

EXCESSIVE... BUT NOT WASTEFUL?
Exploring young people's material
consumption through the lens of
divestment

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Declaration

I, Rebecca C Collins, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has
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Abstract

Recent decades have been marked by growing awareness of the need for more sustainable consumption across society. Young people have been identified as well-placed to drive new (sustainable) modes of consumption through their participation in trend-setting youth cultures, as well as their roles as influential members of households. Yet, whilst the socio-cultural situation of young people makes them an appealing focus for sustainability promoters, the ways in which socio-cultural factors both enable and constrain their capacity to consume sustainably has been the subject of little investigation. The aim of this thesis has been to extend understanding of young people's consumption in order to increase the efficacy of sustainability initiatives targeting youth.

As a corrective to the preoccupation with acquisition that has dominated extant youth consumption studies, this project has taken divestment as its focus. Not only has this permitted a response to accusations of wastefulness amongst the young, it has focused much-needed attention on the socio-cultural forces underpinning young people's relationships with their possessions.

Based on qualitative research with young people in East Anglia, this thesis argues that the problem of waste (and thus unsustainability) in young people's consumption does not (primarily) concern the flow of items into the waste stream. Rather, waste is produced when possessions fall out of use and remain unused over time, and this is driven by lack of agency in response to powerful socio-cultural forces. It is suggested that addressing this requires facilitating young people's attempts to contest waste-making imperatives within extant cultural norms, and that sustainability promoters might attend to this through building young people's competence, self-efficacy and desire to prolong the lives of their possessions. In sum, this thesis argues that young people can drive sustainable consumption if they are able to reclaim power over their consumption from the market and consumer culture.

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For Bam
who never threw anything away

“To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things.”

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981: 1)

CHAPTER ONE

YOUTH AS CHANGE AGENTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

It is estimated that if the rest of the world were to consume like the developed world, we would need the equivalent of four extra earths. As half the world's population is under 20, young people's consumption patterns are decisive for tomorrow's world.

(UNESCO 2002)

1.1 Prologue

This thesis emerged from the intersection of two interests. The first emerged from my work as part of a government-funded sustainable consumption and production (SCP) project focused on the changes required at institutional level in order to promote sustainability in the UK. While this project was concerned primarily with macro level policy making and the actions of government and business, I became interested in how the simplification of ideas about sustainability responded to the institutional need to 'join up' action across government departments and industry sectors, yet simultaneously constrained those institutions' ability to respond to the complexities that characterise the 'real life' contexts where policies are enacted – and expected to yield positive results.

The second interest emerged from my concurrent weekly volunteering at a local youth group. One member, known as 'Little Sam' (aged sixteen at the time), would arrive every week with bags of his latest purchases to show off to his peers. Although his behaviour was the exception rather than the rule amongst the group, it was evident that the ways in which the group members materialised their identities – through their clothes, their mobile phones, their overall 'style' – was central in their assertion of who they were – or wanted to be – in this space. I began to wonder how Little Sam and his peers might respond to demands for their material consumption to be made more sustainable, given its demonstrable importance in teenage life.

The intersection of these interests prompted me to explore how the growing imperative to embrace more sustainable consumption was being communicated – and facilitated – by organisations with expertise in engaging young people on sustainability-related

topics. This led me, first, to a UN-developed project called YouthXchange¹ (UNEP-UNESCO 2008). Described as a “training kit on responsible consumption”, the YouthXchange website and guide present in excess of one hundred ways in which young people can reduce their environmental impact and promote sustainability. Further exploration of initiatives conceived by environmental third sector organisations made evident that there were in fact many projects that aimed to engage young people on sustainability topics.²

However, some fundamental questions left me querying the potential efficacy of such initiatives. First, how effective could projects such as YouthXchange be in creating lasting change in young people’s consumption in light of the existence of youth culture(s) with its/their own norms and demands? While the suggestions offered by these initiatives were both engaging and technically achievable (in the sense that they were concerned with minor adjustment to everyday consumption practices), I wondered whether the positive changes that (it was hoped) would result were themselves sustainable. In other words, could these initiatives offer enough scope for young people to reconcile any concern they might have for the environment with fulfilling their need to experiment with the materialisation of their evolving identity through consumption?

The second question – or set of questions – was provoked by the foreword to the YouthXchange guide. The writers of the foreword, UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner and UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura, suggest that young people, “deserve special attention in efforts to change wasteful consumption patterns into ones that are more attuned to sustainable development” (UNEP-UNESCO 2008: 3). While their statement refers to global consumption generally, its employment in a guide aimed at young people implies that there is something particularly or uniquely wasteful about young people’s consumption, or that young people should be engaged in waste reduction in a specific way. The questions I was left with here were threefold: first, on what basis was it being assumed that young people are wasteful in the ways they

¹ www.youthxchange.net The YouthXchange guide has so far been translated into more than twenty languages and has been used to engage young people in both developed and developing world contexts.

² In the UK alone these include: Peace Child International’s Be The Change! Ambassador peer education project; the Woodcraft Folk’s Sust’n’Able project, which, amongst other themes, aims to tackle young people’s exposure to commercialism; the Otesha Project, a youth-led organisations that empowers young people to live more sustainably; and a collaboration between WWF and Girl Guiding UK, Changing The World: The One Planet Challenge, a series of sustainable consumption-themed activities for members of Girl Guiding of all ages.

consume? Second, what is the nature of this waste; in other words, how is it created? And third, is there something specific about the waste created by young people's consumption that requires a particular approach to tackling it?

It was these questions that prompted this research. In essence, having acknowledged the value for the drive towards sustainability of projects such as YouthXchange, I wanted to explore whether some of the assumptions that appeared to be made about the nature of young people's consumption, and their willingness and ability to consume sustainably, were valid. My sense was that strong socio-cultural forces, particularly those associated with youth culture(s), could assist but also impede youth-focused sustainability initiatives. My concern in this study has therefore been what might broadly be called the enabling and/or disabling socio-cultural conditions of attempts to promote more sustainable consumption amongst young people in the UK. Framing the investigation through the lens of the divestment phase(s) of consumption has directed attention towards those forces which contribute to current possessions being seen as insufficient or irrelevant to present needs. Through this, analysis has been attuned to articulating the nature of waste in young people's consumption.

In this thesis I argue that the unsustainability of young people's consumption (in other words, how waste – as both object and process – is manifested) results from cultural imperatives which make recently acquired possessions irrelevant for present and (imagined) future needs, and that it is not (at least primarily) the ways in which unwanted possessions are dealt with that is problematic. I suggest that attempts to promote sustainable consumption amongst young people must focus on increasing their agency and thus their ability to contest these (consumer) cultural pressures, and that initiatives might do so by supporting the emergence of youth cultural practices that increase young people's competence and sense of self-efficacy.

In this introductory chapter I give an overview of current action and debate concerning the necessity of embracing more sustainable consumption. I outline how this topic is being discussed twenty years on from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the locations and scales at which action is being targeted. I move then to a more detailed discussion of the ways in which the role of youth has been envisioned in the drive towards greater sustainability. Having been concerned thus far with the spheres of policy and practice, I then consider how academic researchers have made sense of, and tried to progress, both understanding and action in the realm of sustainable consumption. I conclude

the chapter by drawing together the key reference points which have informed the design of the research presented here, and I outline the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Sustainable Consumption in the Global and UK Context

June 2012 marked twenty years since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) convened in Rio de Janeiro, known informally as the Rio Earth Summit. This event focused global attention on the increasingly pressing need to rethink human relationships with the environment, particularly in terms of global consumption inequalities and environmental risks (Peattie and Collins 2009; Sagoff 2001; Gabriel and Lang 2006). In short, the Earth Summit aimed to communicate the urgency of planning economic development (for both developed and developing nations) in order to meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987). The environmental risks driving this global effort towards greater equality and sustainability included a climate changing as a result of anthropogenic carbon (and other greenhouse gas) emissions, and pressure on basic resources, from food and water to forests and energy sources. As a means of instigating action, the 1992 summit produced Agenda 21 (UNEP no date), a wide-ranging action plan for global sustainability which, if implemented successfully, had the potential to be one of the most effective programmes of action ever sanctioned by the global community.

The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), known as Rio +20, was an apposite moment for a progress review. Regrettably, it was not a particularly positive one. There was widespread criticism of the outcomes of Rio +20, with many commentators describing the document that resulted, *The Future We Want*, as weak and lacking much by way of concrete commitment or specific action. Explicit consideration of progress towards sustainable consumption was overshadowed by the focus on the global economy, although sustainable consumption (and production) was noted as fundamental to the favoured 'green economy policies' and 'equitable growth' (UNCSD 2012). The brief section of the report which directly addressed sustainable consumption and production was primarily concerned with phasing out subsidies for fossil fuel use, and commitment to programmes outlined in the 10 Year Framework of

Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP 10YFP)³ was undermined by emphasis on the voluntary nature of these programmes.⁴ Shortly after Rio +20, the ninth of May 2013 saw the grim milestone of atmospheric carbon dioxide reaching 400 parts per million (ppm) (NASA 2013), a figure that many hoped would not be reached in light of the climate change impacts it portends. Almost one billion people still do not have access to clean water (Water.org, no date); human environmental impacts are placing growing pressure on this already scarce resource (Vörösmarty and Pahl-Wostl 2013); and resources are being depleted at such a rate that, by 2030, the equivalent of two planets will not be sufficient to sustain a reasonable quality of life for every global citizen (WWF 2012; see also Lee et al. 2013).

Thus despite increasing global attention to the topic of sustainability and the growing urgency of mitigating environmental threats, action to drive more sustainable consumption – at least at the global scale – has been sporadic at best. In the UK, action on sustainable consumption since 1992 has been more definitive, although here, too, this has waned since the onset of the recession in 2008 and the change in government from New Labour to a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010. Despite growing awareness of the need to attend to the environmental impacts of consumption, the UK’s carbon footprint has increased by around 20% over the last two decades, particularly as a result of emissions associated with imports, including popular consumer goods such as clothing and electronics (UK Committee on Climate Change 2013). UK per capita carbon emissions would have to fall to two tonnes of CO₂e per annum (from just under eight tonnes at present; World Bank, no date) in order to achieve the objective of keeping global mean temperatures as close to 2°C above pre-industrial levels as possible.

Although the current Prime Minister’s stated aspiration to lead “the greenest government ever” (Randerson 2010) has been attacked by those frustrated with the slow pace of action towards a more environmentally sustainable UK, both the present and previous governments have made attempts to engage the public on sustainable consumption.

³ The development of the SCP 10YFP was instigated in response to discussions concerning accelerating progress towards social and economic development at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in 2002. From 2002 The Marrakech Process supported the elaboration of the SCP 10YFP through a series of task forces and regional implementation networks. The aim of this process was to produce a framework of programmes on SCP covering the period 2012-2022, which were presented and discussed at Rio +20.

⁴ This is in spite of a proposal for a set of ‘Millennium Consumption Goals’ which was put to the assembly (UNCSD, no date).

These include projects led by the now-defunct Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)⁵, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) public engagement initiatives such as Act on CO₂ and Every Action Counts, and, more recently, a review of waste policy focused on promoting waste prevention as well as waste management (DEFRA 2011a). However, the extent to which government-led public engagement has been based on the information deficit model has been critiqued, as has the predominance of exhortations to engage in ‘greener’ consumption choices, many of which, it is argued, fail to lead to a broader shift in consumption to more sustainable practices beyond the moment of acquisition (Hinton and Goodman 2010).

While the commitment to sustainable consumption by the current government thus appears to be patchy, several organisations continue to promote sustainable consumption to the public, primarily through initiatives aimed at prompting reflection on personal consumption habits at home, at work and on the move. These have included Global Action Plan’s Action At Home programme; Wastewatch’s community initiatives and online advice on reducing waste at home, at work and in the community; the Waste and Resources Action Plan (WRAP) Recycle Now and Love Food, Hate Waste campaigns; Friends of the Earth’s online Sustainable Lifestyle guide; and the outreach activities of Transition Towns (to name only a few of the initiatives with national reach). The focus of these initiatives at the meso level of action (e.g. the household) – between the macro level of policy and the micro level of personal values – is increasingly being viewed as the most appropriate and effective place to target sustainability programmes, not only because it is at this level that individual values interpret and respond to policy messages through individual action (situated in the home, at work, etc.), but equally because lifestyles constitute the mode through which we live, sustainably or otherwise (Gibson et al. 2011a; Green Alliance 2011; Organo et al. 2012; Reid et al. 2010; Tudor et al. 2007, 2011).

It should be noted, however, that in spite of this growing view that the household (as the prime example of a meso level site of action) is ‘where it’s at’ in terms of driving more sustainable consumption, children and young people have been curiously invisible in the major sustainability campaigns, such as those listed above (Horton et al. 2013). This

⁵ The SDC developed a broad remit in its ten year lifespan, covering topics from food and health to transport and the built environment, as well as considering the implications of sustainability for children and young people. A legacy website exists at <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/>

is not to say that they are completely overlooked by these organisations – indeed, far from it; but they are treated as a distinct group engaged separately from the adults with whom they live and who, largely, structure their everyday lives. Why, then, are young people treated as a distinct group in this context, and what is it hoped that engaging them directly will achieve?

1.3 Sustainability and Youth

As noted at the start of this introduction, attempts to engage youth on the subject of sustainable consumption have been numerous. This is based largely on the view that young people have an important role in the present, as well as in the future, as adult consumers and decision-makers (Renton and Butcher 2010). Some youth engagement initiatives, such as YouthXchange and the Otesha Project, are dedicated projects that cover multiple aspects of sustainable living, from choices about clothing and entertainment to transport and tourism. More commonly, nationally-focused non-governmental organisations (including Friends of the Earth, Global Action Plan, WWF and Waste Watch) have offered youth engagement activities or resources that complement their general suite of activities and expertise. In addition, some youth organisations have incorporated sustainability topics into their broader remit around youth citizenship, such as the Woodcraft Folk's Sust'N'Able project and Girl Guiding UK's One Planet Challenge run in conjunction with WWF.⁶

These initiatives might be viewed as little more than a means of communicating topical issues to an audience for whom the launch of new policies or the release of the latest statistic on carbon emissions are difficult to relate to. However, in their research with environmental/sustainability education providers, Schusler et al. (2009) note that, far more than simply communicating information, the aim of these initiatives is often to develop young people's capability to 'tread lightly' on the planet, and, through this,

⁶ It should be noted that the previous New Labour government set out its commitment to both young people and sustainability in a report entitled *Brighter Futures, Greener Lives* (DCSF 2008). This was closely linked with a number of other reports focused on children's futures and sustainability (e.g. *Securing the future: delivering UK sustainable development policy* (HM Government 2005); *The children's plan: building brighter futures* (DCSF 2007); *Every child matters* (HM Treasury 2003); *Every child's future matters* (Sustainable Development Commission 2007)) and set out the delivery of strategy around education for sustainable development via schools and other delivery partners, and with sustainable consumption as one of the key foci, in the UK (Evans and Honeyford 2012). Since the change in government in May 2010 there have been no new government-led initiatives or policies concerning young people and sustainability.

increase their sense of self-efficacy (see also Chawla and Cushing 2007; Percy-Smith and Burns 2013). Specifically, they work to demonstrate to young people that they are powerful agents capable of having a lasting, positive impact in their community and beyond (see also Schusler and Krasny 2010).

As such, youth-focused sustainability initiatives are commonly based on promoting the idea of 'action competence'. Articulated by Jensen and Schnack (1997), this describes being in possession of sufficient knowledge and self-confidence to critically assess a situation and act on the resulting judgement to formulate a response or solution – even when knowledge of the scenario is incomplete (see also Almers 2013). Schusler et al. (2009) draw particular attention to the fact that, because the programmes on which they focused were as concerned with young people's general emotional development as with their capacity to engage in environmental action, the action competence (i.e. sense of confidence and self-efficacy) that resulted was transferable between domains of everyday life. In short, they posit that the driving force behind sustainability educators' attempts to engage young people is a desire to equip them with a 'can do' attitude. That this kind of mindset has been shown to positively predict behaviours aligned with sustainability (Meinhold and Malkus 2005; Vermeir and Verbeke 2004), and because feelings of satisfaction and self-worth have been associated with involvement in pro-environmental activities (De Young 1996; Ojala 2007), suggests that there are demonstrable benefits to linking attempts to engage young people in action for sustainability with opportunities to also develop their self-esteem.

Beyond this 'youth empowerment' imperative, there are three further key reasons why young people have been targeted by environmental educators and sustainability promoters. First, today's young people will inherit the global socio-environmental challenges created by current and previous generations. There is widespread international agreement that providing young people with the opportunity to learn about how to respond to these challenges, now and in the future, is crucial (IISD 1995). Whilst in part this focuses attention on the ways in which young people might reduce their personal impacts in the present, it is equally about ensuring they have the requisite knowledge and skills to respond to the ways in which socio-environmental problems will impact on economies, livelihoods and communities in the future (Jenkins and Pell 2006). Further, it gives them voice to express how they see their role in an environmentally uncertain future and how they want to engage with or otherwise be supported by institutional structures (GAP 2011). Thus one of the primary motivators

of initiatives targeting youth has been ensuring this group is sufficiently knowledgeable and appropriately skilled.

Second, young people have been found to express care and concern for local and global environments (Connell et al. 1999; DEFRA 2008; Forum For The Future 2008; Jenkins and Pell 2006; Ojala 2007; Rickinson 2001; Strandbu and Skogen 2000; Walker and Loughland 2003; Wilson and Snell 2010). They generally possess good (if sometimes inconsistent) knowledge of topical issues related to sustainability and the environment (Hicks and Holden 2007; Walker and Loughland 2003; Walshe 2008), including the need for material consumption to be reduced (Forum For The Future 2008), and have a sense of responsibility in terms of contributing to solutions (Battersby 1999; Renton et al. 2011). Many are optimistic about achieving a sustainable and equitable future – but they are not always sure how many compromises they are willing to make in terms of modifying or reducing their own consumption (Carbon Trust 2012; GAP 2011; Renton et al. 2011; Wilson and Snell 2010).

Yet while this apparent knowledge and concern is, in one sense, encouraging, it is tempered by difficulties translating intention into action. These range from the perception that integrating sustainability into everyday life is difficult (Ojala 2008) and that, even when this effort is expended, the positive impacts are negligible (Jenkins and Pell 2006; Ojala 2005), to more general feelings of helplessness, cynicism, frustration or ambivalence (Connell et al. 1999; Hicks and Holden 1007; Hillcoat et al. 1995; Ojala 2005, 2007). Thus, while sustainability initiatives aimed at youth seek to build on the environmental knowledge gained via formal education and media sources (Campbell Bradley et al. 1999; Connell et al. 1999; Fien et al. 2002; Nagel 2004; Walker and Loughland 2003; Walshe 2008), as Schusler et al. (2009) argue, a sense of self-efficacy is crucial in order to move past these ambivalences.

The third driving factor behind youth-focused sustainability initiatives is young people's social location. There are two components to this of interest to promoters of sustainability: young people's membership of families and situation in households; and their participation in peer groups and youth cultures. The significance of young people's location in families and households is based on the belief that young people can 'transmit' a particular approach to consumption to other members of the family through conversation and through their actions (Ballantyne et al. 2001; Benn 2004; Bentley et al. 2004; El Aoud and Neeley 2008; Evans et al. 1996; Gentina and Muratore 2012; Griffin et al. 2005; Malpass et al. 2007; Maddox et al. 2011; Miles 2000). More

commonly known (particularly to parents) as ‘pester power’, in practice this involves young people ‘pestering’ family members to change everyday household consumption behaviours in ways that reduce their environmental impact – such as reducing water consumption by not leaving taps running, or taking showers rather than baths. In the context of youth-focused sustainability projects, the focus is generally on the transmission of influence from child to parent (or other close family member) (Ballantyne et al. 2006; Duvall and Zint 2007; Evans et al. 1996; Larsson et al. 2010; Leeming et al. 1997; Uzzell et al. 1994; and Uzzell 1999).

However, more recently there has been growing acknowledgement that intergenerational learning around sustainability topics is bi-directional; in other words, the influence between children and parents is mutual (Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2009; Larsson et al. 2010; Organo et al. 2012; Payne 2005, 2010; Percy-Smith and Burns 2013; Renton et al. 2011) – whilst young people may bring home new ideas or practices into which they aim to recruit family members, they themselves are socialised into particular practices and values (implicitly or explicitly) as part of their upbringing. On this basis, while there may remain a strong case to engage young people on the relative strength of their ‘pester power’, the relatively under-researched bi-directionality of influence suggests that there might be complexities in the ways in which ideas and practices relating to sustainability are negotiated in the home that require further investigation (cf. Hall 2011). Furthermore, the home is itself a complex space, not easily contained within walls of a house (Blunt 2005; Blunt and Varley 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Gibson et al. 2011b); the ‘family’ spaces in which this influence is assumed to ‘get to work’ tend not to accommodate this ‘porous’ concept of home. In light of recent interest in social practice as means of accounting for (and potentially altering) habitual consumption behaviours (Shove et al. 2012), it is necessary to think about young people’s influence on and within both practices and the physical spaces in which they are enacted.

In addition to family-focused ‘pestering’, young people are understood to be equally powerful influences in peer networks. Perhaps surprisingly, research into how this might work in terms of promoting environmentally sustainable practices has been slow to emerge. Instead, the belief that young people can instigate new ways of doing things amongst their peers tends to be based on the generally accepted concept of peer pressure or peer influence, or on academic studies of young people’s consumption that note their efficacy as trend-setters (e.g. Wilska and Pedrozo 2007) or peer-marketers (Quart 2003). Sustainability promoters have built on this foundation by devising peer-

education programmes (such as Peace Child International's Be The Change! Ambassadors programme), although the perceived positive impact of these may be more a result of the effectiveness of shared learning than the kind of trend-setting that has widespread power outside of the institutional context of school or a youth group. In short, there has been insufficient research on the extent to which sustainable modes of consumption are transmitted between peers, particularly the ways in which sustainable practices might conflict with youth cultural norms. Further, little attention has been paid to the idea that practices aligned with sustainability might already exist in nascent form within extant youth consumption practices, or that they might be effectively promoted within certain forms or facets of youth culture. Vivoni (2013), for instance, has recently revealed how skateboarding, while apparently not directly connected with sustainability, entails the development of care for the local environment amongst skate park users; and Cermak (2012) has discussed the effectiveness of hip hop as a means of communicating environmental ideas in ways attuned to youth cultural perspectives. These suggest that similar investigations of other youth cultural practices might yield illuminating – and, from a sustainability point of view, beneficial – results.

To summarise, promoters of sustainability directly address the need to ensure that young people have the necessary skills to respond to future socio-environmental risks. They do so by making use of young people's environmental concern and desire for knowledge, giving consistency to that which they already have, and they seek to build a sense of self-efficacy in response to the danger that lack of this tends to undermine the promotion of sustainable alternatives to everyday practices. Through all of this, they seek to capitalise on young people's influential position in family and peer networks in order to 'push' new environmentally sustainable consumption norms into new contexts. Thus, young people come to be framed as akin to 'Trojan horses' for sustainability.

However, whilst the aspirations behind youth-focused sustainability initiatives are noble and, on the basis of the discussion points above, they engage with some genuinely pressing issues, there are lacunae in their foundational premises which potentially undermine the efficacy of sustainability promoters' – and young people's – efforts. These concern how to create and maintain a sense of self-efficacy that is itself sustainable over time; the nature and impact of bi-directional influences concerning sustainability and consumption behaviours in the context of the family; and the nature

of peer influence regarding the communication and normalisation of sustainable consumption, as well as the ways in which powerful youth cultural norms might implicitly conflict with, and thus inhibit, pro-environmental acts.

These problematic gaps contribute to a discomfoting sense of ‘passing the buck’ to the younger generation – giving them knowledge, skills and empowerment as a means of distracting (ourselves) from the fact that there are social and cultural complexities (such as norms and expectations) which mean that consumption remains unsustainable, despite apparently well-targeted initiatives that inform and empower. Are young people even being set up for a fall because of this? The fact that they are seen as, “the literal embodiment of change over time” (Evans and Honeyford 2012: 63) makes them a prime target for policies aimed at shaping the future and directly feeds into the idea that they are the ones who can ‘rescue us’. It is important, therefore, to be clear about what it is reasonable to expect young people to achieve, in the present as well as the future, in response to attempts to engage them, and consider how complex cultural issues might be brought into focus through similar engagement programmes. This requires deeper understanding of the socio-cultural situatedness of young people’s consumption, particularly those factors which shape how they live with, relate to and interact with the objects of consumption, and the extent to which these are connected with the environmental issues about which it has been suggested they are concerned.

The burgeoning of academic research into sustainable consumption in the last two decades has made important contributions to refining the ways in which the public is engaged on the topic of sustainability, particularly as a result of greater understanding of the social networks and cultural practices that structure everyday consumption. As such, this body of work constitutes a useful reference point for my attempt to provide a more fully socio-culturally contextualised account of young people’s consumption which, through filling some of the gaps identified above, might lend itself to more ‘sustainable sustainability’ amongst this group. In the third section of this introduction, I consider some of the ways in which sustainable consumption has been researched by both geographers and other disciplines concerned with the environment and material culture.

1.4 Sustainable Consumption Research: Barriers, Practices, Spaces, Ethics

The topic of sustainable consumption is considerable in scope and has been explored within a wide range of academic disciplines. As such, in this section I do not seek to give a general overview of the 'state of the art' concerning this increasingly vast topic (one such overview is Hinton and Goodman 2009); rather, I draw attention to some key strands of recent research on this topic as a means of contextualising the research presented in this thesis.

The first such strand concerns the barriers which inhibit movement to more sustainable modes of consumption. Interest in this topic emerged from the now widely explored value-action gap (e.g. Barr 2003, 2006; Blake 1999; Hobson 2003; Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002), a phenomenon in which people's professed pro-environmental values fail to translate into pro-environmental action. In the last decade, research into how to encourage lasting change in line with sustainability principles has emphasised the need to move beyond investigations of individual attitudes and intentions, and, in order to close the gap between these and action, instead explore the ways in which consumption is socially and culturally embedded (Jackson and Michaelis 2003; Warde 2005).

The barriers created by socio-cultural norms which perpetuate unsustainable practices have been widely reported (Evans and Abrahamse 2009; Evans and Jackson 2008; Michaelis 2004; Shove 2004; Soron 2010; Southerton et al. 2004). Sanne (2002), for instance, has described the powerful role of government and business in maintaining cultures, systems and infrastructures which have a vested interest in unsustainable consumption, particularly through perpetuating consumerism in the name of economic growth (see also Gibson et al. 2011a). Focusing more directly on how individuals respond to messages about sustainability, Hobson (2002) has noted that one of the major flaws in recent attempts to encourage sustainable consumption has been the failure to appeal to the public's most pressing concerns – which, at present, tend to be social or economic more frequently than environmental. Indeed, many of those researching sustainable consumption in recent years have, on the basis of empirical findings, made arguments akin to that presented by Mansvelt (2010: 230), who states that “achieving changes in consumption practices involves enrolling people as part of the socialities and spatialities in which they are embedded” (see also Clarke 2008; Malpass et al. 2007). The move towards a social practice theory (SPT) framework for researching sustainable consumption has gone some ways towards achieving this

though a focus on the ways in which individuals' actions are subject to their social, cultural and physical location(s), and the meanings or ideas that characterise them (Evans 2011a; Hargreaves 2011; Hitchings 2011; Spaargaren 2011; Shove 2003; Shove et al. 2012; Warde 2005). As a result, SPT has emphatically situated individuals both spatially and socially as a means of characterising the negotiations and processes involved in contemporary consumption.

Much of the research into consumption practices – whether through an SPT lens or otherwise – has been focused on activities in the household, the domestic arena increasingly viewed as a key focus for both research and practice around promoting sustainability (Reid et al. 2010). The home is a crucial site for consumption research because it constitutes the context in which we organise our lives according to different pressures and demands, and materialise the selves we want to adopt and display to the world (Gregson 2007; Miller 2009; Reimer and Leslie 2004; Valentine 1999a). The publication in 2011 of Lane and Gorman-Murray's *Material Geographies of Household Sustainability* suggests that research into sustainability in domestic contexts has, as a strand of consumption research, reached critical mass. Broadly speaking, research in this area has examined how people consume – or are able to consume – in the context of their everyday domestic spaces, mobilities, localities, habits and routines, and how those actions correspond with (or, sometimes, problematise) the ways in which consumption behaviour is assumed to work by macro level policies preoccupied with the micro level of isolated individual behaviours. As Lane and Gorman-Murray (2011: 1) point out in their introduction, the household is:

“... more familiar and comprehensible for many lay people than most of the other geographic scales involved in discussions of environmental sustainability [...] However for this very reason it also entails many assumptions about the ‘normal’ practices of mundane domestic life and the motivations of householders for their behaviour and decisions.”

Thus while the familiarity of the home can make sustainability as a project tangible, and thus potentially more feasible or appealing, that same familiarity, when understood as mundane or routine by external agents, risks being simplified as tiny but significant negotiations or nuances in behaviour are obscured. Some researchers have drawn particular attention to the importance of these nuances by emphasising how sustainability is lived in practice within different kinds of lifestyles (Barr and Gilg 2006; Davies et al. 2012; Gilg et al. 2005).

Other researchers have focused on how different consumption 'ethics' are reconciled within the household. By opening up what she termed the 'black box' of family consumption, Hall (2011) found that, for her study participants, multiple separate but complementary ethical registers (money, waste, health) informed their everyday domestic consumption practices (see also Gibson et al. 2011a). Adams and Raisborough (2010) articulated the difficulties their participants faced when drawing on different, sometimes competing, ethical registers when making consumption decisions, specifically in this instance deciding whether to prioritise environmental or social sustainability concerns when clothes shopping. Importantly, in light of the fundamental conflict between pro-environmental aspirations and the constant clamour of consumerism, Gatersleben et al. (2010) have brought the concept of materialism into dialogue with environmental values, finding that, as a result of wanting to materialise 'home' or lifestyle in a particular way, even the most pro-environmental households in their sample found it difficult to avoid a degree of materialism, particularly in the sense of unwillingness to buy less. What Hobson (2008) suggests is that appealing to existing ethics which underpin everyday consumption choices constitutes a potentially more effective foundation from which to encourage sustainability than attempting to invoke a new or additional environmental ethic.

What, then, might this extant body of research into (un)sustainable consumption as practised by adults offer by way of useful reference points for a study of young people's capacity to be sustainable consumers? First, it points towards the importance of acknowledging the role of institutional structures (particularly retailers) in shaping both young people's acts of consumption and the cultural context in which their actions are situated. It suggests that communicating with a target audience through issues which matter most to them – which may not be environmental – may be more effective as a means of driving change than issues associated with more abstract concerns (as those connected with the environment often are). Third, this body of work speaks of the necessity of working with the socialities and spatialities in which (young) people are embedded in order to create change, rather than trying to create new contexts potentially doomed to failure through their inability to reflect or accommodate everyday lived realities. Finally, an investigation into young people's consumption needs to be sensitive to how the material, social and ethical structure of the home shapes how their consumption is organised in practice. As noted above, domestic life is surprisingly nuanced in the ways in which attitudes, actions and

meanings coalesce to produce routine consumption practices, and this has potentially significant implications for how sustainability is taken up within different households, as well as by different members of a single household.

As outlined at the beginning of this introduction, from the earliest stages of this project I wanted to be sensitive to the nature of waste, both as perceived in extant understandings of young people's consumption and in the context of the lived realities I set out to investigate through my own research. The growing interest in waste within academic contexts, particularly amongst those concerned with sustainability, has been reflected recently in large-scale research projects such as *The Waste of the World* (2006-2011), a multi-disciplinary research project which considered waste production and the movement of materials in contexts as varied as textile reuse and ship-breaking, as well as journal special issues (*Environment and Planning A's Thinking Waste and Matter*, the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour's Unpacking Disposal*, *The Geographical Journal's Reconciling Policy, Practice and Theorisations of Waste Management*), articles reviewing the 'state of the art' of understandings of waste (Davies 2011; Evans 2011c; Moore 2012), and conference sessions (including six panels on Geographies of Waste at the 2012 Association of American Geographers conference).

Yet writing which seeks to explicate the implications for sustainability initiatives of how waste is produced, conceptualised and understood has been slow to emerge. Studies which have connected understandings of waste with attempts to promote sustainability include Barr (2004) and Barr et al. (2005), which consider how waste is conceptualised by those seeking to increase the sustainability of their everyday living, and Tudor et al. (2011), which considers how demographic, environmental and lifestyle factors have impacted on our relationships to the objects of consumption in ways that change our relationship to waste, and calls for more work on how different waste materialities are understood. There remains scope to do more much in this vein, however. In response, one of my aims for this project has been to bring the nature of waste – as it exists in my young participants' consumption – into the heart of my discussion of how sustainable we can (or should) expect their consumption to be. I explore understandings of waste and their implications for this project in more detail in Chapter Two.

1.5 Framing The Project: Where Is The Waste? Deepening Understanding of Young People's Consumption In Order To Encourage Sustainability

My aim in this opening chapter has been to consider the importance of keeping sustainable consumption on the agenda at a time when economic imperatives are pushing environmental concerns into the background, and, particularly, how and why young people have been specifically targeted as an effective means of doing so. Environmental educators have been demonstrably committed to giving young people the skills to cope in an increasingly resource-constrained world and promoting a sense of self-efficacy to counteract doubts that their actions will have a positive impact. Underpinning their hopes for young people as 'Trojan horses' of sustainability has been the location of young people in family households and peer networks, through which – it has largely been assumed – new sustainable consumption behaviours can be transmitted. However, in drawing attention to some significant gaps which potentially undermine the success of youth-focused sustainability projects, I have emphasised the degree to which these initiatives appear not to take into account the complex lived realities of young people's lives, most notably the bi-directionality of influence in families and the impact of youth cultures within peer groups.

By presenting a brief discussion of some strands of research from within the burgeoning field of sustainable consumption, my aim has been to draw attention to some key reference points as a means of situating the research presented here. These included: the need to consider the role of institutional structures in maintaining powerful (consumer) cultural norms; the need to make sustainability engagement initiatives relevant to target audiences by drawing on that audience's most pressing concerns, as well as acknowledging social and spatial specificities which might impact on an individual's capacity for action; and the importance of home as key site where consumption is practised and negotiated, often in the context of competing consumption ethics. My interest in how waste is conceptualised in attempts to promote sustainable consumption revealed a strong foundation for forging such connections based on recent research projects and syntheses of work from across multiple disciplines, although I suggested that there is more that could be done to draw out key messages for sustainability promoters.

The research project devised in response to these interconnected issues is, in essence, an investigation of young people's relationships with their material possessions in the context of socio-cultural conditions that might simultaneously promote and discourage

sustainable modes of consumption amongst this group. Although the interactions between young people's attitudes towards sustainability and their consumption have so far been infrequently documented, the centrality of material possessions to teenage life, as well as the growing autonomy of young people over their consumption (Bentley et al. 2004), suggests that their choices about what they do with their possessions might provide a convenient – and impactful – context for action. Despite this, young people's relationships with their possessions (through the lens of sustainability or otherwise) has, so far, remained a remarkably under-researched topic (Collins and Hitchings 2012). I elaborate on the implications of this in the context of a more general discussion of research into young people's consumption in Chapter Two.

Having been provoked by the reference to waste in the YouthXchange guide, and in response to the scant attention paid to date to young people's consumption beyond the moment of acquisition (discussed in Chapter Two), I have focused my enquiry on the divestment phase of consumption. Using divestment as a lens has allowed me to explore the nature of young people's relationships with their possessions, the length of those relationships, as well as the factors that contribute to the demise of these objects. The concept of waste, and the ways in which it has recently been theorised, is an analytical reference point brought into dialogue with grounded empirical findings.

By exploring the socialities (such as whether friends own similar objects), spatialities (such as where and how possessions are used and accommodated) and materialities (such as the (changing) physical forms of possessions) that impact on my participants' relationships with their possessions, my aim has been to articulate a nuanced understanding of the situational factors that shape their consumption. I contend that this is necessary in order to gauge how these factors might facilitate or inhibit their attempts to consume sustainably – as well as their ability to encourage others to do so. As such this is a direct response to the relative lack of socio-cultural and socio-spatial context that characterises attempts to engage young people on sustainability. Specifically, I have sought to identify the contexts in which waste might be considered evident in the ways my participants manage their possessions, as well as how and why that waste-making occurs, in order to reach a conclusion as to whether or not they do indeed contribute to wasteful consumption patterns (UNEP-UNESCO 2008: 3) and, thus, offer suggestions as to how future youth-focused sustainability initiatives might concentrate their efforts accordingly.

1.6 Structure Of The Thesis

In Chapter Two I present a review of several literatures relevant to the topics incorporated in this project. After a brief discussion of how 'youth' is presently conceptualised by social researchers concerned with this group, I present an overview of recent youth consumption research, outlining, first, why the consumption of possessions is important to this group, and, second, two contrasting ways in which 'the young consumer' has been framed by extant studies. This is followed by a discussion of some of the key themes to have emerged in divestment scholarship as a means of demonstrating the salience of this topic for my inquiry. My focus here is on demonstrating how the ways in which material things are lived with (and parted with) can reveal facets of people's relationships with/to the objects of consumption which contrast with dominant understandings of consumer society. I follow this with a synthesis of recent theorisations of waste as a conceptual reference point for my subsequent discussions of the nature of waste in my participants' relationships with their possessions.

Chapter Three outlines my methodology. Beginning with a concise overview of the suitability of a qualitative methodology for my research, I then introduce grounded theory as the methodological underpinning of my data collection and analysis. I move on to detail the decisions made about the location of my study and the sample of participants, the process of negotiating access to potential participants and the practicalities of organising and conducting the interviews. Following a discussion of the benefits of combining interviews with photographs for a project concerned with everyday consumption, I reflect on some considerations specific to research with young people, before outlining how the data were collected, organised and analysed.

I present the findings of my analysis in Chapters Four, Five and Six. I begin in Chapter Four by considering how my participants' possessions fall out of use. Discussing the influence of 'rhythms' of replacement imposed by retailers, the physical durability of some possessions, and the social validation that 'newer is better', I argue that while it may be necessary to make some allowance for young people's identity experimentation in the context of temporalities specific to adolescence, the changeability of their materialised identities and relationships is taken advantage of, and its drivers magnified, by consumer culture, with few young people possessing sufficient agency to resist.

In Chapter Five I discuss the channels my participants used to deal with no-longer-wanted possessions, as well as the motivations that underpinned their actions. Here I suggest that my participants were highly sensitive to the potential for waste as a product of their actions, and that, in response to this – and their awareness of normative attitudes that construct waste as morally ‘bad’ – they were prepared to expend sometimes considerable personal effort in order to extend the usable lives of their unwanted possessions. Being situated within the enabling structures of family assistance and well-developed and diverse ridding infrastructures meant that they were generally able to follow intention with action; yet despite conscientious efforts, their agency was sometimes undermined by the operations of recently emerging ‘ridding services’ which may be viewed as contributing to the consumer cultural pressures described in Chapter Four. Overall, while my participants were effective waste minimisers, I suggest this is largely the result of familial habitus, support structures, and wider moral norms, within which their agency operates.

Chapter Six is focused on how and why possessions tentatively marked out for ridding come to be retained. I argue that the most commonly reported forms of keeping (described in term of ‘back-ups’ and ‘hedging’) reflect an extension of the social anxieties described in Chapter Four and have the effect of locking un(der)used possessions out of further use. I contrast this with the ability of a minority group of participants to perceive multiple affordances in un(der)used possessions, resulting in the production of futures for their possessions which returned them to use. I then consider how the fluid roles and relationalities of the participants and their family members, as well as the shared construction of various domestic spaces as storage spaces, impact on the ways in which un(der)used possessions are framed variously as clutter, excess and, potentially, waste.

In Chapter Seven I draw together the conclusions from my empirical chapters and discuss these in the context of the questions and gaps that prompted this research. I comment on what my study has revealed about the nature of my participants’ agency within the social and spatial contexts of their consumption, and what the implications of this might be for their efficacy as drivers of change for sustainability. I suggest how environmental educators and promoters of sustainability might act on the findings presented here to better respond to these challenges and provide young people with opportunities to make themselves ‘sustainably sustainable’, particularly through forms of capability-building. I reflect on the nature of waste in my participants’ consumption

of their possessions and point to where action needs to focus – beyond the efforts of environmental educators – in order to create a shift towards more sustainable consumption, for youth and others. I also offer some reflections on where research on this topic might usefully go next in order to develop the ideas presented here.

CHAPTER TWO

MISSING INTERSECTIONS: YOUTH CONSUMPTION, DIVESTMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I provide an overview of the literatures which have informed my research questions and shaped the way in which I have sought to address them. I begin in section 2.2 with a discussion of current definitions and conceptualisations of ‘youth’. My aim here is simply to be clear about the parameters defining the group with which I am concerned, and, additionally, to emphasise some of the elements of this phase of the life course that make young people a particularly important focus for studies of consumption.

I move in section 2.3 to a more detailed consideration of the ways in which young people’s consumption has been characterised in the literature to date. After discussing literature describing the broad aims of young people’s consumption, I present a pair of ‘caricatures’ characterising youth consumption as portrayed in recent studies. I consider how these contrasting views of young people’s consumption emerged, what each reveals about why young people consume in particular ways, and I draw attention to the gaps in these accounts that require addressing if a robust knowledge platform for youth-focused sustainability initiatives is to emerge.

In section 2.4 I draw on recent work on the divestment phase of consumption to demonstrate how looking beyond acquisition to consider how material things are lived with can reveal important facets of our relationships with possessions. Here I discuss what divestment studies have suggested about (adult) consumers’ relationships with everyday material possessions and, by revealing those lived experiences, the extent to which divestment constitutes a useful lens through which to explore the environmental sustainability of everyday consumption.

The final substantive section, section 2.5, introduces the main conceptual thread that runs through my study. In this section I consider the ways in which waste has been conceptualised in a broad body of literature concerned with various facets of consumption and divestment. I focus in particular on the ways in which waste is socio-culturally determined, since, as evidenced in sections 2.2 and 2.3, young people’s

consumption is fundamentally a socially-focused and culturally-influenced set of practices. My aim in incorporating this conceptual thread is to provide a means of speaking back to the assumptions about young people's consumption which prompted this study, establishing when, why and in what ways waste might be evident, and thus the contexts in which attempting to engage young people directly in more sustainable modes of consumption might be worthwhile.

I begin, however, with a brief definition of 'youth' as conceptualised in contemporary social science literatures and some comments on why youth is a particularly interesting and important part of the life phase for scholars of consumption to attend to.

2.2 Defining 'Youth'

'Youth' is a slippery term. There is no single accepted definition; indeed, the very existence of 'youth' as a concept is highly culturally specific with not all cultures recognising a distinct phase between childhood and adulthood (Skelton and Valentine 1998) or conforming to the specificities of the distinctions imposed in the Global North (Evans 2008). Since in this study I am concerned with British youth, my definition and the literature on which I draw in support of it focuses on the experiences of young people in the Global North. 'Youth' in this context is generally constructed as a period of limited but increasing responsibility, in which the reaching of physical maturity⁷ coincides with the accumulation of life skills in preparation for adulthood, growing autonomy and certain expectations about behaviours which should be in evidence, such as self-control (Gram-Hanssen 2007; Griffin 1997; Hopkins 2010; Shim et al. 2011). The point at which 'youth' is seen to begin and end is highly variable across academia, policy and the third sector, with definitions sometimes beginning from as young as age twelve⁸, although more commonly age sixteen, reaching up to twenty-five. The journal

⁷ The progression to physical maturity that characterises this period is described as adolescence, and thus those experiencing this transition are known as adolescents. Since the young people with whom I am concerned in this study fall into this category, I occasionally describe them as adolescents for the sake of semantic variety. (Similarly, I occasionally employ 'adolescence' as a synonym for 'youth'.)

⁸ The distinction between youth and childhood is important here, primarily because the nature of children's consumption is different in many respects from that of youth (being, for example, far more directly structured by the actions of parents or carers). There is already a substantial literature on children's consumption, whereas that of young people remains relatively under-developed by comparison. I therefore do not include discussion of children's consumption here. See, for example, Cook (2005, 2008) and Martens et al. (2004) for useful introductions to this topic, and Evans (2008) on the potential problems of conflating the experiences of children and

Children's Geographies (concerned equally with children and youth) has reported on 'youth' research with young people up to the age of twenty-five, reflecting informal agreement on this upper age limit within the discipline (see also Valentine 2003).

While age and physical maturity are fundamental to defining 'youth', there are other facets of this life period which should be recognised in its definition. First is the idea of youth as a period of 'becoming' (Worth 2009).⁹ Although the implication that, in being situated in a process of 'becoming', young people are somehow partial or incomplete in the present has been widely critiqued, the idea of 'becoming' retains some relevance, particularly as regards the unique temporalities of youth. Recognition of these temporalities is a useful reminder of the fact that 'youth' is far from a static and homogenous category, with young people's senses of self evolving, often changing considerably, between the beginning and end of this phase (Horton and Kraftl 2006), with potentially significant impacts in terms of how they materialise their identities.

Linked to the idea of youth as 'becoming' is youth as a period of transition (Evans 2008; Griffin 1997; Valentine 2003). This theorisation, too, has been critiqued for presenting youth-as-transition as a linear process (Pollock 2002; Wyn et al. 2011), thus simplifying what is in fact a complex, fluid space of opportunities, barriers, relationships and connections. Yet a more expansive understanding of youth-as-transition retains relevance since it encapsulates the flux, uncertainty, risk and anxiety that characterises contemporary adolescence. In particular, youth transitions have been linked to theorisations of contemporary identity as individualised (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002); an open-ended 'project' in which an individual's biography results more from expressions of agency than the effects of structures.¹⁰ This has been argued to be particularly relevant for youth as they gain autonomy, enjoy greater freedom of expression, and 'try on' different identities as they work out who they are or want to be (Du Bois-Reymond 1998).

youth more generally. However, I do include references to studies concerned with 'children's consumption' where the term 'children' is used to describe those in their teens as well as below the age of twelve. There is a further semantic difficulty requiring acknowledgement, in that although young people are, in some senses, no longer children, it can be necessary to describe them as children in relation to adults, particularly their parents. Thus, in this thesis, I occasionally refer to my participants as children purely in the context of parent-child relationships.

⁹ It should be noted that the notion of constant 'becoming' is arguably relevant for all life stages, since we are all always 'becoming' something other than that which we are in the present.

¹⁰ This is not to deny the relevance of structure in the individualisation thesis. Rather, the emphasis is on the ways in which individuals are required to respond dynamically to proliferating structures and institutional constraints (Woodman 2009, 2010; Wyn et al. 2011).

On this basis, youth has been described as, “the phase par excellence to experiment with possible identities” (Van Gorp 2005: 2; see also Campbell 1995; Grant and O’Donohue 2007; Valentine 2000) and the consumption of possessions (primarily clothing and technologies such as mobile phones) is widely viewed as fundamental to this (Deutsch and Theodorou 2010; Foley et al. 2007; Marion and Nairn 2011; Miles 2000; Schwarz 2009; Thompson and Cupples 2008; Wilska 2003; Wilska and Pedrozo 2007). Indeed, the term ‘teenager’ – an age-based grouping within the broader schema of ‘youth’ – is directly bound up with consumption-based identity definitions, since the coining of the term in the 1950s was a response to the identification of a distinct demographic with particular consumption preferences (Abrams 1959; Valentine et al. 1998).¹¹

In sum, theorisations of youth as a period of ‘becoming’ or transition, while not without their flaws, highlight facets of this part of the life course which are especially relevant to an exploration of young people’s consumption. However, as the critiques of these theorisations imply, focusing on who or what young people might become in the future should not obscure the fact that they are fully-fledged actors capable of expressing their agency in the present (Skelton 2002). Consumption is one of the contexts in which they are characterised as being especially adept in this regard (Collins and Hitchings 2012; Mayo 2005); indeed, it is on this view of young people’s agency that this project (and the sustainability programmes which prompted it) is premised.

Yet, for all the agency that we might wish to grant young people as part of attempts to acknowledge them as full and equal participants in social life, there are inevitably structural constraints that shape their attempts to ‘become’, transition, or otherwise express themselves (Evans 2008; Miles 2000). Illustrated in Figure 2.1¹², these include the economic resources available to grant young people access to particular practices or opportunities; the ways in which family norms (and the broader social structures within which they are situated) shape responses to those opportunities; and the powerful influence consumer culture exerts over aspects of youth culture(s), especially in terms of promoting the ownership of certain objects as crucial for peer group acceptance.

¹¹ Although the participants in my study were aged 16-19 and were, therefore, teenagers, I describe them as young people/youth in order to situate them in the context of the literatures/discourses discussed in this chapter and align my analysis with current debates and theorisations.

¹² This figure has been constructed on the basis of references to these structures (which are sometimes un(der)explicated) within the literature reviewed in this section.

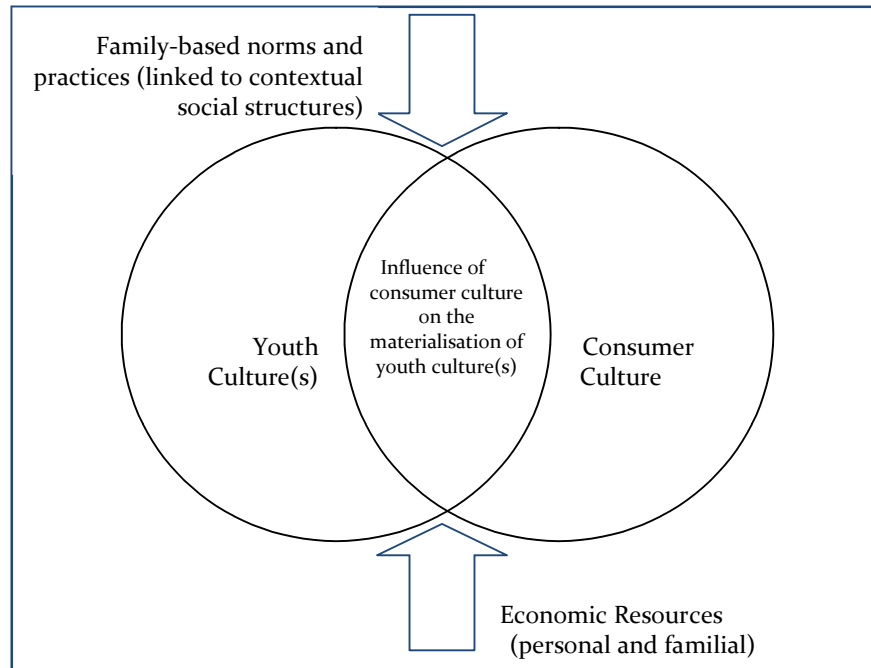


Figure 2.1 Structural factors shaping the materialisation of youth culture(s)

While research into young people’s lives has been swift to identify the structural constraints that characterise spaces of education, employment, class mobility (etc.), studies of youth consumption have tended to overlook them. Yet acknowledging these structures is essential since, throughout consumption processes, external pressures shape the actions that result, whether this is the perception that ‘everyone else’ has a particular type of bag or demands from parents to clear out clutter in response to perceived social mores around the maintenance of domestic order. Moreover, there is a need to bring these conditioning contexts into dialogue with the ways in which young people’s subjectivities respond to them, since it is through these together that their agency is expressed (Brannen and Nilsen 2005).

In light of the assumptions made about the relative strength of young people’s agency by promoters of sustainability, particularly their power to influence others, a more nuanced understanding of where, when and how their agency is more or less constrained is a prerequisite for maximising the chances of success of sustainability interventions. Indeed, both families and peer groups (and the norms associated with each) constitute important elements of the socio-cultural contexts that shape young people’s interactions with material possessions. Families and peers are often visible in analyses of young people’s consumption, generally on the premise of identifying the direction of influence around the acquisition of particular items (Croghan et al. 2006;

El Aoud and Neeley 2008; Gram-Hanssen 2007; Moschis and Mitchell 1986), but they are rarely treated as a main analytical focus.

It is evident that 'youth' is a complex entity, even when viewed solely through the lens of its meaning in the context of consumption. While theorisations of 'youth' continue to be debated and revised, there are elements of extant theorisations which are of particular relevance to a study of consumption, most notably young people's experimentation with identities in response to their shifting relation to past, present and future selves. Further, acknowledging the situatedness of youth within the structures detailed in Figure 2.1 is essential in order to identify the ways in which those structures (positively or negatively) impact on young people's agency.

I move now to a more detailed review of the literature concerned with youth consumption. I begin with general elaboration of the significance of material consumption for young people, before moving to two 'caricatures' illustrating the dominant images of 'the young consumer'.

2.3 Introducing The Young Consumer

As evidenced by the discussion above, there is much about the lived experience of youth that suggests understanding consumption amongst this group is worthwhile. A useful starting point is the publication of Mark Abrams' research report, *The Teenage Consumer*, in 1959. This marked the end of a decade in which market research into young people's consumption had begun to identify their significance as a distinct market segment. Described as "the first evidence of the conspicuous consumption habits of young consumers" (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006: 232), Abrams' report framed young people as not only increasingly financially autonomous but keen to use this freedom to consume according to the latest fashions, and, importantly, to be seen doing so. In many respects this sounds remarkably like today's young consumer. While the scope of research on youth consumption has broadened since Abrams' report, the dominant conceptualisation of young people in many of even the most recent studies of their consumption has remained that of, first and foremost, a conspicuous consumer.

The notion of conspicuous consumption, first described in the writings of Veblen (1915 [1899]), refers to individuals' attempts to gain and indicate status through display of

fashionable goods. For young people, this usually consists of clothing and other apparel, and communication, media and entertainment technologies, which today include mobile phones (often smartphones), mp3 players, laptops and tablet computers. In light of theorisations of youth as a time of identity formation and experimentation in the context of forging peer group affiliations, there is arguably some validity to characterising (some of) their consumption as 'conspicuous'. The relative absence of major financial commitments and sometimes considerable disposable income enjoyed by many young people means they can be well equipped to experiment through consumption, with even those possessing limited financial resources often managing to access popular technologies and participate in current trends (Olsson 2007; Sweeting et al. 2012).

A key factor driving these conspicuous identity experiments is young people's concern with making sense of their relationships to one another – juggling multiple identities as they attempt to balance 'being an individual' with 'fitting in' and being part of a group (Autio et al. 2009; Bentley et al. 2004; Brusdal and Lavik 2008; Croghan et al. 2006; Griffin et al. 2005; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Marion and Nairn 2011; Miles 1995; Russell and Tyler 2005; Van Gorp 2005; Wilska 2003; Wilska and Pedrozo 2007). A young person may juggle several individual and collective identities at any one time as s/he ascertains not only what suits her/him personally, but which personas can be safely combined without inducing peer opprobrium. Gaining peer acceptance often requires possessing the 'right' things at the 'right' time – "visible 'marks of belonging', obtainable as a rule in the shops" (Bauman 2007: 83) – thus emphasising the social importance of being able to acquire new things in a timely manner (Autio and Heinonen 2004; Bentley et al. 2004).

Further, participation in specific youth cultural groupings or practices (in the past commonly described in terms of sub-cultures¹³) can necessitate ownership of particular objects – thus echoing in a specifically youth cultural context Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) suggestion that material objects can be necessary to demarcate and make stable cultural categories. As the number of accoutrements required to maintain these roles

¹³ There has been considerable debate as to the continued relevance of the concept of sub-cultures for the description of contemporary youth affiliations and cultural practices (e.g. Bennett 2011; Blackman 2005; Debies-Carl 2013; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006). This is not a topic I dwell on here since young people consume clothes, technologies, etc. regardless of any (sub)cultural affiliations they may hold. In particular, when it comes to consumption of technologies, contemporary youth are more commonly united within one shared youth culture than divided by sub-culture-specific practices.

increases, so too does the total volume of possessions consumed throughout adolescence, particularly since some items are likely to be abandoned once a style or group has been deemed the wrong choice.

While it is evident, then, that conspicuous consumption plays a part in the overall schema of young people's consumption, this should not imply that it represents all that consumption means and involves for young people. Research on this topic has also suggested that youth consumption is not always primarily focused around ownership and display. Autio and Heinonen (2004: 124), for instance, have suggested that, "instead of ownership the goal of consumption is the gaining of experience, which is created by participating in the act of consuming". Although it is not entirely clear what the authors mean by 'experience', they appear to suggest that young people's consumption is as much about doing (i.e. participating in certain practices and gaining competence) as having (i.e. ownership).

This is an important distinction which presents a subtly different understanding of the way in which the social acts as the primary driver of young people's consumption and thus the significance of participating in a particular practice for young people's social identification. Autio and Heinonen (2004) contrast how the ability of their young participants to acquire new possessions is viewed by their peers as 'cool', with the perception that those consuming moderately or sustainably, opting not to pursue novelty, are 'uncool'. The emphasis here is on participation in the practice of consuming novelty, rather than the consumption of a specific object. By taking emphasis off the object of consumption (whether a mobile phone, a bag or a pair of shoes), attention is shifted away from ideas about visible markers of status to consider the idea that the objects of consumption are merely tools in a broader social project.

A more pertinent question for researchers of youth consumption therefore becomes, what do young people seek to achieve through participation in consumption practices, rather than what do they seek to achieve through ownership of particular objects? Recent studies concerned with materialism¹⁴ amongst young people have indicated that high levels of materialism are associated with low self-esteem and/or well-being (Chaplin and John 2007; Gatersleben et al. 2008; Isaksen and Roper 2012; Nairn et al., no date;

¹⁴ Whilst I acknowledge that the term 'materialism' is used, particularly within anthropological material culture studies, to describe in the broadest terms the ways in which material objects are taken up in the practice of everyday life (e.g. Miller 2001), in this thesis I employ 'materialism' (and the related term 'materialistic') in its more commonly-used sense to describe a particularly high level of attachment to material possessions.

Park and John 2011; Sweeting et al. 2012), and thus point to the existence of material consumption as a panacea for a deeper social anxiety. In short, participation in consumption practices constitutes a means for young people to gain self-esteem, acceptance and a sense of self-efficacy that it can be difficult for them to achieve in other areas of contemporary life.

The connection between self-esteem and proficiency in consumption practices has been noted by Warde (2005), who emphasises the inevitable emergence of wants as part of this process. In essence, effective participation in a practice necessitates ownership of the tools that facilitate that practice, such as a smartphone which enables ready access to email and Facebook as a means of 'doing social life'. From the perspective of young people's consumption, if participation in consumption-based social practices grants them both the scope to explore their self-identity/-ties and a sense of self-esteem that they are unable to achieve in other settings, the fundamental importance of material possessions in their lives becomes easy to understand. It is also the case that the persistence of practices depends upon their reproduction by social groups. Young people, arguably, maintain their own distinct set of consumption practices in order to sustain the social structures through which they are able to negotiate individual and group identity/-ties.

In summary, young people appear to have several closely linked aims for their consumption. They seek to build an individual identity (or set of identities) which cohere(s) with the peer groups with which they seek a sense of acceptance and belonging. Through this, the broader aim is the gaining of a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. Conspicuous consumption can be evident within these processes, but equally sometimes material 'tools' are taken up for the sake of participation in practices, rather than any intrinsic qualities they possess.

The discussion presented thus far has provided an overview of what young people seek to achieve through their consumption – in short, a sense of belonging, and thus self-esteem, through shared practices. Within the literatures that have concerned themselves with youth consumption, the ways in which researchers have explored what this means in terms of young people's lived realities have resulted in two contrasting views of 'the young consumer'. In sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 I present these in the form of two caricatures, the (un)happy hedonist and the citizen-consumer, before commenting on the links between the two in section 2.3.3. I then consider the gaps produced by these partial pictures and why this constitutes a problematic platform for those

concerned with promoting more sustainable consumption amongst youth. It should be noted that I restrict my focus to studies from the last two decades, in order to correspond with the time frame in which youth-focused sustainable consumption programmes emerged.

2.3.1 A Tale of Two Teens: The (Un)happy Hedonist

Much of the youth consumption literature following Abrams' *The Teenage Consumer* (1959) has been based in the consumer behaviour and marketing domain. The preoccupation of these studies with young people's motivations for and processes of acquisition is indicative of the ways in which disciplinary worldviews determine how young people's actions are constructed and interpreted. As a result of this focus, these disciplines have contributed to the image of young people as hedonistic – although not always happy – consumers. Although none has gone so far as to adopt this term, the accumulation of similar conclusions coupled with, until recently, little challenge or nuance from other disciplines has cemented the hegemony of this image. Furthermore, the emphasis on quantitative research techniques within these disciplines has provided study participants with little scope to represent themselves in terms other than those imposed by researchers.

