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### Article

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1 **“Net Mums”**: A narrative account of participants’ experiences within a netball  
2 **intervention**

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16 **Key Words:** Physical Activity, Netball, Social Identity, Mums

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32 **“Net Mums”: A narrative account of participants’ experiences within a netball**  
33 **intervention**

34 **Abstract**

35 Back to Netball (B2N) is a coach-led programme established by England Netball,  
36 aiming to encourage inactive individuals to re-engage with netball. B2N effectively  
37 engages a typically hard to reach group, with 52% of participants being found to be  
38 mums (Whitehead, Walsh, Quayle, Whittaker, & Cronin, 2016). This study aims to  
39 understand how a physical activity intervention (i.e. B2N) influences mums’ identity,  
40 and in turn investigate how B2N is effectively able to cater for mums. There is a distinct  
41 lack of qualitative studies that include mums’ own voices and how they negotiate being  
42 physically active alongside the role expectations associated with being a mum. A  
43 qualitative approach was utilised to consider and represent participant’s experiences.  
44 Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 women who were engaged with the  
45 Back to Netball scheme. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the experience of  
46 mothers who take part in B2N. Two key themes were identified 1) mum identity as  
47 enabler for relatedness and 2) exercise identity as an additional identity. Following the  
48 identification of the two key themes, two non-fiction constructs were created which  
49 illustrate each theme in the context of a B2N participant’s life. The narratives explore  
50 social categorisation and the development of social identity and exercise identity and how  
51 it can influence attitudes, beliefs and levels of engagement in other forms of physical activity.  
52 Practically, this paper demonstrates how future physical activity interventions can cater  
53 for a traditionally hard to reach group, such as mums. To be able to engage mums and  
54 facilitate the development of an exercise identity, relatedness should be a focus of a  
55 physical activity programme.

56 Key Words: Physical Activity, Netball, Social Identity, Exercise Identity, Mums

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58

59 **Introduction**

60 Physical inactivity is a global pandemic requiring immediate action, with over 40% of  
61 adults worldwide failing to reach the minimum recommended level of 30 minutes of  
62 moderately intense Physical Activity (PA) five times per week, and half of all adults  
63 spending more than five hours sedentary every day (Ding et al., 2016; The Academy of  
64 Medical Royal Colleges, 2015). Despite an increased number of countries formulating a  
65 national PA policy or plan, PA engagement levels are not improving (Das & Horton, 2016;  
66 Ding et al., 2016). Lack of engagement in physical activity has been well documented to  
67 be associated with numerous physiological and psychological conditions (Das & Horton,  
68 2016; Fortier, Duda, Guerin, & Teixeira, 2012; Yohannes, Doherty, Bundy, & Yalfani,  
69 2010). The benefits of routine physical activity help to reduce the problem with healthcare  
70 services, reduce sickness absence and increase productivity (Cronin et al 2018).  
71 Economically, a 1% reduction in inactivity has been hypothesised to save the UK's National  
72 Health Service (NHS) £1.2 billion per annum (Speake et al., 2016).

73 In response to some of the above concerns, the new Sport England 2016-2021 strategy  
74 'Towards an Active Nation' (Sport England, 2016 p.19) has as one of its aims the development  
75 of sustained sport and PA participation in both inactive and under-represented groups. This  
76 includes women and girls, in the hope that this will be developed over a prolonged period of  
77 time through tailored support; creating what Sport England describe as a 'resilient habit'(p.25).  
78 'Towards an Active Nation' aims to encourage and motivate those attempting to be active, by  
79 facilitating practicable solutions for participation such as the 'This Girl Can' campaign(p.24),  
80 while also directing funding opportunities towards those that are least active. Against this  
81 strategic backdrop, a large-scale programme such as Back to Netball (B2N) has successfully

82 attracted over 60,000 women since its inception (England Netball, 2014) and increased levels  
83 of engagement in the sport.

84 Netball is one of the most commonly available sports across Key Stages 1-4 of the National  
85 Curriculum, with 96% of female students offered the opportunity to participate through the  
86 course of their school career (Department for Education, 2010). Additionally, in Sport  
87 England's latest audit, 219,000 individuals aged 16 or over reported participating in netball  
88 once a month, an increase of 17,900 from the twelve months previous (Sport England, 2016).  
89 Despite its enduring popularity amongst school-age children through its presence in the  
90 National Curriculum, as with many forms of PA, there is a large attrition rate amongst  
91 individuals over the age of sixteen years old. With this in mind, England Netball developed the  
92 "Back to Netball" (B2N) programme, aiming to engage lapsed netball participants or  
93 beginners, which provides participants with the opportunity to take part in coach-led sessions  
94 over a 12-week programme. England Netball's 2014 review of B2N, in which 1296 individuals  
95 participated, demonstrated that the majority (69%) of participants were aged 26-44, and 93%  
96 defined their ethnicity as White British or White Other (England Netball, 2014). Furthermore,  
97 a 2016 impact evaluation of B2N reported similar trends in terms of participants' ethnicity and  
98 age, with an impressive 89% of former B2N participants reported that they engaged in further  
99 activity (Whitehead et al., 2016), suggesting that B2N is a particularly successful vehicle for  
100 increasing levels of PA amongst participants. In addition, this report also identified the  
101 popularity of B2N amongst mothers, with 52% of participants reporting they had at least one  
102 child aged 18 or under. The Back to Netball campaign integrates PA with a focus on developing  
103 the body's cardiovascular system and improving body tone (England Netball 2014) with a  
104 gentle reintroduction to the skills of netball with a focus on abiding by a set of rules and goals.  
105 This finding is of interest, given that previous research has demonstrated an inverse relationship  
106 between motherhood and PA participation, where mothers may experience feelings of guilt

