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AN INSIGHT INTO 21st CENTURY MOTHERHOOD: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CONSTRUCTING AN IDEALISED IMAGE OF A MOTHER.

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper *An Insight Into 21st Century Motherhood: The Influence of Social Media on Constructing an Idealised Image of a Mother* aims to showcase how the widespread distribution of images depicting motherhood on social media platforms have the ability to create motherhood as the focal point of discourse therefore providing a constant gaze on mothers and the practice of mothering. In particular, my focus will be on Instagram, a social networking platform, as I examine how these images interact with and shape the contemporary cultural meaning of motherhood in the twenty-first century. Discourses of the “good mother” have long provided a framework of morality and social expectation which has limited women’s agency over their own parenting decisions. People's opinions have always played a role in shaping this idealised view of motherhood and mothering, but in the modern world, there is an overload of information on what is considered to be a good or bad mother due to the development of mass media (Wallworth, 2018).This is a major contributing factor to the changing perception of motherhood, as it places immense pressure on mothers to live up to society's unrealistic expectations. In recent times, the “perfect mother” has been given an impossible standard to live up to and when surveillance and monitoring strategies are used, achieving this idealised image can cause mothers a great deal of anxiety and stress, while at the same time mothers who don't fit the mould of the "ideal" mother have a hard time seeing themselves reflected in the popular depictions of motherhood on the internet (Wallworth, 2018). “Media representations of motherhood construct a moral landscape where certain choices and practices are deemed more appropriate than, and even morally superior to, others” (Heffernan & Wilgus, 2018).

In today's society, the concept of motherhood is associated with material success and the mainstream media as well as celebrity culture contribute to this normalisation of a commercialised and consumer-focused conception of motherhood. This creates a false impression of motherhood and puts pressure on mothers to strive for material success as the benchmark of their parenting ability, leading to feelings of guilt and inadequacy among those who do not have access to these resources. Instead of motherhood being seen as an important role in society or in a person's life, it is being valued based on material possessions (Krzyżanowska, 2020). In my analysis I will be discussing these issues that mothers have to face, which are created through Instagram. Through the examination of mumfluencers I aim to discuss how these high profiles shape our concept of motherhood as a social institution and as an individual experience. In addition to this, I will demonstrate how mumfluencers have the ability to influence parents' purchasing decisions by referencing Marx's theory of alienation, which suggests that a fixation on material goods, as a measure of success, can erode our sense of self-worth and identity and make us question our own performance of mothering. By mumfluencers advertising unessential items they create a false sense of need and cause mothers to feel as though they should have all the new up to date products in order to perform mothering perfectly (Scarpaci, 2016).

In public discourse, there is a constant focus on how women are portrayed and this has resulted in developing a fetishised view of the maternal body therefore creating an increased desire for societal regulation of pregnant women's bodies (Stein, 2011). This system reinforces the idea that whether or not a mother is a "good" mother is based on the image she projects, creating an almost obsessive focus on self-image

and social validation and a need to live up to this expectation of motherhood (Roberti, 2022).

CHAPTER 1: SUPPORT OR SURVEILLANCE?

Despite the fact that every culture has its own mythology about motherhood and mothering, there are without a doubt universal standards and expectations of motherhood that we as mothers can relate to. The prevalent paradigm in the West emphasises the importance of a mothers innate and natural qualities for appropriate motherhood. The attributes of "good" mothers are supposed to result organically from their infant's instinctive affection.

In her book *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace,* Sara Ruddick acknowledges that giving birth is a biological act but she contends that the social construction of motherhood, which she claims "romanticises natural mother/child relationships," is what actually adds to women's subjugation (1989, cited in Drury, n.d). Andrea O'Reilly agrees with this view stating that

> motherhood is, thus,primarily not a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood (O'Reilly, 2016).