The figure portrayed in youth consumption studies within the consumer behaviour¹⁵ domain is one at the whim of the market. The hedonist aims to keep pace with new trends, particularly the most fashionable brands (Phoenix 2005), and be an early adopter within her/his social group (Griffin et al. 2005; Wilska 2003). These aspirations are associated with impulsive consumption, particularly by girls, which Griffin et al. (2005) suggest is easily accommodated as a result of the low cost of desired objects. The most widely-cited items in studies of young people's consumption have been clothes (Boden et al. 2005; Croghan et al. 2006; Griffin et al. 2005; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Miles et al. 1998; Piacentini and Mailer 2004; Van Gorp 2005); and electronic items including mobile phones, CDs and DVDs (Croghan et al. 2006; Grant and O'Donohue 2007; Griffin et al. 2005; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Miles et al. 1998; O'Brien 2009; Van Gorp 2005; Wilska 2003; Wilska and Pedrozo 2007). The fall in

¹⁵ A number of disciplines are represented within the broad field of consumer behaviour, including marketing and business, psychology and economics. It should be noted that the worldviews of these disciplines tends towards a focus on the motivators of individual action, rather than the contextual settings in which those actions are situated.

the relative cost of these items in recent years has opened up access to a considerably wider variety of objects for young people's autonomous consumption.¹⁶

However, the low cost of material items is not the only driver of young people's purportedly hedonistic consumption. The satisfaction gained from acquisition has been described as fleeting as a result of the increasingly insatiable wants associated with contemporary consumer society (Bauman 2004; Campbell 1987; Langer 2005). This is further exacerbated by the focus of marketing efforts on the youth demographic (Barber 2007; Quart 2003). While investigations of young people's satisfaction with material possessions are largely absent from the youth and consumption literature, Autio and Heinonen (2004) identify the high frequency with which young people make purchases for short-term pleasure. What underpins this short-termism has been underexplored but points raised in section 2.3 would suggest a combination of socio-cultural pressures (e.g. peer group norms, the emergence of new trends) and the relative strength (or weakness) of individual agency (self-esteem and efficacy) in response to them. Regardless of the cause of the dissatisfaction, the brief subject-object relationship necessarily means that the possession rapidly becomes superfluous.

While the hedonist may experience bursts of short term pleasure as a result of his/her impulsive consumption, enjoyment can be overshadowed by anxiety, confusion and pressure. In their study of childhood-teen transitions, Russell and Tyler's respondents reported experiencing considerable social pressure to 'keep up' with new purchases, referring to things they were 'supposed' to buy (Russell and Tyler 2005; see also Wilska 2003; Isaksen and Roper 2008, 2012), and Phoenix's respondents described those who failed to 'keep up' as "rejects" (2005: 92). Making a 'mistake' purchase or returning goods was seen as particularly shameful. Similarly, participants in Griffin et al.'s investigation into teens' roles in household consumption negotiations relayed the view that one had to leave a shop clutching a bag in order to be 'respectable' (Griffin et al. 2005; see also Miles 2000). The result of such pressures is, as highlighted by Bentley et al. (2004), that many young people experience unhappiness as a result of the pressures of a consumer society in which constant identity (re)negotiation is not only desirable but expected. Paradoxically, this unhappiness may simply fuel the fire of consumerism and validate the perception of the hedonistic young consumer, with the resultant low self-esteem perpetuating further consumption.

¹⁶ For example, CDs and DVDs can be acquired for little more than £2 from high street music/film store Fopp or online retailer Play.com, while a pair of boots can cost as little as £6 in Primark.

Yet it seems that the materialistic, hedonistic traits which are purportedly representative of young people's consumption are not necessarily looked on favourably by the young people themselves. Some of Autio's (2005) most hedonistic participants expressed shame, having reflected on their self-confessed 'wastrel' consumer identities. Situating their actions amongst those of their peers, Wilska's respondents saw themselves as less materialistic than 'everyone else' (Wilska 2003). Lunt and Livingstone (1992: 155-6) describe this self-perception as an example of "cognitive resistance: to consciously distance oneself from the "heavy spenders" is a coping strategy in a rapidly changing material culture." Perhaps, then, even the (un)happy hedonist considers 'excessive' consumption to be undesirable – if not always easy to resist.

2.3.2 A Tale of Two Teens: The Citizen-Consumer

In contrast to the (un)happy hedonist who gains her/his sense of self-worth primarily from acquisition and display, an alternative perspective suggests that young people can also gain self-worth through consumption acts which prioritise environmental, rather than social, impacts. Emerging largely from the environmental education literature and reflecting growing awareness of the relationship between personal consumption and personal responsibility, this individual is characterised – and has been described by researchers as – a 'citizen-consumer'.¹⁷

Unlike the studies which informed the portrayal of the (un)happy hedonist, all of which had young people's consumption as their main, if not sole, focus, the research which has contributed to the caricature of the citizen-consumer has, by and large, been concerned predominantly with the extent of young people's environmental concern and the way this is manifested in particular actions (Larsson et al. 2010); consumption has rarely been the focus of this research, or the environmental initiatives on which it tends to focus (Kopnina 2013). As such, portrayals of young people's consumption have been a by-product of other interests. While the perspective on young people's agency offered by this body of work is, as I demonstrate below, extremely valuable, the fact that consumption is a subsidiary interest for the researchers in the studies discussed

¹⁷ It should be noted that the term 'citizen-consumer' has been associated with adults displaying the same characteristics (e.g. Barr et al. 2011; Spaargaren and Mol 2008; Spaargaren and Oosterveer 2010; Trentmann 2007). I adopt the term as an apt description of the young consumer described within the environmental education literature discussed here, and because of the links it forges with the adult-focused research on comparable practices.

means that consumption as a concept and set of practices is not fully articulated, resulting in lack of clarity as to the acts young people are imagined to engage in and thus limiting the effectiveness of the interventions designed to promote alternatives. Thus in the same way that it is necessary to bear in mind the worldviews of the disciplines which describe the (un)happy hedonist in order to fully understand the caricature (and its limitations), so too it is necessary to acknowledge the aims of environmental educators (i.e. promoting the idea of young people as influential ‘change agents’) in framing particular interpretations of young people’s attitudes and actions. Nevertheless, this literature has facilitated the emergence of an alternative image of the young consumer which is a valuable antidote to the dominant image of the hedonist.

As outlined in Chapter One, environmental education research suggests that the environmental knowledge and concern demonstrated by many young people means the impetus to create the change required for greater sustainability already exists, and that, by virtue of their social location, young people are potentially potent agents of change. The few extant studies which have explicitly explored young people’s consumption through the lens of sustainability have described widespread acknowledgement amongst youth of the importance of reducing personal environmental impacts through their consumption choices, with some already committed to practices such as waste reduction, energy saving and the purchase of organically-produced items (Autio and Heinonen 2004; Autio et al. 2009; Bentley et al. 2004; Hayward et al. 2011).

For these young people, “[G]reen consumer practices are not a limitation to enjoying consumption...” (Autio et al. 2009: 45); rather, they understand sustainable consumption as offering many possibilities for the expression of their identities, values and agency. Nevertheless, even those who expressed some degree of commitment to ‘green’ principles admitted that sometimes the desire to consume outweighed their environmental values (Autio and Heinonen 2004; Hayward et al. 2011; Renton et al. 2011), suggesting that cultural pressures retain some power even for those whose agency, at other times, works to directly contest them. For others, shifts to more sustainable modes of consumption are simply short lived, reflecting the tendency for sustainability to remain a priority within young people’s consumption only for as long as there is the constant prompt of an external stimulus (e.g. an environmental drive at school) (Fröhlich et al. 2012).

Despite enthusiasm and commitment from some young people, for many others awareness of the need to consume sustainably is an insufficiently powerful imperative to counteract the perception that doing so is ‘uncool’, accessing the necessary services or facilities is too difficult, or that their actions are futile, particularly in the context of the perceived inaction of others (Autio and Heinonen 2004; Connell et al. 1999; Halkier 2001; Hayward et al. 2011; Hicks and Holden 2007; Ojala 2007, 2008; Rickinson 2001). Breunig et al. (2013), for instance, found that half of their young Canadian participants were reluctant to change their behaviours for the reasons listed above, with those who were prepared to do so engaging in small-scale actions involving limited personal effort, such as remembering to turn off lights. Few were willing to engage in what the authors term “more demanding [...] more systemic, or more emancipatory” actions (2013: 10), i.e. those requiring more fundamental change in everyday practices, such as car-pooling or taking public transport to school. For Breunig et al.’s participants, as for the young people described by other authors noted above, their consumption is, in a rather different way from that of the hedonist, similarly bound by socio-cultural imperatives which inhibit consuming according to the environmental values they claim to possess. Thus whilst the hedonist’s consumption appears to be underpinned by (and their agency constrained by) anxiety, the citizen-consumer’s seems characterised by inertia and ambivalence.

As a result, environmental educators have framed the citizen-consumer as requiring support (generally from environmental educators themselves) to transform her/his consumption from a site of ambivalence to one of action. Primarily this has focused attention on acknowledging the citizen-consumer’s need to feel that her/his actions make a positive difference (Autio et al. 2009; Bentley et al. 2004; De Young 1996; Ojala 2005, 2007, 2008; Vermeir and Verbeke 2004), since the feelings of satisfaction and self-worth that have been reported as the reward for action (De Young 1996; Ojala 2007) are key to maximising the chance that newly adopted sustainable consumption behaviours persist beyond the short term. In light of the fragility of young people’s self-esteem discussed above, this outcome is significant.

In essence, the citizen-consumer’s agency is characterised as strong one moment and weak the next, with the nature of their consumption subject to the strength of their environmental commitment when lured by youth cultural temptations. Whilst little is reported of the specific acts of consumption in which these young people engage, or the precise contexts in which they are situated, the fact that satisfaction and self-

esteem emerge as key motivators of sustainable consumption is noteworthy. Since these motivators echo those underpinning the far less sustainable consumption of the (un)happy hedonist, there may be more that links these two caricatures than might first be imagined.

2.3.3 Two Teens United?

The difficulties experienced by the citizen-consumer in attempting to resist the pleasures of hedonistic consumption and translate pro-environmental intentions into action suggest that, in reality, the hedonist and the citizen-consumer may simply be facets of the same individual. Autio et al. (2009) have posited that there are fundamental (although not wholly irreconcilable) tensions within the concept of the ‘consumer as citizen’¹⁸, and certainly the fact that even the most sustainability-inclined young people featured in the studies discussed here concede that sometimes their principles are sidelined because the desire to consume is greater suggests that, for these individuals, there is something routine, even necessary, about consuming for pleasure (cf. Strannegård and Dobers 2010). The rigidity of pro-environmental identities associated with sustainable consumption simply proves too great a constraint in the context of their broader social aims (Hayes-Conroy and Vanderbeck 2005).

It should also be noted that some modes of consumption originally devised and enacted in the spirit of environmentalism become tainted by assimilation into consumerism (Frank 1997). Bag designer Anja Hindmarch’s cotton shopping bag proudly proclaimed “I’m not a plastic bag” in order to draw attention to the excessive use of plastic carriers. For many, the bag became the “must-have” accessory of 2007 (BBC 2007). Gabriel and Lang (2006 [1995]) have suggested that this sort of ‘political statement’ consumption is likely to be more popular with young people than ascetic “do without” approaches, since it allows them to appease their desire to perform some perceived act of environmental citizenship (drawing attention to a cause if not always following through with personal actions) without threatening the social priorities within which consuming plays a central role. As Banaji and Buckingham (2009) note, marketing attempts to encourage young people to consume ‘ethically’ (including sustainably)

¹⁸ These include the ways in which prevailing commercial and government structures promote a discourse of consumer choice whilst constituting limitations on consumers’ agency; and the individualised nature of the consumer’s role compared with the collaborative, communitarian nature of that of the citizen.

appeal simultaneously to their desire to acquire and their wish to do so in line with a particular set of principles. Thus, if 'political statement' consumption is little more than following the latest fashion or responding to a well-pitched marketing message, is the owner of a Hindmarch bag more closely aligned with the hedonist or the citizen-consumer? Banaji and Buckingham's (2009) argument suggests the latter; that, although not unproblematic in terms of their exhortation to 'be sustainable by shopping', such acts of consumption do offer young people the means to express a form of environmental ethics through a (pseudo-)political act.

The blurring of the edges between these caricatures is important to acknowledge in light of the dominance of the image of the hedonistic young consumer, both within academic literatures and popular culture. Specifically, it raises the question of what other important features of young people's consumption might be unearthed by research seeking to broaden understanding of what it means to consume and open up the field to explore the contextual pressures that shape the forms young people's consumption takes. What, then, is it possible to take from these two caricatures as a means of directing research aimed at broadening understanding of youth consumption?

2.3.4 (Absent) Culture and (Missing) Context in Youth Consumption

There are two key aspects of youth consumption which I suggest have been underplayed in the literature discussed above. These warrant attention not only because young people's consumption is, at present, arguably misrepresented by the partiality of the perspectives represented by the two caricatures, but equally because failing to do so means potentially limiting the effectiveness of attempts to promote more sustainable consumption to this group.

The first of these is the nature and impact of the socio-cultural structures in which young people's consumption is situated. As illustrated by the model constructed to represent these structures in Figure 2.1, young people's consumption is (generally) situated at the intersection of consumer culture, youth culture(s) (peer norms) and family norms and practices. In spite of Miles's (1995) call nearly two decades ago for more socio-culturally contextualised accounts of youth consumption, studies which consider young people's responses to social and consumer cultural pressures remain scant. One recent exception is Marion and Nairn's (2011) exploration of the ways in which French

teenage girls appropriate aspects of fashion trends in forming dynamic, narrative identities through a process of bricolage.

While the influence of proximate social relations (friends, family) is noted in the literatures informing both caricatures, it tends to be characterised as linear, focused and intentional (for example, peers → individual in the context of the hedonist; individual → peers and/or family in the context of the citizen-consumer), rather than in the more nebulous, indirect, but no less powerful sense of the ways in which cultural norms are embodied in the actions of those socially proximate to young people. A particularly problematic gap is that formed by the lack of work on young people's consumption in the home, and the ways in which the family shapes attitudes to and practices of consumption (Jones and Martin 1999; Hall 2011). Parents have been identified as the most important socialisation agents in terms of how young people learn to consume and why they come to adopt certain dispositions towards objects and practices (Shim et al. 2011; Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2009, 2012). Yet when parents appear in studies of youth consumption it is generally only in the form of direct influence, either a parent directing a child's consumption (Rawlins 2006) or as a target for 'pester power' (Thomson et al. 2007; El Aoud and Neeley 2008; Shim et al. 2011).

Deepening understanding of the contexts in which young people's consumption is situated is necessary in order to better understand the intentionality that underpins their actions. Since intentionality is shaped by subjective responses to cultural norms, this is ultimately a question of how much agency young people possess to define their relationships with the objects of consumption in terms that suit their aims (noting, of course, that those aims are likely to be shaped by socio-cultural imperatives). Appreciation of the pervasiveness of such norms is especially important in contexts where new (sustainable) modes of consumption are sought, and Moisander et al. (2009) note that preoccupation with consumer agency (adults in their case) can overshadow this.

The second aspect of youth consumption which I believe to be (largely) missing from the literature so far is an explicit focus on the objects of consumption themselves – the shoes, mobile phones, DVDs, mp3 players and handbags that purportedly bring young people pleasure and anxiety in equal measure. In recent years a concern with the ways in which the material shapes the experience or appropriation of physical space for the purpose of consumption has emerged, laying the groundwork for materialised and contextually sensitive studies of youth consumption. Foley et al. (2007), for instance,

have examined the use of mobile phones by young women to define areas of public space as spaces of leisure and socialisation, while Thompson and Cupples (2008) have explored how mobile phones are used by teenagers in New Zealand to facilitate rather than replace proximal contact with peers.

Further, in light of the lack of research into young people's satisfaction with their possessions post-acquisition, the nature of the process through which items fall out of use and thus, potentially, contribute to the waste-making of which young people have been accused, remains 'black-boxed'. For those seeking to make consuming sustainably appealing to youth opening up this box is a fundamental necessity, since understanding why a fully functional and previously appealing object comes to be replaced has the potential to uncover specific imperatives within contemporary youth consumption cultures.

Within consumption scholarship more broadly, the importance of the materiality of objects to how they are lived with and related to has been revealed through the growing body of work on the divestment of household material possessions. To date, the fields of divestment and youth research have barely overlapped (a point I expand on below). Yet geographical studies of divestment have, over the last decade, demonstrated how much more it is possible to learn about consumption by looking beyond acquisition or other single 'moments' of consumption. Investigations into the divestment of possessions have explored how things are (or have been) lived with; how long relationships with possessions last (and why); what happens to possessions when they are no longer wanted; and how these decisions are enacted when that time comes.

Gregson et al. (2007a) have argued that, for many years, the lack of work on divestment perpetuated the view that contemporary consumerism is underpinned by a 'throw-away' attitude to possessions. The wealth of research on this topic has since gone a long way to contesting this view, and I contend that bringing the same mode of analysis to young people's consumption offers a means of demonstrating how much more there is to their consumption than hedonistic identity experimentation or anxiety-inducing attempts to appease environmental concerns.

In section 2.4 I review recent scholarship on divestment in order to demonstrate, first, the richness that it has brought to studies of consumption such that simplistic assumptions about contemporary consumer society have been challenged; and second, how the nature of the divestment phase of consumption lends itself to an emphasis on the

contextual and material issues that I suggest are missing from current understandings of youth consumption.

2.4 Divestment

It should be noted from the outset that children and young people have been almost entirely absent from the divestment literature to date. They have occasionally appeared incidentally in studies concerned with the management of household possessions (e.g. Corrigan 1989; Gregson et al. 2007a, 2007b) but they have rarely been the primary research focus. One exception is Morgan and Birtwistle's study of young women's disposal of unwanted clothing (2009), the key findings of which I discuss later. Thus the literature discussed in this section should be understood as describing the actions of adults rather than youth.

'Divestment' describes the process(es) through which objects are physically and emotionally separated from a subject. As a gradual process it incorporates a series of nested practices, which may include, amongst others, sorting, clearing, storing, gifting, selling and binning. Through these acts objects are moved into a new context in which new meanings may be attributed to them. Fully characterising the meaning of 'divestment' requires acknowledging the fact that it is a culturally directed process. Since it occurs in response to the (lack of) co-ordination an individual perceives between the everyday practices in which they participate (through choice or obligation) and the material tools required for successful fulfilment of those aims, the cultural context which determines those practices and provides those material tools necessarily also constitutes the reason why some of those objects become irrelevant. Some degree of sense-making is required on the part of individuals, drawing on personal values and imperatives, according to the extent to which they seek to comply with (changing) dominant cultural practices in the use or divestment of their possessions.

Described by Gregson et al. (2007a: 187) as "the counterpart to appropriation", divestment is far more than ridding or wasting (I discuss the relationship between these terms below); it is equally about how the act of moving along possessions reflects and constructs relationships between people and things, and between people and one another, thus revealing a host of meanings and values. In other words, the possessions individuals – including adolescents – part with, and the ways in which they are parted with, are likely to be as illustrative of those individuals' senses of self and the socio-

cultural worlds within which that self (or those selves) operate(s) as the objects retained (Hawkins 2006).

On this basis, research into divestment has expanded in both scope and depth within the broader cross-disciplinary consumption scholarship. Much of this research has described the intimate and complex relationships people have with the objects and practices of divestment. As such, its focus has been on individuals' subjective experiences of and interactions with the material objects that surround them, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of adults' consumption than previous accounts which, like current youth consumption research, were largely preoccupied with contexts of acquisition and the sign values of possessions (Goss 2004, 2006).

In this section I review some of the ways that researchers have characterised divestment. I consider what these suggest about what motivates and shapes divestment, and what this in turn reflects about the nature of people's relationships with the objects of consumption. I begin with a brief point of semantic clarification about the relationship between the terms divestment, disposal, ridding and waste. I follow this with an overview of the emergence of interest in the disposal of material objects, before discussing the findings of recent divestment scholarship with particular relevance for my study.

2.4.1 Defining Divestment

As stated at the outset of this section, 'divestment' refers to the emotional as much as the physical separation of subject and object. It involves recognising that an object no longer fulfils a need an individual might have, or might once have had, that it better fulfils the needs of another, or that passing it on expresses something particular about the relationship between giver and recipient. In response to this, the object is moved on to a context more suited to the potentialities it possesses. Most commonly, this movement or placing of things is described by the terms 'disposal' and 'ridding' (Hetherington 2004), and, as such, these terms are nested under the broader term 'divestment'. While both 'disposal' and 'ridding' are associated, in popular perception at least, with the movement of unwanted things into the bin¹⁹, and thence the waste

¹⁹ The roles of different types of waste bin, and thus the growing complexity of the term 'binning' means that these terms, too, are not unproblematic. Throughout this thesis I use the terms 'bin' and 'binning' to refer to those mechanisms connected directly with the waste stream. Recycling

stream, it is simply not true that all that is discarded is waste (Gregson et al. 2007b). Rather, objects are disposed of (or, less eloquently, 'got rid of') through a variety of channels, many of which divert objects from the waste stream. I elaborate on these in sections 2.4.4.

Within the literature concerned with disposal and divestment, a variety of terms are used to describe the objects with which researchers have been concerned: garbage, rubbish, trash, refuse and waste, for example, as well as words that emphasise the residual value sometimes perceived in such things, such as remnants, excess and surplus. The terminology employed tends to reflect the context in which the object of analysis is situated, as well as the cultural, conceptual or theoretical lens(es) used to make sense of it. In other words, whether the object is 'garbage' or 'surplus' depends largely on how it is framed by the researcher.²⁰ In section 2.5 I present a synthesis of the ways in which the notion of 'waste', which is key to my enquiry, has been conceptualised in studies concerned with divestment and disposal.

2.4.2 The Emergence of Divestment Scholarship

The disposal of material 'consumer' goods began to be acknowledged as an area of research worthy of independent study in the late 1970s (Harrell and McConocha 1992). Characteristic of the consumer behaviour tradition of which the research was part, the earliest studies focused on categorising ways of divesting by offering taxonomies of disposal (Jacoby et al. 1977). These summarised the range of ridding channels available for everyday household disposal – such as loaning, gifting, selling or binning – and suggested motivations for the selection of each option, such as the social interaction resulting from loaning or selling.

While the taxonomy approach formed a useful base for subsequent studies into different ridding channels, it has only been in the more recent engagement with divestment, largely within social and cultural geography, anthropology and material culture studies, that "how certain [material] things that mattered once come not to matter" (Gregson

bins, discussed in Chapter Five, are described as such in order to distinguish them from waste bins.

²⁰ In this review I employ the terms used by the authors cited – i.e. if an author reports on a study of garbage, I also describe the objects with which they are concerned as garbage. While acknowledging the importance of being alert to the different meanings that each term implies, they should be read in the context of gaining a general overview of the field of divestment.

and Crewe 2003: 202) has been considered in any depth. This body of work is often traced back to anthropologist Mary Douglas's seminal text *Purity and Danger* (1966), in which she describes the ways in which 'dirt'²¹ is classified by culturally-defined systems which both identify and respond to it. In describing 'dirt' as "matter out of place" (1966: 36) Douglas suggests the existence of culturally-defined notions of the 'right' place for things and in doing so firmly situates the construction of waste in social interaction. Her assertion that, "[T]here is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder" (1966: 2) has implicitly underpinned much subsequent research into the meanings, materialisations and drivers of contemporary waste and divestment. More recently, and indirectly responding to Douglas's identification of the closeness of our relationship with 'waste' objects, O'Brien (2008) has argued that there is a richness and intimacy in people's relationships with 'waste' objects that earlier taxonomic accounts of disposal fail to acknowledge (see also Hawkins 2006; Sagoff 2001).²²

Within the divestment literature as a whole, several different foci have emerged, including: the materialisation of social relations, including its role in identity formation (Daniels 2009; Ekerdt et al. 2011; Gregson and Beale 2004; Gregson et al. 2007a, 2007b; Hawkins 2006; Hetherington 2004; Mansvelt 2009; 2012; Marcoux 2001; Miller and Parrott 2009; Morgan and Birtwistle 2009; Norris 2004; Price et al. 2000; Shelton and Okleshon Peters 2009); systems and technologies of 'waste' management, including specific ridding channels (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hillis 2006; Lane et al. 2009; Metcalfe et al. 2013; Perry et al. 2010); the impact of waste management infrastructures on domestic divestment practices (Bulkeley and Askins 2009; Bulkeley and Gregson 2009; Chappells and Shove 1999; Lane 2011); the materiality of unwanted objects (Cooper 2009; Douny 2007; Edensor 2005; Gregson et al. 2009); as well as various historical (Cooper 2009; Cooper 2010; Lucas 2002; Riley 2008; Strasser 2000) and conceptual/theoretical (Gille 2010; Hawkins 2001, 2006; Hetherington 2004; Scanlan 2005) syntheses.

The vast majority of these studies are situated within the context of typical geographical, anthropological or material cultural concerns – such as the role of material culture in

²¹ Douglas (1966) favours the terms 'dirt' and 'pollution' to describe waste objects.

²² The analytical richness of mundane acts such as divestment connects this field with another growing strand of research into 'ordinary' consumption (Gronow and Warde 2001; Hilton 2008), i.e. consumption of, for example, food, water, energy, the understanding of which is increasingly being seen as key to transforming existing resource-intensive practices into more sustainable ones.

rituals associated with life stages (anthropology), and the mutual construction (and materialisation) of identity and place (geography). However, running parallel to this literature is another body of work constituted by disciplines including industrial design and waste management. Here interest in themes such as resource efficiency and durability of product designs (e.g. Cooper 2005; Humphries-Smith 2008; Kostecki 1998; Watson 2008; Yung et al. 2011) points to a potentially illuminating (and as yet under-exploited) nexus between the social sciences and science and engineering disciplines. Research at this intersection could help ascertain whether it is physical or cultural obsolescence (i.e. failure of materials or changing tastes; Maycroft 2009a) that precipitates the 'breakdowns' that lead to divestment. This may become an increasingly important (although economically and politically unpopular) area for research, not only because of growing resource pressures but equally due to concerns about the management of waste(s).

These environmental concerns have been encapsulated in the term 'throw-away society' – a phrase used to describe the popular perception of Western society's attitude to material goods, and a key reference point for discussions about the sustainability implications of contemporary consumption, both within academia and beyond. The birth of the idea of a 'throw-away society', characterised by a preference for disposability, has been attributed to Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers* (1961), a sweeping critique of what Packard perceived as the lack of self-restraint that fuelled overconsumption in the post-war United States. Although Packard's argument has been criticised as moralistic, he draws attention to the dual challenges of the abundance of material goods and persistent dissatisfaction with those goods, and in this respect there are strong echoes of the traits that characterise the (un)happy hedonist in section 2.3.1.

At least in part as a critique of the kind of assumptions popularised by texts such as Packard's, the notion of the 'throw-away society' has been challenged by divestment scholars (Cooper 2009; Evans 2012a; Gregson et al. 2005, 2007b; O'Brien 2008). While some consider the notion to be based on "seductively simple" disputable assumptions (Gregson et al. 2007b: 683), others have argued for its continued salience (Barr 2004; Cooper 2005; Evans and Jackson 2008; McCollough 2007; Van Birgelen et al. 2009). Cooper (2009: 54) has expressed the view that the term retains some use as a description of a society not that simply generates more waste relative to the past, but "that makes certain conceptions of disposal central to its identity." The research

discussed in the following two sections casts light on what these “conceptions of disposal” reflect about divesters’ aims in moving along their possessions and, in doing so, makes evident the fact that, as Gregson et al. (2007b) argue, divestment is far less carefree than notions of the throw-away society imply.

2.4.3 (Re)Constructing Identities and Relationships

One of the dominant themes to have emerged from the extant divestment literature has concerned the extent to which self-identity is constituted as much by the rejection of objects as by their selection (e.g. Gregson et al. 2007a, 2007b; Gregson and Beale 2004; Marcoux 2001; Norris 2004; Shelton and Okleshen Peters 2006; Woodward 2007). Significant life changes (e.g. relationships, friends, family structure, employment or education) often force reflection on relationships with existing possessions (e.g. Wærdahl 2005 on young people’s desire for new clothing when they change schools), such that those considered an improper ‘fit’ with the new, emerging self-identity are divested. Eliminating possessions with which one no longer identifies helps to maintain a particular sense of self, and, if it is true that we are all always ‘becoming’ (Worth 2009) then the recurrent need to rid ourselves of material reminders of past selves is easily explained. Woodward (2007), for example, in her detailed ethnography of women’s clothing demonstrates the importance of both emotional and physical ‘fit’ in determining the version of self her participants present – and, thus, which garments they opt to reject. In doing so she connects her participants’ publicly presented selves with the privately managed ‘tool-kit’ of identities comprised by their wardrobes, and highlights the intimate nature of deciding which past identities (or, more specifically, their material remnants) can be divested.

This intimacy can have a significant impact on the way the process is managed in practice. It may be largely carried out in the privacy of the home (or even the bedroom in the case of young people), but the act of moving objects out of one’s life necessarily means that they become open to observation by others. For some this is a cause of anxiety which actively shapes their chosen methods of ridding. Gregson et al. (2007a: 196), for instance, describe participants in their ethnography of household divestment who avoid giving away things, “that might be seen (by themselves and others) to reflect negatively on them”. These individuals choose to dispose of the vast majority of unwanted items via the privacy of the rubbish bin as a way of safeguarding both their

self-perception and the way that they believe they are seen by others. In doing so they demonstrate the potency of (perceived) socio-cultural norms in determining not only individual perceptions of whether or not something constitutes 'rubbish', but equally how 'rubbish' items should be managed (Hawkins 2006, with reference to Thompson 1979).

The idea of shame or lack of respectability associated with ownership of particular items harks back to the experiences of the young people whose 'mistake' purchases were the cause of considerable anxiety (section 2.3.1). Unwanted possessions can therefore be threatening, perhaps especially for young people, whose sense of self can be fragile while different identities are 'tried on' during adolescence. The presence of an 'uncool' DVD or brand of trainers may result in these objects being hidden when friends visit or even thrown in the bin rather than given away, lest the object be traced back to them.

In one sense, then, divestment research has emphasised the anxieties that can result from managing objects which become deeply imprinted with personal histories, and shows how the blurred private-public nature of ridding can shape the ways in which the material remnants of these personal histories are moved on. However, divestment is not wholly characterised by anxiety. Sometimes it is driven by a wholly practical need to reclaim domestic space by clearing out 'clutter' (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003; Gregson et al. 2007b). In this context decisions are still generally made on the basis of which possessions are (not) relevant to present identity/-ties. Beyond such practicalities, many acts of divestment are also acts of love, care or esteem which reflect the maintenance of important social relationships – what has been termed in the literature "love relations" (Gregson et al. 2007b; Miller 1998).

This is reflected in research concerned with the passing on (gifting) of possessions, generally from older people to younger family members or acquaintances as a means of materialising memories, shared histories or family ties (Ekerdt et al. 2011; Hallam and Hockey 2001; Marcoux 2001; Norris 2004; Price et al. 2000). This is not to say that expressing love or esteem by passing on possessions is the exclusive territory of the elderly. Gregson and Beale (2004), for example, suggest that the passing on of maternity clothing is based not only on the practicalities of moving an item from a context of 'no use' to 'useful', but also on the transfer of maternal reassurance. Reporting on the exchange of clothes between friends and family members, Woodward's (2007) participants consider the sort of traits and associations that are embodied not only in the items of clothing but also in the act of passing the item to a

specific other – thoughtfulness, generosity, and knowing what the recipient would like. Even young people have the opportunity to demonstrate care towards siblings or cousins by passing on clothes, toys and books that they have physically or developmentally outgrown (Corrigan 1989). Even when the item in question is no longer fashionable (at least in the eyes of the divester) its previous ownership by an older relative can lend it a certain caché appreciated by a younger recipient.

Thus, divestment can be a positive process through which close relationships are materialised. This may result from sloughing off a past role or identity (getting rid of material remnants of a past relationship, for example) in order to (re)affirm other social connections, or involve transferring the surplus value in a no-longer-wanted possession to a new beneficiary. Gregson et al. (2007a) link the desire to make use of surplus value with the notion of the ‘appropriateness’ of different ridding channels. In section 2.4.4 I review the main modes of ridding described in the divestment literature and highlight what authors have suggested divesters aim to achieve through use of these different channels.

2.4.4 Ridding Channels: Gifting, Selling, Binning... Storing?

As the discussion above concerning the materialisation of “love relations” implies, one of the most common methods of ridding is gifting within the immediate family (Corrigan 1989) but sometimes to friends or acquaintances (Gregson and Beale 2004; Woodward 2007). Beyond this form of gifting, which is explicitly focused on the expression of esteem, unwanted possessions are also given away to unknown others, usually through charitable channels – charity shops, banks and doorstep collections – but also through online give-away sites, such as Freecycle²³ (Nelson et al. 2007), and social ‘swapping’ events (Albinsson and Perera 2009).

Charity shops have been explored as a site of ‘alternative’ consumption (i.e. acquisition and associated retail practices; Gregson et al. 2000, 2002; Horne and Maddrell 2002), and as a node in the movement of textiles to the Global South for reuse or recycling (Brooks 2013; Norris 2012), as well as being superficially acknowledged as a convenient means of getting rid of unwanted paraphernalia within the early taxonomies of disposal (Harrell and McConocha 1992). There has been less attention paid to why and how charitable channels are selected by divesters, although Gregson and Crewe (2003)

²³ <http://www.freecycle.org/>

highlight the complex and often protracted processes through which possessions proceed down this route. The relative ease of accessing charitable channels means convenience is likely to play a major role, as is the moral sense that the 'surplus' value in unwanted objects 'should' be made use of (Gregson and Crewe 2003). An emerging body of work concerned with the use of online give-away sites such as Freecycle suggests that these provide opportunities for a new form of civic engagement (Nelson et al. 2007), which is particularly appealing to individuals seeking alternatives to the dominant mode of consumer society.

Selling provides another means of moving along unwanted possessions. Interest in this mode of ridding has ranged from car boot sales (Gregson and Crewe 1997a) to online channels, such as auction site eBay (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009; Hillis 2006). Inevitably, these studies, too, have been concerned with acquisition to some extent.²⁴ However, they have equally made apparent the role of social interaction as a key driver of ridding by selling, both in the sense of providing opportunities for everyday social exchange and as a means of constructing through personal narratives the value of the items sold. Growing interest in researching the selling of possessions reflects increasing public awareness of the convenient means (particularly online channels) through which their 'rubbish' could be turned into cash. While for some sellers this quantification of their possessions' value constitutes a form of reassurance that they will be appreciated by the buyer, for others, "goods become assets which are reinvested to fuel promiscuous consumer behaviours" (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009: 305). In other words, the ability to sell unwanted items justifies the acquisition of the new.

In a consumer culture in which the moment of purchase has been described as a greater thrill than the resultant ownership and use of the objects (Bauman 2001, 2004), this idea of the 'thrill of the chase' echoes the suggestion in section 2.3 that, for many (young) people, consumption is about participation in a shared practice more than ownership of specific items. The admissions of two young women in the study by Denegri-Knott and Molesworth that the items they bought and sold had no lasting value for them lends empirical weight to this stance and suggests they are relatively happily hedonistic young consumers.

²⁴ They have shown acquisition to be theatrical, unexpected, pleasurable and skillful and, as such, understandings of the sites and processes of consumption (acquisition) have become more nuanced, particularly regarding the ways in which socialities of exchange shape subjective responses to both the objects and processes of consumption.

Thus, on the one hand, selling can evidently play a role in fuelling acquisition. Yet on the other hand, it may be viewed as an attempt to contest the exhortation of consumer culture to 'buy new' by extending the social life of things (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) through their re-use, or reduce the feelings of guilt that may be associated with wasting things through disuse. In this sense, selling has much in common with gifting in terms of underlying motivations. In both contexts, transferring an unwanted item into the possession of another who (it is hoped) can make use of it makes ridding a necessarily reflexive act (Gregson et al. 2007a) in which the residual value(s) of objects are appraised in order to determine their trajectory. That the channels available to facilitate this transfer are diversifying in response to the need to extract or recycle certain materials and reduce volumes sent to landfill means that divesters are presented with a growing number of options (Chappell and Shove 1999; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hawkins and Muecke 2003).

What has been conspicuously underdeveloped in research on ridding channels is a focus on the household bin (Metcalfé et al. 2013). Chappells and Shove (1999: 268) provide a detailed analysis of the domestic bin as a waste management technology, noting how it "shapes contemporary meanings of waste", but in doing so they focus on the emplacement of the bin within wider, municipally-structured, waste management systems (see also Bulkeley and Gregson 2009). The use of bins in the ridding of household possessions tends to be implicit; it is yet to be the focus of the kind of ethnographic attention that has been paid to selling and giving away.²⁵ The fact that the convenient and habitual nature of binning makes it an especially unreflexive practice, compared with giving away and selling, may offer a partial explanation for its relative neglect.

This may equally explain the comparable lack of attention paid to storage as a form of partial or temporary divestment. A large proportion of the material things in a household are infrequently, sometimes never, used and this is indicated (perhaps also sometimes perpetuated) by their location in the marginal spaces of the home – lofts, sheds, garages, under beds and on top of wardrobes. In a sense this sort of 'partial divestment through complacency' reflects the lack of reflexivity that characterises the

²⁵ It should be noted that some attention has been paid to the bin in the context of dealing with food waste (e.g. Evans 2012b; Metcalfé et al. 2013; Perry et al. 2010). However, since food constitutes a very different realm in which to consider the topics of ridding and waste, I maintain a distinction between the use of bins for food waste and their use for other forms of unwanted household items.

gradual accumulation of 'stuff' in most households, and on this basis the methodological challenges of researching such an unreflexive process mirror those of binning. Nevertheless, the few studies that have researched storing have noted its utility in managing clutter, as well as its facility to simultaneously allow the retention of treasured possessions from the past whilst presenting a socially acceptable public identity (Cherrier and Ponnor 2010; Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003; Maycroft 2009b). In essence, storage allows the keeping of objects which might be intrinsic to our sense of self but are not necessarily constitutive of the image we wish to project in the present.

Through storage it is thus possible to 'mask' part of one's self. Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003) underline this by highlighting the spatiality of storage, suggesting that it tends to occur 'out back' in spaces that will not be seen by visitors. They argue that, as a result, the spaces and practices of storage may be seen as a more intimate reflection of an individual's relationships with his/her possessions – perhaps the sort of reflection that O'Brien (2008) has perceived as absent from earlier studies of divestment. Stored objects are what Hetherington (2004) describes as 'viscous' – moving slowly, reluctantly, often ultimately staying around. As such, Cwerner and Metcalfe's view that "clutter is matter that no longer matters as much" (2003: 237) is perhaps not always true. A young person's childhood toys, for example, might constitute the 'clutter' at the top of a wardrobe but the memories inscribed therein mean that, in fact, such items might 'matter' more than newer possessions displayed more prominently.

Evidently there is much to learn from a focus on ridding channels that adds important nuance to understandings of contemporary consumption, particularly as regards some peoples' attempts to contest and subvert dominant consumer cultural norms around disposability by expending effort to prolong the usable lives of their no-longer-wanted possessions. What is striking about the body of work which exists at present is that much of the ridding discussed is directly – although usually only implicitly – connected with the central tenets of sustainability: reducing use of new resources, preventing unnecessary waste and, where monetary exchange takes place, even contributing to the market economy. Nevertheless, the sustainability implications of divestment have generally been underexplored in the literature to date. In section 2.4.5 I draw upon one study that has brought together the themes of divestment and sustainability, in order to highlight the utility of divestment as a focal lens for exploring the sustainability of contemporary consumption.

2.4.5 Sustainable Divestment?

Perhaps the links between divestment and sustainability have remained underdeveloped (at least until recently) because of narrow thinking about what sustainability is about. Within the geographical and environmental behaviour traditions, most studies that have made a connection between ridding and sustainability have focused on recycling (e.g. Domina and Koch 2002; Ebreo and Vining 2001; Hawkins 2001; Robertson and Walkington 2009), and, as a result, represent a narrow view of what the intersection of these closely interlinked fields might entail. Whilst recycling practices are now largely considered normative behaviour (Barr 2007; Hawkins 2001) it has been argued that other waste avoidance activities remain closely linked to personal pro-environmental inclinations (Barr 2007) or other-than-environmental motivations, such as the need to save money (Evans 2011b; Hitchings et al. 2013; Williams and Windebank 2006). As such, the links between divestment decisions and environmental issues may remain unclear for many people (Morgan and Birtwistle 2009), and even for those who recognise the connection a perception can exist that divesting according to principles of sustainability requires greater effort (Albinsson and Perera 2009).

Gregson et al. (2013: 105) have suggested that the forms of reuse exemplified by the transfer of goods at a car boot sale are most accurately characterised as embodying “cultures and practices of thrift”, thus allowing the consumption of “more with less”, and as such they argue that this is “a very long way from exemplifying the frugality which underpins notions of sustainable consumption”. Yet whilst car boot sale participants may not primarily see the goods that characterise this space as ‘waste avoided’, their reuse through second hand exchange necessarily prolongs those items usable lives, avoids waste, and prevents the purchase (at least in the short term) of a ‘brand new’ item made from virgin resources. On this basis, I suggest that there is a greater undercurrent of sustainability in this context than Gregson et al. acknowledge – actions need not be explicitly driven by a concern with sustainability in order for sustainability to be (inadvertently) manifested. This reflects my broader point here – that the issue of sustainability has often lurked in the background of divestment studies but narrow thinking about what it means and involves has constrained its application in relevant research contexts.

During the period in which this review was carried out, only one study of divestment was located which was directly and explicitly driven by the sustainability implications of acquisition and ridding – Morgan and Birtwistle (2009). Focused on the ridding of

fashion garments, coincidentally, it was also concerned with young women, aged 17-25. Although limited in the depth of its analysis, the main findings offer some useful points from which to develop thinking about how a study of young people's divestment could cast light on their consumption more broadly.

The first point takes the form of a challenge to the widely-perceived social acceptance that the rapid cycle of acquire-use-dispose is not only the norm but positively desirable amongst this demographic. Counter to the expectation that they and their peers might be the primary drivers, many of Morgan and Birtwistle's respondents reported feeling alienated by the rapid pace of change. While their dissatisfaction did not lead to total abstention from regular high street consumption, their unease suggests a disjuncture between personal values concerned with making full use of their garments and a cultural context in which such behaviour is (apparently) less and less common. Despite the fact that the excesses of consumerism were increasingly unpalatable to these young women, as the experiences of the citizen-consumer suggested, acting according to their values was far from easy.

The second key finding relates to awareness of the materiality of objects. Hawkins (2001: 9) states that "[M]any convenient objects have a presence as imminent rubbish that is difficult to suppress." She suggests that such objects designed for swift disposal tend to have forms that discourage sensual attachment; poor quality objects, for example, suggest finite value, "a value waiting to be used up" (2001: 9) and from which little, if any, future value might be obtained. Morgan and Birtwistle contextualise their research with reference to 'fast fashion' retailers who design clothes to be worn a maximum of ten times (McAfee et al. 2004), using their low quality and therefore disposability as a marketable product attribute (Hanson 1980), thus demonstrating retailers' (perhaps mistaken) assumptions about the priorities of young consumers. They found that:

"... most participants were sceptical as to the ultimate value or contribution to society of fast fashion and felt that it encouraged a 'throwaway culture' where products and fashion lost intrinsic value, encouraging consumers to replace and dispose of products before their real life cycle had ended" (2009: 196).

Thus, while Hawkins (2001: 9) feels that, "[T]he capacity for serial replacement is also the capacity to throw away without concern", as Morgan and Birtwistle's research suggests, young people may harbour greater concern about the limited durability of some of their possessions than is generally acknowledged.

Third, and in some respects the counterpoint to the above, is the observation that objects of high quality materials and craftsmanship often have a normative association that they should be treated with respect, and as such are more likely to be maintained, repaired and kept (Cooper 2005; Gregson et al. 2009). The young women in Morgan and Birtwistle's study stated that they kept more expensive items for longer, even if they were not worn (see also Albinsson and Perera 2009), illustrating a view put forward by Thompson (1979) that durability is as much about the social attitude towards an object as its material form. Actions such as maintenance and repair (and even retention of more expensive items, as in Morgan and Birtwistle's example) convey that the object is valued by its owner and communicates this value to members of shared social groups (Gregson et al. 2009). As a result, these objects are less likely to be considered candidates for ridding and, if not kept, are moved on through channels where their value will be acknowledged and maintained (family, friends, or specialist second hand stores), and where the meanings associated with that object can be preserved.

In sum, Morgan and Birtwistle demonstrate the utility of a focus on divestment for exploring consumption practices and the potential for greater sustainability therein. I elaborate on how I take this position forward, drawing on all the literatures reviewed here, in my conclusion to this chapter in section 2.6. My aim in this section has been to highlight how studying the ways in which material things are lived with and parted with can be as reflective of the attitudes and forces that characterise contemporary consumption as studies of acquisition. The divestment literature incorporates many of the socio-cultural and material sensitivities that I suggest are missing from extant youth consumption research, and reflects "conceptions of disposal" (Cooper 2009: 54) characterised more by moving unwanted possessions into contexts of further use than premature waste-making.

My use of divestment as a focal lens for this project has stemmed from my aim to critically respond to the assumptions made about the relative 'wastefulness' of young people's consumption reported in Chapter One. While the term 'waste' has appeared frequently throughout this section, within the literatures discussed it is often used sufficiently broadly as to obscure the nuances of its multiple meanings. In section 2.5 I draw out some of the ways in which 'waste' has been theorised in divestment, consumption and material culture research such that, in the discussion of my empirical

findings in subsequent chapters, I can comment on the extent to which, and in what sense(s), my participants' consumption is as wasteful as some would contend.²⁶

2.5 Theorising Waste

waste (adj.)
Not cultivated or productive; being in a ruined condition; discarded as worthless, defective or of no use.
waste (v.)
To squander or use lavishly; to damage or destroy; to wear away or gradually diminish; to consume or use up material, resources, time, etc.
waste (n.)
Waste matter, refuse; a surplus or profusion; gradual loss or diminution from use, wear and tear, decay or natural process; unserviceable material remaining over from any process of manufacture; the useless by-products of any industrial process; material or manufactured articles so damaged as to be useless or unsaleable.
(adapted from Oxford English Dictionary 2013 and Merriam-Webster 2013)

Figure 2.2 Definitions of waste

That waste – as both process and object – is fundamental to the practice of consumption is made clear in the definitions above (Figure 2.2). Most commonly, 'waste' concerns the failure to make full use of something, often with human (in)action as a key feature of its demise. As such, understanding the forces which contrive to make waste, including human (in)action, is necessary in order to identify those parts of the consumption process which demand greatest attention from the point of view of sustainability.

To begin, it is worth elaborating briefly on the definition presented in Figure 2.2. 'Waste' – a term widely used to describe the unwanted, unused or unusable²⁷ - is generally seen

²⁶ Although in this project I have been committed to a grounded theoretical approach (see Chapter Three), my wish to speak back to the starting points for this thesis has necessitated incorporating some discussion of current theorisations of waste. My aim in this thesis has been to balance engagement with relevant theorisations with making space for the data to tell their own stories, such that the former does not 'crowd out' what the latter might reveal.

²⁷ As a result of this widespread usage 'waste' has become semantically slippery in its interchangeability with related terms such as rubbish, garbage or excess. On this basis, its use in this discussion (and subsequent chapters) should be taken to refer to its most expansive

as describing a broader and more complex set of objects and processes than related terms associated specifically with objects or substances, such as trash, garbage, excess and surplus. The term 'rubbish' in particular has been frequently used by scholars concerned with the material manifestations of everyday waste-making. Accordingly it has been described as: the unwanted by-products of everyday life (Hawkins 2006); objects which are actively devalued (O'Brien 2008); objects suited only for destruction or decomposition (Gregson et al. 2010); and the zero value 'stuff' which acts as a crucial point of reference against which other objects come to be defined as valuable (Thompson 1979). In contrast, the scope of the term 'waste' – as adjective, verb and noun – encapsulates “practices and states of being in addition to physical ‘things’” (Davies 2011: 191; see also Moore 2012), and in doing so makes more explicit the role of cultural processes and phenomena in determining what is or is not wanted or considered acceptable in any given context. This is underlined by definitions that characterise waste as loss of value or opportunity (O'Brien 2008) since these terms, too, require a socio-cultural framework in order to have meaning.

The concept of 'value' – how it is defined, attributed and ultimately lost – is as central to theorisations of waste as the concept of 'waste' is to understanding divestment (or consumption more broadly; Hawkins and Muecke 2003; Hetherington 2004; Miller 2008), since they are, in essence, two sides of the same coin. An even more problematic term than 'waste' in the sense of the breadth of its meanings and attributions, in the broadest terms 'value' is created throughout the process of consumption (and production) via the ways in which we act on and engage with objects (Appadurai 1986; Campbell 1995; Crewe et al. 2009; Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hawkins 2006; Kopytoff 1986; Marx 1990 [1867]; Miller 2000; Parsons 2008; Simmel 1990).²⁸ When an object has no further value (use, exchange, sign/status or otherwise) it is generally seen as waste (and/or one of its related categories such as rubbish) (Hawkins 2006).

However, waste does not necessarily spell the end of value. Research into waste 'ethics' (Edwards and Mercer 2007; Hawkins 2006; Hobson 2006) has demonstrated how attitudes towards waste (such as whether we feel good or bad about how we deal with

definition (as verb, noun and adjective) unless defined otherwise in the context of a specific example.

²⁸ The different ways in which value is created and defined in contexts of both the gift and the market have been widely discussed in the anthropological literature, e.g. Appadurai (1986); Kopytoff (1986); Miller (2000).

it) have become tied up with moral codes, especially as related to social and environmental concerns, which create a sense of obligation to extend the usable lives of things where (convenient) opportunities exist. Research concerned with circuits of second hand consumption have been especially adept at demonstrating the fact that, “people create the conditions for value to emerge” (Gregson and Crewe 2003: 2) and thus that whether or not something becomes (and remains) ‘waste’ depends on people’s willingness to act in ways that (re)construct its value (Hawkins and Muecke 2003). In other words, ‘waste’ objects can and do move in and out of different value regimes (O’Brien 1999), and in doing so extend their ‘biography’ in a new context (Appadurai 1986).

Although it has been argued that value systems need limits (i.e. a point of zero value) in order to make value attributions meaningful (Thompson 1979), the increasingly urgent need to reclaim value from many kinds of waste for both economic and environmental reasons has precipitated recognition of the fact that ‘waste’ is not (necessarily) the final stage in a linear trajectory. Lepawsky and Mather (2011), for instance, conceptualise waste as performed at the boundaries of dominant notions of usefulness, and note that where these boundaries shift to (re-)accommodate an unused object or substance, ‘waste’ is brought back into a context of use (cf. Herod et al. 2013). Thus, acknowledging waste’s “multiple mobilities” (Davies 2011: 191), it is increasingly seen as valuable (economically and otherwise) when transferred to contexts in which it takes on an alternative use. As Frow (2003: 30; see also Whitson 2011) states:

“... objects are likely, in a complex world, to have a number of actual or potential overlapping uses. No single game exhausts their function; no single description exhausts the uses to which their properties might appropriately or inappropriately lend themselves.”

In Appadurai’s terms (1986), value is ‘encoded’ in the (waste) object itself, and what this value ‘does’ depends on how the context shapes the way in which that value is ‘read’. Chappells and Shove (1999) argue that individuals are more likely to contemplate their relationship with objects that they can identify with and assign some sort of value to, and thus if an individual can identify multiple forms of value in an object, it follows that they may be more likely to act in ways that perpetuate that value. This emphasises the importance of identifying how objects that have become waste can have forms of value reattributed through their relocation (Hetherington 2004; Bulkeley and Gregson 2009), rather than treating them as ‘lost’ (Thompson 1979).

How value is 'read' depends largely on the cultural framework within which the object is situated and the judgements made about it with reference to dominant norms. Value (and waste) is thus a result of the ways in which objects are culturally classified and, in turn, how those classifications are enacted through the interactions between those objects and people (Chappells and Shove 1999; Cooper 2009; Douglas 1966; Hawkins 2006; Thompson 1979). As Whitson notes, "[W]aste does not exist outside of our definition of it..." (2011: 1414). Rather, it is defined (or 'performed' as Lepawsky and Mather 2011 suggest) by our behaviour towards objects, until that definition (performance) – and the meanings it constructs and is constructed by – is called into question by a change in context involving the imposition of a contrasting set of values or alternative value system. Yet part of the reason for maintaining clearly defined normative views of value and waste is as a means of articulating social distinction, a (consumer) cultural phenomenon as relevant today as at the time of Veblen's nineteenth century critique (1915 [1899]; also Bourdieu 1984; Frow 2003). Since social distinction depends on the shifting useful-/uselessness of certain (conspicuously consumed) material objects, visible waste-making (i.e. the rejection of no-longer-fashionable goods) is fundamental to its maintenance.

One facet of this topic which has so far been under-researched is the extent of individual agency in responding to dominant waste and value norms, particularly attempts to contest them. Thompson (1979) suggests that the extent to which we are able to determine whether an object is 'transient' (i.e. will diminish in value to become 'rubbish') or 'durable' (will retain its value and therefore avoid becoming 'rubbish') depends on our place in the social order. However, situating individual agency primarily in one's social location defers that agency to the wider social group and thus overlooks the role of subjectivity (based on uniquely personal experiences or understandings) in perceiving, constructing or otherwise responding to value (Crewe 2011; Dant 2005). Multiple interpretations of cultural values exist simultaneously and some individuals might identify with different norms of waste and value because they constitute a better 'fit' with personal attitudes consistent with non-mainstream socio-cultural aims, including those associated with environmentalism and anti-capitalism (e.g. the dumpster divers described by Edwards and Mercer 2007.) In this context, individual agency might be better placed to contest dominant norms of waste and value through a particular sense of self-efficacy premised on creating impact within a limited sphere.

Often, though, those occupying the higher points in the cultural hierarchy have a vested interest in maintaining many objects as ‘transient’ rather than ‘durable’, including speeding up progress towards zero value in some cases (Frow 2003; Packard 1961). While it may be true that some social groupings have sufficient collective agency to make particular objects durable, for most groups this agency is constrained by significant structural forces, primarily those of the trend-setting industries at the top of the power hierarchy (Gille 2010; Miller 2000). The promotion of novelty means what was once ‘new’ soon becomes ‘not enough’, meaning current possessions are sidelined when newer, purportedly ‘better’ versions become available. This has been discussed in the literature in terms of planned obsolescence, which is comprised of both cultural/stylistic elements (i.e. changing fashions; Maycroft 2009b), and physical/technological elements (i.e. material breakdown or reduced performance; Cooper 2005; Watson 2008).

Exacerbated by a widespread acceptance of disposability and easy replacement, and a parallel reduction in willingness to maintain and repair possessions (Dant 2010; Gregson et al. 2009; McCollough 2007; Watson 2008), domestic waste-making is increasingly structured not just by the technologies that define the ‘right place’ for different kinds of waste (Chappells and Shove 1999) but equally by the market structures that determine the availability of more or less physically and stylistically durable products. As Packard noted in *The Waste Makers* sixty years ago, “[S]tyle can destroy completely the value of possessions even while their utility remains unimpaired” (1961: 68), a sense echoed more recently by Chappells and Shove’s comment that, “[T]he valuing of novelty and the valuing of durability [...] influence the rate at which items defined as rubbish flow into the bin” (1999: 269, emphasis in original). In essence, ‘waste’ can be seen as increasingly produced through notions of structurally-imposed cultural irrelevance more than any kind of physical failure; indeed, it is on this basis of trend-based disposability that the notion of the ‘throw-away society’ is (at least partly) premised.

Thus the imprinting of personal history onto an object both physically (in terms of scuffs, stains, repairs, etc.) and emotionally (in terms of association with key events) – described by McCracken (1988) as ‘patina’ – has meant that objects bearing signs of age and use are often seen as low value in a consumption culture which privileges novelty and variety (see also Kopytoff 1986). The pleasure of the new coupled with the ease of acquisition and the belief that, once it has entered the waste stream whatever we throw

away somehow 'disappears' (O'Brien 2008), implies a degree of disconnection from the implications of waste (Hawkins 2001) that might be described as a form of waste fetishism. Addressing this waste fetish is likely to require a similar course of action to any other attempt at unveiling a commodity fetish. Hawkins (2006), for instance, suggests that knowing more about how things are made may mean more people are concerned about where they end up, and Brook (2012) actively advocates deeper personal interaction with the materiality of everyday possessions (through making, altering, hacking, etc.) as a means of imprinting them with forms of personal value that tend to mean they avoid the waste stream, even when old, tatty or unfashionable.

Presenting this synthesis of some of the ways in which waste has been theorised in key texts concerned with consumption, divestment and material culture has allowed me to draw attention to those framings with particular salience for my attempts in subsequent chapters to articulate the nature of waste in my study participants' consumption. Specifically I have sought to highlight the fact that contemporary attempts at waste avoidance in domestic contexts are often driven by a moral imperative that waste is 'bad' and should be avoided; that being able to divert unwanted objects from waste requires being able to 'read' the potentialities for further use within them; and that this 'value literacy' can be expedited by a deeper understanding by consumers of the materiality of their possessions. I have pointed to the influence of cultural pressures imposed by those at the top of the power hierarchy (commercial interests), principally through contributing to the cultural (and often physical) obsolescence of recently acquired items and thus the need to buy new to 'keep up', and I have drawn attention to the challenges for individual agency in responding to culturally sanctioned waste-making, particularly in contexts where individual subjectivities might be better attuned to methods of waste avoidance yet, by virtue of their social location, less able to act in ways that generate significant cultural change.

These key issues constitute reference points to which my subsequent analysis returns, particularly regarding of the nature of waste, both as an object and as a process (the latter being a relatively underdeveloped strand of waste scholarship), in the lived realities of my participants' everyday consumption of their possessions. I return to these ideas in Chapters Four to Seven.

2.6 Summary and Research Questions

I began this chapter by outlining why youth is a particularly interesting and potentially insightful part of the life phase for studies of consumption. Drawing on dominant theorisations of youth as ‘becoming’ and youth as ‘transition’, I highlighted how both the temporalities specific to youth and the relevance of the ‘choice biography’ or ‘identity project’ to this portion of the life phase have implications for the ways in which young people materialise their shifting identity/-ties through their possessions. Whilst consumption has been noted as one of the contexts in which young people are demonstrably fully fledged actors in the present, rather than actors-in-waiting, I drew attention to the fact that youth consumption studies have paid insufficient attention to the socio-cultural structures within which young people’s actions are situated, and that this is in spite of the assumptions that are made about their power to influence the actions of socially proximate others.

This introductory context was followed by a more detailed discussion of the extant youth consumption literature. Discussion here addressed the extent to which young people’s consumption might be considered ‘conspicuous’ and, in the context of balancing the need to ‘fit in’ with ‘being an individual’, why this might be so. Particular attention was drawn to recent research that has suggested that, rather than ownership, it may be participation in youth cultural practices that young people seek, as a result of which peer group acceptance grants them the sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem it can be hard to achieve in other settings. I then sketched two ‘caricatures’ – the (un)happy hedonist and the citizen-consumer – based on the disciplinary divisions that characterise youth consumption scholarship and the contrasting images of youth consumption to which they have contributed. These caricatures emphasised the multi-faceted nature of young people’s consumption – particularly the fact that one individual can possess multiple consumption ‘personalities’ – and highlighted the extent to which disciplinary preoccupations with particular worldviews can result in a problematically partial picture of their chosen topic.

I concluded my review of the youth consumption literature by emphasising the limitations of existing knowledge of this topic, which result from too little attention having been focused on the spaces and socio-cultural structures in which young people’s consumption is situated, in particular the home and family. With reference to geographers’ long-standing expertise in exploring the spatial and socio-cultural aspects of consumption, I introduced the topic of divestment as a phase of consumption which

offers considerable scope to bring knowledge drawn from the 'adult' consumption literature to bear on the gaps identified in youth consumption scholarship.