107 when engaging in PA, because they are not living up to the cultural expectations of motherhood  
108 (Bellows-Riecken & Rhodes, 2008; Miller & Brown, 2005; McGannon & Mauws 2000).  
109 McGannon and Schinke (2013) have started to address this gap in the literature with their  
110 research, which explores mothers and PA engagement through a social constructionism  
111 approach, where mother's own voices of how they negotiate physical activity and motherhood  
112 has been taken into consideration. Being a 'good' mother is based on the expected behaviours  
113 of cultural values and norms that highlight care giving at the expense of putting exercise first  
114 (McGannon et al 2017; McGannon & Schinke2013). The social and cultural factors that shape  
115 the mums everyday experiences will affect their views of participating in sport. Many mums  
116 have a socially constructed view of themselves as mothers based on what others say, which is  
117 created and enforced through social expectations (McGannon and Smith 2016). According to  
118 Brown and Trost (2003) women with young children are a population that may be least likely  
119 to be physically active. This paper aims to investigate these participants' experiences and  
120 motives of negotiating PA engagement through B2N and their role as a mother. Batey and  
121 Owton (2014) believed that women who return to team sports after having a child are an  
122 interesting group to study as they manage both the caring for the family and the need for team  
123 sport. By gaining an insight into these experiences, this paper aims to contribute to the extant  
124 literature that allows for the mothers own voice to be shared (McGannon et al 2017; McGannon  
125 & Schinke, 2013; Appleby & Fisher, 2009).

126 It is important to acknowledge that not all research has found a converse relationship between  
127 motherhood and PA. For example, Spowart, Hughson & Shaw (2008) demonstrated through  
128 their research with snowboarding mums, how these mothers resisted social expectations and  
129 redefined the meaning of a good mother by creating practices to achieve their own happiness.  
130 However, a large body of literature such as work by Solomon-Moore et al. (2017) suggest that  
131 the onset of parenthood has been associated with a decline in PA and parents of young children

132 report having fewer opportunities for PA because they have new responsibilities and time  
133 commitments, and their priorities have shifted from themselves to their child. Within a growing  
134 body of literature, becoming a mother has been found to result in cultural pressures where some  
135 mothers experience a trade-off between PA engagement and time spent fulfilling the mother  
136 role (McGannon, & Schinke, 2013; Lewis & Ridge, 2005). In turn, this may lead to self-  
137 sacrifice and the potential loss of their own identity, as the mother will focus on their parenting  
138 role and commitments rather than regular PA (Hamilton & White, 2011).

139 Existing parental PA investigations have predominantly employed quantitative self-report  
140 measures to identify differences in PA behaviour between parents and non-parents. However,  
141 outcomes may be obscured as PA behaviour in parenthood is not yet fully understood, and it is  
142 unclear whether traditional measures of PA are applicable and acceptable when investigating  
143 parents. Therefore, qualitative investigations are warranted that will deepen the currently  
144 shallow understanding of how parenthood, specifically mothers in this case, affects PA-related  
145 behaviour (Hamilton & White, 2011). Studies that include mothers' own voices and how they  
146 negotiate being active are a significant gap in the literature (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Lewis &  
147 Ridge, 2005).

148 In a qualitative study delving into the experiences of 'surfing mums', it was found that surfing  
149 was used as a strategy for achieving emotional and relational states that added value to the  
150 participants lives (Spowart, Burrows, & Shaw, 2010). Some of the women in this research used  
151 surfing as a 'time out' from motherhood, which allowed them to access a 'different mode of  
152 being' (p1198). Furthermore, within this research the cohort of surfing mums formed a  
153 supportive social network, which enabled participation in surfing, despite the normative  
154 discourse of motherhood that may ordinarily limit sustained engagement.

155 Motherhood within a recreational realm has been explored by a number of authors,  
156 (McGannon, McMahon, & Gonsalves, 2018; McGannon et al 2017; Batey & Owton 2014;  
157 Nash 2011; Spowart, Burrows & Shaw 2010; Wann 2006). McGannon, McMahon and  
158 Gonsalves (2018) describe a juggling metaphor where mothers who engage in recreational  
159 sporting environment describe juggling life as a parent and sporting participations, “We have  
160 balls in the air we are juggling. You're juggling the running ball. You're juggling the parent  
161 ball ... the mommy ball ... and then this ... the job and you just try to keep everything in the  
162 air and see how long you can do it for” (pg. 45). A common theme that emerges is a mum’s  
163 choice of recreational activity is often constrained by domestic responsibilities. Nash (2011),  
164 details in her study on fitness and good motherhood in Australia that women have less leisure  
165 time than men do at all stages of life. Mothers of young children often relinquish the  
166 opportunities of any recreational activity for self-improvement by putting other family needs  
167 above their own. They find it difficult to mix ‘me time’ where they find participating in a  
168 recreational activity and motherhood as a very difficult combination to come to terms with due  
169 the guilt associated with a good mother identity (Nash 2011)

170 A collective theme that emerges throughout the above research is identity. Identity exists along  
171 a spectrum from the personal to the social (Turner & Northwood 2013). The process of identity  
172 formation is not straightforward but rather something that can change with context, time and  
173 interaction with others (Rossing, Ronglan, & Scott, 2014). Originally, identity research was  
174 only acutely influenced by the practical impact that social identities and social identifications  
175 have in the world. Therefore, the application of identity research into parental PA engagement  
176 remains limited. Despite this, social identity should be investigated in a PA context because  
177 humans are social animals who achieve a sense of purpose and self-worth through social  
178 connectedness and group life (Haslam, 2014). The social end of the identity spectrum aligns  
179 with the individual being a member of a particular group. An explanation for the high levels of



180 inactivity amongst parents may be given through a social identity approach. Additionally,  
181 feelings of social identity also relates to self-esteem, which develops through the feelings of  
182 social connectedness that engagement with group forms of PA provides. Clearly, there is a  
183 need to investigate and develop PA interventions that aim to build on this fundamental need  
184 for social support with the aim of increasing levels of engagement with PA.

