**Note**: This paper has been accepted in *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. The version below may differ slightly from the published version, which should be regarded as definitive.

**Playing with class: middle-class intensive mothering and the consumption of children’s toys in Vietnam**

*Khanh Le-Phuong Nguyen, Royal Holloway, University of London*

*Vicki Harman, Royal Holloway, University of London*

*Benedetta Cappellini, Royal Holloway, University of London*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the way in which Vietnamese mothers purchase, gift and share toys with their children. The study utilises a qualitative design comprising semi-structured interviews with 10 Vietnamese middle-class professional working mothers of children aged between 5 and 9.This research highlights the way in which toys defined as ‘good’ by mothers need to fulfil a number of important practical and social functions: they act as an investment in the child’s future, as a reward, and as a means for mothers to buy time for themselves. The findings illustrate how these functions are influenced by Confucian and Western discourses of intensive mothering, generating a localised style of middle-class intensive mothering, characterised by what we have called the ideal of the *triple excellent and intensive mother*.

**Keywords:** gender; toys; intensive mothering; social class; Vietnam.

**Playing with class: middle-class intensive mothering and the consumption of children’s toys in Vietnam**

**Introduction**

Current understanding of ‘good parenting’ in Western societies are dominated by notions of intensive mothering. This form of mothering is a restless child-centred activity aimed at raising successful children who have a competitive and social advantage over others (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003; Perrier, 2012). This intensive way of mothering was initially documented as being based on middle-class, heterosexual and white values of ‘proper’ child rearing (Hays 1996; Lee, Bristow, Faircloth and MacVarish, 2014), but it is now considered the normalised way of being a good mother across social class, ethnicities and indeed cultures (Caputo, 2007; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). Confluent with developmental psychology and the more recent so-called brain science (Nadesan, 2002; Wall, 2010; Gillies, Edwards and Horsley 2016), intensive mothering discourses fit with the neoliberal idea of parental determinism and responsibility for children’s outcomes and future success. Some commentators have highlighted how intensive mothering has become widespread in non-Western societies, forming a new globalised way of doing motherhood across cultures (Ho 2007; Luccisano and Wall, 2009; The Voice, 2010). However, very little has been said about how such styles of mothering manifest outside of Western contexts, where other culturally specific norms and conventions of mothering are also present. Furthermore, more information is needed about how intensive mothering intersects with localised norms of parenting and how different value systems are translated into everyday mothering practices.

This paper seeks to address this gap by looking at how Confucian and Western discourses of intensive mothering are at play in the everyday life of 10 middle class Vietnamese women through their practices of selecting, purchasing and sharing toys with their children. The findings reveal how toys fulfil a number of important practical and social functions - they can be an investment in the child’s future, a reward, and they can buy time for mothers themselves. The findings illuminate how these functions are influenced by discourses of Confucianism and intensive mothering, generating a localised style of middle-class intensive mothering, characterised by what we have called the ideal of the *triple excellent and intensive mother*. The paper demonstrates how Western discourses of intensive mothering and concerted cultivation converged with the Confucian values of mothering in the Vietnamese context.

**Intensive mothering and toy consumption**

Interpretive marketing research highlight how the consumption of everyday objects including baby clothes (McNeil and Graham, 2014), prams (Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006) and food (authors own publication) acquire a central role in the creation of the identity of a ‘good’ mother. Critical studies show how consumption is at the same time an alleviator and instigator of mothers’ anxieties, since the marketplace constantly pushes the boundaries of good mothering, which becomes a never fully achieved target (e.g The Voice 2010). Interdisciplinary research insists that the current interrelation between good mothering and consumption is a result of the Western-based and middle-class discourse of intensive mothering (Takahashi, 2014; Cook, 2013). According to Hays (1996: 8) intensive mothering ‘requires the day-to-day labour of nurturing the child, listening to the child, attempting to decipher the child’s needs and desires, struggling to meet the child’s wishes, and placing the child’s well-being ahead of their [mothers’] own convenience.’ Following Hays (1996: 8) intensive parenting can be performed through methods that are ‘child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive’. If working-class mothering has focused more on children’s development as a matter of ‘natural growth’ (see for example, Hallden 1991; Lareau, 2003), intensive mothers see their child’s development as their own enterprise (Vincent et al., 2013) and as such their mothering is entangled in what Brusdal and Frønes (2013) refer as ‘market of concerned consumption’.