Thus, the second half of this chapter focused, first, on a review of the recent divestment literature. Discussion here focused on the ways in which empirical research has substantiated the view that "what we reject is as important as what we identify with" (Hawkins 2006: 11), such that understanding of contemporary (adult) consumption has been able to move away from preoccupations with acquisition, status and display to reveal a much richer set of relationships with material objects. Having defined 'divestment' in relation to other terms common within this literature (such as 'disposal'), and provided a concise history of the development of academic interest in this topic, I noted that much scholarship has been concerned with the notion of the 'throw-away society' – which has been contested and supported in equal measure.

Research demonstrating the extent to which divestment is a key part of managing identities and relationships has suggested that it is far from the callous disposal some proponents of the 'throw-away society' thesis perceive. Rather it is about deciding how to present oneself, managing anxieties about public perception of our actions, or expressing care or esteem for loved ones. Studies focused on ridding channels have equally demonstrated that there is far greater reflexivity and care involved in some methods of ridding – particularly donating and selling – than had previously been acknowledged, and even those ridding channels that, as yet, remain relatively under-explored (binning and storage) hint at potentially rich findings as a result of the intimate nature of their unreflexive practices. I closed my discussion of divestment with some comments on the infrequently forged connections between this body of work and the topic of sustainability, drawing on Morgan and Birtwistle's (2009) study of young women's fashion disposal decisions as an example of, first, the clear link between divestment and sustainability, and second, the utility of divestment as a lens for focusing an exploration into the ways in which young people consume.

The penultimate substantive section of this chapter was focused on a detailed discussion of the ways in which 'waste' has been characterised and theorised in studies drawn from the divestment, consumption and material culture literatures. I noted in particular how, since waste is culturally determined, the ways in which we act on, or towards, objects can move them out of the category of waste and either imbue them with new forms of value or release existing residual value. Drawing on recent work concerned with the ways in which waste is mobile, I discussed how the places in which

'waste' objects come to be situated determine the forms of (non-)value attributed to them. I also emphasised the lack of attention currently paid to the scope for individual agency to respond to dominant cultural norms associated with waste, particularly in light of institutional power structures which strongly influence consumer cultural norms.

Research Questions

Where, then, does this review point towards in terms of framing questions – and providing a means of answering them – in response to the starting point outlined in Chapter One?

Before it is possible to harness young people's potential power as change agents for more sustainable consumption there is evidently more to understand about the nature of their present modes of consumption – including the ways in which that consumption might be characterised as 'wasteful'. In particular, there is much to explore in terms of the socio-cultural structures that maintain current youth consumption norms before these can be 'unpicked' and more environmentally sustainable alternatives promoted. The review of the literature presented here has made clear the utility of a focus on divestment as a means of exploring everyday consumption away from the distraction of the spectacle of acquisition – a much-needed antidote to the preoccupations of most recent studies. As such, my first research question is:

What can we learn about young people's consumption by studying how and why they engage in divestment?

In order to connect the responses to this question with the starting point of this project and offer a meaningful contribution to current sustainability debates and initiatives, I pose a second question which is:

What might we learn from this to inform the ways in which young people are positioned in attempts to promote more sustainable consumption?

In the following chapter I outline my chosen methodology for addressing these questions.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY: TALKING RUBBISH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

“... people cannot but reveal themselves when talking about the objects in their lives.”

(Lunt and Livingstone 1992: 70)

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce my research methodology. I begin in section 3.2 by introducing grounded theory as an approach to gathering and analysing qualitative data which has informed my methods in this study. In section 3.3 I outline the choices I made about the location of my fieldwork and the sampling of my participants, the processes of making contact with the institutions through which I recruited volunteers, and how I structured the data-gathering process. I follow this in section 3.4 with an overview of the features of my chosen qualitative techniques that recommend them for a study of this kind, and reflect on some of the particular considerations involved in conducting research with young people. In the latter sections I offer a summary of how things worked in the field and details of my analysis procedures (3.5) before introducing the structure of the three empirical chapters in which that analysis is presented (3.6).

First, having opted for a qualitative methodology, it is worth noting briefly at the outset what qualitative techniques offer that made them particularly suited to my concerns in this study. The primary objective of my fieldwork was to understand how my participants' acts of divestment reflected their attitudes to the consumption of possessions. In particular, I sought to explore their understanding – or perhaps more accurately, their attempts at sense-making – of this relationship. How did they make sense of their decisions about the keeping or ridding of their possessions? What did they feel they achieved through these actions? In order to access – and facilitate – this interpretive mode of knowledge construction, it was necessary to employ a methodological approach which granted participants space for reflection as well as the freedom to draw on reference points from across their own lived experience as a means of expressing themselves.

Qualitative methodologies have been embraced in studies of consumption – including divestment – precisely because of their capacity to accommodate reflection, self-interpretation, and means of exploring and articulating superficially mundane events (such as ridding) which are often characterised by routine, irrationality, contradiction and a ‘messiness’ which necessitates talking around a subject in order to give shape and meaning to its content (Clifford and Valentine 2003; Gregson et al. 2007a). As Chapter Two made clear, relationships with material possessions are rarely clear-cut, decisions about them infrequently straight-forward, and processes of divestment generally far from objective or linear; thus their exploration is necessarily ‘messy’.

Qualitative techniques also acknowledge the fact that the subjective experiences which tend to be their focus are constructed at the intersection of multiple processes, including social pressures, cultural influences and economic circumstances (Limb and Dwyer 2001). Figure 2.1 (Chapter Two) illustrated the location of young people’s consumption at the nexus of such forces and, as such, employing research techniques capable of accessing subjective responses to these has been a fundamental consideration in devising the methodology for this study. Further, since the processes of divestment can be characterised by strong emotions, the capacity of qualitative techniques to explore these dimensions of individuals’ relationships with material things recommends them for my attempt to understand how an individual’s changing feelings about an object might prompt its disposal (Davies and Dwyer 2007).

Before proceeding to the practicalities of my project, I first outline my motivations for adopting an approach based in (although not fully wedded to) grounded theory. After a concise overview of the emergence and development of grounded theory, I discuss what it offers my study in terms of analytical techniques which amplify the benefits of qualitative research techniques and facilitate the development of a broad evidence base from which to derive answers to my research questions.

3.2 A Grounded Theoretical Approach to Youth Consumption

“A major intent of grounded theory strategy is to systematically seek the full range of variation in the phenomenon under scrutiny.”

(Corbin and Strauss 1990: 423)

In the broadest terms, grounded theory is premised on a move away from deductive impositions towards inductive analysis in which theory emerges from, rather than is sought out in, qualitative data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006). The theory suggests that close reading of the data will make apparent the most important phenomena, and only at this point can the researcher begin to link those phenomena to build a theory that accurately describes real life events (La Rossa 2005). The focus is on the conditions that give rise to the phenomena that emerge, how actors respond to those conditions through their actions (or inactions), as well as how and why varied consequences result (Corbin and Strauss 1990). In short, grounded theory involves being open to where the data leads, even when that involves following it to unexpected places.

Geographers have employed key ideas from grounded theory for many years in their use of qualitative methods and interpretive analysis (Crang et al. 1997; Dwyer and Limb 2001). Whilst the commitment to building empirically-informed theory which underpins this usage is one with which I align my own work, my aim in this study has been to go beyond merely accepting this foundation as suitable and valid. Rather, I wanted to engage with grounded theory more explicitly precisely because of its concern with opening up the field of enquiry to multiple possible new directions and theorisations – something urgently required in youth consumption research.

Grounded theory emerged in response to Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's view that much research (within their own discipline of sociology) had become focused on testing the ideas of long-established social theorists, rather than theorising anew with reference to contemporary phenomena, and they felt that this obstructed the appreciation and understanding of the complexities of social life. Originally characterised by narrow, systematic guidelines on how to conduct grounded theoretical research (Glaser and Strauss 1967), grounded theory has since developed in ways that have allowed some of its original prescriptive constraints to be cast off (Charmaz 2006; Bryant and Charmaz 2010), such that researchers have been able to respond to Glaser and Strauss's invitation to use their strategies flexibly to suit their own ends. Indeed, there are many ways of employing a grounded theory approach in practice, and "as long as these [core] principles are kept in mind, the details of the procedure can be modified to suit a researcher's needs" (La Rossa 2005: 840, original emphasis) according to the overall aims and themes of the study (see also Corbin and Strauss 1990).

Grounded theory has not explicitly been employed in the consumption or divestment literatures reviewed in Chapter Two; yet its central tenets (such as building flexibility into the data gathering such that new leads can be followed; Corbin and Strauss 1990; Charmaz 2006) overlap in many respects with the rationales for the qualitative methodologies employed in much recent consumption and divestment research. Nearly two decades ago Miller (1995) called for a grounded form of consumption scholarship as a means of countering the myth of consumerism. More recently, Woodward (2001) has suggested that, still, many studies of consumption fail to leave room for subtleties associated with the emotions and anxieties of consumption to emerge. Further, some recent studies aiming to refine theorisations of waste have demonstrated that deductive approaches can inhibit the emergence of more nuanced findings, thus obscuring the socio-cultural processes at work (e.g. Lepawsky and Mather 2011).²⁹ On this basis, grounded theory appears to offer a means of exploring contemporary consumption issues in a way that avoids inadvertent corroboration of popular ideas through lack of nuance.

In addition, grounded theory is equally beneficial for research with youth. Since much of my critique of the extant youth consumption literature is based on many studies' apparent quest to confirm disciplinary worldview-led suppositions, my aim with my methodology has been, as far as is possible and practical, to leave any such tendencies at the door.³⁰ While I discuss the particularities of researching with youth in more detail in section 3.4.3, the fact that grounded theory is explicitly data-led means that young participants' views, expertise, expressions and attempts at sense-making are given priority over any prior expectations or ideas the researcher might bring to the research encounter. In this way their contributions are accorded a high level of significance and it is their version of events that comes to define the theorisation that results.

Since one of the aims of this study has been to understand young people's sense-making of their consumption (such that it could be reshaped in more sustainable form), my

²⁹ This is not to deny that there is a place for theory- or hypothesis-testing approaches; merely that they constrain potential findings in ways that should be acknowledged.

³⁰ It should be acknowledged that there is, inevitably, a limit to the extent to which even the most reflexive researcher can dispense with all of the preoccupations they might bring to a research encounter. Evans (2007), for instance, notes that in practice it is impossible to 'leave at the door' ones theoretical preoccupations and that, in reality, grounded theory generally involves moving between one's data and one's ideas in order to find a coherent and theoretically robust settling place between the two.

participants' required freedom to draw on a wide range of social, cultural, economic, environmental, political and personal references, rather than being limited by any preliminary ideas on my part as to what their dominant concerns might be. In this respect, the focus within grounded theory on the structural conditions of phenomena closely corresponds with my aim to attend to the missing contextual drivers of young people's consumption. Indeed, Corbin and Strauss (1990) are clear that the structural conditions within which the phenomena under investigation are situated must form part of the analysis – and thus the resultant theorisation.

Although my enquiry is underpinned by interest in one particular conceptual theme – the notion of waste – this interest has not directly structured the ways in which I have sought to explore it. Rather, following the principles of grounded theory, my research encounters have been open to the emergence of a range of topics. Only after synthesising the key findings was the analysis brought into dialogue with the theorisations of waste discussed in Chapter Two in an attempt to articulate the nature of waste in the consumption/divestment contexts which characterise my participants' lives.

In summary, a grounded theory approach promotes an open and flexible data-gathering process and encourages the emergence of subtleties within that data which might otherwise be obscured by attempts to substantiate existing theoretical ideas. Its systematic approach and inductive method of analysis, coupled with the building of theory from the data up, reflect its analytical rigour. In subsequent sections of this chapter I return to some of the key tenets of grounded theory in order to illustrate the ways in which I have drawn on its techniques throughout my methodology, particularly in the context of organising and making sense of my data. I move now to the fieldwork, beginning with details of the location and sample selection of my study.

3.3 Researching Where? And With Whom?

3.3.1 Location

Teenagers are everywhere: every high street, street corner, park and leisure complex. (At least, so it sometimes seems.) This ubiquity of contemporary adolescence/adolescents granted me considerable liberty in deciding where to locate my study. The deciding factor thus became one of straight-forward practicalities. Where could I get access to a

diverse range of young people who might be willing to talk to me about the mundane matter of what they throw away? Having worked in the youth sector in the past, both as a volunteer and as a researcher, I felt that the topics on which I wanted to engage young people might not have been an easy fit with the aims and activities of most youth groups. I had already had experience of attempting (and failing) to generate enthusiasm for activities amongst young people who were reluctant to be enthused, and I sensed “tell me about what you’ve thrown away recently” would be a hard sell in this context.

Instead, I wanted to find volunteers who would self-select based on finding some element of my project that engaged a particular interest or set of opinions they wanted to share. On this basis I opted to recruit my volunteers through schools, since, out of a school assembly of around 200 pupils, I felt confident that there would be some sufficiently interested as to offer two hours of their time. Having decided that schools would be my focus, it was then necessary to choose which schools. Whilst those close to my place of work (London) and those in which I was educated myself (South Manchester/Cheshire) were considered, my view was that those in my current home city (Cambridge) would offer sufficient socio-economic diversity in the sample, and, on a pragmatic level, be easiest to co-ordinate and manage logistically.

A small city of just over 120,000 residents in 2011, with approximately 18% of those coming from an ethnic minority background (ONS 2011), Cambridge has a large student population, even excluding the two universities. Within the city of Cambridge itself, seventeen schools and colleges ranging from private boarding schools to state colleges cater for students aged 11-18 studying for a variety of academic and vocational qualifications (Appendix A). These schools and colleges serve young people from far beyond the city of Cambridge, with some students travelling from up to forty miles away. This variety of educational establishments was important as I was keen to recruit a cross-section of young people, from those who, until shortly before the start of my study, were eligible for the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), to those attending fee-paying schools.

3.3.2 Sample

My preoccupation with achieving a diverse sample was based more on my desire to engage students from a wide variety of backgrounds characterised (potentially) by

different sets of values and priorities related to consumption than on assumptions about students' personal financial resources based on the type of school they attended (which could well have been misplaced).

Whilst in the early stages of this project I had considered focusing on a more narrowly-defined group (only girls, for example), on reflection I felt that doing so would undermine my aim to 'open up' young people's consumption in the broadest possible terms, and that this would ultimately constrain my ability to speak back to sustainability practitioners with some useful – broadly applicable – findings. Furthermore, I felt that selecting one sub-group of young people over others was to implicitly assume some kind of similarity amongst that group (and, thus, difference from those external to that group) when, in fact, there was no reason to expect girls' ways of doing divestment to be in way different from that of boys (for example). In short, it felt more meaningful to create a broad 'benchmark' based on a diverse sample than to produce a very specific case study, which would have told only a partial story about the consumption of that narrowly-defined group. This is not to say that opting for diversity over specificity offered the breadth I was seeking unproblematically. Attempting too great a breadth ran the risk of producing findings with little cohesion – how coherent could an account be which took the experiences of young people whose lives were potentially so fundamentally different and attempted to locate and weave together common threads?

In light of this, it was necessary to identify a group which shared some broad traits but was still characterised by diversity. Having already established that schools offered a convenient means of approaching large numbers of teenagers in order to elicit interest in my project, a second benefit of working through this 'gateway' was the fact that students would be united by a broadly similar socio-economic background (i.e. middle class; few occupying the very highest or lowest economic strata³¹) yet extremely diverse in terms of gender, ethnic background, cultural beliefs, and various other social identity markers.³²

³¹ Research with these groups would demand an approach to exploring their consumption that fully engages with their unique demands, challenges and opportunities. In the interest of achieving a coherent and broadly (although by no means universally) applicable set of findings, I chose to focus my attention on the increasingly diverse middle class.

³² It is important to acknowledge an assumption on my part about the willingness of young people who remain in formal education to engage with a project like mine. Ultimately, my concern was to gather sufficient useful data and thus my anticipation of some degree of enthusiasm amongst

The category 'middle class' has become increasingly broad in scope in terms of the income distribution and class cultural practices it describes. As such, not only would it have been ethically and epistemologically problematic to make assumptions about 'typical' middle class attitudes amongst my sample group, doing so would have been very difficult in light of the diversity within 'middle class' consumption practice. Further, although all of my participants stated that they possessed the financial means to fulfil their consumption needs, along with at least some of their wants (either through self-earned money or money given by parents, e.g. as an allowance), some possessed a level of disposable income (usually the result of part-time employment) which permitted consumption opportunities that might be considered atypical in the context of the socio-economic circumstances of their families.

I therefore concur with Sweeting et al.'s (2012) view that ideas about class, or even socio-economic grouping as a more specific social designator, are not necessarily a reliable indicator of the nature or extent of young people's consumption, or the attitudes which underpin their actions. This is not to say that class does not matter in this context; rather that, since the notion of 'middle class' encapsulates a broadening range of socio-economic circumstances and cultural practices, those occupying this grouping should be viewed as able to offer a particularly diverse set of experiences and opinions.³³ In a project such as mine, which is concerned with providing a 'benchmark' study of an as-yet-unresearched area of young people's lives, and seeking findings that, to some extent, are generalisable for non-academic (i.e. policy and third sector) audiences, the breadth within this 'class' grouping is a benefit.

The final choice to be made in defining my sample was that of the age of the students with whom I wanted to work. My selection of 16-19 year olds was based, primarily, on the nature of this phase of adolescence as one of immense personal change – physically and emotionally – and I sensed (from dimly remembered personal experience as well as a more general understanding of adolescence) that the repercussions of this were highly likely to be evident in the material culture of this group. The later teenage years represent the beginning of greater freedom in many respects – more autonomy but also the added weight of more responsibility and living with the outcomes of one's choices. It is also potentially a time of great upheaval – often leaving school, leaving friends and

young people choosing to remain in formal education was a factor in my selection of schools and colleges as the 'gateway' to a group of volunteers.

³³ For example, in her series of studies into Dutch children's consumption, Kopnina (2013) began with middle class families before broadening out to engage other socio-economic groups.

starting out in new places with new people. This phase may last only a couple of years before being repeated as compulsory education ends and university, college or employment beckons. These factors mark out these years as a time when relationships with one's material possessions are often reconsidered as external factors signal times of change. The end of compulsory education in particular is often an opportune time for young people literally to take stock.

I had thus defined a sample based on diversity within a broader, unifying socio-economic grouping; a 'gateway' through which to access volunteers, based at least partially on my imaginings of receptiveness in this setting; and a geographical location for my study, based on the practicalities of managing a complex and tightly-packed interview schedule.

3.3.3 Making Contact: 3 x assemblies (+ 10 minute pitch) = 40 sign-ups

Of the seventeen schools and colleges in Cambridge city, twelve offer post-16 education, including A-Levels, the International Baccalaureate, NVQs and GCSE re-sits. Aware from the start that the mere existence of so many educational establishments was no guarantee of gaining access to their students, at the outset of my fieldwork I began by approaching two very different institutions: The Netherhall School, a state co-educational comprehensive with its own sixth form centre for around 200 students, and the Cambridge Centre for Sixth Form Studies (CCSS), a small independent co-educational sixth form college, again serving around 200 students (Figure 3.1; Appendix B).

Approaches were made in June 2010, on the basis that introducing myself and my project well in advance (with a view to beginning interviews in the autumn of 2010) would allow plenty of time for consultation and logistical organisation. I received a warm response from both and, after the necessary hiatus of the summer holidays (as well as a frustrating beginning of term when my attempts to resume our conversations seemed to be coming to nothing), I was invited into each school to speak at a sixth form assembly in September. Granted only a ten minute slot in the midst of other visiting speakers and school notices, I gave an elevator pitch synopsis of my project, outlining why I was inviting students to volunteer and what they might gain from the

experience.³⁴ Having prepared a sign-up sheet in advance, I asked interested students to add their names and email addresses, and I informed them that I would follow up individually with them in a day or two. At this stage I also issued one-page information sheets about the project (Appendix C) so that potential volunteers had further information on which to base their decision as to whether or not to participate.

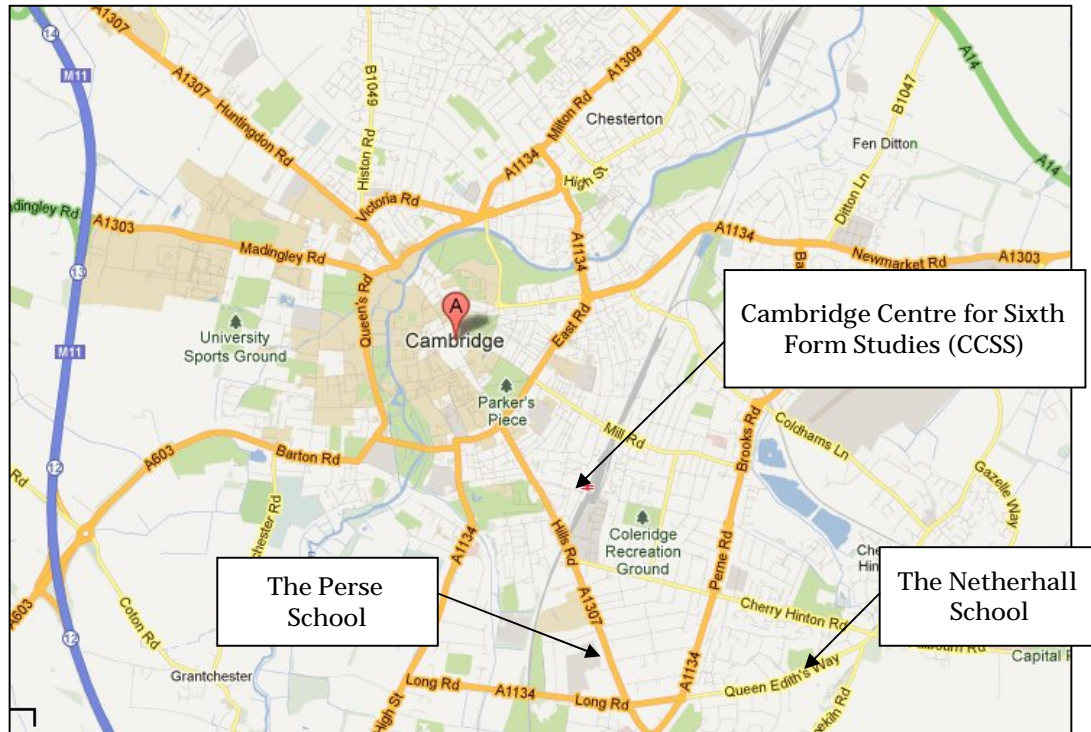


Figure 3.1 Location of fieldwork sites

The responses from each group varied. One student (from an audience of around 70) came forward from CCSS. Twenty-two from Netherhall volunteered (from an audience of around 90), with fourteen of those actually going on to participate. To me the reasons for this stark difference were clear. My contacts at CCSS insisted on acting as intermediaries between me and their students' expressions of interest (students had to express interest to the Deputy Head first, who then passed students' details onto me),

³⁴ This pitch focused on my interest in young people's relationships with their possessions, rather than emphasising my concern with sustainability, since I was aware that presenting my study as environmentally-focused might attract only those students who considered themselves to be actively pro-environmental in their actions, and/or cause volunteers to present an uncharacteristically 'green' self. Instead, I described my project as focused on the 'stuff' of everyday adolescent life and referred to issues of design, production, the economy, social life and culture, as well as alluding briefly to ideas about ridding and non-use. Whilst, inevitably, individuals who self-select for a research project will do so because they feel they have something to say on a particular topic, my attempt to connect with students through a wide range of potential interests was a strategy aimed at eliciting a wide range of perspectives.

whereas Netherhall students were free to sign up themselves immediately after the assembly.

In the moment of frustration experienced at the beginning of September (2010), when my previously enthusiastic contacts were proving elusive, my anxiety led me to make contact with two further schools. The first was Hills Road Sixth Form College, a large state sixth form college catering for over 1,800 students, and the second was The Perse School, an independent boys' school with a co-educational sixth form of around 300. While, again, the response from Hills Road was friendly and helpful, its nature as a large sixth form college meant that was no obvious opportunity for me to address large groups of students together in an assembly-like setting. Subject leaders in geography and sociology forwarded copies of my information sheets to their students but I was not invited in to speak. The Perse School, however, like Netherhall, invited me to speak at a sixth form assembly and were happy for me to ask for expressions of interest there and then. At the end of my talk, 17 students signed up and a further eight took information sheets saying they would think about it. In the end, eleven students from The Perse School participated.

In total, I recruited twenty-six participants in a period of little more than four weeks.³⁵ This was an adequate sample (having aimed for between twenty-five and thirty) and so I was able to put any further recruitment efforts on hold and begin the process of gathering data.³⁶ A participant summary is provided in Appendix D.

3.3.4 Making Space To Talk: Organising and Locating Interviews

Data collection commenced in October 2010 and was completed at the end of March 2011.

The students who had volunteered were contacted via email and we arranged to meet in one of their hour-long free periods during the school day. All interviews were

³⁵ The final group comprised six young men and twenty young women. Whilst I was frustrated that more of the young men who had expressed interest after my talk did not follow through and participate in the interviews, I have not been unduly concerned by the gender ratio. As discussed in section 3.3.2, at the outset of this study there was little basis on which to assume any significant difference in attitudes or behaviours between the genders in the context of the divestment of possessions. Had such a difference emerged, this would have been discussed in the context of my findings.

³⁶ I had originally envisaged having to conduct a second round of recruitment from other schools in January 2011. However, achieving a sample twenty-six, all of whom remained involved throughout the research process, meant that further recruitment proved unnecessary.

conducted on school premises³⁷ and the willingness of each school to accommodate this was extremely helpful.

Locating the fieldwork on school premises was not purely a matter of convenience, nor a response to the requests of school staff. The location of research encounters has been a matter of consideration in the social science methods literature for some time. In their research with young people, Anderson and Jones (2009), Bushin (2007) and Punch (2002a) have drawn attention to the potential influence of the research setting on the way in which participants engage with the project. For a study of young people's possessions, participants' homes might seem like the ideal location to conduct interviews. However, conversations with the participants in six scoping interviews conducted in Spring 2010³⁸ revealed that conducting research in young people's private spaces can be seen as too great an invasion of privacy (Valentine 1999b, citing Moore 1986; see also Woodward 2007). While conducting my interviews on school or college premises risked overtones of adult authoritarianism or the need to provide "correct" answers, these locations remained my participants' "turf" far more than mine. I felt they were likely to be more comfortable in this familiar setting than if they were asked to go to an unknown location. Furthermore, the fact that I was able to use 'common' areas in each school, as opposed to classrooms or staff offices, helped to ensure that the conversations were minimally impeded by associations with formal learning (Jones 2008).

Before commencing interviews with my volunteers, it was essential to acquire their informed consent to participate. Informed consent refers to the provision of sufficient information about a research project that potential participants are aware of its benefits and risks before they decide whether or not to participate (Davies 2008), as well as having sufficient information to decide whether or not the research is relevant and meaningful to them (Edwards and Alldred 1999). It is the first step in any social research since participants must understand what they are agreeing to and know that

³⁷ At Netherhall School interviews were conducted in a space called The Atrium, a large hallway with a cafe-style area for sixth form students to use in their free periods. At The Perse School, interviews were conducted in 'the UCAS room', a facility dedicated to resources for university applications but also used by some students as a quiet study space. Unlike these two schools, CCSS did not have comparable facilities or a student common room, so the two interviews conducted here took place in an empty classroom.

³⁸ Six hour-long scoping interviews were carried out in February-March 2010 with participants aged 17-18 recruited through personal networks. These interviews provided an opportunity to test some of the key questions and topics I intended to cover with the main cohort, while giving me time to reflect on how my questions were interpreted and responded to, as well as any gaps to which my interviewees' responses pointed.

they are able to withdraw at any time. Prior to beginning our first interview, my participants were provided with a copy of the study information sheet if they had not taken one when signing up (Appendix C; large copies were also provided for display in their tutor rooms in school) and an informed consent form (Appendix E). Valentine (1999b) has suggested that having young participants read and sign their own consent forms gives them a sense of control, autonomy, privacy and responsibility to make informed and safe choices. Since my participants were all aged 16 or above and therefore legally autonomous in a number of contexts³⁹, I was keen that they exercise this ability. However, as Valentine (1999b) emphasises, consent is not a one-off act and thus participants' willingness to continue with the project was re-elicited at each stage of the research.

Each participant was interviewed twice between October 2010 and March 2011. In between these interviews participants were invited to take part in a photo-documentary task which was used to inform conversation in the second interview.⁴⁰ Serial interviews tend to offer particularly rich data, not only through the volume of material generated through the length of time spent in conversation, but equally through the growing rapport that develops over time and the greater detail that is often shared by participants as they feel more comfortable (Seale 1998). Building rapport within and across interviews is not only fundamental to ethical research practice (section 3.4.3) it can also address the problem of participant perceptions of the 'right' way to 'do' an interview. Young people's personal experience of interview encounters is likely to be limited and often heavily based on observations of the media (Abell et al. 2006; Christensen 2004; Valentine 1999b). Further, the necessarily 'performative' nature of interviews (Latham 2003; Moisander et al. 2009) may obscure those aspects of the participants' experience with which the research aims to connect or result in interviewees saying what they believe the researcher wants to hear (Punch 2002a). An informal, conversational tone coupled with preliminary questions focused on everyday topics ("What did you do at the weekend?") frames the encounter as a 'chat' more than an interview as a young participant might perceive it.

³⁹ A full list of young people's legal rights from the age of 16 is summarised here by national youth charity ChildLine: <http://www.childline.org.uk/explore/crimelaw/pages/rights.aspx> (accessed 16.05.2013).

⁴⁰ While all six of my scoping interviewees expressed considerable discomfort about the idea of having a researcher in their private space, all were willing to document their possessions and some of the ways in which they manage them through a visual format such as photography.

The interviews in this study were semi-structured in order to maintain some focus on topics central to my enquiry, but granted the participants considerable scope to direct conversation towards topics or ideas they perceived as relevant. They were conducted one-to-one since it was important participants had the space to think and offer considered responses. I was also sensitive to the fact that discussing personal material possessions may involve private, sometimes emotional stories, the sharing of which may be discouraged by a group setting. Further, one-to-one interviews avoid the danger of peer influence, which can result in “social posturing and self-censoring” (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2006: 257), a particular danger for conversations concerned with possessions that may or may not be kept depending on personal responses to peer-promulgated youth cultural norms. Each interview was, with the permission of the participants, digitally recorded for later transcription. Notes were taken during the interviews but the recordings allowed me to more fully direct my attention to my participants.

Following the first interview, participants were invited to take part in a photo-documentary exercise, the aim of which was to document some of their possessions and some of the ways in which they manage those possessions through various forms of keeping and ridding. Participants were given a disposable film camera and a set of guidance notes (Appendix F) which included a reminder of the themes of the project and some suggestions as to how the camera might be used to capture relevant images, without directing them to specific objects or practices (Myers 2009).⁴¹ They were given two weeks in which to make use of the camera, after which I collected them from a ‘drop-off’ point at each school for processing. The photographs were used to direct conversation in the second round of interviews. Participants were given the opportunity to remove any that they did not wish to be used before the discussion commenced (Croghan et al. 2008; Myers 2009), although eliminating photos on the basis of their being “a bit blurry” or “not quite right” was discouraged since such issues did not detract from their content. This was particularly important since photographs

⁴¹ The irony of using disposable cameras in a study concerned with divestment and waste was not lost on me; however, they possess three key features which recommended them over participants’ own digital devices. First, they have a limited number of possible shots, which I hoped would encourage a degree of discrimination in choosing what sort of things to document. Second, they do not offer the multifarious functionality of digital cameras, thus avoiding unnecessary concern with composition. Third, it was hoped that the presence of the camera amongst their possessions would act as a reminder to engage with this part of the project.

not immediately noted for their relevant content could have been eliminated, thus risking never revealing stories they might otherwise have told (Hurdley 2007).

It is important to note that articulating – and accurately interpreting – actions and dispositions that are generally unreflexive, as is the case for many aspects of divestment, can be challenging. However, combining verbal and visual techniques means participants can construct their responses by drawing on personal history with a real, known, object. The benefits to be gained from employing photographs in conjunction with interviews in a study of young people’s divestment are manifold, and it is to a brief consideration of these that I now turn.

3.4 Talking With Pictures: Using Interviews and Photo-Elicitation to (Re)Construct Young People’s Divestment

Two qualitative research techniques were employed in the course of my fieldwork: interviews and photo-elicitation. It has been suggested that talking about things necessarily means talking about people (Gregson et al. 2007b; Lunt and Livingstone 1992; Woodward 2001). More specifically, talking about things is a way of understanding people’s relationship to those things. My aim, therefore, in talking with my participants about their things was to develop an understanding of the nature of their relationship with the material objects of consumption – and the ways in which they managed their possessions through processes of divestment was the conversational topic used to achieve this. Photo-elicitation is a natural counterpart to interviews since it simply involves “inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper 2002: 13), yet it can prompt the expression of ideas and experiences that interviews or visual analysis of photographs alone would not necessarily be able to uncover. Here I provide a concise overview of what these techniques offered my study, particularly how their juxtaposition permitted a level of reflexivity amongst my participants which made for especially rich data.

3.4.1 Interviews

Interviews have constituted one of the cornerstone qualitative techniques in consumption, material culture and divestment research, often as part of ethnographies (e.g. Albinsson and Perera 2009; Cherrier 2009; Dengri-Knott and Molesworth 2009;

Gregson et al. 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Marcoux 2001; Woodward 2001; Woodward 2007). Since research into these topics depends on understanding the subjectivities implicated in human interaction with material things, the potential offered by conversation to reveal what cannot otherwise be seen or heard (feelings, meanings, reasoning, opinions, etc.; see Johnson 2002; Seale 1998) particularly recommends them as a means of exploring the interactions between people and things.

It has been suggested that the reflective space offered by an interview encounter can be especially conducive to exploring subjects such as divestment, “where the knowledge sought is often taken for granted and not readily articulated” (Johnson 2002: 105). Indeed, for this reason interviews have been popular in studies of ‘ordinary’ or inconspicuous consumption as they provide a space to try out ways of articulating the difficult to describe, such that meanings associated with routine practices, such as ridding, are gradually revealed (Gram-Hanssen 2007; Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2004; Hitchings 2012; Hobson 2006; Shove et al. 2007). The reflective nature of interviews has equally been valuable in studies concerned with the relationship between young people’s consumption and personal identity narratives or life transitions (Croghan et al. 2008; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Russell and Tyler 2005), as they have allowed young participants to experiment with different ways of describing their experiences. Further, because of the freedom granted interviewees to draw on any contextual reference points relevant to the expression of their views, interviews are also well-suited to drawing out details of the socio-cultural context in which the events reported are situated (Moisander et al. 2009). This is particularly important in light of the scant attention to these factors in extant youth consumption research.

The discursive nature of interviews is also one of this technique’s strengths. Words used in different contexts in the course of explanations can present opportunities for different meanings associated with the same object, event or process to emerge; for instance, alternative meanings of what ‘getting rid’ involves, or what constitutes being ‘wasteful’. Granting participants the chance to use their own words and reference points is especially critical in studies with youth: first, because it allows young participants to retain some control over the information they contribute, and because it acknowledges their competence to verbally articulate their views and experiences (Bushin 2007; Eder and Fingerson 2002; Punch 2002b); second, because they may employ key words or phrases that are either particularly evocative or illustrative of the

subject being discussed, or representative of a specific youth cultural discourse; and third, because doing so allows them to direct the interview encounter towards themes of significance to them (Croghan et al. 2008), themes that a researcher might otherwise overlook. This was made particularly evident in the scoping interviews, in which my interviewees at times directed our conversations towards facets of consumption that I had imagined to be less significant. Allowing individual interviews, as well as the series of interviews as a whole, to be led by participants' interests is a fundamental tenet of a grounded theory-informed approach, since the primary objective is to allow the issues of greatest relevance to the participants to direct the scope and focus of the analysis.

Lastly, interviews can also reveal how everyday events and the ways in which we talk about them are fundamental to how we then make sense of those events and, in turn, perpetuate the practices and ideas that constitute them. In the cases of my participants, I was interested to see, for example, how the ways in which they talked about their repeated use of certain methods of ridding helped to construct views that these were the 'best' or 'most appropriate' means of divesting successfully.

There is evidently much to recommend interviews as a means of exploring the whys and wherefores of young people's consumption, even those aspects that are habitual, mundane and might, as a result, be assumed to be hard to articulate. Inevitably, though, there were topics that I anticipated would be difficult to explore using only verbal means, predominantly the most habitual (and thus unreflexive) facets of divestment – binning, and keeping unwanted objects through complacency rather than intention. It was for these topics in particular that the incorporation of additional stimuli – photographs – presented a means of eliciting closer reflection from my participants.

3.4.2 Photo-elicitation

Woodward (2001) has noted the utility of 'talking with' objects when attempting to express complex ideas about human relationships with the material world, particularly the ways in which objects are valued (or not). Most research into household consumption and divestment has used ethnographic approaches in order to facilitate this; 'talking with' objects is easy when the research encounter is surrounded by those objects in the space of the home. However, this approach was not feasible for my study for two main reasons. First, having asked my scoping interview participants how they

would feel about talking to a researcher in their home about their possessions, the response I received was unanimously one of caution, suspicion and visible nervousness. None said that they would feel comfortable with such an arrangement, even with a researcher they knew well. This feedback was enough to convince me that attempting an ethnographic element to my project would, at best, be small-scale and probably only partially successful as a result of participant discomfort in the process (a clearly unethical approach to research!), and at worst, would be an abject failure through lack of willing volunteers. Second, even if there had been enthusiasm from participants, their parents constituted a second round of gatekeepers through which to navigate and there was no guarantee of their support (Lewis 2009). Even if they had been willing to invite me into their home, conducting research in a family context inevitably opens the door to interruptions and interjections from parents and siblings (Nilsen and Rogers 2005; Punch 2007), which is not only disruptive to the interview encounter but potentially undermines the participants' contributions to the study.

Ethnography was thus problematic on several fronts. Photo-elicitation, however, offered a useful means of bridging the gap by inviting participants to photograph a range of their possessions in context, as well as some of the ways in which they divest themselves of those which are unwanted. The fact that my participants could choose what to reveal to me and what to keep hidden alleviated any anxiety about having their world fully exposed by the physical presence of an unwelcome researcher.

The term 'photo-elicitation' has been used to describe the use of photographs taken by a researcher, the participant, or a known or unknown third party. In my study I employed a form based on auto-photography, i.e. photographs taken by the participants themselves (Dodman 2003; Emmison and Smith 2001; Johnsen et al. 2008; Ziller 1990). This approach has been employed by others researching with young people for whom ethnography has been neither possible nor desirable (Guillemin and Drew 2010; Lachal et al. 2012; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2006; Young and Barratt 2001), and contributes to the growth of visual methods in research with young people based on their participatory potential.

Within the field of youth consumption photo-elicitation has been successfully used with teens, with participants documenting the objects and places of significance in their lives and talking around them in interviews (Croghan et al. 2008; Russell and Tyler 2005). However, the relative ease of conducting ethnographies with adult participants on topics related to consumption has meant that photographic techniques in

geographical studies of consumption have been rare.⁴² Although photo-elicitation has only relatively recently been embraced as a fruitful research method within human geography more broadly, it has been employed effectively in research with children and young people (Dodman 2003; Newman et al. 2006; Young and Barratt 2001) and geographies concerned with various forms of vulnerability such as illness and homelessness, where it has proved useful in soliciting talk around subject matter that can be difficult to articulate (Johnsen et al. 2008; Myers 2009; Thomas 2007). Photographs have also been used by geographers to explore experiences and performances of everyday life (Dodman 2003; Latham 2003; Latham and McCormack 2009) as a way of documenting the places, objects and interactions that structure everyday practices.

Thus photo-elicitation possessed a number of characteristics which recommended it for my study of young people's consumption. First, and as noted above, photographs act as a tool which can help elicit comments on subject matter that can be difficult to articulate without a reference point. Second, it offered a means of bridging the gap between the interview setting and the material context of my participants' consumption. It presented me with a window into their world, through which I could connect their comments to real objects, people and places, and as a result of which new questions readily emerged. Thus these external stimuli prompted elaboration on participants' past responses (Punch 2002a), unearthed forgotten stories (Croghan et al. 2008; Myers 2009), and sometimes directed the conversation into unanticipated new territory (Mannay 2010). Crucially, in light of the need for a degree of self-interpretation and reflexivity on the part of my participants, the imposition of the camera lens created a critical distance between them and their possessions. The resultant 'de-familiarization' of the familiar (Mannay 2010; Van Leeuwen 1999) prompted reflection on routine, habitual processes or placings of possessions which, while sometimes accessible through speech alone, are more vividly revealed and more closely analysed in the presence of a photographic 'mirror' of one's actions.

The final aspect of photo-elicitation to which I want to draw attention is arguably the most important in light of my aims in this project. In their study of UK teens' consumption Croghan et al. (2008: 353) suggest that photo-elicitation, "allowed participants to show aspects of themselves which sat uneasily with stereotypical

⁴² The exception to this is when photography is used to capture aspects of an ethnographic research site as either an aide memoire or as a means of illustrating analysis.

notions of adolescence”. In other words, it gave their participants the opportunity to present a view of themselves that challenged widely-held perceptions about adolescent attitudes and behaviours. Being able to clarify, amend, downplay or emphasise the self-representations captured in their pictures in order to provide, from their perspective, an authentic portrayal of their relationships with their possessions allowed my participants the opportunity to challenge the dominant image of young people’s consumption by presenting them with the means to articulate experiences that contest extant assumptions.

In sum, the exploratory, cumulative knowledge-building nature of interviews combined with the focus and critical distance provided by photo-elicitation provided me with the means to construct with my participants a detailed, nuanced understanding of how and why they divested themselves of possessions. Part of the popularity of methods such as these has resulted from the recognition that the knowledge that results is inevitably co-constructed by the researcher and participant (Davies and Dwyer 2007; Holstein and Gubrium 2004; McCormack 2004). This collaborative approach fosters the sense of rapport and reciprocity that has been identified as central to the most productive research exchanges with young people (Eder and Fingerson 2002; Miller and Glassner 2004), where building their confidence in their ability to contribute useful information is essential. I move now to elaborate on why constructing knowledge with my participants was an important consideration in this project, and I discuss this in the context of a broader set of issues pertinent to researching with young people.

3.4.3 Young-Person-Centred Research

Since the early 1990s there has been growing recognition of the importance of researching with young people, rather than conducting research on them (Alderson 1995; Matthews et al. 1998; Valentine 1999b). This is based firstly on acknowledgement that young people are – and should be recognised as – mutual collaborators (alongside researchers) in the process of knowledge construction, and, secondly, that data gathered on this basis is likely to be richer and thus more informative than that which treats young participants as subjects from which information is merely to be extracted. The shift from ‘conducting research on’ to ‘conducting research with’ recognised young people’s distinct ways of seeing the world (described by Frønes (1994) and Matthews et al. (1998) in terms of ‘different cultures’; see also Holloway and Valentine (2000);

Valentine (1999b); Valentine et al. (1998)) and precipitated the development of methodologies aiming to put young people's capabilities (acknowledged to be different from although in no way lesser than those of adults) at their centre (Eder and Fingerson 2002; Punch 2002b).

As older adolescents (aged 16-19) my participants possessed 'adult' capabilities in many respects, especially in terms of their verbal communication skills.⁴³ Yet as teenagers they were in possession of distinct views characteristic of their life experience to date, their position in the life course, and their proximity to (and often participation in) contemporary youth culture(s). It was therefore necessary to adopt techniques that worked with their young adult capabilities whilst acknowledging the likelihood of variation in the ways these were expressed. Having framed my participants as 'young adults', I felt that to adopt research techniques that emphasised the 'young' over the 'adult' (as do many creative, interactive methods popular in research with younger teens) and thus make assumptions about their capabilities would be patronising and, quite rightly, probably met with the sort of suspicion and resistance that would quash subsequent attempts at building rapport. Rather, I felt that they were more likely to engage with my questions having had their ability to articulate their experiences recognised. As Punch (2002b: 54) notes, "[T]he challenge is to strike a balance between not patronising young people and recognising their competencies but maintaining their interest and keeping the research familiar and relevant to them." On this basis my focus was, first, on emphasising the value of whatever they had to say, and second, on ensuring my enquiry was framed through concerns to which they could easily relate (such as the pleasure of novelty, attitudes towards fashion and the latest smartphone functionality).

In addition to responding to their youthful capabilities, being sensitive to the fact that my participants were young adults required – and ensured – attentiveness to the balance of power in our interactions, something that Punch (2002a) has suggested is often inadequately addressed in studies that emphasise the closeness of young people's and adults' competencies. Failure to acknowledge the power imbalance inherent in any research encounter can not only impact negatively on the data quality (and, potentially, quantity) as a result of poor rapport and lack of confidence on the part of the participant, there are clear ethical repercussions in terms of participants' comfort, engagement in, and enjoyment of the research process (Punch 2007b). As such,

⁴³ The fact that they were all A-level students in mainstream schools substantiates this.

throughout the fieldwork I aimed to be mindful of the multiple factors that would potentially inhibit a power-balanced research encounter.⁴⁴ At the same time, I remained aware that my participants held powerful positions of their own; I needed their input to build knowledge about a specific aspect of their lives.

Power relations in a research setting constitutes just one part of the broader topic of research ethics with young participants, which has received considerable attention over the last two decades (e.g. Alderson and Morrow 2004; Matthews et al. 1998; Valentine 1999b). In part this has concerned issues of safety (for both researcher and participant) as well as ideas about good research practice more broadly (such as the comfort of participants throughout the research process). Mostly, attention has focused on the extent to which research techniques employed with young people are suited to their competencies and maximise their ownership over their contributions to the knowledge constructed through their participation. In the context of my study, ethical issues around safety were addressed unproblematically with school gatekeepers, since they were equally concerned with this and were keen to provide me with an interview space that balanced the need for quiet and a degree of privacy with the security of having others close by. Beyond this, since, as discussed above, I viewed my participants as competent young adults capable of engaging (as adults) with my chosen research techniques, my main focus in terms of ethical practice was centred on rebalancing the power in the research encounter such that they felt comfortable enough to speak freely.⁴⁵

Maintaining awareness of the shifting power in research encounters requires ongoing reflexivity on the part of the researcher. In good research practice this reflexivity extends throughout the research process. I attempted to be mindful throughout this project of the views, values and assumptions I hold, particularly the ways in which these inform and are informed by my own consumption practices (see Cherry et al. 2011), and in turn, the ways in which these might have shaped my actions, especially my interpretations of my participants' comments (Butler 2001). Yet here, too, there is need

⁴⁴ These factors include my age (c.10-12 years older than my participants); my far longer experience of formal education at higher levels than they have yet undertaken; my intimate knowledge of the themes of my research, as well as the aims of the project and how my research techniques work and were structured; my association with the authoritarian power structures of school/college (since this was the route through which I recruited volunteers); and, finally, the fact that the power rested with me to grant confidentiality and anonymity.

⁴⁵ The ethical implications of this project were considered in detail prior to commencing fieldwork and the project was granted clearance by the UCL Ethics Committee (project reference number 2441/001).

to be pragmatic about one's own practice. It has been suggested that taking an overly reflexive stance on one's work amounts to little more than "self indulgent navel gazing" (Ley and Mountz 2001: 245) and that, in reality, it simply is not possible for the researcher to be wholly reflexive as our roles, identities and subjectivities are constantly shifting (see also Dwyer and Limb 2001). Thus Holt argues that, "[I]t is useful for researchers to admit the partiality of both their accounts and self-knowledge" (2004: 15).

The account of young people's consumption presented in this thesis is inevitably partial, despite my concern with capturing a diverse set of experiences. It presents one perspective on what consumption means and involves for one group of young people, and the analytical framings are based on my personal interpretations of and responses to extant research. The interpretive emphasis shared by grounded approaches and qualitative social research more broadly acknowledges that the findings that result from such enquiries are situated in a particular context and constructed through a particular set of interests and dispositions (Charmaz 2006). Nevertheless, the situatedness of research does not negate its utility in speaking back to the issues which informed it. Indeed, and as I demonstrate in subsequent chapters, the specificities of one case can illuminate much broader issues – here, for instance, concerned with barriers to young people's ability to be agents of change – from which both novel theorisations or practical actions can develop.

In the penultimate section of this chapter, I discuss how my fieldwork played out in practice before giving an overview of how the data, once collected, were organised and analysed.

3.5 Gathering Data... Then Making It All Make Sense

3.5.1 Data Collection

Data was collected over a period of six months, from October 2010 to March 2011. Working within the confines of the school day, school term and school premises required two intense periods of data collection, first in the autumn term (the first round of interviews), then the spring term (second interviews). Methodological writing has rarely reflected on the time constraints that shape the nature and extent of data collection, yet it is a facet of fieldwork negotiated by almost all researchers (Clifford

and Valentine 2003). In my project it was necessary to reconcile the constraints of working through schools⁴⁶ with my desire to follow a grounded theory approach requiring open-ended data collection until the emerging themes were 'saturated', i.e. no new themes emerged from new conversations.⁴⁷ Doing so necessitated structuring the interviews around a small number of core themes (Appendix G), thus anchoring the data around key topics in order to encourage 'saturation' whilst granting participants' freedom to do so using, literally, their own terms. In practice, this seemed to work well. Having concentrated my questions around drivers of divestment, processes of ridding, and reflections on the implications of divestment, my participants drew on varied personal experiences to offer their perspectives on each topic. Whilst 'saturation' was not always reached, a wealth of data was achieved sufficient for a detailed and nuanced analysis.

The participants generally engaged enthusiastically with both the interviews and the photography task. The interviews were scheduled to take place in hour-long free periods. As a result, the majority lasted around 55 minutes. A small number of particularly enthusiastic participants were willing to continue talking into a second free period, resulting in some interviews lasting 60-70 minutes and one around 90 minutes. Most of the young people had a great deal to say and were forthright in their modes of expression. A small number were more reserved and conversation with these individuals flowed less easily, although they still contributed interesting perspectives. The locations of the interviews generally worked well, although there were occasions when the presence of other students constituted a distraction. On two occasions, members of teaching staff intervened in order to reduce background noise from students by asking them to lower their voices or move elsewhere.

It should be noted that there were, inevitably, some topics that were so habitual and mundane (for example ridding by binning) that achieving detailed insights into their manifestations through conversation alone was difficult, even when augmented with photographs. All participants were able to comment to some extent on the most

⁴⁶ In addition to having limited opportunities during the school day to speak with participants (as dictated by their free periods), I was acutely aware that, as A-Level and AS-Level students with exams from May onwards, it was likely that my presence in school after the Easter break might have been an unwelcome distraction. As such I was committed to ensuring my data collection was completed before Easter.

⁴⁷ Grounded theory aims to sample instances of phenomena, rather than individuals, thus necessitating an open-ended approach. However, the assumption of limitless time and resources for the collection of data has been one of the major critiques of the grounded theory methodology.

routine of divestment practices; however, the depth of their reflexivity varied. This by no means marks out my young participants as somehow less adept at articulating these processes than older participants might have been; simply that understanding and describing one's own habitual practices is difficult. Nevertheless, the more limited data on some processes should not undermine the depth achieved in discussions of other facets of participants' divestment.

The photography task was also generally taken up successfully. Only one student did not return her camera, mentioning in her feedback that she did not feel this task had anything to add to the conversations we had. The majority of participants did engage with this task – five used all, or almost all, twenty seven shots on the camera; seven used between ten and twenty; nine used between two and ten, and five had technical problems which meant none of their photographs developed or were usable.⁴⁸ Those whose pictures did not develop were often able to remember possessions they had photographed, so even those with fewer images had several specific objects that they had in mind as key reference points for the second interviews.

As far as was practicable, early stage findings were used to inform subsequent conversations, taking the opportunity to explore in more detail emergent themes such as attitudes towards durability, novelty, malfunction and replacement. Following my participants' lead in this way allowed them to demonstrate how they understood these key concepts, as well as their relevance in the context of their attitudes to possessions.

Before moving to a discussion of the analysis of my data, there are two final points to note. First, all participants were invited to choose their own pseudonym for use in the transcribed interview text and research outputs. Few did so, with most content for me to attribute a pseudonym to them. Secondly, at the end of the research project, each participants' contribution was acknowledged through a £10 book token. Whilst there are pros and cons to acknowledging participants' contributions to a research project with some kind of monetary token of thanks (Head 2009), my participants were not informed of this £10 'thank you' at the time of recruitment as I wanted to ensure that those volunteering were doing so because of their interest in the project, rather than for a 'reward'.

⁴⁸ It was only after getting the camera films developed and noticing this that I wondered whether lack of familiarity with disposable cameras might have been a problem for some participants.

3.5.2 Analysis

My participants' enthusiasm for both the verbal and visual aspects of my project resulted in a large quantity of rich data. Although I have freed myself from some of the analytical prescriptions of formal grounded theory, my main analytical technique - data coding - is common to grounded theory and many other qualitative analysis techniques.

Coding refers to a process of attributing labels (key words or phrases) to sections of data according to the themes which characterise them (Crang 2005; Cook and Crang 2007; Cope 2010). Codes may either 'emerge' from the data ('emic' codes; these dominate grounded theoretical analysis; see La Rossa 2005) or derive from a particular theoretical perspective which informs the analysis ('etic' codes). In methodologies informed by grounded theory, it is the links between codes and the categories into which they are grouped, and the interpretive logics that make sense of those links (these being informed by the guiding concerns of the project) that form the centre of analysis. While a grounded theory approach advocates a two-stage coding approach ('low' level emic codes followed by 'high' level etic codes), as geographers following a similar approach have noted, maintaining this separation in practice is not always practical or desirable (Jackson 2001; Cook and Crang 2007).

Coding can be carried out manually (on hard copies of transcripts, for example) or by using qualitative analysis software. Both were used in the course of my analysis. Having transcribed all fifty-two interviews (plus the six scoping interviews), I began by coding the data digitally using Atlas.ti analysis software. The pros and cons of using qualitative analysis software in geographical studies have been debated (Crang et al. 1997; Hinchliffe et al. 1997; Butler 2001), with consensus suggesting that there are considerable benefits to their usage, so long as they are viewed as a tool in support of the process of analysis, rather than a device for conducting analysis in place of the interpretive work of the researcher. My use of Atlas.ti was based primarily on its efficiency as a means of sorting coded data, thus speeding the process of identifying those 'chunks' of data most central to analysis and theory-building. Certainly the extent of my 'code-wrangling' was comparable whether I was working with Atlas.ti or pen and paper.

The first stage of analysis consisted of open-coding the data. Having attributed preliminary interpretations to the data through this process, I then used hard copies of

the coded data grouped by code (e.g. all the data tagged with the code 'novelty') in order to group linked codes together (e.g. 'altruism' with 'giving away is good'), and permit a second round of coding by hand, drawing out nuances within codes and code-groupings. By working with these printouts in pen and pencil, and by working closely with my interview notes and the participants' photographs, I was able to retain a physical closeness to the data, the perceived loss of which has formed one of the caveats to the otherwise enthusiastic use of qualitative software (Hinchliffe et al. 1997).

It should be emphasised that, through this analytical process, I as the researcher have attempted to make sense of the data by attributing codes and organising code groups, but that, in doing so, I have tried to balance articulating the participants' own sense-making with my imperative to connect the analysis with my research questions and issues that instigated the research. Thus there are two levels of interpretation - participants' of their own actions and then mine of their reported stories. While some might consider this problematic because of the distance between the actions that are the focus and the way those are then 'read', I suggest that, conversely, incorporating participants' reflections on their actions casts more light on the structures and norms that shape them because they are able to situate those actions within a broader set of socially or culturally driven aims.

In the empirical chapters that follow, I have focused on themes where participants' comments crystallised around similar views, experiences or attitudes, whilst also incorporating nuance from 'outliers' that point in particularly interesting directions. This marks my final divergence from the grounded theory approach, since its founders would argue that it is only the dominant, most widely-substantiated stories that should inform theorisations (Corbin and Strauss 1990). However, acknowledging 'outliers' is important for two reasons: first, in order to emphasise that young people's attitudes and actions cannot be neatly 'boxed up' by one analysis; and second, to draw attention to phenomena which may have been infrequent in the context of the present study but that may warrant further exploration in order to ascertain their broader salience. Thus, where such examples emerged in my analysis they are incorporated into the discussions that follow in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined this study's methodology. Having begun by introducing grounded theory, I discussed how this data-led approach is particularly well-aligned with my aim in this study, namely, to present a picture of young people's consumption based on lived experiences rather than disciplinary-led suppositions. Acknowledging the necessity of working within the practical constraints of a doctoral study, I outlined where my project aligns with the central tenets of grounded theory and where I have freed myself from some of its constraints.

I moved then to introduce the location and sample of this study. These were selected with the aim of offering sufficient diversity within the participant group as to permit broad conclusions of use to sustainability promoters and environmental educators. Following a summary of the process of recruiting participants and organising the data gathering activities, I discussed in more detail the particular benefits offered by my chosen techniques – interviews and photo-elicitation. In short, their selection was premised on the view that talking about things necessarily means talking about people; thus, conversation based around their relationships with specific objects (the subjects of the photographs) was a means of participants' talking about themselves and revealing their attitudes to both their possessions and consumption more broadly.

Noting my decision to frame my participants as young adults, I then discussed how I reconciled recognition of their young adult capabilities with the need to acknowledge issues of power and positionality specific to the differences between us, particularly in terms of age, knowledge, and my association with the adult-imposed power structures of school. Latterly, I reflected on how the fieldwork went in practice, the quality of the data generated, and how I have attempted to make sense of that rich data through analytical processes led by interpretative coding and categorising.

What, then, has been the result? What themes emerged and how have these informed my construction of a grounded theorisation of youth consumption? In the following three chapters I discuss findings focused around three key facets of the processes of divestment: how things fall out of use, thus calling into question whether they should be kept or moved on (Chapter Four); the ways in which unwanted possessions were moved on and the motivations for use of particular channels (Chapter Five); and the nature of the 'stickiness' of some possessions, no longer used but resisting ridding (Chapter Six).

Using participants' stories about their relationships with possessions in each of these moments of consumption/divestment, I have attempted to theorise what consumption of everyday material possessions means and involves for this group of young people in such a way as to identify the potential for waste (as object and/or process) to emerge within its practice – thus allowing me to respond directly to assumptions that young people's consumption is inherently wasteful, and offer some suggestions as to how sustainability practitioners might respond to this. While I draw out the nature of waste in each context in the concluding sections of Chapters Four to Six, the ways in which sustainability promoters might make use of these findings is discussed in Chapter Seven.

I turn now to my empirical chapters, beginning in Chapter Four by considering the factors that contribute to my participants' possessions falling out of use.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONSUMPTION IN AN ERA OF DISPOSABILITY?

Why some possessions fall out of use

4.1 Introduction

- Rebecca What prompts you to get rid of something?
- Maggie Umm... the want of change? Like, I don't know, sometimes I just... you know, you get bored of being... someone, or you get bored of a particular thing and then... you just want something to change. (Interview 1/2, 01.11.2010)
- Lettie Umm... if there's, like, a latest, like, better thing. [...] Or... it's never going to be back in fashion and it's just... or I look, sometimes I look back and I'm like, why did I wear this? (Interview 1/2, 10.11.2010)
- Sally If they're broken I'll throw them away. If I really don't like them I'll throw them away. (Interview 1/2, 18.10.2010)
- Cherry Ah, if it's too old. [R: What do you mean by that?] Like, if I have used it for too long and I don't like it anymore. (Interview 1/2, 02.11.2010)

In these four quotes, Maggie, Lettie, Sally and Cherry describe some of the scenarios in which they might be prompted to divest themselves of no-longer-wanted possessions. For Maggie it's about a changing sense of identity managed through a change in the material items with which she surrounds herself. For Lettie, it's about keeping pace with the 'best' gadgets available, while at the same time distancing herself from past fashions now seen as irrelevant, if not downright embarrassing. Sally seems more concerned with practicalities, but for her, too, personal aesthetics play an important part in her decisions to keep or discard. For Cherry it seems to be over-familiarity with specific possessions that, as for Maggie, prompts the desire for change that, by necessity, means some fall out of use.

