Breaks and continuities in intensive mothering on Facebook. The case of Malasmadres and Pequefelicidad.

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Breaks and continuities in intensive mothering on Facebook. The case of *Malasmadres* and *Pequefelicidad*[1]

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[1] *Pequefelicidad* (Child happiness) and *Malasmadres* (Bad mothers)

Breaks and continuities in intensive mothering on Facebook. The case of *Malasmadres* and *Pequefelicidad*

Motherhood as the key to femininity did not appear until the eighteenth century, and it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century, together with the appearance of mass media, that the ideal of the "perfect mother" began to spread through the model of intensive mothering. The main objective of this work is to analyse, from a gender perspective, the messages and discourses on how to be a mother that are transmitted through Facebook. For this, two Spanish Facebook pages that discuss motherhood, *Pequefelicidad* and *Malasmadres*, have been selected. A total of 30 publications on these pages between the months of January and March 2019 have been analysed, and the results reveal that the intensive mothering model continues to be reproduced, despite progress in gender equality.

Key words: Motherhood, social networks, gender perspective, analysis of content, intensive mothering.

Introduction

The model of intensive mothering that Sharon Hays (1996) described more than 20 years ago continues to be the predominant model of parenting in our society. It is a demanding, exhausting and even toxic model for women who suffer alone the consequences of being considered the most appropriate figure to carry the task of parenting that has been placed upon their shoulders, forgetting their own needs as a person to prioritize those of the child.

The current and more conventional model of motherhood, which requires an almost exclusive dedication to the children, is not only discriminatory but is also an obstacle to accessing certain jobs; therefore, motherhood continues to disrupt the professional careers of many women.

For this reason, many middle-class women in Spain (which is the largest class in the studied country) choose to leave their careers in order to take care of their children, and, recently, some women have chosen to forgo motherhood in favour of their careers. Thus, in the absence of reconciliation measures offered by the government and in light of the lack of co-responsibility at home, the birth rate plummets year after year in Spain, where the number of births decreased by 3.5% in 2019 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2020).

Specifically, in 2018 the average number of children per woman was 1.25, one of the lowest levels in Europe (Teresa Castro et al., 2020).

In Spain, the 2018 Fertility Survey showed that the average number of children desired by women is two, which means that the low birth rate is a rejection not of motherhood, but of the barriers to it that currently exist. According to Castro et al. (2020), raising children has never involved the investment of as much time, money and affection as it does today. We add to this that the low birth rate is precisely a result of the requirement of almost exclusive dedication by mothers that is still in force and

incompatible with their desire to build individual professional careers, in addition to the fact that the model of the provider father is still very present in a family-oriented society such as the Spanish one (Paco Abril et al., 2015).

As mentioned above, the dominant parenting model in Spain focuses on the mother as the primary caregiver; furthermore, it places her at the service of the children's demands and needs. This model is maintained by a biological and scientific perspective that ensures that parenting is a natural and necessary job of women, and, in the event that they do not fulfil this purpose, the physical and emotional state of the baby may be compromised (Elisabeth Badinter, 2017).

With access to the internet and the rise of social networks, thousands of pages and profiles of diverse content (Mateo Pérez-Wiesner et al., 2014), including those that discuss motherhood, are easily found. Digital social networks such as Facebook are an important means of communication, creating human connections in a matter of seconds (Manuel Castells, 2006). These pages transmit information and act as a guide for many of the people who follow them. On these platforms, users can quickly view, share and evaluate content, discovering or offering knowledge to others (Francisco Campos, 2008).

According to Ana Luiza Figueiredo (2020) digital social networks such as Facebook or online discussion forums on motherhood constitute spaces for virtual interaction. These platforms integrate a scenario for debates on practices, conflicts, values and cultural, social and political constructions around motherhood, maternal-filial relationships and problems related to domestic work, work-life balance and conjugal life.

In Spain, as in many other Western nations, feminists have called for a deconstruction of the current model of motherhood, one that leads society to accept diverse forms of motherhood for women by considering their wishes, preferences, aspirations and decisions.

The transformative potential of social networks lies precisely in their dimension of interaction, within which we identify the possibility of modifying certain messages. Facebook opens a field in which the exchanges between the people who manage the pages, and all of their users confirm, reject or redefine new content about being a mother (Figueiredo, 2020).

In this paper, we analyse the ways in which messages and discourses on how to be a mother are disseminated and transmitted on two Spanish Facebook pages: *Pequefelicidad* and *Malasmadres*. We focus on understanding how intensive mothering is manifested in the discourses of these two pages and to what extent their users' posts and interactions consolidate or modify the messages of the pages themselves.

