to take a break, it was prevalent for parents and their social networks to consume items that met this socially constructed "need" of entertaining or occupying the baby's attention.

The "Need" for Attachment

Roughly one-third of my respondents identified with the attachment parenting (AP) philosophy, which again puts forth various mechanisms for being "appropriately responsive to your baby" (Sears and Sears 1992: 9) to generate a nurturing environment for him/her. Those who identified with this philosophy gave their subjective interpretations of what this means for them, as mothers. Emma's explanation included the various principles she read-up on and accepted as true:

We follow Dr. Sears' advice on a lot of things. Mothering.com is real big on attachment parenting and a lot of cloth diapering and breastfeeding and a lot of the things that we are big about: baby wearing and co-sleeping. We choose not to circumcise him and we choose not to vaccinate him—real big on Mothering.com.

Charlotte also gave a detailed explanation:

As far as attachment parenting, it's kind of, you meet your baby's needs. You don't put them down in the crib and let them cry it out. My philosophy is, if she can't talk, she can't tell me what she needs. The only way she can is by crying. So if she's crying, she needs something or she wants something and that's my job to take care of it. I don't want to just put her down and let her cry and figure it out herself. I need to make sure I'm there to meet her needs. That's basically the thought behind attachment parenting.

These narratives lent insight to this parenting approach that idealizes parent-baby closeness. Mia shared her interpretation of attachment parenting and the influence it had on her consumptive behaviors:

The thing with attachment parenting is that it doesn't require a lot of stuff. Really, it's just me, dad, and the baby. It's not like you need a whole bunch of stuff to follow that, so that's pretty much what I've realized.

While this train of thought came out in other narratives by AP mothers, it was not consistent throughout *all* of my interviews with AP mothers. That is to say, some mothers identified with this parenting philosophy, but did not interpret it as Mia did and/or limit their scale of consumption. This was perhaps attributed to all of the practices and principles associated with attachment parenting that require particular items.

Co-sleeping, or sharing sleeping (Sears and Sears 1992), is one of the core principles of attachment parenting, and was practiced by respondents who identified with this philosophy.

Some mothers interpreted this as sharing their bed with their infant, whereas others slept separate, but shared their room. Jamie utilized the latter approach, which required various items:

It was important to us that she stay with us, especially at night. In the beginning I was breastfeeding. So, having her close with the split-room floor plan was essential. ...She sleeps in our room. We took a corner of our bedroom, we made it her bedroom—her little nook. So it's separated by curtains. And at first she was in a bassinette because she was little enough, and recently we actually moved her crib in there. ...And again the bassinette was essential for us because of breastfeeding and having her close to us and keeping her close at night.

Jamie's explanation of co-sleeping included a crib, bassinette, and curtains, among other items such as a breastfeeding pillow. Emma practiced the former method her first few months postpartum, however, her account demonstrated that items purchased to facilitate co-sleeping were not inherent "needs," but rather ones that were constructions of the AP philosophy:

I wish we would have bought something like a bedrail or a co-sleeper or something to help with the co-sleeping, but we just kind of made it work with pillows and such.

Her experience supported the claim that co-sleeping was still doable without consumption, but consumer items such as bedrails or co-sleepers would have better facilitated the process.

Baby-wearing (discussed before as a way of meeting the need for convenience), is another principle of attachment parenting. Thus, AP mothers purchased (sometimes several)

slings and carriers for attachment purposes. Jamie informed me of baby-wearing and elaborated on how her two carriers are used to meet the “need” for attachment:

I definitely believe in attachment parenting; having a baby-centered family so that all of her needs are met. We baby wear. I have several different slings.

She informed me of the different types of slings and carriers that were suggested to her by her “natural parenting friends:”

Going forward there are different baby slings they suggested that I’m looking into. They happen to not be very cheap. I really want... not a Moby Wrap because Moby Wraps stretch out too much. But Ergos, or there is a new one called My Tie, it’s also kind of a cloth ring sling that’s a big piece of cloth and you put it in a ring. The Snugi, obviously her little arms and legs fit into here. This one is called a Seven Sling and it actually goes over your body like this and then you cradle your baby in here and then you can carry them around with you.