My participants' interpretations of their motivations for divestment correspond closely with those revealed by adult participants in many previous studies – breakage, lack of physical or stylistic 'fit', irrelevance to current practices or sometimes just the desire for something new (Albinsson and Perera 2009; Gregson and Beale 2004; Gregson et al.

2007a, 2007b; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Norris 2004; Woodward 2007). This is unsurprising given the practical nature of much material consumption. However, since the aim of this project has been to use divestment as a lens through which to deepen understanding of youth consumption more broadly, it is necessary to move beyond how my participants describe and interpret their acts of ridding to consider how and why those acts are precipitated in the first place.

In this chapter I begin at the beginning of the divestment process by considering how my participants' material possessions fall out of use such that they come to be earmarked for divestment which is either permanent (described in terms of ridding and discussed in Chapter Five) or temporary/partial (described in terms of keeping and discussed in Chapter Six). I explore how both socio-cultural and material factors contribute to scenarios in which the divestment of possessions comes to be seen as an appropriate, often desirable, course of action. My aim here is twofold: to consider the nature and scope of young people's agency within the context of the forces that precipitate divestment; and to examine the factors which drive young people's decisions to divest themselves of possessions, acknowledging especially those which could be described as particularly characteristic of adolescence. I argue that the relatively scant agency my participants' possess when materialising their identities in response to socio-cultural demands contributes to inadvertent legitimization of powerful (consumer) cultural structures, which perpetuate a form of consumption where disposability is widely accepted – sometimes even actively embraced – but where the possibility of waste remains invisible.

Since it is important to be clear about the sorts of processes that contribute to the falling out of use that I consider in this chapter, I wish to emphasise that I am not concerned here with possessions that fall out of use for reasons of developmental progression or physical growth – in other words, possessions that are simply outgrown.⁴⁹ These, after all, are unavoidable physical processes. I am, however, concerned with those possessions which fall out of use when they could still be made use of by the participant, as well as those that are acquired in full knowledge of their limited usable lifespan (e.g. 'fast fashion' clothing that is known to last only a few wears). This distinction is important since my enquiry into the feasibility of young people's

⁴⁹ It should be noted, however, that these kinds of possessions are considered in subsequent chapters concerned with physical processes of ridding and keeping, since at these points in the divestment process young people have some choice as to how they act.

potential role as change agents means I am concerned with how their agency is expressed in contexts where they have (some) choice about whether or not they make use of possessions, and the influences of the socio-cultural context (particularly dominant youth cultures) on the manifestations of that agency. In response to Hetherington's (2004) description of acts of divestment as socially and culturally productive, in this chapter I consider how expectations around the disposability of certain material objects (such as mobile phones and 'fast fashion' garments) have been promulgated by potent consumer cultural pressures, resulting in youth cultural norms where disposability is an accepted part of consumption.

In the first of three subsections (4.2), I discuss how my participants' explanations for their divestment decisions revealed relationships with their possessions which are heavily structured by consumer culture. I consider how retailers and manufacturers of typical 'youth' objects (clothing and technologies) shape a consumption culture in which cycles of novelty (un)intentionally take advantage of the natural temporalities of adolescence. I discuss the impact of these cycles of novelty (new styles, 'improved' functionality, etc.) on my participants' attitudes to their possessions and, in particular, I reflect on the extent of their inclination to accede to the demands made of them by youth and consumer culture(s).

In section 4.3 I shift my focus to consider the impact of the physical (lack of) durability of some possessions on my participants' consumption attitudes. Drawing on participants' experiences of the brevity of some objects' usable life spans, I consider how their awareness of this brevity informs their decisions to engage (or not) in repeat purchases of these items. Here I suggest that the prevalence of low durability items has resulted in their normalisation as a culturally acceptable means of managing youth cultural pressures as well as everyday practical demands.

It should be noted that my participants belong to a demographic that has grown up with 'fast fashion' and rapid technological change. While some appear to accept their position in a culture of material short-termism and embrace what it can offer them, others seem to experience a growing unease about its social and environmental implications. In section 4.4 I consider the extent to which social validation that "newer is better" adds credence to the messages received from retailers and marketing media that existing possessions are socially, if not functionally, obsolete. Not all participants towed the dominant youth cultural line, however, and thus I also discuss instances in which some participants actively contested pressure from peers, social norms and

retailers by resisting the promotion of technological novelty or the latest fashion trends.

I conclude this chapter in section 4.5 with a brief summary of the factors that shaped my participants' relationships with their possessions. In light of my primary concern with the nature and scope of young people's agency in consumption practices, I comment especially on the ways in which my participants' agency tended to be manifested in circumstances where possessions were on the cusp of falling out of use, and the extent to which they might be seen as waste-makers.

4.2 New Fashions, New Technologies – Creating 'Use By' Dates for Possessions

In a conversation with Sadie, we talked about the kinds of possessions with which she felt she would be reluctant to part. While various gifts accumulated over the years were named, items of clothing proved to be a marked exception. She said:

Sadie	With clothes I just... don't... connect.
Rebecca	Ok. Why do you think that is?
Sadie	I think it's because of the, umm, again... blame society. [laughs]
Rebecca	In what sense?
Sadie	'Cause, like, as in... umm... fashion comes and goes and comes and goes. People are, like, more concerned with keeping up with fashion. Not that I wear designer clothes or anything...

(Interview 2/2, 01.02.2011)

Sadie articulated a widely-held opinion amongst my female participants⁵⁰ that regular changes in fashion tend to make for somewhat superficial relationships with

⁵⁰ None of the male participants in this study expressed any interest in, let alone concern with, clothing styles in the sense of following particular fashions. Since they inevitably consumed clothing and were exposed to the attitudes of peers to what they wear, this may reflect the fact that male fashion trends tend to be less conspicuous, or that apparel did not constitute a topic with which they wanted to engage, either because of self-consciousness or through genuine lack of interest. While Bakewell et al. (2006) have identified a strong "anti-fashion" ethos amongst British young men (despite their awareness of current trends), there remains very little in-depth research with this group on their interactions with clothing, with the exception of occasional studies concerned with short-lived subcultures, such as Lindblad and Ostberg (2011) on Sweden's 'Partille Johnnys', a group of young men who adopt a distinctive style featuring heavy fake tan, bleached and spiked hair, and clothing accessorised with rubber bands and bracelets.

possessions, and that this is widely accepted, particularly amongst the young. This view was not limited to clothing – it was seen as equally applicable to technology. As Elspeth said when she talked about her latest mobile phone:

... you know as soon as you get something new then there's always going to be another thing that's better within, like, a month. [...] You always sort of upgrade your phone, change your laptop, you know, change your iPod... and I just think that sort of makes them... not mean as much.

(Interview 2/2, 19.01.2011)

The lack of attachment to these easily replaceable items suggests that, when they are seen as no longer relevant to the self image an individual wants to project or the practices in which they want to participate, discarding them is largely unproblematic. Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2009) describe the ease with which their young female participants sold on garments they had no interest in wearing again because fashions had changed, and Ongondo and Williams (2011) found that 34% of their participating students replaced their mobile phone at least annually. This could be read not only as confirmation that young people's self-identity is in constant flux (Evans 2008; Valentine 2000, 2003), but that so too are the terms in which they want to express this by owning particular things (Campbell 1995; Croghan et al. 2006; Griffin et al. 2005; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Van Gorp 2005). So far, so predictable. The social and material impacts of changing trends have been the subject of countless analyses since Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1925 [1899]) and adding anything novel to this body of work is not easy. However, what emerged over the course of this study were relations between my participants and the cycles of fashion and technological change that characterise the consumption and social spaces they inhabit that were more complex and more subtle than extant youth consumption research has acknowledged.

Young people's pursuit of new fashions and technologies has generally been framed in terms of expressions of agency at the point of acquisition, fulfilling a desire for ownership of a particular item (Morgan and Birtwistle 2009; Wilska 2003). In other words, attention has focused on young people's abilities to autonomously acquire new things. Yet, several important factors have been overlooked in these analyses, including the structuring effects of the consumption (specifically the retail) environment. In this section I discuss some of the ways in which retailers attempt to structure (young) consumers' actions by creating cycles of novelty and obsolescence

for certain objects (mobile phones and fashion clothing, most commonly), as well as when and to what extent my participants' agency was able to apprehend these forces.

4.2.1 Time For A Change?

Before introducing some of the ways in which my participants respond to these forces, I consider briefly the ways in which the temporalities of young people's lives might contribute to perceptions of possessions as old, dated, or irrelevant such that they fall out of use. Specifically, I am interested in how the natural rhythms and temporal progression of young people's lives dovetail with, and might in fact be taken advantage of by, those set by manufacturers and retailers, such that commercial rhythms and youth cultural practices together work to "age" objects that are central to adolescent life.

My interest in how the experience of time influences young people's relationships with their possessions was piqued by comments made by some participants (Cherry, Bella, Tina, Maggie) about possessions they felt they had owned for "too long" or, at least, "long enough". Bella, for instance, said:

Bella If it's something that I think it's been too long in my, in my life or in my house then I'd get rid of it.

Rebecca How long is too long? Could you quantify it or is it just something that [you know]?

Bella Umm, I don't think... I think it depends on how I grow, like how my maturity... deepens as I grow with age, I think... that's what would determine when I think it's too long.

(Interview 1/2, 14.10.2010)

For Bella, her relationships with her possessions – and particularly her decisions about when to part with them – were closely bound up with her transitions through childhood and adolescence; that is, with how her evolving self-identity was bound up with the temporal progression of her life. Tina, similarly, talked about feeling that her possessions "should" change as she got older as a reflection of her growing up. These comments not only re-emphasise the transitional nature of adolescence, they also invite the question of what factors contribute to young people's perceptions of a "long" relationship with an object. Since divestment is ultimately concerned with why and

how relationships with material possessions are terminated, gaining a sense of where the line is drawn between new or current (relevant) and old (irrelevant) is crucial.

I suggest there are two temporal phenomena which have a strong bearing on how young people perceive the length of their relationships with possessions. First is the perception that time seems to pass more slowly when we are young and speeds up with age. A two year mobile phone contract, for instance, constitutes a far larger proportion of a sixteen-year-old's life than a thirty-year-old's. Two years is a long time for young people who have yet to accrue the life experience to contextualise it. Second, young people are increasingly expected to fit a lot into short periods of their lives. All of my participants were in full-time education and most were applying to university. Many worked part-time, played high-level music or competitive sport, or gave several hours per week to other extra-curricular activities. Add to that the heavy demands of social life, and it becomes apparent that much can happen in a relatively short time. This can have a distorting effect in which events of a month ago feel as though they occurred several months ago – a phenomenon to which busy people of any age can relate. Taken together, these facts suggest that the notion of a “long” time for my participants is based to a large extent on the intensity of their present life events, and how this compares with (and is contextualised within) their more general sense of timescales based on their lives to date (Jarvis et al. 2011).

How, then, are material possessions embedded in these timescapes, and with what effect on young people's constructions of a “long” period of ownership? Conversation with my participants offered several different takes on how these participant-possession relationships both construct and reflect ideas about what a “long” time is, and it is to these I turn next. I focus first on mobile phones; specifically, the ways in which the growing range of mobile phone functionality is used to document young people's personal and social lives in ways that ‘imprint’ onto the phone the date and time of events recorded. I also examine the structuring influence of rhythms set by phone manufacturers and retailers and, in particular, the impacts of competing rhythms that often supersede one another. Following this, I turn my attention to ‘fast fashion’ and consider how rapidly-changing style cycles amongst low-cost clothing brands contribute towards an attitude that these items are disposable.

While the examples I draw on in sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3 are specific to mobile phones and fast fashion respectively, the general principles behind the generation of the participants' attitudes might feasibly be extended to other possessions.

4.2.2 Imprinting, Ageing And Superseding Rhythms In The Lives Of Gadgets

Reflecting on the extent to which young people's everyday lives are bound up with social life serves as a reminder that material possessions are central to adolescent social events. As certain possessions – including mobile phones – accompany young people through intensely eventful periods, they come to be imprinted with often quite dense histories. In other words, possessions come to be associated with many different places, people and events by virtue of their presence as part of social interactions. This is particularly true for technologies such as smartphones, which a significant proportion of my participants either possessed or aspired to possess. Through their personalisation with messages, images, applications, and other forms of functionality, these objects become vivid “technologies of self” (Schwarz 2009: 348). Omayma's description of the ways in which she uses her phone serves as a good illustration:

I have everything on there, so if I want to go look for something I can look for it on the internet. If I want to listen to my music, it's on there. If I want to look at my photos, they're on there. If I want to talk to my friends on, like, the internet or anything I've got all of that on there. So it's just, like... everything that I need, I just take it with me.

(Interview 1/2, 22.10.2010)

Together, all of these digital objects imprint onto the phone a (potentially) lasting reminder of an individual's life last week, last month or last year. These condensed histories may in turn contribute to notions of a “long” time that are in fact relatively short (compared with the possible life span of the object in question) but experientially dense. This is well illustrated in the conversations I had with Molly. In our second meeting she commented on how quickly she had become accustomed to her new phone.

Molly It's really weird, I've had this phone for ages now. I can't remember not having it.

Rebecca That's interesting, 'cause I mean it's, yeah, November was the last time that we spoke...

Molly That's, like, ages ago. Well it's not, but, like, loads has happened since then so...

(Interview 2/2, 18.03.2011)

The phone to which she refers had been acquired in the four month period between our first and second conversations⁵¹ – a period in which “loads has happened” such that she “can’t remember not having” her current phone. This is in spite of expressing both upset and annoyance at the demise of her previous phone which she had had for three years and “really liked”. Her comment emphasises how the intensity of young people’s social lives can contribute to perceptions of the swift passage of time which both quickly habituates new possessions and ‘ages’ older ones such that they are deemed irrelevant and fall out of use. The notion of the “ageing” of possessions, or, more specifically, what contributes to this perceived ageing, proved to be a recurring theme in conversation with my participants. During our first meeting Lettie made the following comment:

Rebecca Are there any of your current possessions that you anticipate getting rid of in the immediate future?

Lettie [With no hesitation] My phone!

Rebecca Mmhmm? Why will you get rid of your phone?

Lettie Because, umm... it’s dated. [little laugh]

(Interview 1/2, 10.11.2010)

Lettie’s description of her phone as ‘dated’ not only draws an explicit parallel between cycles of technological change and cycles of fashion (discussed in section 4.2.4), it emphasises how these cycles serve to age the objects at their centre. One of the most effective means of ageing electronic items employed by mobile telephone companies has been the use of contracts that offer free upgrades when renewed. Several participants (Bella, Kelly, Lettie, Ailsa and Ella) had mobile telephones on contracts and accepted as a given that they would upgrade when the contract was renewed. While most of the girls looked forward to this, for Ailsa there appeared to be a sense of obligation attached to this arrangement she had entered into, which was manifested in a more ambivalent attitude to upgrading. The offer of a ‘free’, purportedly ‘better’ device contributes to the notion that the existing phone has become ‘old’, ‘irrelevant’, is no longer suited to a user’s needs, and creates a sense of a ‘use-by’ or expiry date for that item which, as several other participants (Olivia, Martin, John, Tina, Jamie, Daniel,

⁵¹ Between the first and second round of interviews, a gap of approximately four months, seven participants acquired a new mobile phone: Tina, Graham, Lettie, Molly, Maggie, Ella and Tessa. Three others – Bella, Rosa and Sally – anticipated getting a new phone in the very immediate future because their present devices were (reportedly) malfunctioning.

Oz, Ruth and Tessa) demonstrated with their older handsets, is capable of productive use for three or four times the length of the contract.

It was not only the power of a perceived contractual ‘use-by’ date that shaped my participants’ attitudes towards the replacement of phones. The seemingly perpetual release of new versions with new functions, particularly in the case of smartphones, promotes more frequent change than is accommodated within most contract packages. This can present an additional temptation to be navigated, as became evident in my conversation with Elspeth. We had been talking about which of her possessions she felt most attached to and what, if anything, might prompt her to get rid of any of those things. Having mentioned her phone (Figure 4.1) as the possession she felt most attached to (for reasons of its wide-ranging functionality), I asked what sort of factors might cause her to part with it. She said:

Elspeth The contract I have now is 24 months... so it’s obviously quite a long time, I might have to change it before then. [laughs]

Rebecca Ok. What do you think, what will prompt you to change it... before then?

Elspeth If a newer, better one comes out? [laughs]

(Interview 1/2, 19.10.2010)



Figure 4.1 Elspeth’s mobile phone (foreground) with her mp3 player and camera

For Elspeth, a two year contract was too long to suit her preference for staying up-to-date with the latest phone functionality. In our second conversation three months later, she picked up the story:

Elspeth I had a good phone before and then I just got bored of it and then I was like, oh, everyone's got a Blackberry, I want a Blackberry now. But it's, you sort of... you really love it at first and then you get past that stage and then there's something else that you want, so it's kind of a.... bit of a vicious circle [...]

Rebecca Mmhmm, ok. So how... how long before the novelty wears off... and new things are starting to look appealing?

Elspeth Well... with my phone, the novelty wore off in about a month when they brought out the new Blackberry. [laughs]

(Interview 2/2, 19.01.2011)

Elspeth directly associates her persistent desire for the latest phone with the release of, in her eyes, “newer, better” versions, which appear with a frequency that supersedes the rhythms of change imposed by her two year contract. This goes some way towards explaining the fact that the Blackberry she had at the time of our conversations was her seventh phone in seven years – while some previous phones broke, Elspeth admitted that sometimes she just “fancied a new one” – an experience that Louise and Khadija also reported. Clearly there are questions about what a “newer, better” phone offers these participants and how these underlying imperatives contribute to the obsolescence of their current, ‘old’ phones – these are addressed in section 4.4.

While contemporary mobile phone technology has much to offer young people in terms of ways to meet social needs (Foley et al. 2007; Green 2003), the proliferation of functions also means many more ways of ‘date-stamping’ the experiences documented on these devices. This is not always problematic – Olivia and Martin, for example, both had phones that were several years old that they were keen to retain specifically because of the personal histories accrued via text and picture messages. Nevertheless, Olivia and Martin were atypical and it was more common for the thrill of new functionality to override any sentiment that might be attached to old devices.

It would seem, then, that for many of the young people in this study, their sense that they have owned a phone for a “long time” – or “long enough” – is strongly influenced by two factors: on the one hand, the ways in which mobile phone retailers structure the ways in which these devices are consumed; and on the other, the ways in which phone

functionality (the latest versions of which are a key marketing tactic used by retailers) is employed by the participants in ways that (un)intentionally 'date-stamp' them. Together, these factors create a consumption context for these devices in which 'rapid' replacement is not seen as 'rapid', just 'normal'. In the world of mobile phone consumption, as Elspeth discovered, the next new version is only ever a matter of weeks away, such that the anticipation of the new means current possessions are seen as no longer offering 'enough'. Furthermore, this was not only limited to mobile phones – mp3 players, particularly iPods, were also discussed in similar terms. Kelly, for instance, said:

I was really annoyed because I got an iPod for my birthday and it was a new one but then they brought out another one, like, a week later. Which is annoying. And then my phone, as well, they had brought out new ones as well.

(Interview 1/2, 04.11.2010)

The ever-presence of something 'better' was both the cause and the cure of some individuals' concerns about technologies, especially their phones, being 'out of date'. Olivia articulated this when, in our conversation about young people's expectations of fashion and technological change, she said:

I can't remember what year but didn't they, like, that bloke that owned Apple got really ill and they didn't bring one out, and everyone expected it to. And [...] I thought, well, why bother when you could keep that one for well over, what, four, five years, probably even longer. Sort of by bringing out one every year, like, you sort of expect it, like, oh you know, it's alright, I can put that away 'cause a new one'll be coming.

(Interview 2/2, 10.02.2011)

Add to this a television advertising campaign by mobile phone 'recycling' company Envirofone in February 2012 which asked viewers, "Bored of your mobile?" before inviting them to send off their 'old' phone in return for a cash payment⁵². The role of mobile phone 'recyclers' such as Envirofone in contributing to cycles of replacement is an important area of enquiry – although one beyond the scope of my concerns in this chapter – since they are demonstrably adept at playing on young people's preoccupation with having the most up-to-date technology as ways of maintaining a

⁵² A similar TV advertising campaign also by Envirofone in 2010 directly linked the cash payments received for donated phones with further consumption in a storyline that featured a young woman attempting to pay for clothes by handing over her smartphone at the till.

See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zFGinzEIUU> (accessed 28.02.2012)

business dependent on dissatisfaction. This is something I consider in greater depth in Chapter Five.

It would appear that, in spite of inferences from youth consumption research that young people's consumption is the ultimate expression of their agency (Miles 2000; Wilska 2003), certainly where technology is concerned my participants' agency often seemed severely constrained. In one respect, this is the result of manufacturers' and retailers' vested interest in selling their latest products. Demonstrating this imperative at work in the context of the production and consumption of laptops, Spinney et al. (2012) found that producers justified the release of new models through recourse to a demanding – but imaginary – technology consumer. The provision of products in response to this manufactured demand prompted their (adult) laptop consumers to re-evaluate the qualities of these items in ways that devalued existing devices. This closely mirrors my participants' feelings that their gadgets were made irrelevant and obsolete by the release of something newer and 'better', and raises questions about what kind of imaginary adolescent informs the production of goods aimed at youth.

The constraints on young people's agency discussed here might also be seen as the result of a facet of youth culture that embraces frequent change as part of its *raison d'être*. Despite the problems that may result from this control – in terms of feeding social anxieties as well as environmental externalities – young people's need to communicate and form relationships in their own spaces and on their own terms means that the burgeoning range of technologies and functionalities keeps many of them locked into this co-dependent relationship.

Although, at the time of our first meetings, approximately one third of the participants had owned their phones for four years or more, by the time of our second meeting four of this third had acquired new devices. Those participants who liked the accumulated personal history and saw this as a reason to keep their phones for many years were atypical. When it comes to technology, therefore, consumer cultural and youth cultural forces appear to have a profound influence on gadgets falling out of use, and the majority of my participants seemed sufficiently unaware of or unconcerned by this to contest these norms. Technology, however, was certainly not the only domain in which rhythms set by retailers had a powerful influence over my participants' consumption. The realm of 'fast fashion' appeared to be equally problematic.

4.2.3 (Un)Willing Followers of Fashion?

Over the course of the interviews, one of the female participants, Lettie, really stood out.

Far more than any other participant, she seemed to conform in many ways to the image of the hedonistic young consumer described in Chapter Two. In a giggling whisper she confessed, “I buy all the time!” reflecting that “I think it could actually be a habit and that’s not good” (Interview 1/2, 10.11.10). Not only did she enjoy shopping on a regular basis (weekly, at least), but coming from an economically prosperous background meant that, certainly more than most of her peers, she had the financial means to acquire whatever took her fancy. As we explored the sorts of characteristics that tended to typify her purchases, Lettie said:

I do like them so they would, like, last a long time. [...] I’d say half my clothes are stuff, like, classic, non-wearing-out but quite expensive clothes, and then the rest are, like, quite cheap but will go out of fashion quite quickly. [...] Generally... when I buy expensive clothes I try to make sure that... they won’t go out of fashion.

(Interview 1/2, 10.11.10)

We picked up this topic in our second meeting since I was keen to learn more about her relationships with her more and less expensive items of clothing. I wanted to know what constituted “a long time” in terms of her ownership of things, and why she bought items that she thought would not last.

Lettie I tend to think more expensive items, and I always think that... these are meant to last, they’re meant to... I don’t know, but places like Topshop you’re just, like, yeah, this is for a season. It’s literally for... a month.

Rebecca And do you find that’s generally the case? Do you find that, say, for your Topshop things, you couldn’t wear it... longer?

Lettie Yeah.

Rebecca Why is that?

Lettie Changing fashion I think. And also, yeah, it does, like, material-wise, it does, it does... break down.

Rebecca Ok. So where would you tend to go for the more durable... items of clothing? Are there particular places that you would associate with something that’s going to last?

Lettie Umm... I don’t know, it depends on what it is, really. Umm, my shirt’s, like, Ralph Lauren... all designer, I guess.

And a little later:

Lettie Yeah, like... I'd say all my expensive stuff I still have, that, I don't know, I've had since forever.

Rebecca How long's forever?

Lettie Like... probably six years, literally. A really long time.

Rebecca Ok. What item's that?

Lettie Like, I have coats and I have shirts. I have all sorts of skirts. [...] I find, like, the more expensive brand they are, they don't do as, like, the fashion's not as extreme, is it? Umm... so... they kind of do more things that are always going to be in style.

(Interview 2/2, 23.03.11)

It was clear that there was a significant gulf between Lettie's expectations of how long she would expect to keep her high quality, high cost designer items – six years plus – compared with items from high street stores – a top from Topshop lasting only a month, thus very much living up to the store's 'fast fashion' moniker. In the opening of this chapter she states that one of her main reasons for getting rid of no-longer-wanted items is if they have fallen out of fashion, whereas for her 'style classic' designer goods, getting rid of those: "It kind of feels like you're throwing money in the bin" (Interview 2/2, 23.03.11).

Her comments reveal three issues at work. The first concerns money. Lettie was clearly sensitive to the fact that throwing away garments that cost a considerable amount is a waste (in monetary terms, at least), but her access to far greater financial resources than the majority of her peers meant that the point at which throwing away clothes (and thus money) becomes wasteful is at the costlier end of the scale. As the discussion in this section will reveal, there are subtleties within the economics of young people's consumption, overlooked by studies privileging their agency and assuming their access to the necessary financial resources, which constitute important findings about equality of access to sustainable clothing consumption. Second, Lettie alludes to the physical durability of more and less expensive garments, an important issue warranting a discussion of its own and, as such, I address this in a subsequent section (4.3). The third issue concerns ideas of style and the contemporary popular understanding of 'fashion' as seasonal trends, and it is on this that I concentrate here. By focusing on how, as in the gadget sector, manufacturers and retailers impose cycles

of fashion in the high street spaces young consumers tend to inhabit, I consider the nature and extent of my participants' agency in the face of these rapidly changing trends.

A walk through any UK shopping centre will provide ample evidence that the well-designed, physically and stylistically durable 'classics' that Lettie had kept for six or more years tend to be out of the financial reach of most young people. In contrast, the clothing they are able to afford tends to be more overtly styled around conspicuous seasonal trends. Indeed, it is suggested by Crewe and Collins (2006: 8) that markets concerned with products aimed at young people might be even more subject to, "accelerating cycles of fashion and obsolescence" than those of adults. These are today's 'fast fashion' retailers – stores such as Topshop/Topman, New Look, River Island, H&M, Matalan and, of course, Primark.

It came as no surprise that one of the most widely-cited reasons given by (female) participants for the divestment of garments was that they were no longer fashionable. What was interesting were the participants' different perceptions of how long it generally took for new items to fall foul of changing trends. Rosa, for instance, bemoaned the fact that she perceived fashion as changing "every couple of weeks" (Interview 1/2, 20.10.2010). For Tina, it was every season (three to four months), whereas Ella took a much longer view. Talking about which of her recent clothing acquisitions she thought she would still have in a year's time, Ella said:

I think most things I'll have if I bought now this time next year because, like, fashion doesn't change that regularly...

(Interview 1/2, 09.11.2010)

These different perspectives may have been at least partially informed by the places in which these girls tended to shop. Over the course of our conversations, Rosa mentioned that she had bought clothing and accessories from fast fashion stores New Look, River Island and Primark. Reflecting on recent changes in how she shops, Tina said:

... when I got my new jeans, I probably would have used to [have] bought it from Next 'cause it was cheaper and... that, but now I'd buy it from Laura Ashley. Even though it's more expensive I think it's better quality. [...] I used to go to Primark a lot but now I don't... maybe because I have more money I don't mind spending

more? And yeah, I think it's just the fact that it's going to last longer and it... I think it looks nicer as well.

(Interview 2/2, 03.02.2011)

It seemed that having more disposable income of her own (the result of a part-time job) had allowed Tina to move on from Next and Primark to mid/high-price-range shops like Laura Ashley and Cath Kidston. Ella, too, made use of fast fashion stores such as Topshop when items were needed for intentional short-term use (for themed parties, for instance). However, coming from an economically prosperous background like Lettie, she also had the means to shop in the high-price-range high street stores such as Whistles and Kurt Geiger.⁵³

For young people, such as Rosa, who are limited to buying from lower-cost outlets, fashion may well appear to change every few weeks as retailers change stock in order to sell more – it is, after all, fast fashion. McAfee et al. (2004) have suggested that garments sold in these stores are designed to be worn a maximum of ten times, and this is as applicable to notions of rapidly outdated style as it is an item's material durability. In contrast, Ella, Lettie and Tina have the financial means to buy from retailers who make their profit from the quality rather than quantity of goods sold, and as such it is not necessary for these stores to constantly purvey variety. My suggestion is that while personal economic circumstances determine where it is feasible for young people to shop, the ways in which different retailers construct 'fashion' (i.e. whether it changes every six weeks or six months; see Gibson et al. 2011b) plays a role in how young people are disposed to manage the objects they acquire – in other words, how quickly they fall out of use.

However, it can be all too easy to perceive the divestment of 'unfashionable' items as a 'necessary' and therefore banal consequence of the pursuit of novelty. In light of the powerful structuring influence of retailers, fashions, and the expectations within much of youth culture that one must 'keep up' with current trends (Russell and Tyler 2005), it is reasonable to wonder to what extent young people's clothing consumption might sometimes be reactive or even defensive – a conspicuous assertion that "I'm not unfashionable" – rather than a proactive pleasurable pursuit. Comments from some participants (Ella, Cherry, Lettie, Molly and Tessa) about some of the "gross" items (Ella's description) they were so eager to wear only a year previously emphasise how,

⁵³ By way of comparison, in August 2012 a pair of jeans cost £8 in Primark, £10-23 in New Look, £28 in Next, from £55 in Laura Ashley and from £80 in Whistles.

for teens, like adults, divestment is a means of articulating (to oneself and others) who or what one is not as much as who or what one is. Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005: 813), for instance, found that many of their (adult) participants were eager to get rid of “the tainted remnants of the less desirable stages of their lives”. For young people navigating a particularly sensitive life stage in a context in which the most accessible material tools are heavily styled, the danger of being tainted by association with an unfashionable garment may result in a defensive form of divestment quite different in character from the sense of nostalgia for past selves (and thus reluctant ridding) that has characterised recent studies of adults’ management of their clothes (Norris 2004; Woodward 2007).

Yet by no means all of my participants’ interactions with fast fashion were characterised by style anxiety. Often they appeared ambivalent about whether the designed-in disposability was a pro or a con. This was particularly evident in the discussions around very low cost fashion, where the availability of garments for less than five pounds means that, even for those on tight budgets, replacing garments every few months is feasible (Schor 2005). As Amy said:

... if you’ve just been given pocket money, if you want to just save up for something bigger, you’d rather not... waste it all in Topshop or something like that because... you can get the same sort of stuff but... cheaper... somewhere else. [...] I think that’s very common [with my friends]... yeah, when we’re out. [...] We sort of go to, like, Topshop and places like that and then... see what we like and say we’ll come back... if we don’t see it in Primark or something like that. [laughs]

(Interview 2/2, 16.03.2010)

The low cost of these items made decisions to get rid of them after only short periods of use apparently unproblematic. As Tina said:

... if you go to a cheap [shop] like Primark I think you already know that you’re probably going to buy that thing again three months later because it’s cheap and... I think you do see it as being disposable. You expect to buy it again in a few month’s time.

(Interview 2/2, 03.02.11)

Here, the disposability of garments is acknowledged before the need for disposal is a reality as a result of Tina’s familiarity with the ramifications of the ultra-fast fashion purveyed by retailers such as Primark. Tina knew that whatever she bought was likely

to be redundant in three month's time, whether on the basis of changing styles or the physical breakdown of the item. Several participants (Tessa, Emily, Louise, Rosa, Ella, Sadie, Amy and Cherry) had become quite relaxed about this – the items were only cheap, after all. Certainly for those particularly committed to following seasonal trends, as Lettie said:

... it's just a cheaper way of being fashionable, it's like... fashion doesn't last long so you don't really need your... items to.

(Interview 2/2, 23.03.11)

While in one sense Lettie was unusual amongst the group in having the financial resources to acquire clothing that was both physically and stylistically durable, she still shared with many of her peers the pleasure associated with embracing low cost fast fashion. The key difference, however, was that, for Lettie, Topshop constitutes a 'cheap' place to shop, whereas for others it is a brand to be undercut by finding similar (but cheaper) alternatives at places like Primark. Although, as Lettie suggests in the quote above, rapidly evolving style cycles mean that, in one respect, these fashion items do not need to last beyond a single season; in another, those participants for whom more expensive, better quality brands are out of reach risk being trapped in a cycle of acquisition and obsolescence, with their consumption perhaps ultimately creating a higher environmental burden (Gibson et al. 2011b).

4.2.4 Section Summary

There are clear commonalities between the factors that influence the rate at which both clothing and mobile technologies fall out of use. Rhythms set by retailers impose a form of 'use-by' date on possessions and these combined with the flurry and flux of the temporalities of young people's lives can make both gadgets and garments obsolete after only a few weeks or months of use. Here, producers' interests – and youth culture's accession to them – determine (the acceptance of) the obsolescence of these items, with those participants for whom it was important to keep pace with the latest trends arguably party to this.

My participants were certainly not mere victims of the ways in which producers and youth cultural norms structure consumption of gadgets and garments. However, the extent to which their agency was able to apprehend these forces was largely determined

by economic means. Regardless of her choice to supplement her designer items with less durable additions from the high street, Lettie's financial means allowed her the possibility of contesting the inherent disposability designed into fast fashion. The costs of consumption were mentioned far less frequently in conversation about technologies. Although few participants offered information about how much was spent on their phones (by themselves from personal earnings or by parents via allowances or direct payment for contracts, credit top-ups or handsets), the demonstrable importance of these devices to the majority suggests that funding these possessions takes priority – after all, there are always cheaper clothes that can be opted for in order to fund phone use.

For a large proportion of young people growing up at a time of educational maintenance allowance (EMA) cuts, growing student debt and youth unemployment at its highest level in seventeen years, low cost clothing is a matter of necessity rather than choice. I have already suggested in the discussion above that the disposability of low-cost items brought about by stylistic obsolescence might be particularly problematic for those with less personal wealth. In section 4.3 I look specifically at the implications of the physical (lack of) durability of participants' possessions, and I reflect on comments from participants which suggest that, once again, it is personal economic circumstances that determine whether this is seen as a benefit or a burden.

4.3 Falling Out Of Use Through Falling Apart

When cheap, low quality items are consumed, it becomes necessary to deal with issues of physical breakdown. Here I am concerned with the ways in which my participants' experiences of the (lack of) durability of some of their possessions informed their wider perceptions of material objects' usable lives.

Perhaps because they are more expensive or more vital to everyday adolescent experience, technologies (especially mobile phones) were treated quite differently from items of clothing in this context. When a mobile phone broke before my participants were ready or able to get a new one, these devices were repaired professionally (for those with smartphones), or in the form of a DIY 'bodge-job' (often involving sellotape) until contract renewal meant a free upgrade or enough money was saved to buy a new handset. (Chapter Six includes a more detailed discussion of my participants' dispositions towards repair.) The anxiety and inconvenience associated with this

exercise meant that, by and large, regardless of their age or status, phones were relatively well taken care of. In contrast, easier access to clothing, in terms of its lower cost (i.e. clothing is often cheaper than a phone) and greater quantity (i.e. an individual owns several items of clothing but usually has only one phone in active use), meant that these items were much more vulnerable to falling out of use as a result of breakage of some kind or simply being worn out. The balance of discussion in this section between these types of objects thus reflects the fact that it was much more common for my participants to talk about items of clothing falling out of use because of breakage or wearing out than gadgets.

A report in *The Guardian* in February 2012 noted that currently one fifth of the UK clothing market is comprised of low-cost, short-lifetime garments, meaning these items tend to be thrown away because they have worn out or broken in some way, rather than because they've had time to become unfashionable (Rowley 2012). As Ruth noted:

...they [her peers] can just go and buy something new because fashions are changing so fast that they don't really care if things break because they know it's going to, like, it's not going to be in fashion soon anyway...

(Interview 2/2, 08.02.2011)

For those young people who enjoy following fashion, it may be the case that, as Ruth suggests, the physical longevity of fashion items is a moot point. Changing styles will make them redundant soon, anyway. However, there are equally occasions when young consumers want their possessions to last – because they like them, because of a sense that material things should last, or simply because they haven't the money to buy replacements. In essence, there are times when young consumers rate durability and stability over endless variety. Rosa's boots provide an illuminating illustration.

4.3.1 Desperately Seeking Stability

During my first conversation with Rosa we talked about some of her most recent acquisitions, which included the boots pictured in Figure 4.2. Boots like this formed a key part of Rosa's style. Not only did she find them comfortable, cheap (depending on the brand) and easy to locate in several high street retailers, she confessed to a high degree of self consciousness about her feet which meant that she was uncomfortable trying on other types in shops. These boots physically fitted her feet as well as her style, and allowed her to avoid anxiety in the process of buying them. As we talked

about which of her new acquisitions she expected to still have in a year's time, she said confidently:

I definitely won't have the boots. 'Cause these don't, they don't last at all.

(Interview 1/2, 20.10.10)



Figure 4.2 Rosa's boots bought from New Look; they lasted "four or five months"

And later:

... things like, say, these Ugg boots, I would probably get them about once a month. I know when I buy them that they're not going to last but say if I get them from Primark, they're only about £6 and you think, well, you know what, for something this cheap I've got to give it a go, and then if they... muck up they're so cheap I can get another pair. [...] I think that's why I won't buy the really expensive ones 'cause these don't look that much different... and yet they want you to pay a hundred and, say, twenty quid, umm... and I just don't really see the point, to be honest. [...] If it's £6 pounds a month, that's about £70 a year and you're getting about twelve pairs. If you get... got one pair and they last you a year, that's still £50 more and they're going to get dirty.

(Interview 1/2, 20.10.10)

Here Rosa explains how several factors contributed to her buying her latest pair of Ugg-style boots.⁵⁴ It is clear, though, that one of the key factors is the low price of the high street equivalents compared with the genuine Ugg brand. She had experienced the 1-2 month cycle of buy-use-dispose many times before our first conversation and, although she referred to a tendency for a hole to appear in her boots at the most inconvenient times, the benefits in terms of perceived cost saving meant she persisted with the low cost versions. When we met for the second time, however, she was beginning to waver. Pointing to the pair she was wearing at the time she said:

Rosa Look at the state of these! I've only had them for a month and they're falling apart again, so... I know I said about buying the cheap ones but I think I'll have to buy the proper ones soon. 'Cause it's getting too irritating now.

Rebecca So those ones you've had about a month?

Rosa Yeah. It's ridiculous. Everyone decides to go to Primark and get the cheapest option and then within about two weeks you regret it. These ones {in the photo} were from New Look and they lasted a lot longer but I might... I don't know, but a hundred and seventy pound for a pair of... it does put me off a hell of a lot. [...] Maybe I'll save up but, I don't know... it's just the thought of, you could have so many other things... for that price.

(Interview 2/2, 09.02.11)

After several months (and possibly as many pairs of boots), continuing with the cycle of ridding and replacement had become sufficiently frustrating as to prompt Rosa to consider saving up for the genuine article. What seemed to hold her back was not so much the price of the boots themselves, but their opportunity cost – the other things she wouldn't be able to buy if she wanted them. This was a common preoccupation amongst my participants; Tina, for instance, said:

Like, plimsolls are, like, a pound from Primark but, like, whereas you can get them from Topshop they'd be £15, but even though they might last longer I could buy fifteen... pairs for the same price, so it makes you think it'd be worth buying them more frequently because they're a lot cheaper.

(Interview 1/2, 14.10.2010)

Whilst regular replacement might be inconvenient, it permits both variety (choosing a different coloured pair of boots every time, for example) and, because the replacements

⁵⁴ Ugg boots are a brand of footwear with styles ranging in price from £140-£360. www.uggaustralia.co.uk

are so cheap, the acquisition of a larger number of items. Yet Rosa and Tina seem ambivalent about such 'benefits'. This is understandable when limited funds are at stake; it may induce particular anxiety in decisions that pit the high financial cost of an item that one wants to last, and hopes will last, against the social costs of putting all of one's money into a single shopping basket. Although on the one hand Rosa is frustrated by having 'disposable' boots (to all intents and purposes), on the other she seems to wonder whether she would be equally frustrated if, in spending all her money on quality shoes, she would lose the means to maintain some of the other ways in which she materialises her identity.

Rosa both fights the disposability of fashion by remaining committed to one style, and bows to it by repeatedly purchasing items that last a matter of weeks. What is significant about her story is that it illustrates that divestment is not just a means of actively and simultaneously casting off old identities and configuring new ones; it can also be a consequence of attempting to maintain a particular identity in a socio-cultural context in which stability is devalued and undermined by the speed of change in fashion and technology (Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006). Further, the issue of cost recurs. Both Rosa and Tina were in the position to be able to choose, to a greater or lesser extent, whether they wore 'disposable' fast fashion shoes or whether they saved up for something more durable. This was not the case for all the participants. As Molly said, talking about her own shoe purchases:

I get through a lot because I don't have the money to buy quality ones.

(Interview 1/2, 12.11.2010)

So far, my participants have appeared as somewhat helpless victims of the tendency towards 'manufacture for disposal' that arguably characterises much of today's consumer culture. It is true that for interlinked economic, social and cultural reasons, the ways in which they consume and divest are, perhaps not scripted, but certainly constrained by the contexts within which their everyday lives are played out. However, there are equally times when the accessibility – even the disposability – of certain items can be less of a burden and more of a benefit.

4.3.2 Place holders – or the benefits of ‘disposable’ items for ‘tiding you over’

The potential benefits of cheap, lower quality items are made particularly evident in the context of what my participants described as the acquisition of certain objects to ‘tide them over’, and what I thus describe as ‘place holders’ – items purchased for short-term convenience when an already-owned item is, for some reason, absent or unusable. Sally, Bella and Ella, for example, all bought cheap phones to fill the gap between the loss or malfunction of a previous phone and the opportunity to buy a ‘proper’ replacement. Such is the importance of a mobile phone, not only for social life but also for communicating with parents, that the practicalities of such a ‘place holder’ are understandable. Kelly offered quite a different example. We had been talking about the factors that have to be weighed up when deciding where to shop for particular items. She told me about what had informed her decision to buy a particular pair of shoes:

Umm, well with the, actually with the shoes that I bought yesterday, I... ‘cause I’m going on holiday, umm... in Easter, so two weeks, umm, ‘cause my shoes are actually falling apart, so I thought I might as well go to Primark and get ones that... cheap ones now that won’t last very long ‘cause I don’t need them for that long anyway, and then when I go on holiday I can buy some more.

(Interview 2/2, 17.03.2011)

Such has been the success of budget stores such as Primark and Matalan that shoppers – and particularly young people – know that there are places they can go to acquire items specifically for short term use, and this can help to legitimate the time frames that inform their acquisition decisions. Their logic can be summarised as, “I’m going to wait to buy something that I really want but I’ll have to get something else in the meantime.” Purchasing a pair of shoes, to draw on Kelly’s example, for a brief, pre-defined period raises the question of whether these items are viewed as disposable – as imminent waste – from the moment of acquisition, or even before. Gay Hawkins has suggested that, “[C]ommodity cultures show how waste as a practice of excess can be free of negative connotations” (2006: viii). In the instances described by my participants here, these objects are acquired in the knowledge that they will only enjoy short-term use and, simultaneously, the fact that this potentially invites their disposal only a short time after their acquisition is overlooked in favour of the more immediate convenience they offer.

Kelly's decision to 'tide herself over' with a cheap pair of shoes is understandable in wholly practical terms, if only because we all need shoes. Tessa offered an example which, more than reflecting any comparable directly practical concern, indicated the importance to some young people of maintaining particular practices even outside the context of everyday social life:

... some of my friends bought really cheap mp3 players when we went to Kenya, just so that they could have it for that period of time 'cause they didn't really care what happened to it.

(Interview 2/2, 11.03.2011)

While perhaps not imagined in terms of the imminent disposability that would appear to characterise Kelly's shoes, Tessa's friends' mp3 players were acquired with a specific, time-bounded purpose in mind. Perhaps these items were taken home and made use of, perhaps not. As Tessa said, her friends "didn't really care" since they fulfilled the function for which they were acquired – to maintain an element of a familiar 'home' youth culture in a foreign setting, without having to take the risk of loss or damage to the more expensive versions kept safe at home.⁵⁵

Whilst neither Kelly's shoes nor Tessa's friends' mp3 players were themselves directly the subject of stories about recent divestment, the girls' talk revealed the extent to which concern with self presentation and the maintenance of practices, facilitated by the low cost of the material 'tools' that sustain them, can override – although demonstrably not fully obscure – the imminent disposability of these objects. The fact that Kelly, Tessa and friends have the financial means to acquire 'place holder' possessions – and that, as a result, those objects' brief usable (or useful) life spans are viewed in neutral, if not explicitly positive terms – further emphasises the contrast between the benefits available to those with the means to pick and choose their interactions with these 'disposable' possessions, and the anxieties experienced by those with less money and thus little choice but to have their consumption patterns dictated by commercial interests.

⁵⁵ In Chapter Six I discuss a similar practice where no-longer-used technologies (generally mobile phones and mp3 players) are retained as 'back-ups' for use in scenarios such as this.

4.3.3 Section Summary

While there are clear benefits (such as variety and the acquisition of ‘place holders’) for those with the financial means to be able to opt in or out of purchasing ‘disposable’ possessions, those without similar means are vulnerable to being trapped in a cycle of acquire-dispose-replace set by producers. As Morgan and Birtwistle (2009) found in their study of young women’s clothing disposal, and as evidenced further here, for some young people, the durability of their garments is a matter of greater concern than tends to be acknowledged. Personal wealth allowed some of my participants to turn designed-in disposability to their advantage but this always involved accepting an object’s disposability, thus working with commercial interests rather than contesting them. The fact that my participants’ agency takes this form in response to these forces reflects a degree of acceptance of the cultural norm of disposability. Since these young people have grown up in an era of fast fashion and rapid technological change, this should not be surprising.

Nevertheless, while some participants took advantage of ‘disposable’ possessions for their own convenience, others, such as Rosa, felt a genuine need for durability and stability – and this is usually masked by assumptions on the part of producers, the media and popular understandings of youth that young people are only interested in variety and change. Whilst all of my participants admitted to enjoying novelty now and then, this was not at the cost of having to relinquish existing possessions. What Rosa and her boots made clear was that stability can be harder to find for those with less money to spend because, as demonstrated in section 4.2, durability (and, thus, stability) tends to remain the domain of those with greater wealth. Thus, once again, the nature of low cost options can be more of a burden than a benefit to those with less.

In one respect then, as this section and section 4.2 have made clear, the ways in which my participants respond to the material demands of youth culture, including trends in fashion and technology, is strongly influenced by their economic circumstances. This is about more than just their ability to buy new things; it is equally about how the types of objects they are able to buy contribute to the formation of dispositions that are more or less tolerant of (or aware of) disposability – and, by implication, waste. In section 4.4, my focus shifts away from the impacts of powerful consumer-cultural structures on my participants’ consumption and divestment decisions to the contexts in which their agency was able to contest these influences. While I begin by discussing the ways in which peer groups, as the physical manifestation of youth cultures, play a major part in

the social validation, even celebration, of newness and novelty as related to material possessions, I go on to demonstrate that some of my participants were only too content to opt out of the modes of social participation most exposed to manipulation by consumer culture.

4.4 The Material Mediation of Social Life

The discussion in this chapter so far has made reference to young people's social lives as one of the most important mediating factors in their relationships with their possessions. Here, my intention is, first, to consider the direct implications of peer relationships and adolescent sociality on the ways in which certain possessions fall out of use; and second, to reflect on what factors underpinned the ability of a small group of my participants to resist, and sometimes actively contest, the cycle of acquire-divest-replace to which many of their peers conformed.

4.4.1 Staying in the Loop and Being Noticed for the Right Reasons: How Peer Relationships Shape Young People's Consumption

I begin by picking up the conversation with Elspeth about why her mobile phone was so important to her.

... your phone you carry with you all the time and everyone sees it and stuff so you kind of want to have the best, best thing going... [...] I just think that if I had... it sounds really stupid, but I just think that if I had, like, an old... phone where you couldn't do picture messages or instant messaging and stuff like that, I just think you'd feel a bit out of the loop.

(Interview 1/2, 19.10.2010)

Two key points are raised here. First, it is important for Elspeth that her phone possesses the requisite functionality to allow communication with friends such that she can stay "in the loop" – a concern explicitly articulated by several other participants: Ailsa, Bella, Kelly, Amy, Emily and Tina. Second, it seems to be just as vital to Elspeth that she is seen to have the means to participate in this way. This suggests dual pressures: new versions of items appearing with rapid regularity and the perception that "everyone else" already has them. Bella agreed, saying:

...new stuff is coming out, like, all the time. Like you had the iPhone 3, then you have the iPhone 3G, then you have the iPhone 4, and when, you know, stuff comes out all the time and you see everyone getting new stuff, it's like... you want to get it as well, 'cause that's what everyone's doing.

(Interview 2/2, 26.01.2011)

I asked Elspeth what sort of functionality her phone had that she particularly valued – and that she liked her peers to know that she had:

Elspeth Umm... Blackberry messenger. [laughs]

Rebecca What's Blackberry messenger?

Elspeth It's, like, umm, instant messaging so you add other people that have... Blackberries and you can chat to them for free, and 'cause so many people have them it's really good 'cause then you don't have to pay for texts.

(Interview 1/2, 19.10.2010)

Four participants were Blackberry owners: Ella, Kelly, Elspeth and Maggie, with Ailsa owning what she called a 'wannabe Blackberry' (a Nokia handset with a similar interface) and Sadie keen to make her next phone a Blackberry. (It is interesting to note that, in contrast, Bella was keen for her next phone to be anything but a Blackberry as she felt they were "too common" – in the sense of ubiquitous.) The provision of a service allowing free communication between users of similar devices (where other comparable services on other types of phones would cost money) can be seen almost as a form of distinct social grouping, where ownership of a Blackberry is the passport to entry. A 2011 study into smartphone use amongst different age groups in the UK revealed the Blackberry to be the device of choice for the majority of teenagers (BBC 2011), with the free instant messaging service provided by Blackberry Messenger (BBM) a strong motivating force (Appstorm 2011).⁵⁶

Suggesting that young people may experience pressure to keep up with the latest "legitimate" phone types, Wilska (2003) identifies the allure of possessing a device that conforms with demands to participate in (virtual and physical) social life via specific mobile phone functionalities, and Tully (2002) contends that the dynamism of

⁵⁶ Although the popularity of Blackberries has waned more recently (Jeffries 2013), the point I make here is broadly transposable to smartphones generally, since the data packages that form part of both contracts and many pay-as-you-go services includes a data (i.e. internet) allowance which makes access to popular social networks (Facebook and Twitter), to all intents and purposes, free.

contemporary youth cultures is both the cause and effect of (easier) synchronicity between peers, a phenomenon driven in large part by mobile phone use (see also Grant and O'Donohoe 2007). Nicky Gregson and colleagues have also posited in their work on the divestment of everyday material possessions that, "to be a competent practitioner of certain practices might require us to get rid of certain artefacts and to substitute something different, newer, or more appropriate" (Gregson et al. 2007a: 188). For young people, this may often relate to a perceived 'need' to keep up with mobile phone technology in order to fully participate – and be seen as able to participate – in adolescent social life.

Concern about how one's possessions are viewed by peers was a widespread concern for my participants, and this was by no means only in the context of mobile phones. Rosa, for instance, connected the ability to display new clothes with the recognition from peers that is closely bound up with young people's self-esteem.

I think because in the back of my mind I know that it's kind of, not cool, but it's good to be fashionable, so the newer your things are, the more kind of respect you're going to get for that, in a sense. It's unbelievable how much you can get... just by the way you look, especially females.

(Interview 2/2, 09.02.2011)

Emily agreed:

... once you've bought them [new clothes] they're not new anymore so it's not as good. Everyone's seen them already.

(Scoping interview, 23.02.2010)

In one of the scoping interviews conducted at the start of this project, Louise offered a view from the perspective that several of my participants felt their peers were judging them from:

Louise Like, with college, I feel like you kind of have to, like, have something new, as well, so at some point... You can't really keep wearing the same clothes.

Rebecca Ok, why is that?

Louise I dunno, I suppose I think it's 'cause I notice when other people do it so I feel like they're noticing me if I did it.

Rebecca Ok, so you notice when other people do have something new, or don't... or both?

- Louise I think it's don't more, usually.
- Rebecca What does it make you think, when you notice...?
- Louise I don't know, it's just, like... sometimes you kind of end up, like, staring 'cause, like, it's not really much to look at if you're, like, poor, you just look at...
- Rebecca Ok, so that creates... almost like an expectation or pressure?
- Louise I don't think there's an expectation to have, like, new clothes but I think, like, I suppose there's an expectation to wear different clothes every day, kind of thing.

(Scoping interview, 17.02.2010)

Taken together, these examples emphasise how young people's possessions can fall out of use – or perhaps come to be nudged out of use – as a result of attempts to live up to peer group expectations about conforming to particular modes of self presentation or social identification. Bentley et al. (2004) found that the direct impact of peer influence on young people's acquisition of specific items was extremely low, suggesting that the ways in which young people's social concerns shape their relationships with their material possessions is more subtle. The nature of this subtle influence is alluded to by Autio and Heinonen's (2004) suggestion that young people's consumption might be less about the ownership of specific things and more about possessing the means to participate in the practices (including particular forms of self identification or presentation) in which those objects are implicated (see also Warde 2005).

Whilst, in one sense, my participants' comments suggest there is truth in this position, there are also nuances within it that are worthy of comment in light of the points raised by my data. Young people's 'need' to have the material means to participate in core youth cultural practices sometimes requires access to a specific kind of object. Consider smartphones and their facilitation of access to social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, or Blackberry's own instant messenger service, BBM. These smartphones produce a practice-within-a-practice – communicating via these online spaces as part of the wider practice of instant messaging – for which ownership of a specific device is a fundamental requirement. The issue then is one of the capacity of material things to structure (or even create new) practices (see for example, Gram-Hanssen 2011; Hobson 2006; Shove et al. 2007; Watson and Shove 2008).

In this instance the development of new phone functionality precipitates the development of practices-within-practices, like BBM within instant messaging, that in turn creates demand for the devices that grant access to that practice and thus that social space. As Warde (2005: 148) suggests, “it is not so much things in themselves, but rather the place within different practices that is afforded by the possession or control of goods and services which is the basis of contentment, social acceptability and recognition.” And for young people for whom social acceptability and recognition are key, sometimes positioning themselves in the right “place within a practice” can necessitate the acquisition of a specific material good, allowing its predecessor to fall out of use (see Gregson et al. 2009 for comments on adults’ similar experiences).

What is important to remember here in light of the discussion in previous sections is the extent to which these practices and social norms are often deeply embedded in the frequent cycles of change that characterise consumer culture. As the majority of the examples provided by my participants so far reveal, for many young people in the UK their social life is characterised by consumption-based participation which is structured by forms of youth culture born out of that consumer culture. But this is not always the case. While some young people appear to express willingness to accept and conform to perceived youth cultural norms, others are able to sidestep the consumption treadmill that is often a source of anxiety for their peers, instead directly contesting the acquire-divest-replace cycle by managing their relationships with their possessions on their own terms.

4.4.2 Challenging the Market, Contesting Cultural Norms: Why and How Some Participants Resisted Acquiring-Divesting-Replacing

Here I turn my attention to how some of my participants, whose social lives seemed to be more distanced from the rhythms and pressures of consumer culture than those of their peers, expressed dispositions which resulted in material possessions rarely falling out of use when they were still capable of productive use. A small subgroup of my participants (Martin, Olivia, John, Oz and Ruth) set themselves apart from the norms of short-term use and disposability accepted by their peers, both through the attitudes they expressed towards contemporary consumption and the ways in which they actively contested demands from the market and their peers to conform.

Olivia and Martin, for example, were both well attuned to the machinations of the market. Olivia is quoted in section 4.2.2 noting how consumer expectations of new devices are shaped by technology companies such as Apple – an attitude which made no sense to her. She, like Martin, felt that whether ‘newer’ also meant ‘better’ was highly debatable. Martin was particularly outspoken on this matter:

... about every six months something seems to come out that’s another form [of the thing] for whichever idiot wants to shell out for it and the chances are it’s not going to be that much better and... the other thing is, there’s always these constant complaints about none of them work.

(Interview 2/2, 23.03.2011)

It is, therefore, unsurprising to note that these two participants were owners of the oldest phones in the group – nearly four and over five years, respectively. For these two young people, their ability to resist being drawn into the acquire-divest-replace cycle (which was as true for their attitude to clothing as technologies) seemed to be based on ‘savviness’ as to the workings of retailers and markets. For Olivia, this seemed to result at least in part from an ‘alternative’ upbringing (in her own words, “my mum’s a bit of a hippy”); for Martin, it was a combination of family-based values and what he had learned from reading about economic and political history. More than just ‘savviness’, however, it was also clear that, while they both had full and active social lives, the kinds of materially-based social expectations articulated by participants in section 4.4.1 were largely absent from Olivia and Martin’s friendship groups. The combination of freedom from expectation and personal values attuned to the workings of markets appeared to grant these two young people far greater agency than that possessed by their peers in similar circumstances.

Ruth had also been able to distance herself from these pressures. In her case this was a result of her religious beliefs. During our first meeting she told me about some of her most recent purchases – a pair of jeans and two cardigans. She had bought them all from the same store, Dorothy Perkins, which she described as her “favourite shop”. Explaining why this retailer (which targets professional women rather than adolescents) was her favourite, she said:

Well, I have a bit of a problem shopping because of my, like, religious beliefs, I think that we should always dress modestly and it’s so hard to go shopping now because so many clothes are, like, immodest and I just find that quite a lot of clothes in there I can wear.

(Interview 1/2, 15.10.2010)



Figure 4.3 Ruth's wardrobe

Because Ruth wants to observe her beliefs about dressing modestly, her clothing consumption opportunities are limited to those which purvey smarter, more demure styles. As a result, the clothes she is able to buy are less vulnerable to the constantly changing conspicuous trends that dominate the fast fashion stores frequented by her peers. Furthermore, being limited to outlets which target professional women means that the physical as well as stylistic durability of the garments she buys is likely to be more satisfactory. What was particularly noteworthy was her ability to fulfil her needs on a tight budget. For Ruth, her ability to resist cultural pressures is based on the prioritisation of her beliefs over any cultural 'demands' imposed by her simultaneous location in the 'youth' demographic. Whilst Ruth's circumstances were unique amongst the participant group, her experience implies that young people's agency can find more active expression when their identities and relationships are distanced from consumer culture.

Ruth, Olivia and Martin's comments suggest contentment with the ways in which their personal values and consumption practices contest the acquire-divest-replace norm. While their strategies tended to be characterised by conscious avoidance of certain retailers and rejection of marketing and media messages, two other participants, Oz and John, described experiences in which, in one sense, they succumb to these pressures, yet in another they directly confront them. Both boys' stories concerned

their mobile phones and both focused on circumstances in which they contested the ease of replacement that can mean possessions unnecessarily fall out of use.

Oz had a first generation iPhone:

... it was, like, the first one that came out. I've got it with me, I'll show you the condition of it. Like, it's pretty... pretty messed up. I'm waiting until before I go to university next year to get a new one. Umm, I've had this one for three, four years? And I, like, tape it up. Everything still works though.

(Interview 2/2, 17.02.2011)

The fact that this phone had almost been replaced emerged when I asked Oz whether he had ever made what he would consider a mistake purchase. He responded:

Oz I bought a new phone but I didn't really need it so I just took it back.

Rebecca Ok. Why did you get it in the first place?

Oz 'Cause my old one was broken but I fixed it.

(Interview 1/2, 18.10.2010)

What is striking about this story is how strongly Oz's actions contrast with expectations of teenage behaviour in such circumstances. Although he was momentarily swayed by either the lure of the new or the convenience of replacement, on reflection he saw this new phone as unnecessary. As a result, he did what many of his peers would consider unthinkable – he returned the new phone in order to continue using the older, broken one. This response was precipitated by his belief that:

... most things if you treat them, I think if you treat them, you know, right, they should last forever.