Literature review

The model of intensive mothering

In 1996 Hays wrote 'The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood'. In this book she explains how working mothers in our capitalist system must confront not only conflicting demands on their time and energy but also conflicting ideas about how they should behave: they must be caring and not selfish while raising their children but competitive and ambitious at work. To achieve this, mothers are encouraged to devote a high degree of time and an abundant amount of money to parenting, which demonstrates that this approach is directly related to capitalism and its consumerism. Furthermore, mothers are being subjected to increased scrutiny and the feeling that they are competing against other women – who could have been a source of support rather than of judgment –thereby increasing the cultural marketing of hyperindividuality (Catherine Bodendorfer, 2014).

What we currently identify as the conventional model of motherhood (Linda Ennis, 2014) is what Hays called intensive mothering. This model focuses on meeting the

needs and well-being of children as the primary responsibility of the biological mother. This implies her constant physical presence and is based on the idea of unlimited maternal love that seeks mutual love and the satisfaction of being a mother as its only necessary rewards. In summary, three fundamental elements are pointed out, all of which interfere with mothers' work commitments and are based on the ideology of the market in their workplace:

- First, in an appropriate parenting model it is essential that women, as mothers, are the main caregivers. They must accompany, make room in their lives and be responsible for the development of the children. Men cannot provide the same level of care.

- Second, the logic that governs the appropriate parenting model includes investing large amounts of time, money and material resources in the son or daughter. A mother must put the needs of the child above her own, and, in addition, must be able to recognise and respond to all the needs and desires of the children. This means that a mother must have detailed knowledge of what experts consider appropriate development for a child.

- Finally, these mothers believe that a comparison between their paid work and parenting activities is ridiculous. Not only is parenting more important than paid work, but it follows a completely different logic. Although childrearing can impose a great economic loss, the son or daughter is emotionally and morally out of the reach of the market.

The creation of an adequate model of motherhood implies the existence of an inadequate model of motherhood. Silvana Darré (2013) uses the expression 'inappropriate motherhood' to designate the set of situations that place women and their maternal practices on the wrong side as parents.

To control this division between adequate and inadequate motherhood, there are maternal pedagogies (Darré, 2013). Through discursive and non-discursive resources, these pedagogies establish the limits between what is appropriate and what is inappropriate and serve to tell mothers what they should do and how they should be. These maternal pedagogies act in the construction of the desirable in political, theoretical and disciplinary terms. These mechanisms build an extended 'common set of acceptable behaviours' among mothers. For example, poor mothers who do not have the resources to feed and maintain the hygiene of their children run the risk of being separated from them by social services. At the virtual level, this is evident in so-called mom shaming, a type of virtual harassment of mothers due to behaviours that users consider negative and inappropriate in the rearing of their children (Sepereak et al., 2019).

At present, for example, celebrity moms and other media strategies have the effect of creating and supporting an intensive ideology that works to keep mothers constantly striving for perfection, under an all-consuming vigilance and fear of failure; this is an institutionalized perspective that exhausts and controls women and keeps them 'in their place' under patriarchy (Lynn O'Brien, 2006).

We see that the current maternal model is more demanding than ever, since it is not limited to only corporal and affective care but also includes the baby's psychological, social and intellectual development, which makes motherhood, according to Hays (1996), a full-time job with a triple contradiction. The first is a social contradiction, as supporters of traditional family values blame working mothers for societal deterioration, while the company blames mothers for not working enough because they have children. Motherhood is still considered the typical feminine form of self-actualisation, despite being socially devalued. Secondly, there is a contradiction with the partner, because the couple's relationship is seen as neglected due to the sacrifices that motherhood involves.

Parental separations during the first three years of the baby's life are common. Thirdly, the contradiction of the woman-mother arises in all women who feel divided between love for the child and their personal desires, between being a selfish individual and being the one who wants to protect the well-being of their little one. As maternal obligations increase, these contradictions become even more acute.

Thus, this model continues to place all women in the position of the all-caring, self-sacrificing ideal mother with a limited and constrained role in the public and professional realm, and, importantly, it places itself as the appropriate ideology of contemporary mothering for women across race and class lines (O'Brien, 2006; Ennis, 2014). For example, women who share the care of their children with other women are often labelled as bad mothers because they do not meet this ideal. This is the case of African-American mothers (Patricia Collins, 2005) or migrant mothers (Heike Wagner, 2008), among others. Mothers who migrate without their children do so, in most cases, as a family strategy to meet economic needs. However, they are often referred to as 'abandoning mothers' because they do not comply with being physically in charge of their children. These women have been blamed for their children's problems such as teenage pregnancy or dropping out of school, precisely because they are physically separated from their children (Wagner, 2008). However, because many of them were already working before migration, in order to manage their responsibilities, they shared care with other women in their immediate network. In this sense, their maternal experiences are far from the intensive mother model (Ana Lucía Hernández, 2021).

