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Representations of motherhood in the media: a systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

We undertook a systematic review to understand (i) how motherhood is represented across different media, (ii) how the modalities of media domains influence the motherhood representations that they offer, (iii) the gaps in recent research on the subject. We searched 7 databases for all studies investigating the representation of motherhood in media texts, in any geographical location, published after 31 December 2016. We identified 55 studies as relevant to the search criteria and undertook a thematic analysis of their findings. Our contribution is to offer a framework that summarizes and contrasts key themes of motherhood and tensions within and between motherhood ideologies as identified in different media domains.

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motherhood; discourse;
modalities

Introduction

Context

Implicitly and explicitly, media representations of mothers have shaped and continue to shape expectations and experiences of motherhood (Bassin et al., 1994; Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018). Portrayals of mothers in the media construct an image of who mothers are, how they should mother, and what they should care about (O'Donohoe et al., 2013), and outline the role that motherhood should play in our society (Lynch, 2005). They also provide tools that individuals – women, mothers – use to construct their self-identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). This shapes the way that mothers *do* mothering, but also the parameters others use to judge their performance (O'Donohoe et al., 2013). In Johnston and Swanson's (2003, p. 21) words: 'Culture tells us what it means to be a mother, what behaviours and attitudes are appropriate for mothers, and how motherhood should shape relationships and self-identity.' Regardless of whether

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these cultural discourses are absorbed, negotiated, or resisted, therefore, they play a role in shaping mothers' relations to their role, to themselves, and to others. The maternal scripts found in media thus warrant our attention.

In today's hypermediated society, these scripts emerge across *many* different media (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018). Films, magazines, books, and advertisements all contribute to the construction of maternal scripts (O'Donohoe et al., 2013). The rise of new domains like blogs and social media also entails that many representations are now concurring, across but also within different media. And each media domain possesses its socially- and culturally-shaped resources for making meaning, which have been constructed through regularities of use and are influenced by consumption contexts – what we call 'modes' or 'modalities' (see, e.g., Jewitt, 2009). Online platforms, for instance, have democratized motherhood discourses by enabling mothers to share their experience (c.f. Pedersen, 2016). While many studies have explored motherhood representations, we are yet to see a comparison of findings and a reflection on the relation between such findings and the media domains from which they emerged.

This systematic review thus aims to answer the following questions: (i) How is motherhood represented across different media? (ii) How do the modalities of media domains influence the motherhood representations that they offer? (iii) What are the gaps in recent research on the subject? In analysing the corpus, we also consider the tensions between and within different motherhood ideologies.

Motherhood ideologies

To explore maternal representations, we must first recognize that the mother is a social invention rather than simply a woman with child(ren) (e.g., Badinter, 2010; Lazar, 2000; Lynch, 2005; O'Donohoe et al., 2013), and that part of this construction occurs in the media ecosystem (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018). Studies of motherhood have found it useful to establish and/or use seemingly cohesive models that offer a set of expectations for 'good motherhood' – what we hereafter call 'motherhood ideologies', following Johnston and Swanson's (2003) terminology – as analytical tools. These have enabled researchers to foster a dialogue with concurrent and past studies. Motherhood ideologies have been studied both longitudinally (especially before the turn of the century; see e.g., Keller, 1991) and synchronically (see e.g., Johnston & Swanson, 2003).

Arguably the most widely used ideology is Sharon Hays' theory of *intensive motherhood* (1996). According to this model, a woman is and should be the primary caregiver for her child(ren) and motherhood is framed as 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996, p. 8). The mother is grounded in the domestic sphere and positioned as an all-caring and self-sacrificing individual. Hays' model remains a reference in contemporary motherhood literature and is still used as an analytical tool (see, e.g., Lerner, 2018).

Researchers have also used frameworks made of multiple successive and/or concurrent ideologies to contrast different representations and to align findings with their socio-political context. In her longitudinal analysis of magazines, Keller (1991) identified four motherhood ideologies across time: the traditionalist, feminist, neotraditionalist, and economic-nurturer ideologies. Later studies (see e.g., Johnston & Swanson,

2003; Pedersen, 2016) suggest that the four models coexist in contemporary media representations. The traditionalist and neotraditionalist models are similar in positioning the mother as a self-sacrificing, full-time caregiver. Whilst the traditionalist mother never enters the workplace, the neotraditionalist mother has resigned – possibly part-time – to focus on childcare. This choice is often justified through a postfeminist rhetoric of ‘choice’, suggesting that the woman is an empowered neoliberal subject who independently decided to focus on childcare. Neotraditionalist mothers also strive to educate themselves to inform their mothering, often consulting expert advice on childcare. The feminist model, in comparison, suggests that a ‘good mother’ strives to acquire a sense of self-efficacy through the pursuit of personal interests and rewarding work. To this aim, she is supported by a community and accessible services; both the child’s and the mother’s wellbeing are valued. Like her feminist counterpart, the economic-nurturing mother seeks employment outside the home, but primarily to provide goods and services to her children. She compromises her career aspirations to maintain a balance between work and family demands. She is also likely to remain the primary caregiver.