Charlotte also had various slings, with a preference toward one:

Dr. Sears (attachment parenting expert) is a big proponent of wearing your baby in some sort of carrier. I do that a lot. The one I use most is the Ergo—it’s my favorite. So we wear that when we’re out sometimes or even at home sometimes. ...My sister gave me a couple different wraps and slings and different contraptions, because there’s all these different kinds. And I did not like any of

them! I had heard that this [Ergo] was a favorite of peoples and I bought it and that is definitely my favorite.

Both of these accounts highlight the variety of items available to them to facilitate baby-wearing and thus, attachment or closeness.

Some mothers reported breastfeeding for reasons other than, or in addition to, it being natural, organic, or better for the baby; that is, the “need” for attachment was also influential in AP mothers’ decisions to breastfeed. All of my respondents who identified with attachment parenting, engaged in breastfeeding, as this too, is an important aspect of the philosophy. There, were items used to facilitate closeness during breastfeeding (breastfeeding pillows, rocking chairs, etc.). Charlotte elaborated on how both of the aforementioned items were necessary, both for breastfeeding and for putting her daughter to sleep:

I do feel that a glider is very essential. If she won’t sleep or fall asleep, I can rock her in this and get her to sleep. ...Oh! The Boppy! The Boppy pillow is very important to me. And that’s just again—I still use it—it helps for breastfeeding but also if I put her on there and rock her I can get her to go to sleep.

Aubrey did not identify with the attachment parenting philosophy, however she did share some AP values and principles, including breastfeeding. Her admission supported my claim that the “need” for such items is socially constructed and specific to each mother’s subjective reality:

That [rocker] is not essential. A nursing chair? I guess you would need *something* to sit on. I honestly at night time I just end up nursing on this [futon].

Thus, the rocker itself, or features of that rocker, are not inherent “needs” of new mothers, but may have been sufficient in facilitating breastfeeding, which was the broader “need” that AP participants all socially constructed. Other items were consumed that were sufficient in facilitating breastfeeding and thus, mother-baby attachment or closeness. Even more telling, is that the remaining respondents who did not identify with attachment parenting, do not find the same items essential, or might for different reasons. This too is indicative that the “need” for attachment is socially constructed, and may differ for each mother based on their subjective reality or the resources that shaped said reality. That is to say, these items are constructions of who the mother is.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The preceding study was an exploration of need-based consumption for babies. Data stemmed from fourteen semi-structured interviews with predominantly white, middle-class new, first-time mothers. The goal of the data collection process was to “gain a thematic description of [consumer] experience” (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989: 137) and the interview narratives successfully captured the reality-construction processes, as they related to consumption.

As first-time expectant mothers, respondents implied they were targets of advice; they acquired knowledge about a baby’s “need” and any consumer items that would facilitate those “needs.” Sources of information included books, magazines, parenting groups and classes, consumer reports, websites, and other mothers (both friends and family, but also mothers on social networking sites). These resources constituted mothers’ and thus, babies’ consumer realities. There were various cultural practices concurrent with pregnancy by which most of the consumer items were accumulated. Respondents reported that much of their needs were met through the baby shower(s), though women could attempt to control the items gifted to them through their gift registry or registries, to ensure that they would meet the “needs” they have constructed for their prospective child. In addition to explaining the *reality-constituting resources* and *reality-constituting practices* that influenced consumptive behavior, my analysis explains each of the reoccurring “needs” that my sample of predominantly white, middle-class mothers constructed for their baby. Interview excerpts and examples of items used to accomplish “needs,” were incorporated throughout the analysis to support my claims that “need” is socially constructed and consumption is used by new mothers to accomplish said “needs.”

Technology was an additional theme that reoccurred in mothers' accounts of their consumptive experiences. Technology was not interpreted as a "need" for most women, but rather it shaped their overall experience. Respondents relied heavily on online resources for accessing bodies of knowledge on baby gear, and for some, even managing their gift registries. While there was still a trend of mothers seeking out information in books, magazines, and other offline resources, these were no longer *as* influential as they might have been historically. It was even common for respondents to turn to other mothers on various online forums or product review sites. Given social interaction constitutes reality, online social interaction and other various technologies are defining this new parenthood. Similarly, mothers sometimes labeled items as "essential" for accomplishing one of the aforementioned "needs," but would imply that the technological features of that item are what allow them to fulfill that "need." Because these are relatively new items or gadgets, it is clear the "need" for these items were not inherent. However, these technologies were shaping mothers' realities and are thus, worthy of analysis.