Despite these contradictions, mothers subscribe to this demanding and exhausting model, so that countless frustrations and feelings of guilt develop (Bodendorfer, 2014).

In today's society, this pressure is only mounting, as social networks play an important role in the perpetuation of this model, especially the profiles of celebrity mums

who expose their lives and show themselves juggling it all – work, family and mothering – with a smile on their face and glowing pictures with their healthy, well-behaved children (O'Brien, 2006).

Added to this pressure is what Banditer (2017) has termed naturalism, a return to the traditional model that seeks to persuade women to reconcile themselves with nature. From the eighteenth century to the present day, physicians and moralists have asserted that the survival of a child depends on the woman, as does the happiness of the family and society (Badinter, 2017). Hence, the laws of nature and biology come together to speak of the concept of 'maternal instincts', which imposes increasingly demanding obligations on mothers to care for children. We can see the influence of the naturalists in the discourse about breastfeeding, for example, because the supporters of so-called attachment parenting are strong advocates of breastfeeding.

From this ideology, naturalists point to a new model of motherhood that Badinter (2017) calls 'the good ecological mother', the one who, in the process of upbringing, rejects any 'artificial' intervention that reacts against nature. For example, this model supports giving birth at home and without an epidural, prohibits baby bottles or disposable diapers and includes the obligation of co-sleeping, to cite only a few concerns.

Digital social networks and motherhood

Digital social networks are a social and communication phenomenon that currently mediates social relations and interactions (Campos, 2008). The widespread use of digital social networks is due, among other factors, to the fact that they favour and enable an increasingly interconnected, global and informed world in a fast and simultaneous way (David Caldevilla, 2010).

Facebook, as a digital platform, is a source of dissemination of images, ideas and representations shared by subjects through publications that produce and reproduce social

representations about a topic. This platform allows users to find both pages and people with common interests, ideas and opinions. Thus, Facebook acts as a means to share individuality and experience (Caldevilla, 2010) and create an online community.

Virtual relationships – the exchange and the formation of virtual communities through digital technologies – have come to juxtapose and even replace the traditional functions of third places (Miquel Ruiz, 2008). These are meeting places that are built from shared interests (Rosario Barba, 2020).

Digital platforms have reduced global gaps between people by expanding the scope of interpersonal communication (Rosa Sepereak et al., 2019). However, the opinions and personal biases of some of select authors usually dictate the trends and tone of the news that reaches the network and therefore, frequently induces behavioural changes in users (Caldevilla, 2010). Thus, these are also privileged platforms for the dissemination and exchange of diversity of opinions (Elías Arab & Alejandra Díaz, 2015).

The topic of motherhood is part of this dynamic and is strongly present in social networks. Through various digital platforms, the ability to reflect mothers' lifestyles or positions on issues related to motherhood is enhanced (Asunción Bernárdez, 2015). Among the virtual phenomena that have emerged in this regard, as we mentioned above, is 'mom shaming' (Sepereak et al., 2019), or the role that influencers have in the exaltation of traditional values of the wife and mother through discourses and representations of intensive mothering and a postfeminist domesticity (Rocío Palomeque, 2020). This perspective emphasises a return to domesticity and naturalism (Badinter, 2017). Marco Pedroni (2016) refers to 'media celebrities' who have become pedagogical tools who inform their audience on how to act. This is the case of the influencer Chiara Ferragni (Palomeque, 2020).

Intensive mothering has taken various forms over time, adapting to different

concepts that have emerged, such as ecological motherhood or attachment parenting.

However, these approaches can be seen as nothing more than different versions of the

same model that, in the end, focuses on locating the mother as the only valid caregiver

because of her innate instinct.

Social networks are no stranger to this dynamic. A wide variety of blogs, online

forums and pages that deal with motherhood range from those that claim the value of

motherhood as the 'most important job in women's lives' to those that demand equality

in the labour market, effective conciliation measures and alternative maternities.

Method

The methodology we used for this study is qualitative, because we are interested in

understanding the socio-cultural dimension of motherhood to find out how models of

motherhood are reproduced and interpreted through new virtual networks such as

Facebook.

The qualitative technique chosen for this social research was content analysis,

defined as a research technique that aims to make replicable and valid inferences from

texts to the contexts of their use.

