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# **Mothers as Consumers of Childcare Centres**

## **Living up to the image of the ideal mother**

Master Thesis

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how mothers, in their evaluation of different types of childcare centres, deal with the image of the ideal mother – paying special attention to the symbolic meanings they attach to the different childcare centres in their consideration set. The research examines how women's mother groups influence their preferences for certain childcare options, the connection between mothers' actual and ideal identity, the influence of word of mouth and its impact on their behaviour in relation to the decision-making when choosing childcare.

The theoretical framework for the thesis is based within sociological theories, more specifically the phenomenon of symbolic interactionism. Literature related to reference groups, symbolic consumption, identity construction and motherhood are seen in relation to the empirical findings. Erwin Goffman's dramaturgical approach and his essay on face work inspire the analysis providing insight into the interaction in different mother groups and an understanding of how it influences both the mothers' idea of an ideal mother and their preferences for certain childcare centres.

The study is based on 3 focus group interviews with already established mother groups in Elsinore. With a qualitative approach the study gives insight into some mothers reflection in their choice of childcare and the role of their mother group in their decision-making process. The analysis shows that not only the final choice, but also the way they approach the information search carries symbolic meaning. Some symbolic meanings are shared and culturally constituted, whereas others reside purely within the mothers' social environment, in particularly her mother group. The study also explores how experience from other mothers makes individuals doubt or reassure themselves in their choice and how statements in relation to childcare are constructed to correspond to fit into the mothers' definition of an ideal mother.

The purpose of this thesis is to support the municipality of Elsinore as providers of childcare centres in their competition with the private market. Providing them with an understanding of mothers' reflections in relation to their choice of childcare and how this understanding can be used to develop and promote childcare centres, so they do not just fit the mothers' actual identity, but become a service that the mothers would recommend as part of their ideal mother identity.

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Front-page picture from [www.minpasning.dk](http://www.minpasning.dk)

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## **1.0 Introduction**

That products are consumed to convey symbolic meaning has for a long time been of interest for marketers (Leigh & Gabel 1992, p.6). Believing that, “all products - no matter how mundane - may carry a symbolic meaning” (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982, p.134) means that also the choice of childcare is strongly influenced by society and the opinion of significant reference groups. Mothers as consumers of childcare have a wide choice to choose from. This choice also needs to fit into the family life when maternity leave is over. Her evaluation of alternatives and her final choice therefore not only needs to match her identity and convey the right meaning, but in the end also fit into her life as a working mother. This leaves the mother with a puzzle of combining all ends and constructing statements that represent her ideal mother identity when publicly stating the reasons for her choice of childcare.

With this study of qualitative nature, the thesis will give an insight into some mothers' thoughts and reflections in relation to their choice of childcare. Exploring the impact of the mother group as an influential factor in their choice this thesis will support the municipality of Elsinore, as providers of childcare centres, with suggestions on how this understanding can be used to promote childcare centres. Childcare centres that do not only correspond to the mothers' actual identity, but also appeal to their ideal mother identity.

### **1.1 Problem statement**

Symbolic consumption refers to the tendency for consumers to focus on meanings beyond the tangible, physical characteristics of material objects (Levy, 1959 cited in Banister, 2015). Also the transition into motherhood and symbolic consumption has been explored, but mostly with focus on tangible products such as prams (Thomsen & Sørensen 2006), baby clothes (Andersen et al. 2008) and food consumption (Keenan and Stapleton in O'Donohoe, 2013). Parents as consumers of childcare have a wide choice to choose from. In the municipality of Elsinore varying sizes of private and public options are offered and some even with a special focus such as gymnastics, culture or outdoors life. 91,2 % of Danish children between 1-2 years old attend some type of childcare centre (Dansk statistik 2014). Childcare centres can therefore easily be said to be a fairly popular service among parents and childcare is somehow embedded in the Danish culture. A mother's choice of childcare centre can be a way to communicate her identity as a mother towards

her social environment, as well as the social environment can be a factor influencing her choice due to the shared symbolic meaning.

Health-visitors have, since the mid 70's, been involved in gathering mothers into mother groups (groups consisting of other mothers). These groups quickly give the new mother a group to belong to. A group in which, she can exchange advice and experiences about life as a mother. Within these groups shared meanings can reside not only in relation to product consumption, but also the consumption of services such as childcare centres. Little research has been done regarding parents as consumers of childcare centres in Denmark. One survey from "Konkurrence og Forbruger Styrelsen" (Website- Konkurrence og Forbruger Styrelsen) explored parent satisfaction with the information search process and their final choice in relation to childcare centres, but most research papers on parents' decision-making regarding childcare centres are from countries such as USA and UK where childcare services are operating in a private market.

Some researchers argue that consumption plays a critical role in the enactment of motherhood (Davies et al., 2006), and that mothers intuitively understand the relationship between possessions and the self (Belk, 2002 cited in O'Malley, 2006). No research, has to my knowledge, been done on the symbolic meaning of childcare centres and how mother groups can act as an influential reference group for a mother's choice of childcare.

This thesis will explore how the signal value of mothers' choice of childcare centre can support their identity construction and potentially provide them with a certain experience of self. With a social network framework, this thesis will investigate how the mother group influences mothers' preferences for certain childcare options and how these said preferences play a role in portraying a wanted identity. The theoretical framework for the thesis will be based on literature related to reference groups, symbolic consumption, identity construction and motherhood, in order to understand mother groups as an influential source of information and the relationship between the evaluation of childcare services and the creation of mothers' wanted identity.

The author of this paper expects that the findings will give a deeper insight into the role of mother groups as a reference group and identity construction for mothers as consumers of childcare.

## 1.2 Research question

*How do mother groups influence a mother's choice of childcare centre, and how can the providers of childcare centres accommodate this in their future marketing activities?*

The thesis will answer the following questions;

- 1) How does the role transition impact mothers' identity construction?**
- 2) How does mothers' social environment contribute to their preferences for certain type of childcare centres?**
- 3) Can childcare centres represent symbolic consumption?**
- 4) Which marketing implications should the providers of childcare consider?**

### **Significance of the Research**

Countries with a childcare market dominated by private actors such as the UK and US have studied parents as consumers of childcare, but the field is not overwhelming and some claim that there is still a lack of studies into parents as consumers of childcare services (Fuqua & Labensohn 1986; Weber 2011). The available research explores the actual outcome and not the decision-making process that leads up to parents' final choice of childcare service (Weber, 2011). Research on how parents form preferences and how they receive their information about childcare can assist governments in providing parents with adequate information and developing more adequate childcare facilities, that fit the lives of parents (Fuqua & Labensohn 1986). Research on parents as consumers of childcare in a Danish context is to my knowledge even more limited, maybe due to the historical development of childcare centres in Denmark, which has been dominated by public providers.

It has been found that the mothers' identity is strongly related with the type and quality of childcare that they choose and that; "Policy that tries to impose a single type of childcare solution on all mothers will not be fully effective " (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2002, p.10 ). However social relations, especially in the Danish context of constituted mother groups can also be an important factor explaining mothers' choice of childcare. Research on how Danish parents form preferences, the mother group as a potential influential information source and the deeper background, such as the relevance of identity and the symbolic meaning of their choice, could assist the municipality of

Elsinore in their future marketing activities and in developing childcare centres, that do not just fit into the lives of parents, but becomes a service that they would recommend and see as a choice representing them and their values as mothers.

### **Explanation of words**

#### **Day care**

A group of maximum 4 children between the ages of 6 months and 2-3 years are taken care of by the child minder in her home. In Danish “Dagpleje”

#### **Big Day Care**

A group of maximum 10 children between the ages of 6 months and 2-3 years are taken care of by two child minders working together. In Danish “Flerbørns dagpleje”

#### **Crèche**

Children between 6 months and 2-3 years are taken care of by pedagogically educated personnel. The institutions vary in size. In Danish “Vuggestue”

#### **Pre-K**

Creche and kindergarten for children aged 6 months to about 6/7 years. The institutions vary in size. In Danish “Integreret institution”

The above explanations of words are inspired from Website-expatindenmark ( 2015)

#### **Own care**

The municipality of Elsinore provides parents with the opportunity to take care of their children at home instead of using a childcare centre. For children between 24 weeks and 2 years of age parents will be granted 6.800,00 DKK. per month per child (Website-helsingor 2015b).

In Danish “pasning af eget barn”

#### **Steiner**

Steiner childcare centres, in some countries also referred to as Waldorf, are private childcare centres with a pedagogical teaching inspired from Rudolf Steiner. “The education is based on an anthroposophical view and understanding of the human being, that is, as a being of body, soul and

spirit. The education mirrors the basic stages of a child's development from childhood to adulthood, which in general reflects the development of humanity through history from our origin, far back in past times up to the present” (Website-Waldorf 2015).

### **Childcare centres**

When the childcare centre term is used, it refers to all of the different types of childcare as a collective whole. In Danish: “Dagtilbud”

The above types of childcare centres can be private or public options.

## **1.3 Outline of the thesis**

Chapter one provides the reader with general background information about the childcare market in general and in the municipality of Elsinore specifically. It briefly introduces the reader to the concept of mother groups and describes the considerations and limitations of the study. Chapter two constitutes the theoretical framework of the research, where the literature review and the theories are presented. Chapter three explains the methodology, the research process and the research choices. Chapter four consists of an analysis of the empirical findings seen in relation to previous theories on the subject. It includes suggestions for managerial implications based on the findings. The conclusion will summarise all four chapters and the thesis ends with a chapter on limitations and suggestions for future research.

## **1.4 Background of the study**

### **Mother groups in Elsinore**

In Elsinore groups of first time mothers and mothers with more children are gathered into one group according to the age/birth of their children (Website-helsingor 2015a). These groups of mothers often gather informally once a week for a coffee and a talk about things related to motherhood (Website-helsingor 2015a). The Danish media has discussed both the purpose and the composition of the mothers in these groups stating, that these groups are composed of mothers with equal social background, level of education, family type and ethnicity (Johannesen & Cramon 2012). In other words a group consisting of mothers with same “values, attitudes, and standards” (Botten, McColl,

Harris, & Gledhill, 2012, p.104) encouraged to meet informally once a week, making it a potentially contractual reference group for mothers navigating in their new role.

### **History of the childcare market**

Formal childcare as we see in Denmark, seems embedded in the Danish culture. History shows that it has been a service provided by the government for several decades dating back to 1919 where the government started to provide subsidies to the existing childcare centres (Website-FOA). With an increased demand for labour more women entered the workforce and in the 1970's the responsibility of providing childcare services were solely taken over by the municipalities who provided women and children with different nurseries, kindergartens and support for private childcare (Website-FOA). Since the 1990's the government has enabled the increase of private options (Website-FOA) making the market more competitive.

### **The current day care market**

All young children in Denmark have the option of enrolment in a childcare centre (Website-expatindenmark). Each municipality determines its own overall goals and framework of childcare options (Website-expatindenmark). 91,2 % of Danish children between 1-2 years old attend some type of childcare centre (Dansk statistik 2014). The municipalities are obliged to provide childcare for all children from 6 months old and until they start preschool (Website-expatindenmark). They are responsible for the different public childcare options both in terms of finance, the administration of the waiting lists and the overall running of the childcare centre, such as opening hours, rules and regulations (Website-expatindenmark). The government sets a maximum parent payment of 25 % of the cost, whereas the municipality are obliged to pay the remaining 75% (Website-Konkurrence og Forbruger Styrelsen 2007). If the municipality is not able to provide a childcare option within their own municipality, they must arrange for care in another municipality, in a private childcare centre or subsidise the parent seeking a private option, still with the parent paying a maximum 25 % of the cost (Website-borger.dk 2015).

The municipality provides several options for reduced rates if parents choose to use their services. In case of siblings, parents will receive a 50 % discount on the payment for the 2<sup>nd</sup> child. Single parents or parents with low income can be granted a free place or a payment less than the 25 % (Website-helsingor 2015c). Although childcare centres seem to be a fairly popular service, there is

no direct price competition between the different types of childcare (“Udbudsrådet” analyse konkurrence på dagtilbudsområdet, 2011). The opening hours are also often more or less the same within each municipality (See appendix 1.1). In order to differentiate them it has been suggested that the different childcare services look at their educational approach and thematic focus (e.g. music or nature childcare options), to attract parents and children to the service (Sekretariatet for Udbudsrådet, 2011).

### **Private versus public options**

The average parental fee for a public childcare option in the municipality of Elsinore is around 3000 DKK a month (Website-helsingør, 2015c). Families with a certain low income are granted different amount of subsidies in the publicly provided childcare centres (Website-helsingør, 2015c), which are not granted for parents choosing a private option. This means that not all mothers will have the same possibility of choice regarding childcare centres and that some might base their choice of a public childcare centre purely on economic reasons. As with the public services, private childcare services are themselves responsible for the financial side, the administration of the waiting lists and the overall running of the childcare centre (Website-borger.dk, 2015). Opening hours, rules and regulations are to a certain extent set by the municipality (Website-borger.dk, 2015).

### **The childcare market in Elsinore**

Elsinore is a municipality north of Copenhagen with around 61.519 (2014) inhabitants. The childcare market in Elsinore is divided into the towns Elsinore, Espergærde, Kvistgård, Hellebæk, Ålsgårde, Hornbæk and Tikøb (Website-helsingør kommune). Elsinore is interesting as a case because they have empty spaces in their current offerings and are open to new suggestions on how to make their public options seem more attractive to families. The municipality of Elsinore has previously provided parents with the option of public day care, which has now become solely a private option (Helsingør Dagblad, 2011). However, many families chose to stay in the day care regardless of the fact that it became a private option. Not providing public day care did not make the parents enrol in one of the empty spaces in the public childcare centres provided by the municipality (Helsingør Dagblad, 2011).

## **2.0 Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter the theoretical field for the research will be introduced. While identity, symbolic consumption and social environment are interrelated and do not follow any logical order, the theoretical framework follows the sub-questions posed in the problem statement. Firstly literature regarding motherhood, transitional consumption and identity construction is reviewed in order to understand how role transition impacts mothers' identity construction. This is followed by a review of the literature concerning consumers' social environment and how it can influence part of their decision-making process in particularly their evaluation of alternatives. Lastly literature in relation to symbolic consumption is reviewed to see how previous studies explain product/service as a potential source of meaning in identity construction.

### **2.1 Transition into Motherhood and identity construction**

#### ***Motherhood***

"Motherhood is a social construction and ideals of good motherhood are defined according to social norms" (May, 2008 in O'Donohoe, 2013 p.199). Role transition and especially the transition into motherhood has been of great interest for researchers wanting to explore how the change in personality affects the choice of consumption and contributes to identity construction via symbolic consumption (cf. Hogg et al., 2004:262 cited in Thomsen, 2006). Most researchers seem to agree that women enter a new role (Deutsch, Ruble, Fleming, Brooks-Gunn, & Stangor, 1988; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Sørensen & Thomsen, 2006) when they become mothers. Some researchers indicate that this has to be "played" correctly in order to portray the "ideal mother identity" (Heisler & Ellis 2008). Heisler & Ellis (2008) examined women's attitude about motherhood and the role memorable messages play in the construction of their "mummy identity" using Goffmans terminology as a framework. They conclude that women can be protective and hesitant in revealing their "real" identity and that they will adjust their "mummy identity" according to cultural expectations and social desirability (Heisler & Ellis, 2008) in the conversation with others. This is not done to deliberately deceive the audience (Heisler & Ellis, 2008) or the researchers, but is a natural way for people to adjust in order to achieve acceptance within a group (Buckley, 1997, p.37). In the survey by Heisler & Ellis (2008), the researchers gave the women specific targets in order to get a glimpse of the truth; their backstage personality. Women indicated that "they did not engage in "good mother" facework, yet when given specific targets (e.g., mother-in-law, dsignificant other, friends) to whom they might try to communicate that they are good mothers,

there were some differences in the means and standard deviations” (Heisler & Ellis, 2008, p. 462) indicating that the women were not fully aware of performing the “good mother” facework. The authors themselves explain the mixed results with the different level of facework that mothers may engage in according to the “audience” or the poor instrumentation to measure facework (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). If women are not fully aware that they actually perform “the mummy face” it will be difficult for them to express it. They play the role, with the purpose of receiving the audience acceptance, not with the purpose of actually deceiving the audience (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). Indicating that they do engage in “good mother” facework might also be the same as revealing that this is not the real them, which some women might find difficult (Heisler & Ellis, 2008).

Motherhood represents an important transition that carry biological, personal and social changes (Smith 1999). The progression into a new role in life is referred to as a transitional stage. Many researchers of motherhood as a transitional stage, describe the transition as an on-going process (Stern & Stern, 1998, p. 3–4, Himmelweit & Sigala, 2002; Simonič & Poljanec, 2014), which is socially (May, 2008 in O’Donohoe, 2013, p. 199, Davies & et.al, 2006, p. 4), historically (Davies et al., p.4) and culturally constructed (May, 2008 in O’Donohoe, 2013 p.199). It is a phenomenon that continues to develop even after the birth of the child, more than a stage representing a direct shift into a new role. Interviewing mothers will therefore only reveal a snapshot of their development and not a finished picture of motherhood. What they think in the moment of the interview can change as they continue their journey in motherhood.

### ***Self-Concept and Identity***

The concept of self can be understood from many different theoretical perspectives. Most researchers seem to agree that it denotes the “totality of the individuals’ thoughts and feelings having references to himself as an object” (Rosenberg 1979, p.7 in Zinkhan, 1995, p. 54). With this definition the individual is in focus. The self is stable and is taken out of its social context. But excluding the individuals’ social environment and the role it plays may not provide a full image. Both identity theory and social identity theory sees the self as dynamic and having multiple identities (Hogg et al. 1995), where the concept of self involves “ideas and feelings that he has about himself in relation to others in a socially determined frame of reference” (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987, p.14). The self is dependent on the situation combined with individual factors (Schouten, 1991) leading to the discussion of multiple selves. If the self changes according to the situation, a person will have as many selves as he/she has different social roles (Solomon et al., 2002). This

idea of important variations of self-concept dates back to Landon, 1974 (Ekinici & Riley 2003). Researchers seem to have identified at least four different types of selves;

- (1) real self (actual or objective self) —the way a person actually is.
  - (2) self-image (subjective self) —the way a person sees himself.
  - (3) ideal self (self-actualization) —the way he would like to be.
  - (4) looking-glass self (social self) — the way he thinks others regard him.
- (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987; Sirgy 1982, 1985a in M. J. Sirgy & Su, 2000).

Empirical studies regarding self-concept often involve individuals' own evaluation of their self-concept. This has led to the discussion of how people then evaluate their own self-concept. It has been suggested that when individuals evaluate their own self-concept, they do so from the perspective of how another person would see them (Solomon 1983). This theory has its foundation from Cooley's (1902) notion of the "looking-glass self", which suggests that the self is defined largely through social interaction (Pescosolido 1992). The consumer imagines the reactions of others, also known as "taking the role of other" (Solomon et al., 2002 p. 193) when defining themselves. Individuals' actual self-concept is therefore more an estimation of how individuals believe others to perceive them, rather than an accurate and precise evaluation of one self.