Toys can be seen as a way of extending the self of the mother, ensuring her presence even when she cannot physically be present (Belk 1988). Toy consumption may involve both adults and children in the process of selecting a product that could be subsequently used by the child on their own or by parents and children together (Seiter, 1992; Keller and Ruus 2014). As such a focus on children’s toys can offer an insightful way of understanding parents’ engagement with the identity construction project for themselves and for their children (Brusdal and Frønes 2013). Previous studies on toy consumption reveal that social class plays a fundamental role when mothers are selecting toys for their children (Pugh 2005; Seiter 1992; Williams 2006). Indeed Seiter's (1992) observational study at two toy stores shows how tension between parents and children when selecting toys emerges not from the price of toys but from differences in ‘taste’, or in other words, the inferior cultural attributes middle-class adults assign to mass-produced toys compared with more expensive educational ones.

Expanding Seiter’s work, Williams’ ethnographic research (2006) demonstrates that what parents choose to buy for their children reflects not only their cultural capital, but also the desired identities for their children. In particular, a middle-class parents’ shopping journey can be a lesson to teach the child self-regulation and reasoning skills, as well as how to select ‘worthy products’ that satisfy parents’ criteria of symbolic and beneficial values (Williams, 2006:183). In the same vein, Seiter (1992) claims that middle-class parents transmit cultural capital by directing children to educational toys, thus creating an advantage for children as they are likely to become more familiar with pedagogical toys used at school than those with more limited access. Williams (2006) then states that in contrast to working-class parents who see toys and leisure activities simply as entertainment without a clear educational orientation, affluent parents adopt what Lareau (2003) refers as a ‘concerted cultivation’ parenting strategy. This approach consists of parents monitoring and assessing children’s talents, enrolling them in multiple adult-structured leisure activities and consuming toys aimed at fostering children’s academic skills. In contrast to the belief in the ‘accomplishment of natural growth’ amongst working-class parents, children are seen by their middle-class parents as products to be cultivated and successfully developed (Lareau, 2003). This suggests that concerted cultivation results from both parental moral responsibility and anxiety regarding the child’s ability to match or surpass his/her social class origin.

**Mothering in Vietnam**

Current social norms of marriage and motherhood in Vietnam have evolved from its Confucian heritage (Bélanger and Oudin, 2007). Following Confucian tradition, family life is determined by the principle of the Three bonds, which establishes the authority of the father over his children and of the husband over his wife. Furthermore, Confucian women’s identity is defined by the Four Virtues asserting that women should act in certain ways to general virtue (for example, avoiding talking too much, making herself attractive to men and acting as a good housekeeper) (Ho, 2007). Despite such a patriarchal conceptualisation of family life, Vietnamese women have enjoyed more independency than in other Confucian cultures, including, for example the right to inherit property (Hirschman and Loi, 1996). According to Slote and Davos (1998) this is because Vietnamese Confucianism advocates for more individual autonomy which is supported by an overall belief in individual fate and destiny. Although presented here in a very concise way, these values are still in use and women’s morality is judged by her ability to raise children and maintain the overall harmony of her family (Slote and Davos 1998). In fact, having a family and a child is seen as the mark of a fulfilled life, a successful identity and a patriotic contribution, since families are seen as the foundation of the country (Bélanger & Oudin, 2007). Such a tradition has been incorporated with the more recent economic reform of 1986, known as *Doi Moi*, which shifted the country’s economy to an outward-oriented and market-based one, promoting gender equality through economic, educational and political policies (Schuler et al., 2006). These political and economic changes have led to the increase of dual-income households (Tran, 2007).