In our review, we consider elements that align with these motherhood ideologies and point to elements that these ideologies overlook. In the discussion, we return to a reflection on the analytical tools deployed in studies of motherhood and their relation to the lived experience of mothers.

Materials and methods

Database search

We conducted a systematic review of all studies investigating the representation of motherhood in media texts, in any geographical location, published after 31 December 2016. This restricted timeframe enables us to create a dialogue between studies of similar scholarly and historical contexts, and to present the most recent developments in the field. This review was conducted in accordance with current PRISMA guidance (Page et al., 2021), which aims to optimize transparency and validity by inviting researchers to keep systematic notes.

We searched the following seven online databases: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, ABI/INFORM Collection, Business Source Ultimate, Humanities Index, Scopus, Social Science Database, and Web of Science. These databases were selected because they are widely used in the social sciences and in consumer culture research. Our search strategy included fifteen search terms, which were divided into three levels: population (e.g., mother*), research focus (e.g., identit*), and text (e.g., advert*). The complete search strategy can be found in Appendix A. In total, we identified $k = 6753$ citations. Using Endnote 20, we removed $k = 1386$ duplicates.

Title and abstract screening

We imported the remaining $k = 5367$ citations into Rayyan for title and abstract screening. Author 1 and Author 3 reviewed the titles and abstracts of $k = 260$ articles ($\pm 5\%$ of the corpus) for relevance based on a decision flow chart, which can be found in Appendix B. The kappa score for this screening was 0.66, and Author 1 screened the remaining $k = 4025$ articles.

Full-text review and quality assessment

We identified $k = 54$ articles for full-text screening. Author 1 screened $k = 54$ articles (100% of the corpus), and Author 3 screened $k = 27$ articles (50% of the corpus). We determined that $k = 8$ articles did not fit the review criteria and were unable to access the full text of $k = 2$ articles. We contacted the corresponding authors but did not receive a response. All in all, $k = 44$ articles passed the full-text review stage. We reviewed their bibliography and identified $k = 11$ articles that passed our inclusion criteria but had not been identified in the database search. We suspect this is due to the keywords' selection: some of these articles did not refer to a media domain or referred to a specific platform (e.g., Mumsnet) in their title and abstract and were consequently not scoped by the text level of our search. Our review discusses a total of $k = 55$ articles.

We assessed the quality of the articles using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) checklist for qualitative research, informed by the contribution of Hannes (2011). The checklist, which is presented in Appendix C, revolves around three central questions: Are the results of the study valid? Does the study present clear and coherent results? Does the study contribute to existing research? (CASP, 2018) It enabled us to systematically review different dimensions of the studies and highlight shortcomings in research practises which we discuss in our findings.

Thematic analysis

Author 1 extracted key information for each article in the corpus, including: sample, method(s), theoretical framework, and key findings. Authors 1 and 3 then thematically analysed the corpus using Braun and Clarke's (2021) five-step method. The flexibility of thematic analysis made it possible to include inductive and deductive analytical phases, which enabled us to draw independent findings whilst simultaneously reflecting on the applicability of the motherhood ideologies introduced above. We began by (i) familiarising ourselves with the data by reading each article. We inductively (ii) developed codes and used a mind map to (iii) generate themes – e.g., 'mother works' and 'mother stays at home' were grouped under 'career'. We (iv) reviewed the themes through the lens of motherhood ideologies – e.g., evaluating whether we could claim that one ideology was dominant in one media domain or in a group of studies. This review was inconclusive and led to reflections we further develop in our conclusions. We therefore (v) defined and named themes based on our original grouping.

Limitations

Our findings reflect the disciplinary biases and sampling limitations of the studies whose results populated them. Some domains (e.g., advertising) were explored less than others (e.g., user-generated content) and are thus less likely to present internal tensions. Some domains are also not represented in our final tables (e.g., websites) because they were analysed by less than three studies in our sample. We particularly miss investigations of websites, podcasts, books, packaging, and online resources.