Findings are consistent with the broader theory of social construction in the sociology of knowledge sub discipline, that provides "a basis for examining the circumstances of reality construction, the meaningful resources that are employed, and the realities that are produced and used in the process" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997: 161). The insights gained from the present study tell us a great deal about the ways that respondents participated in the construction and distribution of their social realities as new mothers, and inevitably the consumer realities of their babies. Mothers had turned to similar resources (online forums, consumer reports, other mothers, parenting groups, books, magazines, etc.) to help them construct need and formulate

decisions among commodities. Provided they were relying on comparable, if not overlapping, bodies of knowledge, mothers' narratives about consumer "need" were often congruent.

Not only are the types of "needs" and items themselves social constructions, but the ways expectant mothers accumulate items are ritualized and made tradition. The baby shower and gift registration process (which all of my respondents participated in to some variation) are social constructions themselves; these practices, which are so strongly tied to consumption, help constitute reality for mothers. The social interactions (including the gifting of new and second-hand items) that take place during, or surrounding, these consumption rituals help to perpetuate the existing culture of motherhood. While it should be noted that consumers can be active, artful, and empowered in their behaviors, they are simultaneously passive in that they obey social norms and are limited by "finances, time, cognitive capacity, and knowledge" (Cherrier 2006: 516).

Given my recruitment methods and thus, somewhat uniform sample, one aspect I was not able to investigate was race and class differences. Past, relevant research tells us "Consumption identities clearly intersect with other aspects of identity politics. What we consume is classed, raced, and gendered and indicates a host of other social and symbolic identities" (Cohen 2003; Cherry, Ellis and DeSoucey 2010: 252). While financial means are considered an indicator of one's level of consumption, there is a difference between bought and borrowed/free (Katz-Gerro 2004). Provided second-hand items were central to the majority of mothers' realities, class might not be as telling of the scope of consumption. While economic resources were not directly inquired about, styles of life were. As Holt et al. claimed, "Societies segregate into different

reputational groupings based not only on economic position, but also non economic criteria such as morals, culture, lifestyle” (1998: 2). These factors were investigated; hence the distinctions between “attachment parenting” mothers and “mainstream” mothers. My study framed materialism as a cultural occurrence, but Holt et al. (1998) referred to materialism as “a class practice” (1998: 19). While I did not have diverse enough of a sample to explore any racial or class disparities, this is worthy of analysis and is one suggestion for further research.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1) You were invited to participate in this study because you are a new, first time mother. How long have you been a mother?
- 2) Tell me about the household the child has been living in so far.
- 3) What kind of stuff did you get in preparation for having a baby? How did you get it? When did you get it?
- 4) At what point did you learn the sex of the baby? How did that prepare you? Did you tell others?
- 5) What materials did you read in preparation for your child?
 - ...parenting magazines? ...child rearing shows? ...websites? ...classes?
 - Did these materials suggest which items or baby gear to buy?
- 6) Who helped you prepare?
 - Did you turn to other mothers? What advice did they give you?
 - Did you receive any second-hand items? ...shop at any second-hand stores?
- 7) Did you have a baby shower? Tell me about your baby shower.
 - Who planned it?
 - Who was in attendance (family, friends, coworkers)?
- 8) Did you register? Tell me about the gift registration process.
 - Where did you register? Why did you choose these stores?
 - How did you choose which items to register for?
 - Were the majority of baby shower gifts items you registered for?
- 9) Tell me about your child's nursery.
 - At what point did you set-up the nursery? Tell me about this process. Who helped you with this process?
 - Tell me about the theme or any decorations in the nursery. Did the child's gender play a role in the theme?
- 10) How would you characterize yourself as a consumer (in general, not just in preparation for your baby)?
- 11) Is there a particular parenting philosophy that you subscribe to?
 - Does this philosophy impact what kind of stuff you find critical?
- 12) Is there anything you thought we would discuss that we did not cover?

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