The concept of motherhood is different to each and every one of us, whether it be from our own experience of mothering or just from being mothered, while simultaneously we are constantly subjected to a variety of information that portrays motherhood and what it means to be a mother in either an idealised or a negative way. We look to women to provide a safe haven for their children and nurture them to maturity, yet at the same time society often blames them for being overbearing and smothering and their children's misfortunes in life (2012, cited Ross, 2016). To further its agenda of influencing public opinion, the media has appropriated and

misconstrued instructions on how to be a good mother by presenting this information from a variety of academic and scientific sources (Ross, 2016). This good mother ideology is “an articulated, self conscious belief and ritual system aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action”. This concept and system functions as a cultural framework that all mothers must confront, embrace, or contest at some point in their lives (Vigil, 2012).

Gendered assumptions, culture, and the historical moment in which motherhood is investigated all form and modify the paradigms underpinning concepts of the good mother. As mentioned by Sophie Goodchild (2007) in The Independent's story headlined *The Nanny State: Monstering of the Modern Mother,*

> It seems that everything a woman does these days comes in for criticism from an army of child-rearing gurus, government campaigners and healthcare experts who are only too ready to wag the finger and dish out blame (Goodchild, 2007).

Historically other people's perceptions have always played a role in shaping this socially constructed view of idealised motherhood and mothering but in today's contemporary world, there is an overexposure of information on what is deemed to be a good or bad mother due to the evolution of mass media. Contemporary motherhood can be extremely contradicting and polarising and when surveillance and monitoring strategies are used, achieving the idea of the perfect mother can cause internalised concerns to mothers and place immense pressure on them to live up to these standards. While at the same time mothers who don't conform to social norms about what makes a good mother are often stigmatised in society (Wallworth, 2018).

“But the media does more than simply mirror reality. In many ways today’s media constructs reality” (McClellan, 2007 cited in Ross, 2016). This of course is nothing

new, but perhaps more so now than ever with the increase of media platforms, women are bombarded with advice on how to perform mothering effectively from a wide variety of sources. Even before motherhood begins for a woman, or in some instances it does not, the media begins advising on what we should and should not do in terms of diet, exercise, and tobacco use in order to have a healthy pregnancy, labour, and postpartum recovery. Although guidance has evolved over the years, one constant is that it is still primarily given to women and rarely to men.

There are unlimited amounts of self-help, contemporary child rearing manuals, and other books out there that counsel mothers or mothers-to-be on what they should or shouldn't do for their personal health and, more crucially, the health of their unborn child. One of these self-help books is *The Whole-Brain Child -12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind* by Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson (2011). Daniel J. Siegel, neuropsychiatrist and author of the bestselling *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (2009), together with child development expert Tina Payne Bryson, present a new way of thinking about how to raise children by focusing on twelve principles that promote healthy brain growth. With over 2 million copies sold, it is a New York Times bestseller. Another popular example is Heidi Murkoff's *What to Expect the First Year* (2014). With over 11 million copies in print, Murkoff's book is the world's best-selling and a popular choice amongst parents for guiding them through the instructions that babies don't come with, but should. More so now than ever, there has been a parallel increase in the quantity and circulation of parenting publications. Increasingly, researchers are looking at intensive mothering, as a means for mothers to encourage their children's social, emotional, and intellectual development (Quirke, 2006). This ideology of intensive mothering, popularised by Sharon Hays, an American sociologist, is a style of mothering which is seen as, "child-centred,

expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive and financially expensive" (Hays, S., 1998).

The internet has created a space for contemporary mothers to talk openly about motherhood as a complex, ambiguous, humorous, and occasionally painful experience. Breastfeeding, sex after birth, and postpartum depression were once taboo subjects, but they have now gained mainstream attention. Platforms such as Mommy blog websites have enabled mothers to discuss issues related to motherhood, child rearing, and family life that are often overlooked in the media. Mommy blogging can be seen as a place where mothers, whether it be anonymous or not, can share their unfiltered thoughts on motherhood in a public forum. Here they get the chance to rescript the socially constructed idea of motherhood "in the assertion of their own writing selves, and combating the cultural 'amnesia' that for long tidied up the story of what it meant to mother" (Morrison, A., 2010).