We chose not to impose spatial restrictions and it was thus impossible to appropriately contextualize all the findings presented here, for reasons of clarity and space. Similarly,

further observations can be drawn by exploring studies published before and after our chosen time range. Studies of magazines were for example particularly popular in the 1990s, and relevant insights may have been missed.

Results

Overview of research practises

Overview

Studies¹ originated from a variety of disciplines and perspectives. Alongside fields like communication, media, and discourse studies, linguistics, family and gender research, queer studies, and feminist scholarship, we identified contributions from celebrity studies (Bayard, 2018; Davies, 2023), education (Jeziarski & Wall, 2019), medical humanities (Allen, 2017), religion (Hernández, 2019), and sports and exercise (McGannon et al., 2017a, 2017b).

The geographical and cultural contexts studied too are diverse, and we observed that the location of the samples influenced the questions explored. Studies that analysed media texts from the Middle East asked whether representations of motherhood reinforced conservative ideologies (e.g., Aronis, 2019; Barak-Brandes, 2017a, 2017b; Lachover, 2019), a topic that was less prominent elsewhere. Studies that investigated non-normative forms of motherhood were often set in Western Europe or North America (e.g., Feasey, 2022; Lerner, 2018; Reed, 2018; Waldron & Mullin, 2023). These discrepancies in research questions mean that we are unable to compare media representations based on their cultural contexts, because they were examined with different motives and lenses. As a result, we will not attempt to contrast the motherhood ideologies that dominate different cultures. We have reviewed our findings to ensure that cultural context was not a determining factor in the themes that we identify (i.e., that a theme was not solely found or overly prevalent in one given cultural context but not others); when this is the case, it is explicitly mentioned in our results. An overview of the locations of the samples can be found in Appendix D (Figure 1).

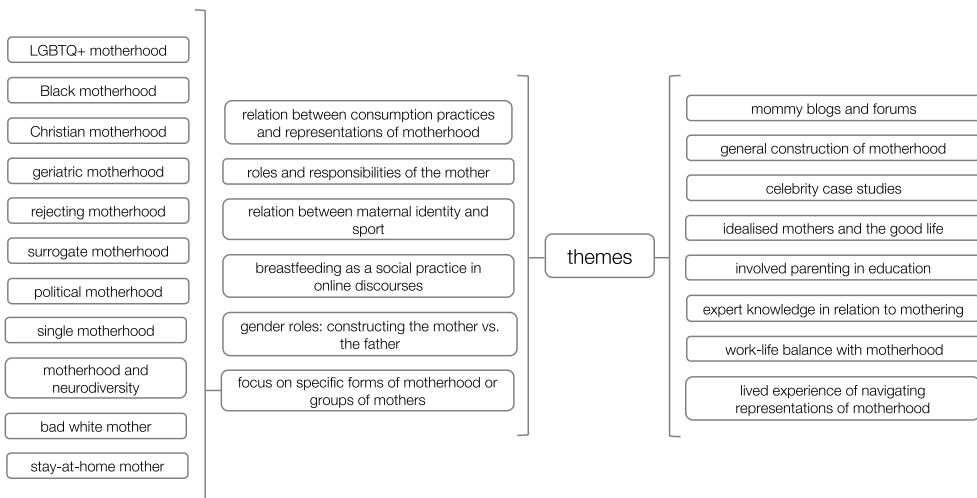


Figure 1. Overview of research contexts.

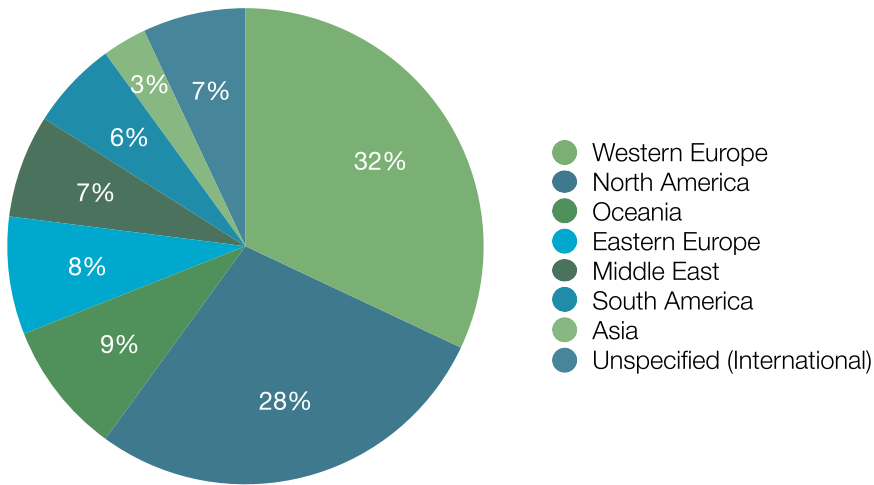


Figure 2. Overview of research themes.