Identity is also a "complicated and unclear concept" (Fearon, 1999, p. 2) that not even the academic literature has clearly defined. The Oxford dictionary defines identity as "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is" (Website-oxforddictionaries), but this definition is said not to capture the whole sense of meaning that the word identity has today (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). From a social constructivist framework, identity is the result of an on-going symbolic interaction between the individual and the society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Weigert et al, 1986; Gergen, 1997 in Sørensen and Thomsen, 2005). The focus is on the social interactions rather than the individual standing alone. Fearon (1999) argues that identity is "used with two linked senses, which may be termed "social" and "personal" (Fearon, 1999, p.2) and that today many believe identity to be socially constructed (Fearon, 1999). Hogg and Abrams (1988) combine the social and individual aspect when defining identity as being; "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2 cited in Fearon, 1999 p. 6)

making self-concept, personality traits and social influences important elements in the definition of identity.

### ***Motherhood, self-concept and the mother identity***

#### ***How does the role transition impact mothers' identity construction?***

Role transition impacts the self and thereby first time mothers' identity in several ways. Arnould, Price and Zinkhan (2005) perceive the sense of self, developing through interaction with three aspects in the environment; "Significant others", "Material and objects" and "ideas, beliefs and values" (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005, p. 388). A change in one of these aspects will therefore lead to a change in the self (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005, p. 388). "Virtually any role transition creates changes in one or more of the three entities in the environment of the self" (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005, p. 389). "Significant others" includes both the individuals actual relation to other people and the relations perceived by the self, but not necessarily an actual relation. When women become mothers, their social environment "significant others" changes. They will along with motherhood and the interest of their child either broaden or change their social relations, like when attending a mother group. The "material objects" and the importance laid on it can change due to both new interests in child related things and their new social environment. The women's ideas, beliefs and values are also likely to change during their transition into motherhood. The concept of multiple selves has also been explored directly in relation to motherhood drawing parallels to the already identified types of selves with motherhood (Banister and Hogg, 2007). Some researchers have suggested that consumers' self-concept directly influences consumption behaviour (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987 cited in Adam P. Heath, Don Scott, 1998). Banister and Hogg (2007) explored how mothers used consumption either to incorporate or resist different experiences of these various mothering selves. They argue that women entering motherhood are confronted with different selves such as;

The actual self, which is in line with the description of self-image (subjective self) by Onkvisit & Shaw (1987) cited in Sirgy & Su (2000) describing mothers' actual experience as mothers.

The ideal self, which is in line with the description of ideal self (self-actualization) by Onkvisit & Shaw (1987) cited in Sirgy 1982, 1985a in M. J. Sirgy & Su (2000) which is how the mother wants to be a mother.

Instead of (subjective self) and looking-glass self (social self) Banister and Hogg (2007) describes an undesired self and an ought self. These identified types of selves in relation to motherhood, strongly reveals the idea of motherhood as a social construction. Both the undesired self - the self that the mother does not want to be and the mother she feels she should be (ought self) could be the images of motherhood grounded in societies' construction of motherhood. The undesired self will portray what is not deemed a "good" mother by society and the ought self, the conflict between the picture of society's representation of an ideal mother and how the mother actually experiences motherhood. Believing that when individuals evaluate their own self-concept, they do so from the perspective of how another person would see them (Solomon 1983), the self-image (subjective self) —the way the mother see herself as a mother, will be influenced by how she thinks other people see her as a mother (looking-glass self). This fact is important to bear in mind when analysing how a mothers self -concept translates into product evaluation. Critics of the concept of multiple selves claim that the concept does not take different situations into consideration. According to them, the actual self does not include the influence of "others" (Schenk and Holman, 1980, p. 612) and the ideal self "lumps all of these others together in a single category" (Schenk and Holman, 1980, p. 612). Believing that identity and the concept of self is an evolving process and not a stable concept has made researchers with the interactionist perspective explore the concept of situational self as an alternative to the concept of multiple selves (Hogg & Savolainen, 1998). If self-concept (and motherhood) is interrelated with society and culture (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005) the self will be dynamic and change according to situations. This has lead to the discussion of a situational self- image (Schenk and Holman, 1980).

## **2.2 The social environment and its influence on the decision making process**

### ***The situational self***

"Situational self-image is defined simply as the meaning of self that the individual wishes others to have of him/herself" (Schenk and Holman, 1980 p. 611). The idea behind the situational self is that people play different roles according to different situations (Ibid, 1980). They do not have a more consistent ideal self and/or actual self, but a dynamic self that changes "attitudes, perceptions and feelings" (Ibid, 1980, p.611) according to how they wish to be perceived (Schenk and Holman, 1980 and Hogg and Savolainen, 1998) "and to obtain positive reactions" (Schenk and Holman, 1980, p.611) from others in any given situation. A person will be categorized into "social positions" (Gross, Mason, and McEachern, 1958 in Schenk and Holman, 1980, p.611) by other individuals,

which again will determine what would be appropriate behaviour in any given situation (Schenk and Holman, 1980). These behavioural expectations are called social roles (Ibid, 1980) such as being a teacher, a daughter and/or a mother etc. These different social roles are in part dictated by the norm in the culture and society, but also the context; the specific situations where these symbolic interpretations take place are of importance when understanding the self (Ibid, 1980).

### ***Consumers as role takers***

Looking at consumers as role takers/actors stems from the symbolic interaction theory (Schenk and Holman, 1980). It is a sociological theory where products play symbolic roles and humans are seen as pragmatic actors, who continually adjust their behaviour to the actions of other actors, which they are then able to interpret symbolically (Leigh and Gabel 1992). Goffman, 1959, was one the first to comment on this (Schenk and Holman, 1980) with his “life-as theatre analogy” (Buckley 1997) presented in his book “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” (Schenk and Holman, 1980). In this book Goffman (1959) describes society as a play where the individual has to perform several roles (Buckley 1997). With performance Goffman (1959) refers to the activity performed by the individual in front of observers, which in turn will have influence on the observer (Goffman, 1959). In his analogy Goffman uses the terms front stage and back stage. Back stage is, according to Goffman’s theory, the place where the individual does not have to perform its role, but it is also a place where not everyone is let in (Buckley, 1997). Nevertheless “incidents do occur” (Goffman, 1959,p. 131) enabling the audience to get a glimpse of what happens behind the curtain. Front stage is where the actor performs the role he wants the audience to see. The audience is asked to believe in this role and believes that the actor actually possesses the attributes he claims to possess (Goffmann, 1959). The audience will have to invest time and emotional energy if they do not support him in this role (Goffmann, 1959). It is therefore also in their own interest not to analyse the performance, but instead take for granted that what appears is actually reality (Goffmann, 1959). “The individual offers his performance and puts on his show for the benefit of other people” (Goffmann, 1959, p.10) in order to present “an idealised view of the situation” (Ibid, 1959, p.23). The act comes naturally to the actor (Buckley, 1997) and takes place in all types of situations (Ibid, 1997). When these interactions include products, the actor will tend to only show the end-product leading the audience to only judge him on the carefully “finished, polished and packaged product” (Goffman, 1959, p.28). This performance is not done to deliberately deceive the audience. The actor might believe so much in his own role that he himself also believes that the stage role is actually reality and only the “sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the

”reallness” of what is presented (Goffman, 1959, p.10). This performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of society (Ibid, 1959). Each individual plays different roles in life, but the actor will ensure that the role he plays in front of one audience will be consistent and not reveal the other roles he might perform in front of another audience (Ibid, 1959).

Goffman later on developed this theory with his essay “On Face-work-An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interactions” (Goffman, 1967). In the essay he states that everyone has a self-image, which he refers to as “a face”. Goffman (1967) defines “face” as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967, p. 306). Each individual/actor acts and speaks in accordance with this face and at the same time helps others to act in accordance with their face, which Goffman calls “Facework” (Heisler & Ellis 2008). The choice of a particular product can help the individual to express the chosen self- image or “face” in any social situation (Schenk and Holman, 1980) and by helping each other to keep their face and acting in accordance to what would be acceptable (Buckley, 1997) a common understanding of what takes place in the situation will be sustained (Ibid, 1997).

### ***The situational self in relation to motherhood***

Consumption has shown not only to play an important role in the transition into motherhood, but also that it continues to play a central role when women have established and are enacting their mothering roles (Carrigan and Szmigin 2004, Hogg et al., 2004 cited in Davies et al.,). As for any other phases in life, the first period of motherhood can be influenced by a great deal of insecurity. The role transition contributes to changes in the self-concept and the person needs to find out how to act in this new role, what props to use and what mask to wear in order to send the intended messages to the audience. Some studies on transitional consumption claim that the consumer does not always know how to consume their way through the transitions and that they are not always motivated to approach new roles (The Voice Group, 2008). Consumption can instead be dependent on the degree to which the consumer embrace their new role (Jennings and O’Malley, 2003) or even complicate the role transition by causing liminality instead of solving it (The Voice Group, 2008 and Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006). Other studies indicate that consumption not only acts as a facilitator during role transition, but also that consumption supports the consumer in overcoming the obstacle of entering an unknown territory, where the consumer does not yet know the social rules and symbolic meanings of products (The Voice Group, 2008). During the mothers’

introduction to a new social environment, such as a mother group, they gradually learn about the social rules and symbolic meanings of products and services, which lead to the discussion of reference groups and their influence.

### ***Reference groups and Word of Mouth***

A reference group, also called a comparison group, “is a group whose presumed perspectives, attitudes, or behaviours are used by an individual as the basis for his perspectives, attitudes or behaviour” (Arnould, Price and Zinkan, 2005, p. 608). In this thesis, the focus on reference group theory will concentrate around their ability to impact and influence decisions through a shared understanding of the symbolic meaning of certain products and services and through word of mouth (hereafter referred to as WOM). It has been demonstrated that people use others' product evaluations as a source of information about products (Bumkrant and Cousineau 1975 cited in Bearden & Etzel 1982). Arndt (1967) defines WOM as “an informal mode of communication between non-commercial parties concerning the evaluation of products and services” (Arndt, 1967 cited in Lim & Chung, 2011, p. 18). This definition contains three basic elements of WOM. It is informal - not insinuated by a company, the topic of communication is commercial and the source of the information has normally nothing to gain from the information and is therefore more likely to be perceived as trustworthy (Schiffman and Kanuk 1997, cited in Bansal & Voyer, 2000). It has been argued that especially for services, other peoples opinion is of great importance (Bansal & Voyer 2000) “due to the heterogeneity of service quality, the higher associated risk, and the intangible nature of services” (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Ekland et al., 1995; Jolson and Bushman, 1978 cited in Lim & Chung, 2011, p. 18). Few search qualities are associated with services (Bristor 1990 cited in Bansal & Voyer, 2000) and it can therefore be difficult to compare. Information from experienced users can help overcome these issues and a consumer to whom the product is a novelty can therefore find reassurance from an experienced source (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). The informal social influences such as WOM has been said to hold great power by being highly persuasive (Bansal & Voyer 2000) and consumers have been found to rely more on informal/personal sources of communication than more formal ones (Bansal & Voyer 2000). The study by Bansal & Voyer (2000) found that the level of influential power seemed to differ according to whether the WOM information was actively sought. If the reciever had specifcily asked for the information it showed to have greater influence on the receiver's purchase decision than if it was not actively sought (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). A strong bond/friendship between the sender and reciever was also found to highly influence the purchase decision of the reciever and the more experienced the sender was,

the more likely they were to be asked for information and to actually influence the receivers purchase decision (Ibid, 2000). The study was based on positive WOM and conducted on military personel, which the authors state tend to be more prone to seek information through WOM (Ibid, 2000). Furthermore the authors highlight the fact that the study was evaluated on post data and that an enquiry of the actual date for the purchase was not made. WOM can be positive, neutral or negative (Running et al. 1998). Positive WOM contains informal recommendations of products and services (Running, Ligon, & Miskioglu, 1998) whereas communication complaining about a product/service or warning other people against it is categorised as negative WOM (Running, Ligon, & Miskioglu, 1998). Consumers in role transition has been said to be particularly susceptible to symbolic consumption due to their lack of role knowledge and insecurity (Leigh & Gabel 1992). WOM cannot only reassure the mothers in their decision, but also contribute to their understanding of the symbolic message of childcare consumption. Some researchers have argued that the decision-making in relation to childcare (Weber 2011 and Chaudry et al. 2010) is complex and cannot be represented in any linier model as the classical decision-making process. However, this model still contributes to an understanding of where in the process that the social environment contributes via WOM to mothers' preferences and priorities for certain childcare centres.

### ***The classical decision-making process***

“Consumer decision-making is about evaluating and selecting alternative behaviours or actions” (Reynolds and Olson, 2001, p. 5). The classical model of consumer decision-making comes from a rational perspective on decision-making, where it is assumed that the consumer goes through each step in the decision-making model and makes a rational decision in the end (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, Consumer Behaviour, 2006). Others believe that consumers only follow these stages for some purchases (Solomon et al. 2002). Most classical decision-making models include fives stages as illustrated in the model “The classical consumer decision-making process”.



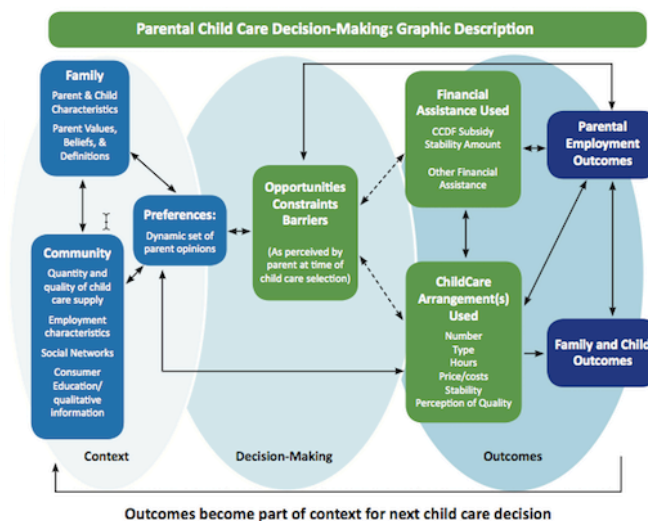
The classical consumer decision-making process. Picture from (Website-jayexplains n.d.)

The first stage; “Problem recognition” illustrates the state where the consumer becomes aware of a problem that needs a solution. The second stage; “Information search” depicts the sources that provide the consumer with information about the product/service. These sources can be the company’s marketing effort and the external sociological influences on the consumer. Choice is the outcome of the first two steps of the classical decision-making model. Choice involves assessment and judgement, which refers to the stage of the decision-making model often referred to as “evaluation of alternatives”. “Evaluation of services can be difficult and this forces consumers to rely on different cues and processes” (Ekinci & Riley 2003, p.201). The cognitive view recognises that the consumer will not obtain all information about every choice, but will be likely to cease their information seeking effort when they perceive they have enough to perform a satisfactory decision. This view is especially important when it comes to the adaptation of new products because in this case it is difficult for the consumer to evaluate and relate the product to needs (Schiffmann and Kanuk, 2007). The fourth stage; “product choice” is where the consumer chooses one of the alternatives. The fifth stage; the output stage looks at the post-decision behaviour such as the actual purchase, repeat purchase and post-purchase evaluation (Schiffmann and Kanuk, 2007). The rational decision-making model sees the consumer as an individual, basing his decision on a cost-benefit calculation. Researchers of the symbolic interactionist tradition argue that any decision-making model looking solely at the consumer as an individual loses out on information about how the individual’s social environment contributes to the decision-making process (Pescosolido 1992). They argue that social desirability involves more than the actual purchase and consumption of the

product, but also the way the consumer impresses the "audience" by portraying self confidence and negotiation skills during the information search process (Onkvisit & Shaw 1987).

### ***Consumer decision-making in relation to childcare***

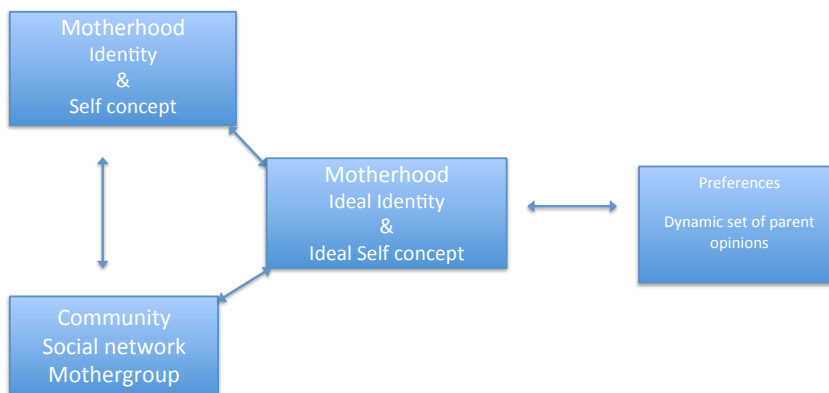
Research regarding the decision-making process in relation to childcare centres is fairly limited, even though some interest into how parents make decisions about their children's care is starting to emerge (Chaudry et al. 2010). Especially the lack of information available to parents and the complexity of the choice process have been highlighted as issues needing further research (Cryer, Debby and Bwchinal, Margaret, 2006 and Fuqua, Robert W and Labensohn, Dorothy, 2015, Weber 2011). This lack of information and the consumers' lack of knowledge on how to evaluate and compare the different alternatives make it difficult for mothers to identify the best option and "...approach child care from a consumer viewpoint" (Fuqua, Robert W and Labensohn, Dorothy, 2015 p. 295). Weber (2011) argues that the decision-making in relation to childcare cannot be understood without understanding the context that these decisions are made in. According to her and many other researchers, decision-making in relation to childcare (Weber 2011; Chaudry et al. 2010) is more complex and cannot be represented in any linier model as the classical decision-making process. Weber (2011) developed a model illustrating the decision-making process for childcare.



Model from Weber, 2011, p. 4

The first part of the model (the two first boxes in blue) illustrates the factors influencing parent preferences for certain childcare and also shows, with the arrows pointing both ways, that these are interrelated. The outcome of the decision-making process - the actual purchase of a service will constitute the base for any new decision about childcare service.

Self-concept has been found to offer an important perspective to the understanding of consumer decision-making directly influencing consumption behaviour (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987 cited in Adam P. Heath, Don Scott, 1998 and Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005) through a change in brand preference (Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006). Weber's (2011) model does not explicitly mention identity and self-concept as contributors to parents' preferences, but mention values and beliefs in the first box labelled "family". A person's values and beliefs constitute a person's identity and contributes to thoughts about who they are (Fearon 1999). Based on the first part of the model by Weber (2011) a model in the context of this thesis has been developed.