It's become increasingly common in modern society to equate the ideal of motherhood with material success. Television, magazines, books, and movies all too frequently portray a distorted version of motherhood that sets an unrealistically idealised norm (Bradshaw, 2013 cited in Ross, 2016) and condemns "other" mothers who fall short of this ideal. The mainstream media and celebrity culture both contribute to the normalisation of a highly commercialised and consumer-focused conception of motherhood. Instead of motherhood being recognized as an important role socially or personally, it instead "becomes increasingly linked, in public discourse, to economic relations of acquiring or gaining material goods" (Krzyżanowska, 2020).

The media also helps maintain dominant paradigms by publicising and circulating images around the internet creating a false hope that all women entering into

motherhood should or will have flawless pregnancies to flawless postpartum bodies, perfect relationships, and thriving professions. “These images essentially reinforce the conception of motherhood as a test of a woman’s psychological adequacy”. In reality, “fatigue, overwork, and lack of sexual interests are typical problems that mothers of young children bring to physicians” (Trice-Black & Foster, 2011). Contemporary mothers are not only expected to mother their children with the same level of dedication but they are also now pressured to keep up with their appearances of “yummy mummy”, as portrayed on the front-cover images in the celebrity weeklies, while also balancing paid employment and other commitments outside of the home. Because of this, motherhood has become an integral part of the language of self-perfection, which in turn requires extremely high levels of individual consumption. “While women dwell over whether or not they are more of a ‘yummy mummy’ or an ‘earth mom,’ they have less time to consider the deeper questions of loss of self and sacrifice that come with motherhood” (Tropp, 2013).

Motherhood in the contemporary world is fraught with tension; it's a place where women experience both emancipation and subjugation, where love and wrath coexist. Motherhood can also be considered a place of surveillance where women constantly observe each other as well as compare themselves to unrealistic portrayals of motherhood. Mothers are evaluated according to the postfeminist notion of "having-it-all", an ability to take care of the home, raise a family, have the perfect appearance as well as a paid profession.

> The plethora of mothering manuals, how-to-guides and blogging sites dedicated to fit mums, thrifty mums, stay-at-home mums and the latest neologism, “mumpreneurs”, contributes to an environment in which motherhood is constantly displayed, critiqued and also, commodified (Wallworth, 2018).

CHAPTER 2: THE RISE OF THE ‘MUMFLUENCER’

Mumfluencers’ are influential people on social media who use their platform to share their experience of mothering while simultaneously promoting their favourite products and services via visual storytelling. Their day typically consists of documenting and sharing content such as images of their “freshly bathed babies (with only the best diaper recommendations)” (Steyn, 2021) ,as well as “staged photos of happy, put-together mothers and children with captions about children’s accomplishments” (Kirkpatrick & Sungkyoung, 2022). Even if you don't follow them, you'll see posts from recommended "mumfluencer" Instagram accounts appear in your home feed. These accounts are typically operated by white, skinny, attractive upper class women who also happen to have pristine homes and well groomed children. They are reminiscent of the 1950s in some sense, as images posted usually depict mothers promoting domestic bliss where they are seen “twinning” with their children, (a term used to describe two people who wear the same outfit), and epitomise a "traditional wife" lifestyle (Cosslett, 2022).

Fig.1: Tammy Hembrow, a mumfluencer, pictured with her children.

“From taking care of children, to still having the time to curl your hair, put on your favourite lipstick and pose for a fashion shoot”, images like these, which are depicted by mumfluencers, create a romanticised view of motherhood and puts increased pressure on mothers to live up to this expectation, therefore negatively affecting their mental health (Steyn, 2021). Particularly during pregnancy, women felt that they couldn’t live up to the ideal that is portrayed on Instagram. Images such as the perfect “golden hour”, a term used to describe the skin to skin contact between mother and baby immediately after the birth, to the perfect postpartum photo has become idealised and fetishised on social media (Cosslett, 2022). From vlogs about “how we found out we were pregnant” to their gender reveal parties, as well as ultrasound pictures and bump progress posts also known as “bumpdates” , fertility and pregnancy have become a social media phenomenon where high profiles overexpose content ,that used to be considered private, to boost their social profiles and gain popularity. While it is great to see women normalise pregnancy moments and topics that were once considered taboo, research indicates that overexposure of perfectly curated imagery can have a seriously negative affect on a mother’s wellbeing.