Revisiting reform policies on gender equality, research studies have shown how Confucianism is still relevant in contemporary Vietnamese society (Earl, 2013) in which the female labour force participant was 72% in 2011, far greater than most countries in the world (for example, USA 57% and UK 56%) (GSO, 2011; WDI, 2015). Schuler and his colleagues (2006) have drawn attention to the ‘Three virtues’ and the ‘Happy and Civilised Family’ campaigns conducted by the Vietnamese Women’s Union since 2002 (VWU, 2007). The two campaigns define ‘triple excellent women’ and ‘new mothers’ as those who ‘study actively and work creatively, raise children well, and build happy families’, using the mass media to widely promote images of independent women who can juggle work and motherhood effortlessly (Schuler et al., 2006; Earl, 2013). While affirming the role of women in the public sphere, these campaigns also highlight the Confucian values that caring for the family and parenting are seen as a women’s domain and a measure of women’s success. Feelings of pressure to conform to highly demanding and contradictory standards of womanhood have been identified among Vietnamese women (Knodel et al., 2005).

This contradiction is also highlighted in studies showing the existence of a gap between the desired results of social-economic revolution and the reality of gender equality. For example, Vietnam ranks relatively low in terms of gender equality (WDI, 2015) and empirical research suggests that the gender division of housework and parenting has changed very little (Knodel et al., 2005; Le and Efroymson, 2008). The role of mothers as the main caretaker and educator of the child is a common theme between the ideological legacies of Confucianism and socialist frameworks. It is in the commonality of these discourses regarding womanhood that mothering is seen as a crucial identity project for Vietnamese women.

**Research methods**

In order to provide an in-depth understanding of mothers’ experience of selecting toys, this study adopted an interpretivist approach, gathering data via semi-structured interviews. Ten mothers were recruited via a purposive sampling technique, accompanied by convenience sampling and the snowballing technique (Silverman, 2006). Women in full-time employment with at least one child aged from five to nine years old were recruited. Since the literature review showed children from five to nine-year old start to request and challenge their guardians in purchasing products (Pugh, 2009), mothers with children at this age were information-rich cases to be investigated. All interviewees were Vietnamese mothers living in urban areas, self-identified as middle or upper-middle-class based on education level, occupation, household income, and personal salaries. The middle-class lifestyle was also reflected in their discussion of family hobbies and activities. Participants ranged in age from 29 to 43 years old, and married with full-time working partners (see figure 1). Due to the small sample, this study does not claim to generalise its findings as representative of Vietnamese families, but the modest number of participants can still provide the study with thoughtful insights and intensive analysis to contribute to the literature (Thompson, 1996).

[Insert table here]

Interviews lasted between 50 minutes to 1.5 hours and were conducted via Skype for logistical reasons. In the interviews, participants were invited to reflect on how they select toys for their children and how playing is part of their children’s everyday life. Also interviewees were asked to describe their ideals of mothering and their everyday mothering practices. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and with participants’ permission, they were recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Utilising thematic open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 2008) and Nvivo computer software, each interview transcript was analysed individually and later compared with the others to find thematic relationships amongst transcripts. From the initial open coding, codes were identified, including categories of toys (educational, entertaining, high-end and mass-produced – according to mothers’ narratives), sources of toys, mother’s taste, children’s taste, playtime and gendered division of domestic work. The final interpretation of the data emerged from back and forth movement between the analysis and the literature on toy consumption and between individual and joint interpretation of the data.

**Findings**

***A toy good for the child: Investing in the future***

Despite mothers affirming their willingness to accommodate children’s desires, selecting a toy was seen as a practice to be carefully managed, with alternatives and possible outcomes planned in advance.

*Since I realized he was more interested in cheap useless toys sold by street vendors, I always took him to shopping malls. There, he could look at a few options, I would suggest a few, but we agreed to buy one at a time. My son needed to convince me with reasons why he liked that toy, how long he was going to keep it and how useful it was to him.* (Linh, two children)

Linh’s planned process is not at odds with some of the literature highlighting how middle-class mothers carefully select items for their children as a way of training them to disregard objects associated with a lower class (street toys) and appreciated the ones symbolising the ‘proper’ taste (Seiter, 1992). The idea of something being a ‘proper’ toy was often referred to by mothers as a matter of being a toy of quality described as educational toys, including assembly toys such as Lego, or crafts, and puzzles. Such a quality was also clearly linked with social class. For example, Nghi claimed that: *‘The higher the social class, the more people consume high-class educational toys’*.