This model illustrates that a mother's identity and self-concept are interrelated with her own and her social environment's ideas of an ideal mother. It shows that her community influences her idea of an ideal mother and through word of mouth her preferences for certain childcare centres.

Weber's (2011) box labelled "family" is relabelled "motherhood", with values and beliefs constituting part of the mother's identity and self-concept. While "interaction with others form an essential element in the dynamics of decision-making processes" (Pescosolido 1992), motherhood, community and preferences are interrelated. The arrows pointing both ways illustrate this, as also seen in the model by Weber (2011).

The importance of women's perception of their own role as mothers as a factor affecting their choice of childcare was found in an empirical study from the UK (Himmelweit & Sigala 2002). The type and quality of childcare chosen by the mother was strongly related with her identity as a mother (Himmelweit & Sigala 2002). More protective mothers did not in many cases trust the care of their child to any one other than relatives (Himmelweit & Sigala 2002). However, this survey did not explore identity in a social context, but instead looked at how the mother identified herself as a mother. Identity is the result of an on-going symbolic interaction between the individual and the society (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Weigert et al, 1986; Gergen, 1997 in Sørensen and Thomsen, 2005). Information from other mothers has shown to contribute to ideas of what constitutes a good or a bad mother (Bhopal, 1998) making the social environment a very important element to include when observing and analysing identity in relation to motherhood. The research by Himmelweit & Sigala (2002) was done with mothers having pre-school children and therefore mothers in the post-purchase stage of the decision-making process. As the authors themselves highlight in the article, this can pose certain difficulties (Himmelweit & Sigala 2002). "Participants tend to produce accounts that are more coherent than those elicited during the decision-making process" (Jordan et al., 1994 in Himmelweit & Sigala, 2002, p. 5). This is also referred to as the "choice-supportive bias" theory (Mather & Johnson 2000). Motivated by Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, many studies have demonstrated that people tend to change their attitude after having made their choice, making it more consistent with the decision they have made (Mather & Johnson, 2000). This is therefore an important aspect to take into consideration when studying post-purchase decisions; such as why people chose the childcare they have already chosen.

### ***Social environment, word of mouth and motherhood***

#### ***How does mothers' social environment contribute to their preferences for certain type of childcare centres?***

The social environment is especially relevant for the study of motherhood, while along with motherhood "relationships may exist that provoke a need to present a constructed image of motherhood, selectively highlighting successes and moments of pride" (Heisler & Ellis, 2008, p. 446). Several studies have investigated specific aspect of their influence (Bearden & Etzel 1982). According to Leigh & Gabel (1992) certain group characteristics will influence the likelihood of symbolic consumption. Group characteristics such as "exclusive groups, distinctive groups, homogeneous groups, frequently interacting groups, and formal groups" (Leigh & Gabel 1992, p.8) are said to contribute to the feeling of belonging. With a strong sense of belonging the consumer is

more likely to exhibit symbolic purchasing behaviour. Mother groups are exclusive groups in the sense that they are only for mothers, who have children around the same ages. These groups, constructed by health-visitors, have also been said to consist of homogeneous groups of women, who not only share the role of motherhood, but also to some extent social background, educational level and ethnicity (BNB 2012). According to Leigh & Gabel (1992) these group characteristics are likely to influence the consumption behaviour of the members and influence the role and meaning of their consumption. Often the mothers will meet at each other's houses, informally, once a week and can be said to be frequently interacting. This provides the members with the opportunity to observe and evaluate each other's consumption behaviour (Leigh & Gabel 1992), but also to listen and learn from each others experiences in relation to products and services. WOM "tend to flow from interpersonal channels based on shared interests, friendship or family" (Arndt, 1967b p. 71 cited in Bansal & Voyer, 2000, p.167) and while members in mother groups at least share the interest of motherhood, the group can constitute an important source of information regarding product and services related to motherhood. The study by Bansal & Voyer (2000) found several important factors where parallels can be drawn to first time mothers and their mother group. One of their stated limitations were that the study was done on military personnel "because of their mobile lifestyle, tend to be habitual seekers of the WOM information for their purchase decisions" (Bansal & Voyer, 2000, p.176) and that the study therefore was not sure to be valid for a generalised level of the population. First time mothers enter a new domain. It is a role that carries many expectations, shaped by culture and society (Rich, 1977). Women often learn to navigate in this new role by the expectations of their surrounding environment and from "...verbal instructions from others" (Reynolds, 2001 in Heisler & Ellis, 2008, p.448 ). Mothers have many sources to seek advice from, such as friends, family, books and magazines. Sources, that dictates the right things to do (The Voice Group, 2008). The large availability of information sources combined with the fact that the wrong items could considerably undermine consumers in establishing their desired identity (Thomsen and Sørensen, 2006), make first time mothers just as prone to seek WOM information as the military personnel in the survey by Bansal & Voyer (2000). First time mothers are new to the service of childcare. By asking experienced mothers they can overcome the fact that different childcare centres can be difficult to compare and their quality difficult to measure (Huff & Cotte 2013). The construction of mother groups with both first time mothers and mothers of more than one child gives first time mothers the possibility to ask for information from experienced mothers in

the group. This can provide a way to find the reassurance (Bansal & Voyer, 2000) for the choice and at the same time understand the symbolic meaning that a choice could represent.

## **2.3 The symbolic nature of consumption**

### ***“Self-concept/product image congruence” theory***

Symbolic consumption refers to seeing the consumer as meaning-centered, not making consumption choices solely from products’ utilities, but also from their symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988 cited in Elliott, 2011). The symbolic meaning of products and services is an on-going process learned through the media and social interaction (Boyd-Jansson 2010). With the consumption of or by avoiding certain products consumers can portray their identity (social-symbolism) and/or create an ideal image of themselves (self-symbolism) (Elliott, 1997 in Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 2015).

Empirical studies support the fact that consumers using consumption to develop and express their self-concepts often select products that match some aspect of the self (Solomon et al., 2002). This concept is referred to as the “self-concept/product image congruence theory” (Solomon et al., 2002 p. 195), which theoretically draws support from cognitive dissonance theory (Onkvisit & Shaw 1987). Often the studies do not indicate which type of self-concept is being referred to. Onkvisit & Shaw (1987) states that empirical research validates this hypothesis regardless of whether if self-concept is based on how consumers view themselves (actual selves) or on how they would like to be (ideal self) (Onkvisit & Shaw 1987). Sirgy and Su (2000), however, debate that the different types of self-concept also leads to different types of behavioural motives and “consequently different types of self-congruity” (Sirgy and Su, 2000 p. 343).

Empirical research supporting the “self-concept/product-image congruity” has been done several times where the self-concept refers to the way a person actually is, also called the person’s actual self (Birdwell 1968; Landon 1974; O'Brien, Tapia, and Brown 1977; Ross 1971 cited in Sirgy 1982 and Belch and Landon 1977; Bellenger, Steinberg, and Stanton 1976; Birdwell 1968; Ericksen and Sirgy 1989, 1992; Grubb and Hupp 1968; Grubb and Stern 1971; Hughes and Guerrero 1971; Landon 1974; Malhotra 1981, 1988; Martin and Bellizzi 1982; Ross 1971; Sirgy 1980, 1985b; Sirgy and Danes 1982; Sirgy et al. 1991; Sirgy et al. 1997 cited in Sirgy and Su, 2000). Other

studies have failed to validate this hypothesis, such as the study by Green, Maheshwari and Rao (1969) and Hughes and Naert (1970) cited in Sirgy (1982). It must be said, that the symbolic meaning that a product conveys is mostly based on the receiver's interpretation and to a lesser extend on what the consumer wants to communicate (Jenkins, 1996; Arvidsson 2001; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). According to the symbolic interactionism paradigm the self-concept is seen as being a function of interpersonal interactions (Sirgy, 1982). This perspective acknowledges the difference that exists among people and that people therefore do not respond in the same way towards the same product (Sirgy, 1982). The receiver will interpret the product from his/her point of view and therefore not necessarily the way it was intended. Still, symbolic consumption can provide others with an idea about the consumer's identity and at the same time be an outward expression of the consumer's self-concept (Arvidsson 2001; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). In the role theory of Goffman (1957) products were introduced as props that individuals could use to strengthen their performance and thereby guide the interpretation of their situational self (Schenk and Holman, 1980). This implies that self-concept and product concept evaluation are related according to different situations. In other words, consumers would choose the brand/product that they believe communicates the same as their desired self in the specific situation (Schenk and Holman, 1980).

### ***The “product/image congruency” theory in a social context***

Researchers believing consumers to be more concerned about the social relationships and identities that come with the consummation of products, than actual products' utilities have studied the “product/image congruency” theory in a social context (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988 cited in Elliot, 2011, Cova & Cova, 2002). Sirgy and Su (2000) differentiate between a social self-image and an ideal social image (Sirgy and Su, 2000). The theory suggests a match between consumers' social or ideal social self-image and product image (Abdallat MMA, 2012). This has been supported by several studies in the context of consumer goods (Ericksen and Sirgy 1989, 1992; Malhotra 1981, 1988; Sirgy 1979, 1980, 1983; Sirgy and Danes 1982 cited in Sirgy and Su, 2000). However, these studies have not asked through whose eyes the respondents are imagining the assessment of themselves (Schenk and Holman, 1980) and if “consumers vary in the importance they place on others in determining self-definition” (Anould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005, p. 388).

Whether all products convey meaning, has also been discussed. Schenk and Holman (1980) state that “conspicuous” (Bourne, 1968 in Schenk and Holman, 1980 p. 611), “visible” (Robertsen, 1970

Schenk and Holman, 1980 p. 611) and products with a very differentiated brand image within a product category are likely to be used. Holbrook (1982) states, “all products - no matter how mundane - may carry a symbolic meaning” (Holbrook, 1982, p.134). However the choice is not always made to deliberately send an intended message.

### ***The “product/image congruency” theory in relation to service***

Symbolic purchasing occurs when a consumer directly purchases “...a specific good or service for what it signifies, based on the symbols attached by society” (Leigh & Gabel 1992, p.5). Not only can the service be used to communicate “symbolically between the individual and his significant referents” (Leigh & Gabel 1992, p.5) it can also be a tool to create and maintain women’s new identity as mothers (McCracken, 1986, Kleine and Kleine, 1999 cited in Davies & et.al, 2006). Some researchers have suggested that consumers self-concept directly influences consumption behaviour (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1987 cited in Heath & Scott, 1998, Leigh & Gabel, 1992). According to Onkvisit & Shaw (1987) “The consumer wants a product that gives the illusion that it was made exclusively for him, that it matches his personality, and that it responds to his needs (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987, p. 20). They might not only seek products that match their actual self, but to a high degree also products that enhance their ideal self-concept (Sirgy 1982). The process of selecting between alternatives of childcare can therefore play an important role in the mother’s social construction of her new identity as a mother. Mothers have been said to intuitively understand the relationship between possessions and the self (Belk, 2002 cited in O’Malley, 2006). No mother wants to give the impression that they are not giving their child the very best and mothers routinely seek out consumer goods as markers of “good motherhood”, in order to appear to be doing the best for their children (O’Malley, 2006 in Marylyn & Szmigin, 2006). The markers of “good motherhood” can therefore be said to drive their purchase towards products that are congruent with an ideal mother, such as the “self-concept/product image congruence theory” states that consumers seek products congruent with their self- image (Solomon et al., 2002). Most of the studies exploring the “self-concept/product-image” theory has been done on tangible products and at the pre-purchase stage (Ekinici & Riley 2003), but also studies in relation to service and image congruency has been done, though with mixed results. A study by Madrigal (1995) examining the relationship between personality and travel behaviour also failed to validate this hypothesis and a study by (Gentry & Doering 1979) studying the role of gender and type of leisure, showed that gender was a greater factor than personality in predicting purchasing behaviour (Sirgy, 1982). Their findings may be interpreted as opposing the self-congruence theory, but can also be explained by

methodological and theoretical shortcomings (Ekinci & Riley 2003) or that no theoretical definition of self image exists (Schenk and Holman, 1980).

### ***Childcare as a symbolic service***

#### **Can childcare centres represent symbolic consumption?**

A product chosen not only for its utilities, but from also from its symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988 cited in Elliot, 2011) signifies symbolic consumption. This symbolic meaning of products is partly “based on the symbols attached by society” (Leigh & Gabel, 1992, p.5) as well as a meaning created within the reference group (ibid,1992). The symbolic meaning of a certain type of childcare or a specific childcare centre is therefore not necessarily shared among different mother groups, but also created and developed within the group. The combination of what a product/service signifies to others, as well as for the individual, is a motivating purchase factor of symbolic goods (ibid, 1992, p.5). A mother’s choice of childcare can therefore not only be influenced by her own understanding, but highly influenced by what this particular childcare centre represents to her mother group. The discussion of symbolic meaning in relation to the choice of childcare has to my knowledge not been explored by the academic literature. Elliott, Richard and Wattanasuwan, Kritsadarat (2015) states that; “all voluntary consumption carries, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings; if the consumer has choices to consume, he or she will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings” (Elliott, Richard and Wattanasuwan, Kritsadarat, 2015, p. 5). Mothers looking for childcare centres do have choices to consume. If the consumer is seen as meaning-centred, not making consumption choices solely from products’ utilities, but also from their symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988 cited in Elliot, 2011) then a mother’s choice of childcare could also represent symbolic consumption.

### **3.0 Methodology**

In this chapter the methodology of the project will be described. It gives an overview of the research methods used to answer the research questions. The methodology framework is based on Kvale & Brinkmann's (2014) “seven stages” and also draw on Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill's (2009) Saunders, “Research Onion” presented in their book “Research Methods for Business Students”.

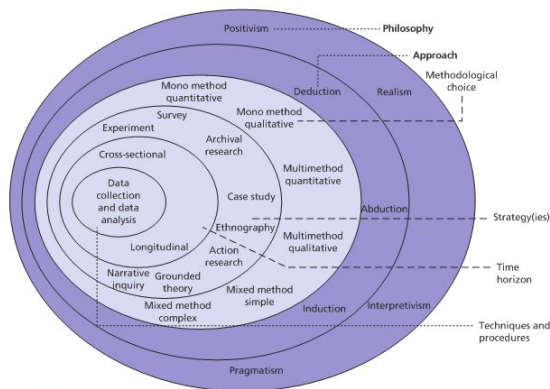


Figure 4.1 The research 'onion'  
Source: © Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill 2011

Picture from Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2012). p. 128

### 3.1 Research Purpose and Research philosophy

Research philosophy is the first layer of the research onion by Saunders et al. (2012), which describes how the researcher understands and interprets the world. Even though the research question is not answered only within one philosophical domain (Saunders et al., 2012), the dominant domain serves as a guide for how the researcher understands and interprets the world and how the survey will be conducted (Saunders et al., 2012). Social interaction is said to be an essential element in the dynamics of decision-making processes (Pescosolido 1992). Wanting to understand the influence that the social environment has on the decision-making process is therefore dominated by an interpretive philosophy “assuming that people create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them” (Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991, p.5). This thesis aims to explore the interaction between individuals in their social environment and not as isolated individuals. With an interpretive research, the researcher seeks to understand the “phenomena through accessing the meanings participants assign to them” (Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991, p.5). This interpretive perspective gives the researcher the opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the consumers, which are seen as social beings, meaning makers and identity seekers.

“Ontology is concerned with nature of reality” (Saunders et al., 2012 p. 130). The ontological considerations for this thesis are the subjectivism or social constructionism, “which views reality as being socially constructed” (Saunders et al., 2012 p. 132). The researcher acknowledges that the

phenomena being studied; the meaning mothers attach to the different types of childcare centres is constantly co-created and needs to be understood in order to understand the influence from the mother group and how the evaluation of alternatives (of different types of childcare centres) represent parts of their identity and again the reason for their choice.

### **3.2 Research Approach**

The second layer of the research onion consists of the research approaches. Saunders et al. (2012), describes three different research approaches; the deductive approach, the abduction approach and the inductive approach. The deductive approach has its starting point in the literature, which then forms the basis for the identification of theories and ideas constituting a theoretical framework, which is then tested using data (Saunders et al., 2009). The inductive approach begins with data that will be used to develop theories that then subsequently will be related to the literature (Saunders et al., 2009). The abductive approach combines elements from the inductive and deductive approach (Eco, 1990, cited in Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). This thesis started out with an explorative pilot study - a focus group (see appendix 1.2). This first focus group was focused on how mothers make their choice of type of childcare. Data from this study contributed to an understanding of how mothers interpret their social world. The research approach is therefore best described by the description of the abductive approach. The pilot study served as inspiration for themes to explore in the literature review. This approach gave a wide range of themes. Without the knowledge and understanding of the relevant research from the academic literature regarding these topics, it seemed difficult to focus the research and guide future focus groups to data that would answer the research question. The progress of the thesis therefore took a more deductive approach by focusing on the literature before moving to any further data collection. The abductive approach is close to the hermeneutics (Eco, 1990, cited in Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009) approach described further in section "Analysing".

#### ***Thematizing***

Thematizing is to answer the question of *what* is going to be studied (Steiner, 2007) and to clarify the purpose of the study (ibid, 2007). The intention of the research is to explore how identity and social interaction influences consumption choices and again how social interaction is interrelated with the construction of identity. The thesis is based within the school of sociology known as

symbolic interactionism. “In symbolic interactionism the individual derives a sense of identity from interaction and communication with others” (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 342).

### ***Designing***

The plan of the design study takes into consideration all seven stages (Steiner, 2007) and constitutes the step where the methodological procedure is planned and prepared. It involves the procedures and techniques of the study (Flick, 2007a cited in Kvale 2007). Both qualitative and quantitative techniques are suggested for case study research (Saunders et al., 2009), however focus group interviews seemed highly relevant for this study exploring how women’s mother groups influence their choice of childcare centre. Focus group interviews, observations and theories were therefore used in order to understand the symbolic meaning of the type of childcare chosen by the mothers. This method is also referred to “the method of triangulation” where more than one method is used to reach the most correct answer and to limit bias (Saunders et al. 2012). The research strategy along with the research choices and the time horizons constitute the design of the research (Robson, 2002 in Saunders, et al., 2009). The research question guides the strategy to use. Saunders et al. (2006) list several types of research strategies, experiment, survey, case study, action research, grounded theory, ethnography and archival research (Saunders et al., 2006). These are not mutually excluded, but can be combined in the same research project (Ibid, 2006). This thesis combines the element of case study and ethnography with the municipality of Elsinore as a case company. Elsinore is a town that desires their inhabitants to choose among its public childcare options and wishes to understand the reasons behind mothers’ choices of childcare. Robson (2002) defines case study as ”a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Robson, 2002, p.178 cited in Saunders, et al., 2009 p. 145-146). This thesis used “multiple sources of evidence”, combining literature on previous studies with an empirical study of the phenomena. For the empirical research case study strategy was combined with ethnographic methods. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998), argues for the concept of social representation to explore the socially shared meaning of consumption, which is the main purpose of this thesis. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) states that “group interviews and participative observation should be the main data collection methods to grasp the group’s interaction process, and to explore how the group’s shared meanings may influence its members’ consumption choices” (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998, p. 20). Different types of strategies exist within the field of ethnography, whereas Cunliffe (2010) describes three: “Realist Ethnography, Impressionist or Interpretive Ethnography and Critical

Ethnography” (Cited in Saunders, et al., 2012, p. 181). The research question in this thesis relates to the interpretive ethnography. This strategy “places much greater stress on subjective impressions than on objectivity” (Saunders, et al., 2012, p. 182). There is no one meaning, but rather multiple meanings, socially constructed by the different participants (Saunders, et al., 2012) as well as the researcher’s. Perceiving the researcher and the participants as actors in a play, “the research report will reflect both roles, “through devices such as personalisation, use of dialogue and quotations, dramatisation and presentation of different perspectives as well as contextualisation, orderly and progressive description, factual reporting, analyses and evaluation” (Ibid, 2012,p. 182).