185 Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) originates from Tajfel's seminal work on  
186 social categorisation, intergroup relations, social comparison, and prejudice and stereotyping.  
187 SIT hypothesises that the self is composed of a collection of identities, which reflect the roles  
188 attached to positions held in networks of social relationships. Individuals are postulated to have  
189 two forms of identities: social identity, which defines the self in terms of group membership,  
190 and personal identity, which defines the self in terms of idiosyncratic personal traits. Self-  
191 categorisation theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987) extends SIT by explaining the process of how  
192 categorising oneself as a group member manifests through social identity, group and intergroup  
193 behaviours. SCT explains individuality and group behaviour (and the relationship between  
194 them), and is defined as the process whereby a person defines the self in terms of the  
195 environment they find themselves in (Turner, 2005). The personal self contains those aspects  
196 of self-concept that are based on bonds of attachment such as friendships or specific role  
197 relationships, which in B2N may be evident in the player-coach relationship. The collective  
198 self is achieved by inclusion in large social groups, and in B2N is evident through feelings of  
199 belonging with other netball players. SCT explains the process by which those individuals who  
200 harbour a sense of belonging categorise themselves and automatically internalise the attributes  
201 that are shared by the group.

202 Within the context of mothers, SIT and SCT can be used to understand parental  
203 engagement with PA by exploring how mothers perceive their social identity within a PA  
204 context. Brown, Brown, Miller, and Hansen (2001), identified that 62% of women who were

205 mothers would actually prefer to exercise with friends due to the social experience it  
206 provided. This supports Spink's (1995) work, which suggested that females also appear to  
207 have a strong need for belonging and a need to feel connected to others within a physical  
208 activity environment. In turn, this potentially leads to identity foreclosure if individuals  
209 feel exclusively able to fulfil their role as a mother. Extant literature has highlighted this  
210 identity foreclosure amongst mothers (Hamilton & White, 2010), and when applied to a  
211 PA context can be used to explain how a state of identity foreclosure is not conducive to  
212 habitual PA participation. Instead, long-term engagement is intimately related to the  
213 development of an exercise identity (Hardcastle & Taylor, 2005; Rossing et al., 2014;  
214 Strachan, Brawley, Spink, & Glazebrook, 2010; Strachan, Brawley, Spink, Sweet, &  
215 Perras, 2015).

216 Given that B2N is particularly successful at engaging mums, an exploratory investigation to  
217 capture the perceptions of how B2N is particularly accessible to mums is warranted. Attaining  
218 a sense of space and self is important for mums, giving them some time to themselves which  
219 can develop a sense of empowerment and self-determination (Batey and Owton 2014). By  
220 taking a qualitative approach, and theories of identity (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986, SCT;  
221 Turner, et al., 1987), this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how a physical  
222 activity intervention (i.e. B2N) impacts mums' social identity, and in turn investigates how  
223 B2N is effectively able to cater for mums, and what future initiatives can learn from this. This  
224 paper is one of the first to postulate how prolonged physical activity engagement is facilitated  
225 through a relationship between feelings of relatedness and social categorisation.

## 226 **Methods**

227 There is a distinct paucity of qualitative studies that include mums' own voices and how they  
228 negotiate being physically active alongside the role expectations associated with being a  
229 mum. That said, recent work has demonstrated how qualitative approaches can elucidate the

230 experiences of mothers and connect practice with theory. For example, McGannon and  
231 Schinke (2013) privileged the voices and experiences of a women (and family members) as a  
232 means of developing understanding of physical activity discourse. In so doing, the authors  
233 were able to describe and explain the everyday nuanced construction of identity that  
234 influences a women's choice to engage or disengage from physical activity. Indeed, in depth  
235 qualitative accounts provide time and space for participants and researchers to describe,  
236 analyse and construct meaning from participants' experiences. While such work does not  
237 provide the breadth associated with methods such as surveys, it nonetheless adds much  
238 needed in depth understanding of women's experiences. More specifically as McGannon and  
239 Schinke (2013) illustrate, qualitative work can situate insightful accounts of women's stories  
240 in grounded and contextualised descriptions. Thus, when successful, qualitative studies can  
241 both acknowledge the active nature of women's agency whilst also recognising how identities  
242 are co-constructed through interaction with others. Such representations can help readers to  
243 connect with the experience of women and to understand the influences upon women's  
244 experiences. Such nuanced accounts are necessary for research to move beyond  
245 acknowledging the challenge of women's under representation in physical activity settings.

246

247 In order to build upon research such as McGannon and Schinke (2013), a qualitative  
248 approach was utilised to consider and represent participant's experiences of B2N. More  
249 specifically, thematic analysis was used to analyse the experience of mothers who participate  
250 in B2N. Other qualitative approaches were available and may also have been appropriate e.g.  
251 narrative analysis, grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography. Nonetheless, thematic  
252 analysis was justified on the basis that it can thoroughly examine a wide range of  
253 interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This decision is further justified in a wide range of  
254 recent literature that uses thematic analysis to explore diverse topics such as media

255 representations of masters athletes (Oghene, McGannon, Schinke, Watson, & Quartiroli,  
256 2015), identity of rugby fans (Hall, et al., 2012) and para-sport experiences (P. de Cruz,  
257 Spray, & Smith, 2017).