We carried out subjective interpretation and the extraction of conclusions from

the text through a systematic process in which themes or patterns are classified, codified

and identified (Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon, 2005), allowing us to look beyond

the words contained in the text.

With content analysis, we have been able to identify and describe what the

existing beliefs that surround motherhood in our society are, carrying out a content

analysis of the publications and messages transmitted by two very popular pages about motherhood in Spanish: *Malasmadres* and *Pequefelicidad*.

Sample

Firstly, we carried out an analysis of social networks and followed some of the most popular motherhood Facebook pages written in Spanish. The pages in question were *WOWMOM – Maternidad y crianza consciente; Maternidad Consciente*; *Pequefelicidad*; *Malasmadres*; *Mundo de Bebés; Embarazo y Maternidad*; *Maternidad como Puedas* and *Montessorizate – Tigriteando*.

For this study, we chose a sample of two Facebook pages with a high level of daily or weekly activity and a large number of followers, *Pequefelicidad* and *Malasmadres*. These pages are designed to attract the attention of pregnant women or mothers with very different views and perspectives on motherhood.

We selected Facebook because WhatsApp (88%) and Facebook (87%) are the most widely used social networking sites in Spain, according to the Annual Study of Social Networks carried out by IAB Spain in 2019[2]. For our research, it was necessary to select a social network that allowed us to publicly view both the content and the interactions of the page's followers, and WhatsApp did not give us that option. Facebook users tend to engage with the site in order to seek and share information, pass time, be entertained and relax, but they also use the site for its communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion and surveillance/knowledge about others (Anita Whiting & David Williams, 2013).

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[2] https://iabspain.es/estudio/estudio-anual-de-redes-sociales-2019/

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Analysed material

The analysed material in this research consists of Facebook posts from the *Malasmadres* and *Pequefelicidad* Facebook pages, published between January 1 and March 31, 2019, as the information provided by posts from three months was considered to constitute a significant sample for the study.

The sample in this study consists of a total of 60 posts from the pages of the previously mentioned sites, extracted during the months of January, February and March 2019. In total, we analysed 30 publications from *Malasmadres* and 59 text fragments or sections from 30 posts from *Pequefelicidad*.

We created an Excel database for each of the pages to be analysed. In them, we grouped the publications by topics according to the sampling units of this research, and the main coding unit and the secondary coding units that could be identified in these publications have been specified for each post.

Specifically, we paid attention to the publications on both pages that responded to the categories of analysis of 'work environment', 'presence of the father' and 'intensive mothering', creating coding units related to these sampling units, such as co-responsibility for 'presence of the father', work-life balance for 'work environment' and economic, emotional and time investment or biological mother as the main caretaker for 'intensive mothering'.

Results

Below, we present the results obtained from the content analysis of the Facebook publications on the *Malasmadres* and *Pequefelicidad* Facebook pages during the period in question, reflecting how the messages reproduce, rethink or break with the model of intensive mothering's focus on the following elements: 1. child as the centre of care and upbringing; 2. biological mother as the main caretaker; 3. economic, emotional and time

investment; 4. expert advice. In presenting our results, we focus on four topics: nutrition, models of upbringing, work environment and co-responsibility.

The good ecological mother and reconciliation with nature

Global warming is a social problem that is becoming increasingly important for Spanish society. Mothers and fathers (although not always fathers) feel committed to caring for the environment and making environmentally and socially responsible decisions when rearing their children. These parents face dilemmas to which they are exposed by different virtual platforms once the first child arrives, such as cotton diapers versus disposable ones, wooden versus plastic toys, breastfeeding versus using a bottle or organic and healthy food. In the analysed pages, we find that these discourses are very close to the approaches of ecology and attachment parenting philosophy.

Breastfeeding is one of the main topics on maternity websites and blogs. In the pages analysed, we find direct proposals in favour of breastfeeding and instructions for its correct development, as in the case of *Pequefelicidad*. Breastfeeding must be on demand, without rationing and must anticipate the children's needs; that is, it reaffirms the approach of the child as the centre, which strengthens the model of intensive mothering.

At the same time, *Malasmadres*, which seems to have a broader discourse, spreads messages that value breastfeeding over other decisions, which reinforces the formula 'breastfeeding equals being a good mother'. For example, we found a Facebook post from January 21, 2019, about a woman who ran 430 kilometres but stopped in strategic places to express her breast milk. Rather than questioning the incompatibility between sports and lactating mothers, for example, or taking advantage of the news to debate the limits of breastfeeding, the shared post discusses the merit of this athlete-mother. The responses

to the post are filled with praise, using words such as 'superwoman', 'greatness', 'value' and 'sacrifice' for this model reproduction of a mother who can do anything.