> It is possible that parents with high levels of social comparison orientation also make upward comparisons in relation to posts from professional profiles, indirectly comparing themselves to the “perfect” parent who is able to follow every piece of advice all the time (Grose, 2022).

Fig.2 & 3: Elle Swift, an influencer, publicly announcing her pregnancy and documenting her process via vlogs.

In addition to sharing idealistic and admirable depictions of motherhood, that solely focus on the positive aspects of parenting, mumfluencers are uniquely positioned to understand the needs of parents and children, given their experiences as mothers, and therefore have the ability to influence parents' purchasing decisions (Cosslett, 2022). With the rise of digital media, influencer marketing is becoming a widely used tool for businesses and marketers to reach a larger audience. It is "estimated to be a $16.4 billion industry in 2022 (up from $13.8 billion in 2021)". This is due to the fact that every market and field has an influential figure with a sizable fan base. Many mumfluencers also partner with companies to promote products they believe in, often family-friendly and mother-oriented brands like Huggies and Pampers (*Momfluencers and mommy bloggers are the latest trend in influencer marketing,* n.d.)

When promoting baby products, mumfluencers tend to advertise items that fall into a certain category in terms of appearance. As of recently, they have adopted this specific monochromatic style, as writer, librarian, and mother Hayley DeRoche (2022) would describe as a “sad beige” childhood aesthetic, where bright colours for children’s clothing, nursery decor and toys have been banished in favour of muted earth tones and neutrals such as oatmeal,khaki and taupe (Shafrir, 2022).

> Sad beige is when your aesthetic is marketed in such a way that it views childhood as a somber experience and that dressing your children this way or creating this environment will create a calm environment full of little scholars who want nothing more than to just, like, listen to Mozart quietly in their beige room and play quietly with their one wooden toy (Donnelly, 2022)

DeRoche points out in an interview with Yahoo Life that, while there's certainly nothing wrong with stocking up on neutral-coloured baby essentials, it's a common misconception that a parent is automatically better if their child's nursery is devoid of colour and they are dressed in expensive, eco-friendly clothing. Products that DeRoche labels "sad beige" are often promoted as "better" and "more ethical" because they are organic but in fact whilst investigating further, DeRoche came across widespread instances of "greenwashing," a practise used by companies to market products so that they appear environmentally friendly when they are not (Donnelly, 2022). Objects advertised by mumfluencers such as “interior design-friendly" Scandinavian inspired wooden toys and matching silicone tableware sets for toddlers are guilty of this practice in the sense that they may seem organic and sustainable due to their colour scheme and minimalistic appearance. By advertising products like these, mumfluencers are adding to this consumer culture and going by Marx's theory of alienation, as discussed by Joseph Scarpaci in *Material Culture and the Meaning of Objects* (2016), we can see how this

preoccupation with consumerism can have a damaging effect on our sense of self-worth and identity, as we become increasingly focused on attaining material objects as a measure of success. This constant exposure to content which aims to promote nonessential fancy baby products that fit into a trendy aesthetic can create a false sense of need where mothers feel as though they should have all the new up to date gadgets in order to perform mothering perfectly (Scarpaci, 2016).

> These desires to consume conflate how individuals (e.gš, consumers) determine their "needs." Marketing stimuli artificially impose a sense of needing objects, and the greater those needs are, the larger the process of alienation. How many pairs of shoes, TV sets, cars, and pieces of jewellery are required to survive? (Scarpaci, 2016).