Participants demonstrated a calculative way of selecting toys for their children, which shows how ‘quality’ is also perceived as an investment aimed at developing cultural or educational capital that will constitute an advantage for the child in their future careers (see also Brusdal and Frønes, 2013). For example, toys which involved counting and literacy skills were considered crucial because they helped improving the child’s academic performance. Participants tended to justify the purchase of expensive toys as an investment that benefits the child:

*Liking cooking toys might be a hint of our son’s future career, so I needed to nourish it.[..] If he has more time to play instead of going to extra classes, his play needs to be beneficial for his learning so he will not be left behind.* (Thy, two children)

Mothers’ overall agreement to the social norms emphasising learning after school over unstructured playtime was noticeable. Supporting previous studies (Lareau, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2007), the findings suggest that mothers felt a social pressure to ensure their child’s academic performance matched their potential and that of their peers. Investing in children’s educational toys offered mothers the moral identities that they were contributing to their children’s future success and to the future of their country (Earl, 2013).

Despite showing overall consensus on the idea that a toy should be seen as an investment for the future, contra discourses also emerged, highlighting how an over-calculative and over-intrusive attitude toward leisure time was seen as ‘bad’ mothering (see also Brusdal and Frønes, 2013). Most participants understood good mothering as a matter of balance between being calculative and ‘soft’, and between being vigilant and ‘relaxed’. However, achieving such a balance was often a reason for anxiety. For example, Truc conformed to the norms of investing in the child’s future through toys, but constantly worried about managing the expectations of family and friends:

*Many of my friends and my child’s grandparents asked me to take him to extra classes but I think he can develop naturally. If anyone teases him about not having extra classes, my son can argue that he has his own specialties including playing basketball and chess.* (Truc, one child)

Distancing herself from a more calculative way of looking at children’s leisure time, Truc communicates an overall sense of insecurity around her decision, explaining it in terms of acquiring alternative skills that could also be useful in future. By justifying her decision in this way, Truc seems to be unable to completely distance herself from the intensive mothering logic seeking to provide a competitive advantage to her child.

***Deserving toys: Rewards, compensation and celebrations***

Training the child to a middle-class taste and cultivating their cultural capital were not the only motivations for purchasing toys. A more general relationship to consumption emerged in looking at the occasions of consumption and the quantity of toys owned by participants. Toys were usually purchased for formal occasions including birthdays, New Year and Christmas. Other extraordinary occasions included the absence of the mother for work trips. Mothers described this as an agreement in which the promise of a home-coming gift made before the trip would make the children behave well with the child’s carers (the child’s father or grandparents). Treated as a currency between mother and child, some women saw this trade as problematic:

*I am not buying my children’s affection with material objects, because I try to take them out for, meals, picnic or so to spend more time with them the weekend after my trips.* (Giang, two children)

As Giang summarises it, her absence from the family for work purposes needed to be compensated somehow. Her way of rebalancing does not simply include toys, but also spending more time with her children immediately after a business trip. Similar to the notion of mother’s payback gifts (Thomson, 1996; Williams, 2006), toys and leisure time were seen by mothers as means to relieve their anxiety of not being with their children. As we will see in the next section, such anxiety is also related to the traditional Confucian mothering framework insisting that the child’s wellbeing is a mother’s main imperative.

Toys were also acquired regularly as a form of gratification which needed to be justified. Some participants described a trade mechanism in which good grades, good academic performance or more general good behaviours were traded with toys. Other parents, like Truc, have adopted a system in which children earn an ‘imaginary salary’ – in Truc’s own words- that could be later spent on toys. All these mechanisms aimed at encouraging children to put effort to earn toys echoes the strategies that Williams (2006) interprets as a way of preventing children from acting greedily. Such an imperative to avoid greed by justifying the need for a new toy is applied to mothers themselves:

*Sometimes I like a particular toy so much I try to find an excuse, like trying to remember a good thing he did that week to justify my gift. I need to be stricter with him.* (Thy, two children)