### **Time Horizon**

While the aim of this study is to understand the world of mothers in relation to their evaluation of different types of childcare, the time horizon is cross-sectional. The study provides only a snapshot picture of a moment in their life representing this stage and not the changes or development in the final steps of their decision-making process, the purchase of the service, in this case the enrolment in the childcare centre.

### **Sampling**

The respondents were chosen according to criteria derived from the research objective namely already established mother groups within the municipality of Elsinore. This study included three semi structured group interviews with already established mother groups of different sizes. In-depth information was necessary in order to understand the symbolic world of each individual in relation to their choice of childcare and therefore, only a limited number of respondents were deemed necessary. The first group consisted of 5 Danish women. The second group consisted of 3 Danish women and a foreigner. 2 members of the group were missing the day of the interview. The fact of 2 members of the group not being present and having a foreigner in the group not speaking Danish fluently may have let the discussion for the focus group seem less dynamic. It can seem more as an in-depth interview where the moderator asked the questions that were then answered by each of the members. The third group consisted of 7 Danish women, whereas one arrived late and one did not show. The fact that not all members of the last two mother groups were available for the interview, may have contributed to another understanding of the group dynamic, than if all members had been present. The mother groups for the present study were selected among mother groups in Elsinore found through the researchers network. Only mother groups consisting on both first time mothers

and mothers of more than one child were selected. Mother groups responding to a posting on Facebook that consisted of only foreigners, mother groups with only first time mothers and newly established mother groups were rejected. The children in the mother groups were from 6 months to 11 months old. This meant that they had known each other for a while and the hope was that this would increase the likelihood of a dynamic group discussion where the participants knew each other well and felt that they could speak freely. Detailed profiles of the interviewees are presented in appendix 1.3.

### **3.3 Interviewing**

To observe the group dynamic and how or if the group members influenced each other in their perception of different types of childcare, focus group interviews were conducted in already established mother groups. As for their usual meetings the sessions took place in the mothers' home. This ensured a relaxed and well-known atmosphere for the participants. An interview is defined as "a purposeful discussion between two or more people" (Kahn and Cannell, 1957 cited in Saunders, 2009 p. 245). Semi-structured means, that the interview guide includes themes to be explored/ discussed during the session. These should not necessarily be followed in a strict order. The three groups followed the same interview guide and therefore covered the same themes. However, a different dynamic in the groups and the flow of the interviews, taking a conversational approach, often led to further questions making the three interviews differ from each other.

#### **Background of the Interview Guide**

The interview guide was constructed based on Halkier's book "Fokus grupper" (2008). Halkier (2008) states that it is important that all participants are allowed to small talk before the session starts. This was allowed in all 3 groups while we waited for most of the participants to arrive. The participants were, before the start of the session, asked to fill out a paper with details about themselves. Participants often mentioned their children's names and having that written down made it easier to recognise who was talking when transcribing from an audio recording of the interview. Participants were asked their own age in order to understand if life experience in general made them more certain in making a choice. To get an idea of the timespan between the searches for childcare options for mothers of more than one child, they were asked to provide ages of all their children. They were asked about their own and their husband/partners type of employment in order to see if anyone of them or their partner were in the childcare business and therefore had another basis for

their evaluation of childcare options than the ones without the knowledge of childcare from an employees point of view. Furthermore participants had to answer if they had a car or not. This was asked in order to assess whether some mothers would state that location would not be a factor of importance due to the availability of a car. Participants were furthermore asked for permission for the session to be videotaped. Most agreed to this, but those who expressed that they were not so keen on it were placed outside the camera angle. Lastly participants were asked to write their favourite childcare option. This was done to see if they throughout the session would change their mind. However most of the participants had already subscribed to the type of childcare that they favoured and this information was therefore not used during sessions or in the analysis.

### **Interview guide**

Halkier (2008) highlights the importance of the introduction when conducting group interviewing. According to her it should include answers to potential questions from the participants of what is the purpose of the session. A brief introduction had already been done when asking for participants to join the focus groups. This was repeated more informally when arriving at the session and again during the audio and video recording and official introduction. The project was explained briefly using more general words to avoid influencing the participants. Symbolic consumption and identity was therefore not mentioned during the introduction, but instead the participants were explained that the overall theme of the session were their choice of childcare and in case of further questions time would be allocated when the session was over. As suggested by Halkier (2008), the participants were explained in the introduction that it was mostly them who should do the talking. Based on one of Halkiers (2008) suggestions the moderator said; “ it is mostly you who should do the talking, you will do the discussion and if the overall theme disappears usually someone in the group will guide the group back to the theme” (Halkier, 2008, p. 54). Even though this was said, the moderator often guided the groups back to the theme. As Halkier (2008) suggests the moderator highlighted the fact that she was there to learn from them to ensure a free and open discussion, where the participant knew from the start that there would be no right or wrong answer.

Even though all participants knew each other very well they were asked to introduce themselves. This, so the moderator could get to know them, to facilitate recognition in the transcription phase, to get everyone talking from the start, but also for the analysis part by paying attention to the words they use when introducing themselves. If they included their job title, their child/ children name and

age and in what order. It showed, however, that the first person doing the introduction often laid the foundation for how the rest of the group would introduce themselves.

The interview guide took a funnel approach and was surrounded by five different themes. The first theme was broad and laid the foundation for the discussion. The themes were not revealed for the participants and only sub questions were asked by the moderator to guide the discussion. Firstly participants were asked of the childcare options available in Elsinore. This was done in order to see what options they had in their consideration set. Then they were asked if they had subscribed to any childcare. This was asked to find out if the survey would carry the characteristics of a post survey. They were asked if they had visited different places before subscription. Would they ensure the best place by visiting it, would they take a more relaxed approach to it counting on that anything would do or would location or other factors be more important than the place itself? This, the researcher believed would reveal part of how they approached their role as a mother.

The second theme wanted to explore their experience of the transition into motherhood seen in relation to making a choice of childcare. It explored if parallels to symbolic consumption could be drawn in relation to their choice of childcare. The interviewees were shown pictures of different mothers with mother types description and asked to place them next to different types of childcares. Participants were expected to comment their matches during the process. While the municipality of Elsinore have childcare centres with a clear thematical profile such as culture, outdoor life and sport (see appendix 1.1), the mother type description, wanted to reveal if certain childcare centres with an exact thematical profile would be mentioned in relation to the mothers interest. It was highlighted that their discussion was of importance and not any specific result. The focus was whether the participants thought that different types of mothers would chose different childcare options. If “a product category itself is also capable of assuming a unique personality” (Onkvisit & Shaw 1987), then what symbolic meaning would be shared within the group and what would the different options say about the type of mother? Thomsen and Sørensen (2006) states in their survey of prams as status symbols; “If there were no differences in the symbolic meanings attached to different prams or any relevant substitutes, they would not be able to supply their users with differing identity markers” (Thomsen & Sørensen 2006, p.913). This, the researcher believed, could be said for childcare as well. “Since identity is based on distinction” (Weigert et al. 1986 cited in Thomsen

& Sørensen 2006, p.913), the mothers would not be able to pair the type of mothers with different types of childcare if they did not perceive any symbolic meaning attached to the choice.

The third theme wanted to explore the role of the mother group as a reference group. They were asked with whom they had discussed their choice and the participants with more than one child were asked about the difference between the first child and later children in relation to the choice process. This, to observe if more experienced mothers would dominate the group's view on childcare. The fourth theme explored the participants' values and how they imagined life would be when their children started childcare. The last question was also to get an idea of their values both as an actual mother and an ideal mother. The last theme had two questions repeating previously asked questions in another way. The first question was asked in order to compare the answers with the discussion from the exercise (see appendix 1.4). The last question was a reformulation of what was important for them in their choice (see appendix 1.4). To explore if another way of asking the question would reveal more about their actual versus ideal mother identity.

### ***Transcribing***

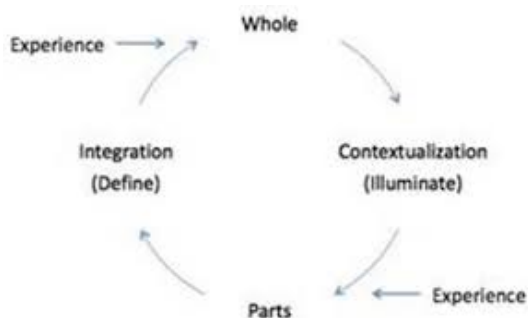
All interviews were audio and video recorded. They were audio recorded with two mobile phones to ensure a back up in case of technical problems and the computer as video recorder. To ensure that the researcher had their full focus on the situation and in order to be able to fully participate in the conversation, field notes were not taken during the interview. Instead impressions, ideas and the researcher's own opinions about the session were written down immediately after the end of each session. All interviews were done with the same moderator and lasted from 1 hour to 1 ½ hour. Video recording was used to be able to include body language and facial expressions to fully explore the dramaturgical theory and the theory of Facework by Goffman (1967). Both the audio and the video recordings were of varying quality. Babies cried, baby alarms sometimes interfered and disturbed the recording and the participants were walking in and out of the session. It was difficult to find an angle showing the faces of all participants and to ensure that nothing was placed in front of the camera during the sessions. It was therefore clear that the main tool for the analysis would be the audio recording. The interviews were firstly transcribed using only the audio recording resulting in 93 pages of interview text. Transcription is a process where spoken words are transformed into written words (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). Any transcription would therefore also reveal the understanding of the one transcribing (Kvale, 1997). The transcription is done with focus on writing the exact words as said by the participants including pauses and expressions such as

hmm, uh, giggling, and laughs (see appendix 1.5, 1.6 and 1.7 for full transcription of the focus groups). However even verbatim transcriptions create artificial constructions that might not be covering the oral conversation nor the written more formal style (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). Small talk before, during and after the session (Kvale, 1997) is only directly transcribed if it could somehow be deemed relevant for the study. This means that background talk such as individuals talking to their babies, asking each other to pass the coffee or talk strictly not related to the theme is not included. This form of transcription is done to avoid missing out on what later in the analysis can show to be of importance, however even dots and commas in the transcription carries the transcriber's own interpretation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The interviews and the transcriptions were all done in Danish. The citations included in the analysis are translated into English for the flow of reading the report. The Danish and original version of citations is found in the appendix 1.10. The video recording has been used in situations where the quality of the video is considered acceptable and the situation of importance for the analysis. In these cases interpretation of facial expressions and body language is included in the analysis. Due to the varying quality of the video recordings it has not always been possible to include participants' facial expressions and body language even if this would have enriched the analysis.

### **3.4 Analysing**

The analysis seeks to “get beyond the self-presentation of the subject” (Steiner 2007, p.38) with what Halkier (2008) refers to as a “Goffman inspired interaction analysis” (Halkier 2008, p.90). According to her, two important points to remember when doing a Goffmann inspired analysis is that the subjects are in interaction with each other and will try to sustain their representation of themselves and that conversation can be social rituals (Halkier 2008). The analysis will therefore include participants' discussion and not only citations from one of the participants, when this illustrates the group dynamic. An agreement within the group will not be considered as if everyone has the same opinion, as this could also be a way for the group to reconstruct their social relations (Halkier, 2008). Kvale (1997) states that writing down the spoken language word by word can make the phrases seem unclear and make the interviewees seem less intelligent. When possible the analysis will therefore include the respondents' facial expression, body language and tone of voice to complement the interpretation of the spoken words. The interpretation of data follows the hermeneutic approach. The hermeneutic approach is recommended by Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) when studying the phenomena at group level, as is the case for this thesis. “Hermeneutics is

defined as the theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning” (Bleicher, 1980 cited in Butler, 1998, p. 286). In other words hermeneutics is concerned with how texts are being interpreted. Heidegger (1936) introduced the hermeneutic circle as a picture for how texts are being understood (Fry, 2009).



The circle illustrates the relationship between the reader and the text or the reader and the author. It illustrates that the reader forms an opinion by reading parts and at the same time having expectations of what the whole text will be (Fry 2009).

Picture taken from; Website-qualitativeresearch.net (n.d.)

While reading, the whole text changes with the reader’s progress in knowledge (Fry, 2009). This is based on the thought that it is not possible to set aside preliminary ideas (Fry, 2009). The reader’s experience, what is already known, will through the reading be held up against what the text says and again referred back to what is known (Fry, 2009). The circle cannot be avoided, but must be entered in a correct manner (Schmidt 2006, p.4). The image of a circle has been criticised for not illustrating that while interpretation moves from parts to whole again and again each time the readers attention will have been transformed by the previous interpretation (Ángel & Landa, n.d.). The hermeneutic spiral therefore better illustrates this process of interpretation (Ibid,n.d.). The spiral illustrates that no “complete understanding can ever be achieved”, but is instead an “ever-expanding interpretive process” (Ibid, n.d., p.157). This was found especially relevant with the dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1975) and the theory of Facework (Goffman, 1967). Rereading his work in relation to the empirical findings contributed to a more profound understanding.

The hermeneutic approach has, as previously mentioned, its foundation in the understanding of text, more precisely biblical text (Fry, 2009). Modern advocates of hermeneutics see it as strategy that can be used to understand text as well as social actions (Bryman & Bell 2011). This leads back to Goffman that highlights the importance of context and non-verbal actions when understanding speech/text (Ángel & Landa n.d.). The hermeneutic approach stresses the importance of the interpretation in understanding social phenomena (Bleicher, 1980 cited in Butler 1998) and still considers the researcher as playing a part in the research process.

### **Researcher's role**

In the role of participant-as-observer the researcher will reveal the purpose as a researcher and take part as any other member of the group (Saunders, et al., 2012). Taking on the participant-as-observer role the researcher will openly reveal the purpose as a researcher when participating in one of the mother group's weekly meetings. With this open role, the researcher will be able to direct the discussion and ensure that the group provides the data needed in order to answer the research questions. However with the identity as a researcher in the group and considering the limited time allocated to really get to know these groups, the risk is to loose out on the true emotional involvement of each member. Staying in the terminology of Goffmann (1975); the researcher will be invited to observe the "play" of the group and might be allowed to perform the role of "guest". The challenge is then to discover the processes by which each of the mothers construct and reconstruct their mummy identity during the conversation about the different types of childcare. Researchers taking on the view that consumers are actors playing different roles in life using consumption as different props to portray their role need to acknowledge that they are also playing their part in the play. Are they as researchers perceived, as audience where the one interviewed still needs to perform? Or has the researcher found a way to peak in behind the curtain and get a glimpse of what is happening backstage? In the "knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action, is a social construction by human actors and that this applies equally to researchers" (Walsham, 1993 p. 5 cited in Guest et al., 2013 p. 5).

The interpretation of the participant's facial expressions, their selection of words and the circumstances in which this is taking place carry the researcher's interpretation. In addition, this interpretation is refined by the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Jenkins, 1996) such as depicted by the hermeneutic tradition (Alversen and Skoldberg, 2009). Observation as a data collection technique will enable the researcher to observe the process of communication and see how each individual responds to the other members of the group. Observation can reveal how members either adjust their symbolic understanding or influence the others' understanding and the research question seeks to understand and explore how the social circumstances of attending a mother group influences mothers' symbolic understanding of childcare centres and their construction of their new identity as mothers.

### **3.5 Reliability and Validity**

“Reliability pertains to the consistence and trustworthiness of research findings...” (Steiner, 2007, p.122). This includes whether the interviewees would have given a different reply to another interviewer and the transcription and analysis of the interviews. The analysis of meaning was done throughout the transcription process and notes were taken about the social and emotional aspect of the interview situation (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014), however these carry the subjectivity of the researcher. The researcher’s intentions with the interviews can influence the group and the interview itself. While it was the aim to avoid leading questions, some questions might have been interpreted as leading, considering the researcher’s own body language and tone of voice during the interviews. The pilot study revealed that more objectivity was needed in order to make the participants feel that they could speak freely and not be judged and lead by the researcher’s own tone of voice and facial expressions. The researcher wanted to show interest in what was being said and therefore often asked the participants to further explain their statements. The researcher wanted to include everyone in the group and asked participants direct questions if they did not seem to participate in the discussion or if their particular opinion or idea of the topic would be of great interest. However objectivity can still be questioned, while the researcher’s ideas and beliefs about the subject will affect the truth discovered.

Validity pertains the degree that a method investigates what is intended to be investigated (Steiner, 2007). Believing that there is no true objective, social reality makes validity an open conception where the study in principle leads to valid scientific knowledge (Steiner, 2007). Triangulating the data combining the semi-structured focus group interviews with observations of the group and a progressive review of the literature were considered the method that would best reveal how mother groups influence a mother’s choice of childcare. In depth interviews with mothers individually would not have revealed the group dynamic in her mother group, but might have given a different account on how she personally felt that her mother group had influenced her preferences and priorities for certain childcare centres.

#### ***Reporting***

Reporting the findings carries the subjectivity of the researcher, who chooses how a respondent’s answer should be interpreted and rewritten in the final report (Steiner 2007). It is the researcher who

gives the respondent a voice and as for the transcription and analysis the final reporting of the findings carries the researcher's selection and interpretation (Steiner 2007).

### **Ethical considerations**

The participants were ensured anonymity in the final report and it was mentioned that the thesis was done in corporation with the municipality of Elsinore. This though, could be an incentive for many of the participants to voice out opinions that they wanted the municipality to hear, such as discontent with the rates and the process of signing up to different childcare centres and also for them to avoid revealing things that they did not want the municipality to know.

Researching the feelings involved in motherhood and how the mothers perceive their actual mother identity versus their ideal identity is a sensitive issue. Some might have reconsidered their view due to the form of the focus group. During one of the sessions, one member had only attended the group once. The conflict between her actual self and what the group expected became apparent during the focus group. She evaluated and reconsidered the fact of not having visited any childcare centres before making her choice. While this was of great interest for the research itself, ethical consideration such as how the session was perceived for each of the members should also have been contemplated.