Fig.4: an example of a ‘sad beige’ aesthetic nursery

Fig.5: an example of matching tableware set

Many brands have found that highlighting a certain lifestyle has resulted in increased sales. But rather than promoting reduced consumption, simplicity or minimalism has become fashionable and the newest trend that people follow these days.

> The term minimalism today typically refers to simplistic designs and neutral colour schemes. The “lesser” look often tries to imply that it is somehow better, even if it's not necessarily environmentally friendly or ethical. There is no guarantee that something is good for the environment or has clean ingredients just because it appears that way (Claudia, 2021).

This type of consumption is an example of what the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre discusses in his critique of consumer society (1984). In his book *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Lefebvre contends that advertising and marketing promotion gives value to objects and deceptively promises bliss through consumption. Through the advertising of their specific aesthetic, mumfluencers create the notion that happiness and status are promised through the act of consumption. They also insinuate the idea that if a childs nursery, clothing or toys are aesthetically pleasing then mothering will be easier, happier and more efficient thus again creating this idealised image of motherhood that mothers constantly have to compare to (1984).

CHAPTER 3: THE PERFECT MATERNAL BODY

> We conceptualise our bodies as our own, as private, but there is an undeniably social dimension to our bodies as well that limits the extent to which they are within our control. This precarity becomes much more salient during pregnancy, when a woman’s body begins to occupy more public space as the private space of her own body becomes occupied (O’Branski, 2013).

According to Sadie Stein's article *A Brief History of the Bump Watch* pregnant women were frequently confined to private chambers during the 19th century and this sensibility extended to maternity wear, which was aimed to conceal pregnant

women's bodies with loose clothing. Although pregnancy was once a performance of anonymity, it has now transformed into a badge of honour with women flaunting their bumps in tight fitting and exposing maternity attire. However, with this change came a fetishised view of the maternal body and therefore has created an increased desire for societal regulation of pregnant women's bodies (2011).

In public discourse, there is a constant focus on how women are portrayed. “The public gaze whether it be male or female, are constantly preoccupied with what a woman will do next to her body in terms of clothing, accessories, self-care, and the pursuit of physical perfection” (Sabala & Gopal, 2010). Nowadays, there is an obvious marketing of beauty, and everyone mindlessly adheres to the societally acceptable ideal of this certain appearance that has been established. This false standard of beauty that is perpetuated by society puts a great deal of pressure on people, particularly women, to conform to what they are told they should look like (Sabala & Gopal, 2010). Furthermore, this hyper-focus on a woman's appearance serves as a reminder of her subordinate position in society, and perpetuates the idea that physical attractiveness is the most important aspect of womanhood.

Social media platforms such as Instagram enable mumfluencers and celebrities to reinforce this idealised view of the maternal body by posting content that displays this physical “perfection”. Many public figures often share details of their weight loss openly, as well as revealing specifics about their diet and workout plans, by uploading images of their "perfectly toned' bodies just weeks after giving birth. And if some haven’t immediately returned to their pre-baby bodies, the media often spotlights these women as different or exceptional. The maternal body continues to be a topic of discourse and, at times, the centre of public opinion because of this

continual focus. "You see Rihanna at the moment being called out for not losing her baby weight, or being praised for not losing the baby weight," (James cited in Ruggeri, 2022). Remarks like these are typical of a culture that routinely and aggressively seeks access to women's bodies.

> Reproducing women are increasingly subject to surveillance and regulation by the state, strangers and each other. Barely any aspect of reproductive decision-making has been left untouched—from an employer's interest in a woman's use of birth control, to the state's interest in her miscarriage (Bronstein, 2016).