Here, anxiety over being too strict or not ‘strict’ enough suggests that although mothers consume out of love (Duncan, 2005), they also acknowledge the responsibility in achieving a balance between pleasing their children with toys and being ‘good mothers’ who make responsible consumption decisions. We think that this idea of responsible consumption, or ‘symbolic deprivation’ (Pugh, 2009), is emblematic of the middle-class’ principle of balancing discipline and rewards, punishments and gratification, work and leisure. Although money is not a concern for our participants, their moral relationship with money is emblematic of the imperative of teaching their children the Doi Moi ideal of deserving and earning pleasure and rewards (Schuler et al., 2006). Such a ‘balanced’ way of seeing toys and leisure as part of the children lives, was also evident when talking about the size of toy collection. Many of the mothers interviewed used comparative words to describe the amount of toys their children and others owned:

*I felt sorry for my children’s cousins because all they have are cheaply made plastic toys. I could also relate to my childhood when I played with self-made things such as fruit seeds. That’s why I taught my children to appreciate their toy collection and sometimes tend to overbuy toys for my children.* (Thy, two children)

For participants like Thy, the quality and quantity of toys are regulated by middle-class constraints, as inappropriate toys (plastic ones) and ‘too few’ ‘appropriate’ toys were seen as a sign of a deprived household unable to meet the middle-class norms of a good childhood. Equally too many toys were seen as synonym of conspicuous consumption, thus as a marker of over-indulgent affluent mothering, a moral disapprobation (see also Brusdal and Frønes 2013).

***A toy good for the Mother: Buying time for me***

Participants discussed their mothering practices in relation to an idealised ‘caring mother’, suggesting that entering the workforce made performing ‘good mothering’ more difficult. According to Nghi, for example, a ‘caring mother’ had to achieve a balance between work and family, and ‘put away her own stresses to focus on the child instead of herself’. This coincided well with the traditional values of Confucian discourses and the socialist expectations for ‘Triple excellent women’, seeing a ‘good’ women as a good mother and a worker. The high expectations imposed by these discourses seemed so influential that it made those who could not conform feel guilty about their practice:

*Sometimes after work, I want to put him to bed early so I can rest. It’s an internal conflict, I always want to put him first but I just can’t play with him as much as I should.* (Hong, PR practitioner, two children)

Hong’s account suggests that within the ‘caring mother’ framework, mothers might embrace the demands of the child-centred approach of mothering and strive to fulfil them; but they seemed critical and concerned about the impracticality of such demands. Echoing Hong, all participants admitted feeling guilty when they multitask to complete their household tasks while playing with their children, suggesting that toy playing adds a second or third shift for working mothers (Thompson, 1996). Fathers were not completely absent from childcare and domestic work, but they were often described as ancillary figures ‘helping’ women to perform their household’ tasks. They were also described as helpers in playing with the children, a task that women think they perform in a more efficient way. For example, one mother explained that ‘*If my husband plays with the child I will be more tired cleaning it up.*’

Mothers generally held tightly to the idea of self-sacrifice for their family and their children, but they also sought to reclaim some time for themselves, which they justified as a ‘necessity’ to be able to perform efficiently in the workplace as well as at home. Given that mothers felt the need to have time for ‘themselves’, children’s toys seemed to extend the self of the mother (Belk, 1988):

*Without toys he will always follow me and I can’t do anything else.* *I need to focus on myself as well, like recover from job stress to work better and live healthily. So I persuade myself that my child does not need attention all the time, it’s okay to let him play alone sometimes.* (Thao, two children)

Here, the focus on the self seemed to challenge the ‘selfless love’ idea of caring mother. Interestingly, for many interviewees, self-awareness of personal well-being and being able to manage their career were parts of contemporary womanhood which was the ideal model for them and for their children. These working mothers expressed the view that paying attention to themselves could be reconciled with the other-centred idea of good mothering. Given that mothers use toys as a substitute for their presence and more intense involvement with the children’s play, it is not surprising to see how much effort is required for purchasing a toy. Such a toy could at the same time being an investment for mother’s present career and the child’s future one.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This study has contributed to the scant literature on mothering and consumption in non-Western contexts showing how the discourses of intensive mothering and concerted cultivation have crossed borders interacting also with local values and norms. In the specific case of Vietnam, these discourses seem to reinforce the Confucian traditional division of gender roles in the family, seeing women as the main caregiver and responsible for raising future good citizens. These discourses are at play in the motivations behind purchasing children’s toys. As shown in the findings, toys can be purchased for providing leisure, developing children’s skills and confidence, fostering academic advantages, rewarding children for ‘good’ behaviour, but also mitigating working mothers’ sense of guilt for their absences. Such a mix of motivations and ideals drawing on both Confucianism and intensive mothering influences the way middle-class mothers undertake their consumption practices, generating a localised style of middle-class mothering, which we have called the tripe excellent and intensive mother (see figure 2).