Figure 1. Post. 'The mother who won a 430-kilometre race with breastfeeding stops', January 21, 2019.

Accessed October 20, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/1440723302772427

In the analysis, we found only a single comment questioning this trend, and the page responded that their intention is to discuss obstacles to women's achievements.

Figure 2. Post and answers. 'The mother who won a 430-kilometre race with breastfeeding stops',

January 21, 2019. Accessed October 20, 2021.

https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/1440723302772427
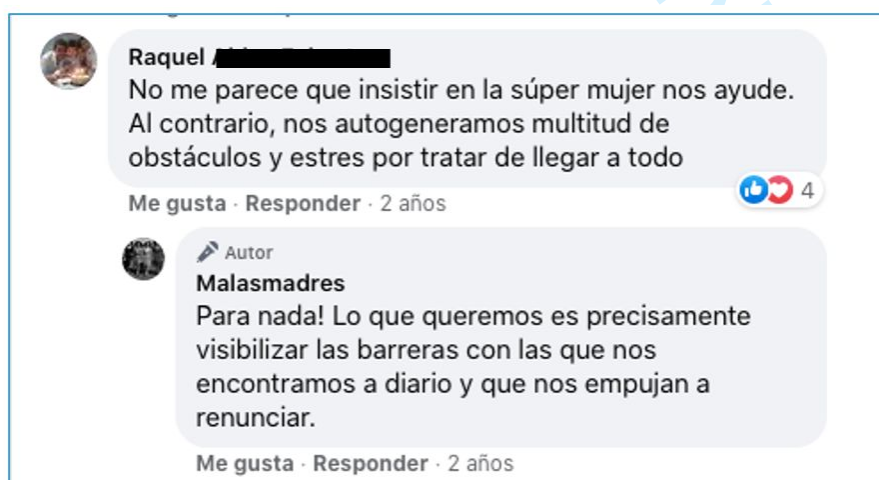
Feeding with solid food after breastfeeding is also part of the publications of the pages under study. The presence of a nutrition expert to recommend healthy diets for the whole family or the publication of healthy recipes are two of the strategies they use to argue the importance of a good diet. This reinforces the idea that there is a need for supervision of the mothers in their task of parenting, as proposed by intensive mothering, and the constant presence of experts indicating and instructing mothers ensures correct motherhood.

> 'Healthy ice cream with two ingredients' (*Pequefelicidad*, January 19, 2019).
>
> https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2025550701077173&id=152109702
> 1522546
>
> 'Vegetarian, vegan, flexitarian, chickentarian, raw vegan ... last Thursday I learned
> a lot in the tenth program of "Shopping with Carrefour" about these types of diets.
> We broke all the myths of the vegetarian and vegan diet with Boticaria Garcia, we
> knew that it is suitable for all stages of the life cycle: pregnancy, childhood ... even
> for athletes, that must be well planned'[3]. (*Malasmadres*, December 1, 2019).
>
> https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/1721883964656358

This approach reinforces the ecological ideology with vegetarian and vegan diets as healthier options, with a strong investment of money to buy the best organic products that guarantee a good quality of food and a significant dedication of time devoted to its preparation.

Another issue that is related to this ecological approach is the support of attachment parenting described by Sears in 1960 or positive discipline (Jane Nelsen[4]) that keeps boys and girls at the centre of early childhood experiences. *Pequefelicidad*'s perspective is presented with a strong defence of physical contact between mother and child. From co-sleeping to skin-to-skin contact to baby-wearing, we see that the

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[3] All quotes are our own translations from the original Spanish
[4] https://www.positivediscipline.com

administrator of this Facebook page feels that attachment parenting is the essential method for the correct emotional development of a child. This page promotes the view that mothers should try to spend a great deal of time being as close as possible to their children, even if that means sacrificing time for themselves and intimacy with their partner.

Pequefelicidad defends co-sleeping as the best way to sleep and to encourage children to be autonomous, self-confident and happy. The page ensures that co-sleeping seeks happiness and comfort for everyone involved, because the mother's happiness is defined as being as close as possible to her children and for as much time as possible. We identify a focus on this page on a happiness that is manufactured according to the desires and well-being of the children, so the mothers' needs are minimised, and the most important thing is the welfare of children.