258 Notwithstanding, its widespread use and ability to analyse interpretations across a large  
259 sample, thematic analysis is not free from criticism. In particular, researchers using thematic  
260 analysis have been criticised for not documenting processes or researcher positions in a  
261 transparent manner (Clarke & Braun, 2013). To address this criticism, we acknowledge that  
262 the study was guided by a relativist epistemology that values subjective meaning making and  
263 interpretation. Additionally, a constructivist ontology that considers reality as local, social  
264 and constructed also informed the study. The following section details how these positions  
265 have influenced sampling, data collection, analysis and representation. These discussions also  
266 include considerations of the methodological limitations while also outlining the ethical  
267 issues relevant to the study.

268

### 269 **Sampling**

270 Purposeful sampling was used to recruit B2N participants who identified as mothers (N=19).  
271 Mothers were defined as participants who were aged 18 or older and had at least one child  
272 aged 18 or younger. In order to access this sample, participants were approached through  
273 electronic communication via an England Netball database, which was utilised as part of a  
274 wider project (Author 1)<sup>1</sup>.

275 A total of 19 participants were included in the study because they had experience of the  
276 phenomenon in question i.e. participating in B2N whilst identifying as a mother. The sample  
277 was entirely female, entirely Caucasian, and were of the following ages: 22-29 (n=1), 30-34

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<sup>1</sup> This raises ethical issues which are further discussed below.

278 (n=3), 35-40 (n=3), 40-49 (n=11), and 50-64 (n=1). Amongst participants, seven had one  
279 child, 11 had two children, and one had three children. It is important at this juncture to note  
280 that the sample lacks diversification, as does B2N participation in general (Author 1).  
281 Moreover, it is acknowledged that this sample is not heterogeneous and does not represent  
282 the perspectives of all mothers or B2N participants. On the contrary, the findings that we  
283 report are relativist and are based on subjective accounts of these women's experience.  
284 Generalisation from the study should therefore not be made on the basis of the sample, but  
285 through reader's own natural attitude. Additionally, readers should cautiously act as  
286 connoisseurs when considering the relevance of findings to their own contexts. Nonetheless,  
287 the experiences of the participants are valuable in their own right, because they shed light on  
288 the phenomenon in question i.e. participating in B2N as a mother.

## 289 **Ethics**

290 Participants were accessed via a wider evaluation of the Back to Netball programme that was  
291 commissioned by England Netball. Consistent with legislation, a database of potential  
292 participants was accessed via a secure server and the participants were contacted via email.  
293 The email included a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) that contained salient details of  
294 study e.g. aims anonymity. In keeping with institutional ethical approval, those that  
295 responded to the email were contacted verbally and information was again provided about the  
296 study. Participants were advised that their data would remain confidential and pseudonyms  
297 would be used for the purposes of dissemination. Participants were reminded of their right to  
298 withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged. In response participants  
299 provided verbal consent prior to the start of the interview. All interviews were recorded and  
300 conducted by the second author.

## 301 **Data Collection**

302 Semi-structured interviews were used to facilitate a natural discourse of respondents'  
303 experiences within B2N. The interview guide was constructed through a review of literature  
304 by the authors and was informed by Social Identity Theory. Questions directly related to  
305 theory, such as "How has your behaviour towards sport and physical activity altered at all  
306 since attending B2N?" Additionally, open questions designed to provide space for  
307 participants to recount their own lived experiences of B2N were incorporated e.g. "Can you  
308 tell me about an early or your first B2N experience?" This schedule enabled the interviewer  
309 to ensure that the same topics were covered across all participants, but which still allowed  
310 participants to add further idiosyncrasies and experiences within the B2N programme.

### 311 **Data Analysis**

312 Recorded interviews were transcribed, read, inputted into appropriate software (Nvivo10) and  
313 re-read as part of a first step in data analysis. Following this, the authors implemented Braun  
314 and Clarkes' (2006) thematic analysis by;

- 315 1) Generating initial codes that summarised salient points in the first three interview  
316 transcripts.
- 317 2) Developing a code book by reviewing and refining the initial codes and combining  
318 these with relevant theoretical heuristics e.g. Social Identity Theory.
- 319 3) Using the code book to analyse the next 15 transcripts. This stage involved applying  
320 existing codes to units of data, but also generating new codes and adding these to the  
321 code book. Then revisiting the earlier interviews to develop a complete code book and  
322 entire coding process.
- 323 4) Reviewing the codes in order to recognise themes. This was an interpretative process  
324 that involved a back and forth between data, codes and the authors' interpretations
- 325 5) Collaboratively reviewing, questioning and naming the themes. (see table 1)

326 During the above process, a double hermeneutic took place i.e. the researchers made sense of  
327 the participants own sense making. Accordingly, the following three steps were taken to  
328 ensure rigour;

- 329 1) During the initial development of the coding book, a co-author acted as a critical  
330 friend to consider the verisimilitude of the coding process (Smith & McGannon,  
331 2017; Costa & Kallick, 1993).
- 332 2) During the 'search' for themes the team examined the analysis collaboratively (Baker,  
333 Zhou, Pizzo, Du, & Funk, 2017; Saldaña, 2013).

334 3) A final interview (19) was conducted that confirmed theoretical data saturation  
335 because no new codes were identified (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

336 These processes were undertaken to encouraging reflexivity and critical considerations of the  
337 data analysis process. It is important to note however that in keeping with the relativist  
338 epistemology and subjectivist ontology espoused, that we do not see these processes as a  
339 means of establishing a universal valid or reliable truth (Smith & McGannon, 2017). For  
340 example, the notion of theoretical saturation is contested and another interview may have  
341 yielded new insights. Similarly, another critical friend may have viewed our coding from a  
342 different perspective and added different insights. Accordingly, we acknowledge that while  
343 the analysis process is systematic and rigorous, it is also subjective, relativist, and part of a  
344 double hermeneutic process.