The Pregnant Body as an Object of Desire

With the help of social media and the rise of mumfluencer accounts, there is an increased pressure on women to perform pregnancy in a certain way. Duffy et al. (2022), identifies the gendered fictions that are evident on these platforms and how they aid in creating/recreating views of femininity that are considered somewhat conventional. Women must then contend with this expectation, and are often left feeling "wronged or inadequate" (Roberti, 2022). For several years, mainstream media has attempted to emphasise the stylish, alluring, and frequently sexualized qualities of feminism and femininity, while also viewing pregnancy as a fashion choice ,like the newest or oldest accessory (Roberti, 2022). Instead of highlighting its ability to illuminate the complex power relations characterising modern society, the media is too preoccupied with creating a glamorised view of the maternal body. The concept of "having it all" suggests that women's aspirational role as working professionals does not require them to give up their femininity or their wish to start a family, fusing the stereotypes of the perfect housewife and the hard working career woman in a way that is both idealistic and implausible. In this view, women can achieve what Campo (2005) calls "the ultimate trifecta" career, marriage, and children without sacrificing their femininity if they work hard and organise their days perfectly (2005, cited in Bronstein, 2016). Because of this women feel under

pressure to perform pregnancy in a particularly regimented way and are criticised if they don't manage to portray pregnancy as a time of radiant femininity. “The pregnant woman should be blissful, glowing, and free of complaints. She should be a martyr to her pregnancy, from regimented dietary restrictions to opting for natural childbirth—after all, this is her first act as a mother” (Bronstein, 2016). The implementation and practise of this gender imaginary through social media and advertising, creates a sense of worry that these views of femininity will become normalised and generate certain stereotypes and assumptions (Roberti, 2022).

Fig.6: Niamh de Brún pictured at her baby shower.

In the past, being pregnant was something to be kept secret out of concern for one's own modesty. Women, especially unmarried ones, were expected to hide their condition out of shame and fear of ridicule or being ostracised by their communities. Nowadays, things have taken a complete turn, and the nation is now a womb-obsessed society. While this shift is beneficial in that it brings this vital part of women's lives into the mainstream, the constant media coverage has increased the

criticism that women face in many areas. Despite advances, people still pass judgement on women based on how they look and try to dictate how they live (Bronstein, 2016).

In *Pregnant With the Stars*, Renee Cramer explores celebrity pregnancy in depth, connecting the baby bump phenomenon to the larger patriarchal system that governs women's bodies. “The pregnant female body has gone from being an embarrassing reminder that women had sex and therefore private state of being to being considered public property for regulation and commercial property to be celebrated as sexy.” As a result of this, pregnant women are constantly observed. Now, ridiculous debates such as whether Beyoncé or Jessica Simpson is better at portraying pregnancy dominate the media. Which public figure is more desirable, Christina Aguilera or Chrissy Teigen? (2015 cited in Bronstein, 2016).

In *Making ‘Postmodern’ Mothers: Pregnant Embodiment, Baby Bumps and Body Image* (2012), Meredith Nash draws attention to the complexities of how pregnant bodies are perceived, a woman caught between the desexualised ideals of femininity as well as the desirable ideals where they are viewed as merely objects of sexual attraction. Nash states that the desexualisation of pregnant women is evident in maternity clothing through the reference to ‘girls’ as their consumers. This characterisation is quite unusual as pregnancy in itself is an open display of sexuality (Nash, 2012). Despite the fact that women are labelled as such, they are still viewed as objects of desire, which is evident through the term ‘yummy mummy’ that has been ascribed to mothers.

> Yummy mummy is a slang term used to describe an attractive mother. The term developed in the late 20th century, and was often applied to celebrity mothers such as Elizabeth Hurley or Victoria Beckham, who appeared to quickly regain their pre-pregnancy figures after giving birth, and would continue to lead carefree and affluent lifestyles (*Yummy mummy*, 2022).

New and unconventional maternity clothing advertised to women nowadays are often described as “sexy”, “fun” and “glamorous” and are reported as being overly tight or too low-cut by mothers. This suggests that in order to wear these kinds of clothes, a woman should be confident enough to reveal her pregnant body in such a way. This seemingly contradictory desire to both conceal and reveal pregnant bodies at the same time demonstrates that women are expected to take up a particular performance of maternity that does not match with the reality of being pregnant. “Nash is able to peel apart these layers enough to shed light on the bifurcated and overlapping experiences of pregnancy as simultaneously private/public, Self/Other, thin/large” (O’Branski, 2013).