> 'He falls asleep hugging me ... I look at him and I am simply HAPPY. It seems that there is a barrier, and that when the child turns 6 months; "It is time" to become independent... Why? What's the rush? What are we afraid of? […] I like to sleep with my family, and yes, I think it is HEALTHY' (*Pequefelicidad*, January 6, 2019). https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2020063284959248&id=15 21097021522546

Skin-to-skin contact and co-sleeping are clearly recommended, especially during the first months of life, because they favour the psychological development of the child. Mothers must adapt to the needs of their babies, because it is up to them to look after the child's well-being, and they do so from a more naturalistic and ecological perspective (Badinter, 2017).

A nuance of this approach can be seen in *Malasmadres*, which also discusses co-sleeping, presenting it as a 'survival' strategy:

'Co-sleeping always generates different opinions. I have it clear, I co-sleep for

survival' (*Malasmadres*, January 27, 2019), Accessed September 27, 2021.

https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/1444084042436353

Once again, we find opportunities that are not taken advantage of – or that posters

are unwilling to take advantage of – to reflect on the practice of co-sleeping in a critical

way. The post is written by an 'expert in early care and stimulation', explains what co-

sleeping is and gives a list of the benefits of co-sleeping. It does not present risks or

disadvantages so that mothers can decide for themselves. Moreover, the phrase 'co-

sleeping for survival' refers to a strategy by the mothers, because they are responsible for

the children also at night, for feeding them and putting them to sleep. Although they do

not claim that co-sleeping is a good method for the mental health of children, they say it

makes parenting easier for mothers, so the message is that children's sleep is the mother's

responsibility, not the father's.

Mothers: Take care of yourselves to take care of others and take care of everything. Fathers are merely helpers.

The gender division of labour assigns women the role of caregivers, as society

assumes this task is closely linked to the biological capacity for reproduction. Women

take care of others simply because they are women. This social allocation has crossed the

boundaries of households and extended to the labour market, where we find feminised

professions curiously linked to care: early childhood education, nursing and care for the

elderly and dependent children.

In the pages analysed, this approach is maintained and reinforced to the point that

the mother's self-care is promoted as a means of placing her in better condition to care for

others.

Pequefelicidad points this out as advice to mothers to take care of themselves to be in a better position to take care of others. According to the creator of this Facebook page, it is important to learn to be good to ourselves in order to offer the best version of ourselves to our children.

In *Malasmadres* we find an attempt to break that idealisation of motherhood when the page addresses taboo topics in our society, such as physical care in pregnancy and postpartum, maternal mental health, postpartum depression, the mental burden on mothers when there is a lack of co-responsibility and its emotional impact, among other concerns. However, self-care is also promoted as necessary for the care of others. Self-care is always the prerequisite for continued caring.

> '[…] Take care of yourself because if you don't, nothing else will work. Take care
> of yourself because if you don't, you will not be able to care for others. Take care of
> yourself because if you don't, nobody will do it for you' (*Malasmadres*, January 11,
> 2019). https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/1440723302772427

Childrearing is presented as a mother's business and caring for children prevails as a personal aspiration in women's lives over their professional careers, which must be put on the back burner or are seen as incompatible with raising a child. The mother must choose, and, unsurprisingly, good mothers will always choose their offspring.

The presence of fathers in childcare is yet another area that is not explicitly addressed through publications on the *Pequefelicidad* site. Only two examples have been found in which the co-responsibility of the father is discussed, and these consist of his taking care of the household chores so that the mother can exclusively take care of the baby. Thus, we see how the father becomes a secondary actor in the upbringing process, being only a facilitator so that the mother can fulfil her purpose as the exclusive caregiver.

Also, we note a difference in language when the Facebook page *Pequefelicidad* gives directions to the mother verses to the father. We see that if the page refers to the

mother, it uses phrases such as 'you must', 'you have to' and other imperatives, while, when the page refers to the father, it uses only suggestions and recommendations, through words such as 'could' or 'should'.

There are two arguments that we link with the intensive mothering model that we have been able to identify in these pages: constant consultation with experts and trust in the maternal instinct as the main driver of decision making for mothers, which in turn justifies their actions.

'That instinct that mothers have, and that I don't know very well where it comes from, tells me that I have done the right thing' (*Pequefelicidad*, March 26, 2019). https://www.facebook.com/1521097021522546/photos/pb.100044628600287.-2207520000../2067585696873673/?type=3

Motherhood in the networks and the contradiction with being working mothers

In our study, we have found some messages that give rise to reflection and debate on the difficulties surrounding the intensive mothering model and the real lives of mothers, mainly working mothers. In this sense, it is *Malasmadres* that takes a position on issues such as returning to work after giving birth, conciliation, double shifts and co-responsibility.

Malasmadres is particularly interested in tackling the issues between maternity and paid work, which is why it has published about the breastfeeding mother's feelings when she returns to work. To do this, the page turns to the advice of experts in early care and stimulation.