345

#### 346 **Data Representation**

347 The themes identified in Table 1., are presented in the forthcoming section though two  
348 narrative cases; Sue and Cath. These narrative representations (Sue and Cath) are creative  
349 non-fiction constructs. They were not participants in the study but were creatively  
350 constructed by the authors in order to elucidate the findings derived from thematic analysis.  
351 The use of creative narrative representations to illustrate these findings is justified because a  
352 story can 1) illustrate a theory in practice; 2) can illustrate a number of themes; 3) situates the  
353 themes in a descriptive lifeworld; 4) prompts reflections by opening up theoretical debate to  
354 readers; 5) protects the identities of participants, and 6) may be accessible to audiences  
355 beyond traditional academic readers (Smith, McGannon, & Williams, 2016). These  
356 justifications for creative narratives, such as Sue's and Cath' stories, are increasingly  
357 accepted by scholars such as psychologists, literary theorists, philosophers, historians,  
358 theologians, anthropologists and sociologists (Hevern, 2004). Moreover, the power of  
359 narrative representation to situate experience in cultural contexts and to evoke readers has  
360 been well established by a range of author's (Armour & Chen, 2012; Coulter & Smith, 2009;  
361 Denison, 2016; Holley & Colyar, 2009; Smith, Latimer-Cheung, Tomasone, & Martin Ginis,  
362 2015; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Nonetheless the ultimate judge of whether Sue's and  
363 Cath's narrative representation situate the experiences in personal contexts will be made  
364 through readers' own natural attitude.

365

366 Table 1. Themes from Back To Netball

Theme	Exemplar Quotations
<b>Mum identity as enabler for relatedness</b>	<p>On Thursday we do a few more skills sets and we do a bit more on fitness. We're all mummies. We're all over the age of 30. For the majority of us our muscles have gone since we had the kids. So we do that more specific to us and our requirements.</p> <p>There are quite a few of our ladies who have had children and their confidence is quite low and you know, seeing them change socially has been massive. There are quite a few examples of that.</p> <p>I met some people, erm, who've got kids and we do go and have a drink occasionally, especially at the end of the season and stuff so it is quite nice from that perspective.</p> <p>A few of my friends are in a similar situation to me really. I've sort of met them through the baby groups and things like that and everybody is saying you know, 'I could do with getting myself shifted and that now' and I just, you know, I always used to ask them about the netball that they went to and then I joined them.</p>
<b>Exercise identity as an additional identity</b>	<p>I feel like I communicate with adults there as well and I'm not just at home or going to baby groups or seeing mums with their children. So it is a completely different world outside of mum life. It is more, I can talk about other things that go on. I can talk about different things that go on in netball and talk about other things other than just baby based things so it has made me more confident in the fact that not everything in my world now revolves around being a mum and having a baby</p> <p>Before Back to Netball I kind of, like, my day to day would literally be getting up with Harry, sorting him out, we'd go to the park or we'd do a bit of shopping or something like that and it would be spent preparing meals for him and making sure everything was okay for him, erm, I didn't see a lot of other people, I didn't see a lot of my friends because my life revolved around him. I just couldn't get my head round being a mum but then also being myself as well. So when I started Back to Netball, because stepping out, even for just that hour a week, I was stepping out and just doing netball and seeing other people, meeting other people who were kind of going through the same thing as well where you have young children and they are just having their hour to themselves. It made me feel more confident but also more comfortable doing it.</p> <p>I changed to be a stay at home mum and so every day, day in, day out, morning and night I'm looking after him so all I was at the time was just a mum and I wasn't able to go to the gym because I had him to look after and his dad was working all the time. So I kind of got to a stage where I just felt I was nothing more than just a mum and then thinking of going back to netball was something I used to enjoy before I was a mum so when I went back and started the sessions and started training with them again, it made me feel a lot more confident, a lot more, that I had a lot more purpose than just being a mum as I was able to help the team in certain ways because of the positions I'd play and it kind of, just got me into the mindset that I can do this for myself and I can be a mum to him as well. I can do a bit of both and kind of have that 'me' time alongside being in with him all day."</p> <p>Coming to Back to Netball has given her a different group of friends outside of the village that we live in, it has given her lots of different contacts,</p>



367 **Findings and Discussion**

368 The findings and discussion section will introduce two themes; 1) mum identity as enabler for  
369 relatedness and 2) exercise identity as an additional identity. These will be elucidated with  
370 reference to appropriate theory. Following this a narrative will be presented that illustrates  
371 each theme in the context of a B2N participant's life. The relationship between B2N  
372 participation, social categorisation and the development of a social identity can be outlined in  
373 the first narrative, which demonstrates the importance of social categorisation and relatedness  
374 in promoting engagement with the B2N scheme. Wann (2006) identified that playing team  
375 sports and being part of a social group can assist in maintaining a positive self and social  
376 identity. In narrative one, Sue is in the process of developing a social identity that appears to  
377 be specific to B2N.

378 Sue is a 40-year-old mother of two who used to play netball regularly but stopped participating  
379 just before having children. She saw B2N as an opportunity to improve her fitness, but was  
380 surprised by the social benefits of the programme. Whilst Sue recognised that being a mum is  
381 an important role, she regularly attended B2N every week and enjoyed *'doing something for*  
382 *herself'*.