Most studies analysed media texts as their primary data, and often used synchronic (critical/visual) discourse analysis, content analysis, and/or thematic analysis. A minority used interviews to explore how mothers negotiate media texts in the construction of their identity (Baybars & Dedeoglu, 2021; Lehto, 2022; Malatzky, 2017; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Reed, 2018).

We observed increasing research exploring motherhood representations on social media (Hernández, 2019; Johnson & Rintoul, 2019; Orgad & Baldwin, 2021) and web platforms (Imbaquingo & Davilla, 2020), blogs (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Hartzell, 2017; Lehto, 2022; McGannon et al., 2017a; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Van Cleef, 2020) and forums (Cino, 2020; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Khvorostyanov & Yeshua-Katz, 2020; Miklyaeva & Rumyantceva, 2018), with a platform-specific focus on Instagram (Bayard, 2018; Cornelio, 2021; Lehto, 2022; Palomeque Recio, 2022; Vergara & Carter, 2021; Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017), Mumsnet (Mackenzie, 2016; Orgad & Baldwin, 2021) and Reddit (Feldman, 2021). We mention interesting correlations between the themes identified and the media domains studied throughout our findings, and develop them further in our conclusion. There, we also introduce tables (see Appendices E–I) that compare the presentations of themes across different media.

The topics covered are broad, but can be grouped into the following clusters (Figure 2).

Quality

We observed diversity in research questions, disciplines, and theoretical frameworks; we are optimistic that the field is rich and promising. The strongest studies in the corpus went beyond analysing media representations and explored what individuals do with the label ‘mother’ (e.g., Mackenzie, 2016; Reed, 2018). Other studies demonstrated strengths in reflecting on how the analytical tools used in studies of motherhood conditioned their findings (e.g., Brydon, 2018).

However, we also observed that studies in the corpus had common limitations. Despite concentrating on a specific domain (e.g., advertising) and/or case study (e.g., a celebrity

mother), most studies did not reflect on the relation between those parameters and the findings they produced. This is especially important when arguments appear to contradict those of another study. For example, studies that disagreed on whether mothers resist normative prescriptions online often sampled different threads and communities but failed to reflect on the impact of these choices. When a specific case study had been selected (e.g., one mother), it was sometimes unclear why this case should embody certain motherhood experiences. Some studies did not provide a detailed account of their sampling approach, neglecting to mention the number of texts in their corpus or to justify their sampling choices. Multiple studies also failed to detail their methodological approach, e.g., failing to explain how themes had been derived from the data.

Results of the thematic analysis

Theme 1: defining ‘mother’

Most studies did not propose a definition of ‘mother’ nor reflect on the criteria used for the sampling of what they considered to be ‘representations of motherhood’. But a handful of studies critically reflected on the meanings associated with the label ‘mother’ both for women and researchers.

Reed (2018) explored how LGBTQ mothers respond to motherhood imperatives identified in popular representations. She found that many see ‘mother’ as the placeholder of a typically heteronormative hegemony because it is often portrayed as part of a heterosexual family unit where a ciswoman gives birth to her child(ren). These mothers felt that asking to be labelled differently – like being called by their own name or through made-up labels such as ‘vessel parent’ – enabled them to articulate their role outside of the traditional script. However, other participants found comfort in the association of the sign with the traditional family unit. In placing the individual woman within a culturally intelligible framework, ‘mother’ can help legitimize the role of a parent who does not have a reproductive relationship to their child(ren) – as is often the case for LGBTQ + parents (Waldron & Mullin, 2023). Some of Reed’s (2018) participants also underlined the opportunity to challenge the meaning of ‘mother’ without resorting to alternative labels. Lesbian mothers, for example, aimed to associate ‘mummy’ with representations of strong independent women outside of the heteronormative framework. In this context, media representations embody imaginative resources that allow mothers to ‘offer models of mothering practice which promote different possibilities for gender and identities.’ (Reed, 2018, p. 48)