'Returning to work after becoming a mother is often difficult. In order to face this moment in the best possible way, this report gives us several pieces of advice from our collaborator and expert Alejandra Melús from Early Attention and Stimulation'. (*Malasmadres*, January 9, 2019). Accessed January 15, 2019.

https://www.facebook.com/page/214225512088885/search/?q=colecho

Work is a topic that is approached with special relevance in *Malasmadres*. In fact, it is considered an activity that is difficult to reconcile with motherhood. In their posts, they promote the role of women in positions of power within companies, work-life balance and equal motherhood and paternity leave, and they address the difficult situation of the labour market for women who decide to become mothers.

The development of this topic has entered into the current debates that are taking place in Spain about the difficulties of work-life balance, the care overload that working mothers experience and its negative effects on their professional development (Juan Fernández & Constanza Tobío, 2019).

Malasmadres holds a well-defined stance on this issue and advocates for a coherent approach to motherhood with a labour market participation that offers optimal conditions for mothers. *Malasmadres* is also clearly in favour of equal and non-transferable motherhood and paternity leave to promote the role of the father in raising children on equal terms with the mother. In the view of this Facebook page, upbringing should be the responsibility of the father and the mother in equal parts.

'There are references to fathers who are the ones who are pushing the change, like Alberto Vargas, who identifies as a co-parent and feels like a "*mala madre*" (bad mother) (…) he gave up his career in favour of his wife's and had to endure pressure of all kinds' (*Malasmadres*, March 19, 2019).

https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/1485585718286185

In Pequefelicidad, mothers' work is not relevant, as parenting prevails as a personal aspiration before mothers' professional careers because, for that page, work is incompatible with raising a child. Only two fragments have been found that make specific reference to this issue in *Pequefelicidad's* Facebook page, and they discuss the limited possibility of pursuing work-life balance in Spain and the overburdening of grandparents.

Although our study was carried out prior to COVID-19, we have reviewed what was published on both sites during the pandemic. From the beginning, *Malasmadres* has emphasised the barriers and obstacles to work-life balance for families and these issues' effects on mothers and their careers. With the pandemic and the lockdown, the website has intensified its publications on work-life balance, working mothers and the difficulties of caring and working.

'We have been locked up at home for 13 days and we still have not been able to figure out what "balance" means'. Many *Malasmadres* telecommute these days. In many families, both parents telecommute, and this is compounded by the duties of being "good sons" and "good daughters" and/or the demands of our little ones. The result is a working day that extends all day due to the many interruptions to which we are forced. Without a doubt, this is not "balance", it is "survive as you can" (*Malasmadres*, March 23, 2020). Accessed April 3, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/1841492282695525

'This is a country where there are no structures for reconciling work and family demands, in which grandparents - remember, a risk group - and schools, which are not places of care, have become the only means for making these demands work' (*Malasmadres*, September 19, 2020). Accessed March 29, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/malasmadres/posts/2010496072461811

One of the results of this change of topic is the launch of four studies on meeting work-life needs and Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021. These studies have been carried out by the Association 'Yo no Renuncio'[5] (I don't quit), founded and directed by the administrator of Malasmadres.

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[5] https://yonorenuncio.com/nuestra-lucha-category/estudios-sociologicos/

On the other hand, in the case of *Pequefelicidad* no major modifications have been

identified. The site has continued to position itself in its parenting model by focusing on

children's needs and interests.

'Families! In these days when we are all locked up, more than ever, we need ideas,

resources ... One of the things that is relieving us the most is board games. Above

all, when I am not feeling very energetic, it is as if playing relieves us all a little,

unexpectedly, laughs come and that little time I spend playing connects me a little

with my son' (*Pequefelicidad*, April 10, 2020). Accessed April 14, 2021.

http://www.pequefelicidad.com/2020/04/un-juego-divertido-y-accesible-

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Discussion and conclusions: The model of intensive mothering in social networks

From the results obtained through the analysis of the posts on the Facebook pages

of Malasmadres and Pequefelicidad, we have found that the biggest differences between

the two pages are related to paid work, work-life balance and co-responsibility. Each of

the pages has different positions on these issues, as we have shown. Malasmadres

advocates an independent work life, promotes motherhood and parenting as another facet

of mothers' lives and proposes that childcare should always be shared equally with the

father.

In fact, the creation of their page was due to the refusal to have to decide between

work or motherhood. '"I am not going to give up my professional career or give up seeing

my daughters grow up". This was the phrase that gave birth to the Malasmadres Club'.

Work-life balance was their page's starting point, and with the Coronavirus pandemic,

this focus has expanded even further.