(Interview 1/2, 18.10.2010)

Oz liked to design and build things. He was well acquainted with the knowledge, skills and effort required to make things, and this informed his belief that certain objects – including mobile phones – can and should physically endure. His first-hand experience of production meant that he also valued his possessions as resources and embodied labour, as well as objects of practical use. His ability to directly confront and contest the convenience of replacing his phone resulted from agency facilitated by specific knowledge and skills, and augmented by the fact that his friends, many of whom were also interested in design and production, shared similar views.

John's interactions with his iPhone tell an equally interesting story. At the time of our conversations, John had owned his current phone, a first generation iPhone (Figure 4.4), for about a year. It was a hand-me-down from his brother upon his (brother's) acquisition of what was then the latest version of the same device, the iPhone4.



Figure 4.4 John's phones, with his "original, vintage" iPhone in the foreground

During my second interview with John, he told me about how he had come to own his present phone as a result of his (older) brother's preoccupation with keeping up with technological trends.

John Umm... he is kind of more... kind of up to date with new technology and, umm... if something else better comes out... then he doesn't really care how long it lasts because he's just going to throw it away anyway. So... my iPhone... 'cause it's... well, I say original vintage and he says caveman phone. And that I should throw it away. [...] He calls his 'the Jesus machine'. His iPhone 4.

Rebecca What does he mean by that?

John He thinks that it's really great and that it's amazing and it's... you know... got amazing powers.

Rebecca Ok. How long do you think he'll think that? Until the iPhone 5 comes out?

John Yeah, I think so. Until they come out with a new amazing... extra...

Rebecca Ok. And he said your phone is like a caveman phone whereas you describe it as vintage?

John I say vintage and original. It's only a couple of years old.

(Interview 2/2, 27.01.2011)

His brother both ages and simplifies John's phone by describing it as a "caveman phone" at the same time as bestowing powers on his own by calling it "the Jesus machine". John is clear that this view will last only as long as "the Jesus machine" is the most up-to-date device on the market. Demonstrating a completely different attitude to his brother, John describes his first generation iPhone as "original vintage". While the term "vintage" is used ironically, it not only underlines the speed at which technologies come to be seen as old fashioned, as well as plain 'old', here it seems to speak of a pride John has in owning a device that, in other terms, might be described as 'old skool cool'. The first sense, then, in which John confronts the devaluation of his phone is by contesting the negativity associated with its age, or, indeed, the ageing of gadgets generally.

In terms of its use, John's phone is used "strictly as a tool [...] I use it when I have to" – usually to make short notice amendments to social plans, or to ask a quick question of a friend or family member. His limited use of his iPhone's functions (calling, texting and the alarm clock) led to an insightful comment from one of his peers:

"My friend said to me, hey, umm, you have an iPhone and you actually use it as a phone."

(Interview 2/2, 27.01.2011)

This observation from his friend seems to be one of surprise, reflecting a youth cultural attitude to mobile phone technology in which all functions are there to be used. It is important to remember, however, that John did not choose this phone for himself; it was given to him as one of his brother's cast-offs. Despite having functionality including email, the internet, an mp3 player and access to hundreds of applications, John did not engage with any of them, making him less susceptible to some of the forms of socially-activated ageing described in section 4.2, which seemed to beset his peers. Thus, John's second method of tackling the obsolescence imposed on his iPhone is by resisting being lured into dependency on functionality he knows he does not need.

Over the course of our conversations John never mentioned for how long he expected to keep this phone, saying only that he accepted it from his brother because his old one had been failing for some time – “only about two buttons on it worked.” However, his pride in possessing an “original vintage” iPhone combined with his ability to remain relatively unaffected by the commercial rhythms that drive much mobile phone replacement amongst his peers suggest that, for John, it is the physical durability of the object – a purely practical concern – rather than temporalities imposed by consumer or youth cultural norms that determines when – or if – it falls out of use.

For the five individuals featured in this section, the forms of social validation that their peers negotiate in conformance with youth and consumer cultural norms are achieved outside of this heavily structured system as a result of attitudes that see as unnecessary conspicuous display and novelty for novelty’s sake. Although these five were a minority, the fact that some young people are demonstrably able to apprehend the cultural forces that push possessions (particularly clothing and technologies) out of use (and, for many, seem to be a source of anxiety in consumption) by drawing on knowledge, skills or beliefs to exert their agency is an important finding worth underlining, and a theme to which I return in Chapters 6 and 7.

4.4.3 Section Summary

My aim in this section has been, on the one hand, to illustrate how the demands of adolescent social life play into consumer cultural forces concerned with speeding the demise of certain possessions, and on the other, to emphasise that not all young people fall victim to these pressures. It was evident that the ways in which material things are incorporated into participants’ social relationships is often in response to the need for validation from peers.

The fact that peer influence seems largely to be indirect is an important finding, particularly in light of the emphasis placed on peer influence by environmental educators. While participants often spoke about wanting to join in and feeling judged by others based on the relative newness of their sweater or phone, this was never the result of direct comments from peers, only ever personal perception. Since indirect peer influence is strongly mediated through individual self-esteem, for those participants with few other avenues through which to develop self-esteem, one way of

achieving it may be through the validation of one's attempts to keep pace with the latest trends (Warde 2005).

The relationship between participants' attitudes towards the longevity of possessions and their sense of confidence and security in their self-identity was also apparent in the second half of this section. The five participants featured in section 4.4.2 shared a sense of agency that, in the context of resisting the acquire-divest-replace cycle, was far stronger than that of most of their peers. Although each had his or her own personal beliefs, interests or values in which this agency was embedded, their actions were linked by their common ability to confront and contest the dominant cultural norms which pushed many of their peers' possessions out of use. Further, these participants seemed to gain their sense of belonging, competence and validation from forms of sociality that were more distanced from consumer culture than those of their peers. Since adolescent (lack of) self-esteem has been linked to youthful tendencies to seek validation through material consumption (Chaplin and John 2007; Isaksen and Roper 2012; Park and John 2011), seeking means of increasing young people's agency away from their role as consumers is evidently fundamental to making their consumption sustainable. I return to the implications of this in Chapter Seven.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I summarise the socio-cultural, economic and material factors that shaped my participants' consumption and consider how these forces might be viewed as conspiring to make waste out of usable possessions.

4.5 Conclusions: Falling Out Of Use... Becoming Waste?

Bulkeley and Gregson (2009) argue that addressing the reasons why possessions fall out of use is key to reducing waste. By extension, there are clear implications for increasing the sustainability of everyday material consumption. For my participants, it appeared that several forces worked together to create contexts in which their possessions fell, or were pushed, out of use. The most powerful of these were the seemingly overwhelming choice, low costs (much of the time) and apparent acceptance of short-term use and disposability within contemporary consumer culture; and the dominant form of youth sociality, which retains at its heart the necessity of owning certain types of material possessions as a passport to participation in core youth practices. For most participants, their relationships with their possessions were negotiated in the context of these pervasive cultural norms.

As this chapter has made evident, the result of the domination of youth culture by commercial forces means that many of the items central to youth practices are at risk of falling out of use long before their material form (i.e. their physical durability) would render them physically useless. Superseding styles or functionality create what has been termed stylistic obsolescence (Maycroft 2009a) or a lack of emotional durability (Thompson 1979), leading to an acceptance of disposability which overshadows the knowledge that possessions could be used for longer. This is exacerbated by peer group expectations as to one another's ability (even obligation) to keep pace with the newest gadgets and styles. As a result, the spectre of waste – as a process of wasting – emerges in the form of the unused potential of the object.

Whilst an object's use is a function of its owner's agency, discussion in this chapter has shown that, for my young participants, their agency was – on the whole – relatively weak in the face of socio-cultural demands, at least as far as contesting dominant norms was concerned. Bentley et al. (2004) have argued that young people often find their agency limited by consumption desires linked to social expectations, such that other values are overshadowed and complicity with consumer cultural demands occurs with little resistance (see also Miles 1995). In this respect, as Miles (2000: 63) suggests, young people can use aspects of youth culture to “legitimize dominant power structures.” The ease with which some of my participants' possessions fell out of use suggests that they might be doing this. The fact that consumer culture is so adept at responding to young people's ‘need’ to materialise and perform their youth in such a way as to constantly reproduce its characterisation as innovative, dynamic and pushing at boundaries means the overlap between consumer and youth cultures is, at present at least, inextricable. Thus, waste/wasting, in the sense of lack of full use, occurs as a direct result of scant individual agency in the face of consumer culture-imposed trends legitimized by their widespread uptake amongst adolescent groups.

The nature of an individual's (potential) waste-making was, at least in part, a function of the ways in which their personal wealth shaped how their agency was expressed in relation to their engagement with the disposability of particular possessions. Those with fewer financial resources, who found their choices limited to lower quality, less durable goods, whilst expressing annoyance with malfunctioning purchases, did not necessarily view the outcome of this process in terms of waste created. Indeed, the cost-durability relationship made sense to them – as Emily said, “you expect [things] to last, like, long enough for you to get, like, their worth” (scoping interview, 23.02.2010).

Whilst those with greater wealth had the means to acquire more durable items, particularly garments, they did not always do so. Instead, these participants selectively opted for more 'disposable' goods when these items offered particular convenience, exemplifying Hanson's (1980) view that such items tend to present their disposability as a positive attribute. Here, these participants' focus was more on how the nature of that object fulfilled their immediate need or desire – which was, itself, implicitly acknowledged to be fleeting – rather than the fate of that item once that need or desire had passed. Hawkins (2001: 9) suggests that, "[M]any convenient objects have a presence as imminent rubbish that is difficult to suppress", yet for my participants, although the disposability of these objects was often acknowledged before it became a reality, the realisation that these objects were, in essence, imminent waste seemed not to occur.

The potential for waste is thus largely invisible in the contexts in which my participants' possessions fall out of use. During acquisition, the potential for the object to fall out of use and become waste is obscured by the tendency to only perceive that object in active use. This tends to be exacerbated by very low costs, since the thrill of a bargain magnifies the excitement of having something new. As Rosa said, "... to be honest, when I get things from Primark I don't really think 'cause they're just so cheap" (Interview 1/2, 20.10.2010). Waste remains equally obscured when a possession is a means to an end – when it facilitates participation in a practice but the object itself is not intrinsically important – mobile phones being the key example here. In this regard, my participants are arguably complicit in a form of waste fetishism, where, rather than cultural mediations enhancing the social value of their possessions (Dant 1999), they work to reduce their value instead. Here the implications of non-use rather than the conditions of production are obscured by an implicit acceptance of, even a kind of pleasure in, superfluity. I do not suggest that my participants seek to be wasteful (cf. Veblen 1915 [1899]), simply that they are ambivalent about waste's presence because they are preoccupied with social demands.

While some participants were able to exercise a degree of agency by appropriating the disposability of objects for their own ends, their actions were made possible by cultural norms that make them acceptable, a consumer culture that provides, as standard, resources of the requisite (low) quality and cost, and personal wealth that meant they could afford to acquire 'duplicate' possessions. This latter fact sets up an interesting problem around whether young people with greater or fewer financial resources are

better placed to be environmentally sustainable consumers. David Evans (2011b) has recently considered similar questions in the contexts of adults' consumption, concluding that thrift does not necessarily equate with more sustainable consumption, as saving money is often used as a justification for buying more – as some of my participants also reported. I return to the implications of this in Chapter Seven.

Despite the widespread and potent influence of youth cultural practices on most of my participants' relationships with their possessions, one small sub-group, whose social lives drew little on dominant youth cultural norms, expressed forms of agency capable of directly contesting the acquire-divest-replace cycle experienced by their peers. Although this was a minority group within the sample as whole, the fact that they maintained social relationships situated within alternative⁵⁷ values systems and social norms, and characterised by a less acquisition-intensive means of mediation, underscores the influence of the immediate socio-cultural context of young people's everyday lives on their relationships with possessions.

In sum, powerful consumer cultural and youth cultural forces conspire to suppress young people's agency in determining the nature and length of their relationships with their possessions. That waste was rarely acknowledged as a potential outcome of my participants' possessions falling out of use – even for those items acquired because of their disposability – underlines the extent to which the normalisation of disposability has effected a kind of blind self-absolution from the responsibility of dealing with the remnants of consumption. While, in one sense, it would be hard to argue against the view that the reasons why my participants' possessions (at least, those presented here) fall out of use make them complicit in waste-making, their apparent obliviousness to this suggests the norms to which they subscribe and the social demands with which they seek to comply, rather than their personal values, are the drivers, thus bearing out the view that the creation of waste is embedded in social life (Cooper 2009; Douglas 1966; Hawkins 2006; Thompson 1979).

The possessions discussed in this chapter largely inhabited a 'grey area' between use and non-use, and, as such, articulating the extent to which they were waste or wasted is difficult. Indeed, while viewing unused objects as wasted has some merit in terms of gauging the volume of un(der)used resources lying dormant in households (the problems of which from a sustainability point of view are discussed by Ongondo and

⁵⁷ I use the word 'alternative' here in the sense of atypical in the context of contemporary youth culture(s).

Williams 2011), the fact that falling out of use is a process from which possessions can be retrieved suggests that whether or not they become waste is far from a foregone conclusion. Much depends on what happens to those objects next. In Chapter Five I discuss some of the ways in which my participants dealt with possessions that had fallen out of use.

CHAPTER FIVE

GIVING AWAY, SELLING ON, CHUCKING OUT Getting rid of unwanted possessions

5.1 Introduction

Shoes, mobile phones, clothing, DVDs... over the course of our conversations my participants spoke about many different possessions which, over weeks or months, had fallen out of use. In this chapter I am concerned with what happened to these objects next. While understanding the factors that contribute to possessions falling out of use is fundamental to understanding the sustainability of young people's material consumption, exploring how these objects are then dealt with is equally revealing. Are they left to gather dust or callously binned, as the popular notion of the profligate, wasteful teen would suggest? Each of my participants talked me through how they moved on their no-longer-wanted possessions, and here I discuss the different channels used, as well as what their use suggests about my participants' tendencies to create or avert waste.

For most, ridding⁵⁸ began with sorting. Often this involved arranging possessions in piles during episodic 'clear out' sessions. These 'clear outs', which were sometimes – but not always – prompted by parental demands, were located in participants' bedrooms and usually occurred in school holidays when participants had time to reflect on which possessions were still wanted and which were of no further use. There was always a 'keep' pile – largely consisting of items still in everyday use, as well as those with strong emotional significance. For some there was a 'maybe' pile consisting of items less frequently used, or perhaps not used at all but associated with a memory that made it difficult to decide whether keeping or ridding was the 'right' option.

In this chapter I am concerned with the contents of a third pile – that which was generally described as 'throw away' or 'get rid'.⁵⁹ Sometimes this included items from the 'maybe'

⁵⁸ I employ the term 'ridding' to describe the physical movement of possessions out of my participants' ownership and into other realms of use (or non-use) through processes such as binning, selling and giving away.

⁵⁹ 'Get rid' is a commonly used but problematically vague term which describes the process of moving along (or the intention to move along) no-longer-wanted material objects into either the waste stream or another ridding channel. Since the participants often described their

pile once a decision had been reached. Primarily, however, the ‘get rid’ pile incorporated possessions that were no longer used or wanted. This included the kinds of objects that fell out of use as a result of the factors discussed in Chapter Four – mobile phones and items of clothing, for instance. However, it also incorporated other possessions, less vulnerable to these forces but which had fallen out of use for other reasons: malfunction, changing personal interests, or simply growing up. As a result, the discussion in this chapter incorporates a wider range of objects than the preceding chapter, including: books, CDs and DVDs, games and childhood toys, and objects implicated in leisure interests. Investigating the trajectories of a larger range of objects elicited stories about the use of ridding channels beyond those catering for clothing and mobile phones, and permitted the exploration of a wider range of influences on participants’ ridding practices.

Focusing on the channels that are used to ‘get rid’ of no-longer-wanted possessions, and acknowledging that the objects marked out for ridding to some extent influence the trajectory chosen, my concern in this chapter is primarily with how these channels come to be selected (i.e. my participants’ inclination and ability to make use of different options⁶⁰) and what those selections reflect about my participants’ aims in ridding in those ways. Accordingly, discussion concentrates on why some possessions were moved on in ways that actively avoided the waste stream (by selling and giving away), and what differentiated these items (or the contexts in which the act of ridding occurred) from those for which the bin seemed the most appropriate choice. What emerged from my participants’ comments was a clear preoccupation with the social value of their no-longer-wanted possessions, underpinned by a strong moral imperative around waste avoidance. In this chapter, I consider what contributed to this preoccupation, and what its implications were for the ways in which my participants engaged in ridding.

actions in terms of ‘getting rid’ of things, I, too, adopt this phrase to describe the general processes of ridding they reported.

⁶⁰ While the infrastructures that support ridding channels clearly play an important part in the forms of ridding available to my participants, I do not discuss these in any depth here since their role in shaping divestment has been addressed elsewhere (e.g. Bulkeley and Askins 2011; Bulkeley and Gregson 2009; Chappells and Shove 1999; Perry et al. 2010; Tudor et al. 2011; Van Vliet et al. 2005). Although my participants may have had access to different ridding channels based on where they lived, they all had access to a variety of options for giving away, selling and binning. My focus is, therefore, on how they responded to the range of channels to which they had ready access.

It should be noted briefly here that the word 'value', particularly when discussed alongside 'use' (which, as this chapter will demonstrate, my participants frequently did), is heavily loaded in social theoretical terms. In the discussion that follows I employ these terms first and foremost to relay participants' preoccupations as they articulated them. Miller (2008) has recently argued for a new approach to theorising the increasingly expansive concept of value based on how the term is used in a range of everyday settings (see also Dant 2005). He suggests that, "a better way to ask what value is, is by asking what value does" (1122). In light of the fact that perceptions and conceptualisations of value are "open to constant relational, social and active negotiation" (Crewe and Gregson 1998: 50), as well as the recognition that social actors have a key role to play in creating the conditions for value to emerge (Parsons 2008), here I am concerned with how the forms of value my participants associated with their possessions emerged from their awareness of and participation in a variety of contemporary social relations. As a result, I employ a grounded definition of 'value' based on their everyday encounters with their possessions in a range of social contexts. I contend that this is a constructive means of deepening understanding of the nature of young people's relationships with material things, especially the traits they associate with utility and waste.

In this chapter I discuss the three main trajectories employed by my participants: binning; selling; and giving away. I begin in section 5.2 by acknowledging the place of binning in my participants' ridding repertoires and outlining the contexts in which participants turned to binning as the most appropriate means of dealing with no-longer-wanted possessions. I follow this in section 5.3 with a discussion of the reasons participants gave for seeking out methods of ridding other than binning. Here the emphasis is on the sorts of traits my participants perceived in their no-longer-wanted possessions which made them view the bin as an inappropriate ridding method. Sections 5.4 and 5.5 focus on selling and giving away respectively. I consider how these methods of ridding contribute to the construction or maintenance of different forms of value, the capabilities required to successfully rid in these ways, as well as what my participants seek to achieve (in terms of self-identity and social relationships) by doing this, beyond their practical concern with getting rid of unwanted possessions. In a concluding section, 5.6, I reflect on what my participants' ridding suggested about their sensitivity to the potential for waste creation in their ridding decisions, as well as their ability to act in ways that negated this threat.

5.2 Binning: No Use, No Value... No Effort?

In the context of this project ‘binning’ refers to the ridding process through which unwanted material possessions are placed in the waste stream via household waste bins, which, in turn, feed into municipal waste management processes. It is a form of ridding in which the items concerned are perceived as having little or no value of any kind, and are thus handled in ways that construct them as valueless rubbish (Thompson 1979).

Chappells and Shove (1999: 269) have argued that, “[T]he valuing of novelty and the valuing of durability [...] influence the rate at which items defined as rubbish flow into the bin” (emphasis in original). In light of the findings of Chapter Four, that poor physical and stylistic durability and the cultural valorisation of newness were major contributors to my participants’ possessions falling out of use, a logical conclusion might be that a large proportion of my participants’ possessions were destined for the bin. Extant literature on the subject of young people’s binning tendencies offers little context on this issue, since studies of this topic have focused almost exclusively on the recycling of waste paper and food and beverage packaging (for example Chung and Leung 2007; Robertson and Walkington 2009; Zhang et al. 2008). While recycling can, in some senses, be viewed as a subset of binning, here I maintain a distinction between the two practices, the reasons for which I discuss in section 5.2.2. First I consider the range of scenarios that led to binning.

5.2.1 “If I don’t use it, I’d just throw it” – Why Some Things Just Get Binned

If it’s completely useless and I don’t like it, I don’t want it, then it’ll go in the bin.

(Jamie, Interview 1/2, 10.11.2010)

Jamie’s motivations for binning some of his unwanted possessions, as expressed in this quote, were, unsurprisingly, very common across the group. Objects that were considered old, damaged, irrelevant or embarrassing were dealt with in this way. Graham, Cherry, Molly, Sadie, Bella and Omayma, for instance, were all explicit about their tendency to bin items – particularly clothes and shoes – that they considered ‘old’. Omayma especially was unwilling to use any other means to get rid of items she felt were in a dubious state, suggesting she was sensitive to how her actions might reflect back on her. Bella took a more pragmatic view, saying:

If it was... worn out shoes then I'd throw it away 'cause I know that it wouldn't do much good for someone else to wear them...

(Interview 1/2, 14.10.2010)

Damaged items were viewed similarly, with Rosa, Kelly, Jamie, Amy, Ailsa and Khadija all saying that they would bin possessions that could not, or would not (for reasons of time, effort, cost or general disinclination), be repaired.⁶¹ For some, as Gregson et al. (2007a) report for adults, embarrassment provided another reason to use the bin. Talking about clothes and accessories she now thought were “hideous”, Ella said, “[T]hey get thrown. Straight into the bin” (Interview 1/2, 09.11.2010) because she “wouldn't want to inflict them on people” (Interview 2/2, 23.03.2011) – a response shared by Lettie, Molly, Sally and Aidan, who said of some DVDs he bought as a young teenager, “I wouldn't want people to see them! [laughs]” (Scoping interview, 17.02.2010). Both Ella's and Aidan's remarks vehemently emphasise the fact that, as Gregson et al. (2007a, 2007b) and Woodward (2007) note, a fundamental driver of divestment is the desire to sweep away traces of undesirable past selves; indeed, Ella's comment that she “wouldn't want to inflict [her unwanted things] on people” goes further by suggesting that to dispose of these items through any channel other than ridding would be almost cruel.

Not all participants' binning was precipitated by such a strong emotional response to their possessions, though; some objects simply ceased to be relevant to their everyday lives, such that any possible further use was difficult to imagine. Khadija, for example, said:

... if it's something that's, sort of... completely not needed then I'd... throw it away.
[...] It's like... not relevant to anything or it won't be useful in the future.

(Interview 1/2, 22.10.2010)

In viewing the sorts of objects she would bin as “not relevant to anything”, Khadija sets up an apposite comparison with other possessions that are moved on in other ways precisely because they maintain a relevance to everyday practices, even if they can now be better used by others. Evie concurred, describing binned objects as having “no reference to [her] life” (Interview 1/2, 20.10.2010). In contrast, possessions with which she maintained a degree of connection or attachment avoided the bin, even when she herself had no further use for them.

⁶¹ The subject of repair is addressed in Chapter Six.

Sally had previously made use of car boot sales as a means of moving on her unwanted possessions. However, due to both school-related time pressures and a change in family circumstances which meant attending car boot sales had become difficult, she was now “probably more likely to throw [things] away” (Interview 1/2, 18.10.2010). Rosa, who lived in a small village outside Cambridge, found that living far from town made it difficult (in terms of both time and transportation) to rid via the charity shops and banks which tend to be concentrated in urban areas. As a result, she only made use of these channels when having a major clear-out; binning was used in the interim. Sadie was somewhat blunter about her reasons for binning rather than seeking out other channels:

I kind of try... but... sometimes I can't be arsed! [laughs]

(Interview 2/2, 01.02.2011)

These comments convey the centrality of convenience to some of my participants' ridding practices. Sally, for instance, said:

Sometimes I'm just, like, actually, I need to get rid of it so it's going in the bin.

(Interview 2/2, 27.01.2011)

Evie, similarly, said:

There's been times when I've just had to throw things out. Well, not had to, but I've just thrown things out because of being busy or whatever.

(Interview 1/2, 20.10.2010)

The busy lives led by my participants meant they often preferred to deal with unwanted possessions quickly in order to avoid the stress associated with unnecessary 'clutter' (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003). The domestic waste bin offers a level of convenience unlike any other ridding channel – items can be binned moments after being designated unwanted (Evans 2012b). Even if they remain in the bin for several days until the next municipal waste collection, placing them there relieves the anxiety associated with the presence of waste by 'black-boxing' the troubling items - out of sight, out of mind (Chappells and Shove 1999; De Coverly et al. 2008). As Gregson et al. (2007a: 196) identify, bins work to, “[r]eclaim the self from the polluting effects of the excess”, creating a psychologically important separation between present self and remnants of past selves, events and experiences. Using other ridding channels, whether selling or giving away, inevitably involves an interim period in which no-

longer-wanted objects remain nearby, often getting in the way and acting as a reminder of that now irrelevant, and sometimes troubling, past self. For my participants, the appeal of binning lay in its instant results. In one sense this could be viewed in terms of unwillingness to disrupt existing routines; yet as the participants' comments suggest, often it was simply about ridding in the most convenient way in the context of busy lives.

For some of the young people, their tendency to opt for the bin out of convenience was associated with either not knowing about other ways of ridding, not being sure which ridding channel to choose, or with having had their possessions rejected by alternative channels. Louise, for instance, stated that she binned the vast majority of her no-longer-wanted possessions (other than clothes which she took to charity shops) because she was unaware of other ways in which she could get rid of them and she felt she would annoy her parents by passing the responsibility to them. Maggie simply felt overwhelmed at times by the multitude of different ridding channels she was surrounded by and the different 'rules' attached to each, meaning that items sometimes ended up in the waste stream that might have been moved on in another way. Furthermore, as Rosa made clear, most young people have more pressing concerns than locating the most appropriate way of getting rid of unwanted possessions.

... it sounds terrible, but if I had homework to do, I wouldn't think, right, I'm going to look for half an hour for a way to get rid of this iPod that's not working. I'd probably end up just chucking it. 'Cause you see, again, it's easier.

(Interview 2/2, 09.02.2011)

Despite some degree of effort to make use of ridding channels other than binning, sometimes the participants found that the methods they hoped to use were not suitable for the possessions they sought to get rid of. Maggie, Amy, Ailsa and Graham reported having experienced this, particularly when it came to dealing with gadgets. As a result, binning was used as a 'second choice' ridding channel after their initial attempts to give away or sell items had been unsuccessful. Figure 5.1 illustrates one such experience described by Jamie.

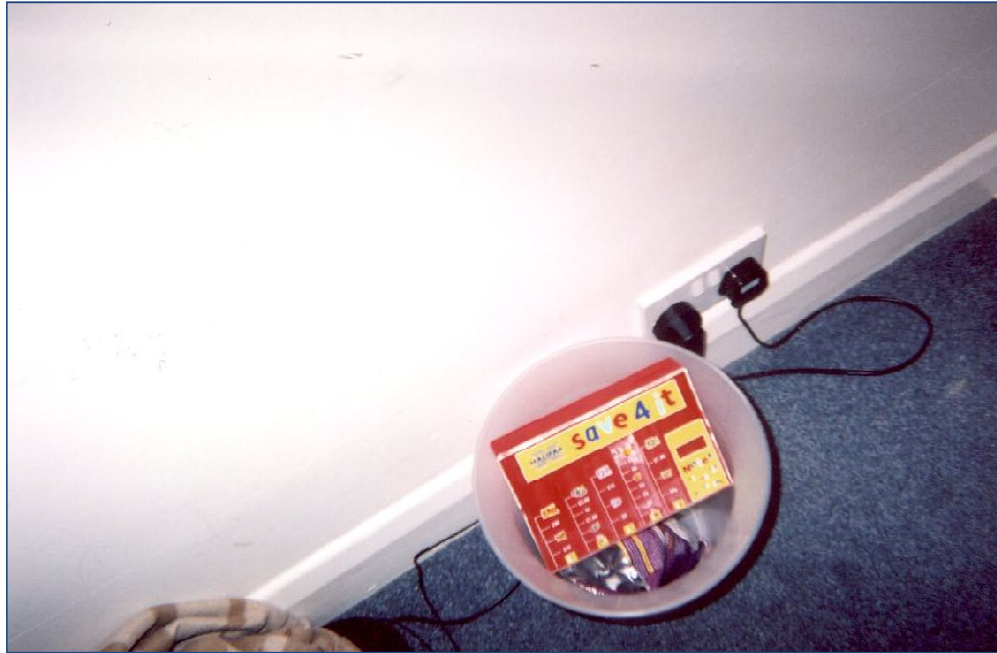


Figure 5.1 Jamie binned his money box after neither his younger brother nor his younger sister was willing to take it.

He had attempted to pass on the money box - pictured here in the bin - to both his younger brother and younger sister, both of whom had declined the offer. He said:

Jamie That's something that my brother wouldn't take because he had one and my sister wouldn't take 'cause she, I think, commented on it being fairly tacky. It's a money sorting box. And it felt a bit childish so I let it go.

Rebecca OK. So you tried to pass that on and no-one was...

Jamie No-one wanted it.

(Interview 2/2, 17.03.2011)

Passing his possessions on to his younger siblings was Jamie's primary method of divesting himself of unwanted items. When those possessions were rejected, as was the case with this money box, Jamie's 'second choice' channel was usually the bin.

Although Jamie, Maggie, Graham, Amy and Ailsa's unwanted possessions ended up in the bin, they recognised that other methods of ridding could have been used and they actively sought them out. In these instances it was not recourse to convenience that meant their possessions were binned, but the disjuncture between the opportunities the participants perceived (or perhaps hoped) were offered by alternative ridding channels and the realities of what these channels could or would accept. In other

words, they possessed the knowledge, intention and agency to divert their unwanted possessions from the waste stream, yet the ridding infrastructures they targeted constituted a barrier to successfully following through. Gregson et al. (2007a) found that their adult research subjects had similar experiences during household clear-outs, and note the importance of site-specific knowledge as to what kinds of items are accepted at particular charity shops, second hand fairs, etc., in order to avoid the binning through despondency or frustration reported by my participants. Two of my participants, Tina and Martin, possessed this in-depth knowledge as a result of work experience in charity shops, but as Rosa's quote above makes clear, few of their peers were equally knowledgeable, nor were they inclined to become so.

In summary, the bin was selected as a suitable ridding channel when possessions which were perceived as having no discernible value on account of their age, cultural irrelevance, lack of functionality or propensity to be a source of embarrassment needed to be swiftly dispatched. That these correspond closely with the motivations for binning described by Gregson et al. (2007a; 2007b) in their ethnographies of UK household divestment practices is unsurprising – there is simply a limited number of reasons why one bins unwanted objects, particularly when other channels are often accessible. The point to emphasise is the familiarity of binning as a domestic practice – a trait which augments its convenience as a desirable ridding channel during busy times or stressful 'clear outs' – and its existence as a routine practice into which young people are inevitably socialised as part of their upbringing (Martens et al. 2004). Acknowledging the centrality of domestic norms in shaping all forms of ridding, the extent to which family members were implicated in my participants' use of different ridding channels is discussed in more depth later in this chapter and in Chapter Six.

The extent to which binning is a relatively unreflexive practice is a pertinent issue in light of the findings of Chapter Four concerned with the normalisation of disposability of many typically 'teenage' items. This is particularly so when juxtaposed with the findings of Morgan and Birtwistle's (2009) study into young women's clothing disposal, which found that fast fashion garments that are worn, torn or deemed too unfashionable to give away or sell tended to be binned. As Hawkins (2006) has previously suggested, the existence of cultural norms accepting of disposability arguably predisposes certain items to ridding via the waste stream – and this would appear to be borne out by my participants' comments about binning items that are 'embarrassingly' unfashionable or broken. This raises two issues of note. First, young

consumers may bin more frequently if they buy the kinds of 'fast' consumption items discussed in Chapter Four. Appadurai (1986) posits that value is encoded in objects and that what that value does (cf. Miller 2008) depends on how it is 'read'. In circumstances where my participants 'read' the value of their possessions as (approaching) zero – as informed by a consumer cultural context which perpetuates the perception of fast fashion (McAfee et al. 2004) and broken items (Dant 2010; Gregson et al. 2009; McCollough 2007; Watson 2008) as valueless and not worth retrieving from this state – they did indeed 'perform' waste (Hawkins 2006; Lepawsky and Mather 2011) through their placing of these items in the bin.

The second point, following on from this, is that frequent binning may become habitual binning as a result of the expectation that all no-longer-used possessions are no-longer-usable, meaning that items which could be divested via other means are also placed in the waste stream. This latter point was, in fact, far less true for my participants. Having articulated a number of reasons why my participants binned some items, the relatively infrequency with which this occurred needs to be contextualised within their overall reports of how they dealt with unwanted possessions. In section 5.2.2 I give brief consideration to how the concept and practice of recycling fitted within my participants' understandings of (avoiding) waste, before moving to a discussion (section 5.3) of the logics employed by my participants when they avoided binning.

5.2.2 The Relationship Between Binning and Recycling

The ways in which my participants employed the term 'recycling' in this study requires unpacking; first, to distinguish between the kinds of bins connected to the waste stream (discussed above) and those which connect with circuits of further use, but also to better understand how these young people conceptualised 'recycling' and what their use of this term suggested about how they made sense of their actions. Across the group references to binning sometimes pertained to 'placing in the waste stream' but on other occasions referred to 'recycling'. Throughout the interviews I was careful to be clear which of these was being referred to for any given example, in order to guard against later misinterpretation based on assumptions I might have made based on my own definitions of the terms 'binning' and 'recycling'.

The proliferation of opportunities to recycle a growing range of everyday items has resulted in a corresponding growth in the number of bins devised to accommodate

these practices. As a result, the blurring of the boundaries between these terms is understandable. On the one hand it has been suggested that the growth in the number and type of bins may mean that a wider range of unwanted objects come to be seen as waste (Chappells and Shove 1999). Yet on the other, it can equally be argued that the essence of recycling as a process through which the residual value of objects is recognised means that the opposite is true – that, in fact, being presented with multiple different ways of dealing with unwanted objects provokes a reflexive approach in which the potential future utility of an object is more likely to be considered (Bulkeley and Gregson 2009; Chappells and Shove 1999; Hobson 2006; Metcalfe and Riley 2012). It was the latter that appeared to be true for my participants.

It should be noted that my participants have grown up with recycling as an established method of dealing with much of the no-longer-needed material ephemera of everyday life (unlike many adults, for whom accommodating recycling practices and infrastructures can be problematic; see Evans 2012b). It is therefore understandable that, for them, the term ‘recycling’ describes multiple different acts concerned with extracting value from things in ways which prolong their usable lives, incorporating passing on, reuse and repurposing as well as reforming into another product. In conversation it was a term that recurred often in its more expansive sense, used to mean ‘make further use of’ in contexts where participants aspired to do so, even if other factors complicated their ability to turn intention into action. Ridding acts described by participants as ‘recycling’ included: trading in old computer games for money at a computer game shop (Olivia); donating to (and buying from) charity shops (Oz); trading in an old computer against a newer one (Oz); passing on books to a friend (Evie); placing clothes in charity banks (Khadija, Tessa, Amy and Ailsa). Thus ‘recycling’, for this group, was at least as much about recognising the value that persists in the items passed on or sold as the process that those items go through in order to be reused. I expand on my participants’ apparent concern with recognising the residual value in their possessions in section 5.3, and discuss some of the ridding channels through which they ‘recycled’ those items in sections 5.4 and 5.5.

5.2.3 Section Summary

Binning played an important role in my participants’ ridding repertoires, allowing them to quickly move along possessions that were, in their eyes, useless and unlikely to be

returnable to a valuable state. As such, the objects here are framed as the zero value 'rubbish' in relation to which the (use, exchange or social) value of other possessions is constructed (Thompson 1979). Binning also offered an appealing level of convenience in the context of participants' busy lives. This convenience, along with the familiarity of binning as a means of dealing with unwanted items within the household context, contributed to a sense amongst the participants that they were relaxed about some of their possessions becoming 'rubbish'. In part this may be attributed to the tendency of the bin to 'black box' the waste produced by the placing of objects within it, thus absolving the rider of anxiety about (their role in producing) its contents. O'Brien (2008) has remarked on the widespread perception that waste somehow 'disappears' when we get rid of it, and as Hawkins (2001) argues, this can lead to a disconnection from the implications of waste which, as those concerned with sustainability would argue, is increasingly problematic.

Indeed, although, as I discuss in subsequent sections of this chapter, there was a strong moral sense underpinning the ways in which participants moved on their no-longer-wanted possessions, the fact that this did not seem to impinge on their binning activity suggests that this is a firmly (consumer-) culturally-situated moral sense, which excuses or even overlooks waste produced through designed-in disposability or disinclination (or inability) to repair broken things. As Hawkins (2001: 9) contends, "[T]he capacity for serial replacement is also the capacity to throw away without concern." It might be argued, therefore, that here, again, there is an element of waste fetishism in the context of my participants' binning of some of their possessions, arising from the 'matter-of-fact' acceptance of those items' disposability.

Yet, in another sense, participants' use of the bin simply reflected the typical everyday experience of managing material things in the home. In this respect there was nothing to mark them out as more inclined towards binning (thus arguably more 'throwaway') than any other group which has been the subject of similar study (Gregson et al. 2007a and 2007b, for example). Thus, while acknowledging the role of the bin in my participants' divestment, it was equally evident that it constituted only one of several channels used. In section 5.3 I examine the specific traits my participants identified in many of their no-longer-wanted possessions which motivated them to move them along via channels other than the bin.

5.3 “Another way of disposing of it without wasting it” - Why Some Possessions Aren’t Binned

5.3.1 “My first thought is to throw it away, but...”

During my first conversation with Ailsa we talked about the channels she felt she used most frequently to move along her no-longer-wanted possessions. She said:

...my first thought is sometimes just to throw it away but if it’s something that can be of use to someone else then I’d give it to them.

(Interview 1/2, 12.11.2010)

Interested in how this reflexive tendency had emerged within an otherwise habitual binning practice, I asked what had prompted her to consider other ridding channels:

I think I see the way others get rid of their stuff. [Like, someone] might throw away something that I think is perfectly useful, so it made me think well I could give it to someone else or I could recycle it...

(Interview 1/2, 12.11.2010)

Ailsa’s comment illustrates a position put forward by Gregson et al. (2007a: 197) who suggest that, when it comes to binning, “... it is evident that such acts are seen by many as insufficient and inappropriate, at least for dealing with certain types of surplus things...” For Ailsa, binning was inappropriate because she perceived that her possession(s) could still be of use to someone else, and this awareness had emerged from first-hand experience of perceiving as useful items that others had marked out as useless. Her identification of (un)known others who might benefit from receipt of her unwanted possessions illustrates the co-production, by ridder and recipient, of the surplus or residual value in those objects. In other words, her possessions’ surplus value was created by its potential exploitation in another context.

This sensitivity to the residual value of their possessions was common across the group. Maggie, for instance, said:

If it’s still working and [totally] functional then it shouldn’t be chucked out. Some other people could make better use of it. Like, one man’s junk is another man’s treasure.

(Interview 1/2, 01.11.2010)

Talking with Evie about the different channels she used to get rid of unwanted items she distinguished between what went to a car boot sale and what was binned, saying:

I wouldn't throw away something that I think's, like, that's... not broken or... actually has some value, or... [...] But not necessarily money value but, like... a book or a DVD, someone else might enjoy it.

(Interview 2/2, 31.01.2011)

Although there is inevitably a monetary incentive associated with ridding by selling (section 5.4), Evie's admission that she rarely made more than a few pounds from the sale of her possessions suggests that it is more than monetary gain alone that motivates her choice to sell them.

Graham's description of his ridding process at first seemed to identify him as a frequent 'binner'. He would take a bin-bag up to his room and could pick out at a glance what he no longer wanted or needed, placing these items into the bag destined for the rubbish bin. Although superficially suggestive of a lack of care, it became evident that this bin-bagging formed only a minor component of Graham's ridding practice, and that, actually, he was very waste-averse. I asked him what sort of items he came across that he was confident he had no further need of but for which the bin did not seem the appropriate place.

Graham If it's something that still has some value... because there's not much point throwing it away. [...] I just don't really like throwing things away, you know? It feels a bit bad.

Rebecca Do you think it's bad?

Graham I think... if it's still got a function then there's no point.

(Interview 1/2, 10.11.2010)

Maggie, agreed, saying:

I feel quite bad if I just chuck it in the black bin. 'Cause, like, other people can use it or it can be turned into something else.

(Interview 1/2, 01.11.2010)

Jamie expressed the sentiments of several participants when, explaining why he always attempted to give away possessions rather than resort to the bin, he said:

It's easier than binning it. And it feels better than binning it as well.

(Interview 2/2, 17.03.2011)

There was, evidently, more to my participants' attempts to move into a context of further use the perceived surplus in their unwanted possessions, with Graham, Maggie and

Jamie invoking an affective dimension to their ridding choices, seeking to divest in ‘feel good’ ways. The corollary implicitly evoked in their comments – feeling ‘bad’ about binning – suggests a powerful normative waste ethic, in which failing to facilitate the extraction of residual value from unwanted items is morally problematic (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hawkins 2006). Hawkins (2006) suggests that experiencing a ‘feel good’ response to the ways in which unwanted items are dealt with demonstrates the extent to which ridding is bound up with social rules and moral codes. Drawing on Veblen’s (1915 [1899]) view of waste as objectionable because it offers no enhancement to the experience of everyday life, and thus characterising waste as a loss of opportunity, O’Brien (2008) describes a moral framework in which it is individual agency inappropriately or ineffectively mobilised that creates the threat of waste (see also Foden 2012, who substantiates this empirically). In other words, waste is the result of a failure to take up opportunities to perpetuate value. As these opportunities expand in number and diversify in type (Chappells and Shove 1999), the social policing of doing the ‘right thing’ to avoid waste is further embedded within the practices of social life (Gibson et al. 2011; Hobson 2006).

Comments by Rosa, Oz and Ailsa echoed these moral concerns when they suggested ‘wasting’ possessions by binning them “just doesn’t seem right” (Ailsa interview 1/2, 12.11.2010). Ruth went a step further, seemingly situating her own waste avoidance efforts in the context of the “throwaway society” concept. She said:

I hate just throwing things away, just... It’s just such a big waste, like, how much people waste now. It’s really awful...

(Interview 1/2, 15.10.2010)

For these participants, the actions they took to move along their unwanted possessions were directed at least in part by an affective response to the implications of binning; denying a functioning material object the possibility of further use provoked feelings of discomfort, sometimes guilt. However, not all participants’ responses to the potential for waste were characterised by such anxieties. Some took a straight-forwardly pragmatic view of what it ‘made sense’ to do with un(der)used possessions; here, too, waste was emphatically something to be avoided. Omayma, Bella, Khadija and Molly took this stance, with Molly saying:

I just figure if you’ve got something and it’s not broken, why chuck it away? [...] Everything’s got to go somewhere and I prefer to not, like, clog up the world as much as possible.

(Interview 1/2, 12.11.2010)

In the context of the conversation from which it is drawn, Molly's comment that she prefers not to "clog up the world" with her ridding was a throw-away (no pun intended) comment. However, in light of the scant references by any of the participants to the environmental implications of their ridding choices, it warrants (all too brief) acknowledgement. In talking about their motivations for ridding via channels other than the waste stream, Molly was the only participant to (in/directly) make this connection. Whilst many of the participants professed to be concerned about the impact of waste on the environment, this was usually in abstract terms and was perhaps underpinned by normative attitudes that this is the 'correct' view to hold. It is clear from the discussion here that what motivated them to divert their unwanted possessions from the waste stream was rarely the environment – a finding that I have discussed elsewhere, with others, as a form of 'inadvertent environmentalism' (Hitchings et al. 2013; see also Evans 201b). Instead, their actions were directed by social and moral concerns – they understood their unwanted possessions were still capable of productive use by others and to deny them this use was hard to justify. In essence, their ridding decisions were more naturally situated in personal spheres of experience, relationships and morals than in abstract notions of seemingly distant environmental problems.

5.3.2 Section Summary

The apparent disconnect between awareness of the environmental implications of waste (which all participants possessed, to a greater or lesser extent) and the motivations which informed their ridding might, in one sense, be troubling for those hoping that young people are better than their elders at recognising the impacts of their consumption. However, as I have suggested thus far, this disconnect does not automatically translate into ridding practices which are grossly, or even particularly, unsustainable or otherwise environmentally problematic. Indeed, my aim in this section has been to illustrate the breadth of motivations on the basis of which my participants actively sought to divert their possessions from the waste stream. In doing so they drew on a framing of waste as a morally problematic (potential) product of their actions. Interestingly, this moral sense was grounded in a sense of social responsibility rather than an environmental ethic. With reference to a normative view of waste as 'bad', participants recognised that moving their unwanted possessions into

a context of further use could negate the threat of waste by co-producing the unwanted item as still valuable.

Thus, where feasible, they sought out means of ridding that would extend the usable lives of their possessions.⁶² Responding to Miller's (2008) suggestion to ask not what value is but what value does, participants' socially-grounded conceptualisations of value drove the circulation of possessions through channels which resituated them in contexts where that value could be manifested in a new nexus of social relations. In the remainder of this chapter I focus on selling (section 5.4) and giving away (5.5) as a means of exploring what my participants sought to achieve by moving value on in this way, beyond relieving themselves of troublesome clutter and the anxiety of latent waste.

5.4 Selling – For Satisfaction, Reassurance or Convenience... But Not For Money

In this section I present some of the ways in which my participants moved on their no-longer-wanted possessions by selling them. Eight (Sally, Evie, Martin, Jamie, Daniel, Elspeth, Tina and Ruth) had sold in the past. Rosa had previously tried to sell some items with no success, while ten others stated that they may consider selling items in future but had not done so previously. The link between selling an item and recognising its value is, in one sense, quite clear. The fact that the residual value an object possesses is characterised in terms of exchange value in a monetary transaction confirms that it is worth something to someone. However, the motivations behind my participants' selling were more subtle than this straight-forwardly economic perspective; indeed, perhaps surprisingly, the monetary gain from their activities reportedly played a relatively small part.

In the discussion that follows I examine the aims of the sellers in the group, as well as what the opportunities and challenges associated with selling suggest about how great a role sellers' agency can play in constructing and maintaining the forms of value which characterised their no-longer-wanted possessions.

⁶² As noted in section 5.2, for reasons of time constraints and difficulty of access not all ridding channels were always feasible options for participants' ridding needs.

5.4.1 The Lapsed 'Car-Booters'

Five participants – Tina, Tessa, Sally, Ruth and Evie – had, in the past, made use of car boot sales, with Elspeth handing some of her possessions to her uncle who, in turn, sold them at car boots.⁶³ The items divested in this way tended to be those which had been outgrown – clothes, toys, books, games, as well as CDs and DVDs. Tessa, Sally and Evie had attended these sales as part of a large-scale family ridding event; Ruth and Tina had sought out opportunities individually. Crewe and Gregson (1998) have explored the car boot sale as a consumption space, emphasising the ways in which multiple forms of (economic and non-economic) value are constructed through acts of buying and selling (see also Gregson and Crewe 1997a, 1997b, 1998; and Gregson et al. 1997). While their attention concentrates mainly on the experiences of purchasers rather than sellers, the multi-faceted value they describe is the result of social embeddedness and affective motivations, which maps closely onto the aims expressed by my participants for ridding via second-hand channels, including the car boot sale. Here, their (socially embedded) experiences of the use and transfer of possessions, as well as their perceptions of how the items they offer will be received, create expectations of value which are then realised (or sometimes not) in the space of the car boot sale.

Whether attended alone or with family members, my participants' presence at car boot sales was generally infrequent, almost opportunistic; their chance to attend one was the result of both them and their families being available on the days when the sales took place, as well as having 'enough' accumulated possessions to make the trip worthwhile. At the time of our conversations, all five girls stated that the time pressures of school responsibilities and part-time jobs meant that they rarely attended car boot sales any more, instead opting to give away the possessions they might otherwise have sold. Evie and Sally were optimistic that they might find the time to attend sales in future; indeed, both had been accumulating items for some time with this hope in mind (Figure 5.2).

⁶³ Elspeth did not recoup the money made from the selling of her possessions. Her uncle and his family had, she said, been struggling for money recently, and so she asked that the money made be spent on her cousins instead.



Figure 5.2 Possessions Sally hoped to take to a car boot sale

As a result of the low frequency of car boot sale attendance by both this group of previous ‘car-booters’ and the participant group as a whole, for the remainder of section 5.4 I concentrate on other methods of selling, all of which are mediated by the internet and which I describe as ‘online offloading’.

5.4.2 Online Offloading – Selling On The Internet

Four participants – Martin, Tina, Elspeth and Louise – had sold through online channels in the past, and the majority of those who said they would consider selling possessions in future stated that they would use an online channel to do so. Given the growth in popularity of ‘online offloading’ websites such as eBay, Gumtree, Music Magpie, and phone ‘recyclers’⁶⁴ including Envirofone and Mazuma Mobile, as well as young people’s familiarity with navigating online spaces, it might have been reasonable to expect selling to have been more prevalent than it proved to be amongst this group. A more convenient means of selling possessions than car boot sales, which were both time consuming and sporadic, selling via online channels requires a computer and internet connection, to which all participants had access, and access to postal services – found in all of the towns and most of the villages in which participants lived, in addition to

⁶⁴ In section 5.4.4 I explain why I describe these companies as mobile phone ‘recyclers’.

those in Cambridge where they went to school or college. Furthermore, the anonymity provided by online selling meant anxieties about being associated with ‘embarrassing’ possessions could be averted, and, perhaps of greatest relevance for young people (especially in light of the economic issues which emerged in Chapter Four), online offloading potentially offered a stream of (modest) income.

It was certainly the case that, for those who had not sold unwanted possessions previously but would consider doing so, the desire to make money was the primary driving factor for most. Six would sell possessions solely to make money for themselves, with two more saying they would do so with the aim of raising money for charity. However, amongst the small group who had sold possessions in the past, none said that their primary goal in doing so was monetary gain – a stark contrast with the popular perception of the hedonistic young consumer. This also contrasts with findings of research into adults’ online offloading which describes possessions as, “assets which are reinvested to fuel promiscuous consumption behaviours” (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009: 305) – although one participant who was a hypothetical seller did allude to similar motivations.

Instead, there appeared to be two main drivers for online offloading, each connected with a different online channel. The first driver, associated with the use of internet auction site eBay, was the desire to achieve recognition (through monetary exchange) of the cultural value of the unwanted items. In other words, the participants selling in this way sought acknowledgement that the possessions that they had enjoyed or benefitted from were still culturally recognised as fun, useful, or otherwise worth having, through this validating their own biography as represented by their past choices. As Emily said:

I know that I’ll end up getting rid of the stuff that I have now... and I don’t want that to be rubbish, because it’s not rubbish now.

(Scoping interview, 23.02.2010)

The second driver was convenience. This was associated with sites such as Envirofone and Music Magpie, which offer a means of getting rid of electronics such as mobile phones, games consoles and mp3 players, which, several participants stated, it can otherwise be difficult to know what to do with. I begin by considering my participants’ experiences of internet auction and marketplace sites, particularly eBay.

5.4.3 The Pleasures and Pitfalls of Online Offloading

Martin was a committed ‘eBayer’. He described himself as very “head over heart” in his ridding decisions, willing to part with possessions he felt attached to if they didn’t have any current practical relevance. Disliking the idea of no-longer-wanted possessions being left ‘dormant’ – i.e. not in regular active use – he turned to eBay to manage a large-scale clear-out after his GCSEs. A large number of items were sold, including games, toys and books (figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3 Martin’s books and games awaiting despatch having been sold on eBay
For Martin, being able to sell these items reflected someone else’s desire to make use of them, which made him feel comfortable moving on possessions which had often meant a lot to him.

... if you go on eBay and buy an item and you pay me for it then you clearly want it or you wouldn’t do that so my reasoning is just... it’s going to someone who wants it more than I do... because if I really wanted it I wouldn’t have put it on there in the first place.

(Interview 1/2, 04.11.2010)

Despite being very “head over heart” in his decision to part with these possessions, Martin’s desire for reassurance that his old books and games would be valued echoes the affective motivations which Crewe and Gregson (1998) identified amongst car boot

traders, and which have also been described by Herrmann (1997), Lastovicka and Fernandez (2005) and Daniels (2009) as a search for a ‘good home’ with new owners who similarly appreciate the object’s cultural value. Although other sellers in the group appeared to experience this affective response to a lesser degree, they too sought monetary recognition that their childhood possessions remained valuable. This was particularly the case for toys which were – and to some extent still are – cultural icons of the late 1990s, when my participants were young children, such as the Ty Beany Babies™ (small soft toys in a range of animal designs) collected by Evie, Kelly and Elspeth (Figure 5.4) and Evie and Jamie’s Nintendo Game Boys.



Figure 5.4 Crates of Beany Babies™ stacked in Elspeth’s garage

These participants knew that, if and when these items came back into fashion as ‘collector classics’ or, in Thompson’s (1979) terms “durable” items, that they could sell for more than today’s prices, and this was clearly a large part of their motivation for keeping them. An affective element was, however, also evident in their desire to be acknowledged as participants in one of the major cultural trends of the time.

The deferral of the decision as to how to move these toys on may have reflected an implicit recognition that selling them would not necessarily be a quick or easy task. This was certainly the consensus amongst most of the participants who had sold possessions online, or even made tentative forays into doing so. Since most participants were comfortable with shopping online and several had used eBay for

buying, it was clear that it was not the virtual space itself that made online offloading unappealing. Instead, it was the considerable effort involved in planning and following through with the transactions. As Sally said succinctly:

“[It’s] just generally a lot of hard work!”

(Interview 1/2, 18.10.2010)

Selling on eBay in particular can be time consuming and requires a string of planning and follow-up activities including photographing the items, posting detailed descriptions on the website and working out postage costs, as well as the ‘savviness’ to know how to make a good sale (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009). Martin described the eBay process as being, for him, “quite easy” but his description also illustrates why many of his peers disagreed:

I just find it quite easy, umm... Just... pop it on, give a description, give it a category. If you start, if you put it on an... auction for up to a month and you give it a starting price of... 99p or under, you don’t have to pay a fee to them if it goes unsold. So you only have to pay a fee if it gets sold. You pay like five per cent of what you get for it. So actually, doing that system means that basically I know that even if it doesn’t sell it’s not the end of the world and it’s quite quick and quite easy, and actually if you put a picture on there, things without a picture won’t sell but if you put a picture on there – takes about a minute – the computer and... it’s just quite easy to do. And then at the end of the month just give the address and send it off and...

(Interview 1/2, 04.11.2010)

For Martin, the relative effort of ridding in this way is balanced by the reassurance that his possessions will be used by the buyer who is prepared to pay for them. For others who are able to achieve similar reassurance or satisfaction from ridding in other ways, the time demanded by online selling is too much to ask to achieve the same result – even with the potential monetary reward. Was it possible, then, for online offloading channels to respond to young people’s apparent need to know their no-longer-wanted possessions would be used, yet still offer the convenience that allows time-pressured individuals to rid easily? A story shared by Amy suggests that existing online social networks are being appropriated for exactly these ends.

During our conversations Amy had not mentioned ever having sold any of her no-longer-wanted possessions. I asked her whether it was something she would consider.

- Amy Umm... I'm tempted to use eBay to sell, like, clothes and things like that. Actually quite a lot of my friends have started selling things on Facebook.
- Rebecca How does that work?
- Amy Umm, they just, like, put a photo up and people from school or just other friends will just be, like, yeah.
- Rebecca Ok. Do people say, oh, yeah, I'll give you a fiver for that, I'll meet you in the common room at break?
- Amy Pretty much, it's like that.

(Interview 2/2, 16.03.2011)

This raises some interesting questions. Whilst I did not ask directly about my participants' use of Facebook and other social networking sites, they were referenced frequently. Not only are (most) young people already well acquainted with Facebook as a virtual social space, they are swift to adopt its latest functionality. As such, it is far more intuitive than the convoluted – as well as unfamiliar – system of eBay. Perhaps most importantly, Facebook remains a space that, within the limitations imposed by the company, users can appropriate for their own ends – as Amy's friends illustrate. Indeed, Livingstone (2008: 394) has noted that critical scholars of new media anticipate that young people's appropriation of online tools for their own ends is set to become a global "innovative peer culture". Further, online spaces used to facilitate the transfer of unwanted possessions (particularly give-away sites such as Freecycle) have been identified as presenting opportunities for new forms of civic engagement (Nelson et al. 2007) through their ability to contest the dominant mode of consumer society. Both Amy's friends and Nelson et al.'s 'Freecyclers' consume through online space in ways that simultaneously reflect and construct their relation to consumer society, in Amy's friends' case both contesting the premature waste-making of fashion trends but also making money to (potentially) fund future purchases.

From the point of view of its potential as another means of facilitating online offloading, the fact that Facebook seems to act as an advertising space aimed directly at those with whom the seller is personally acquainted also presents pros and cons. On the upside, it taps into young people's need for a convenient way of ridding which acknowledges an item's value culturally and monetarily. What could be easier than taking your no-longer-wanted jacket into school and handing it over to its new owner at break in exchange for a few pounds? But on the downside, the anonymity of more formal online

offloading channels is gone and instead it becomes necessary to think about what this transfer of possessions implies about the relationship between divester and recipient. Corrigan (1989: 527) quotes Gregory (1982: 19) on the topic of different ways of divesting possessions to a known recipient, who suggests that, “commodity exchange establishes a relationship between the objects exchanged, whereas gift exchange establishes a relationship between the subjects.” By selling unwanted possessions through one’s social network these boundaries may become blurred with the possible effect that passing on items as an act of esteem and generosity (discussed in section 5.5, below, as commonly associated with giving away unwanted possessions to friends) is usurped by an expectation of financial gain.

From a single comment by one participant it is only possible to speculate on the social effects of ridding through online social networks but it is an emerging phenomenon worthy of investigation – particularly to establish whether young people become more concerned with making money from their possessions when it is easier to do so. Further, whilst the items exchanged might themselves avoid waste, questions exist around whether the ease of making money from possessions via Facebook (etc.) might perpetuate the legitimisation of divestment and replacement associated with proliferating ridding channels (Chappells and Shove 1999) and encourage the kind of “promiscuous” consumption (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009) which has been associated with adults’ use of online offloading.

The idea that some possessions can be (relatively) conveniently divested for cash is one that, for my participants, was most commonly associated with the selling of unwanted (but not necessarily old) mobile phones through online mobile phone ‘recycling’ services. I consider next whether cash or convenience was the primary driver of this activity, as well as the role played by these services in precipitating the premature obsolescence of gadgets discussed in Chapter Four.

5.4.4 Selling Mobile Phones – Cash or Convenience?

Mobile phone ‘recycling’⁶⁵ companies are now regular advertisers on television, the internet and in print media. Mazuma Mobile and Envirofone, the two biggest and most

⁶⁵ I describe these companies as mobile phone ‘recycling’ services for three reasons: first, because this is how some companies (such as Envirofone) describe their business; second, because the term ‘recycling’ as expansively employed by my participants incorporates the reuse which some

widely known such companies describe themselves as a “mobile phone REUSE specialist” (mazumamobile.com/about.php 2012; emphasis in original) and a “mobile phone recycler” (envirofone.com/en-gb/about-us 2012) respectively. Around one third of the participants mentioned these services as something they had used, considered using before deciding not to, or would consider using in future. The remainder had not considered using them, either because they had other means of divesting themselves of unwanted phones or because they accumulated them, not being sure of the most appropriate means of ridding.

For those who had already used them, as well as several who would consider doing so in future, convenience was the primary driver, particularly since, as electronic items, mobile phones were seen as particularly difficult to know what to do with. In contrast, the participants seemed largely ambivalent about the potential for financial gain. Evie, for example, felt she would be unlikely to receive much money for her old phone and, in this respect, was sceptical about whether ridding her phone this way would be worth the effort. Yet she conceded:

I know there's places you can take them but, or even send them in to get money back, but I don't really see the point in that 'cause I'd probably get about 1p for them. But at least that would get rid of them.

(Interview 1/2, 20.10.2010)

Elsbeth had also made use of these services on several occasions and would do so again, even if there was no financial incentive:

Rebecca Would you still be inclined to send away your phone if you didn't get something back for it? Or would you look for another way of getting rid of it?