383 ***Narrative One- mum identity as enabler for relatedness***

384 *"Before Back to Netball, I only really knew the Mums who I saw in the playground, but*  
385 *we never got together and did anything outside that. There's a few of us who are all in*  
386 *a similar situation so everybody was saying how we needed to do something to get us*  
387 *all moving. We saw B2N advertised and we went along, I think it was easier as there*  
388 *was a few of us all starting together. We absolutely loved it! For only £1.50, it's really*  
389 *well organised and what else you wouldn't really get any other fitness classes for £1.50*  
390 *so it is always worth a go really.*

391           *We've met so many other ladies who we wouldn't have met otherwise: B2N is one of*  
392           *those special programmes where you've got ladies who are younger than us, and much*  
393           *older than us, and I think it's great to see that you can all come together and enjoy the*  
394           *same thing no matter what age you are. Especially for us Mums, you can sometimes*  
395           *feel like you're not a priority but it's great to see everyone taking time out of family life*  
396           *and doing something for ourselves, even if it's just for that hour a week.*  
397           *I just think it is marvellous. It is a marvellous opportunity to get women off the*  
398           *sofa, you know, give them something to do and some of our mums and it is mostly*  
399           *mums who do it, you know, they just come back week after week after week so, you*  
400           *know, somebody's doing something right."*

401 Narrative one highlights how B2N acts as a vehicle that allows mums to overcome potential  
402 barriers to PA presented by parenthood. Instead of committing solely to the role of a mum, the  
403 feelings of relatedness, evident through participants "*coming together and doing something for*  
404 *(themselves)*", drives the feelings of social categorisation, and in turn moves participants away  
405 from a state of identity foreclosure, towards social identity. McGannon et al (2017) found that  
406 participating in sport could serve as a way of self-identity renegotiation for mums. The feeling  
407 of doing something for herself that she enjoyed helped Sue to view who she was differently as  
408 she had more experiences at her disposal (Smith et al 2016). The B2N environment provides a  
409 setting in which the psychological need of relatedness is met through participants' shared  
410 common interest in netball. Increased feelings of relatedness, defined as '*the need to feel close*  
411 *to and understood by important others*' (Patrick & Williams, 2012), have been demonstrated  
412 to proximally influence well-being for individuals engaged in PA (Gunnell, Crocker, Mack,  
413 Wilson, & Zumbo, 2014; Mack et al., 2012). This highlights the importance of how the  
414 participant needs to feel effective and as though they have meaningful connections with others  
415 during PA.

416 In narrative one, Sue highlights how she “*met so many other ladies who (she) wouldn’t have*  
417 *met otherwise*”, highlighting how B2N has facilitated a process of self-categorisation amongst  
418 participants of different ages, in turn driving their prolonged B2N participation. Such feelings  
419 of social categorisation and relatedness promotes long-term participation in the scheme and  
420 participants “*coming back week after week*”. Prioritising PA in weekly schedules illustrates  
421 feelings of commitment, which has been posited to be a dimension of an exercise identity  
422 (Hardcastle & Taylor, 2005).

423 The salience of feelings of relatedness, which are evident in B2N participants’ prolonged  
424 engagement within the scheme has been corroborated by Batey and Owton (2014), Wann  
425 (2006) and Spink (1995). These authors indicated that mums prefer to exercise with friends,  
426 due to the social experience it provides and the perceived benefits of being part of a team and  
427 needing time out from being a mother. The affiliation that the B2N programme provided,  
428 resulted in the setting up of social events and the creation of new friendships which gave  
429 participants a sense of belonging and feeling as though they are connected to others. Amongst  
430 participants, their self-categorisation as part of the B2N group was something they had failed  
431 to experience in other forms of PA, which had led to them previously failing to maintain their  
432 engagement.

433 Fundamentally, B2N is recognised as being accessible to mums because of the increased  
434 perceived importance of social categorisation and relatedness, rather than perceptions of  
435 competence. The importance of relatedness enables participants to feel part of the B2N social  
436 category, in turn driving the internalisation of intrinsic reasons that facilitate an increasing need  
437 to participate in the scheme. Finally, the internalisation process allows the participant to add  
438 an exercise component to their identity, which drives their long-term commitment to the  
439 programme, and allowing them to enjoy the social benefits associated with such strong feelings  
440 of relatedness with other group members.

441 *Narrative Two: Exercise identity as an additional identity*

442 Narrative two extends the first narrative by highlighting the role of B2N as a vehicle for  
443 creating an exercise identity that extends to other PA contexts. Although Cath's exercise  
444 identity developed within the B2N setting, it has influenced her levels of participation in other  
445 forms of PA. Previous research has highlighted the role of habitual scheduling of PA in the  
446 development of an exercise identity, where participants highlight how involvement in PA is  
447 part of their lives (Hardcastle & Taylor, 2005). Narrative two explains how Cath has progressed  
448 beyond Sue's state in narrative one, where the exercise identity is specific to B2N, through to  
449 a social identity that influences attitudes, beliefs and levels of engagement in other forms of  
450 PA.

451 Cath is 24 years old and has an 18-month-old son, Adam. She returned to work when Adam  
452 was 6 months old but she struggled to adjust to working full time and being a mum. She made  
453 the decision to stay at home to look after Adam. As a young single parent, there were three  
454 things that were key to her getting her life back on track; joining a back to netball group which  
455 gave her a sense of belonging, getting fitter which helped her spend more quality time with her  
456 son, and feeling confident, which gave her a sense of purpose.