### **Pre- or post survey**

All the mothers interviewed for this thesis had either already signed up for the type of childcare they wanted or had a clear idea of it. While none had actually started to enrol their children in a childcare, the empirical findings for this thesis can be said to be in the pre-purchase stage of the decision-making process. Many of them had visited childcare centres and done their information search and subscribed to the childcare they wanted. The focus group data therefore carries the same difficulties as for the survey by Himmelweit & Sigala (2002) where the mothers were in the post purchase stage of the decision-making process when surveyed. As in their survey empirical data for this thesis also carries the "participants tend to produce accounts that are more coherent than those elicited during the decision-making process" (Jordan et al., 1994 in Himmelweit & Sigala, 2002, p. 5). In the interaction of the focus groups the mothers were presenting and describing a service that they had already decided on and therefore almost portrayed what Goffman (1967) refers to as the "end-product" (Goffman, 1967, p. 28). "In those interactions where the individual presents a

product to others, he will tend to show them only the end-product, and they will be led into judging him on the basis of something that has been finished, polished, and packaged” (Goffman, 1967 p. 28). Even though none had actually enrolled their children yet and could theoretically still change their minds, the talk during the focus groups and the way most explained their choice were as presenting only the end-product using the focus group session to make the final “finish, polish, and package” (Goffman, 1967 p. 28) in front of the audience. Most of the participant defended their choice, making their decision consistent with the decision they had already made (Mather & Johnson, 2000). Only one participant (Julie), strongly influenced by the social norm in this particular group, decided during the focus group to pay the childcare a visit and then see if she should change her mind.

### **3.6 Summary of methodology**

In summary, the empirical findings for this explorative study used the method of triangulation. Focus group interviews and observation of participant behavior, combined with a progressive review of the literature. This method was chosen to understand how mothers interact with the choice of childcare in a social setting and how this impacts their preferences and priorities for certain childcare centres. With an abductive approach, the study began with a pilot study providing inspiration for themes to explore. Using deductive reasoning these themes laid the foundation for the literature review, before moving to any further data collection. Using the municipality of Elsinore as a case; the focus groups consisted of 3 mother groups with a total of 16 mothers. The Goffmann inspired analysis included the respondents’ facial expression, body language and tone of voice to complement the interpretation of the spoken words. The interpretation of the data followed the hermeneutic approach, going back and forth between the literature, the empirical research and new knowledge creation. All the mothers interviewed for this thesis had either already signed up for the type of childcare they wanted or had a clear idea of it. The empirical findings for this thesis therefore carried the same difficulties as a survey in the post-purchase stage of the decision making process.

## **4.0 Analysis**

In this chapter the empirical findings (see appendix 1.10) will be described and related to the theoretical findings. Themes emerged from the data, following the hermeneutic approach, going back and forth between the literature review and the empirical data. The themes will be organised to

follow the sub-questions posed in the problem statement. Lastly managerial suggestions based on these findings will be proposed.

## **4.1 Motherhood**

### ***The transition into motherhood***

Interviewing first time mothers and mothers of more than one child revealed their perceived differences to these transitions. Mothers of more than one child showed a more established identity as mothers portraying more confidence in their role as mothers and in their choice of childcare. First time mothers expressed more insecurity and fear combined with this new role. The glorified image they had had of motherhood sometimes clashed with reality when the baby arrived. A first time mother described the first few days of motherhood being full of fear of loosing the child (appendix 1.10.1). Another first time mother had imagined that she should just lay in bed with her new born child and that breastfeeding would be just a “piece of cake”. However the reality was completely different and she explained that tears and chagrin replaced the imagined feeling of comfort and tranquillity over not being able to breastfeed (appendix 1.10.2). Maybe due to this first experience this woman seemed more insecure in her role and during the interview her statements often revealed that she had a clear and well-defined image of a “good” mother and what a “good” mother ought to do in different situations (appendix 1.10. 9,2,3). One first-time mother described the transition into motherhood as a process going from one person to becoming a completely different person after the birth of the child (appendix 1.10.4). While pregnant she had promised herself that this would not happened to her and during the interview it became clear that she had experienced an internal conflict of trying to sustain her old personality with the new demands from life as a mother. She revealed how her “ideas, beliefs and values” (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005, p. 388) had changed during her transition into motherhood. Even though she stated that she had now come to terms with this new role and even preferred the person she had become (appendix 1.10.5), her statements during the interview portrayed that this internal conflict still played a part in her life. She had found out that her image of the ideal mother that could study, take a driving license and at the same time devote all her energy to her child was unrealistic (appendix 1.10.6). While pregnant she had an idea of becoming the mother who would cook all meals for the child herself and that they would have dinner together every day. Even though she stated that she had now come to terms with precooked baby food and oatmeal once in a while, it seemed as though she still felt a need to defend her choices. In the same sentence she explains how she has cooked a lot of food for the child herself

and invested time and energy in making dinner time a cosy and nice time for both of them (appendix 1.10.7), indirectly revealing that this internal conflict between her idea of an ideal mother versus her actual self was still apparent.

The empirical findings showed that even though experienced mothers seemed to portray more confidence in their role, they still felt it as going through a new transition, where their role had to be modified now having more than one child to consider. More experienced mothers seemed to have embraced their identity as mothers, but were now concerned about how this perfectly constructed identity could continue now having to equally focus their attention and time on more than one child. The transition was not so overwhelming and drastic as for their first child, however new concerns had arisen with the new role as a mother of two. Their focus and time should now be shared among two and this could lead to worries about any of the children feeling less worth (appendix 1.10.8). Especially time was a dominant theme for mothers of more than one child. The lack of time seemed to be what concerned them most. This issue seemed to appear already in the second pregnancy, where they found themselves not reading about their pregnancy week by week as they had done with the first (appendix 1.10.9).

### ***The social construction of the ideal mother***

The empirical findings showed that mothers have a clear idea of what constitutes a good and a bad mother (Bhopal, 1998) and that information from other mothers contributed to these ideas. The overall theme of what constituted a good mother versus a bad changed from group to group. In the first group the conversation was characterised by the fact that most of them had chosen a private option. In the second group a good mother was someone who kept the child's needs in mind when making a decision and the third group seemed to be dominated by mothers who valued their professional life and felt that good mothers also had to consider their own needs. This is not to say that these mothers did not struggle with their actual - and a society constructed image of an ideal mother. However, within the group was a common understanding of the need for a job to sustain some of ones previous identity and not purely to sustain a certain financial lifestyle.

Most of the interviewees seemed to agree that a society's image of an ideal mother, would be a woman who could think about her child's needs before her own. Many of the first time mothers also wanted to portray this same image to the group. The first time mothers would directly state that their child came before anything else and that motherhood was somehow about supressing their

own needs (appendix 1.10.10). The groups also indicated that the picture of a good mother was something unknown “others” have made. That “ideals of good motherhood are defined according to social norms” (May, 2008 in O’Donohoe, 2013 p.199) was seen in the way the groups discussed what a good mother ought to. Camilla, a first time mother explained that she felt bad when she did not have the energy to play with her daughter even though she ought to. A good mother should play with her child even though she does not have energy to do it.

*Camilla: When I ought to play with her on the floor, right?*

*Laura: Ought, but it is also relative, ought according to whom?*

*Camilla, Johanne: yes*

*Camilla: I do not know*

*Laura: But it's your own requirements*

*Johanne: yes (appendix 1.10.3)*

This conversation also illustrates that Laura as a more experienced mother has come to term with the fact that she is not always able to live up to the image of an ideal mother and by asking what ought refers to, she makes the two first time mothers acknowledge that ought is also something that resides within them.

### ***Hours spend in childcare - good mother versus bad***

One reoccurring theme for the three interviews were the hours spent in childcare. Few hours in the childcare centre seemed to be an indicator of good motherhood. One of the mothers described how she felt that the other parents in the childcare looked at her strangely when she dropped off her child on her days off.

*Anne: But I do remember in the beginning when I started to put my first child in care... I had started working part-time and the days I didn't have to work he was still attending the childcare centre and there I felt that people looked strangely at me wondering why I didn't kept him at home when I was off (appendix 1.10.11).*

Feeling that the other parents looked at her strangely might be her perceived feeling more than an actual fact. Nonetheless also the media has contributed to this image of an ideal mother that ought to spend time with her child when not working. The discussion seems parted into those who believe the parents should sometimes focus on themselves in order to be able to also focus on the child and those who believe that parents should concentrate on their child's needs. The debate also shows that

childcare is embedded in the Danish culture as something parents will have to use. It is not perceived as any other paid-for-service, that the parents are free to use, as they like within the opening hours of the childcare centre. Nevertheless this debate shows the interaction between the media, culture and the current society's creation of the ideal mother image. In relation to the discussion of sending children in childcare centres while the parents are at home enjoying some childfree hours are the hours spend in childcare. A survey showed that many parents feel guilty about the many hours their children spend in childcare (Gaonkar 2014). This same feeling was also apparent in the discussions during the focus groups, where 3 o'clock seemed to be the time the ideal mother would pick up her child. How the mothers had come to this shared opinion of the ideal pick up time was not explored during the focus groups. This might be a combination of media influence and how a day in a childcare is often precisely constructed with most activities before noon. Often less staff would be employed during the early and late hours of the opening hours (Bæksgaard 2015), which can contribute to the idea of 3 o'clock as the ideal pick up time. In one of the groups one of the participants had stated that she was alone with her child. Opening hours were therefore of importance to her and she knew her child would have long hours in childcare. While she was shortly away from the group, they started to discuss her situation in relation to good motherhood.

*Laura: but there is also such a thing as Bente, she is forced to because she's alone right.*

*Ida (Moderator): So the perfect mother drops off at 9 am and picks up at 3 pm?*

*Laura: If it is right for her*

*Camilla: Yes*

*Laura: but the perfect mother, if she prioritizes to make some money so she can take a little vacation with her child, then she will have to work right? And then she will have to be away (from the child). It depends on what perfect is.*

*Camilla: For Bente might as well be a perfect mother*

*Laura: 100%*

*Camilla: because, she just have to work because she is alone with Karen and she has those working hours from 6 am to something and then she is forced to it, but she can still be a perfect mother after all.*

*Laura: yes*

*Camilla: when they get home (appendix 1.10.12)*

The above conversation still shows that Camilla's idea of a good mother is a mother who puts aside her own needs. It is only due to the others' private situation that it is ok that her child spends many

hours in childcare. Her last sentence actually states that she can be a good mother when she has picked up her child from childcare. Indirectly indicating that she is not a perfect mother while she is at work and the child is in care. The fact that this discussion also takes place while Bente is not present also highlights the group dynamic in this group consisting of mothers with very different opinions. They all have a need to voice their opinions, but also to stay polite and let each other play their definition of the ideal mother to the researcher. At the same time it should also be noted that Bente did not seem insecure or as someone playing the bystander role in the play. She appeared to be the type who could defend her own ideas. By voicing her opinion without the presence of Bente, Camilla manages to avoid a potential conflict, so the play can continue “within a framework acceptable to all present” (Goffman, 1975, p.4) and sustain the idea of a performance among close and intimate friends.

The other interviews revealed the same dilemma of many hours in childcare with the need of having a job. The actual mother who needed to work 8 hours a day seemed to conflict with the ideal mother’s wish of short hours in the childcare.

*Andrea: Well we will have to find some balance. We do not know yet what my husband gets. He is looking for work now um but um , but we um must find some balance so she should not be there to 5 pm every day, but at the same time I wont have to sit and work every evening when she is in bed ... so a middle way. Yes but I would rather pick her up at 3pm every day if I could (appendix 1.10.13).*

*() : Nine hours throughout the day. It scared me quite strongly (appendix 1.10.14).*

However with more experienced mothers this conflict seemed to be more between the actual mother and the ought-self, knowing the social norm that short hours or not sending the child in childcare would be an indication of good motherhood.

*Sanne: ...it is just that you really want this baby. We all want that, although we have chosen to put our children in childcare, but but there are some who prioritize their child over anything else over their job, over everything.*

*Isabella: But it's the same for me (), but I know it well and I have just the same conscience. Quite the same I think quite the same, that you get it that bad conscience. Urgh a bad mother. And I sometimes when I come down in the childcare centre and picks her up at 4:30 pm, there are only five children left. I think how in the world (laughs) are they able to pick up their children so early (1.10.15).*

Experienced mothers have found ways to overcome this cognitive dissonance telling themselves and their social environment that this is also something the children want.

*Isabella: They just think that it is so nice there and we feel that she has a better day when we drop her off early. It is easier for her to join the others in their play than when I bring her perhaps at 9 am, so then () she gets upset and does not want me to leave () and do not really join the others in their play .*

*Isabella: They actually want to be in childcare! (appendix 1.10.16)*

No one in the group contested the above statement and they seemed to agree with Isabella with their nods and smiles.

### ***The working mother identity***

Job seemed not only to be a way to earn money, but for many it was also part of their identity and a way to fulfil their need to socialize with other adults where children would not be the main topic. Andrea, a first time mother was the only participant in all the focus groups who introduced herself by also mentioning her job title. This could indicate that part of her identity is based in her job. Being a high school teacher she had heard about many colleagues who worked in the evenings in order to perform the role as the ideal mother during the day picking up their children early from childcare. This, she stated, was not her ideal. Her dream was not to work late every night, but maybe fewer hours in order to perform both the role of high school teacher and ideal mother.

*Andrea: If I could work 24-25 hours a week, that would be great. Then she could go to childcare and play with other children and come back home again. And I could earn some money and see some grown up people, but that might be just ()...(appendix 1.10.17)*

Her job is not only a way to earn money, but as she states, also a way to see other adults. While she still sees other adults during her maternity leave she might mean other adults who share her interest in the academic life.

One participant had shared her maternity leave with her husband and had started working part-time when her child was 6 months. She had just moved to Elsinore and had only attended the mother group once before. Her honest account of the feelings involved when considering starting work again reveals the conflict between her actual self and the ought self (Banister and Hogg, 2007).

*Julie: Um I have started working already now, but I would not when he is 6 months give him to anyone (), but it 's then my boyfriend who takes care of him because I like that ... yes , I can well just get a slightly different () . () Where I so sometimes think it is really bad that I already need it in some way. But I have just so um ... I certainly could not imagine being a stay-at-home mother. \_\_\_\_ And it's not because I do not feel or think it's nice to be with him and work around an cuddle him and things like that, but I just really ... I also think that ½ years. It should also be said that I have*

*only started up part-time. Maybe if I had started up full time I would have thought that I never got time with him and I ( ) but it suits me just fine to get started with something (appendix 1.10.18) .*

It makes her feel bad to have this need to start work when her child is not older. Knowing that her actual self does not correspond to the stay at home mum or the picture of the ideal mother of a woman who thinks about her child's needs before her own. The interview does not reveal her actual reason for having started working, but the "choice-supportive bias" theory (Mather & Johnson 2000) seems to come into play with her reasoning that it suites her very well to have started work. The fact that it is the husband taking care of the child combined with her only having started up part-time, enables her to justify her choice making it more consistent with the decision she has already made (Mather & Johnson, 2000).

### ***The role transitions' impact on the mothers' identity construction***

The role transition impacted the mothers' identity construction, because the transition introduced them to new "Significant others", "Material and objects" and "ideas, beliefs and values" (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005, p. 388). Most apparent were the similarities and differences between first time mothers and mothers of more than one child. Both were introduced to new "Significant others" through their mother groups. Both perceive a change in identity and both expressed insecurity and concerns with their new roles. Even though the feeling of entering a new role was most significant with first time mothers, also more experienced mothers were reconstructing their mother identity to include more than one child. Some first time mothers had tried to hold on to their previous identity, still trying to construct an identity as a mother without completely losing the old identity. More experienced mothers seemed to have embraced their identity as mothers, but were now concerned about how this perfectly constructed identity could continue - now having to equally focus their attention and time on more than one child. Both first time mothers and more experienced mothers perceived a modification in their "ideas, beliefs and values" (Ibid, 2005, p. 388). This might be the reason that also more experienced mothers' felt like they were going through a new transition, having to reconstruct their identity.

## **4.2 Social environment**

### ***The situational self***

The focus group interviews showed the mothers' situational self-image. Conducted in their mother group they portrayed the images they wanted the others to have of them (Schenk and Holman,

1980). The focus groups were all well established, having children from 6 month and older. This means that they all knew each other very well, besides the group where one had only recently joined. Their already established roles influenced the interaction among the group members. For two of the groups it was obvious that the eldest mother among them portrayed the most confidence and did not in the same way get influenced by the others' opinions and points of view on the topics. They were confident in the decision they made in relation to their child and they appeared to be very strong members of the groups who knew how to stage themselves as the mother they wanted to portray. In one of the groups a lot of members were missing that particular day. This also influenced their group dynamic and the focus group turned out to become more like an actual interview where the moderator asked questions that then got answered one by one by the participants.

### ***The importance of visiting different childcare centres***

With the situational self-image, people adopt their "attitudes, perceptions and feelings" (Schenk and Holman, 1980, p.611) according to how they wish to be perceived (Schenk and Holman, 1980 and Hogg and Savolainen, 1998) with the goal to "obtain positive reactions" (Schenk and Holman, 1980, p.611) from the others in any given situation. This adaptation was obvious in one of the focus groups where one of the women had only recently joined and was attending her 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting when the focus group was conducted. The combination of first time mother and at the same time new to the already established mother group made the session reveal how she navigated through the social norms in the group, while establishing her own way to express the most appropriate "face" in this social situation (Ibid, 1980) still new to her. Looking at the group interaction during the focus group revealed how the group contributed to modifications in her decision-making process (Pescosolido 1992). She was the only one who had not visited any childcare centre before signing up. She explained that while still in Copenhagen they could have visited different childcare centres in Elsinore, but she felt that there would be so many factors that a visit would not reveal anyway, that she in the end did not find it necessary.

*Julie: .... I just think ... I just think that there were so many things like ... like someone really cared about if the place had any male educators, but then again they could quit their job a week after you have enrolled your child into it. There were so many factors ( ), which I did not think that I could see on a visit , so I kind of thought, yeah ... . It's probably good enough if there is something with nature and something like food and such, and then it is probably be fine (appendix 1.10.19).*

Looking at the facial expression of Anne, the women sitting next to her, shows that what Julie is saying is not the common norm in the group. Anne neither nods nor shows any agreement by her

facial expressions, but looks more surprised by the other woman's honest account. Julie explains that it was important for her not to wait too long for a place. The criteria for signing up to the place she did was therefore based on location and the fact that she knew that some of her colleagues are satisfied with having their children which calmed her in her decision.