Elsbeth I probably would, to be honest, 'cause... some-, it's kind of just easy to be able to just get rid of them instead of having them lying around if they're useless.

(Interview 1/2, 19.10.2010)

However, Elspeth equally felt that the financial incentive was a key driver of the success of these schemes.

Rebecca And how much do you think it's about getting something back that encourages people to do it?

Elsbeth A lot. [laughs]

companies (such as Mazuma Mobile) emphasise as their modus operandi; and third, to imply the lack of clarity which surrounds the actual processes that characterise these businesses.

- Rebecca A lot?
- Elsbeth Definitely. Like, even though, like, I said that I... you know, if there's a... deposit bin thing for phones in the supermarket, I'd do it, but... the thing with the... websites where you can sell your phone, and they send you, like, a free... umm, post bag and everything so it's just easy, like, you don't have to pay to send it or anything like that.
- Rebecca Ok. So there's a degree of convenience as well.
- Elsbeth Yeah, definitely.
- Rebecca So which do you think is more important, the fact that you get a return or the fact that it's convenient? Or both?
- Elsbeth I think maybe a mixture of both, but, like, kind of, more that you get something back, 'cause people generally... don't really like to do things to, like, help the environment and stuff if they don't get anything back for it.

(Interview 1/2, 19.10.2010)

Elsbeth's comments raise an important point. None of the participants who had previously used these services stated that they had done so primarily to make money from their old phones. It was, first and foremost, a means of getting rid of a no-longer-wanted object that was otherwise difficult to get rid of; the money received was considered a bonus. However, it should be acknowledged that the satisfaction of having successfully got rid of a problematic object may have masked the fact that the allure of making money (even a few pounds) was more significant than the participants were able to recall. After all, as Elsbeth identifies, the financial return has a central part to play in attracting people to this ridding channel. This was confirmed by John, Molly and Tina who all said that they would sell their phone this way in order to make money if they felt their phone was worth enough. Talking about what she plans to do with her old phone, Molly said:

- Molly I might send it to one of those Mazuma Mobile things but you only get a pound for it so... I don't see the point.
- Rebecca If you felt it would be worth more would you be more inclined to get rid of it?
- Molly Yep. Definitely.

(Interview 2/2, 18.03.2011)

Although she suspects that her old phone not might not offer much of a financial return, it is telling that Molly would be more inclined to move her old phone on this way if the

reward was greater. Attaching a monetary (market) value to unwanted mobile phones thus raises a somewhat paradoxical issue about the extent to which these services in fact contribute to the devaluing of mobile phones.

On the one hand, services such as Envirofone attach a monetary value to no-longer-wanted mobile phones – thus pricing an object which has, in socio-cultural terms, and certainly for the participant, become close to valueless. Yet at the same time, the fact that the unwanted phones are framed as destined for ‘recycling’ emphasises their irrelevance to contemporary practices and contributes to the premature ageing that in Chapter Four was identified as a key driver of gadgets falling out of use long before their physical composition fails. Olivia had identified this paradox, saying:

I think to an extent they're recycling things like iPhones and I just think, well, that's such a new phone still that, you know, you can understand like the massive old, like, bricks or something but the new phones you just think, why are you giving people money for throwing them away...?

(Interview 2/2, 10.02.2011)

It seems, then, that whilst disposing of unwanted mobile phones through companies such as Envirofone responds to the convenience imperative, the frustration of otherwise not knowing what to do with an unwanted phone, and, for those selling more recent phones, offers a financial incentive, the precise role played by this form of ridding is far from clear cut in terms of its role as waste co-producer vs. waste avoidance mechanism. On the one hand they are comparable with other modes of recycling, attaching a (monetary) value to items otherwise seen as valueless, yet they are equally complicit in the commercial pressures that make new devices ‘old’. Thus unwanted mobile phones occupy an ambivalent place on the waste-value boundary in this context (Lepawsky and Mather 2011), and this has repercussions in terms of whether young people’s engagement with this mode of ridding casts them as waste makers or waste avoiders; the former corresponding with the commercial imperative to drive new products through the market and young people’s concern with social participation mediated by up-to-date gadgets described in Chapter Four; the latter with their concern to ensure some value is extracted from an otherwise unused object.

5.4.5 Section Summary

Beyond the waste avoidance aspirations articulated in section 5.3, selling offered my participants the means to have their personal histories with their possessions culturally validated; it was a means of achieving reassurance that possessions which had been important to them would also be appreciated by others. Although descriptions of selling as too time-consuming or too much effort were common, for some items (usually gadgets, and especially mobile phones) the opportunity to sell them (even for negligible financial return) constituted a means of getting rid of possessions which were otherwise difficult to know what to do with.

It was clear that the participants who had sold or would consider selling their possessions had an ambivalent relationship with the potential for monetary gain. Money was only cited as a motivating factor by those who said they would consider selling their unwanted mobile phones, but it should be acknowledged that the satisfaction of having made successful sales may have masked similar motivations experienced by past sellers. More commonly, the monetary by-product of selling possessions was seen as a bonus by participants. Martin, for instance, said of his eBay efforts:

... it wasn't really the money, it was more just that actually, I could have gone out and thrown them all in the bin but I'd have felt like a complete idiot doing that. It felt much better to actually to give it to someone who really wanted it and, umm, and actually the money was sort of a bonus...

(Interview 1/2, 04.11.2010)

While making money was, for Martin, “a bonus”, it was equally the reward for his efforts. However, for most, this kind of “bonus” required more effort than they were prepared to expend when there were more convenient ridding channels available. For my participants, time was generally more valuable than money. However, the potential appropriation of existing online networks, such as Facebook, for the selling of unwanted possessions opens up intriguing possibilities: might monetary gain become more important if the process of selling is easier?

Broadly, selling presented a context in which there was considerable scope for my participants' agency to dictate the movements of their no-longer-wanted possessions. It was an activity that they took it upon themselves to engage in, with those selling via car boots, eBay or Facebook demonstrating ‘savviness’ as to how to sell successfully in their chosen settings. Their actions allowed them to actively contest ideas that their

possessions might be valueless rubbish by seeking out others who, through the act of purchase, collaboratively (re)produced their possessions as valuable.

However, the selling of electronics, particularly mobile phones, through online 'recycling' companies complicates this picture, since these services simultaneously attribute to unwanted gadgets a market value and contribute to the cultural message that such items pass rapidly into obsolescence. Whilst ridding by selling might generally be read as a clear means of waste avoidance, the extent to which this applies to services such as that provided by Envirofone is unclear, in some respects resting on how the company deals with the items it purchases. My participants might have evaded the trap of waste through lack of use by selling their unwanted phones, but in doing so they were arguably complicit in legitimising the obsolescence that, in Chapter Four, was characterised as a source of anxiety. Once again, this points to producer-driven cultural attitudes as the genesis of the production of waste, with my participants' attempts to contest the possibility that their possessions might become waste by complying with the very systems that seek to make them such.

One of the clear disincentives for participants to sell unwanted possessions was the time and effort involved in doing so. Most sought a more convenient means of ridding. In section 5.5 I examine the third form of ridding employed by my participants – giving things away – which offered multiple convenient waste-avoidance channels.

5.5 Giving Away – Care or Convenience?

Giving away no-longer-wanted possessions to friends, family, acquaintances or charity has been widely documented within divestment scholarship (Bulkeley and Gregson 2009; Gregson 2007; Gregson et al. 2007a, 2007b; Gregson and Beale 2004; Hawkins 2006; Marcoux 2001; Morgan and Birtwistle 2009; Norris 2004, to name a few). The act of giving, as discussed in these studies, has been argued to comprise elements of generosity, altruism, anxiety, expressions of love or esteem, as well as certain kinds of knowledge about the intended (known or unknown) recipient. In this section I discuss my participants' ridding by giving away – something which they all did, to a greater or lesser extent. I consider to whom they gave no-longer-wanted possessions, what their aims were in selecting these recipients, and the kinds of knowledge required to successfully rid in this way. My aim is to ascertain how the 'effort' implicated in acts of giving away is embodied and reconciled with the convenience imperative which has

driven the forms of ridding discussed previously. Finally, I aim to characterise the nature of the value produced through these acts.

5.5.1 “I tend to ask friends first...” - Passing To Peers

Gregson et al. (2007a: 188) suggest that the act of passing on possessions has, “clear social effects.” In other words, giving away an unwanted object both reflects and affects the relationship between giver and recipient. As a result, giving no-longer-wanted possessions to known acquaintances, particularly friends or family, requires reflection on the meanings associated with the object, and how reaffirming or challenging these reflects the identities of the giver and recipient, as well as the nature of their relationship.

Chapter Four illustrated the extent to which young people’s relationships with their peers can be intensely mediated by material possessions. For this reason, passing on to friends items deemed no longer appropriate to oneself is fraught with the potential for social faux-pas. Some offerings, particularly those most strongly associated with fashion and technology trends, could, for example, be read as suggesting, “This is no longer good enough for me, but it might be for you.” On this basis it was not surprising to discover that none of the participants offered their unwanted mobile phones or mp3 players to friends⁶⁶. Whilst there may have been assumptions that their peers would only want devices with the functionality that afforded them participation in the forms of social life discussed in Chapter Four, offering items such as mobile phones horizontally within a peer group might equally be perceived as insulting, suggesting a social disparity between giver and recipient. Careful thought is therefore required to ensure that possessions passed to friends communicate esteem – “I like(d) this and you might too” – rather than an unintended insult caused by inferring willingness to accept an item of low socio-cultural value.

Clothes and accessories seemed to be the ‘safest’ items to pass on to friends, with several of the female participants – Cherry, Olivia, Amy, Elspeth, Sally, Ruth, Rosa and Maggie – as well as two of the male participants, Oz and Mark, engaging in this form of ridding. Garment-gifting was, to some extent, shaped by the diktats of current fashions,

⁶⁶ Unwanted phones were, however, offered (and usually accepted) by younger siblings or extended family members. In these relationships, social image or prestige was less of a concern and, certainly for the younger siblings, a hand-me-down from an older sibling was often imbued with a certain caché.

although each participant had her or his own views on which garments were too unfashionable to consider offering to a friend. Usually the items passed between friends tended to be those least open to rejection as a result of different body shapes – jumpers, jackets and cardigans, belts, bags, scarves, shoes and other accessories.

Although her height limited what she was able to accept, Elspeth, for instance, was a willing recipient of some of her friends' surplus items, just as they were happy to accept Elspeth's unwanted but originally expensive Jack Wills jumpers. Brand new items from fashion stores such as Jack Wills may be out of the financial reach of many young people so passing on items such as these offers Elspeth the means to demonstrate both generosity in giving away a high (monetary) value item and esteem towards the friend deemed a worthy recipient. This is particularly the case when the item passed on is itself either brand new or almost brand new (worn or used only once or twice). Cherry, for example, was particularly concerned with giving her newer unwanted possessions to those closest to her – both family members and friends.

I... I think because if it is a bit too old it's not that good to give to someone you know. And, umm... if it is, like, really new, giving to charity is a bit, umm, I don't know... [laughs] It's a bit... [laughs] ... of a waste, really.

(Interview 2/2, 08.02.2011)

Her comment, that giving nearly new items to charity rather than friends is “a bit of a waste” underscores her awareness of the relationship-building capacity of passing these items on to known others, and implies that materialising the importance of those relationships in this way is a ‘better’ use of unwanted objects than donating them to charity. The surplus value in Cherry's clothes is co-produced through her use of them to materialise her care for her friends; indeed, such is her concern with this expression of their relationship that there is no sense that these unwanted items might, at any point, be considered waste – unless, of course, their social value is wasted by gifting to an unknown other (charity) rather than a friend.

In their study of clothes swaps, Albinsson and Perera (2009) suggest that one of the primary reasons why people like to ensure their unwanted items are passed to known others is because this allows a degree of control over the destinations of objects that are still seen as an extension of the self (see also Belk 1988; Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005). Although this motivation did not seem to dominate my participants' passing of

possessions to friends (which is not to say it did not feature to a minor degree), it was far more prevalent when items were handed down within the family.

5.5.2 Hand-Me-Downs – Keeping It In The Family

No-longer-wanted possessions are not only passed to friends and, in fact, giving items away to individuals outside of peer groups tends to be less anxiety-ridden and, often, less reflexive in general. This is not to say giving away to others is thoughtless or careless; merely that the anxieties associated with inadvertently jeopardising relationships through an inappropriate offering are less prevalent here. The most common recipients of passed-on possessions were close family members. Every participant made reference to passing on items in this way – most often to younger siblings, but also older siblings, parents and cousins. Handing down (or up, or across) within families is a common phenomenon, as has been widely noted by scholars concerned with this subject (Corrigan 1989; Curasi et al. 2004; Curasi 2011; Daniels 2009; Ekerdt et al. 2011; Ekerdt and Sergeant 2006; Gregson and Beale 2004; Klocker et al. 2012; Marcoux 2001; Sousa et al. 2010). Although many of these studies emphasise the thought and care that their adult subjects employed in their decisions about which possessions to pass on and to whom, for my much younger participants, handing items on to family members seemed, by contrast, a relatively unreflexive practice.

While there were occasions when considerable thought was still applied, this was infrequent and tended to apply most often to the selection of beloved childhood toys or books that were chosen for passing on to much younger siblings or cousins. Olivia, for example, talked about some of her baby clothes and toys that she planned to give to her new half-brother. Elspeth liked to give her childhood books, toys and videos to her six-year-old cousin so that she could continue to enjoy them by seeing them in use. In these circumstances, part of the act of giving seemed to be about the nurturing of the familial relationship through that act of generosity as well as sharing in the history of that object. As Bulkeley and Gregson (2009: 939) suggest, this circulation of possessions works “to materialise [...] social ties.” Aidan exemplified this succinctly when he talked about holding on to some of his old band t-shirts and posters in order to pass them on to his six-year-old brother when he was older.

... when we were clearing out, um... my room for, like, t-shirts and stuff, like, any old clothes there were these band t-shirts that were sort of getting a bit small for me.

But I thought, y'know, not only do I like them but I thought, oh Rhys would probably like them when he's a bit older, so he can wear them, like, y'know? So I said, keep them. I'll keep them, and then maybe when I'm older I can give them to him.

(Scoping interview, 17.02.2010)

Beyond these examples, though, handing on to family members appeared to be more about the convenience of relatively effortless disposal, particularly since parents – usually mothers – tended to intervene in this form of ridding, performing the typically maternal provisioning role of ensuring their children's possessions are suited to their current needs, moving these between children as necessary according to age, gender and, particularly in the case of clothing, physical growth⁶⁷. While this accords with Corrigan's (1989) observation that passing on in families tends to be a female activity, the fact that Aidan, John, Martin, Jamie and Graham all reported being givers and/or recipients of passed on items (from within immediate family) confirms that male participation in this form of ridding does occur – even if sometimes the physical movement of items is devolved to female family members.

5.5.3 Passing On (Responsibility) To Parents

Some participants left much if not all the work involved in the ridding of no-longer-wanted possessions to parents, whether this involved handing on to family members or moving items outside the home via other channels. Khadija, Elspeth, Evie, Cherry, Ella, Kelly, Graham, Louise, Aidan and Tessa all stated that their parents played an important part in the physical moving on of their possessions, and several others referred to input offered by parents throughout the divestment process. While sometimes this help was merely logistical – transporting bulky items by car, for example – for others the involvement of parents constituted a more extensive deferral of responsibility. In these circumstances, the final destination of participants' possessions was not always known. Although Kelly took responsibility for passing on the items intended for her younger sister, the ridding of any additional unwanted possessions was left to her mother.

⁶⁷ A discussion of research concerned with the gender roles of household management and provisioning is outside the scope of this thesis. However, several studies point to the dominant role of women in the management of household material items (e.g. Grunow et al. 2012; Kaufman 1998), including when this is focused explicitly through a concern with sustainability (Organo et al. 2012).

Kelly I don't know what happens to the rest of the stuff. I think once I give it to her I just forget about it...

(Interview 1/2, 04.11.2010)

There are two possible interpretations of this deferral of responsibility to parents. The first is that non-participation (or limited participation as in Kelly's case) in the physical processes of ridding masks the effort involved in these processes, as well as the trajectories of items deemed unsuitable for passing on, or that are rejected by potential recipients. Here, the destination of no-longer-wanted possessions remains unknown to the rider, thus obscuring the (waste) implications of non-use – much like the 'black box' of the waste bin discussed earlier. This potential invisibility is significant because it may create a 'responsibility gap' between young people's consumption of their possessions and the implications of those possessions becoming unwanted.

A second interpretation of parents' involvement in their children's divestment would suggest that, far from masking the implications of ridding, observing how parents enact ridding may help to normalise certain practices, such as passing on to friends and family, and giving to charity – and, in turn, help create and facilitate the participants' expressions of agency in the context of their ridding practice (Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2009; Matthies et al. 2012). Indeed, this is how several participants reported their own ridding preferences, as well as their general dispositions towards prolonging use and waste avoidance, as having formed. Ailsa, for instance, said:

I think you... sometimes get it off watching, like, your parents. [...] I don't think I've ever really thought about how I've gotten rid of things. I think it's just always been there and I've always... seen what I was around, [how things are done] so I've just kind of... followed.

(Interview 2/2, 21.03.11)

The idea that children and young people are recruited into specific forms of everyday consumption practices through observation and participation in family 'ways of doing things' has been noted by Martens et al. (2004) as a topic worthy of further empirical substantiation (see also Albinsson and Perera 2009; Hanson 1980). This has been tentatively explored by Gram-Hanssen (2007) in the context of teens' and parents' cleanliness practices. Gram-Hanssen argues that, while peers have some influence on the ways in which mundane practices are embodied by teens, parent-led norms have a more profound impact because parents are a constant presence in the home where

cleanliness practices are enacted. The same is true for ridding; while the implications of ridding decisions (as for cleanliness practices) can and sometimes do impact on peers, parents – as the ‘managers’ of domestic space – retain considerable power. On this basis, I contend that my participants were, to a large extent, socialised into a particular ridding habitus, or set of dispositions (Bourdieu 1977; 1984), which both structured their use of ridding channels and framed their understanding of the meanings conveyed by ridding in those ways (see also Hawkins 2001). As Hetherington (2004) has noted, acts of divestment are socially and culturally productive; in the home, these acts work to produce surplus value in unwanted possessions which attunes the younger household members to their possibilities, even if they defer responsibility for performing this value through selling or gifting to parents. This can be contrasted with the fact that, as Ruth stated, the whys and wherefores of ridding simply are not common conversational topics or shared experiences amongst young people: “we don’t really talk about this sort of thing” (Interview 1/2, 15.10.2010).

This suggests, then, that the family plays a significant role in how young people construct and maintain the value of their possessions, and that there may be something about keeping ridding in the family (both in terms of the physical processes and the possessions that are moved on) that helps to maintain the visibility of the residual value in things. For my participants this, at least in part, results from the convenience of deferring responsibility for aspects of ridding to parents. But even through doing this they come to be aware of, if not actively participate in, ridding processes which come to be normalised. Handing down to family members is perhaps the most influential practice – it is probably the one within which young people are most embedded from an early age – and one which arguably helps to affirm the persistence of value in items that are passed on, as well as the role of social (family) relations (expressions of esteem and care, or Miller’s “love relations” (1998)) in articulating this value. The fact that a ready-made social network exists to receive no-longer-wanted possessions is a crucial factor and it is important to recognise the role played by the intimate relationships that comprise these networks in maintaining the value of the objects moved through them. I return to the role of family members in my participants’ divestment practices in Chapter Six.

It would seem, therefore, that the high levels of reflexivity that characterised the forms of passing on in section 5.5.1 are not always a pre-requisite for forms of ridding that successfully prolong the lives of possessions. This is not to say that handing on to

family members is an unreflexive practice, just that it is more usually characterised by habituation acquired through socialisation into norms, rather than reflection precipitated by anxiety. In the final part of this section I consider how giving no-longer-wanted possessions to charity reflects a shift in my participants' concerns from social relationships to straightforward convenience, and how doing so did not entirely negate the need for reflection and skill.

5.5.4 All For A Good Cause – Giving To Charity

For many of my participants who gave unwanted possessions to charity, the charitable aspect seemed incidental to the fact that the charity shop, bank, or doorstep collection constituted a particularly convenient ridding channel (Harrell and McConocha 1992). Almost all the participants said they gave no-longer-wanted possessions to charity. The frequency with which they did so depended on the relative accessibility of charitable channels. Some, like Olivia and Louise, had a charity shop on their local high street, or at least in their home town or village. Few had opportunities quite so locally-sited as Amy, whose nearest charity bank was opposite her house (figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5 The Salvation Army charity bank opposite Amy's house

However, not all of the participants had comparably convenient access. Sally and Rosa, for instance, had no local shops or donation banks, and school pressures meant they

did not have the time to seek them out. Cherry, similarly, had no local charity shops or banks, nor did she receive the charity bags which are commonly posted through household doors in advance of doorstep collections. Any of her possessions that she wanted to donate to charity were transported by her parents. Most other participants mentioned that they had received doorstep collection bags; figure 5.6 illustrates two filled by Oz awaiting collection.



Figure 5.6 Full charity bags awaiting collection from Oz's house

Reflecting similar comments by other participants, Sadie said:

... you know, those, umm, charity bags keep on coming so I'm like, oh yeah, maybe I could do that, you know, like... I don't really think a lot, like, saying oh, I don't know what to do with these clothes or that, this... the first thing that comes into my mind is, like, oh yeah, charity...

(Interview 1/2, 18.10.2010)

Charity bags, in particular, seemed to constitute a 'safety net' for unwanted possessions, their presence offering a means of giving items away – thus avoiding the bin – without the necessity of transporting those items oneself. Indeed, donating unwanted items to charity was seen by Tessa, Tina and Martin as a handy 'second choice' ridding channel capable of accepting possessions rejected from 'first choice' channels, such as selling or offering to friends or family.

The combined impact of high street charity shops, donation banks on road sides and in car parks, and an apparently steady stream of doorstep collection bags meant that, for most of my participants, the idea of giving to charity was itself a constant presence in their households. This relative ubiquity of charity-destined ridding channels may have contributed to the normalisation of a mode of ridding that, like handing down, had become relatively unreflexive in its routine-ness. In other words, in the same way that observing parents engaging in the redistribution of possessions through family networks contributes to the normalisation of handing down, even a passive awareness that charity is the destination of other possessions may equally contribute to the habituation of this form of ridding. Responding to my question about why she liked to give to charity, Elspeth observed:

I think, well, to be honest, I've done it for so long I don't really know but probably just 'cause it's something my parents do. They're quite good at... giving stuff to charity..."

(Interview 1/2, 19.10.2010)

If the proliferation of means of 'recycling' (in the broadest sense) has contributed to the perpetual reminder that most of what we seek to get rid of possesses residual value of some kind, the same might be said of the frequency of requests for donations from charities seeking second-hand goods. This seemed to be particularly influential for my participants when their parents were already adopters of this ridding technique. Further, the moral imperative to 'be generous' and rid via this channel exploits the preference demonstrated by my participants to divest according to their desire to produce social value rather than a loosely-held environmental ethic associated with a more abstract relationship to waste.

Yet whilst donating unwanted possessions to charity might have been convenient, routine and moderately unreflexive for most, donating successfully was not without the need for effort and, sometimes, specialist knowledge or a more reflexive mode of thought, nor was it always entirely anxiety-free. Olivia, for instance, had learnt from frustrating first-hand experience that some shops refuse electrical items because of the costs associated with ensuring their safety. Tina and Martin had both worked in charity shops, each of their experiences contributing to somewhat different attitudes to donating. Martin felt frustrated by the length of time it took to process items for reselling and, as a result, giving to charity remained very much a second choice option for him, after attempting to sell things on eBay first. Tina, on the other hand, felt

better placed to donate a wider range of items having learned that even poor quality garment donations can be made use of for ‘ragging’.⁶⁸

The benefits of possessing these kinds of insights was emphasised by Rosa, who seemed anxious about how ill-equipped she felt to give the ‘right’ sort of items to charity. We had been talking about the extent to which she was able to get rid of her possessions in the ways she wanted to and it was apparent that her lack of knowledge about what charities will accept constituted a major barrier to her giving away more of her things in this way.

I don’t know, would a, would a charity want fashionable clothes or would they want plain things, or would they want... I don’t actually know what each charity, I mean, I know it’s all about fundraising, but perhaps some things they don’t simply try and sell because they know they won’t.

(Interview 1/2, 20.10.2010)

While Rosa was adept at passing on her unwanted things to friends or family, her anxiety about how to successfully donate to charity reflects the fact that ridding through this channel requires a knowledge base of its own. Some participants had acquired this through personal experience but for Rosa, giving to charity was as fraught with concern as some of her peers’ attempts to pass possessions onto friends. Underpinning this appeared to be a sense of responsibility to only donate items that would not risk a further period of waste-as-non-use, should they be unsuited to charity shop sale. Giving away her unwanted possessions seemed not to fully reassure Rosa that waste had been or would be averted, and this highlights two points: first, that the best of intentionality on donors’ parts to prolong the usable lives of unwanted items has little bearing on the extent to which ‘value mediators’ such as charities (are able to) do so; and second, that passing along the responsibility for extracting the surplus value from unwanted possessions may create rather than reduce anxiety about being party to the production of waste. On this basis, avoiding the ‘black box’ of ‘value mediators’ such as charities (as well as other intermediaries including those involved in selling) offers greater scope to ensure that, at least for the unwanted object’s first step, it is moved into a context where its value can be readily (re)produced.

⁶⁸ ‘Ragging’ describes the process in which clothing which is no longer suitable for wearing is shredded into rags for use in a variety of industrial products and processes.

5.5.5 Section Summary

Three key facets to my participants' acts of 'passing on' emerged from our conversations.

First, giving to friends tended to be an act of generosity and esteem – albeit sometimes against a backdrop of anxiety. This reading accords with much of the divestment scholarship on this topic which identifies the expression of love and care as a key driver of giving to known others. Secondly, there is an element of habituation, both when passing to family and donating to charity. While in one sense the resultant avoidance of the waste stream is a clear benefit, in another, the habitual devolution of responsibility for ridding to parents may constitute a 'responsibility gap' where, for the participants, the waste implications of their consumption remain invisible. Thirdly, the relative convenience of giving to charity meant that, for many, it was viewed as a 'safety net' – an ever-open door to re-use which meant that, when attempts to sell or otherwise pass on a possession had failed, binning was not a foregone conclusion. However, ridding via charitable channels was not without its anxieties, with the 'black boxing' of the fates of possessions donated suggesting that, despite understandings of these channels as efficient co-producers of unwanted items' surplus value, this does not always guarantee the avoidance of waste-as-non-use.

In general, passing along no-longer-wanted possessions was a lower effort process than selling. In part this was about the convenience of access to the requisite ridding channels – friends seen at school every day, family members who live in the same house, charity shops on the local high street or donation bags dropped through the letter box sufficiently often as to feel like a constant presence. However, that these opportunities were so readily taken up reflects the strength of the norms into which my participants had been socialised – norms which not only routinised giving away as a practice, but which also articulated the residual value in the possessions involved.

5.6 Conclusions: More 'Give-Away' Than 'Throw-Away'?

In this chapter I have been concerned with understanding why my participants moved along their no-longer-wanted possessions in different ways, in order to gain a sense of how 'throw-away' their divestment really is. My aim in doing so has been to uncover the multiple imperatives at work within these processes, and, in particular, to reveal the key drivers of those forms of ridding which actively avoid the waste stream.

Binning played a role in my participants' ridding repertoires, being both convenient and a means of 'black-boxing' what were perceived to be zero value items which might otherwise have been a troubling presence. Yet it was only one part of repertoires which also comprised various forms of selling and giving away. Behind the use of these channels was the participants' clear recognition that their unwanted possessions needn't become waste; indeed, their choice of ridding channels was largely determined by their efforts to ensure this was not the case. Rather, they were aware that, when it came to ridding, waste would be an object of their making. This was something to be avoided for three interlinked reasons.

First, being conscious that their unwanted possessions remained an extension of themselves (Belk 1988), they did not want their previously valued possessions to become worthless, since this might have been taken to suggest that their relationship with that object was somehow meaningless or a mistake. Second, they possessed a strong sense of the social value of material things, particularly the ways in which possessions can be moved to express relationships or one's position or participation in a broader cultural context, and they understood, largely from socialisation into norms of familial gifting, that moving on unwanted possessions in this way offered important social benefits. Third, and closely linked to the cultural norm of gifting surplus possessions, was a strong moral sense that waste is 'bad', since it constitutes missed opportunities to forge connections with (un)known others through the co-production of value, and, through this, enhance the experience of everyday life (O'Brien 2008).

My participants' ability to respond to the threat of waste by moving their possessions into contexts in which their residual value could be (re)produced resulted from their access to diversifying infrastructures and services capable of facilitating the co-production of this value, as well as their location in a cultural context in which the management of possessions within close social networks (primarily families) is a long-standing norm. I contend that these factors were fundamental to the waste sensitivity displayed by my participants, as well as the extent to which they possessed the agency to act on their individual responses to the widely-shared waste (avoidance) ethic. In short, their socialisation into and within a set of (socially and culturally shared) dispositions normalised the relatively reflexive appraisal of unwanted possessions as those items moved through the process of divestment.

It should be noted that an environmental dimension to this waste (avoidance) ethic was conspicuous by its relative absence. In light of the extent to which environmental

values continue to top the agenda for sustainability promoters, this suggests that there may be considerable merit in reframing attempts to encourage more sustainable consumption amongst young people as a social rather than environmental issue. Doing so would align with recent studies which have shown that many people of all ages engage in comparatively pro-environmental forms of consumption but on the basis of 'other-than-environmental' logics, such as money-saving or notions of 'common sense' (Evans 2011a; Hall 2011; Hitchings et al. 2013). It is also worth emphasising that the kinds of ridding which would be viewed as aligned with sustainability were already in common use amongst this group, and that what appeared to drive these waste-avoidance tactics were social norms underpinned by familial habitus. This emphasises the importance of the household and/or family unit as a site in which consumption behaviours take root – something which scholars concerned with pro-environmental behaviours have recently begun to emphasise (e.g. Klocker et al. 2012; Lane and Gorman-Murray 2011; Reid et al. 2010).

Finally, in light of my concern with my participants' ability to divest in ways aligned with sustainability (implicitly or explicitly), a comment on the nature of their agency in these contexts: the main questions about their agency have not been so much about whether they have the agency to rid in different ways – demonstrably they do – but instead about the contexts in which they might unwittingly constrain their own agency in the name of convenience. While on the one hand, sacrificing one's agency to parents, for instance, constitutes a relatively benign act – the chances are that parents will get rid of possessions in the same way their teenage offspring would otherwise have done – embracing the convenience presented by commercial 'ridding service providers' (e.g. mobile phone 'recyclers') may permit an agentic response in using the service, but the nature of their business simply constrains agency in another context – earlier in the consumption process, as presented in Chapter Four.

In summary, when it comes to physical processes of ridding, it would seem that this group of young people were far from the 'throwaway' teenagers both popular opinion and many sustainability initiatives would have us imagine. This serves to emphasise that the 'problem' of waste in young people's consumption is not necessarily about how unwanted possessions are got rid of. Rather, as demonstrated in Chapter Four, it is at least partly about what drives possessions out of use in the first place and thus, as suggested by Morgan and Birtwistle (2009), the problem of waste in young people's consumption may, more commonly, be tied to problems of acquisition. It may also be

about the kinds of non-use that some have argued constitutes a form of ‘wasting by keeping’ (Gibson et al. 2011a). In Chapter Six I consider what kinds of circumstances led to no-longer-used possessions being kept and the kinds of household negotiations that took place in order to re-accommodate them, and I suggest to what extent my participants’ keeping might have been more ‘wasteful’ than their ridding.

CHAPTER SIX

PROLONGING USE OR CREATING WASTE?

What happens when un(der)used possessions are kept?

6.1 Introduction

In my first conversation with Tessa I asked whether she intended to part with any of her possessions in the near future. She told me about a pair of riding boots that were now too small for her, saying that she would most likely donate them to a “second hand shop” in her village. After a thoughtful pause she added:

But... I don't know... my idea of 'get rid' is, like, not use for... a very long time! [laughs]
And sort of stash away in some box...

(Interview 1/2, 12.11.2010)

Tessa's description of what 'getting rid' means for her illustrates that possessions falling out of use does not necessarily result in ridding, and points to a facet of divestment that might best be described as partial or temporary divestment. Here, an individual moves a possession outside of the spaces of everyday encounters – for instance, off a desk, out of a wardrobe or off a shelf – and relocates it in a less frequently encountered, but (importantly) still accessible, space within the home. These spaces include lofts, cellars or basements, garages, sheds or other outbuildings, spare rooms, storage cupboards, as well as rooms inhabited by other family members (e.g. siblings' bedrooms or communal areas such as hallways and landing spaces) or even specific areas within an individual's own wardrobe, cupboards or chests of drawers. Divestment is partial because the object is removed from the space of everyday encounters, although ownership is retained, and temporary because it can be returned to at any time, either to be brought back into use or to be fully divested through passing on, selling, binning or other methods of ridding.

In essence, this form of divestment is really about keeping things. As Gregson et al. (2007b) argue, the tendency in much research concerned with our purportedly 'throw-away society' has been to prioritise understanding ridding at the cost of fully acknowledging the significance of keeping. Yet the logics which inform the keeping of possessions require interrogation if we are to establish the extent to which this practice

is the friend or foe of sustainable consumption (Gibson et al. 2011a, 2011b; Organo et al. 2012). In order to establish the significance of keeping for my participant group, in this chapter I examine how they legitimised keeping possessions that had fallen out of regular use and thus feasibly could have been 'got rid of'. My aim in doing so is to understand why these objects are retained – what factors make keeping infrequently- or never-used items both desirable and possible – and, in turn, whether the logics behind these acts are more or less likely to contribute to those possessions being used or wasted.

In the introduction to Chapter Five I referred to the sorting process in which many of my participants engaged when they were deciding which of their possessions to get rid of. Part of this process involved the creation of a 'maybe' pile, the contents of which participants found it difficult to know at first glance whether they wanted to part with. Those who created 'maybe' piles ultimately moved on most of the contents via binning, selling or giving away since, as Ella noted:

... if I decide I don't want something then I generally don't go back to it because I know that I'll just... keep it again. And I don't really need it..."

(Interview 1/2, 09.11.2010)

While Ella's comment reflects uncommon decisiveness about what is ultimately parted with, around three-quarters of participants retained some possessions that had occupied the 'maybe' pile (literally or figuratively). These items were kept because they were associated with significant people or memories, or, more commonly, because the participant perceived that they might be useful in future.

Of course, all the participants kept possessions that had strong emotional significance – toys, books, games or trinkets from childhood. However, I do not concern myself with these in this discussion; keeping on the basis of memory, sentimentality and personal history is, in itself, a rich area of exploration (see, for example, Cherrier and Ponnor 2010; Miller 2009; Tolia-Kelly 2004a, 2004b; Turan 2010; Walsh 2011), but, since I am primarily concerned with the fates of items subject to the kinds of pressures described in Chapter Four, it is a topic outside the scope of my present concerns. In addition to inhabitants of the 'maybe' pile, I consider those objects that have fallen out of regular use but are not considered candidates for ridding, in order to understand why, despite their lack of use, they are kept. My focus is, therefore, those possessions which could have been or were almost got rid of in light of their perceived irrelevance to current

practices. I refer to these items as 'kept objects' or 'kept possessions' in the discussion that follows, and 'keeping' refers to acts of retention involving these specific objects.

I begin in section 6.2 by introducing the concepts of 'backing-up' and 'hedging', forms of keeping concerned with minimising disruption to important youth cultural practices. My suggestion is that the retention of possessions as 'spares' or 'just in case' constitutes a means of managing the anxieties associated with the pressure to fulfil social expectations. By considering why my participants engaged in this form of keeping, I explore how their preoccupation with social participation informed their decisions to keep infrequently-used possessions, whether the forms of sociality which characterise contemporary youth cultures could be seen as demanding 'spares', and whether these infrequently used items might, in one sense, be viewed as waste – or, more accurately, as wasted.

In section 6.3 I explore the extent to which my participants kept possessions with a view to repairing or repurposing them. Breakage or malfunction did not always result in ridding; almost half of the group said that they would keep objects and attempt to mend them or find alternative uses for them before resorting to ridding (usually via the bin). Reflecting on issues of skill, knowledge and competence, I consider whether manually intervening in the lives of material things engenders sensitivity to their (potentially multiple) affordances (Gibson 1986; Ingold 1992; Dant 2005), such that an object's potential 'usefulness' becomes easier to perceive and the threat of waste easier to avoid.

Section 6.4 focuses on the re-accommodation of kept objects within the home. Whether an item is mended, hedged, or a back-up, it needs to be kept somewhere. Since the clear-outs that prompted ridding were often instigated by participants' parents' desire for order, and/or by pressure on household storage spaces, re-accommodating items that might otherwise have been divested often required negotiation – sometimes direct contestation. In this discussion I consider my participants' responses to parental demands around the management of their possessions and suggest that parents retain considerable influence over how keeping/ridding is practised by their children. I also reflect on the extent to which some possessions are kept through complacency, as well as the implications of storing possessions in places that hide them from everyday view, and I point to the potential for waste to occur where stored possessions remain invisible long-term. My concern here is with highlighting some of the socio-spatial complexities of the domestic settings in which my participants' acts of keeping (and

ridding) are played out, especially the shifting roles of my participants and their parents as they engaged in these processes.

In a brief concluding section, 6.5, I draw together the key points of this chapter, suggesting that keeping is far from an “easy” way out of having to deal with the anxieties of divestment – quite the contrary – nor does it necessarily negate the threat of waste.

6.2 Back-ups and Hedging – Keeping Things ‘Just In Case’

6.2.1 “It’s almost like a back-up plan”

In Chapter Four I introduced Rosa and her ‘Ugg’ boots. The story of her constant stream of replacement boots emphasised the extent to which these items formed a core part of her identity, all the more so since they were shoes in which she felt both physically and stylistically comfortable. At the heart of her story was the problem of the boots’ short life span – sometimes only a matter of weeks. However, the physical breakdown of these items, while enough to prompt swift replacement, did not always mean that the ‘old’ pair were immediately consigned to the bin. Rosa said:

I wouldn’t get rid of these Uggs before I got a new pair. ‘Cause I don’t really like wearing anything else. And then I might keep, keep it for a while anyway, in case something happens to the new ones. It’s almost like a back-up plan.

(Interview 2/2, 09.02.2011)

A “back-up” is precisely how Rosa views the keeping of her older boots. They may be in a poor enough state to warrant replacement but she would rather wear boots that are falling apart than something in which she does not feel comfortable. In the first part of this section, I explore the extent to which some of my participants were content to keep and use ‘old’ versions of more recently-acquired possessions and risk being perceived as ‘uncool’ in order to maintain their place in important youth cultural practices.

Sixteen participants made clear references to backing up or hedging possessions, with a further eight alluding to these practices although in vaguer terms – “I might keep [X] because I might need it if I do [Y].” The exact form of participants’ backing up or hedging varied – several different objects were implicated, for instance – but with the aim of achieving the same ends. Rosa, Kelly and Graham, for instance, saw the notion of back-ups as applicable to items of clothing or accessories. However, for most other

participants backing-up was more commonly associated with electronic gadgets, particularly mobile phones and mp3 players. Emily, Elspeth, Lettie, Tina, Ailsa, Tessa, Evie, John and Sally all explicitly referred to 'old' gadgets retained for this reason.

Emily, for example, in common with many of her female peers in this project, described her mobile phone (or, more accurately, the service it provided) as the possession she felt most attached to. She had accumulated several 'old' handsets over the years and, while she suggested that one of the main reasons for this accumulation was her uncertainty about how to get rid of them appropriately, the fact that she felt she 'needed' to be reachable at all times (by friends more than family) meant a 'spare' was essential:

Old phones and things like that, I usually hang on to them 'cause... it's almost like a back-up, it's just in case.

(Scoping interview, 23.02.2010)

Elspeth similarly used the description of a "back-up" to describe why she had kept her old mp3 player (see Figure 4.1, Chapter Four) after having bought a new one, as well as why she, too, had accumulated several mobile phones:

... when I got a new iPod, I sort, I didn't really need one but I just wanted one [laughs] because it was better, so I do still actually have a mini iPod, and it does work. Umm, so... if that breaks then maybe for a couple of days if I'm desperate, I'll use that... until I can get it fixed. But sort of the same with the phone. [...] I think it just is... sort of to do with not wanting to get rid of something that still works. And then also having it as back up, if worse comes to worst... and you need it, even though it's not as trendy and cool, and you don't really want to use it, but at least it's something.

(Interview 2/2, 19.01.2011)

The idea that she might be "desperate" to listen to music on an mp3 player underlines the importance of this practice in her everyday routine and legitimises her decision to keep her previous iPod. It seems that a back-up phone would be equally welcome if her current phone malfunctioned. Although she admits that she would be reluctant to use something that is not as "trendy and cool", maintaining contact with her friends outweighs the potential stigma of using an old phone. In this sense, her reluctance to "get rid of something that still works" may be more about safeguarding her ability to maintain participation in social life than upholding personal values around avoiding

the ridding of still-functioning objects. In any event, Elspeth's phones and mp3 player, like Emily's phones and Rosa's boots, are retained 'just in case' they are required, remaining on the sidelines of everyday activity (in drawers and cupboards) until they are called back into active use.

Other participants made more active use of their 'spares' by taking old phones and mp3 players when they were going to places where newer versions might be at risk of damage or theft. Sally, for example, said:

I also have my old iPod that I use mainly when I'm going out.

(Interview 2/2, 27.01.2011)

Evie, who had also accumulated several phones, said:

I still have all my phones. For no real reason, I just haven't got round to doing anything with them. And some of them still work, so if I go somewhere that needs... and, like, I don't want to break my new phone, so I'll just use my old one, 'cause it's not as valuable...

(Interview 1/2, 20.10.2010)

The fact that she hasn't "got round to doing anything with them" might reflect a busy teenage life, a lack of pressure from limited storage space, a sense that addressing this accumulation is not a current priority, or uncertainty about how to deal with them (as Emily also reported). The fact that some possessions are retained through the complacency that can result from each of these scenarios is discussed in section 6.4. What is significant here, however, is that at least one phone is still made use of. In one sense it could be argued that by using their 'old' gadgets in this way, Sally and Evie are taking steps to prolong the lives of their newer gadgets by keeping them safe at home, at the same time as prolonging the use of those items that were usurped by new acquisitions. As such, they are able to make active use of two versions of the same object. However, this in turn raises the question of the extent to which contemporary youth cultures comfortably accommodate, perhaps even demand, multiples of some objects – the newest versions which demonstrate one's ability to participate in the latest trends (the most popular game 'app', for example), as well as older versions which, while not the trendiest, allow the most important practices (texting, calling, listening to music, etc.) to be followed 'out and about'.

The keeping of 'old' mobile phones as spares has become common practice amongst young people. Ongondo and Williams (2011) have suggested that as many as 60% of all

the 'old' phones owned by UK university students are kept (un/intentionally) as spares or back-ups, and argue that this is becoming increasingly problematic as demand for new phones necessitates access to the metals contained in (physically or socially) defunct models. Whilst young people's proclivity to keep 'old' phones as back-ups might, in one sense, be seen as a means of waste minimisation (keeping them from the bin), these studies suggest that, in fact, keeping might be tantamount to wasting since both the phones and the materials that comprise them are prevented from moving back across the waste-value boundary into a context of further use (Lepawsky and Mather 2011).

In sum, those possessions which it would have been particularly disruptive to routines to be without were often kept as back-ups by some of my participants. In one respect, 'backing-up' can be seen to reflect anxiety about being without a possession at a crucial moment when participation in a specific practice demands the incorporation of a particular object. At the same time, this anxiety about 'being without' may be exacerbated by the knowledge that possessions that have fallen out of use are still usable. In addition to 'backing up' possessions as a means of appeasing this anxiety, some participants also engaged in a practice I describe as 'hedging'.

6.2.2 Hedging – Or Ameliorating The Fear Of “Missing Out”

While just under half of participants engaged in the object-specific practice of backing-up important possessions, around three-quarters of the group engaged in the more loosely framed practice of 'hedging'. 'Hedging' refers to the process whereby ownership of possessions is maintained on the basis that 'maybe one day' they might be used again – a much vaguer, more tentatively imagined future scenario than that which characterises the retention of 'back-ups'. As such, hedging is less about actually envisaging subsequent reuse of these possessions and more about providing a sense of security that they are still nearby 'just in case'. Hedging applied to a diverse selection of my participants' possessions. Clothes and accessories tended to be the objects most commonly moved back and forth in this way, but possessions implicated in hobbies, interests and leisure pursuits did so too.

Kelly, for instance, took advantage of the fact that her younger sister had a bigger bedroom by using this space as a means of hedging some of her possessions – usually clothes, accessories and books. (Her sister was, reportedly, quite content with this

arrangement since she got to make use of these items while they were in her custody.) Here she suggests that her possessions move back and forth between her sister's and her own active use and ownership, depending on changes in her tastes or interests:

... when I don't have enough space for anything else I just give a whole load of stuff to her but then it's not really gone 'cause it's still in her room... [...] [W]hen I give her stuff I always think, oh I can just go back and get it if I ever want it again. A lot of it is just stuff that I don't need at the time and then I have gone back and found it and been like, "Why did I give it to her? Take it back".

(Interview 1/2, 04.11.2010)

... And even then I think all the books I've given to my sister I've never actually gone back and... retrieved them from her room so it's just the thought that they're still there in case I ever wanted them that's more than, that I think I'd want to read them again.

(Interview 2/2, 17.03.2011)

This movement of possessions back and forth between Kelly and her sister reflects Corrigan's (1986) findings that, within families, possessions are not only gifted between members (i.e. moved uni-directionally); they also move bi-directionally depending on who has use for that item at a given time, and most commonly between sisters. Whilst Corrigan describes the exchanges in his study as often being the cause of disagreement and animosity between siblings, my participants' siblings were generally seen as allies in attempts to legitimise the keeping of un(der)used possessions – a theme to which I will return in a later section.

It should also be acknowledged that there is a spatial issue here; Kelly states quite clearly that it is lack of space that prompts the transfer of these possessions from her bedroom to her sister's. It should equally be noted that these constraints could have led her to give away, sell or bin these items; yet she negotiates space elsewhere in the house which allows them to be kept. The issues of spatial constraints and the need to negotiate access to household spaces in order to store possessions are discussed in detail in section 6.4.



Figure 6.1 Kelly's sister's bedroom: "Um, ok, so... that is my sister's room, which is where I said a lot of my stuff ends up. [...] Like all the... I can see all the bags there, those are mine." (Interview 2/2, 17.03.2011)

In these quotes, Kelly articulates the essence of what hedging aims to achieve – “they’re still there in case I ever wanted them”. However, the ‘hedgers’ in the group largely agreed that they rarely, if ever, returned to the possessions they stored away, suggesting that while future use was the logic that helped to legitimate this form of keeping, these imagined scenarios rarely came to pass. While other researchers’ perspectives on the meaning of keeping possessions have tended to be characterised by fantasy, anticipation or aspiration (Campbell 1987; Sullivan and Gershuny 2004), or by affectionate nostalgia for a long-vanished past self (Woodward 2007), the future scenarios constructed by my participants were, instead, often infused with anxiety, uncertainty and the desire to manage these emotions through objects that were familiar. Talking with Elspeth, for example, about how, during clear outs, her

possessions moved between 'keep', 'rid' and 'maybe' piles, she articulated this anxiety in the form of "paranoia" that getting rid of certain items might be a source of stress in future:

Rebecca When you've got those piles and you're sorting through, do things ever move between piles?

Elsbeth Yeah, they can do, 'cause... some things, like, with clothes especially and I'm like, oh I really like that and then I'm like, oh, but am I going to wear it, when am I going to wear it, so then I kind of change my mind.

Rebecca Ok. So... is it, is it easy or quite difficult to be ruthless about...

Elsbeth I find it quite difficult, 'cause I always think, oh but what if I do want to wear that and then I get paranoid that something's going to come up... where I'd wear it.

(Interview 1/2, 19.10.2010)

Rosa, similarly, relayed stories of parting with garments, acts which she then regretted. Even though she acknowledged that she rarely returned to items she kept, those occasions of regret had been sufficient to predispose her towards keeping items she felt unsure about.

Rebecca With clothes in particular, why do you sometimes hold onto things thinking that you're going to wear them if after so many years you've realised that... you generally don't?

Rosa I don't know if it's, like, not fear but... it's like, whenever I do get rid of clothes, like I said earlier, I realise that I need them. So you kind of make yourself feel stupid because you haven't got rid of them for ages and then as soon as you do get rid of them you realise that you could have used them. So now I'm kind of like, well, if I never chuck anything away then I will never have missed out on anything that I've given up. I think that's kind of... what that is, in a way.

(Interview 2/2, 09.02.2011)

These girls' preoccupation with 'missing out' – reflecting a concern shared with several other female 'hedgers' in this study – implies more than simply missing the opportunity to re-wear a particular item. It suggests missing out on an opportunity to be part of a significant experience – one in which the incorporation of this specific object is integral to the anticipated enjoyment. As such, getting rid of the possessions

that feature most prominently in these imagined future scenarios is viewed as potentially curtailing one's own opportunities for future enjoyment. This may be a particular source of anxiety for young people due to the emphasis placed on being seen to have fun participating in the 'right' events, dressed in the 'right' clothes while in possession of the 'right' accessories (Isaksen and Roper 2012; Foley et al. 2007).

Hedging thus connects directly with the logic behind backing-up, where ensuring means of participation in peer sociality is a central concern. For some it is equally about adding layers of memories to their possessions, strengthening rather than severing the social affiliations they represent. Perhaps the fun times (past and future) associated with these objects are what these individuals fear losing if they were to give them up. While the latter scenario to some extent accords with the 'aspirational' keeping described by Sullivan and Gershuny (2004) and Woodward (2007), where respondents hoped for future scenarios in which their kept possessions would be brought back into use, more commonly my participants' hedging was akin to a comfort blanket with familiarity and reassurance provided by the proximity of the possessions in question (cf. Cherrier and Ponnor 2010).

The extent to which my participants hedged possessions was a powerful indication of the difficulty of divestment – how parting with possessions requires effort, commitment and a degree of certainty. When this is too much to contend with, hedging both legitimates and facilitates the deferral of decisions. However, anxiety avoidance was not the only imperative underpinning my participants' hedging. Some items were retained because, although they were broken or damaged in some way, repair was intended; section 6.3 is directly concerned with this. The hedging of a third group of objects, predominantly comprised of items of clothing and accessories, was framed in explicitly positive terms, where the hedging process helped to create distance between participant and possession, resulting in a more critical appraisal of their value. There were two possible outcomes of this process.

First, as described by Ailsa, Kelly, Ella, Tessa and Amy, there was pleasure in rediscovering possessions – usually accessories such as scarves and bags – that had been stored away during moments of indecision in clear outs – what Parsons (2008) describes as “the find”. Amy described going through ‘cycles’ of using, putting away, rediscovering and reusing. Ailsa, Tessa and Kelly described similar processes of moving possessions around the storage spaces in their bedrooms, enjoying uncovering items they had not encountered for several months. Ella seemed to take as much pleasure in

putting her possessions away as rediscovering them, in the knowledge that she would enjoy them again in future.

Ella Bags, I'm... I kind of group bags with clothing, like, I like having, I think I've got five, like, fairly new ones then in a couple of years I'll kind of like change it over again. Umm... but, most things... I quite like keeping, and if I don't... if I don't particularly have a use for it then, then I normally hide it away somewhere so that in a few years I find it and I'm like "ooh!" [laughs]

Rebecca Ok. When you say, like, hide things away do you actually hide things so you can rediscover them or is it just a case of 'I'll put it away'?

Ella Umm... well I've got, like, a storage thing in my room. Umm, I put boxes in it, boxes that don't fit on top of it. So, normally I put one in the bottom of there and every few months I go through them.

(Interview 1/2, 09.11.2010)

For these girls, hedging was, in these circumstances, a positive process of re-valuing their possessions by creating distance between them such that returning to them invoked a sense of novelty without the need for a new acquisition. Campbell (2001: 253) notes that something old can still be novel, stating that, "... novelty is more likely to be a judgment which an individual makes on the basis of previous experience and is largely unrelated to any given characteristics of the product itself." Here, having had previous positive experiences of returning 'old' possessions to use without being subject to peer scorn for their being 'out of date', these girls were content to continue this practice of creating 'novelty' from existing possessions.

In this respect, this act can be seen to offer a similar sort of satisfaction to clothes swapping – in both 'new-old' objects are made desirable again (Albinsson and Perera 2009, 2012; Botsman and Rogers 2010; Woodward 2007). However, this 'novelty-making' approach was relatively rare – only five girls talked about it explicitly. More commonly, hedging allowed participants to phase possessions out of their lives as they realised that they made little or no use of them. Tina, for instance, talked about how she favours different items of clothing at different times, and stated that those that are currently out of favour are put to one side. Although she, like Rosa and Elspeth, wondered about whether she would want to wear things again, the evidence of not having returned to some items for months, or even years, helped her to feel secure in her decision to part with things:

Occasionally, maybe once... in four months I'll... come back to it. And it'd probably be after a couple of years I'd say I don't need it.

(Interview 1/2, 14.10.2010)

Tessa agreed, saying:

I tend to leave clothes for a couple of years and then when I come back to them I hate them so... I throw them away.

(Interview 2/2, 11.03.2011)

Ailsa, too, said that returning to clothing she had previously stored away helped her to decide whether they were things she wanted to make any further use of.

... sometimes, just by looking at some things I feel actually I don't want it anymore or don't need it so I might pass it down or give it to charity or whatever. [...] It makes me think about it a bit more.

(Interview 2/2, 21.03.2011)

In their study of the meanings at work during clothes swaps, Albinsson and Perera (2009) found that several of their informants engaged in a process like hedging prior to the swap event in order to ease the process of 'letting go' (see also Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005; Roster 2001). The separation between present and past selves created by my participants' hedging seemed to make it easier for them to gain clarity on the likelihood of kept possessions being brought back into active use. This effect is arguably even more pronounced in a context in which the kinds of objects (clothing and technology) that tend to constitute 'hedged' items are situated in a consumption culture characterised by rapid fashion and technological change (Chapter Four). When possessions are increasingly rapidly 'dated', post-hedging decisions about their desirability, and therefore an individual's willingness to retain the item for longer, may be made easier.

Furthermore, and particularly in this context of 'fast fashion' and rapid technological change, the extent to which rediscovered possessions are brought back into active use will depend on an individual's attitude to those changes – whether new trends are potent enough to make anything that is not current undesirable and irrelevant. While on the one hand, a concern with potentially being excluded from an important social event means infrequently used possessions – even those participants profess to be "bored" with – are kept, the fact that they are rarely returned to active use serves to emphasise that the context in which these future social scenarios are situated is one in

which fashion, technologies, tastes and practices have moved on. Put another way, the reasons why certain possessions fall out of use in the first place seems to be the most powerful factor in whether or not they will be used again for more than short term use.

6.2.3 Section summary

My participants' experiences of backing-up and hedging suggest that, for young people today, it can be important to maintain access to possessions that are central to dominant youth practices and identities (from mobile phones with a particular form of messaging functionality to the most popular style of trainers) in order to ensure that they always have the means to participate, even at the risk of not being the 'coolest'. However, since backed-up and hedged possessions are rarely reintroduced to active use, participants' claims about their potential future usefulness instead seem to be a strategy to legitimate keeping in response to social anxieties. Underpinning these anxieties is uncertainty as to whether they might somehow limit their social opportunities by getting rid of a particular item. The tentative keeping that results from this uncertainty reflects the flux, fragility and contradiction within young people's social identities – not necessarily knowing who they want to be next week, next month, or at so-and-so's party on Saturday night – as well as how they attempt to manage these through the management of their possessions.

In some respects, the inclination of some of the participants in this study to keep their infrequently used possessions and make occasional use of them can be seen as a means of extending those objects' usable lives such that replacement with a new acquisition is deferred (although admittedly not necessarily for very long). However, keeping rarely used items is not unequivocally a good thing. Gibson et al. (2011a: 27) have asked, for example, whether hoarding, as a similarly anxiety-laden version of keeping, is "... an outcome of overconsumption, or a practice that reduces waste disposal and enables future reuse?" It is therefore necessary to reflect on the circumstances in which keeping might be more problematic than beneficial from the point of view of sustainability, particularly since assumptions about its benefits may simply mask the root of the problem of accumulation – acquisition (Morgan and Birtwistle 2009; cf. Cherrier and Ponnor 2010). In the case of my participants, the fact that their kept possessions were infrequently (if ever) brought back into use, suggests that it is indeed a problem of acquisition – in the form of replacements and upgrades – that leads to

unsustainable accumulations, and that retaining items on the pretext of potentially returning them to use may simply be a means of alleviating guilt about new acquisitions, as well as anxiety about the ridding of possessions that may (but more likely would not) have been sought out for use in future.

A related question raised by the discussion here surrounds the extent to which contemporary youth practices make demands of young people and their possessions in ways that legitimise problematic forms of keeping in which objects are wasted through lack of use. Back-ups, for instance, constitute a response to many young people's desire for constant social connectivity, but equally are symptomatic of the nature of the markets for easily replaceable gadgets which shape youth culture. Arguably, the 'waste' of a redundant or infrequently used object is, therefore, the result of how young people's agency responds to these demands.

In the discussion so far, claims about a possession's potential future usefulness have been used to justify keeping that infrequently results in subsequent use. In section 6.3, I consider the actions of a particular group of participants, whose approach to keeping was more aligned with maintaining active use of their possessions.

6.3 Making and Mending, Reusing and Repurposing

6.3.1 Willingness to Mend

Of all the participants in this study, Omayma was perhaps the most committed keeper. She rarely parted with any of her possessions – only clothes when they were too small for her. Even broken electronic gadgets were kept, put back into their original boxes and stored under her bed. While she admitted that any gadgets that she believed to be completely defunct were usually binned, those she thought might be fixable were retained.

Rebecca So a lot of the electronic things that you keep, do you keep because they might be fixable?

Omayma Yeah.

Rebecca And how often do you manage to get them fixed? Or do they kind of just sit... waiting?

Omayma Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca Ok. What is it that kind of... that means they don't get fixed that...

Omayma I just don't have the time.

(Interview 2/2, 01.02.2011)

Although not having time proved to be a significant factor in these objects remaining in limbo, stored away under her bed, Omayma's willingness to keep broken objects with the intention of seeking repair implied that binning, though convenient enough for unfixable gadgets, was not always a foregone conclusion. This finding was replicated across a large proportion of the group: the majority stated that they would consider repairing a broken possession. However, with the exception of mobile phones, there was rarely any urgency attached to doing so, mirroring findings from studies with adults (Godbey et al. 1998), even though the items retained for mending tended to be those that were particularly liked. As Tessa said, "I'd probably leave it and then when I want to use it, I'll fix it..." (Interview 1/2, 12.11.2010). As a result, many items were stored away until they were wanted or there was time available for repairs to be attempted.

Over half the group said that they would first attempt to repair a possession (usually clothing or gadgets) themselves; the majority of the others (as well as the first group if they did not have the requisite skills) would seek assistance from either family members (mothers, aunts or grandmothers for repairing clothing; fathers, male siblings or male friends for gadgets⁶⁹) or professionals/retailers (gadgets). While there was general willingness amongst the group to have possessions repaired, the fact that these objects were placed on the sidelines of everyday life for weeks or months while other (sometimes new) possessions were brought into use reflects that actual attempts at mending were sporadic at best. After all, these young people had convenient access to substitutes and replacements. Conversations with my participants rarely extended as far as their reflections on contemporary attitudes to repair versus replacement, but Rosa offered this viewpoint:

If we were maybe educated in how to fix certain things then maybe we wouldn't be using materials that are now in demand, if you know what I mean.

⁶⁹ This reflects a strongly gendered division in different kinds of mending competence. It should be noted that four of the eight male participants did engage in basic repairs of their clothing, such as mending small tears and re-attaching buttons. In contrast, none of the female participants reported attempts to mend their mobile phones, laptops, or other electronic gadgets, beyond re-attaching loose parts with sellotape. A detailed discussion of gendered approaches to repair was outside the scope of my investigation.