 [Insert figure 1 here]

As the main toy purchasers, gate keepers and professionally successful wives, Vietnamese mothers are able to conform to the ideal Confucian feminine traits (being caring and gentle) and the moral maternal practices (extensive engagement and investment in the child) via consumption. This seems consistent with the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003) in Western societies, and the traditional Confucian ideal profile of women. The intensified consumption of educational toys is framed as a way of helping women achieving the ideal of the excellent Vietnamese woman who is able to raise her children ‘well’ (Confucianism value), progressing in her professional career while remaining the main caregiver of her household (Doi Moi value). In particular the way busy working mothers buy toys after business trips or assign children to play educational toys before leaving for work confirms what Pugh (2005) found in toy catalogues targeting ‘working mother’s guilt’. Thus, toys are considered as effective tools for busy mothers to display their child-focused attitude towards their children’s future success, even when mother and child are not near each other.

Having experienced scarcity of commodities in their childhoods, mothers valued the material comfort of post-Doi moi era and want to ensure their children take advantage of this economic privilege by investing in consumption patterns and lifestyles that only affluent families can afford. This corroborates the work of Brusdal and Frønes (2013) suggesting that consumption is a vehicle through which parents identify their identity as part of their social class. Considering the distinctive backdrop of the nation’s transformation into a more consumer society with a growing class division (Earl, 2013), the manifestation of social class is also evident in mundane consumption practices, including purchasing a toy for a child. Furthermore, by encouraging children to go toy shopping with them and initiating discussion to find the ‘worthy toy’, mothers communicate class-based values and status goals to the children, transforming economic capital to cultural capital and passing it down in the context of family habitus (Brusdal and Frønes, 2013).

If these findings echo previous works on middle-class mothers’ disposition, which is also characterised by an acute distancing from taste and consumption patterns of lower classes (see for example, Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006), in our case we did not document a competitive attitude of mothers seeking to outdo others. One potential explanation is that toy playing often occurs at home - a private sphere - in comparison to other goods which are consumed and displayed more publicly such as designer clothes (McNeill and Graham, 2014) and prams (Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006). In fact, most mothers explicitly distanced themselves from conspicuous spending on toys, seeing it as a bad parenting act of affluent families. As Pugh (2009) argues, this practice allows parents to appear morally acceptable as if they eschew materialism of their neighbours, while in practice they might invest emotionally and financially in child-rearing consumption themselves. However, too few toys or lack of investment in worthy toys is considered a way of practising ‘inadequate’ mothering. Yet in contrast to Perrier’s (2012) findings, our participants did not regard limited toy possession as pathologised but showed compassion to lower-class mothers. This should be read in the context of the interviewed mothers’ childhood experience, which commonly included the poverty of the post-war period before Doi Moi economic reforms. They refuted judging the practice of lower-class mothers but could not help comparing their own practices to mothering practices of other social classes. Thus interviewees construct their moral maternal selves through the consumption of an appropriate amount, somewhere between the practice of affluent and lower-class families.

The importance of learning and developing children’s social skills was mentioned as an important feature of good mothering, which all participants recognised as a preference typical of their social class. This echoes Seiter (1992), Williams (2006) and Lareau's (2003) studies, reflecting the classed-parenting strategy of ‘concerted cultivation’. Furthermore, assuming educational commodities are inherently good at promoting skills and cognitive developments, mothers can justify their spending on relatively expensive toys if they are investing in children’s future opportunities in terms of academic performance, financial and occupational success. These findings confirm previous works (Brusdal and Frønes 2013;Vincent and Ball, 2007) suggesting that mothers’ aspirations and anxieties in relation to their children’s ability to achieve and exceed their class identities lead them to invest in educational toys to provide classed advantages for their children at school.