When asking the other members of the group if they had visited any of the places before signing up, Malou another first time mother in the group, explained that she had visited three places before signing up. She was seeking what she referred to as the right feeling to base her choice on. A feeling that could only appear when visiting different places. This "right feeling" became something the group continuously refers back to when talking about the importance of visiting places before deciding on one. The talk about the "right feeling" as determining their choice seemed to be what constituted the social rule in this group of what a good mother would base her choice on. The combination of first time mother and at the same time new to the already established mother group made it clear that Julie did not know how to consume her way through the transitions (The Voice Group, 2008) in relation to childcare. During the focus group, Julie seemed to notice this social rule and tried to approach the group by a slight modification of her "attitudes, perceptions and feelings" (Schenk and Holman, 1980, p.611) when asked about feelings related to motherhood. She seemed to start including the group in her accounts, looking at them and not only the researcher when speaking. After having described her surprise of all the love one can have for another human, she took up the subject of visiting childcare centres before making a choice.

*Julie: Well, I think, for example just with the childcare centre where I said; " I was not out visiting any." But it's also because I say ... I do not know what to look for. If I had just some experience. If I had some... anything, like now I know from another childcare centre that this was great. This was bad, it is then I might feel; "yaa this is important for me", but as a first time mother then I think that there are actually many things which are actually very important, which you are just not aware about. You will have to go through it yourself and learn yourself. This is something I find really really difficult (appendix 1.10.20).*

The above statement including a more open and less protective facial expression gave Julie a chance to become part of the group. She indirectly made an excuse for her social "faux pas" due to lack of experience and at the same time appealed to the others' understanding and acceptance. Having made it clear earlier that she had already made her choice based on location she developed her answer to include her concern for the childcare centre's "sugar politics". Having heard why the others found it important to visit a place before making a choice, she found out that the appropriate behaviour within this "...context, the specific situation where these symbolic interpretation takes

place...” (Schenk and Holman, 1980, p. 611) is to mention other criteria than just location when explaining why she had chosen the childcare centre she had chosen. She mentioned that she could have looked for the “right feeling”, however she did not (appendix 1.10.21). During the session Julie developed the reason for having chosen as she did and made her decision consistent, with the values she had now observed indicates the ideal mother. Namely considering the child over own needs;

*Julie: But I will say that, for example the fact that we just chose the one; ““Kiddie Cloud””. It was also because she shouldn’t spend too much time in the childcare and I would be able to pick her up immediately after work, which was certainly the idea (appendix 1.10.22).*

That the “right feeling” became the norm in the group indicating good motherhood was also seen in how the other members of the groups started to adopt the term, when having to describe what to look for when choosing a childcare centre. Later on during the interview also Julie had adopted the term “the right feeling” as an indicator for the right choice. When asked if the cost of childcare could influence her choice she said;

*Julie: Well it depends on how much more. Because if I had “the right feeling” and it was about 1,000 DKK more a month, then I wouldn’t say that cost would be a vital factor...(appendix 1.10.23)*

However the focus group session made her reflect about her own process. While the others explained why they found it important to visit a place before choosing she was no longer nodding, but instead looking thoughtful or starting to focus her attention on the babies next to her as if she indirectly wanted to withdraw from an unpleasant situation. The focus group seemed to have made her doubt if she had approached choosing a childcare the correct way. As an attempt to meet the social rules of the group, she ended up asking the others if she still had time to visit the place and in case change her mind. This was asked with a careful smile and a more open and welcoming facial expression. Isabella helped her “save the feelings and the face” (Goffman, 1968, p.10) telling her that only some childcare centres have a long waiting list and she could therefore still pay the place a visit and change her mind. In other words, it was not too late for her to do what the ideal mother would have done.

*Julie: I see but I still have time. There is no waiting list so...*

*Isabella: Yes yes. There are of cause some childcare centres with waiting list, but I think so.*

*Julie: Yes*

*Isabella: That you have time to change it right. But as I have said before, I have been more satisfied with childcare centres in Espergærde (appendix 1.10.24).*

On the other hand Isabella still needed to remind her, that she herself had been more satisfied with childcare centres in Espergærde. The fact that she needed to say this can also be a way for her to withdraw from any thought responsibility in case that Julie was not satisfied with her choice after having visited the place.

### ***Social environment, word of mouth and motherhood***

Whether the social environment plays a factor in their choice was another recurring theme during the focus groups. The social environment did not only constitute the mother group, but other mothers they knew. As Sanne explained, experience from people that the mothers felt had the same values as them was the ones to give the most reliable and comforting recommendations.

*Sanne: but it's nice to know that there are others who have good experience with the place that's for sure because ... it's people who you compare yourself with and which seems to have some reasonable opinions and uh () ... and if they think it's a good place then it could hardly be wrong I think (appendix 1.10.25).*

Her statement also shows that mothers compare themselves with other mothers and those who for them represent the ideal mother are those most highly to affect their decision.

Both negative and positive WOM seemed to flow from other streams than purely the mother group. Other mothers in their social environment seemed keen to share their own experience and advice. Not only were they able to impact the final decision with recommendations and warnings, but they also knew how first time mothers should actually evaluate the different alternatives. Sanne, a mother of two had learned how to evaluate different childcare centres from “...verbal instructions from others” (Reynolds, 2001 in Heisler & Ellis, 2008). She said that it was only by advice from another, that she understood the importance of visiting the place before making a choice. Something she had not even thought of before.

*Sanne:.. so his uh () sister has uh uh have had children for many years so it was her who said ; "Oh how can you just enrol him to any childcare centre you haven't even visited". This I had really not thought about. The fact that this is how it was (appendix 1.10.26).*

The other mother had managed to make her feel bad about the way; she at first wanted to approach the childcare decision. The ideal mother would make choosing the right place a priority. This advice

combined with the knowledge gained from her first child had changed her approach in choosing a childcare centre. Now understanding the importance of visiting the place before deciding on it.

*Sanne: ... this time I could not imagine choosing a place without visiting it first, because you now see that there is so much difference between childcare centres when you actually pay them a visit and that really means a lot. They have to spend many hours there every day right and for several years. One would prefer not to have too many changes when they are so small. () Well, then you can always-just take them out and enrol them in another childcare centre, but that isn't a very satisfactory way either right. Then rather hit it right from the start. It would be a pity not to (appendix 1.10.27).*

### ***The importance of positive WOM***

Especially when new to the different alternatives other people's opinion was of great importance. First time mothers and mothers who had moved to Elsinore and therefore had to look for another childcare centre seemed to lay the same importance on other people's recommendations. As the military personnel in the study by Bansal & Voyer (2000) they seemed more inclined to ask for other people's recommendation entering this new domain.

Andrea, a first-time mother, had moved to Elsinore during her pregnancy. She explained that she did some pre-research before moving to Elsinore by asking for recommendations from a colleague living in town and having children in childcare centres (appendix 1.10.28). Another mother of two remembered how this was important to her with her first child where she had just moved to Elsinore (appendix 1.10.29).

Johanne, a first time mother, revealed that she was directly influenced by another in the mother group who had talked very highly about a particular place. Being a first time mother she did not know anything about childcare centres and had not really shown an interest in it before having her own child.

*Johanne: () I heard about "Grandma's house" from Camilla who talked a lot about the place, while I did not know anything about anything. It has never interested me before I got a baby myself (appendix 1.10.30).*

With her statement Johanne revealed another important issue. As for most other products and services it is not something that women even think about before the need for it arises. However when the need arise for this particular service they are in a transitional stage trying to cope in this

new role as a mother. Childcare centres are therefore not the only new product/service related to the new-born child that these women will have to know and form an opinion about. Other people's opinion and experience can therefore be a comforting factor in their choice as well as guide them in their search for the correct childcare centre.

### ***Positive WOM- do not necessarily leads to action***

The groups spoke also of childcare centres that they had heard very positively about. This positive WOM did not always lead to action as seen with the negative WOM. Mothers would avoid enrolling their child in the ones that the mother group talked negatively about, however they would not necessarily enrol their children in the one everyone spoke positively about. All of the focus groups talked very positively about "Grandma's House", though only one out of the 15 interviewed had actually enrolled her child in it. Two others might have neglected it purely due to financial reasons, however the rest had not even included it in their consideration set maybe due to location.

In one group the discussion of childcare was very influenced by the talk about the right feeling. In this group the ideal mother would feel what would be the right decision for her. Recommendations and warnings were of importance, but did not overrule the feeling that they could only feel themselves when visiting a place. WOM, they acknowledged, was something very common in relation to childcare, however so many different opinions fluctuated that counting on oneself would still be the best.

*Isabella: but I can see that there are many who ask for advice in those groups. Those "Elsinore groups" and "Love Elsinore" and what else they are called (on Facebook). Many people often ask; what about this childcare centre or something right. What do think of it? There you can see that people have very different opinions, so I don't think asking would help anyone. You have to go and see them yourself and feel it yourself (appendix 1.10.31).*

This statement again highlights the dominating view in the groups; namely that the ideal mother would know best and that importance should not be placed on other people's opinion. However none of the participants could deny being influenced by WOM and especially negative WOM had a great impact on their decision.

### ***The impact of negative WOM***

People working in childcare centres in town seemed to be an influential source of insider information. However, negative WOM seemed to have the greatest impact in all three groups, automatically leading to a change in decision. None would enrol their children in a place that they

had heard negatively about even if the location of the place would be better for them (appendix 1.10.37). Each group had a place that they had heard very badly about. The social environment could warn about factors not obvious when visiting a place.

*Sanne: Well () yes of course you can't () see it all on during a 15 minutes visit to the place. There might be something with the management or something (appendix 1.10.32).*

Negative WOM was reinforced within the group. Visiting centres that a member in the mother group disliked seemed to be an influential factor in their own impression of the place. This was particular apparent in two of the groups who directly mentioned the name of the place that they had heard negatively about and in this case the mother group seemed to be a great influential factor for mothers, not to choose this particular place. Other mothers would confirm the same facts if another mother had heard negative things about a certain childcare reinforcing the negative WOM and making this particular place the worst place a mother could choose. This negative WOM did not seem founded in anything else, but rumours. Often they would not know anyone directly, who had told them negative things about a place, but heard it from someone who knew someone.

*Philipa: ..I remember that I know a mother who took her child out. At the same time I know another mother who has chosen to move ... remove her child from this childcare centre ... However, I do not know anyone close to me having children in that place (appendix 1.10.33).*

However the impact of these rumours seemed very strong and appeared to contribute to a change of decision.

*Andrea: but another one from our mother group she should had had her child in that childcare centre and changed it to the one which I have chosen, also because she had heard something from her mother right? (appendix 1.10.34).*

The above statement clearly illustrates the impact of negative WOM. The mother has rejected the one she had heard negatively about and instead chosen the same place as another one from the mother group. While this woman was not present at the focus group session, her reasoning for having chosen this particular childcare centre instead was not explored.

The previous findings had revealed that all 3 groups viewed the ideal mother as someone who knew best and someone who would base her decision on her own feelings rather than others' thoughts and opinions. The ideal mother would therefore still make her own impression of the place by either visiting or walking by the place. However the negative WOM influenced their expectations of the

place and the findings revealed that often mothers would just reconfirm the rumours from their own point of view.

*Johanne: So Bente said something about the place having a very high ceiling and all I can see when I walk by ““Kiddie Cloud”” um then I see ... that it does not look particularly interesting, so I rejected this one (appendix 1.10.35).*

Johanne's statement showed that her own impression already carried the negative impression she had been told about the place. A mother who had heard negative things about a place seemed to seek confirmation about this negative impression and would lead her to her own negative opinion about the place to share with others in her social environment, making a negative rumour very difficult to fight for the childcare centres to overcome.

### ***The importance of social relationships***

If the mothers were more concerned about the social relationships and identities that came with the choice of a certain childcare, than its actual utilities (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988 cited in Elliot, 2011, Cova & Cova, 2002) were seen especially in two of the groups, that seemed to have decided on a favourite childcare that they all spoke highly about. One group said that they had talked about enrolling all the children in one place, however the reality after maternity leave also needed to be taken into consideration and this particular place were not the best solution for all mothers. Nevertheless two of the mothers seemed very influenced by each other. When one of them was asked about her impression of the place, they complimented each other with positive words about the place.

*Camilla: precisely... it is also part of it or my choice is really based on the fact that it was a childcare centre with a nature profile.*

*Johanne: yes large playground like “Grandma's House”.*

*Camilla: Yes large playground, out a lot and here “Grandma's House” was just perfect (appendix 1.10.36).*

This group seemed to be constructed by strong women who knew the task of staging themselves very well with everyone eager to play their own role during the focus group interview. However, these two women seemed to connect to each other more strongly, playing almost one role together within the group. They had met each other in a pre-birth course and were after the birth of their

children, happy to find out that they were now in the same mother group. Having the same difficulties with breastfeeding the first few months of motherhood had made the women connect and create their special bond within the group. The group seemed very dynamic, where each individual had a strong need to voice out their opinion, however these two women seemed so connected that they almost portrayed only one person during the focus group and it was clear that they were persuaded by each other of the positive values of the childcare centre that they both favoured.

The social relationships that came with the choice of the childcare also seemed very important in another group. The social relationships were not necessarily from within the mother group. Ebba the eldest in the group was more concerned with the social relationships outside of the group.

*Ebba:() and “The Gingerbread House” is definitely the best place, but I didn’t chose it because someone I know the have another one, so I chose that one also because it 's located closer to where I live (appendix 1.10.37).*

Location was of importance to her, but her reasoning was still based on where she knew others were satisfied with having their children. The fact that she knew others that could support her in the choice with the best location enabled her to sustain the role of the mother who wanted the best for her child and at the same time choose a place that fitted her actual mother identity the best. However, if the place somehow did not live up to her expectations she would move her child to the other place that the mother group talked very positively about.

*Ebba: Well I can also () So if it turns out for one reason or another that there is something I dislike with the place, then I will enrol my child in the same place as the others in “The Gingerbread house” (appendix 1.10.38).*

Malou, a first time mother who during the focus group had laid importance on the right feeling when choosing a place also reveals that the talk in the mother group had firstly influenced her in her decision-making.

*Malou : I was so keen from Ebba ... .Who else was it who had chosen...*

*? : Tilde?*

*Malou: That she should enrol in ““Smiles Childcare”.*

*Malou: I was a little upset by my husband because he still wanted to pay “Babes n\* Tots” a visit, because there was ... we should not enrol he there. I had already decided it, but uh then we visited*

*“Smiles Childcare” and I could just feel ... it was not ... it just didn’t feel right... I mean for us (appendix 1.10.39).*

The above statements leave the impression that her final choice was based on “the right feeling”. The place recommended by two others in the mother group did not give her “the right feeling”, but during the interview she revealed that her husband had attended “Babes n\* Tots” when he himself was a child. This could have made him a very influential and important source and making his recommendations weigh more than the two others’. Another reason could be the location of the place that was closer to their home than the place recommended by the other mothers in the group. However, this subject was not further investigated in the empirical findings. Relating the final choice with “the right feeling” corresponded more to the role she had started playing out during the focus group and was a way for her to express her ideal mother identity.

### ***The decision-making process***

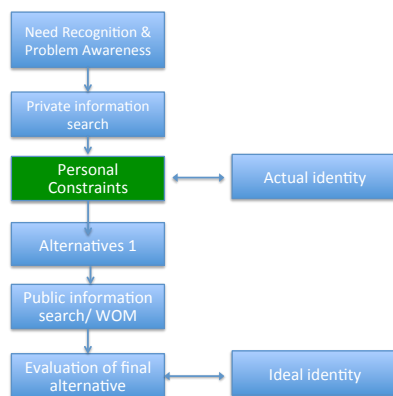
For most of the mothers other people’s recommendations and visiting different places seemed to play a major role in their decision-making process. However, certain constraints also had a major impact on their final decision. The main constraints were economy, location and opening hours, factors that limited what the women perceived as choice opportunities. It seemed, as the first step, for many were to look at childcare centres within a certain geographic area found through a search on Google. Here they would look into the different childcare centres’ websites and then again rule out the centres that could not be in their final consideration set due to personal constraints. Bente revealed that she had looked at the website of a private childcare centre, but rejected it due to her economy. She also stated that due to her status as a single mother, she had been forced to look into the opening hours of the childcare centre, leaving her only with the possibility of choosing a public childcare centre with long opening hours.

*Bente: So I was offered a place in “Happy Children’s House” despite the fact that I had not wanted it, and it has some opening hours I can’t use (appendix 1.10.40).*

In this particular mother group the negative WOM was concentrated on a public childcare centre with long opening hours, again limiting her choice. However, when asked directly she argued for her final choice basing it on values that corresponded to the perfect and ideal mother identity of a mother that would choose a place according to its values.

*Bente: But the reason I chose “The Sunflower House”, I was out visiting so many centres and because I work in a childcare centres myself, I have many ideas about how I think it should be, and it was the one who matched my ideas best (appendix 1.10.41).*

The decision-making process in relation to childcare seemed to include both the mothers' actual and ideal identity. However while the mothers' actual mother identity differs, the way they approach the decision-making process in relation to childcare seemed to differ. For most of the mothers the first steps of the decision-making process seemed to be dominated by the mothers' actual identity. Her search for information was done in a private sphere, where only alternatives that could fulfil the mothers' actual need were taken into consideration.



#### Authors own model

When these alternatives (alternative 1) had been found the mother would continue her search for the perfect childcare in a more public sphere including visiting different childcare centres and asking for information from her social environment. Recommendations and warnings from her social environment combined with her impression of the different childcare centres during the visit would then enable her to make her final choice. The above model only shows what seemed to be the most common approach in the groups interviewed. Within the groups, some mothers began their information search by listening to others' opinions, some had more personal constraints than others and the process itself seemed to differ according to the mothers' actual mother identity. However, the women's ideal mother identity was always included when evaluating the alternatives in public. This also showed that the women's self-concept offered an important perspective to the understanding of how they felt that they approached the information search. The wording used in their answers reflected the personality they wanted the group to see. Here, self confidence and negotiation skills during the information search process was important elements to impress the "audience" (Onkvisit & Shaw 1987).

### ***Self-confidence and negotiation skills***

Onkvisit & Shaw (1987) states that it is not always about the actual product, but also for the consumer to portray self-confidence and negotiation skills during the information search process... to impress the "audience". In this the more experienced mothers knew how to perform their role. Anne described herself as a person who based her decision on facts indicating that the entire search for the right childcare needed to correspond for her need to control. By visiting the place before making her choice she would know how things were.

*Anne: Oh, I 've always been like that. I must be in control of it all and know how things are and things like that. So I could not imagine choosing without having visited the place first (appendix 1.10.42).*

More experienced mothers also portrayed more self-confidence and knowledge regarding the important skills to use in the information search process. They seemed proud of it and somehow knew that this was a way to impress the audience of the less experienced mothers.