Brydon (2018) reflected on the disciplinarity that research deploys when studying motherhood representations by proposing to separate ‘mothering’ from its gendered implications. His argument follows a feminist understanding of ‘mothering’ as ‘a state of gendered (historically female) action rooted in physical, time-consuming, hands-on care for children’ which ‘begins for many women at pregnancy, birth, and/or breastfeeding, but extends beyond that to long-term, daily nurturance and caregiving’ (p.2). Brydon suggests that, as women are not always or automatically mothers, mothering can be imagined as a cultural performance that can be enacted by people who do not identify as women. Brydon is especially interested in ‘male mothering’, or mothering by cismen. This perspective ‘differentiates mothering performance from motherhood or maternalism as a cultural construct, the latter more rooted in mother as a specific, gendered

entity.’ (p. 2) Brydon’s theoretical questioning is valuable for studies of motherhood because ‘[t]aking a more performance-based approach allows us to identify a set of parameters to define what mothering could mean in a culture or specific discourse, who is performing it, and what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothering.’ (p. 2)

Theme 2: career

On the one hand, studies found that the ‘good mother’ is represented as a woman who prioritizes the development and wellbeing of her child(ren) above her career interests (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; César et al., 2020; Kuvychko et al., 2018; Orgad & Meng, 2017). For example, César et al. (2020) found that, in Portuguese parenting magazines, the professional activities of mothers are portrayed as secondary, especially compared to those of fathers. The magazines featured portraits of mothers who celebrate leaving their careers to concentrate on childcare. This aligns with what Keller (1991) and Johnston and Swanson (2003) identify as a neotraditionalist ideology. But while the mother is constructed as a neoliberal subject in charge of her own life decisions, the class and privilege that allow her to make these decisions are silenced in the texts sampled.

On the other hand, the mother is told in the same texts and in others that she can (or should?) ‘juggle’ home- and child-care with her career and needs not prioritize one over the other (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Brydon, 2018; McGannon et al., 2017b; Orgad & Meng, 2017; Priyatna et al., 2019; Palomeque Recio, 2022). Bayard (2018), for example, notes the emergence of Instagram photos portraying celebrity mothers breastfeeding in the workplace, thereby not only combining maternal ‘responsibilities’ and career, but doing so in the first few weeks following birth. Although such framings of motherhood promote a feminist ideology by encouraging mothers to find fulfilment in their careers (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Keller, 1991), they ignore the support system that is required for these aspirations to be fulfilled (Sørensen, 2017). For example, the lack of appropriate spaces and facilities for mothers to breastfeed in the workplace is overlooked.

This second strand of articles reinforces Hochschild’s (1989) idea of the ‘second shift’, a new sexual contract which imposes that mothers should be both labourers and carers – especially when we know that most studies found mothers were portrayed to be primary caregivers, as we will see below. In this context, De Benedictis and Orgad (2017) wondered whether stay-at-home mothers (SAHM), like those represented in the first strand of studies discussed, could embody a resistance to this new contract. However, they found that representations of SAHM show them subscribing to the aesthetic labour, self-surveillance, and beauty practices demanded by neoliberalism. This suggests a new dimension to Hochschild’s theory: even when mothers are not expected to enter the workforce, they remain expected to subscribe to neoliberal labour – albeit in a different form.

Theme 3: primary caregiver

Mothers were portrayed as primary caregivers across news media (Aronis, 2019), magazines (César et al., 2020; Jezierski & Wall, 2019; Priyatna et al., 2019), advertisements (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Orgad & Meng, 2017), social media (Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Feldman, 2021; Mackenzie, 2016), and web and TV series (Douglas et al., 2022; Lachover, 2019; Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). Studies found that the responsibilities involved include domestic chores, caring for and spending quality time with the child(ren), and ensuring their safety and wellbeing. But different aspects seemed to be foregrounded

on different domains: advertisements prescribed that mothers should manage their family through appropriate consumption (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Orgad & Meng, 2017), whilst magazines indicated that mothers should instil the right mindset and values in their child(ren), motivate and monitor them, and provide them with the appropriate environment to flourish into desirable citizens (César et al., 2020; Jezierski & Wall, 2019). This can be explained by the modalities and motivations of these domains: advertisements focus on tasks that can be completed through consumption, while magazines focus on development because they benefit from extensive space and exist to serve a demand for guidance. As such these findings confirm and expand Hays' (1996) theory of intensive motherhood by showing how this ideology is refracted through the interests of different media domains.

The other parent, who is often a father (Hidalgo-Marí & Palomares Sánchez, 2020), is a limited presence across domains (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Bayard, 2018; César et al., 2020; Lerner, 2018; Orgad & Meng, 2017; Priyatna et al., 2019; Rodgers, 2019). He may even be portrayed as a 'complication' because of his inability to appropriately care for the child(ren) (Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). Studies on both Reddit (Feldman, 2021) and Mumsnet (Mackenzie, 2016) found that mothers make little allusion to their partner when discussing childcare, whilst fathers do mention their partner (Feldman, 2021).