457 *"Before Back to netball, I felt like nothing more than a Mum. Every day I'd get up, get*  
458 *Adam ready, and take him to the park or around the shops. I wouldn't have many friends*  
459 *to meet as they all worked full-time. I'd tried to go back to work six months after having*  
460 *Adam, but I really struggled leaving him so gave it all up when I was 23 to be a stay at*  
461 *home Mum. I wouldn't go out much, my confidence was rock bottom, and I didn't do*  
462 *anything for myself. My friend told me about Back to Netball and how much she'd*  
463 *enjoyed it, so after a bit of convincing I decided to give it a go. At first, I was a bit*  
464 *scared to leave Adam, but I realised it was only for an hour a week and went along."*

465           *“Back to Netball has changed my life! I feel like I’m stepping out on my own, not as a*  
466           *Mum, but as Cath, and I’ve met so many friends who I know I can rely on. It’s only an*  
467           *hour a week, but I’ve realised I can do something for myself and I’ve started to realise*  
468           *that Adam doesn’t need me 24/7. I’ve lost weight, nearly all my baby weight now, so I*  
469           *feel much more confident and everyone’s commented on how much happier I*  
470           *look!” “Back to Netball’s completely changed my life in so many ways I didn’t expect.*  
471           *I’m now eating healthier which I know will help Adam in the future as he’ll hopefully*  
472           *pick up my habits. Before going to Back to Netball, I might go to the gym once a week*  
473           *and do a load of random exercises. Now I’m focusing my workouts to benefit my*  
474           *netball: it’s given me a real sense of purpose and a clearer focus. It’s paying off too: a*  
475           *couple of weeks ago the coach came over to me and asked if I wanted to go and train*  
476           *with their team. She really thinks I’m good enough to play for them, and I can’t wait to*  
477           *start training with them! Without Back to Netball I’d still just be a Mum: it’s completely*  
478           *changed my life!”*

479 In narrative two, Cath demonstrates how B2N’s role in developing her social identity has  
480 influenced her schedule, and her *“life has changed”* to include taking part in *“focused*  
481 *workouts”* in the gym and starting to transition into competitive netball through joining a team.  
482 This planning has been hypothesised to act as a strategy used by participants to remain  
483 committed to their new active lifestyle, and is conducive to long-term PA behaviour change  
484 (Hardcastle & Taylor, 2005).

485 Long-term participation in PA is associated with a host of psychological benefits, such as  
486 reductions in stress and anxiety (Das & Horton, 2016). The B2N scheme was reported to  
487 provide psychological benefits to participants by creating an opportunity for the mums to  
488 alleviate the psychological demands of being a mum, and many of the participants commented  
489 on being able to cope with their parental roles more effectively after attending B2N sessions.

490 Beyond the success of escaping care responsibilities, B2N also improved participants'  
491 psychological wellbeing by providing a catalyst for more extensive changes to their perceptions  
492 of self. With such an emphasis on relatedness and social support, evident through how she has  
493 "*met so many friends that (she) can rely on*", the B2N environment provides a safe space for  
494 Cath to explore social roles outside that of her role as a mum. By doing so, Cath has started the  
495 process of reconstructing her self-identity through her engagement in B2N and therefore  
496 becoming empowered to change other aspects of her life, such as eating habits (Roster, 2007).  
497 The positive feedback from the coach has increased Cath's positivity about her competence,  
498 meaning she feels effective, able and proficient. This type of environment has the potential to  
499 nurture perceptions of bodily competence and competence of self (Batey & Owton, 2014).  
500 Although Cath was committed to the programme and improving her competence as a netballer,  
501 having a safe space where she felt confident in her own ability was important (Batey and Owton  
502 20014; Brown et al 2001). This aligns with Spowert et al (2010) who examined the extent to  
503 which surfing mums used the activity to allow them spaces of freedom of being a mum.  
504 Building B2N into her routine allowed Cath do something for herself, allowing her to explore  
505 social roles outside her state of foreclosure as "*just a mum.*" In order to effectively cater for  
506 mums, physical activity programmes should principally focus on developing feelings of  
507 relatedness, allowing participants to feel comfortable to explore social roles outside that of their  
508 current state, before placing value on perceptions of competence. By focusing on competence,  
509 existing programmes are detracting from what B2N participants perceive as central to their  
510 prolonged participation in the programme: feelings of social categorisation and sharing a  
511 common interest with a diverse group, rather than focusing on measures of performance.

512 Cath's increasing level of autonomy is evident by how she feels that she is "*stepping out on*  
513 *her own, not as a mum, but as Cath*". According to self-determination theory, perceptions of  
514 competence and achievement enhance intrinsic motivation, which is related to a process of

515 internalisation whereby the behaviour becomes valued by the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000).  
516 Initially, participants were motivated extrinsically before they internalised more intrinsic  
517 reasons for participating throughout the remainder of the scheme, which served to influence  
518 the development of participants' exercise identity (Hardcastle & Taylor, 2005). Changes in  
519 Cath's motivation towards PA are evident through how it initially "*took a bit of convincing*  
520 *and (she) decided to give it a go*", reflective of extrinsic or introjected motivation. In contrast,  
521 Cath now has a "*sense of purpose and a clearer focus*", demonstrating how she is now  
522 engaging in PA for intrinsic reasons. Previous literature (Teixeira, Carraça, Markland, Silva,  
523 & Ryan, 2012; Mailey, Huberty, Dinkel & McAuley, 2014; Brown, Brown, Miller & Hansen  
524 2001), has repeatedly demonstrated that intrinsic motivation is more predictive of long-term  
525 physical activity adherence than more extrinsic forms of motivation. Furthermore, competence  
526 satisfaction positively predicts physical activity participation across a range of samples and  
527 settings (Silva et al., 2008; Teixeira et al, 2012). Increasing levels of intrinsic motivation has  
528 also been demonstrated to have benefits outside a physical activity domain, and been shown to  
529 predict important health related outcomes. For example, autonomous self-regulation for  
530 exercise directly predicted moderate and vigorous PA as well as reduction in body weight  
531 (Silva et al., 2008).