*Isabella:... and I have also tried quite a few. Childcare centres. I have tried "The Playhouse" in Espergærde and then I have also tried "The Happy Forest" in Elsinore, so I know how to compare. I mean I am able to compare. See what there is and there is not. What you care about and not, because I have tried quite a few right (smiles) (appendix 1.10.43).*

The smile and the tone of voice made Isabella's explanation seem less bragging. As if she knew that this was said to impress the audience. With a smiling tone she ensured that this did not put the audience off and made her stay within the terms of social norms existing in this group, that no mother is perfect and knows how to do everything thing right.

### ***Evaluation of childcare centres***

From the very first question asked in the focus groups where the participants were asked to mention different types of childcare centres that they knew were provided in Elsinore it was obvious that most of them knew that they had a wide choice to consume. Again only the very branded childcare centres such as "Grandma's House" and a childcare centre inspired by the pedagogical teaching from Rudolf Steiner would be a choice made deliberately to send an intended message. Elliott, Richard and Wattanasuwan, Kritsadarat (2015) states; "All voluntary consumption carries, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings; if the consumer has choices to consume, he or she will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings" (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 2015, p.134) All the mothers had choices to consume. Some mothers had less choice than others due to financial reasons or personal reasons. These important factors sometimes prevented the mother to

choose the childcare centre that she knew conveyed the symbolic meaning she really wanted. Nevertheless they all knew how to modify the reason for their final choice in order to make it correspond to their ideal identity as a mother and still be able to send the correct message when asked directly about reasons for their choice.

Many mothers were drawn to specific childcare centres showing that they had committed staff. One of the participants indicated that marketing initiatives such as distributing cookies with the place name was an indicator of this commitment. The fact that parents having children in the place spoke highly about it and used Facebook as a communication channel had affected her impression which she carried on to her own mother group. Values of importance that got repeated in all focus groups were the feeling of commitment on behalf of the staff. Concern, care and security were the stated values that the mothers said were important in their choice of childcare. Goffman (1967) states “when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” (Goffman, 1967,p. 23). The culture in society expects these kinds of values to be mentioned when a mother is asked what she emphasizes when evaluating the different types of childcare. However, these types of information can be difficult to acquire before actually enrolling the child in a childcare centre and mothers therefore need to ask for other peoples’ experience and/or rely on what a 15 minutes visit in the childcare will portray.

Malou, a first time mother, appeared more concerned about having to leave her child with strangers. She had considered if it would be possible with the option of “own care taking”, but had later rejected the idea. She was the one who had firstly introduced the term “the right feeling” to the group. This feeling was almost described as if finding the one and only.

*Malou: It was just like..., you just know it feels good. That this is the right place. That it is the right one for you. You can feel that in this place it is ok for you to enrol our child. ...It's just when you have found the right childcare centre then you just know it (appendix 1.10.45).*

It almost seemed that she had romanticised the choice of childcare. She did not highlight the utilitarian need it should fulfil, but the romantic dream of the right place that it should correspond to. This also indicated that even though this was not always the case, at least some mothers needed to stay with the image of childcare being a “paradise” for the child, more than a service for the mother to attend her job.

Practical reasons seemed to overshadow the symbolic meaning in the mothers' choice of childcare. Instead of sending a message with the choice of childcare it seemed apparent that many had a need to justify their choice with more than practical reasons. When asked directly, the women would state values and intimacy as reasons for their choice. However, indirectly many of the mothers revealed more practical reasons such as economy, location and opening hours. The argumentation for the choice they had already made was founded in the social image they wanted the group and the researcher to perceive of them. No mother wanted to give the impression that they were not concerned with giving their child the very best. If the type of childcare chosen did not clearly represent the identity she wanted to convey, her argumentation for her choice would.

### ***The lack of experience***

Most of the first-time mothers indirectly indicated that they perceived the choice process as complex. Not knowing how to approach the task of finding the correct childcare. Especially the lack of knowledge on how to evaluate and compare the different alternatives made it difficult for them to identify the best option and "...approach child care from a consumer viewpoint" (Fuqua, Robert W and Labensohn, Dorothy, 2015 p. 295). Experience seemed to be what most of the mothers found to be the best type of knowledge in relation to evaluating childcare centres.

*Julie: If I just had some experience. If I had just had anything. Like now I know from another childcare centre that this was great or bad it is then I would feel; "Aaa this is something I care about", but as a first-time mother then I think that there are many things which are actually very important and you just do not know. Things you will have to go through and learn by yourself. That is something I find really hard (appendix 1.10.46).*

*Fiona : ... yes what should you really focus on... this feeling I can easily relate to. What is good and what is bad. What do you actually ought to know (appendix 1.10.47).*

However, first time mothers who themselves worked in a childcare centre portrayed the same knowledge as the experienced mothers, knowing what to look for and what they found important.

*Bente: Well I was very influenced by the fact that I work in a childcare centre my self ... however I was really hysterical with what they had and I were out to visit five childcare centres when she was four weeks old because I wanted to see what I could be offered and here I was very critical of what values I emphasized on (appendix 1.10.48).*

Bente's professional experience provided her with useful knowledge regarding the important skills to use in the information search process.

### ***The influence of the mothers' social environment on their preferences for certain type of childcare centres***

The empirical findings showed that many of the mothers used their social environment to guide them in choosing the right place through WOM. It was in the mother group that the women either heard about WOM or were themselves initiators of WOM in relation to childcare. This WOM highly influenced the mothers' preferences and priorities. The mothers' social environment were not constituted by their mother group alone, but also included the father, other relatives, friends and colleagues. Those who shared the same values or values that the mothers admired, were most likely to affect their decision. Most expressed that the father only played a minor role in their decision-making. The mothers were the ones taking the initiative for the information search and it often seemed like they were also the ones with the final word regarding the decision. The mother group displayed a great impact in relation to especially negative WOM, where none would actually chose a childcare centre that the mother group spoke negatively about. The different points of view from the mother's social environment influenced her own interpretation of the different childcare centres and different types of childcare. However other mothers' recommendations of certain childcare centres only contributed to the mothers' ideas of which values were of importance in her final choice. Practicalities and the mother's ideal identity showed to be an even greater contributor to the mothers' preferences and priorities of different childcare centres.

## **4.3 Symbolic Consumption of Childcare Centres**

### ***Portraying the ideal identity***

The focus interviews did not seem to carry any obvious link between women's perception of their own role as mothers and their final choice of childcare. One group actually stated that they did not perceive any connection between any ideal mother identity and the choice of childcare centre.

*Britt: Not necessarily. Not necessarily. Actually, I don't see any correlation between the perfect mother and childcare. Because I think the perfect mother, I mean does she really exist?*

*Ida: What do you think (addressing the others in the group)? Would the perfect mother choose a public pre-k?*

*Pernille: She could*

*Stephanie: If only she gives her child love and care. If she has to, then she would do it (read: choose a public pre-k).*

*Britt: I do not think that a perfect mother has something to do with the choice of childcare centre at all! (Appendix 1.10.49)*

Regardless of the above statement this group were still able to pair the different mother types with different types of childcare centres during the exercise. This group also had a clear idea of the mother type who would choose a private option, namely the mother who wanted the very best for her child. This could indicate that mothers are not aware of the message they are sending with their choice in the beginning of the decision making process and only come to understand this when they have to reflect over the choice already made.

Mothers did not deliberately use their choice of childcare as props to strengthen their performance, but their argumentation for having chosen the one they had, helped them to portray the image they wanted and guide the others in the interpretation of their situational self (Schenk and Holman, 1980). Not all the mothers had chosen the brand or the type of childcare that they believed communicated the same as their desired self, however their reasoning for their choice consistently transformed and adapted to fit into the specific situation (Schenk and Holman, 1980). While the “self-concept/product image congruence theory” (Solomon et al., 2002 p. 195) states that consumers choose products that will enhance their self-concept, empirical findings for this thesis showed mixed result. Some mothers seemed to choose a childcare centre that enhanced their self-concept as mothers. Most of the other mothers had heard positively about this childcare centre with a clear thematically profile. This thematical profile enabled this mother to adapt the values of the childcare centre and directly communicate this meaning to her social environment. As illustrated with below conversation between Johanne and Camilla, a childcare centre with a clear thematical focus also seemed to indicate that the mother had made a choice with the child in focus. The fact that Johanne would be willing to spend extra time in reaching this specific childcare contributed to her construction of the ideal mother.

*Johanne: Yes. I'd rather walk to “Grandma’s House”, which is 2 km further away...*

*Camilla: Yes*

*Johanne: than that I will go to “Kiddie Cloud”. He must attend a good childcare centre (appendix 1.10.50)*

Mothers, who had chosen a childcare according to more basic functional criteria such as opening hours and location, would only indicate this indirectly. Their reasoning for their choice would still be founded in values enhancing their self-concept. Often these values were of more general and less

transparent nature such as attention and care from the staff. It seemed clear that the socially constructed idea of the ideal mother would be someone who would choose what would be best for her child over what would be best for her. Reasoning for their choice was therefore founded in considerations for their child. Using the term of Goffman (1967) they adopted their “face” to the situation. The mother had attached strong feelings to this “face” and need to sustain it or establish an even better (Goffmann, 1967) also in a mother group that should portray an environment of confidence and openness. Regardless of the real reasons behind the choice of childcare, the mother representing her social identity would highlight values corresponding to the norm in society. None seemed to deliberately want to deceive their audience, but with a mask portraying honesty they persuaded their social environment and maybe even themselves that the choice was based on more than the basic functional values of the childcare centre. This supported their self-concept and their construction of their ideal mother identity. Saving their “face” within the group (Goffman, 1967), where the topic of childcare was being discussed.

Different types of self-concept, also leads to different types of behavioural motives and consequently different types of self-congruity (Sirgy and Su, 2000). In other words many of the mothers may have chosen a childcare centre according to their actual self however, when reflecting over their choice in a social setting they would highlight values according to their ideal self. Another explanation could also be that people do not respond in the same way toward the same product (Sirgy, 1982). The receiver will interpret the product from their point of view and therefore not necessarily the way it was intended. Some believed day care to be for first time mothers who felt insecure about enrolling their child in a big childcare. Some believed it would be more flexible and others that it would not. While the symbolic meaning that a product conveys is mostly based on the receiver’s interpretation (Jenkins, 1996; Arvidsson 2001; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998) the sender needs to make sure that the receiver understands the symbolic meaning the way it was intended to and this is best done by explicitly explaining why the values of the chosen childcare centre were of importance in her choice.

### ***The ideal mother would know best***

Most of the mothers denied being influenced by what was said by other people when asked directly. The ideal mother would know instinctively what would be best for her child. People’s recommendations could reassure the mother of her choice or make her change her mind, but this contradicted the cultural norm of mothers who knew their children best and therefore also ought to

know which childcare centre would be the best for their child. The “right feeling” was the most important indicator for the right choice. Fiona’s reflection showed the feeling of ambiguity related to the choice, when she was asked if she also found other people’s recommendation of importance.

*Fiona: No, not if I have “the right feeling” it is not, but it 's always nice that there aren't others who are not pleased with having their children there and say some awful things about the places () . But I do not really care about it if I myself have “the right feeling” about the place (appendix 1.10.51).*

However asked more indirectly Fiona acknowledged that especially for day care other people’s opinion and experience was of importance (appendix 1.10.52). And later on when asked in another way if WOM was of importance, she said when referring to her own choice;

*Fiona: I also did it the first time. () I trusted someone I knew who had her own child in this day care right (appendix 1.10.53).*

The different answers showed that the right thing to say was that their choice was based on the right feeling, however maybe without the mothers’ knowledge WOM had a great impact on their decision and for some this was also okay. One mother directly compared it to any other product that you cannot touch and feel for example shopping online. Comparing the search of childcare with any other product bought on the Internet revealed the complexity in evaluating a service without experience.

*Laura: I'll damn say I actually didn't spent time visiting all possible places, but I heard about other people's experiences. The same as when I purchase a product online, then I read reviews of it, right (appendix 1.10.54).*

For this mother who was the eldest in the group and one that seemed to appear confident both as a person and in her role as a mother compared childcare with any other product enabling her to stage herself as a confident mother with a rational more than emotional approach to the decision.

### ***Public versus private option***

The empirical findings showed mixed result for a clear distinction between the private and the public market. One private childcare centre (“Grandma’s House”) was repeated in all of the groups indicating a clear brand image for this specific place. Especially in one group this seemed as a very popular place that the ideal mother would chose for her child. This particular focus group made a clear distinction between private and public childcare centres. In this group, the ideal mother would choose the very best option for their child, which would be a private option. They felt that the private market offered more staff per child and therefore would be better able to focus on their child

than any public option. As for “Grandma’s House”, that was spoken very highly about during all of the focus group sessions, the marketing done by them like handing out home backed cookies represented an eagerness from the staff of really wanting their job. The fact that the staff seemed so engaged was for many an indicator of a good place. It was clear that most of them thought that the ideal childcare would be a private option, something also the ideal mother would choose if she could. Only one of the mothers had chosen a public option. Eventhough having stated earlier on in the interview that this was the only option available to her due to financial reasons, she repeatedly argued for her choice. She explained that regardless of her financial situation her first priority had been a public childcare, while she herself works in one and believes that if things should change in the public childcare centres, mothers need to choose these. Some of the others had spoken very highly about a private childcare branding themselves with having many outdoor activities. During her argumentation for her choice of the public childcare she reflected on why their values are not so important to her basing it on her professional view.

*Bente: ... and I placed great emphasis on small rooms and time for involvement and many adults, meaning good rating (nomeninger) and an outdoor life is also important, but at the same time an outdoor life in my head is not particularly important in a childcare centre. I work myself in a childcare centre and a child at that age cannot handle to be outside on a playground for 6 hours a day (appendix 1.10.55).*

Another one from the group explained that according to her the private options provide more staff per child, which is something she found very important. Here again Bente felt the need to defend her choice of public childcare.

*Bente: It really depends on the place. “The Sunflower House” have 4 adults taking care of 11 children in one room and 3 adults taking care of 11 children in the other.*

*Mette: Are you completely sure of this?*

*Bente: yes (appendix 1.10.56)*

The fact that she repeatedly defended her choice could lead to the impression that she is not fully satisfied with her choice. However she seemed to have faced the reality of being alone with her child knowing what she had to work with financially and in her time management. The fact that she herself worked in a childcare might have made her seem stronger. She knew her argumentations very well and could back it up with experience and a professional point of view. However the above conversation is also a conversation between two strong women, where neither of them were ready

to loose face. They did not seek a common understanding, but each wanting to defend their choice with the best argument.

The other two focus groups did not seem to make the same distinction between private and public childcare centres in their own choice. One had chosen a private option because her wanted public option had a too long waiting list and she preferred to enrol her children in a small place. In another group one was unsure about whether the place was private or public, but were told by the others that it had recently become private. The exercise though showed that many had a clear image of the mother type choosing a private option for her child. Many stated that a career mum would chose a private option which especially in the group where only one had chosen a public option, lead to some discussion. Many in the group believed that people concerned about their child's needs, the ideal mother, would consider private and again those who would be concerned about their child's needs would be financially well-off and well educated.

*Mette: Career mother with one child. Isn't it just any ordinary childcare centre? The one closest to? Or ...*

*Camilla: I really think this is something she cares about. Not to say that you don't care about if you chose a public childcare centre (appendix 1.10.57).*

This idea of a well educated and financially well off mother choosing the private option seemed to annoy the mother who had chosen a public option. She might have felt that with this definition she would automatically be put in a category that did not correspond to her own definition of herself as a mother nor the type of mother that she wanted the others to perceive of her.

*Johanne: No it is also something private ...career mother. I just think that*

*Bente: Fine. Though the children we have in my childcare centre, they are damn it very resourceful families. There are many families who are very highly educated and earn big time! I mean they are career families ... Both mother and father. And it is an ordinary childcare centre.*

*Johanne: But how many private childcare centres are located in Fredensborg? Are there many*

*Bente: There are a few (appendix 1.10.58)*

The above conversation, can in its written form, almost seem as an argument. However it appeared to the researcher to be more of an exchange of views between two women with strong views on the subject. An earlier discussion during the focus group indicated that they had talked about the choice of childcare before the focus group and that the private option, "Grandma's House" had been

something the woman who had chosen the public option were interested in. Johanne broke the unwritten rules of the social interaction by revealing that the woman out of the context of a focus group had said that she would have chosen “Grandma’s House” if cost would not have been an issue. Johanne indirectly revealed that Bente played a role that did not correspond to the role she normally played when a researcher was not part of the audience.

*Johanne: Yes I was just wondering if now “Grandma’s House” ... if you also could receive the same reimbursement in a private childcare then you would of course also have chosen it ... it was just what we have talked about before.*

*Bente: Well maybe, but I have not even been visiting it. I wasn’t at all, because already when I read about the options for reimbursement this option was excluded (appendix 1.10.59).*

In the stage of the focus group she was not ready to reveal the fact that “Grandma’s House” might have been her favourite option. Indirectly she revealed that she had looked into it and gone through their website. When reading their website she found out that this option would be more expensive to her. However, during the focus group she was not ready to walk out of her role and wanted the researcher as well as the others in the group to understand that she was satisfied with her final choice. The subject was not further developed and Johanne’s attempt to “tire off the mask” was not supported by the other members of the group. Bente could continue her play, but knew then, that she needed further argumentation for her final choice to support her in her role and convince the audience of its authenticity.

### ***Mother type and type of childcare centres***

The exercise of paring different mother types with different types of childcare was used to see if the mothers could make distinctions between the different types of childcare. None of the groups stated that this could not be done indicating that all types of childcare carried a symbolic meaning and had attached a certain mother identity to them. No specific names of different childcare centres were mentioned, making the exercise focused only on type of childcare centres and not any specific childcare centres. The exact symbolic meaning that certain childcare centres carry for the mothers could therefore not be drawn to the exercise alone, but more from the contribution to the discussion. The findings from the exercise showed that especially “own care taking” had a specific image attached to it. All groups indicated that the ecological mother would choose “own care taking”. She would be the type, who would focus on her children over anything else. This type of mother, putting the children over anything else, had seemed to be the ideal mother type for many in the groups, however no one had “own care taking” as a dream option. Only one of the interviewees had

chosen this option. She said her choice was based on a financial concern where this option would be more financially beneficial for the family than using a childcare centre.

Himmelweit & Sigala (2002) found that more protective mothers did not in many cases trust the care of their child to any one other than relatives (Himmelweit & Sigala, 2002). However, empirical findings from this study did not confirm this. Taking care of their own child or leaving it with relatives did not seem an obvious option for even those mothers who seemed more protective. This might be explained by culture, whereas childcare centres in Denmark are perceived as a natural step in children's lives before attending school. Many believed that a more protective and insecure mother would prefer a smaller place such as day care with only few other children. However, this idea was not confirmed by the participants' actual choice. Only two had chosen day care as an option. They were both mothers of two and the empirical findings did not reveal if their choice with their first child were based on protectiveness and insecurity. However, they had chosen the same day care for their second child as their first child were enrolled in. Not because of convenience of having two children in the same place (both their eldest were about to enrol in kindergarten), but because they were very satisfied with this option and had confidence in the women taking care of their child. The empirical findings showed that it was widely believed that more protective mothers would base their choice on a lack of trust confirming the findings by Himmelweit & Sigala (2002). Day care was discussed as an option chosen due to insecurity with the world of childcare.