Connecting the sustainability implications of easy replacement with the need to possess certain skills in order to intervene in the processes of material objects becoming waste, Rosa articulates an issue which some scholars concerned with sustainable consumption have begun to touch upon. Certainly a degree of competence is a prerequisite for repairing possessions which might otherwise become waste; yet, broadening the appeal of acquiring this competence first requires a cultural revalorisation of mending and mended things. The combination of skill and cultural valorisation may contribute to the sort of self-efficacy capable of contesting the disempowering messages of consumer culture (Brook 2012), the absence of which tends to hold young people back from persisting with sustainable forms of consumption (Ojala 2005, 2007).

Here I focus explicitly on the making and mending activities of a small group of my participants – Ruth, Oz, Graham, Molly and Olivia. Although across the group as a whole there was widespread willingness to mend possessions (or have them mended), few participants possessed the level of skill (or interest) which would allow them to move beyond the very basics of reattaching a lost button or sellotaping the back onto a phone. My aim in singling out this small group is to ascertain how their interrelated skills and dispositions worked together to prolong the lives of their possessions. Drawing on the idea that the location of material things in particular contexts creates affordances (Gibson 1986; Ingold 1992; Dant 2005), I suggest that the competence which emerges from manually intervening in the (re)production of possessions can contribute to dispositions inclined towards prolonging the lives of material things. In other words, I suggest that the particular sensitivity to the efforts of making displayed by these five individuals contributes to dispositions well-attuned to the diverse affordances inherent in their possessions, and that this in turn can create especially durable participant-possession relationships. My intention is not to dwell on the different ways in which these individuals practise making and mending (i.e. whether they sew or tinker with electronics); instead, in order to draw out general lessons about why young people might mend, my concern is with what prompts and enables them to act on their possessions at all.

6.3.2 Knowledge, Skill and The Potential In Things

Molly, Ruth, Graham, Oz and Olivia each mended in quite different ways, and on the basis of different interests or motivations. Molly and Ruth sewed. Ruth's sewing was partly about prolonging the lives of objects for her personal use, but also about using garments that were no longer wearable to make new things – bags, cushions, toys and other items given away as gifts. Molly, like Ruth, had learned the basics of sewing from her mother, and had developed her interest in a context in which making skills were visibly valued:

I think my mum just showed me how to do it and... and then my mum took me to her friend who used to have, like, a stall in Camden Market and she taught me how to sew, like how to actually make clothes and stuff, so.... yeah. [...] She taught me to kind of, like, how to actually use a sewing machine and stuff. But I knew how to sew, I've known how to sew, like, forever...

(Interview 1/2, 12.11.2010)

Like Ruth, Molly used her skills both for making new items – clothing and bags – and mending things, both of which she described as “quite easy”. While both girls were prepared to spend time on these activities because they were a source of enjoyment and satisfaction, both also described personal economic circumstances characterised by the need for thrift – although neither explicitly connected this background with her sewing activities. Olivia, too, had grown up with little financial wealth and her mum was adept at finding alternative – often very innovative – uses for things. Having grown up immersed in this context, Olivia was similarly able to put objects to practical use in unorthodox ways – turning a pair of shoes into a desk tidy, for instance. For these three girls, while the need for thrift played a (relatively unspoken) role in their efforts to prolong the lives of some of their possessions, equally their interest in creative ways of manipulating material things, as well as their possession of the skills that allow them to do so, informed their dispositions towards acting on their possessions in this way.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that thrift was not a prerequisite for mending, reusing or repurposing. Even those participants who were apparently ambivalent or simply disinterested in prolonging the lives of their possessions sometimes did so in the guise of another practice. Lettie was the most striking example here. Despite being the closest any of my participants came to the caricature of the hedonistic young consumer, she occasionally repurposed some of her clothing, usually cutting up skirts to reshape them into trendier styles. For Lettie, these acts were overtly about

affiliating with new trends rather than engaging in a practice simply for the pleasure of making something or prolonging the garment's use in response to a personal ethic of reuse. Nevertheless, while her skirt-restyling activities were sporadic, they represent a context in which one facet of her consumption is made (more) sustainable. This connects with recent work on a range of everyday consumption activities which, practised primarily for reasons of (amongst other things) thrift, health, personal values and good parenting, have the additional benefit of being more sustainable modes of consumption (Evans 2011a, 2011b; Hall 2011; Hitchings et al. 2013). In essence, this suggests that not only do some individuals already engage in forms of sustainable consumption without knowing it (albeit sometimes sporadically, as in Lettie's case), drawing on values or interests with no obviously discernible link to sustainability (fashion, for instance) may offer a means of engaging those who are currently out of the reach of existing sustainability initiatives.

My conversations with Graham and Oz revealed that both boys possessed a greater sensitivity to the environmental implications of consumption than many of their fellow participants. While this was an important underlying factor in why they acted to prolong the lives of their possessions, their comments suggested that their dominant motivation was simply to learn how things work. Beyond being a matter of personal interest there was equally a desire to be able to maintain, adapt and, when necessary, repair these items. Graham, for instance, liked to take things apart. Having asked him whether there were any circumstances in which he would think twice about getting rid of something, he replied:

Maybe I would use that, or kind of, suddenly... [...] Or that would be quite cool to take apart, kind of thing. I do quite a lot of taking apart. 'Cause, you know, there's always more to learn. And it means if I wanted to do something similar, [inaudible], you know, a project, I kind of have an awareness of how to go about it...

(Interview 1/2, 10.11.2010)

Like Graham, Oz liked to understand how things work. He was particularly interested in the properties of different materials (he hoped to study materials science at university) and liked to feel connected with the provenance of his possessions. In addition to building (from scratch) and maintaining his two bicycles, he had also repaired his laptop and mobile phone. Based on his understanding of materials and production processes, Oz simply felt that these items should still be usable and so he made use of

skills he had learned in the course of pursuing his interests to return them to a usable state.

It is evident from the experiences relayed by these participants that the primary factor driving their actions was their interest in both the process and results of repair (or repurposing), a key part of which was the pleasure gained from its results (i.e. a functioning object). They also possessed the requisite competence to allow them to achieve successful repairs or repurposing, which Gregson et al. (2009) note as being fundamental to attempting to act on possessions in this way. Indeed, Brook (2012) has argued that there is something about the transformative potential of acting on a material thing to bring it back into use that, in itself, is capable of providing satisfaction and affirming one's ability to produce a useful thing (i.e. producing a sense of self-efficacy). The participants' sense of self-efficacy, gained through the pursuit of these interests and their increasing competence, underpinned a shared attitude that many, if not most, of their possessions could (and therefore should) be repaired or repurposed. As such, I suggest that their ability to perceive that these items portended future use was a function of how their interests and skills broadened their perception of what any given object could offer. In essence, I posit that they were particularly sensitive to multiple affordances within a single object.

While the concept of affordance has received much theoretical attention since its definition by Gibson (1986) (e.g. Ingold 1992; Dant 2005; *Ecological Psychology* special issue 15/2 2003), my concern with it here is wholly practical and based on its potential as a useful means of understanding why some individuals – such as Molly, Ruth, Graham, Oz and Olivia – were particularly adept at prolonging the usable lives of their possessions. The term 'affordance' describes what an object offers by way of potential uses in the environment in which it is situated. Ingold (1992: 46) argues that we ascribe affordances to objects depending on how we make sense of them in a particular context, and that, "[D]epending on the kind of activity in which we are engaged, we will be attuned to picking up a particular kind of information, leading to the perception of a particular affordance." What I suggest here is that, through their past experience of engaging with the materiality of many different objects through practices of making, tinkering and taking apart, these five participants were particularly attuned to picking up information from their possessions' present form about the future forms those un(der)used items could take. They also possessed what Ingold (1992) terms the effectivity to act on those affordances – that is, they had the competencies to transform

their possessions into what they perceived they could be. This echoes recent work by Dant (2005) who argues that clear links exist between the physical properties of material things, the cultural context in which interactions with those things are situated, and the ways in which these are mediated by an individual's perception, dispositions and abilities in order to bring an object (back) into use (see also Frow 2003).

Of particular note in light of Dant's point about the cultural context in which these perceptions are situated is the fact that Olivia, Ruth, Molly, Graham and Oz belonged to the group of participants whose social lives, by and large, were less influenced by dominant youth cultural norms. As such, they arguably had a view of their possessions less subject to the interference created by consumer-culture-led exhortations which convinced their peers that 'older' possessions were incapable of fulfilling their needs. In contrast to the (almost total) lack of use of the items retained by most other participants, the sensitivity to their possessions' affordances displayed by Olivia, Ruth, Molly, Graham and Oz meant that they were not only concerned with prolonging the usable lives of items that had malfunctioned, they were also inclined to find alternative uses for un(der)used items, meaning that often their less-frequently-used possessions still remained in use of some sort.

Furthermore, in line with suggestions by Cooper (2005) and Maller et al. (2012) that people are more likely to take care of objects that they have had some involvement in the production of, it might also be argued that these young people are more inclined to prolong the lives of their possessions because they have experienced the satisfaction of repairing and/or repurposing. My suggestion, therefore, based on the experiences relayed by Molly, Ruth, Graham, Oz and Olivia, is that sensitivity to multiple affordances can be an important factor in keeping material things in active use (such that they cannot be said to be wasted), and that key to possessing this sensitivity is experience and a degree of competence in interacting with and intervening in the lives of material things.

While, in some senses, calls to avoid waste echo in current sustainable consumption discourses, achieving this through manual intervention in the lives of material things has received scant attention. Isis Brook has recently drawn attention to this, stating that "active, purposive engagement with the material realm", particularly in the form of mending, can help us to "reintegrate ourselves into the material fabric of the world" in ways attuned to environmentally-sensitive consumption (2012: 109). Graham and

Thrift have similarly argued that the knowledge gained in pursuit of repair offers “emancipatory potential” (2007: 2) from a consumer culture in which, as I suggest above, producers are taking ever more cynical steps to deter consumers from repair attempts.⁷⁰ In sum, I contend that these participants’ experiences make a compelling case for ‘re-materialising’ sustainability initiatives in ways that seek to increase young people’s sensitivity to the potential (i.e. residual value) in things. I elaborate on what this might mean in practice in Chapter Seven.

6.3.3 Section summary

While the notion of repair was clearly present in my participants’ minds, attested by the fact that the majority described keeping possessions specifically with the intention of having them repaired, for most, mending was a practice which was sporadic at best. It rarely extended further than re-attaching a lost button or taping the back onto a mobile phone. As a result, many possessions kept with the intention of repair existed in a state of limbo – not deemed sufficiently useless to be binned, but insufficiently important as to demand the attention required to return them to use.

However, for a small group of participants, mending was a reasonably common practice, and, as Gregson and Beale (2004: 690) state, “unusual instances frequently have a great deal to tell us.” It has been my contention in this section that exploring why these young people were willing to act on their possessions in ways that returned them to use could suggest how others might be encouraged to do the same. The experiences of Molly, Ruth, Graham, Oz and Olivia suggest that engaging with the materiality of one’s possessions by acting on them (by repairing, repurposing or just maintaining) can broaden perceptions of how objects of all sorts might be used. This more expansive view of the potential in possessions constitutes an important means of diverting unwanted possessions from the waste stream, as well as from the kind of waste characterised by lack of use.

⁷⁰ Whilst the majority of my participants might have presented themselves as ambivalent at best about resisting consumer culture, this should not be read as disengagement from opportunities that might strengthen their agency such that resistance becomes both more appealing and more feasible.

6.4 Social and Spatial Constraints – When Parents Say, “You Can’t Keep That”

So far this chapter has been concerned with the logics my participants employed in order to justify keeping material possessions that otherwise might have been disposed of. While it would be easy to assume that objects can simply return to the drawers, shelves, cupboards or wardrobes they came from, it is important to remember that the processes of divestment that necessitate decisions being made about keeping and ridding are often themselves initiated by the need to make space and clear out ‘clutter’ – and that, more often than not, these requests come from parents.

In the first part of this section, therefore, I am concerned with the ways in which family members, particularly parents, play as important a part in the decisions and processes associated with keeping as they do ridding – in other words, how the (social) relationships and relationalities that comprise a family household impact on how possessions are managed. I consider how parents’ roles as managers of household spaces are embodied in their interactions with their children about the keeping or ridding of their possessions, specifically in terms of their inhabitation of specific, relational, yet shifting roles defined by their family roles as care-taking parents and adolescents straddling the role of care-receiving children and care-sharing young adults. These allow a varying balance of power between their respective agencies – sometimes parents win out; at other times my participants do. I also discuss the ways in which parents’ priorities (attempt to) constrain my participants’ keeping, and how their routine involvement in their offspring’s divestment attempts can contribute to keeping through complacency. In the second part of this section I focus on how the spaces of the home contribute to particular keeping practices. I suggest that family members together define the spaces where infrequently used possessions are kept through a series of interlinked (in)actions, and I discuss the implications of kept possessions becoming ‘invisible’ as a result of long-term storage.

My main contention here is that parents retain considerable influence over keeping and ridding practices as a result of their ‘domestic management’ role. This is not to say that my participants’ agency was always overpowered; it is simply to acknowledge a balance of power which complicates assumptions made about the strength of young people’s agency in domestic settings, specifically that they have the power to sway parental decisions to achieve outcomes aligned with their own aims.

6.4.1 Parents Know Best? Contesting Demands For Ridding

These are John's trainers.



Figure 6.2 John's trainers, which he had owned since the age of ten

To begin our first interview, I asked John which, of all his possessions, he had owned for the longest time. He replied:

The longest thing I've owned is probably... I know it sounds stupid but a pair of trainers. I've had them since... since I was... ten. Before it was... it was my casual pair of trainers but now I just use it as, like, a gardening pair... to garden. If I want to garden I take off my... this pair and I put on those pair of trainers. Sometimes my dad uses them as well.

(Interview 1/2, 12.10.2010)

Several things struck me about John's opening comment. First, that a teenage boy had kept a pair of trainers in reasonably active use for nine years. If physical growth had not been a reason to part with them, youth cultural trends in footwear – particularly young men's affinities for certain brands and styles – might have been (Bakewell et al. 2006). The second striking point was that, not only were these trainers retained, they were kept in active use and for specific purposes – gardening, as well as household jobs like putting out the bins, as he told me later. Third, John was not the sole wearer of these shoes – his dad also made use of them, also for gardening and household chores.

Straight-forward utility seemed to be at the heart of why these trainers had been kept. As such they fall into a category less discussed in this chapter – objects retained because they are (reasonably) frequently used – for the simple reason that regular use is perhaps the most compelling reason to not get rid of something, and my concern here has been with objects that occupy the fine line between keeping and ridding. From John’s point of view, it was clear to him that these trainers were worth keeping because he and his father continued to use them. However, not everyone in John’s household had the same view. For his mother, these trainers had overstepped the line which defined objects worth keeping:

John They’ve survived repeated attempts of trying to get rid of them by my mum.

Rebecca Why is it that your mum wants to get rid of them?

John It’s because they’re old. And she doesn’t... like clutter and she wants to... to get rid of them.

(Interview 1/2, 12.10.2010)

His mum was desperate to get rid of these old shoes. John had retrieved them from the bin several times and often called upon his dad, as another user, to lend weight to his assertions that they should be kept. This clash of priorities – John’s and his dad’s desire to make use of a still-functional pair of shoes, versus his mum’s desire to have a tidy house – illustrates the difficulties that can arise in households when family members attempt to manage the flows of material things according to conflicting priorities. For John, keeping his trainers seemed to have taken the form of a battle of wills with his mother, with his commitment to keeping them growing every time she attempted to bin them.

Members of a family/household will view a material possession differently depending on their role in that family/household. Focusing specifically on the ways in which mothers manage their children’s possessions, Phillips and Sego (2011) suggest that the terms in which an individual defines their identities (as parent or child, as well as the other identities a person adopts) and their familial roles impacts on the ways in which they do divestment. The nature of parenthood means that the adult inhabitants of a household usually take responsibility for maintaining order within the domestic environment, which includes provisioning for (younger) family members and clearing out objects that are no longer required (Gregson 2007; Gregson et al. 2007a; Phillips and Sego 2011). As such, much (although certainly not all) of the time, parents inhabit

a care-taker role that explains their insistence that their adolescent offspring take some responsibility for maintaining order amongst their own possessions. As young adults – but also still children – my participants occupy two roles: that of care-recipient but also, increasingly, a jointly responsible care-sharer. The fact that what ‘order’ constitutes within a household is vastly subjective, and, as participants described, frequently differed in definition between their parents, created space for their agency in these contexts where their parents’ priorities – and thus parental agency – otherwise tended to dominate.

John was by no means the only participant whose intentions for the futures of his possessions clashed with those of his parents – indeed, in representing similar scenarios from the parents’ point of view, Phillips and Sego (2011) acknowledge that disagreement, conflict and subterfuge are commonplace in family divestment negotiations (see also Hanson 1980, and Evans and Chandler 2006 on the applicability of this to household consumption generally). Participants’ reasons for wanting to keep possessions their parents were keen to get rid of varied. Occasionally, like John, it was a question of continued use; sometimes the objects in question were back-ups or hedged items; sometimes it was a case of significant memories or other emotional attachment. For the purpose of this discussion, the motivation behind the participants’ desires to keep certain things is of secondary importance to the negotiations that occurred in order to permit keeping.

Maggie and Olivia both described employing covert tactics to surreptitiously subvert their parents’ wishes by keeping a wide range of things they had been asked (or told) to get rid of. Maggie came from an army family. As a result of their military lifestyle, Maggie’s mum had become particularly strict about accumulating unnecessary possessions that would only create more work the next time they needed to relocate. While Maggie was sensitive to this, there were occasions when items her mum viewed as surplus to requirement were things that Maggie felt strongly she wanted to keep. As she said herself, having to relocate regularly meant that her possessions constituted “home” more than any house she might temporarily inhabit. She and her sister had taken to moving possessions back and forth between them in an attempt to convince their mother that those surplus objects had, in fact, been moved on.

Rebecca I just wondered how you passing stuff to your sister fitted with your mum’s desire to de-clutter and get rid of stuff. Do things just kind of move round... and not entirely disappear?

- Maggie Yeah. What mum doesn't know won't hurt her. [laughs]
- Rebecca Ok. So things get passed around and your mum doesn't know that it's not actually leaving the house?
- Maggie Yeah. She's like, it's all being chucked out and then it's like, no, it's actually gone into that room there and...
- Rebecca So it kind of... it moves but under her radar.
- Maggie Yeah. Like the other day I pulled out a dress, and she was like, oh, I thought I chucked that away. And then I was thinking, oh my god, please don't remember that dress. [laughs]
- Rebecca Ok. [laughs] Does she ever... call you out on things like that?
- Maggie Yeah, literally, like... all sorts of things. Isn't it about time you chucked those out? She's, like, I tried to chuck those out three months ago! No. [laughs] It's not getting chucked out yet.

(Interview 2/2, 17.02.2011)

Olivia's attitude towards keeping was similarly attributable to her experiences growing up, and is best explained with reference to her mother's pragmatic attitude towards the utility of material things. Both Olivia and her mum perceived a wide range of possessions as always usable, even if not in their original form or for their intended purpose. It was this perception which seemed to underpin Olivia's attempts to 'hide' her possessions from her father, using space in the spare room when items couldn't be accommodated in her bedroom. I asked her how she would go about re-accommodating possessions that, during sort-outs, she decided that she wanted to keep.

Probably hide it from my dad [laughs] so then he wouldn't know I didn't get rid of it. 'Cause I've got these drawers under my bed and they're crammed full of things that my dad goes, oh you should chuck it away, and I put it in there. I don't know, it just sort of... I'd... find a little place for it, I suppose. You know, and my dad always says well everything's got a home, and... a lot of it's under my bed, but [laughs] that's its home. But I'd probably just keep, I don't know, I... I'd hide it, shove it in the loft or... yeah.

(Interview 1/2, 12.10.2010)

As the experiences of John, Maggie and Olivia attest, some of my participants were willing to engage in contestation or downright subversion of parental wishes in order to retain

possessions that they were not ready to part with. Nevertheless, disagreements with parents were less common than circumstances in which participants were quite content for parents to make suggestions or decisions, or sometimes act on their behalf. In these instances, the participants – Ella, Sally, Sadie, Evie, Khadija and, to a lesser extent, Elspeth – seemed content with their parents’ roles as the regulators of household space. Indeed, often they admitted that they did not even notice when parents – usually mothers⁷¹ – intervened and got rid of possessions that they, as care-taking parents, perceived were no longer needed. The fact that these actions passed unnoticed confirmed their suspicions that these objects were not used and thus not missed. Ella, for instance, said that if her mother got rid of some of her things:

I’d probably forget in about a week [...] I probably wouldn’t even notice they’re gone for a couple of weeks.

(Interview 2/2, 23.03.2011)

Elspeth, who generally resisted any ‘assistance’ from her parents in sorting out her possessions, was not only content to leave the fates of some objects to her mother, she did not have strong feelings about where she would like her old things to end up. Talking about a large collection of Beany Babies™ (pictured in Chapter Five, figure 5.4) that she and her siblings had collected over many years, she said that they were currently boxed up in the garage while her mum decided what to do with them.

Elspeth ... my mum’s a bit sneaky sometimes. She’ll just, like, get rid of stuff and not really ask any of us ‘cause we probably won’t even notice anyway. [laughs] She just... sneakily... gets rid of them, but, to be honest, I wouldn’t, I’m not really bothered about that and I wouldn’t mind if, I don’t think my brothers would mind either if she got rid of them.

Rebecca What would you like to happen to them? Given that some of them were yours.

Elspeth Umm... I don’t really mind, to be honest.

(Interview 2/2, 19.01.2011)

Considering the strength of feeling Elspeth expressed about the destinations of many other possessions she had parted with, her disinterest towards the fates of the Beany Babies™ marked an interesting contrast. This example, along with comments by Ella,

⁷¹ The role of women as the primary managers of domestic spaces and particularly household provisioning has been discussed by, amongst others, McDowell (1999); Blunt and Dowling (2006); Pink (2004); Cook (2008); Cox (2010); and Phillips and Segó (2011).

Sally, Sadie, Evie and Khadija about their mothers clearing out possessions with which they were similarly disinterested, suggests that a key role for parents is one of getting rid of possessions accumulated through complacency. In these instances, their adolescent children do not have strong enough feelings about the objects to want to make keeping or ridding decisions and follow through with the necessary actions themselves. This underscores the importance of the role of parents in managing their children's material things because, while it was clear that my participants were often prepared to act to determine the futures of possessions towards which they had strong feelings (whether positive or negative), there were still plenty of items – clothes they were never particularly fond of, for instance, or toys and games long since outgrown – that they had no particular feelings towards but which still required someone to move them on.

This was made clear through the majority of participants' references to their parents – again, usually mothers – maintaining a close eye on the quality and quantity of their possessions, sometimes directly intervening in their clear outs, saying, “you don't need this” or “it's time you got rid of that” (precisely the interventions that John, Maggie and Olivia fought against). Having not interviewed my participants' parents their reasons for these claims can only be guessed at; however, Rawlins (2006) has drawn attention to parents' concerns with helping their offspring present 'respectable' identities, which may constitute at least part of their motivation. Sometimes such comments from parents were taken as validation of a participants' own sense that it was time to part with something. Sadie, Oz, Elspeth, Olivia and Khadija all talked about having 'old' and 'grotty' items, usually garments, pointed out to them by parents, observations which were usually met with agreement, with the old and 'grotty' items usually being consigned to the bin. (Understandably, none of the participants was willing to pass on an item they admitted was 'grotty'!) In these instances, participants usually complied with parental demands for ridding because the 'old' or 'grotty' garments were so irrelevant, even unpleasant, that the participants wanted nothing further to do with them. However, while there was generally consensus on what constituted a 'grotty' garment, sometimes participants had their own ideas about what to do with these no-longer-wanted items. Although binning was the most common option, others either gave them to charity for ragging (Tina, Martin) or retained them to use as rags (for cleaning or in hobbies; Bella, Jamie, Graham).

Over the course of the project it became evident that gaining a true sense of the extent to which my participants kept possessions through complacency would be difficult – and this mirrors the limited discussion of this topic in recent scholarship on divestment and the material culture of the home, including those studies concerned explicitly with storage (see, however, Cwerner 2001; Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003). There are two closely linked reasons for this difficulty in apprehending complacent keeping. First, keeping things because one simply fails to make an active decision about them is a highly unreflexive process and one that is, therefore, difficult to identify and articulate – particularly for young people whose parents are still closely involved in the management of their possessions. Second, there is probably a rather blurred line between the hedging described in section 6.2 and genuine complacency. Whilst hedging might be considered reflective of unwillingness to engage in critical thought as to the likelihood of further active use of a possession (often, and certainly for several of my participants, as a result of social anxieties), keeping through complacency is perhaps more accurately characterised as simultaneous lack of need to rid (no pressure on storage space, for instance) coupled with lack of immediate need (i.e. use) of the object.

For my participants, keeping possessions through complacency seemed to be the result of two main issues. First, the same time pressures that made binning an appealing means of ridding when convenience was prioritised (Chapter Five, section 5.2) also meant that the need to review and sort possessions simply did not become a high enough priority for some. As Ella said, “... in term time it’s just too busy to think about that sort of thing” (Interview 1/2, 09.11.2010). Many of her fellow participants agreed, especially those who had significant commitments outside of school (part-time work, volunteering, competitive sport, for example). Second, and closely related to this issue of time, is the fact that when possessions fall out of use there is rarely any impetus to dispose of them immediately. Instead they are put to one side to await some further prompt – the arrival of a charity bag, an opportunity to sell them, the inability to close a cupboard door – or, as demonstrated in this section, parental demands to ‘clear out the clutter’. Indeed, the significant role played by my participants’ parents in their keeping/ridding activities might partially explain the prevalence of complacent keeping.

The key element which characterised the lack of impetus to immediately dispose of no-longer-used possessions was the availability of space to accommodate kept items.

Material objects accumulate in storage spaces when there is no pressure for that space to accommodate additional or other things. However, the acquisition of new items or the need to use storage spaces for other purposes demands that accumulations of possessions must be addressed. This was often the context in which my participants' parents demanded bedroom clear-outs. While these clear-outs invariably resulted in some ridding, they usually also involved keeping and, as a result, participants' possessions had to be re-accommodated. The negotiations with family members around the spaces in which re-accommodation could occur are the subject of section 6.4.2.

6.4.2 Under The Bed, Up In The Attic, Back Of The Wardrobe: Negotiating Space For Kept Possessions

I don't see the point of throwing something I could possibly use... if I have got room for it, obviously.

(Graham, Interview 1/2, 10.11.2010)

I hate getting rid of things but sometimes I just kind of think I can't hold on to this any longer, it's taking up too much space, I need this space for something else.

(Ruth, Interview 1/2, 15.10.2010)

Being able to keep possessions that they had considered getting rid of (or that parents wanted them to get rid of) was contingent on participants having access to space for storage. They each had varying amounts in their bedrooms, in addition to which access was often sought to other household spaces. Since family decision-making about the management of material possessions is firmly situated in the spatial context of the home with its fixed volume of domestic storage space, for my participants, one of the key issues was negotiating access to these, sometimes contesting limitations imposed by other family members.

The first significant point pertaining to access to household storage spaces relates to sibling relationships. While parents – alongside the participants themselves – were the key actors in determining which possessions could be re-accommodated in the home, and where, participants' siblings also played an important role. This was usually in the form of granting access to their own storage spaces in order to accommodate the participants' surplus. This sharing of space was largely unproblematic, either because

the (older) sibling had left home and had no current need for the space (e.g. John's brother, Daniel's brother, Ella's sister), or because the arrangement was of mutual benefit to both participant and sibling. Kelly's younger sister, for instance, was happy to allow Kelly to keep some of her things in her room because she was permitted to make use of them herself (Figure 6.1). As discussed in section 6.4.1, Maggie and her sister had a similar arrangement which allowed them to secretly retain possessions their mother had insisted they get rid of. By colluding to keep one another's belongings in hidden-away storage spaces, they were able to keep far more items than their mother was aware of.

While these participants were able to appropriate their siblings' spaces in order to elude the pressure exerted by parents to clear out their 'clutter', others who made similar attempts were unable to avoid these demands for very long due to the re-appropriation of those spaces by older siblings returning home, or changes in the use of household spaces as determined by changing family dynamics. For Olivia, her father's relationship with a new partner with children, alongside the imminent arrival of a new baby sibling, precipitated her sorting out the spare room which had, in recent years, become her own personal storage space. John and Daniel both made use of their older brothers' rooms; John's brother was living in Cyprus and Daniel's was at university.



Figure 6.3 The 'spare' room at John's house (previously his older brother's room)

However, it was not only these two participants who made use of these ‘spare’ rooms – their parents did as well. Figure 6.3 illustrates John’s brother’s room, now home to a wide variety of family items including several things belonging to John. Here the joint appropriation of this space for the accommodation of surplus household items both helps to explain and legitimise John’s disposition towards keeping.

Talking about where he kept possessions he wanted to keep but that he could not accommodate in his own small bedroom, Daniel said that since his brother had gone to university, “we put all the junk in there” (Interview 1/2, 09.11.2010). As well as directly implicating his parents in this (shared) practice, Daniel’s description of possessions he clearly wants to keep as “junk” perhaps reflects his awareness that their retention is not strictly necessary, merely feasible due the possibilities afforded by the vacant space in his brother’s room. Siblings are therefore potentially powerful allies in participants’ attempts to retain possessions, because they – explicitly or implicitly, through their presence or in their absence – grant access to more storage space. This sometimes works to undermine parents’ intentions, but at other times parents are equally complicit in the appropriation of these spaces. Nevertheless, parents, as the household care-takers, retain the power to determine access to these spaces, with their decisions about how different areas of the home should be used ultimately determining participants’ ability to accommodate kept items.

Unsurprisingly, bedrooms – their own and those of siblings – were the most common locations in which participants stored possessions. However, beyond bedrooms, a variety of spaces around the home were used by the whole family, including attics, garages and outbuildings (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003; Makovicky 2007). In some instances, no-longer-wanted possessions were temporarily stored in these places prior to ridding. Graham, for instance, tended to accumulate gadgets and electronic components because, even for the technologically savvy, disposal of these items is problematic due to lack of access to appropriate channels. Elspeth’s difficulty was less technical and more straight-forwardly practical. She had put some no-longer-wanted videos in the attic because she wasn’t sure what to do with them and intended to seek help from her mum:

Umm, videos... are all in the loft. Umm... probably will get rid of them at some point but my mum didn’t help me to clear the bookshelf so I just put it all in the loft because I didn’t know what else to do with it! [laughs]

(Interview 2/2, 19.01.2011)



Figure 6.4 Various unwanted items stored in Elspeth's loft whilst awaiting ridding Tessa, quoted at the outset of this chapter as viewing “getting rid” of something as not using for a long time and “stashing it away”, described how, for her, storage can be a precursor to intended ridding but that things can get “stuck” when other things take priority.

Umm, I think because I might want to go back to it, have another rummage through, maybe see if there's anything useful. Umm... like, for example, last week I went on a massive, like, getting rid of cupboard [and taking out] lots of old belts and stuff. But I guess it's kind of, like, it goes through, like, three stages. It's like being chosen to get rid of and then storing it and then actually getting rid of it. And most of it sort of stays in the being, like, stored bit. [laughs]

(Interview 2/2, 11.03.2011)

Tessa's comment, which neatly articulates the second key spatial issue of participants' keeping, makes an important point about the potential inertia that can result from preference to rid via specific channels that do not offer the immediacy and convenience of the bin. In having to wait for the right time to be moved on, no-longer-wanted possessions can exist in a state of limbo lasting weeks, months, or potentially even years, thus embodying Hetherington's (2004) description as “viscous” those objects intended for divestment that ‘loiter’, simultaneously present and absent. Phillips and Segó (2011) describe storage as a means of avoiding the anxieties of

ridding, and Hetherington (2004) makes a similar point, employing the idea of ‘first’ and ‘second burial’ to describe the gradual emotional and physical separation of divestment, with ‘first burial’ consisting of storage followed, in time, by the ‘second burial’ of ridding. Yet how long no-longer-wanted possessions remain ‘stuck’ depends on an individual’s drive to move them on, as well as their access to the means to be able to do so. For example, in contrast to Tessa’s experience of her possessions getting “stuck” in the storage phase, the items Martin sold on eBay (Chapter Five, figure 5.3) similarly inhabited a liminal space (the garage) but only for the short time between his decision to part with them and despatching them to eBay buyers. How ‘sticky’ storage spaces are, or how ‘viscous’ their stored contents, is thus largely defined by the extent to which objects’ owners are committed to (re)producing their value by moving them (swiftly or slowly) into a context of further use.

Most of the spaces used by my participants and their families for the accommodation of kept possessions – such as ‘spare’ rooms, attics and garages – had come to be defined as storage spaces by virtue of the ambiguous useful/useless nature of the objects which inhabited them (Evans 2012b). Other areas of the home came to be appropriated as storage spaces when objects spilled into them - “‘gaps’ are opened into which stuff ‘falls’, and surfaces are cleared upon which things are placed” (Cwerner and Metcalfe 2003: 236). Siblings’ bedrooms could be seen as one such example.

One of the most revealing examples of this process was offered by Daniel. He talked about a space on the landing in his house which had become the site of a mass accumulation of possessions belonging to him and other members of his family. This space had for some years been inhabited by Daniel’s drum kit, but since he no longer played the drums the kit had recently been sold. In the time since it was moved on, Daniel and his parents saw an opportunity to recast this now ‘vacant’ space as a storage space.

He said:

Umm, I think it was... started off, uh, when I moved, uh, when I sold my drum kit which used to be in this space. Umm, and we put about... a box, uh, about two foot by two foot in there, umm, just in the corner to keep... sort of excess toys and things, lego... Umm, and then it just... grew.

(Interview 2/2, 10.03.2011)



Figure 6.5 Daniel's landing space and the pile that 'grew'

Describing this space and its contents, Daniel said:

Daniel So... so what we've done is tactically, uh, covered up so it doesn't look so bad, umm... there are a few bin bags of old clothes. And there are... puzzles, uh... toys, games, sort of... stuff we don't use anymore. Umm... I think there's a mattress there. Pillows. A tool box.

Rebecca Umm, so it's not just your stuff, it belongs to everyone? Or there are bits belonging to different people?

Daniel Y-yes, uh... yes.

Rebecca Ok. And is the stuff that's under there... often used? Or is it used ever?

Daniel No... otherwise it wouldn't be under there. [laughs]

(Interview 2/2, 10.03.2011)

There are two key points here. First, similar to the scenarios illustrated by previous examples, the definition of the landing as a storage space came about through the

actions of both participant and parents. Both had a need for somewhere to locate surplus possessions and the ridding of the drum kit presented an opportunity which neither contested. This serves to emphasise a finding that has run through this section, that participants and their parents often do ‘keeping’ in comparable ways, and that, in a non-care-taking role (i.e. simply as inhabitants of a space) parents employ logics very close to, if not the same as, those of their adolescent children. They, too, hedge, back-up, and keep things for reasons of sentimentality or complacency. The key point to extract here is that, in sharing these logics and practices, keeping things (including ‘clutter’) comes to be validated as a means of managing possessions, and thus this shared practice contributes to the socialisation of the young people in the household into particular attitudes towards (the management of) material possessions.

Second, the fact that Daniel’s accumulation of items is covered up “so it doesn’t look so bad” helps to ‘trap’ them in the sort of limbo Tessa describes above. In one sense, these sorts of accumulations could be viewed as a means of managing a surplus such that decisions about divestment can be postponed until a time in which the necessary knowledge, resources and inclination collide. In another, however, amalgamating the possessions under the blanket means they come to be seen as a single (problematic) mass, ceasing to be seen as a group of individual material things that require individual attention (and time and effort) to determine their futures. As Daniel stated when I asked him why, if these items were never used, they were still there:

Uh... ‘cause it’s so, uh... it takes so long to get rid of all this. You’d have to sort it into the recycling and such. You’d have to sell off things, bring things to charity shops.

(Interview 2/2, 10.03.2011)

For Daniel and his family, covering up these items is a means of trying to make them invisible such that they can forget about the effort that would be involved in ridding the component parts. The issue of the ‘invisibility’ of stored possessions is an important one in light of the idea that items that are forgotten remain unused and, according to the arguments of some, wasted (Gibson et al. 2011a, 2011b). This constitutes the third important spatial issue illustrated by my participants’ keeping. Some of my participants admitted that they tended to forget about possessions they had stored away. Tina, for instance, seemed to experience Cwerner’s (2001: 86) notion of the wardrobe as “a space of darkness and forgetfulness” when she said:

Tina And I was looking yesterday, choosing what to wear for the meal last night and I was thinking, god, I didn't, I forgot I had all those clothes. And that made me think that I should actually, if I don't remember having them I shouldn't keep them. So I think I should... I should get rid of them.

Rebecca Do you think you will now you've discovered them?

Tina Yeah, I think I will. Probably tonight. Yeah, 'cause if I don't remember I've got them then I obviously don't use them.

(Interview 2/2, 03.02.2011)

Martin had a similar experience when, after finishing his GCSEs, he had a thorough clear-out and reorganisation of his bedroom. He said:

... it was only then when we started moving things around that it dawned on me that actually under the bed I've got two sort of huge portable compartments just full of stuff that actually most of which wasn't really... I mean, she {his mum} kind of put it to me. She knew, she knew that normally I would have got rid of it if I didn't want it, and she said, she said, look, just have a look at it. And I was like, yeah, I will, and it kind of hadn't really dawned on me that it was there...

(Interview 1/2, 04.11.2010)

Sadie, John and Tessa also talked about being surprised to rediscover possessions they had forgotten they had, and earlier in this chapter I discussed Ailsa, Kelly, Ella and Amy's hedging of items that they took pleasure in revisiting later, often having forgotten about them for months at a time. On the one hand there is demonstrable pleasure to be gained from the rediscovery of possessions that had long been forgotten about, yet, as Tina, Martin and others reveal, some possessions can be forgotten for so long that they are deemed irrelevant by the time they are unearthed. Regardless of whether rediscovered possessions are willingly brought back into use or consigned to the charity bag or bin, the extent to which their weeks, months, or years of disuse might be viewed as constituting waste feeds into the ongoing debate within studies of household consumption as to when, how and why keeping might undermine efforts at greater sustainability.

6.4.3 Section Summary

My aim in this section has been to reveal the complexities surrounding the management of my participants' possessions within their households. While, for some, interactions

with their parents on this subject were marked by contestation, more commonly participants were quite content to absolve themselves of the responsibility for dealing with possessions in which they no longer had any interest. As such, it is clear that parents retain significant power and influence in the management of their adolescent children's possessions – both in terms of the practical movement of no-longer-wanted things and in the dispositions into which their actions help to socialise their children. Building on similar findings discussed in Chapter Five, this corresponds with recent work which has suggested that social interactions and the contexts in which they are situated together contribute to the crystallisation of particular attitudes and practices, including those aligned with sustainability (Hards 2011).

The discussion here made evident that parents and participants (with siblings as present or absent collaborators) together were complicit in some forms of keeping and that this illustrates the presence of shifting and relational roles within the family/household. On the one hand this suggests that adults and young people are not all that different in the logics they employ to manage their material things, but on the other this may simply reflect the powerful effect of socialisation into shared practices. Who wins out tends to depend on the participant's strength of feeling towards keeping a specific possession, as well as the lengths they are prepared to go to (subversion, collusion, etc.) to retain it. In essence, what these findings emphasise is the collaborative nature of the management of my participants' possessions, while also pointing to the overriding influence provided by parents' roles as domestic space managers.

This is significant in light of the emphasis placed on adolescents' purported autonomy and influence in their family households when it comes to shaping consumption practices (e.g. Ballantyne et al. 2006; Larsson et al. 2010; Maddox et al. 2011). It would seem, in fact, that when it comes to divestment, in many instances parental agency remains the more powerful. Indeed, when it comes to keeping (and ridding), my participants' attitude towards the involvement of their parents largely suggests that the appealing convenience of devolving responsibility to them might, first, make it difficult to persuade young people of the merits of reassuming this responsibility themselves, and, second, point to parents as the more appropriate group to engage on matters of household sustainability.

6.5 Conclusions: Keeping - In Or Out Of Use?

Keeping can be viewed as a form of partial or temporary divestment and, as such, it forms an important part of how material possessions are managed in the home. As a facet of young people's relationships with their possessions keeping has been overlooked; yet, as the findings presented in this chapter suggest, there are elements of this practice that complicate existing beliefs about those relationships, as well as the social and spatial interactions within the domestic settings where these relationships are played out. For my participants, keeping formed a central part of how they lived with and managed their possessions and often they worked hard to retain all sorts of things.

I began this chapter by presenting the practices of backing-up and 'hedging' as two means through which participants legitimated keeping possessions. Participants often justified these actions through recourse to ideas about their possible future usefulness, yet the reality seemed closer to a means of managing anxieties associated with the demands of adolescent sociality. Whilst keeping on the basis of aspirations for future use may have been a legitimate logic employed by participants – perhaps as a means of balancing concerns about being a waste-maker with their social priorities – the reasons why these backed-up and hedged items fall out of use in the first place remain powerful factors in keeping them out of further use. In other words, the temporalities of cultural obsolescence mean that the longer an object is left in storage, the less 'relevant' or desirable it is likely to be when it is rediscovered since fashion and technology will have moved on that much further (Maycroft 2009b). This was evidenced by the fact that my participants rarely reverted to hedged or backed-up possessions. Here, then, the chances of kept possessions both being wasted (i.e. unused) and becoming waste (i.e. being perceived as sufficiently irrelevant as to be valueless) were high. Indeed, extending Hetherington's (2004) adoption of the notion of 'first' and 'second burial' as stages of divestment, it could be argued that this double 'burial' amounts to a double negation of the potential for the value of that object to be (re)produced; it is first denied use (value) through storage, then when it is revisited it may be sufficiently out-of-date that, either as Ella said in Chapter Five, it shouldn't be 'inflicted' on anyone, or there may be no interest from potential recipients in (re)producing its value through exchange.

In contrast to this apparent slow descent into waste, section 6.3 focused on the activities of a small group of participants who were particularly inclined to keep possessions in active use through repair or repurposing, thus explicitly embodying waste avoidance

through their willingness to act on things to (re)produce value (Hawkins and Muecke 2003). While there was a widespread willingness to mend (or at least investigate the feasibility of mending) across the whole group, those who were both skilled and interested in acting on their possessions (by repairing or repurposing) for its own sake (rather than practical necessity alone), demonstrated a noteworthy sensitivity to the affordances of things. I suggest that this is particularly worthy of acknowledgement in light of the emphasis placed on young people's sense of competence and efficacy in encouraging their participation in sustainable forms of consumption (Ojala 2005, 2007), as well as the lack of attention currently paid to the role of manual skills and creative intervention in the lives of material things for the drive towards sustainability (Brook 2012).

Further, and in response to Thompson's (1979) position that an individual's ability to contest dominant cultural norms around waste depends on her/his place in the social order, the five participants who comprised this minority group demonstrated that individual subjectivity and agency (quite apart from an individual's place in a wider social group) can equally form a powerful basis on which to contest dominant norms around the (re)production of value (Crewe 2011; Dant 2005). Their individual desires to perpetuate the value of their possessions – which, though complementary, were subtly different in nature and genesis – along with their manual competence in acting on their things, allowed them to depart from the youth cultural script of acquire-dispose-replace and form a different relationship to the objects of consumption. Were enough young people inclined to follow their lead, youth culture (or perhaps, more realistically, a youth sub-culture⁷²) may possess the means to contest commercially-driven waste-making at the larger scale with which Thompson (1979) is concerned.

My focus in section 6.4 was on situating my participants' keeping (and ridding) activities in the family/household contexts in which they take place. The experiences they related revealed a domestic context in which parents retain considerable influence over how their adolescent children manage their possessions, through both direct involvement in the physical processes of divestment and the indirect validation of norms and routines. In highlighting the shifting and relational roles adopted by both participants and parents throughout processes of keeping and ridding, my aim has

⁷² I employ the term 'sub-culture' here for semantic convenience since I construct this grouping in relation to mainstream youth culture. I acknowledged, as discussed in Chapter Two, that sociologists of youth have long debated the relevance of the term 'sub-culture' and that another may be more appropriate should this nascent grouping emerge.

been to emphasise the fact that the logics informing how material things are managed can and do change depending on the role adopted. Parents might actually share with their children attitudes towards keeping, but what sets them apart is their role as care-taking parents who have the responsibility for managing household spaces, provisioning, and helping the family as a whole subscribe to social norms around acceptable appearance, generosity through handing down, etc. (Cook 2008; Phillips and Seg0 2011). Appreciating the significance and impacts of these shifting yet mutually constitutive roles – and especially the outcomes when parents and young people adopt different roles as part of different practices – might constitute a more robust foundation on which to build effective sustainability interventions compared with those which target young people and adults separately and, in doing so, gloss over these complex household relationships.

While, as discussed throughout this chapter, some forms of keeping are inevitably complacent and unreflexive, simply because there has been no prompt to consider ridding, at other times keeping is a thoughtful, sometimes anxious, sometimes combative process, suggestive of a keen interest in maintaining the use of kept things. Yet although the forms of keeping discussed by my participants were generally intended to prolong the usable lives of their possessions, the occasions when those possessions were brought back into use were rare. Social and cultural pressures combined to hold these kept objects in limbo. As such, it might be argued that waste was more prevalent in my participants' keeping practices than in their ridding practices. Not only does this add urgency to Gibson et al.'s (2011a) question, 'to what extent is keeping un(der)used possessions problematic for sustainability?' (Ongondo and Williams (2011), answering in the context of unused mobile phones have already suggested, 'quite a lot'), it fundamentally challenges the notion that any societal waste problem to which young people might contribute is an issue of their actions being 'throw-away'.

The nature of the anxieties that seemed to characterise hedging and backing-up, as well as the contestation that, at times, existed within household divestment processes make clear that, for my participants, keeping was not always an 'easy' way out of having to deal with the anxieties of divestment – quite the contrary. Nor did it necessarily amount to zero waste. This points to the problem of waste in young people's consumption (as well as consumer culture more generally) as being one of a cultural acceptance of accumulation created as a result of the pressures surrounding

acquisition. Here no-longer-relevant possessions exist in use-less (and therefore waste-full) limbo. On this basis, the nature of waste in young people's consumption may be more accurately characterised in terms of retaining unused accumulations (a result of the ease of, or demands for, acquisition) than any form of ridding.

In the final chapter of this thesis I draw together the findings of this and the preceding two chapters in a discussion of what this project has suggested about my participants' general attitudes towards the consumption of their material possessions, and the sorts of social and cultural forces that have contributed to the way those attitudes are manifested in divestment practices and the production/negation of waste. I use this as the basis for my reflections on what these findings mean for the ways in which young people might most effectively be situated in interventions promoting sustainable consumption.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS: EXCESSIVE... BUT NOT WASTEFUL?

The implications of a more nuanced understanding of youth consumption for sustainability

7.1 Introduction

The starting point of this thesis was an apparent disjuncture between the desire of sustainability promoters to position young people as influential drivers of sustainable consumption, and the popular perception of young people as hedonistic perpetrators of the worst excesses of contemporary consumerism. That this disjuncture has been mirrored by research into young people's material consumption which has been constrained by narrow disciplinary worldviews – illustrated in Chapter Two by the 'Two Teens' caricatures – indicated to me that significant questions remained unanswered, not only about the nature of young people's consumption beyond acquisition, but about where and how – in the broad schema of their everyday consumption – opportunities might exist for that consumption to become more environmentally sustainable.

In response to the implication that young people's consumption is inherently wasteful (Steiner and Matura/UNEP-UNESCO 2008), and drawing on a strand of consumption research which has gone some way to contest the overly simplistic notion that we inhabit a 'throwaway society', this thesis has used divestment as a focal lens and theorisations of waste as a key reference point in order to develop a more nuanced picture of young people's consumption. My aim has been to identify where, within their overall consumption practice, the greatest opportunities exist to encourage environmental sustainability through lower impact consumption, as well as to suggest how this might be achieved and, ultimately, to comment on the extent to which young people are capable of being the Trojan horses of sustainability that environmental educators hope them to be. These aims were framed as two research questions:

1. What can we learn about young people's consumption by studying their divestment of personal possessions?

2. How might this knowledge inform the ways in which young people are positioned in sustainability interventions?

In this concluding chapter, I draw on the key findings discussed in Chapters Four to Six (summarised in section 7.3) to present a grounded theorisation of young people's consumption based on their divestment practices (section 7.4). This firmly situates their relationships with their possessions in relation to a range of contextual forces which have previously been underplayed in the youth consumption literature. In section 7.5 I discuss the implications of my findings for attempts to engage young people in more sustainable consumption, and I offer some suggestions as to how promoters of sustainability might respond. In doing so I link back to some of the key characteristics of recent environmental education initiatives discussed in Chapter One, and I comment on the feasibility of newly adopted environmentally sustainable practices 'rippling out' to family and peer groups. I suggest some possible avenues for future research in support of these proposed forms of engagement in section 7.6, before concluding with some personal reflections on the key message of this study (section 7.7). I begin, though, with some reflections on the extent to which my grounded methodological approach has allowed me to fulfil the aims I set for this project.

7.2 Methodological Reflections

7.2.1 Techniques and Sampling: Were They Effective?

When I began this project in 2009 I was aware that many theoretical lenses could have framed my study and, thus, shaped my methodology. However, my sense was that being led by any one theoretical approach would distract from – and potentially obscure – answers to what were quite straight-forward empirical questions. In particular, since the most revealing insights were likely to come directly from my participants' everyday lived experience, I felt that to impose a single theoretical angle onto their responses before they had given them would have opened up my work to the accusations of partiality that I critique through the 'Two Teens' caricatures, and explicitly framed those responses as somehow 'not enough' to tell a compelling story on their own. Since my over-riding aim was to be able to speak back to sustainability promoters with a nuanced understanding of the realities of young people's consumption, my priority was creating space for this to emerge.

On this basis, I opted for a grounded theoretical methodology, allowing theory to be built ‘from the data up’ – an approach noted for generating rich data from young people’s expertise (Eder and Fingerson 2002; Miller and Glassner 2004). A rich body of data was, happily, the result here: the conversations I had with my participants have still more to reveal about their consumption than it has been possible to elucidate in this thesis. Whilst, as noted in Chapter Three, the constraints on the amount of data it is possible to generate imposed by the scope of a doctoral project meant that the point of ‘saturation’ advocated by grounded theorists was not reached, there was both sufficient breadth and depth to the topics discussed in the interviews that an extremely detailed picture of young people’s consumption emerged, with key themes widely substantiated across the group (and less widespread themes equally achieving substantiation from smaller numbers in the group). This was made evident during the coding process as the data attributed to key codes expanded in quantity and diversified in nuance as more transcripts were coded. In turn this testifies to the value of interviews as a means of eliciting detailed reflections on and reconstructions of thoughts, actions and emotions; my participants were usually very keen to elaborate on their basic responses with detailed stories about specific experiences or events.

The photo-elicitation element was, on the whole, worthwhile as participants generally produced a good number of images which (as I had hoped) provided useful points of reference during the second round of interviews. However, a relatively small number of the participants engaged with this task to its full extent; it was more usual to have a batch of seven or eight blurry images to work with – yet even these usefully supplemented the topics which emerged through conversation, prompting previously unrelated stories or elaboration of events described in prior interviews.

The gender bias in my sample also warrants comment. As noted in Chapter Three, the sample was skewed towards female participants. At the point of recruitment I did not consider this a significant problem since there was no basis (within extant research) on which to assume that young men and young women would either rid differently or experience the pressures that precipitate ridding differently, thus I felt there was no more likelihood of omitting relevant stories by having fewer male participants than by having fewer participants overall. Furthermore, my concern was with revealing un(der)acknowledged facets of young people’s consumption which, again, based on (the lack of) extant research, were no more likely to be different between genders as they were likely to be comparable. In short, I felt that there were sufficient young men

in the sample that, if gender did prove to have a significant bearing on any of the reasons for or processes of ridding, this would be evident and a useful indication of a potentially fruitful avenue for future research.

The analysis suggested that the female participants manifested their social anxieties more explicitly in the ways in which they managed their possessions than did the young men in the group. On the one hand this may simply reflect that the male participants were less prepared to admit their social anxieties to a (female) researcher⁷³, or that they were unable to perceive the way these might have impacted on their relationships with their possessions. On the other, it might represent a significant finding that young women's possessions are more susceptible to falling out of use through cultural pressures than those of young men. However, this 'finding' is undermined somewhat by four of the male participants referring to male friends, peers or family members whom they perceived as falling victim to those same pressures. Overall, the general range of views and experiences relayed by male and female participants revealed similarities between genders (and differences within them) which suggest that the skewed sample was largely unproblematic in terms of gaining a broad-ranging understanding of the factors shaping their relationships with their possessions and practices of divestment.

7.2.2 Reflections On A Lens: Focusing On Divestment

I also want to briefly acknowledge the benefit of using divestment as a lens in this study. Focusing on this part of the broader process of consumption resulted in a wealth of data capable of adding much-needed nuance to how young people's consumption is understood. Whilst it was never my intention to make divestment itself the object of study, a number of links with recent divestment scholarship became apparent over the course of the analysis, and these warrant succinct acknowledgement.

It was clearly evident that my participants constructed their identities as much through the rejection of possessions as through acquisition, use and ownership (as in Gregson et al. 2007a, 2007b; Gregson and Beale 2004; Marcoux 2001; Norris 2004; Woodward 2007). Their anxiety about being judged on the basis of 'embarrassing' unwanted possessions led them to dispose of those items through channels where the items could not be traced back to them (usually the bin; Gregson et al. 2007a), although the

⁷³ This may also explain why the uptake from male volunteers was comparatively low in the first place.

relative lack of reflexivity that characterised ridding by binning meant that participants were less able to comment on these acts than on other forms of ridding – thus reflecting (and contributing to) the scant knowledge of the lived practices of binning within this field.

Other ridding channels were selected on the basis of convenience as well as a sense that surplus value can/should be (re)produced by others' use (Gregson and Crewe 2003), or because they helped to constitute the expression of 'love relations' (Gregson et al. 2007; Miller 1998), where particular consideration was given to what the transfer of possessions between family or friends expressed about the relationship between donor and recipient (e.g. Gregson and Beale 2004; Woodward 2007). Whilst no direct evidence was found of participants' selling being used in support of "promiscuous consumer behaviours" (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009: 305), some did sell their unwanted possessions as a means of generating reassurance as to those objects' cultural value. The appropriation of online social networks (specifically Facebook) as a means of facilitating selling (as well as, potentially, gifting) marked an interesting new phenomenon worthy of further investigation; I return to this example later.

The discomfort with the rapid pace of change in fashion and technology identified by Morgan and Birtwistle (2009) amongst their young female participants was echoed in my participants' frustration with the obsolescence of their gadgets, particularly their mobile phones, and their anxieties related to the ridding of garments that lacked either physical or stylistic durability. As such this directly contests Hawkins's (2001: 9) suggestion that, "[T]he capacity for serial replacement is also the capacity to throw away without concern." Conversely, as demonstrated by those participants who expended considerable personal effort in prolonging their lives of their possessions, doing so was more likely amongst those who, through their particular sensitivity to the affordances in things, were better able to perceive multiple forms of value in that item (Chappells and Shove 1999; Dant 2005; Gregson et al. 2009).

In sum, the extent to which my findings corresponded with those presented by others concerned with divestment suggests that there are commonalities in adults' and young people's consumption that mean the tendency to maintain a separation between these two groups may (at least sometimes) be unnecessary, as well as unhelpful – as my findings on the relational domestic roles of my participants and their parents implied. At the same time, the instances where my participants' stories diverged from accounts discussed in recent literature demonstrate that there is much that can yet be

contributed to divestment scholarship by new empirical studies, particularly those with under-researched groups such as youth, and that doing so constitutes an important means of refining – and sometimes challenging – accepted understandings of how ‘consumer society’ is lived in practice.

Exploring my participants’ consumption by focusing on how and why they engage in divestment not only allowed me to add contextual depth to theorisations of young people’s consumption (elaborated in section 7.4), focusing attention on those moments of consumption characterised by non-use of possessions brought into focus the nature of waste within these processes (discussed in the context of the chapter summaries in section 7.3). In summary, my methodology generated (more than) sufficient information to allow me to develop, and sometimes challenge, dominant ideas about young people’s consumption and point to some of the areas of their consumption where promoters of sustainability might want to focus their attention in order to address the potential for waste. Before presenting my detailed conclusions on these matters, I first revisit the key themes which emerged from each of the empirical chapters.

7.3 Chapter Summaries: The (Potential For) Waste In Young People’s Consumption

In Chapter Four I argued that the primary driving forces of my participants’ possessions falling out of use were the normalisation of short-term use and disposability within consumer culture, and a contemporary youth culture which demands timely acquisition of the latest styles or gadgets as a passport to participation in core youth practices. With reference to Bentley et al. (2004) and Miles (2000) I noted how participants’ social concerns played into consumer cultural demands in ways that ultimately constrained their agency and legitimised the commercial power structures responsible for doing so. I suggested that, here, waste as a process of wasting resulted from scant individual agency in a context where rapidly changing commercially-driven trends were sanctioned by their widespread uptake within youth culture.

I then noted that the disposability of many of the material items targeted at youth was largely accepted by most of my participants – although not always happily. Those with less personal wealth tended to be frustrated by their relative lack of choice in engaging with disposability, although they remained pragmatic about what it was reasonable to

expect for low cost. Those with more money – whilst having the ability to consume physically and stylistically more durable items – often engaged with disposability as a positive attribute, acquiring both garments and gadgets for intentional short-term use. My main contention here was that despite participants' awareness of the evident short-term usability of these items, they appeared oblivious to (or simply chose to overlook) the fact that these objects were (potentially) imminent waste.

On the basis that the potential for waste was largely invisible in the contexts where participants' possessions fell out of use, I suggested that they were complicit in a form of waste fetishism; ambivalent about the threat of waste due to more pressing social concerns and content to accept the normalisation of disposability as a means of absolving themselves of responsibility for the remnants of their consumption. This begins to respond to calls from scholars concerned with investigating the underlying reasons for the widespread acceptance of disposability (e.g. Barr 2004; Cooper 2005; Evans and Jackson 2008) – but also makes clear that there is much still to explore. Only one small sub-group diverged from this norm, expressing forms of agency which directly contested the acquire-dispose-replace cycle facilitated by social lives and relationships set back from the demands of mainstream youth and consumer culture. The experiences of this small group made especially evident the impact of socio-cultural context on young people's relationships with their possessions, and further substantiated the view that young people with a stronger sense of self-efficacy are less materialistic (Chaplin and John 2007; Gatersleben et al. 2008; Isaksen and Roper 2012; Park and John 2011).

In Chapter Five I sought to gain a sense of how 'throw-away' my participants' divestment was in practice. I described how binning was used as a convenient means of 'black-boxing' zero value items, which otherwise might have remained a troubling presence, but noted that ridding by selling and giving away were far more prevalent techniques. I suggested that this reflected participants' construction of waste in this context as an object of their making – something that they wanted to avoid making for three main reasons: first, they did not want items which remained an 'extension of self' (Belk 1988) to be framed in negative (value) terms; second, they possessed understanding of the social value of things, particularly as a means of expressing relationships (e.g. Gregson et al. 2007b; Miller 1998); and third, they expressed a strongly shared moral sense that waste is 'bad', since it represents failed opportunities to (co-/re)produce value through the movement of things (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Hawkins 2006).

I went on to suggest that the waste sensitivity displayed by my participants emerged from their location in a cultural context in which the management of possessions within close social networks (especially families) is a widespread norm, as well as from their proximity to the multiple infrastructures and services to which they had access for the purpose of moving on unwanted things. I suggested, too, that these contextual factors were fundamental to my participants' agentic response to the widely shared waste (avoidance) ethic, visibly demonstrating to them the means through which the surplus value in their possessions could be (re)produced (Grønhøj and Thøgersen 2009; Matthies et al. 2012). Noting the conspicuous absence of references to the environment in participants' discussion of a waste 'ethic', I posited the reframing of attempts to engage young people in sustainability in social rather than environmental terms, aligning with recent work on forms of sustainable consumption driven by an 'other-than-environmental' ethic (Evans 2011a; Hall 2011; Hitchings et al. 2013).