In contrast, in the case of Pequefelicidad, work-life balance, mothers' work and

co-responsibility seem to have no place. Mothers who follow this page recognize the

difficulties of juggling work and home responsibilities but agree that the solution is to leave work to devote themselves 100% to the care of their children. In other words, these mothers agree with the model of intensive motherhood for a better upbringing. In response to Pequefelicidad's post titled, 'The problem is that they make us believe that you should work as if we didn't have children and raise them as if we didn't have to work', in the responses the followers are directed to opt for full-time caregiving: 'I can relate, to the point I decided to quit to take care of my son full time, and it was totally worth it'.

In addition to this topic, on the remaining issues we observed many similarities in the pages regarding a high dedication of time and effort in the care of children by mothers. For example, when these pages discuss healthy food, they refer to home preparation, which requires a considerable investment of time and money, since at all times 'healthy food' refers to ecological, organic and high-quality products. The same applies to education, mother-child relationships and family dynamics. We can affirm that both pages are directed toward women who are in a privileged position in which they have the time and money to develop this type of maternity.

Although, as we have seen, they promote different philosophies, both pages give information on how to educate and how to be a mother and constantly present both adequate and inadequate ways of being a woman. That is, they act as gender technologies (Teresa De Laurentis, 1987) and establish maternal pedagogies in which they constantly indicate the boundaries between adequate and inadequate motherhood (Darré, 2013), maintaining intensive motherhood as a reference. Pequefelicidad does this in a very direct way; Montessori pedagogy, children at the centre of parenting, attachment parenting and positive discipline, and presenting the mother as the main caregiver are examples that indicate that the page assumes intensive motherhood as a model of adequate motherhood, disseminates it in its posts, and adapts it to the present time. Pequefelicidad clearly

advocates a complete dedication to care and upbringing, addressing mothers and insisting on their fundamental role in the welfare of children, which is based on unconditional love. Thus, when the problems of modern mothers have to do with the indisputable choice between work and parenting, the mothers should choose parenting.

Malasmadres does this in a subtler way, guiding the behaviour of mothers toward what experts advise and promoting mothers' choosing freely. Therefore, it seems to us that the case of Malasmadres is more complex, because it presents a model of mother who is, apparently, far from the most traditional gender roles, and at the same time encourages women to be successful in many areas of daily life: work, marriage and physical and mental well-being, including motherhood.

Its message is that women are free to choose, and thus, the positioning of the site is that it is the mothers who 'decide' to act in the way they consider best. However, the site teaches, instructs and educates mothers to 'do it right'. In other words, the discourse of intensive motherhood is also present in the constant recourse to experts, in its recommendations for parenting (biological feeding, co-sleeping, etc.) and in the scarcity of its references to other figures in the care of children.

The fact that the administrator of Malasmadres Facebook page names mothers as 'malasmadres' (bad mothers) and other caregivers as 'buenpadre' (good father), 'buenabuela' (good grandmother) or 'buenabuelo' (good grandfather) implies that she maintains the centrality of mothers, and what these other people do will always be fine, regardless of their actual participation in care and upbringing. In the end, these people are not the main ones responsible for these tasks.

Moreover, we are discussing messages transmitted through digital platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, which right now are configured as a valuable outreach tool that has never before been seen. As we have mentioned, digital social networks are tools

that overcome the barriers of access to mass visibility, previously controlled by media gatekeepers (Zeynep Tufekci, 2013). Pequefelicidad has more than 130,000 followers, and Malasmadres reaches almost one half million users. Thus, in both pages we identified a great potential to promote a model of motherhood, and the reach and the responses that they receive from their followers are indicators of the impact they have.

Both pages have built a community of mothers from the social networks they manage and use novel, attractive and participatory formats that reach more people, particularly during the closing of the pandemic. As a result, they manage to convey their message of how to be a good mother.

The element of participation is a novelty of social networks: the comment sections are spaces for venting, complaining and seeking support among women with similar positions. Conflicts or questioning between those with different positions do occur, but they are solved by page administrators (Figueiredo, 2020). Therefore, although it may seem that social networks stimulate diversity of opinions and perspectives in their responses, Malasmadres and Pequefelicidad as maternal pedagogies are concerned that their messages reach a broad audience and control how they are interpreted. Those opinions that reinforce and amplify their beliefs are validated; however, possible dissonant voices in the comments are shamed, leading to censorship and blocking.

Social networks serve as a loudspeaker to transmit these types of messages, since in the digital and globalized era in which we live, social networks are part of our routine. The scope and diffusion that this type of content can have is higher now than at any other time in history.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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