Theme 4: support

Studies also found that mothers are not portrayed as receiving support with childcare even when looking beyond the 'other parent'. Such support only figured in samples that explored 'non-normative' experiences: LGBTQ motherhood (Reed, 2018), male mothering (Brydon, 2018), 'imperfect' motherhood (Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019), and Black motherhood (Ayee et al., 2019; Orgad & Baldwin, 2021). Lerner (2018), for example, describes the episode of a web series about 'imperfect' motherhood in which a mother is unable to watch over her children due to work commitments and relies on a friend to 'mom-share'. This seems to extend the observation of 'other-mothering' practices noted in African American communities by Black feminist scholars like Collins (1991) and hooks (1984) to other non-normative groups. These practices have revolutionary potential because they take place 'in opposition to the ideas that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearers.' (hook, 1984, p. 144)

Studies of user-generated content found that mothers may receive emotional support from other mothers.² This can be explained by the (inter)personal nature of user-generated content and its modalities for dialogue. Researchers observed that digital platforms provide the infrastructure for mothers to unite through feelings of mutual recognition (Van Cleef, 2020) and to learn from each other's experience (Cino, 2020). Mommy blogs³ become spaces of reassurance in the face of 'often seemingly incompatible identity expectations' (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 6). On the flip side, because mommy blogging practises spring from a desire to feel that one is 'doing ok' as a mother (Abetz & Moore, 2018), narratives that do not comfort but instead challenge the personal experiences of mothers may lead to open conflicts. In an increasingly individualized context, mothers online may begin to view mothering as a combative practice and apprehend narratives that do not echo their experience as challenging their own mothering capabilities (Abetz & Moore, 2018).

Theme 5: criticism of mothers

Studies found that the affordances of the digital ecosystem facilitate social surveillance, as narratives are monitored by other mothers and women may receive criticism if their mothering practises differ from others' (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Feldman, 2021; Lerner, 2018; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Consumers of mommy blogs, for example, tell Abetz and Moore (2018) that they have witnessed 'mom-shaming' (of mothers by other mothers) for 'anything' – from the way a mother feeds her baby to the way that their child falls asleep. Dorofeeva et al. (2021) talks of the *territoriality of parenthood* to describe the ambiguity between private and public practice in the judgement of mothering online. Contrasted with our previous section, this highlights the ambiguity of maternal narratives in user-generated content: just as online support may take on an intimate dimension, criticism is more likely to be targeted. In addition, Feldman (2021) observed that mothers may pass this judgement *on themselves* and express feelings online of having failed in their maternal role.

Although the public criticism of mothers is facilitated by the affordances of user-generated content, it is also noted in news media (Allen, 2017; Aronis, 2019; Davies, 2023; Orgad & Baldwin, 2021). The genre of news media is indeed often incriminating in tone, partly because it exists in response to unfolding, mostly negative events. Aronis (2019), for example, analysed the press coverage of a baby formula scandal in Israel. She found that the mothers of the babies who had consumed the contaminated formula were portrayed as 'incompetent' and 'guilty' because they had deviated from their 'natural' maternal role by opting out of breastfeeding. Feasey (2017) and Lerner (2018), in their analysis of TV shows, concurrently observe that mothers are portrayed as 'incompetent' when they place their own interests above their child(ren)'s, effectively deviating from the ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996). One character is criticized by her friends – who are also mothers – for arranging to have 'child-free' time to go to the spa.

Theme 6: struggles and resistance

Studies reported that mothers' difficulties may also be normalized as a natural part of motherhood. This was observed across domains (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; César et al., 2020; Lerner, 2018; Feldman, 2021; Imbaquingo & Davilla, 2020; Johnson & Rintoul, 2019; Orgad & Baldwin, 2021; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Rodgers, 2019; Tardivo & Zolin, 2021; Vergara & Carter, 2021; Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017) apart from news media. These difficulties and their solutions are framed differently in different domains. The mother in magazines showcases concerns and fear for her children, but it is suggested that these can be resolved by letting go of 'trying to be perfect' (César et al., 2020). The mother in advertisements, on the other hand, will find the solution to her anxieties, confusion, tiredness, and frustration in consuming the right products (Barak-Brandes, 2017b). The concerns of the mother in user-generated content are centred around her own performance and a sense of inadequacy or failure, as well as difficulties adapting to her maternal role; they can be alleviated by seeing her narrative validated by her peers (Feldman, 2021; Imbaquingo & Davilla, 2020; Johnson & Rintoul, 2019; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Vergara & Carter, 2021; Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017). Narratives of anxieties in visual entertainment media are the only ones not to be directed towards a solution, instead voicing the complicated relationships mothers entertain with normative