Yet mothers also expressed resistance to the practice of prioritising formal learning over playing. Here, being reluctant and obsessive about education are both considered as inappropriate, making these middle-class mothers self-regulate themselves in between two spectrums. Thus, mothers prefer and invest in educational toys to compromise learning and playing, to ease their concern over the child’s potential success and the desire to protect childhood’s playfulness. Moreover, there was also evidence of belief in the so called ‘natural growth of the child’, as in the example of Truc, which was only seen as a working-class parenting logic in Lareau’s (2003) study. Thus, our findings are slightly different to existing studies of middle-class families in the UK and USA (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007), which draws attention to diverse practice of mothering in the Vietnamese context.

While all mothers agree that spending time with their children engaging in practices such as playing is crucial to the development of the children and mother-child relationship, they are also critical about the impracticality of the selfless approach to wholly focus on the children of full-time working mothers. On one hand, the findings concur with literature (Pugh, 2005; Thompson, 1996; Williams, 2006; Diaz, 2008) that mothers appear to be caught between worker identity and mother identity, feeling guilty due to having limited quality time with their children. In this sense, they hold strong to their mother identity and see their employment as a detrimental factor to good mothering (Duncan, 2005). On the other hand, between the child and personal competing needs, there were mothers seeing full-time employment and self-care as part of modern-woman identity and moral maternal self. Contesting the selflessness idea of dominant mothering discourses, these mothers flexibly adapt and construct their self-presentation to preserve their good-mothering identity by identifying their professional success and self-love as facets of a role model for their children. Here, the moral understandings of working mothers are negotiated subjectively.

**References**

Bélanger, D. & Oudin, X. (2007) For better or for worse? Working mothers in late Vietnamese socialism. In *Working and mothering in Asia: Images, ideologies and identities* (ed. by T.W. Devasahayam &B.S.A. Yeoh), pp. 106–135, NUS Press, Singapore.

Belk, R. (1988) Possessions and the extended self, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15(2) 139-168.

Brusdal, R. & Frønes, I. (2013) The purchase of moral positions: An essay on the markets of concerned parenting. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **37**, 159–164.

Caputo, V. (2007) ‘She’s from a good family’: performing childhood and motherhood in a Canadian private school setting. Childhood, **14,** 173-192.

Cook, D.T. (2013) Introduction: Specifying mothers/motherhoods. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, **13,** 75–78.

Diaz, J. (2008) Toy Stories : Mothers and the Meanings of Toys. *Sociology Honors Projects -* Macalester College.

Duncan, S. (2005) Mothering, class and rationality. *Sociological Review*, **53**, 50–76.

Earl, C. (2013) Saigon style: Middle-class culture and transformations of urban lifestyling in post-reform Vietnamese media. *Media International Australia*, **147**, 85–98.

General Statistic Office (GSO) (2011), ‘Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam’, accessed July 31, 2015, from <http://www.gso.gov.vn/default\_en.aspx?tabid=467&idmid=3&ItemID=12897>.

Gillies, V. Edwards, R. and Horsley, N. (2016) Brave new brains: sociology, family and the

 politics of knowledge. *The Sociological Review*, **64**, 219-237.

Hallden, G. (1991) The child as project and as beign: parents ideas as frames of references. *Children &Society*, **5**, 334-346.

Hays, S. (1996) *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

Hirschman, C. and Loi, V.M. (1996) Family and household structure in Vietnam: some glimpes from a recent survey. *Pacific Affairs*, **69**, 229-249.

Ho, P. S. (2007) Eterna mothers or flexible housewives? Midlle-aged Chinese married women in Hong Kong. *Sex Roles*, **57**, 249-265.

Keller, M. & Ruus R. (2014) Pre-schoolers, parents and supermarkets: co-shopping as a social practice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **38**, 119-126.

Knodel, J., Vu, M-L, Jayakody, R. & Vu, T.H. (2005) Gender roles in the family: Change and stability in Vietnam’, *Asian Population Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 69–92.

Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, Second Edition with an Update a Decade Later*,2nd edn, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Le, T.T. & Efroymson, D. (2008) Women’s Economic Contribution through their Unpaid Work in Vietnam. *Health Bride and the Institute of Social Development Studies*, no. January, 1–30.