532 Alongside the development of intrinsic forms of motivation for PA, Cath's story evidenced the  
533 development of an exercise identity that extends beyond the B2N setting and has even  
534 influenced her health behaviours such as eating habits. This narrative clearly supports extant  
535 literature, which demonstrates that if PA becomes part of the participants' lives, through  
536 making it part of their routine, they are more likely to maintain their motivation to participate  
537 (Eynon, O'Donnell, & Williams, 2016). B2N has created a space for her to not only be herself  
538 but also to be able to exercise and feel better about herself. Cath has taken back control of her  
539 eating habits, exercise regime and has regained a sense of purpose. She has changed her

540 perception of being a mum which is corroborated by the claim that benefits can be gained  
541 across life domains when psychological need satisfaction is met (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

542 *Motherhood as a conduit for relatedness and social identity*

543 Practically, B2N influences physical self-cognitions over time, as participants begin to view  
544 exercise as central to their weekly routines and an important part of who they are. Increased  
545 feelings of achievement, a greater sense of control of their lives, a sense of belonging and social  
546 categorisation were critical factors in fostering an exercise identity. In turn, this allowed  
547 participants to engage in guilt-free exercise coupled with feelings of empowerment and well-  
548 being.

549 There was evidence of an identity shift away from a state of identity foreclosure, being “*just a*  
550 *mum*” through the development of a social identity. Participants in the present study appeared  
551 to be in the process of or had succeeded in adding exercise to their identity, which involved  
552 planning and prioritising B2N over their existing commitments. This was highlighted by  
553 numerous participants as a particularly salient factor in their prolonged engagement with B2N.  
554 Once the social identity was constructed in the B2N context, prolonged engagement with the  
555 programme facilitated the development of an exercise identity that is applicable to other PA  
556 contexts. Behaviourally, the development of a more generic exercise identity allowed the  
557 individual to transition from B2N into prolonged engagement in other forms of PA, such as  
558 competitive netball.

559 Relatedness was emphasised by a number of participants to be a feature of the B2N programme  
560 that was particularly influential in promoting long-term engagement. The development of a  
561 social identity is posited to be facilitated through a cyclical relationship between B2N  
562 participation, participants’ feelings of relatedness and exercise identity. In this case, B2N  
563 participation facilitates the process of categorising oneself as a group member, in turn driving



564 prolonged engagement with B2N, manifesting as the development of an exercise identity in a  
565 B2N context.

### 566 *Study Limitations*

567 This study explored mums' understandings about PA related behaviours within a PA  
568 programme that has been demonstrated to be particularly successful in engaging a typically  
569 hard to reach target group (Whitehead et al., 2016). By doing so, this research has the major  
570 strength of investigating a group within a PA domain that is not extensively researched or  
571 understood. Furthermore, by taking an approach rooted in identity theory, this study provides  
572 a novel perspective for understanding how a PA programme may successfully engage mums.  
573 However, it is recognised that the study has several limitations. Firstly, the gynocentric sample  
574 does not fully explain how levels of engagement with PA are affected by parenthood, and as  
575 both mothers and fathers are both at greater risk of inactivity, future studies should aim to  
576 investigate any differences between how mothers and fathers perceive their PA behaviour to  
577 be influenced through the transition into becoming a parent. Secondly, the retrospective  
578 descriptions of PA may mean that participants have misrepresented their activity habits, or  
579 emphasised parts of their experiences that were particularly meaningful to them. Thirdly, the  
580 sample was entirely Caucasian, yet non-Caucasian populations are at a higher risk of not  
581 engaging in PA (Gothe & Kendall, 2016). Given that there are differences in cultural beliefs  
582 about PA, future research could investigate how these traditionally hard to reach groups  
583 perceive PA in parenthood. Finally, using semi-structured interviews, this research focused on  
584 understanding PA from the individual perspectives. However, given the perceived importance  
585 of relatedness in promoting long-term PA engagement amongst B2N participants, future  
586 research could capitalise on feelings of social categorisation by utilising focus groups or dyadic  
587 interviews, to investigate how B2N is able to function as such a successful multi-relational and  
588 multi-generational programme.

589 **Conclusions**

590 The aims of the paper were to investigate the relationship between individual experience and  
591 social engagement in PA by exploring how the team environment increased participants'  
592 feelings of membership with their B2N group. The findings suggest that long-term maintenance  
593 of PA can be achieved amongst mums through a cyclical relationship between B2N  
594 participation, feelings of social categorisation and the development of an exercise identity.  
595 Initially, participants were motivated extrinsically by relating the game of netball to something  
596 they enjoyed when they were at school. More intrinsic reasons for exercise throughout the  
597 remainder of the scheme were incorporated, which served to influence participants' social  
598 identity. The importance placed on relatedness was demonstrated to be a particularly influential  
599 factor in promoting long-term participation in B2N. The paper also postulates how prolonged  
600 PA engagement is facilitated through a relationship between feelings of relatedness and social  
601 categorisation. To be able to engage mums and facilitate the development of an exercise  
602 identity, relatedness should be a focus of a PA programme. Such feelings of relatedness  
603 facilitate the development of a B2N-specific exercise identity, which allows participants to  
604 explore alternative social roles, before their continued participation in the scheme, giving rise  
605 to feelings of competence, drives the development of a more generic exercise identity.  
606 Participants' commitment to the more generic exercise identity allows them to transition from  
607 B2N into competitive netball, or other forms of PA, hence successfully facilitating long-term  
608 behaviour change.

609 Social identity, the development of which was driven by the internalisation of intrinsic reasons  
610 to participate, appeared to be a particularly salient factor underpinning participants' motivation  
611 in attending the B2N sessions. In turn, this manifested as changes in self-esteem and self-  
612 efficacy, and empowered participants to improve their other health behaviours. These feelings  
613 allowed participants to engage in guilt-free exercise coupled with feelings of empowerment

614 and well-being. The supportive atmosphere encouraged individuals to engage in health-  
615 conducive behaviours for their own reasons, which facilitated success in dealing with barriers  
616 to change, and helped to convey a feeling of acceptance and respect. The B2N scheme  
617 integrates a model of women's sport that encompasses the social experience and nurtures the  
618 psychological need for relatedness.

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