*Isabella: I think that often it is the first-time mother who chooses day care because this is a small place. There are not so many children there. There may be 4-5 children maximum right. It is a small place and that is something that one sometimes appreciates as a first-time mother. The fact, that it is a small place (appendix 1.10.60).*

Even though this belief reflected in the above statement seemed shared in the groups, the ones that had chosen day care were neither first-time mothers or seemed to correspond to the image of an insecure mother. This can be explained by the fact that they had enrolled their first child in day care and chose the same option for their second child because they were content with the choice. It can also be due to the fact that this image was not really shared. Those believing that first time insecure mothers would choose day care had not chosen the option themselves. It was not simply part of their consideration set at the time when having to make their choice.

*Andrea: Then there is also day care, but I have not look into it, but there must be ...(appendix 1.10.61)*

*Isabella: ... but when I was a first-time mother I didn't think about day care as an option. I didn't take it into consideration at all. I just thought about crèche (appendix 1.10.62).*

Day care could not provide the parents with the need for control needing to have 100 % confident in one person. They found the choice of day care more vulnerable where it was of great importance that they could really trust the caretaker.

*Andrea: We had not even considered it. We thought about it when we had signed her up for the waiting list that we had not considered day care, but I also think the fact that you leave your child with only one woman*

*Anne: makes it is very vulnerable*

*Andrea: So it's really hit it right or not. If you find out after six months that it wasn't (). That she sits there every day drinking whiskey every time the kids take a nap right? (appendix 1.10.63).*

Andrea said this it with a smile and even though her tone of voice in her last sentence could indicate irony, the lack of control with the choice of day care seemed to be the major concern for her. The other types of childcare did not seem to convey any clear symbolic meaning. Their discussion indicated that every type of mother could choose any of the options, however all groups ended up with pairing a mother type to a type of childcare. This might be explained by methodological concerns regarding the introduction or the type of exercise. The participants perceived the exercise as an exercise that should end up with correct answers. Participants who stated that this option could be chosen by any of the mother types were often overheard by the group or ruled out. Even though the two last groups were told that there were no correct answers and that their discussion was what was of interest to the researcher, these groups seemed to be eager to solve the exercise and receive appraisal from the researcher. The results from the exercise indicated the mothers' ideas of what different mother types would base their choice on. Their discussion during the exercise revealed that most considered the option of pre-k as a practical solution that mothers with more than one child or with the idea of having more than one child would consider. This type of childcare was considered practical while parent with more than one child should only attend one place with both children. Another consideration regarding pre-k was to avoid introducing the child to a new place when starting kindergarten. Putting the child in focus for her choice Malou explained that she had chosen this option while it seemed better for the child to start kindergarten in a place already known. The choice itself did not seem to convey any general symbolic meaning, however their reasoning revealed their mother type focusing either on the practicality from the mothers perspective or as for Malou the child's perspective (appendix 1.10.64).

***“Grandma’s House” - the childcare centre conveying the correct meaning***

Especially one childcare centre that was discussed positively in all 3 groups (“Grandma’s House”) seemed to enable the mother who had chosen it to portray her identity (social-symbolism) and/or create an ideal image of her self (self-symbolism) (Elliott, 1997 in Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 2015). This particular childcare centre not only had a clear and well-defined thematical focus, but also the skills to make the mother visiting the place feel that this place “was made exclusively for her” (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987, p.20). This exclusivity was already apparent with the phone conversation when the mother called to book a time for a visit.

*Pernille:.. and also every time you call them () ()*

*Stephanie: Yes*

*Pernille: They are so easy to talk with*

*Stephanie: They give you are feeling of love. Like “we love you” feeling (Appendix 1.10.65).*

Childcare centres which did not have a clear image, a clear profile illustrating what they could provide more than just caretaking, were less transparent for the mothers and did not carry a symbolic meaning for most of them. A childcare centre with a clear image seemed more “conspicuous” (Bourne, 1968 in Schenk and Holman, 1980 p. 611) and “visible” (Robertsen, 1970 Schenk and Holman, 1980 p. 611) to the mothers as consumers of childcare. They knew what they would receive for their money and at the same time the meaning was clear to them and their surrounding environment. They had chosen the place because they wanted the best for their child. A childcare centre with a pedagogical teaching inspired from Rudolf Steiner was one of the childcare centres mentioned with a distinctive image. This image though, was so differentiated from other childcare centres that many perceived it to be a too alternative place only chosen by a certain type of parents that most of them could not identify themselves with.

“Grandma’s House” was perceived conveying the correct meaning for many of the mothers with a thematical focus on outdoor life. It was repeated several times in all of the focus groups as a very nice place and it seemed clear that this particular childcare centre stood out from the rest of the childcare centres provided in Elsinore. This childcare centre had managed to create an image of a place where outdoor activities were valued, something that seemed to appeal to most of the mothers in the focus groups. Their image was clear and the childcare centre seemed to have achieved to

differentiate themselves within the category of childcare centres that otherwise could seem less transparent for the consumer. The symbolic meaning that this place conveyed was a mother more concerned about her child than her own practical needs and a “dream” place for the children to spend many hours of their childhood in.

Onkvisit & Shaw (1987) states that “the consumer wants a product that gives the illusion that it was made exclusively for him, that it matches his personality, and that it responds to his needs” (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987, p.20). When the participants were asked what they valued or disliked when they visited a childcare centre, most of their answers were based on the greeting they had received. Their very first impression, sometimes already starting with a phone conversation when booking a time for the visit, contributed to the mothers’ expectations of the childcare centres. Camilla and Johanne’s account of their first visit reveals the importance of using the right words when introducing the place. Stating that they pay attention to each child individually contributes to the illusion that this place is made exclusively for the mother and her child.

*Camilla: ... and she told much about what they cared about () the children also individually too ... They paid great attention to individual needs if there were any and the food it is ecological most of it and ... (appendix 1.10.66)*

The activities that take place in the childcare centre matches the mothers’ personality and the values she seeks in a childcare centre.

*Johanne: They are working with the old folks home just opposite of them*

*Camilla: Yes*

*Johanne: and they often went to the beach*

*Camilla: and nature (appendix 1.10.67)*

This specific childcare centre not only considered the mothers’ need in their introduction of the place, but also included and engaged the parents in the everyday running of the place, making them an active part of the childcare centre.

*Johanne: and uh uh they had many events and the parents were very much involved in the every day*

*Camilla: Yes*

*Johanne: You also have to contribute with your own work of keeping the place*

*Camilla: And that's ok*

*Johanne: When it is not too often*

*Camilla: and uh they were just sweet and nice and the rooms were very uh ...*

*Johanne: they were very nice and clean*

*Camilla: Yes neat and clean*

*Johanne: and there was not too much and not too little*

*Camilla: hmm*

*Johanne: There were not too high ceilings. It was nice. It was a place where I would like to sit on the floor and play with lego myself (appendix 1.10.68).*

Johanne's statement about the height of the ceiling is an indirect comparison to the place the group disliked. They had earlier talked about that one of the things they did not like about the particular childcare centre, that the whole group spoke negatively about, was the high ceilings making the rooms less cosy.

### ***Childcarecentres centres as symbolic consumption***

For childcare centres to represent symbolic consumption they should be chosen not only for their utilities, but from also from their symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; Dittmar, 1992; Douglas, 1982; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCracken, 1988 cited in Elliot, 2011). The academic literature has discussed if all products convey meaning. The empirical findings showed that childcare could be perceived as symbolic consumption. First time mothers were still in the learning process of the meaning and the social interaction (Jansson Boyed 2010, p.59) from their mother group and other mothers in their social environment were therefore important mentors in this process.

At first, the mothers' choices of childcare centre did not seem to represent any clear symbolic meaning. However the mothers' argumentation and reasoning for their choice was founded and explained by the symbolic meaning they wanted to express. This symbolic meaning became especially apparent when the subject of childcare was discussed in the mothers' mother groups. This symbolic meaning was often founded on the values that the childcare centres represented. The same values that the mothers wanted to convey to their children. While the meaning the mothers

conveyed with their choice seemed just as important as the functions of the childcare centre, also childcare centres denote symbolic consumption.

#### **4.4 Which marketing implications should the providers of childcare centres consider?**

Providers of childcare centres should be aware of the importance of a mother's choice of childcare as part of her identity construction. In this study only one mother group made a clear distinction between private and public childcare centres. For them, private was equal to better quality care and therefore the choice that the ideal mother would make. In the two other mother groups this distinction was not found and they did not seem to perceive the market as an option between private and public service, but more on a product specific level.

All three groups seemed to share the idea of the ideal mother. The ideal mother would put her child's needs before her own. The justification for their choice of childcare centre was therefore focused on the children's needs before their own and founded in the childcare centre's values. Values that they also wanted to give their children. Within each group there were a specific consensus about the idea of the perfect childcare centre, but no parallels could be drawn between the groups. Themes that represented the perfect childcare centre for the groups were, among others, the differentiation between the private and public childcare centres and the feeling a specific childcare centre gave each mother when visiting.

The findings supported the idea that mother groups influence a mother's choice of childcare centre. Mother groups showed to be a highly influential reference group, guiding mothers' preferences for childcare centres through WOM. Especially negative WOM seemed to be the dominating factor affecting mothers' choice of childcare, consequently leading to rejection of certain childcare centres.

The findings hold several implications for providers of childcare centres. The most important points were:

1. To differentiate between public and private childcare centres
2. To appeal to the ideal mother identity
3. To work with WOM

### ***Public versus private childcare centres***

The most important factor would be for Elsinore municipality's public childcare centres to differentiate themselves positively from the private offers. Marketing initiatives promoting the publicly provided childcare centres will hardly be effective if the mothers do not make a clear distinction between the private and public market. Looking for inspiration in the corporate world Elsinore could more consistently treat their childcare centres as products under the umbrella brand of "Elsinore Childcare Centres". "Elsinore Childcare Centres" would then be responsible for promoting all their childcare centres as one brand. This could contribute to a united image of "Elsinore Childcare Centres" and in turn differentiate the public offers from the private. The municipality of Elsinore have decided to provide all their childcare centres with a thematical sport profile in 2016 (Website-helsingoer, 2015). At the same time a sport profile is a thematical profile that the mothers seemed to value. However to avoid that all public childcare centres are perceived as one product with only one thing to offer, each childcare centre under the "Elsinore Childcare Centres" brand should still have its unique personality and individual values. This could make the "Elsinore Childcare Centres" stand stronger in the competition with the private market that has a diversified portfolio to offer. "Elsinore Childcare Centres" should provide guidelines and support for their childcare centres, while still preserving the uniqueness of each childcare centre such as their internal environment and values. "Elsinore Childcare Centres" should support the communication strategies in the childcare centres. This could include guidelines on what should be available on their online communication channels such as their website and Facebook profile and what channels to use in their internal communication. "Elsinore Childcare Centres" should use PR by inviting the local press when special activities take place in their childcare centres. Communication should promote "Elsinore Childcare Centres" as a "paradise" for the child, and thereby appeal to the mothers' ideal identity.

### ***Appealing to the ideal mother identity***

When appealing to mothers' ideal identity, communication should focus more on the child than the mother herself. This means that slogans such as "Your child's choice" should be preferred over "The right choice". Internal communication in the centres should highlight the activities that take place in the childcare centres. This can contribute to reassure the mother that this childcare centre is a "fun" place for the child and not only a service that she needs.

It was important for the mothers in the focus groups to have a feeling of control over the choice of childcare centre. The ideal mother would know best and base her choice of childcare centre on the “right feeling”. Most importantly for the mothers were to have a feeling that they themselves had made the choice, regardless of other people’s recommendations. Visiting different childcare centres was a way for many of the mothers in achieving a positive self-concept and the findings revealed how some mothers displayed self-confidence and negotiation skills by the behaviour they had engaged in during the search process. The municipality of Elsinore could, through the health-visitors, encourage mothers to visit several of their childcare centres. They should ensure that their childcare centres are well informed in how to conduct the introduction visit and could provide them with specific guidelines. Such a visit could contribute with not only the “right feeling”, but also provide the mothers with a feeling of having made the decision themselves based on their own judgements and values as mothers.

Childcare centres should consider the symbolic meaning they create through their stated values. Both childcare centres with and without a clear thematical profile had values that appealed to the mothers’ ideal identity. This indicates that childcare centres need to communicate these values and promote the activities taking place in the childcare centre that support these values. Childcare centres should create a clear profile through these values. Highlighting the values of the childcare centre will contribute to the mothers’ demand for the place to represent “paradise” for her child.

### ***Working with WOM***

Providers of childcare centres should not overlook the importance of mother groups and their influence through WOM. The analysis revealed that especially first time mothers needed security in their choice. This was especially found in positive WOM from an unofficial source, where other parents’ eagerness in recommending a place was a good indicator of a place with quality care. Childcare centres could suggest to parents, who contact them, to also seek information from other parents attending the childcare centre. Often childcare centres have different events for children and parents during the year. Childcare centres could encourage parents with children already attending the childcare centre to invite a friend to these events and thereby introducing the childcare centre to potential new parents through WOM.

Perhaps most importantly, negative WOM directly influenced the mothers in their choice. This negative WOM began, developed and was reinforced within the mother groups. Negative WOM

about a certain childcare centre would therefore often be “invisible” (Richins, 1987 in Singh, 1990, p. 13) for the providers of childcare centres. Singh (1990), in his study on negative WOM in relation to services, states that “companies can influence negative WOM by communicating responsiveness to consumers’ complaints” (Singh 1990, p.13). Childcare centres should therefore have a clear idea of existing parents’ satisfaction level. Direct contact and a direct and open communication strategy might encourage them to bring problematic issues to the management rather than to spread negative WOM.

#### **4.5 Summary of analysis**

The analysis showed that the role transition impacted both the first time mothers and the more experienced mothers. Both were introduced to new “significant others” and with these, new “ideas, beliefs and values” (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan, 2005, p. 388) emerged. While the issues of importance differed between them, all mothers felt like they were going through a new transition, having to reconstruct their identity. Most of the mothers viewed the ideal mother as someone who would put the child’s needs before her own. Long hours in the childcare centre were therefore complimented with a feeling of guilt. The mothers reduced that guilt by telling themselves, and their social environment, that the children were happy and content in the childcare centre. The childcare centre should not only be a service for the mother to attend her job, but contribute to the image of being a “paradise” for the child.

The mothers’ social environment, such as their mother group, was a great influential factor in their decision-making through recommendations and warnings about different childcare centres. The mother group carried important power in sustaining and/or contributing to both positive and negative WOM.

Childcare centres could represent symbolic consumption chosen not only for its utilities, but also the meaning the mother wanted to convey with their choice. The symbolic meaning was not always clear just by the choice itself, but became apparent when the choice was discussed in public. The mothers’ arguments would be modified, polished and packaged to fit their idea of the ideal mother.

The findings hold several implications for Elsinore as providers of childcare centres and this study suggests creating a mother brand of “Elsinore Childcare Centres” with the public childcare centres

as individual products under this brand. This, to differentiate the public childcare centres from the competition from the private market and at the same time support the childcare centres individually in appealing to the ideal mother identity, leveraging on positive WOM and avoiding and overcoming negative WOM.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

*How do mother groups influence a mother's choice of childcare centre, and how can the providers of childcare centres accommodate this in their future marketing activities?*

This study was undertaken to understand the interrelation between a mother's mother group, her sense of identity as a mother and her choice of childcare centre in order to provide the municipality of Elsinore, as providers of childcare centres, with managerial suggestions for future marketing activities. Even though childcare centres can be said to be a fairly popular service among Danish parents, a service that is somehow embedded in the Danish culture, the study showed that mothers' choice and especially the justification for their choice, illustrated parts of their identity as mothers.

The mother group showed to be a highly influential reference group, guiding mothers' preferences for childcare centres through WOM. Especially negative WOM seemed to be the dominating factor affecting mothers' choice of childcare, consequently leading to the rejection of certain childcare centres. The analysis showed the power of the mother group in not only influencing mothers' preferences for certain childcare centres, but also the information search leading up to the evaluation of the different alternatives. It revealed how unwritten norms in these groups dominated the image of how the ideal mother would approach this decision.

Even though the mothers in the study did not themselves perceive any clear symbolic message with their choice of childcare, the analysis showed that the symbolic meaning was highly attached to the values promoted by the childcare centre and the norm in the mother group. The findings supported the idea that mothers' actual and ideal identities also played a part in their choice of childcare centre.

To accommodate the above findings Elsinore as providers of childcare centres should in their future marketing activities collect all their childcare centres under the mother brand “Elsinore Childcare Centres”, which would be responsible for the overall communication strategy and promotion of the brand, to ensure a clear differentiation between private and public childcare centres. “Elsinore Childcare Centres” should invite their mother groups to visit their different childcare centres. In that way each mother will be able to sustain their need to portray confidence in the search process and identify the childcare centre with the values she prefers among the publicly provided childcare centres. Inviting mother groups would also make the publicly provided childcare centres take advantage of the power of mother group as a very influential reference group.

## **6.0 Limitations and future research**

One important theme in the public debate in relation to childcare centres is the choice between private versus public options. In this study only one mother group made a clear distinction between private and public childcare centres. This study was not specifically focused on the symbolic meaning of private versus public childcare options. The choice of childcare centre is not culturally viewed with commercial eyes. However, lately the Danish media has started to pay attention to the fact that more parents choose a private option and that the market for private childcare has seen a steady increase regardless of a decreasing birth rate (Sørensen et al. 2015). In Norway and in Sweden big companies have entered the market for private childcare centres (Saietz, 2010). This form is not yet well known in Denmark, where only the company Titibo has approached this form with five childcare centres under its brand (Website-Titibo 2015). Future research into the symbolic meaning of private versus public childcare options and parents’ reasons for choosing private options could not only be of interest for private companies who wish to explore the opportunities of entering the private market in Denmark, but also for the municipalities, as providers of childcare centres, in order to stay strong players in the competition with the private market.

The focus groups were all done with mothers living in Elsinore. It would, however, be interesting to also study mothers in other areas of Denmark. Mothers in Copenhagen and mothers in smaller towns might perceive distance and their available choice differently providing another picture of thoughts and opinions of Danish mothers in relation to their choice of childcare centres.

Lastly this study focused on how mother groups contributed to a mother's understanding of an ideal mother and how it influenced her choice of childcare centre through WOM. Future research into mother groups as an influential and powerful reference group could be interesting for providers of childcare centres and also companies who target these women both as mothers and as women.

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