Lee, E. Bristow, J. Faircloth, C. and MacVarish, J. 2014 *Parenting Culture Studies*, Basingstoke: MacMillan.

Luccisano, L. and Wall, G. (2009) The sharing of motherhood through social investment in children: examples from Canada and Mexico. In L.MacDonald and A. Ruckets, eds, Beyond neoliberalism in the Americas. Basingstoke, Palgrave, 199-214.

McNeill, L. & Graham, T. (2014) Mother’s choice: An exploration of extended self in infant clothing consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, **13**, 403–410.

Nadesan, M.H. (2002) Engineering the entrapreneur infant: Brain science, infant development toys, and govermentality. Cultural Studies, **16**, 401-432.

Perrier, M. (2012) Middle-class Mothers’ Moralities and “Concerted Cultivation”: Class Others, Ambivalence and Excess. *Sociology*, **47**, 1–16.

Pugh, A. J. (2005) Selling Compromise: Toys, Motherhood, and the Cultural Deal. *Gender & Society*, **19**, 729–749.

Pugh, A.J. (2009) *Longing and belonging parents, children, and consumer culture*, University of California Press, CA.

Romagnoli, A and Wall, g (2012). I know I’m a good mum’: young, low-income mothers’ experiences with risk perception, intensive mothering ideology and parenting education programmes. *Health, Risk & Society*, **14**, 273-289.

Schuler, S.R., Anh, H.T., Ha, V.S., Minh, T.H., Mai, B.T.T. & Thien, P. V. (2006) Constructions of gender in Vietnam: In pursuit of the “Three Criteria”. *Culture, health & sexuality*, **8** , 395–406.

Seiter, E. (1992) Toys are us: Marketing to children and parents. *Cultural Studies*, **62**, 232–247.

Silverman, D. (2006) *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analyzing talk, text and interaction*, Sage, London.

Slote W. H and G.A. Devos (eds) (1998) *Confucianism and the family*. State University of NewYork, New York.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (2008) *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques.* 3rd edn., Sage Publications, CA.

Takahashi, M. (2014) Ideological dilemmas: constructing motherhood through caring consumption in Japan. *Young Consumers*, **115**, 84–93.

Thompson, C. (1996) Caring consumers: Gendered consumption meanings and the juggling lifestyle. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **22**, 387–407.

Thomsen, T.U. & Sørensen, E.B. (2006) The First Four-wheeled Status Symbol: Pram Consumption as a Vehicle for the Construction of Motherhood Identity. *Journal of Marketing Management*, **22**, 907–927.

Tran, T.P. (2007) Work and family roles of women in Ho Chi Minh City, *International Education Journal*, 8, 284–292.

Vincent, C. & Ball, S. (2007) Making up” the middle-class child: families, activities and class dispositions. *Sociology*, **41**, 1061–1077.

Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU). (2007) ‘Goals of the women's movement in the 2002 - 2007 period’, available http://hoilhpn.org.vn/newsdetail.asp?CatId=66&NewsId=154&lang=EN (Accessed 07 March 2016).

The Voice (2010). Buying into motherhood? Problematic consumption and ambivalence in transitional phases. *Consumption Markets & Culture,* **13**, 373–39

Wall, G. (2010). Mothers’ experiences with intensive parenting and brain development discourse. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, **33**, 253-263.

WDI 2015, ‘Female labor force participation rate’, *World Development Indicators- World Bank Group*, accessed July 20, 2015, from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>.

Williams, C.L. (2006) *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.



Figure 1: Triple excellent and intensive mother

 **Raising children well**

-Cultivating children’s skills and abilities

- Educating children to be compassionate to less advantaged families

- *Intensive consumption of educational toys stimulating academic and professional skills*

**Building a happy family**

- Being the main caregiver in the household

-Teaching children responsible consumption

- *Balancing discipline and rewards through a ‘balanced’, although intensive, consumption of toys*

**Working creatively**

- Having professional and highly demanding jobs

- *Intensive consumption of educational toys substituting mothers’ presence with the child*

**Triple excellent and intensive mother**