Having acknowledged that my participants had, on the whole, quite strong agency in determining the trajectories of their possessions, I drew attention to some of the contexts in which they might unwittingly constrain that agency in the name of convenience. Here I was particularly concerned with online 'recycling' services which, I argued, contribute to the threat of premature obsolescence discussed in Chapter Four. Nevertheless, I concluded that, on the whole, this group of young people was relatively far from the image of the 'throw-away' teenager – at least on the basis of their ridding practices – and that we should look at other moments in the overall practice of consumption for opportunities to promote greater sustainability.

In Chapter Six I argued that one place where attention might be focused in this regard is in the long-term keeping of un(der)used possessions, since questions have recently emerged as to the extent to which keeping material things out of circuits of reuse is problematic for sustainability (e.g. Gibson et al. 2011b; Ongondo and Williams 2011). Keeping formed a central part of my participants' management of their possessions and they often went to considerable effort to retain a wide range of things. Sometimes this was in the form of 'back-ups' or 'hedged' possessions. Here, whilst participants legitimised these actions with recourse to notions of future utility, in practice the indeterminate periods of non-use experienced by these items suggested that their retention was more an act of managing anxieties associated with the demands of adolescent sociality. Further, I suggested that the cultural obsolescence that pushes these possessions out of use in the first place constitutes the main force that precludes

them from being brought back into (regular) active use. On this basis, and with reference to Hetherington's (2004) notion of the 'first' and 'second burial' of divested items, I posited that the potential surplus value of these items is doubly negated; first, as a result of being denied use value (through storage); and second as a result of the negligible interest in, later, (re)producing that value due to a greater magnitude of cultural irrelevance.

I contrasted this with the activities of a small sub-group of participants who, conversely, frequently acted on their possessions in ways which kept them in active use, often returning them from states of malfunction or other forms of un-usability. Noting the sensitivity of these participants to the affordances in their un(der)used possessions, and the benefits of this sensitivity for keeping items in active use through acts of repair and repurposing (Dant 2005), I argued for more attention to be paid, first, to increasing young people's sense of competence and efficacy as a means of encouraging their participation in more sustainable forms of consumption⁷⁴, and second, to the role of manual skills in particular within attempts to encourage sustainability (Brook 2012; Gregson et al. 2009). Using this group as a reference point, I noted that individual subjectivity and agency can be powerful bases on which to contest dominant norms around the production of waste and the (re)production of value. With reference to Thompson's (1979) contention that an individual's ability to contest dominant norms depends on her/his place in the social order, I suggested that attempting to increase young people's competence and enthusiasm around acting on their possessions to transform their value has the potential to crystallise in the form of a youth 'sub-culture', and that this might potentially grow in scale to reach that which, Thompson (1979) argues, has the ability to create significant change in cultural norms.

Returning to the impact of family members on my participants' management of their possessions, I noted that, in spite of shifting and relational domestic roles, participants' parents retained considerable influence over how their teenage offspring's possessions were managed. Acknowledging parents' overall responsibility for the organisation of domestic space, their role in formulating an influential familial habitus, as well as the negotiations and acts of subversion that characterised my participants' engagement with parental requests to 'sort out their clutter' (Gregson 2007; Gregson et al. 2007a;

⁷⁴ It is worth noting again here the link between self-efficacy and materialism, in that these participants' attitudes to their possessions contrast with the consumerist materialism associated with young people with a less developed sense of self-efficacy (Chaplin and John 2007; Isaksen and Roper 2012; Park and John 2011; Gatersleben et al. 2008).

Phillips and Sego 2011), I suggested that attempts to engage both young people and adults on the topic of household sustainability might be more effective if they considered how these shifting roles and relations impact on how sustainability is negotiated – and thus lived – in practice between family members.

I concluded that, for my participants, keeping was not always an ‘easier’ way of managing their possessions than ridding, and that the threat of waste was more prevalent in the context of possessions invisibly stored away un(der)used than in most of their modes of ridding. As such, this lends weight to my contention that the problem of waste in young people’s consumption is created by the cultural acceptance of accumulation, and thus is primarily a problem of acquisition (as similarly posited by Morgan and Birtwistle 2009).

Having made reference throughout these summaries to the multiple social structures, cultural norms and spatial influences on my participants’ relationships with their possessions, I turn now to address the primary intent of this thesis - to articulate a revised, empirically-grounded understanding of what young people’s consumption is about, before using this to offer some suggestions as to how promoters of sustainability might use this understanding to refine their attempts to engage this group.

7.4 ‘Re-structuring’ Young People’s Consumption

Recent studies (as discussed in Chapter Two) have characterised young people’s consumption as a response to the necessity of contemporary identity construction. The experimentation involved, the focus on ‘being cool’ and ‘keeping up’ with trends, and the preoccupation with ownership of particular kinds of objects have privileged young consumers’ agency, emphasising individual actions in pursuit of individual identity goals (Autio et al. 2009; Bentley et al. 2004; Brusdal and Lavik 2008; Croghan et al. 2006; Griffin et al. 2005; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Marion and Nairn 2011; Russell and Tyler 2005; Van Gorp 2005; Wilska 2003; Wilska and Pedrozo 2007). The result has been that these practices have somewhat uncritically been treated as fundamental to the wider practice of contemporary adolescence, yet with little acknowledgement or discussion of the structural factors that might shape their emergence or impact on young people’s agency. My contention in this thesis has been that this missing context undermines what is already known about young people’s consumption, and that, particularly if it is necessary to encourage different modes of

consumption amongst this group – as sustainability promoters seek to do – it is essential to move beyond the concern with the conspicuous and reveal the mundanities, anxieties and lived realities in order to understand what consumption means and involves for youth.

Here I draw together my conclusions as to the nature and impacts of various socio-cultural, spatial, economic and material factors on my participants' consumption as a means of grounding the overly-individualised characterisation of young people's consumption described above. Doing so achieves more than 'tying up the ends' of a grounded theoretical approach (Corbin and Strauss (1990) state that the structural conditions of a phenomenon must be central to its explication); it provides a detailed and nuanced picture of the forces that interact with the agency privileged in extant studies and thus constitutes a more fully realised foundation from which to consider how, where and in what ways greater sustainability within young people's consumption practices might be encouraged.

In Chapter Two I presented a diagram which pictured the main structural factors – implicit in the literature reviewed but rarely the focus of analysis – shaping the ways in which youth culture is materialised within young people's consumption practices. Figure 7.1 (overleaf) reproduces that diagram with augmentations added in light of the findings presented here.

First, it was clear, particularly from my participants' descriptions of how they managed the ridding and storing of their possessions, that family-based norms and routines – what I described in Chapter Five as familial habitus, and illustrated here at the top of the diagram – played a large, and previously unacknowledged, part in the ways participants related to their possessions. More than merely being a logistical aid during 'clear outs', interactions with family members were shown to play a central part in the development of participants' attitudes to the potential for producing or negating waste (or value) in the consumption of their possessions – as well as their responses to this potential. The waste 'ethic' discussed in Chapters Five and Six emerged from routine participation in family practices, and these in turn reflected and constituted part of a wider culturally-sanctioned set of behaviours around the management of surplus possessions. My participants' generally reflexive movement of their possessions throughout the course of divestment suggested their sensitivity to this. It was, thus, evident that the home and family – as a site in which cultural norms around

the management of surpluses are played out – were influential in shaping these young people’s attitudes to the objects of consumption.

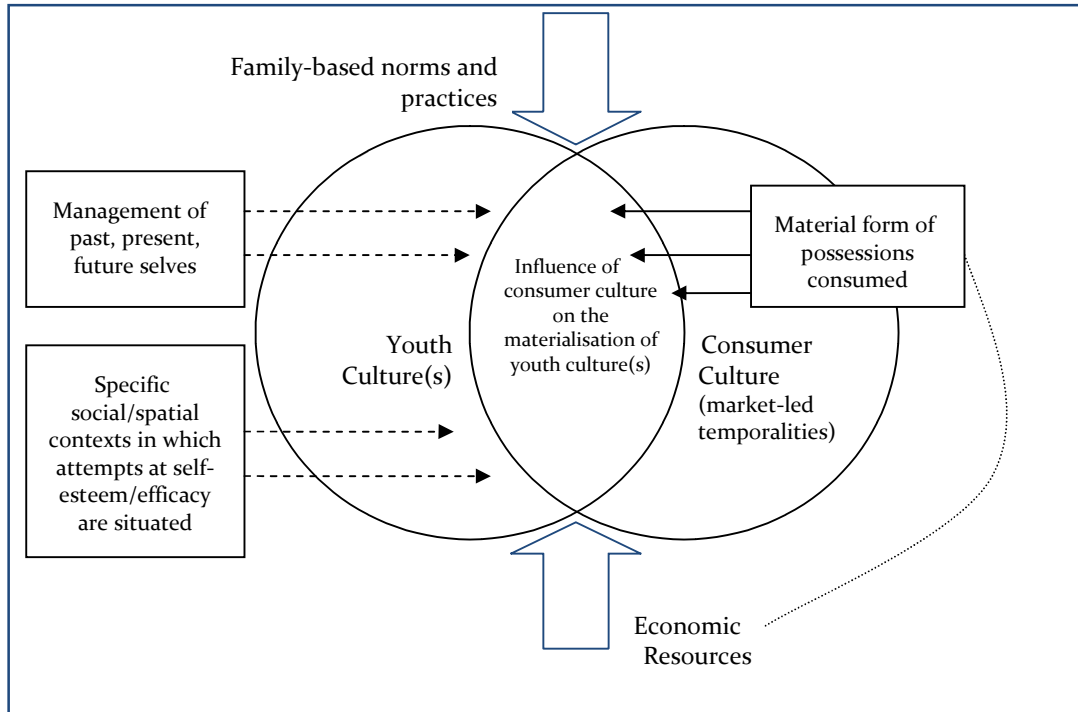


Figure 7.1 Structural factors shaping the materialisation of youth culture(s) (augmented version)

The impact of young people’s varying economic resources (represented at the bottom of Figure 7.1) was made most evident in Chapter Four’s discussion of responses to physical and stylistic durability. (This connection is described in Figure 7.1 by the dotted line linking ‘Economic resources’ with ‘Material form of possessions consumed’.) Whilst in one respect participants’ personal wealth was a key factor in determining the extent to which they were able to contest some forms of commercially-driven obsolescence, the fact that wealthier participants were able to consume more possessions – as evidenced by the acquisition of duplicates (Kelly’s shoes and Tessa’s friends’ mp3 players, for instance) – raises clear questions as to whether young people with greater or fewer financial resources are better placed to be drivers of sustainable consumption – a question that Gibson and Stanes (2011) have also recently raised based on similar findings concerning wealthy teens’ tendency to buy fairly traded and organically produced clothing – but also more of it.

Importantly, although financial resources inevitably granted those possessing them more agency in some circumstances, this was a highly commercially-bounded agency. In other words, they had greater means to engage with the demands of adolescent social life and youth cultural practices, but in ways which fully conformed to the interests of the commercial providers of the requisite material 'tools'. As such I contend that the wealthier participants did not, in fact, have greater agency than their less well-off peers, merely that they had the means to consume in ways that were, at times, suggestive of greater agency. In a sense this might be read as suggesting a class-based stratification of young people's ability to consume according to particular principles (pro-environmental or otherwise); however, in a wider social context in which consumer cultural values have been embraced across the diverse (economic) grouping that now constitutes 'the middle class(es)', particular class-cultural attitudes cannot unproblematically be associated with certain levels of personal wealth or family economic circumstances. In other words, whilst my participants' (families') economic situation played a crucial part in shaping their consumption, this was not always accompanied by a class-cultural attitude typically associated with their particular level of material wealth. In sum, young people's financial resources – more than the impact of their class identity in the more expansive sense of the term – seemed to determine the extent to which they succumbed to the demands made by the intersection of youth and consumer culture.

This intersection of youth and consumer culture, at the centre of Figure 7.1, has proven to be the most influential structural context in my participants' relationships with their possessions. Since attempting to separate the influence of youth culture from consumer culture would deny their interconnectedness (not to mention be extremely difficult), I discuss the implications of the two in tandem.

As noted in Chapter Two, the social expectations that characterise adolescent social life demand participation in particular practices, and, in turn, these tend to create specific material 'wants' (Autio and Heinonen 2004; Bentley et al. 2004; see also Warde 2005). My participants' experiences revealed the extent to which these practices and their associated 'wants' are profoundly structured by commercially-driven rhythms in ways which tap into the preoccupation with dynamism and 'being one step ahead of the rest' that characterises youth culture. 'Keeping up' with the latest gadget functionality and possessing the means to 'do' novelty (particularly through clothing) were the two clearest expressions of this. Commercially-driven consumer cultural demands thus

become youth cultural demands, with young people's responses to these necessitating balancing the means to participate in current practices with disposing of no-longer-needed material remnants of past practices, retention of some remnants which might be recalled for roles in future practices, and imaginings of the demands of future practices.⁷⁵ I contend that what might be assumed to be the pleasure of acquisition does not reflect consumption as the ultimate expression of young people's agency (as Miles 2000 and Wilska 2003, for instance, have inferred); rather it may be more accurate to characterise this moment as one of relief, having successfully (if only temporarily) acceded to the demands made by youth and consumer culture.

This socio-spatial context – the peer group interactions where accession to, or refutation of, youth/consumer cultural demands becomes evident – constituted the location in which most of my participants sought to gain a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. For those whose social lives were firmly situated within, and heavily materialised in relation to, the trends imposed by producers, their well-being was largely dependent on possessing the 'right' items in order to participate in the 'right' practices at the 'right' time. In this sense, they located their attempts to feel competent in socio-spatial contexts where commercial imperatives dictated, as a result becoming obliged to acquire the latest things in order to remain competent youth culture participants and maintain a positive self perception.

In contrast, the attempts at gaining and expressing competence by those whose materialisations of their identities and social relationships were distanced from these pressures were less susceptible to – indeed, largely uninfluenced by – externally-imposed changes. These participants consumed very differently from their peers, almost never expressing that they felt the need to 'keep up' through consuming particular things; they based their identities and relationships in social contexts with more durable measures of competence. Not only does this substantiate recent research which has associated high levels of materialism with low levels of self-esteem amongst youth (Chaplin and John 2007; Gatersleben et al. 2008; Isaksen and Roper 2012; Nairn et al., no date; Park and John 2011), these contrasts contribute valuable nuance to understanding how sociality informs young people's relationships with their possessions, specifically how different forms of youth sociality, and the proximity of particular forms of social life to the youth/consumer cultural nexus, involve different kinds of relationships with the objects of consumption. As demonstrated by the

⁷⁵ This is represented on the left-hand side of Figure 7.1.

majority of the participants in this study, for many young people their preferred form of sociality may demand sacrificing some of their agency to the market, which, in turn legitimises dominant power structures' ability to dictate the terms of consumption (Bentley et al. 2004; Miles 2000).

In sum, there are evidently far greater forces at play in determining young people's relationships with their possessions than their individual responses to dominant youth cultural ideas of what is 'cool', from the impact of familial habitus and waste 'ethics', to the location of an individual's social life relative to dominant consumer-culturally structured forms of sociality. My analysis suggests that their consumption is characterised by a struggle for agentic expression in the context of performing 'youth' and participating in practices associated with key youth cultural imperatives (such as dynamism, trend-setting, and challenging the status quo). Since many are ill-equipped to look to other forms of self-expression more embedded within their individual competencies as a means of achieving this, instead they reach for material 'tools' which are almost exclusively provided by consumer culture. Thus, rather than consumption being the ultimate expression of young people's agency (Miles 2000; Wilska 2003), I posit that young people's consumption often manifests their desire for agency, more than expressing agency that they might already (but rarely do) possess.

There is one further point worthy of elaboration here, which concerns the very different way in which socio-cultural expectations impacted on my participants' relationships with their possessions at earlier and later stages of their consumption. In the earlier stages (i.e. acquisition and regular use) participants' social preoccupations formed a key part of what made their consumption relatively unsustainable – 'keeping up' with the latest practices demanded new things, even when old phones, shoes or clothing were physically suited to further use. Yet in later stages of an item's consumption, participants' social relations were fundamental to ensuring that item remained in use, even if this was by someone else. This suggests that there are two overlapping spheres of socio-cultural influence – one that works to push possessions out of use early in consumption ("you must keep up with the latest practices!"), one that seeks to keep them in use later in consumption ("but you mustn't waste!") – and that, in the middle, is a blurred area where possessions accumulate while these competing social imperatives push and pull possessions through the process of consumption.

These spheres seem, at first glance, incommensurable. However, my suggestion is that this may not be the case and that, in fact, attempting to reconcile this apparent

dilemma might be one of the most fruitful places for promoters of sustainability to focus their attentions. I elaborate on why this might be the case in section 7.5.

7.5 Engaging Youth In More 'Sustainable Sustainability'

In Chapter One I stated that one of my aims in this thesis was to use a grounded understanding of youth consumption to inform the promotion of a more sustainable form of sustainability amongst this group. In essence, I have sought to identify what makes young people's consumption particularly unsustainable at present – in terms of both their actions and the cultural context which, as evidenced in the previous section, plays a major role in shaping them – and then use this to re-direct the attention of sustainability promoters to those aspects of consumption which, by virtue of their complex personal, social and cultural drivers, may be harder to tackle but, for reasons I elaborate in this section, are more likely to engender longer-lasting and more impactful results.

I have striven to emphasise – particularly in the summary above - that young people's agency is (most commonly) sublimated to demands imposed by cultural norms – in contrast to what much of the extant youth consumption literature has implied. There have, naturally, been exceptions: the case of the sub-group of my participants whose social lives were distanced from typical forms of youth sociality; and some parts of the ridding process where participants' actions were driven by subjectivity and personal waste ethics (although it should be noted that even these were largely the result of cultural norms and familial habitus). For most, however, their agency was latent; desirous of expression in ways that demonstrated participants' ability to be a competent participant in youth cultural life, but usually bounded by what commercial imperatives determined was the presently favoured mode of expression.

What has become clear is that my participants were more able to act in ways that prolonged the lives of their possessions when there was less 'noise' from consumer culture. In other words, the less of a direct influence applied by consumer cultural pressures to a participants' relationship with an object, the better placed that individual was to perceive its continued value – for someone else if not for themselves. In this section I present some suggestions as to the ways in which promoters of sustainability might work with young people to quell the 'noise' of consumer culture, such that youth culture and its practices might be – at least partially – reclaimed as a

space for youthful expression and the development of self-efficacy and self-esteem on young people's own terms.

7.5.1 Forget The Environment: Try Subtle (But Selfish?) Sustainability

The caricature of the citizen-consumer described in Chapter Two showed that even young people who describe themselves as committed to sustainability find it hard to put their values into action consistently (Autio and Heinonen 2004; Connell et al. 1999; Ojala 2007, 2008), with the desire to consume according to typical teenage imperatives often outweighing their purported awareness of the importance of 'treading lightly' on the planet. This reflects one of the growing challenges for promoters of sustainability – how to reconcile what it means to consume sustainably with the other priorities associated with living an enjoyable and practical life. Gibson et al. (2011a: 6) have suggested that:

“Researchers need to identify and bring to light practices different from those commonly ascribed as green, to contest a narrowly normative expression of ‘sustainable behaviour’ before boundaries become too entrenched, and to harness cultural diversity as a resource to imagine alternative ways of doing things.”

The fact that youth culture has its own aims and demands, which are often addressed in highly creative ways by its participants, suggests that looking to what young people already do well, in addition to what other opportunities they seek, may be a means of 'harnessing cultural diversity' in order to promote different modes of consumption without overtly framing them as being 'green'. This is all the more important since young people have been found to be 'put off' sustainability by messages which imply that they must reconfigure their whole identity accordingly (Hayes-Conroy and Vanderbeck 2005; Renton et al. 2011). Attempts to engage 'mainstream' youth therefore need to be only partially focused on sustainability; 'subtle sustainability' (or 'inadvertent environmentalism'; Hitchings et al. 2013) should be accommodated alongside – or ideally within – other social priorities, since the actions promoted must be easily realisable and willingly taken up in everyday contexts in order to stand a chance of becoming normalised (Fröhlich et al. 2012).

Further, Pearce et al. (2013) have suggested that behavioural change initiatives need to present alternatives which offer at least comparable status (and ideally more) to the consumer. For youth, for whom status amongst peers is a fundamental driver of their

consumption, this requires careful thought as to how gaining status through consumption might be framed less as necessitating acquisition and more about other kinds of interactions with material things. At the same time, as suggested in Chapter One and evidenced throughout this thesis, there is a compelling need to build a sense of competence amongst young people as part of attempts to engage them (explicitly or implicitly) in sustainability (Jensen and Schnack 1997; Schusler et al. 2009). Not only does this generate the self-efficacy needed to ensure that young people's early attempts at sustainability are not short-lived (Autio et al. 2009; Bentley et al. 2004; De Young 1996; Ojala 2005, 2007, 2008; Vermeir and Verbeke 2004), competence in participating in culturally-sanctioned practices is ultimately what young people seek to achieve through their consumption (Autio and Heinonen 2004).

In light of many of my participants' objective of achieving a positive self-image and degree of social status through their consumption – although notably against a backdrop of social (and occasionally environmental) concerns associated with the production of waste – initiatives which conspicuously prioritise their social 'needs' are perhaps best placed to pique their interest and maintain their engagement. There may even be benefits – amongst sustainability professionals at least – in framing this mode of engagement as 'selfish sustainability', where the aim is for young people to achieve outcomes primarily for themselves, with wider social and environmental effects constituting additional benefits. Indeed, this would mirror recent moves within the sustainability policy arena to promote 'intrinsic' rewards (e.g. personal satisfaction and self-esteem) in the context of 'extrinsic' benefits (i.e. broader socio-environmental benefits, such as a cleaner, safer community) (Waste Watch 2012).

I want to briefly acknowledge here that 'selfish sustainability' does not and need not overlook the fact that, as demonstrated in this thesis, there are aspects of young people's relationships with the objects of consumption that are clearly characterised by concern with/for others. However, since these parts of the consumption process (ridding, primarily) are arguably less directly troubled by the demands of consumer culture (characterised as they are by stronger agency on young people's parts and a sensitivity to the potential for waste) and thus 'less unsustainable', I concern myself here with those facets of consumption which are most susceptible to commercial manipulation, involve greater constraints on young people's agency and are characterised by an apparent obliviousness to, or denial of, the production of waste.

In the following section I present some ideas as to how sustainability initiatives might respond to these suggestions. In doing so I connect ideas about how to increase young people's agency and sense of competence with actions capable of negating the threats of waste highlighted throughout Chapters Four, Five and Six. The proposals discussed constitute an intentional move away from the tendency of many recent youth-focused sustainability initiatives to 'parcel up' promoted pro-environmental behaviours in ways which detach them from the social context and cultural drivers of young people's actions. Instead, I suggest two possible ways for sustainability promoters to engage youth which foreground these priorities.

7.5.2 Labelling Social Value

The first approach seeks to address the 'waste fetish', which, as a result of the acceptance of some products' disposability and thus the inhibition of the imagination of possible further use, can precipitate a kind of self-absolution from dealing with the remnants of consumption. Premised on the centrality of social concerns to my participants' attempts to avoid waste, it focuses on the social relations of divestment as the basis for an initiative which seeks to bring those possessions most susceptible to 'waste fetishization' back into a context where their surplus value might be recognised.

In practice, this is envisaged as a system⁷⁶ which integrates product labelling – where labels on new products describe a future 'second life', having passed from its original purchaser to a second owner – with an online service. The online system, which would 'plug in' to social networks such as Facebook (the potential of which as a ridding channel was highlighted in Chapter Five; and the role of which as a motivator of pro-environmental behaviour has recently been noted by Robelia et al. 2011) or online ridding channels (such as Freecycle, Gumtree or eBay), would act as a means of both facilitating transfers to new owners (when this is deemed desirable) and eliciting stories of real-life 'passings-on' to be used within the labelling scheme. Schemes comparable to this already exist, such as the partnership arrangement between Marks & Spencer and Oxfam (described as 'shwopping'), where no-longer-wanted Marks & Spencer garments donated to Oxfam are acknowledged with a five pound Marks &

⁷⁶ This might be led by a youth organisation in partnership with a sustainability-focused organisation such as WWF, GAP or Friends of the Earth.

Spencer voucher.⁷⁷ In order to address the waste fetishism which my participants' accounts revealed to be most prevalent in the context of fast fashion and some forms of technology, the system I describe here would be concentrated on retailers purveying these kinds of items. In both my proposed scheme and that operated by Marks & Spencer and Oxfam, purchasers of new items are conspicuously reminded that once they have no further use for that item, someone else might, and they are directed to a ridding channel (online or on the high street) through which they can pass on that surplus value.

An initiative along these lines would directly engage with the socially-inflected waste ethic expressed by my participants, demonstrating that, although they might sometimes struggle to imagine that anyone might want to make further use of some of their unwanted possessions (Ella's "gross neon tops", for example), there remains scope to move them on in ways that avoid them becoming the kind of troubling items that must otherwise be 'black-boxed' in the bin or kept out of sight, out of mind (and out of use) in the loft, garage or other storage space. By using a label to give a face and/or name to a potential future user, the nature of waste as unused potential, a missed opportunity, and thus an undesirable outcome of their personal actions is emphasised. Counteracting the waste fetish (prevalent, in my participants' experience, at the point of acquisition when non-use of the desired object is unimaginable) by making visible the obligation to take responsibility for the remnants of one's consumption (e.g. the ridding of a no-longer-wanted garment) has the potential to prompt reflection on the necessity (or desirability) of the acquisition, as well as acknowledgement of the object's value beyond the purchaser's own use of it.

Whilst an initiative such as this may well be suited to engaging groups beyond young people, there are two interlinked reasons why focusing on youth – at least in the first instance – may be particularly worthwhile for promoters of sustainability. First, involving young people in the design of the scheme – its mechanisms as well as its presentation – maximises the chance of devising something that effectively speaks to this group. No-one knows better than young people themselves which kinds of messages engage them (and why), and which do not. Further, eliciting input in this way offers young people a degree of ownership over the process – they are co-

⁷⁷ Information on the scheme from each partner can be found at :
<http://plana.marksandspencer.com/about/partnerships/Oxfam>
<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/donate/donate-goods/mands-and-oxfam-shwopping>

designing a system for their own use – and this may feed the kind of action competence identified as central to encouraging sustainability (in both senses of the word) in individuals' everyday practices (Almers 2013; Jensen and Schnack 1997).

The second benefit of devising such an initiative with youth is based on tapping into their existing expertise. Chapter Five suggested that interest is growing amongst young people in making use of online services and networks as a means of moving on no-longer-wanted possessions. Although some of my participants were hesitant about using these kinds of channels – largely due to unfamiliarity with the processes that characterise some of them – more familiar online spaces, such as Facebook (as per Amy's example), may present a context in which selling, giving away or exchanging could become as convenient – and as effective a means of visibly (re)producing objects' value – as donating unwanted possessions to charity. Not only would designing an initiative around the ways in which young people already use online spaces and social networks likely reap benefits in terms of positive uptake, the focus in the initiative proposed here on making visible the surplus value as transferred between (known or unknown) peers goes some way towards countering the anonymity that can characterise other forms of online ridding, which (as I suggest in Chapter Five with reference to mobile phone 'recyclers') can result in disconnection from the implications of the remnants of consumption.

This first potential engagement strategy, then, is based on making use of young people's expertise and creativity, as well as the multiple ways their relationships with their possessions are socially embedded, to unveil the waste fetish and emphasise the surplus value in items that might otherwise have been framed as suited only for the waste bin. As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, it was these items which were most likely to evade circuits of reuse because of the perception amongst participants that their peers would share their view of them as low or zero value.

The second strategy I propose is, in some respects, a more radical departure from existing modes of sustainability promotion. However, even more than my first suggestion, I contend that it speaks directly to the priorities of contemporary youth, particularly their concerns with negotiating and asserting their identity, gaining status and esteem, and embodying the dynamism of youth culture.

7.5.3 Hacking For Sustainability

This engagement strategy is premised on the idea of facilitating young people's re-imagination of the notion of ownership as characterised by greater personal involvement in shaping the lives of their possessions. Emphasising their power to determine the futures of their possessions would, I contend, help young people to define and materialise youth culture(s) on their own terms, rather than through recourse to consumer cultural values and meanings imposed by producers.

In large part this strategy builds directly on the experiences of the small group of 'menders and makers' discussed in Chapter Six. These individuals were especially sensitive to the affordances of their un(der)used possessions because of the competences they had accrued through manual experimentation, and, as such, they clearly displayed 'action competence'. The aim for sustainability promoters would be to facilitate the development of skills amongst young people that would help them simultaneously perceive the possibility of further use of possessions and act on those objects in order to make them (re)usable. A programme of activity along these lines would respond to Schusler et al.'s (2009) contention that facilitating the general development of transferable skills (rather than being led by a specifically environmental imperative) constitutes a more effective means of engaging young people in such behaviours beyond the short-term and ensures their skills and senses of satisfaction and competence translate across contexts.

Practices already exist which might be easily extended or reframed as a specifically youth development initiative (whether or not sustainability as a driving theme is also brought into the mix), and these can generally be brought together under the term 'hacking'. 'Hacking' – in the context of material culture – refers to modifying the material form of an object in order to accomplish a goal outside that object's original intended purpose. It involves tinkering with an object such that it facilitates uses that it did not facilitate previously, and as a practice it is as applicable to garments as gadgets, as well as other kinds of items besides.⁷⁸ Hacking is also closely allied to practices such as customisation and personalisation, which have already been linked to keeping products in use by offering scope for a form of novelty which can be created rather

⁷⁸ It should be noted that a wide range of objects can be hacked and with different ends in mind, including: straightforward repair; updating, augmenting, customising or personalising an item (e.g. embellishing or re-shaping a garment); adding functions or combining aspects of unrelated objects (e.g. a GPS tag to a rucksack).

than bought (e.g. Wilhelm 2012 on the customisation of mobile phones). My data revealed that young people can and do experience novelty in the context of existing possessions – ‘rediscovering’ items that had previously been stored away, for example. The challenge is to find ways of extending this through supporting the development of specific skills to encourage, as Gill and Lopes (2011: 307) suggest, “making new relationships [rather] than making new things” – developing understanding of patterns and templates, for instance, which might then be used to transform a no-longer-fashionable garment into something more acceptable to current tastes.

The ‘anti-establishment’ tone of hacking as a practice (based on its emergence as a response to frustration with the disposability, homogenisation and ‘closed’ nature of manufacture of growing numbers of consumer objects; Magaudda 2010; Rosner and Bean 2009) may be particularly appealing to youth, fulfilling their need to set themselves apart from other social groups content to conform, whilst giving them the knowledge and skills to take greater ownership of their possessions, (re)making them into whatever they want or need them to be. In this respect there are parallels between the potential of hacking to engage young people (implicitly or explicitly) in sustainability, and the suggestions put forward by Vivoni (2013), Cermak (2012) and Marion and Nairn (2011) that existing youth cultural practices (skateboarding, hip hop and fashion ‘bricolage’, respectively) might offer potential for sustainability through engaging with the values young people seek to express through their everyday acts of sociality.

In the same way that the ‘Labelling Social Value’ initiative described above makes direct use of young people’s familiarity with online space, hacking is also, to a large extent, facilitated through the sharing of information online. The internet is already well-populated with ‘how-to’ guides for a growing range of activities, including but going far beyond those encapsulated by ‘hacking’ (Paulos et al. 2011; Torrey et al. 2007), some of which are specifically aimed at young people (Lovell 2011). Since my participants were increasingly turning to internet-based tools as a means of managing their material surpluses, offering resources through these channels aimed at prolonging objects’ ownership might be as effective a means of avoiding waste as facilitating access to ridding channels. There is, however, an equally important role for physical spaces capable of materialising the possibility of acting on an object to improve or change its function. To this end, sustainability promoters might seek to ‘partner up’ with the new

wave of 'Fab Labs' and 'Make Spaces'⁷⁹ now emerging around the UK, which, as well as providing access to equipment from screwdrivers and sewing machines to laser cutters and 3D printers, also present opportunities to experiment, innovate, develop specific skills and learn from experienced makers or hackers.

The over-riding aim of placing this practice at the centre of promoting sustainability is one of facilitating the acquisition of skill, in turn leading to competence and self-efficacy. If it proves possible to generate a sufficient groundswell of enthusiasm amongst young people for 'hacking for sustainability' initiatives, it may not be overly optimistic to imagine the emergence of a youth cultural context where esteem between peers is based at least as much on young people's ability to singularise their possessions in unique and innovative ways as on the consumer objects they have the means to acquire. Indeed, the extent to which, and the ways in which, young people creatively singularise possessions has been a topic largely absent from the youth consumption literature, and has only really been visible in popular consciousness in the form of sub-cultural styles (such as the 'Partille Johnnys' discussed by Lindblad and Ostberg 2011).

Further, and responding to the closing point of section 7.4 concerning the differing impacts of social preoccupations on my participants' consumption at earlier and later moments in the process of consumption, the emergence of peer esteem based on respect for skill (rather than capacity to acquire) may have a transformative effect on how social factors shape young people's relationships with possessions. Specifically, the earlier phases of consumption may come to be characterised less by social anxiety (i.e. 'keeping up' with evolving practices and their requisite acquisitions) and more by collaborative forms of value production, similar to those which characterised the latter parts of consumption and were effective at negating the threat of waste by pulling objects back into the realm of value. Daring to imagine even further ahead, this may allow young people to liberate themselves from the anxieties precipitated by consumer culture-driven trends and contribute to a wider reclaiming from the market of how youth culture is practised and materialised.

⁷⁹ 'Fab lab' is an abridged term for fabrication laboratory: <http://www.fablabsuk.co.uk/>
'Make spaces' (also 'Hacker spaces') are the same kinds of organisations, merely with a different name. These spaces have begun to emerge around the UK in the last five years, having first developed in the US.

In the two 'subtle sustainability' initiatives outlined here, I have advocated an approach to promoting sustainability amongst young people which ignores the environment. Instead I have suggested that the focus should be on increasing young people's sense of competence to perpetuate the value and durability of their possessions – either through participating in a system which makes clearly visible the usability of items consumer culture would otherwise paint as disposable, or through developing sensitivity to objects' affordances which prompts their reconfiguration in a more useful form. Through this, I contend that young people would be increasingly well placed to contest the commercial pressures that demand the acquisition of new things in order to 'do' novelty and the discarding of those items which have become culturally obsolete in order to be considered competent participants in contemporary (consumer-culturally structured) youth culture.

I wish to be clear that I neither assume nor suggest a complete withdrawal from what consumer culture has to offer young people. Rather, the kind of activities I have outlined here should be seen as a means of communicating that they can still consume (and enjoy) fashions and technological trends, but that they also have the ability to decide on their own terms (rather than at the whim of producers) whether and how they want to engage with – or, indeed, ignore – those trends. I contend that this is key in light of the ways in which personal wealth impacted on my participants' consumption of certain possessions (Chapter Four). Communicating to young people that they do not need to constantly acquire novelty in order to 'do' novelty (or, indeed, simply maintain aspects of the ways in which they materialise their identity) may reduce the kind of anxiety that perpetuated the acquire-dispose-replace cycle represented, for example, by Rosa's boots. Further, it should be noted that the two schemes proposed here incorporate no financial barriers to access beyond possessing the means to shop (thus coming into contact the labelling scheme, or acquiring basic tools required for hacking projects) and/or access the internet.

Before I look forward as to how the ideas presented in this conclusion might be extended by future research, I want to briefly reflect on what my findings – and my proposals in this section – suggest about the capacity for young people to be 'Trojan horses' for sustainability within their immediate social networks, since it is on this basis that young people have been made the focus of so many sustainability initiatives. In light of the specific suggestions I have made here as to how youth might be engaged in a very different approach to promoting sustainability, here I consider in what ways

approaches based on labelling social value and 'hactivism' might have the capacity to 'ripple out' to family, friends and peers.

7.5.4 The 'Social Valuer' And The 'Hactivist': Two Trojan Teens?

Youth-focused sustainability initiatives have operated on the premise that newly-formed environmentally sustainable behaviours can be transmitted from young people to family and friends (Ballantyne et al. 2001; Benn 2004; Bentley et al. 2004; Duvall and Zint 2007; Evans et al. 1996; Leeming et al. 1997; Malpass et al. 2007; Maddox et al. 2011; Uzzell et al. 1994; Uzzell 1999). It is on this basis that young people can be seen as akin to 'Trojan horses' for sustainability; taking new ideas and practices into the household or peer group and disrupting existing ones. However, as noted in Chapter One, there has been growing acknowledgement by scholars concerned with the transmission of environmentally sustainable behaviours that, within the context of the family, parents and children mutually socialise each other into routine behaviours, thus the nature of influence is more complex than the uni-directional linearity foregrounded by environmental educators.

Whilst parent-child interactions were not specifically the focus of my research, they emerged as a significant influence on how my participants related to and managed their possessions. Indeed, as demonstrated in Chapters Five and Six, familial habitus was fundamental to participants' capacity to perceive surplus value and thus the genesis of their waste ethic. In contrast, there appeared to be little scope – or, indeed, need – for participants to contest existing ridding practices (apart from those occasions when they sought to keep items parents demanded the disposal of) or instigate alternatives that would have been more environmentally sustainable. On the matter of waste it thus seems that parents of contemporary youth not only engage in several forms of comparably sustainable practice already, but that they are the dominant agents in normalising those practices and the values which underpin them. Since this set of processes appears to be firmly in place (largely by virtue of the fact that some of the component practices, such as handing down/giving away, are long-standing cultural norms), there would seem to be little sense in interfering with them.

However, there may be scope for young people to take a complementary set of practices into the home based on the initiatives outlined above. For the 'social valuer', this might involve introducing family members to online ridding channels capable of

relocating items which otherwise tend to linger on the waste-value boundary, often, in the meantime, becoming the waste-through-non-use posited in Chapter Six. Some of my participants said that, while they were not eBay users themselves, they had helped their parents set up accounts on this site, suggesting that this collaborative practice may already be nascent. If the physical moving-on is already well managed within a household, ideas taken from the proposed information labels of new acquisitions might be used to inspire alternative uses for items that might otherwise go un(der)used. The 'hactivist' might deploy her/his newly acquired skills to conduct basic repairs, not only of her/his own possessions but of household items too, reversing the waning of the practice of repair that has been identified amongst younger generations as a result of the acceptance of designed-in disposability (Cooper 2005; Crewe et al. 2009; Dant 2010; Graham and Thrift 2007). Or, like the social valuer, 'hactivists' might use their increasingly expansive view of their possessions' affordances to put un(der)used items to alternative use.

Both scenarios situate activities which prolong the usable lives of possessions in the home, where other family members may be exposed to, influenced by or even recruited into, their practice. That such inclinations might exist within households already has been hinted at by Wakkary and Maestri (2008). In their 'design ethnography' of the home they characterise families as 'everyday designers', who appropriate and reconfigure household objects into hybrid creations that fulfil needs specific to that household. They note that as a wider range of objects are interacted with and experienced within the home, the level of creativity brought to bear on using existing household objects to fulfil emergent needs grows. If young people were able to augment an already existing proclivity to repurpose domestic objects for immediately practical ends, they may be in a position to contribute to a significant shift in the sustainability of household consumption, as family members are increasingly prompted to think creatively about the uses to which existing possessions can be put and possess the skills to attempt moderately (sometimes very) sophisticated repairs or original constructions.

There may well be scope, then, for young people to be 'Trojan Valuers' or 'Trojan Hactivists' within the home. But what about within their peer groups? In some respects it is difficult to gauge in light of the lack of research into the transfer of consumption dispositions between young people (aside from the widely, yet largely uncritically, discussed notion of 'peer pressure'). However, growing interest in the

potential of online spaces to help realise possessions' surplus value (particularly through the appropriation of social media such as Facebook) may constitute a means for young people to justify – to themselves and their peers – not wasting no-longer-wanted items, and participate in a system which aligns with their socially-driven waste avoidance ethic. Hacking (and its associated activities) offers young people a new 'cool' set of practices to adopt in ways that have the potential to serve unique personal, social and cultural ends, particularly producing and consuming novelty, and achieving social status and peer esteem.

That these strategies might be more effective than environmentally-focused sustainable consumption practices at granting the status and caché young people seek constitutes a reason to hope that they might be easier to disperse amongst youth than other modes of sustainability. But this is a topic requiring empirical substantiation before any such conclusions can be reached. Having thus tentatively suggested that, yes, young people may well be able to act as 'Trojan Teens' for sustainability through 'labelling social value' and 'hactivism', I move now to some suggestions as to how future research might build on my findings and the ideas presented here.

7.6 Future Research: Inter-generational Spaces Of/For Sustainability, and (Re-)Materialising Youth

There are two main directions in which research might, in the first instance, develop in response to the findings and suggestions presented here. The first of these responds to my findings concerning the benefits of manual skill and material sensitivity for encouraging sustainable use of possessions, and my identification of generational similarities and differences which might be harnessed as a means of disseminating this kind of knowledge. This research concerns the ways in which different social and physical spaces facilitate the genesis of skills and attitudes allied with sustainable consumption, and how different generations' attitudes to material consumption might be shaped by their access to these spaces. Derived from the findings presented here which revealed simultaneous commonalities and contrasts between my participants' attitudes to the management of material surpluses and those of their parents, as well as the role of the home as a fundamental influence on how material things are managed, this research would seek to articulate the social and spatial conditions most conducive to equipping individuals to live sustainably.

Recent studies have explored the imperatives that characterise consumption for different, particularly older, generations (e.g. Biggs et al. 2006, 2007; Day and Hitchings 2011; Hitchings and Day 2011; Rees Jones et al. 2009), with authors noting the dual influences of the physical location (usually the home) in which consumption is situated and the cultural trends and norms of the time which define both the identity of a generation and the individuals by whom it is constituted. This body of work constitutes a key reference point for the research I propose here, connecting the ways in which different (primarily domestic) spaces might be conducive to promoting knowledge and practice of energy-saving, waste-reducing, or resource-conserving behaviours with the cultural values that characterise the consumption dispositions of different generations.

Specifically, and in light of the proposals made in section 7.5.3 concerning the promotion of hacking for sustainability, it would be most fruitful to concentrate on practices focused on keeping household items in use through repair, repurposing or similar. A foundational research base for this strand already exists in the form of studies such as Wakkary and Maestri's (2008) 'everyday designers', as well as work within geography and sociology which has begun to explore the socio-cultural and spatial contexts in which repair is attempted, inhibited or flatly denied (e.g. Dant 2010; Graham and Thrift 2007; Gregson et al. 2009) Articulating the mechanisms through which skills, attitudes and practices move between the physical spaces inhabited by different generations (workplaces; garden sheds, garages and workshops; spaces of in/formal education; as well as differently-configured homes) may also usefully speak back to the ways in which these spaces are theorised by those concerned with their role in an environmentally sustainable future (Gibson et al. 2011a, 2011b; Hargreaves 2011; Lane and Gorman-Murray 2011; Nye and Hargreaves 2010; Reid et al. 2010; Waitt et al. 2012), as well as adding detail to extant theorisations of these places as porous sites through which ideas and practices move.

In order to balance this interest in physical space with the social contexts which, as my own study has shown, are powerful influences on how consumption is practised, questions might also be asked about to what degree individuals from different generations manage(d) their consumption in ways which mark(ed) a divergence from either contemporary cultural norms or, for older generations, those norms which characterised major parts of their lives. A small sub-group of my participants seemed to have achieved this through participation in social lives which demanded far less acquiescence to the mores of consumer culture than those of their peers. I contend

here that exploring how and why some individuals practice forms of consumption distinct from the norms of the time may throw into even sharper relief how personal attitudes, social contexts and physical spaces intersect to produce modes of consumption particularly allied to sustainability, and cast some much-needed light on how the most beneficial (for sustainability) intersections might be encouraged.

Having achieved a large volume of rich data by combining interviews with participant-directed photography within my own study, a similar approach would be suited to the research proposed here. Individual and family interviews might be conducted in participants' homes⁸⁰, with the use of self-directed photography or even film used to capture objects, practices and spaces considered significant talking points.

The second strand of research I propose would build on an extant body of work concerned with definitions, performances and materialisations of youth in the twenty-first century (e.g. Evans 2008; Hopkins 2010; Maira and Soep 2005). It focuses on how the modes of (sustainable) consumption discussed in section 7.5 might play a part in helping young people achieve their personal aims for a 'successful' adolescence, as well as mitigate some of the risks they face as they move towards adulthood in an increasingly risk-laden socio-economic context (Jeffrey 2009; Kraftl et al. 2012; McDowell 2012; Turnbull and Spence 2011; Walther and Plug 2006). With the ways in which 'youth' is being redefined in relation to twenty-first century uncertainties (including environmental threats) forming a backdrop, this research would seek to restate what contemporary youth aim to achieve through material consumption and, more particularly, articulate what their actions reflect about how they make sense of their position in relation to these risks. It would consider how it might be possible to encourage young people to adopt a relationship to the objects of consumption which would allow the materialisation of uncertainty-beset 'youth' in environmentally sustainable ways, whilst also exploring how initiatives seeking to promote this might simultaneously be able to offer young people some of the tools (such as adaptability, experimentation, collaboration) needed to address the wider socio-economic and environmental risks that will necessarily characterise their lives far into adulthood.

Linking the sustainability agenda with broader issues of concern to youth (such as coping with uncertainties throughout the transition to adulthood) would provide a means of testing the argument put forward by Schusler et al. (2009), that engaging young people

⁸⁰ The ethical concerns and issues with negotiating additional gatekeepers that I faced in my study would largely be avoided here as the participants would themselves be the householders.

through opportunities to develop transferable and widely-applicable skills and dispositions is capable of achieving greater and longer-lasting impacts than initiatives that work in topic-specific silos. This might, in turn, inform a set of related questions linking the generation of self-efficacy through positive experiences of sustainable consumption with the expression of esteem amongst peers and the recognition of status within the broader schema of youth culture. In other words, and with reference to my point in section 7.5.4 regarding the present lack of understanding as to how (high-status) consumption practices are transmitted amongst youth, exploring how sustainable modes of consumption can be popularised and attributed high status amongst young people (perhaps through their association with the acquisition of a broader range of competencies) may constitute a worthwhile line of enquiry – and one of particular benefit to sustainability promoters who remain committed to the idea of young people as ‘Trojan Peers’.

Whilst, as noted above, the photo-interview approach used in my study proved effective in meeting the specific aims I had for this project, the strand of research I propose here may benefit from a closer engagement with its sample as a means of tracing the impacts of the initiatives outlined in section 7.5 (or similar) on the everyday practices of a group of young people. As such, interviews or focus groups (based around participants’ articulations of what ‘youth’ means to them and the kinds of challenges they feel contemporary youth face, for example) would be augmented by observation of how a hacking-based project, for instance, is delivered by organisers (such as a youth and/or sustainability organisation) and responded to by participants over a set period of time.

This strand of research could offer several valuable contributions to debates concerning both youth and sustainability. It may contribute refinements to how ‘youth’ is theorised in the ‘risk society’; suggest how young people might be supported in managing current socio-economic risks whilst simultaneously being ‘primed’ as the drivers of a more environmentally sustainable future; provide insights into how factors such as efficacy, esteem and status impact on the transfer of consumption practices within youth culture(s); and offer both sustainability and youth work practitioners a framework for the development (separately or in partnership) of new youth engagement initiatives.

There are, naturally, multiple other directions in which further research could extend the findings and ideas presented here; I have focused on two as a means of offering some

specifics as directly related to the suggestions I have offered sustainability practitioners. In the final section of this chapter, I close with a few reflections on the key message of this thesis – neatly summarised, in fact, by one of my participants.

7.7 Final Reflections

This project emerged from intrigue as to the nature of contemporary young people's consumption. It was based on a sense that, whatever that (inevitably complex) nature turned out to be, understanding its nuances and contradictions would contribute to a more robust platform from which to promote sustainable consumption amongst and beyond this group than that which existed to date. As suggested in this conclusion, there is considerable scope to re-think how young people are engaged in sustainability, drawing on emergent practices (such as hacking) to equip them with the skills and sense of competence necessary for consumption which both accommodates youth cultural imperatives and operates within environmental limits.

I want to conclude with some reflections on a quote from one of my participants, which has stayed with me since my conversation with him in November 2010. Graham and I had been discussing his perceptions of how his age group responded to the multitude of consumption opportunities with which they find themselves surrounded. He felt that most of his peers were not as considered in their consumption as he tried to be, largely because of their relative unawareness of the negative impacts, which, compared with the majority of the participants in this study, Graham was quite highly attuned to. He suggested that, because of this, his peers:

... are excessive sometimes but not, not wasteful, just excessive. There's a kind of difference there.

(Interview 1/2, 10.11.2010)

Concluding this study, Graham's comment seems an eloquent summary. While there is still debate to be had over where in the processes and practices of consumption waste occurs, if we are concerned with what gets thrown away – as my participants were during our conversations, and as those concerned with the 'throwaway society' thesis largely remain – Graham and his peers appeared no more wasteful than any other group which has been the subject of similar academic study (e.g. Albinsson and Perera 2009; Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2009; Gregson et al. 2007a, 2007b; Lastovicka

and Fernandez 2005; Morgan and Birtwistle 2009), and were arguably less 'throwaway' than some.

Further, I think Graham may be right in describing young people's consumption as characterised by excess rather than waste – certainly the accumulations described by my participants reflect a surplus of possessions, but, importantly, a surplus that was, on the whole, valued even in processes of ridding. As this thesis has made evident, my participants were generally very sensitive to the potential for waste in the ways they managed their possessions; they were aware that, in many instances, a possession only became waste if they made it so through their actions. A notable exception to this was those items characterised by such explicit disposability (e.g. fast fashion garments) that the participants appeared to feel that, in binning those items, they were not culpable in making these items waste; rather they were simply following through the intentions of the producers. Indeed, it became clear that pressures issuing from commercial structures, and filtering through the youth cultural contexts in which my participants materialised their identities and social relationships, were not only complicit in the production of participants' accumulated excess; arguably they were the key drivers. In short, my participants possessed sufficient agency in the latter phases of consumption to prevent many of their possessions becoming waste, but they possessed little agency to contest the accumulation of excess.

Of course, the line between waste and excess is a fine one – as evidenced by the ongoing debate about the status of kept possessions as the friend or foe of sustainability. The extent to which that line is crossed in an individual's management of their possessions is, as demonstrated here, the result of a complex nexus of social and cultural pressures, as well as the extent to which individuals possess the agency to determine their relationships with possessions on their own terms. The challenge for promoters of sustainable consumption going forward will be to strengthen that agency, whilst acknowledging the far from clear-cut role played by those socio-cultural forces, aiming to shape norms and practices – within and beyond youth culture(s) – which fulfil young people's needs in the present while safeguarding their futures.

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Appendix A: Schools offering post-16 education in Cambridge city

Appendix B: Fieldwork Sites

The Netherhall School & Sixth Form Centre

The Netherhall School is a co-educational secondary school and sixth form for 11-18 year olds in the Queen Edith area of south-east Cambridge. It is currently considering conversion from comprehensive to academy status. There are around 1000 pupils in the main school, with an additional 300 in the sixth form.



The majority of students are white British with other groups from a range of backgrounds including Indian, Bangladeshi and Chinese. A larger than average number of students at Netherhall have special educational needs. The proportion of students known to be eligible for the pupil premium is below that found nationally.

The percentage of students achieving five GCSE grades at A*-C is below the national average (68.4% in 2012) but has increased year on year since 2007. In 2012, 70% of A-Level students achieved grades A*-C; 99% achieved A*-E.

The school was described by OFSTED in its 2012 report as 'requiring improvement'.

www.netherhall.org

Cambridge Centre for Sixth Form Studies (CCSS)

The Cambridge Centre for Sixth Form Studies is an independent co-educational sixth form college catering for young people aged 15-24 and located across multiple sites in the centre of Cambridge city. 178 students were enrolled in the 2012-2013 academic year.



Half of the students at CCSS are British, with the other half comprised of around 40 other nationalities. Around one-third of the students are day students; two-thirds are boarders. Boarders (both international and British students) are accommodated in five boarding houses located in central Cambridge. In 2012-2013, 27 enrolled students had special educational needs and/or disabilities.

CCSS offers students a variety of courses, including: GCSEs and GCSE retakes; standard two-year A-Level courses as well as one year fast-track A-Levels; and a pre-International Baccalaureate course.

In 2012, 69% of CCSS students taking or retaking GCSEs achieved grades A*-C. 80% of A-Level students achieved grades A*-C, with an overall pass rate of 99.6%.

The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) report of 2013 described the quality of students' achievements, learning and skills as "good", with their personal development, as well as the management, leadership and curriculum at CCSS as "excellent".

www.ccss.co.uk

The Perse School

The Perse School is one of the country's leading independent day schools. It caters for children from the age of three through to young people up to the age of 18, and is co-educational throughout.

The Upper School, for young people aged 11-18, consists of over 1000 students, with just under 300 of these comprising the sixth form. Annual fees for Upper School students for the 2013-2014 academic year are listed as £14, 451.



Around one in ten students at the Perse Upper School is from an ethnic minority background. A further one in ten has been identified as having a special educational need or disability. About one quarter of Upper School students are in receipt of either a scholarship or bursary.

In 2012, 99.4% of students achieved GCSE grades A*-C. In 2013, just under 90% of A-Level students achieved grades of A-B-B. 50% of students achieved A* or A in all of their subjects.

The report by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) in 2010 described all levels of education at The Perse School as excellent or exceptional, noting that students' ability was far above the national average.

www.perse.co.uk

Appendix C: Information sheet for participants



Information Sheet for Young People Participating in Research Studies

Project Title: Young people's 'stuff': Investigating UK teens' relationships with their possessions

This project aims to learn about young people's relationships with some of their personal possessions. In particular, we hope to understand why some objects are valued above others, what sort of factors influence young people's relationships with personal objects, why some objects come to be unwanted, and how these unwanted objects are removed from everyday lives.

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee [Project ID Number: 2441/001]

Contact Details

Primary Researcher: Rebecca Collins, PhD candidate, University College London
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Secondary Contact: Dr Russell Hitchings, University College London
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This project forms part of a human geography PhD study which aims to address a number of unanswered questions about young people's relationships with everyday objects and the implications of these relationships for global social and environmental issues. As the views of teens are not often included in research of this kind, we have elected to address this gap by working exclusively with young people aged 16-19.

We would like to invite you to participate in this research project by sharing some of your thoughts and experiences.

Participants will be invited to take part in up to three phases of the research project. The first phase, which will take place in October 2010, will consist of one-to-one hour long interviews with the Primary Researcher. These interviews will take place on school/college premises. At the end of this preliminary interview, participants will be invited to take part in phase two of the project. This will involve a short photo-documentary project carried out over a period of 2-3 weeks (cameras provided), followed by a second hour-long interview (November/December 2010). In the final phase of the study (early 2011) we will invite participants to participate in a final interview, in which there will be the opportunity to reflect on both the experience of being a participant in the project and some of the ideas that have arisen over the course of the study.

You should only participate in this project if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. You may volunteer for the first phase or first and second phases of the project and choose not to participate beyond that point.

You may withdraw your participation at any point during the study without giving a reason. You will not be at any disadvantage if you do this. You may also withdraw your data at any time up until the interviews are transcribed for analysis (generally one week after the interview is conducted).

We hope that participants will find being part of the research discussions and activities both enjoyable and thought-provoking. At the end of the study, participants will be offered a copy of a brief summary report of the findings, as well as a voucher as recognition of their contributions.

Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important to read this information sheet carefully and discuss it with others, including the Primary Researcher, if you wish. Please ask if

there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form.

All data will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 and will be accessible only by the research team. The material collected will be treated in confidence, anonymised and stored securely. Recorded interviews will be written up and the digital voice recorder will then be wiped clear.

Note: The Primary Researcher has undergone a full Criminal Records Bureau check.

Appendix D: Participant Summary

Appendix E: Consent Form



Informed Consent Form for Young People Participating in Research Studies

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

Project Title: Young people's 'stuff': Investigating UK teens' relationships with their possessions

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee [Project ID Number: 2441/001]

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Before you agree to take part the person organising the research must explain the project to you.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you to decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

Participant's Statement

I

- have read the notes written above and the Information Sheet, and understand what the study involves.
- understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and withdraw immediately.
- consent to the processing of my personal information, which may include transcriptions of interviews and copies of written diary material, for the purposes of this research study.
- understand that my participation will be taped and I am aware of and consent to any use you intend to make of the recordings and transcriptions after the end of the project.
- understand that the information I have submitted will be used to inform a PhD thesis and that I will be sent a copy of a summary report. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications.
- understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study.

Signed:

Date:

Thank you for volunteering to take part in this study. If you have any questions at any time during the study, please contact Rebecca Collins, Primary Researcher: rebecca.collins@ucl.ac.uk

Appendix F: Camera Task Guidance Notes

Photo-Documentary Task: Guidance Notes



Thank you for volunteering your time and ideas as part of my research into British young people's relationships with their possessions. My work aims to provide a detailed and honest account of what material objects mean to young people and your contributions are very much appreciated.

As part of my fieldwork, I am providing all research volunteers with a disposable camera which you can use to document some of the possessions in your life. The themes we talked about in the first interview will give you some idea of what sort of things it would be good to photograph but these Guidance Notes offer some more detailed suggestions.

I would like you to photograph as wide a range as possible of the sort of possessions that you have. But please note that the items you capture should be yours rather than family-owned items. The things that you could photograph might include:

- things you have owned for many years or just a few days.
- things you really love or things you really don't like.
- things you hope you will always have or things you're desperate to get rid of.
- very special, unique things or incredibly ordinary, everyday things.

I am also interested in what happens to different possessions depending on the sort of relationship you have with them – whether they're very important to you, or not at all important to you, for example. So you could photograph:

- an empty space in your room which represents something you've just got rid of.
- precious objects stored in a safe place, e.g. in a box, or on a shelf.
- your bin full of things you're about to throw away.
- the people and places that represent how you get rid of things you no longer want, for example: bins, recycling bins, charity shops or charity bags, jumble sales or car boot sales, family members you might pass things on to, family members who help you get rid of what you no longer want.

You don't need to take photos that include all of these ideas but it would be great if you could take as wide a variety as you can – perhaps a mixture of things and places. Please also feel free to take pictures that don't necessarily fit into the categories above – as long as they relate to the main themes of the project!!

When you have used up all the film in the camera (27 shots), or you have taken as many photographs as you feel you can, please return the camera to _____.



I will collect the cameras to get the films developed. In our second interview (in about 4-6 weeks time) we'll talk about the pictures you took. I will email you nearer the time to arrange an interview date. If you have any questions at any point, please feel free to contact me on rebecca.collins@ucl.ac.uk

Appendix G: Sample Interview Questions

The specific questions asked varied somewhat from participant to participant, depending on the flow of the conversation and the topics or ideas that emerged from the examples they shared. These sample questions, taken from both the first and second rounds of interviews, give an overview of the types of topics covered.

Motivations for Divestment

What prompts you to get rid of something? What is the trigger?

Thinking about all the new things you've acquired in the last couple of months, what proportion, roughly, do you expect to still have in a year's time? What will you keep? What will you get rid of? How will you make these decisions?

What do you do when something breaks or falls apart earlier than you think it should?

Are there any types of objects that you change or replace regularly? Why do you do this?

Do you get rid of things to make room for the new, or acquire new and then feel you have to get rid of the old? Or neither?

Ridding Processes

Do you 'throw as you go', or accumulate things and then sort out lots at once? Why? Could you talk me through the process you go through when you decide to sort/throw things out?

Would anything make you think twice about getting rid of something?

When you're having a clear out, have you ever come across something that you don't want but you don't think ought to go in the rubbish bin? What sort of objects? What happens?

When you want to get rid of something, how do you get rid of it? Do you get rid of different things in different ways? Why?

How do you know what to do with things you want to get rid of?

Reflections on Ridding

How much thought do you give to what happens to an object once you've decided to get rid of it?

Why do you think you get rid of your unwanted things in the ways you do?

Do you think the decisions you make about your possessions – what you keep, what you get rid of – are quite typical of your age group, or do you feel you're quite different from your peers?

Quite a few people have suggested that children and younger teenagers tend to have a more 'throwaway' attitude to their possessions, but that they themselves found this changed as they got older. Is this true for you? Why do you think this change occurs?