

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

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Abstract

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

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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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methods

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

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

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

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

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

Sampling

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

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

¹ This raises ethical issues which are further discussed below.

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

Ethics

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

Data Collection

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

Data Analysis

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

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

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

- 1) During the initial development of the coding book, a co-author acted as a critical friend to consider the verisimilitude of the coding process (Smith & McGannon, 2017; Costa & Kallick, 1993).
- 2) During the 'search' for themes the team examined the analysis collaboratively (Baker, 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.

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.

366 Table 1. Themes from Back To Netball

Theme	Exemplar Quotations
Mum identity as enabler for relatedness	<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>
Exercise identity as an additional identity	<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>

Findings and Discussion

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

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

Narrative One- mum identity as enabler for relatedness

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

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

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

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

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

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

Narrative Two: Exercise identity as an additional identity

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

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

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

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

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

Long-term participation in PA is associated with a host of psychological benefits, such as reductions in stress and anxiety (Das & Horton, 2016). The B2N scheme was reported to provide psychological benefits to participants by creating an opportunity for the mums to alleviate the psychological demands of being a mum, and many of the participants commented 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

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

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

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

Motherhood as a conduit for relatedness and social identity

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

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

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

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

Study Limitations

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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