expectations (Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). This may be because movies and TV series aim to explore the depths of individual experiences without working towards an explicit goal like providing guidance (e.g., magazines), selling a product (e.g., advertisements), or offering support (e.g., user-generated content). Importantly, some authors note that these difficulties can only be expressed within white privilege (Guillem & Barnes, 2018), as Black mothers are not expected to be able to fulfil traditional white motherhood expectations in the first place (Handyside, 2021). Struggles in this context are not ‘natural’ but rather an expected, racialized ‘failure’. This confirms the need for what Collins (1991) has called an ‘Afrocentric feminist analysis of Black motherhood’ that moves away from analyses rooted in white middle-class perspectives to address the role of race in motherhood expectations.

Occasionally, studies noted that these negative feelings materialized in explicit resistance to normativity. This was observed especially in user-generated content, perhaps because of the latter’s affordances for engaging in critique (Feldman, 2021; Imbaquingo & Davilla, 2020; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Vergara & Carter, 2021). Johnson and Rintoul (2019) and Zappavigna and Zhao (2017), for example, observe that women use breastfeeding selfies to challenge the myth of the serene and selfless breastfeeding mother by introducing dimensions of exhaustion, frustration, and pain. In this context, social media may provide resources that mothers can use to (re)constitute norms in offline mothering practices (Orton-Johnson, 2017). Feldman (2021, p. 46) similarly observes that Mommit can offer a perspective whereby ‘there is no singular way to be a mother, a woman is not singularly a mother, and mothering comes with highs and lows.’

However, studies generally agree that this framing is ambivalent, at once resisting and reinforcing the norm. Lerner (2018) analysed three Italian series that challenge constructions of ‘the perfect mother’: she notices that perfect motherhood is constructed as something that the characters both admire and criticize. This is true too of user-generated content, where resistance to and reinforcement of the hegemony co-exist (Orton-Johnson, 2017). This can be attributed to the fact that entertainment media and online platforms do not have a single objective to direct their narrative and may reflect tensions both between characters/users and inherent to the characters/users themselves.

Theme 7: knowledge and skills

Authors observe that user-generated content and websites also present mothers with information and advice to ‘enhance’ their mothering (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Cino, 2020; Cornelio, 2021; Feldman, 2021; Fuentes & Brembeck, 2017). Neotraditionalist expectations are able to flourish (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Keller, 1991), for motherhood is presented as a practice which requires training and professionalism. This again plays into the ambiguity of user-generated content: these resources may reassure the mother by offering guidance, but they may pressure her by suggesting she should learn more. The guidance may originate from institutionalized experts. Fuentes and Brembeck (2017), for instance, observe that branded websites offer expert advice and provide opportunities for mothers to ask questions to childcare professionals. This echoes maternal discourses of the past century (Agudelo-Gonzalez & Chapman-Quevedo, 2021; Proctor & Weaver, 2017).

But authors also remark that user-generated content has created possibilities for mothers to position *themselves* as specialists (Abetz & Moore, 2018; Cornelio, 2021;

Feldman, 2021).⁴ This yields potential for the investigation of a new space of representations. Cornelio (2021), for example, analysed the Instagram accounts of mothers who offer childcare advice both on the platform and through paid services. She argues that, although online resources arguably embody an added pressure for mothers, they are inherently dependent on active demand. This entails that mothers may go online to *seek* guidance regarding their maternal role, in a similar way to mothers who consume parenting magazines.

Maternal knowledge was also found to be used as a tool for framing consumerist discourses. Studies found that advertisements, magazines, and influencer/celebrity content portrayed mothers using their ‘expertise’ to purchase the ‘right’ products for their home and children (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Bayard, 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Fuentes & Brembeck, 2017; Orgad & Meng, 2017; Priyatna et al., 2019). Orgad and Meng (2017), for instance, observe that the portrayal of ‘the good life’ offered by advertising often depicts a middle-class mother who can enjoy quality time with her children because of her consumption practices. This aligns with the economic-nurturer ideology (Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Keller, 1991), a narrative which imposes socio-economic barriers to accessing ‘desirable motherhood’ by making mothering dependent on a capacity to purchase (Krzyżanowska, 2020). It also grounds mothers in the domestic sphere by placing them ‘in a position of personally needing to know everything but being seen to use this professional knowledge for a singular maternal purpose.’ (Davis et al., 2022, p. 52). Barak-Brandes (2017b) has criticized these representations for recruiting ‘feminist rhetoric to promote traditional maternal tasks on the pretext of granting women influence and personal empowerment.’ (p.65)

Discussion and conclusions

In response to our first research question – *How is motherhood represented across different media?* – we find seven themes that stand in external contradiction (with one another) and internal tension (incoherent within themselves). Discourses are simultaneously orthodox and heterodox, at once pushing to and pulling from traditional normative expectations. We also observe that motherhood ideologies themselves are populated by tensions. When studies found appeals to feminist models, for example, these representations overlooked the structural issue of accessing the support necessary for women to pursue personal interests and a fulfilling career whilst balancing childcare. Further, ideologies appear greatly permeable. Media domains feature representations that correspond to more than one ideology at the same time, like user-generated content that sports feminist aspirations but reinforces neoliberalist rhetoric.

This yields questions about the experience of discourse consumption: it seems that mothers are not exposed to linear and cohesive narratives, but that their own media ecosystem instead presents them with competing and contradictory elements of which they must make sense. Forcing representations into the boxes of *motherhood ideologies* fails to express the complexity of this picture. Is our object of study, to use Robyn Wiegman’s (2012, p. 10) words, ‘diminished by the worldly limits in which it is forced to live’?

In response to our second research question – *How do the modalities of media domains influence the motherhood representations that they offer?* – we find that the objectives and affordances of domains play an important role in emphasising and silencing elements of

motherhood, thus influencing the maternal scripts that become dominant in different media and therefore the hegemony of maternal ideologies at a given time and place. For example, the consumerist purpose of advertising drives a representation of good motherhood that is dependent on appropriate consumption but cannot portray difficulties that a brand could not resolve. The role of media domains in shaping discourses becomes more apparent on online platforms (see e.g., Cino, 2020) and research on user-generated content has picked up on this influence. We aim to extend this consciousness across media domains.

We notice that magazine narratives are particularly prescriptive and make high demands of mothers – especially regarding the development of their child(ren) into ‘good citizens’. This may be because they benefit from extensive space that facilitates in-depth discussion, and because parenting magazines exist to serve a demand for guidance. In contrast, visual entertainment media and user-generated content both offer narratives that partially resist normative expectations. In visual entertainment media, the mother is at once pushed to and pulled from normative expectations, for example regarding childcare responsibilities, support, and personal aspirations. This may be because shows and movies benefit from space and depth to reflect on the inner tension of a character and oppose different ideologies via different characters, and because they are not constrained by a single objective. But this relation takes on an individualized dimension in user-generated content, since it provides opportunities for sharing personal accounts and responding to that of others. The mother is offered space to challenge normativity by sharing and receiving validation about her experiences, but she may also encounter narratives or critiques that (she believes) directly challenge her own mothering capabilities in a way that is more impactful because it is more personal. The ever-growing multiplication of content online can also confront her with resources to improve her mothering that may at once reassure and overload her.

Overall, our argument is that insufficient attention has been granted to what motherhood ideologies do for us as analytical tools and for mothers as identity resources, and to how motherhood expectations are refracted through the modalities of different media domains. Having just outlined our answers to both questions, we offer a framework that summarizes and contrasts different aspects and domains – see Appendices E–I. The first seven rows present the themes that were derived from our analysis, contrasting how these diverge across different media. The eighth row reflects on the role of modalities in shaping maternal scripts. The remaining three rows explore tensions within and between motherhood ideologies, elements that these ideologies must bypass or silence, and characteristics that are required to access the ‘good motherhood’ that they portray.

Going forward, and in response to our third research question – *What are the gaps in recent research on the subject?* – we suggest that more research is warranted on the ways that mothers negotiate motherhood discourses and the normativities that they organize. Some studies of media texts offered insights into the tensions that are inherent to motherhood representations, and we hope to see this trend continue. But we found that the handful of studies that used interviews with mothers offered particularly novel insights into the ways that mothers negotiate those tensions, and especially their complicated relation to normativity (Baybars & Dedeoglu, 2021; Lehto, 2022; Malatzky, 2017; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Reed, 2018). This opens a promising dimension to studies of motherhood.

Notes

1. An overview of all studies can be found in Appendix D.
2. It is worth noting that this trend was observed only in studies that analysed texts from Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As mentioned previously, it is not possible to determine whether this is due to the (absence of) phenomena observed by the researchers or to their research focus.
3. A term which follows from ‘The Mommy Blog’ created by mother Melinda Roberts in the early 2000s.
4. It is worth noting that this trend was observed only in studies that analysed international texts and texts from Spain and the United States. As mentioned previously, it is not possible to determine whether this is due to the (absence of) phenomena observed by the researchers or to their research focus.

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