With the rise of the “yummy mummy” persona, mothers often feel pressure to project an image that motherhood hasn't changed them physically all the while trying to live up to the standards of the ideal mother, wife, and employee. "It is a very strange part of our culture where we gauge a woman's postpartum period in terms of how they look, rather than how they're feeling," says Oakley. “It's nine months of growing a baby where everyone tells you how glowing you are and how lovely you are. And then afterwards, they're a bit like, 'Ew'’ (James cited in ruggeri, 2022).
Bounce-back culture or also known as snapback culture refers to the celebration of a person whose body is able to quickly return to its prepregnant state. This is exacerbated by the nature of social media, where it is often difficult to tell fact from fiction as we are constantly bombarded with false and misleading information.The pressure to return to pre-baby weight or look a certain way after childbirth is one that

plagues new mothers everywhere and can be incredibly damaging to mental health. (This is a harsh reality for new mothers, who are already dealing with the daily struggles that come with being a parent.) This is evident through research that has shown how postpartum depression rates are higher among mothers who compare themselves to images they see online (Trotta, 2022).

“[...] feminist communication scholarship always has at its core a goal of examining how gender relations are represented, or the ways in which audiences make sense of them, or how media practitioners contribute to perpetuating sexual inequalities” (Mendes and Carter cited in Roberti, 2022). Through the practice of critically analysing representations of gender within media texts and contexts, feminist communication scholarship attempt to reveal and challenge how gender inequality is sustained, reproduced and transformed in contemporary society. By taking this approach,they are then able to illustrate the way gender functions not only at a social level, but also how it is embedded in our personal and professional lives.

The rapid proliferation of digital media, and especially social media, has greatly increased the number of surveillance mechanisms with which women must contend. Gill (2021) cited results from a survey of over 200 young people between the ages of 18 and 30 in which respondents noted the pressure they felt to conform to social media's normative portrayal of ideal behaviour and the importance social media placed on its own prescriptions for how its users should fulfil their social roles. Particularly young women feel that they are always being judged by others. This scrutiny often manifests itself in the form of unwanted and judgmental comments or critiques of appearance, behaviour, and life choices and is amplified through social media platforms. It is “[...] not simply done by others to the self, but equally is applied

to one’s own appearance, requiring a distinctive critical gaze on the self ” (Gill, 2021 cited in roberti, 2022).This system reinforces the idea that a woman's identity and worth are based on the image she projects, creating an almost obsessive focus on self-image and social validation and a need to live up to the standards of others and to this idealised image of a perfect woman. Social media and high public figures such as mumfluencers all contribute to the construction of a common female imaginary, offering the audience that follows them a romanticised depiction of what it means to be a woman in today's society (Roberti, 2022).

CONCLUSION:

Throughout my discussion, I have demonstrated how the proliferation of motherhood related images across social media platforms have the potential to make mothers and mothering the topic of constant discussion and attention. In this paper I have concentrated on the good mother ideology and how social media platforms such as Instagram contribute to the construction and reconstruction of this idealised image of the “perfect” mother and mothering practices. Motherhood is regarded as not a natural or biological function but rather a fundamentally cultural practice that is constantly rescripted through various social media platforms (O’Reilly, 2016). The media's constant depiction of mothers, mothering, and motherhood has made the topic of motherhood a cultural focal point. Perfectly curated and well edited images of mothers shared on social media by mumfluencers have the ability to create an idealised view of motherhood and this research paper examines how these representations shape our conceptions of motherhood, our views on mothers, and our own mothering experiences. Through the advertisement of aesthetically pleasing yet nonessential baby products, mumfluencers have the ability to influence other mothers' purchasing decisions. This is problematic as it adds to the growing consumer culture where people equate objects to happiness as well as setting unrealistic standards to mothers who are underprivileged, thus creating stress and anxiety for mothers as they contemplate their mothering practices.

In public discourse, there is a constant focus on how women are portrayed. In particular, a fetishised view of the maternal body has been created through the modern ways in which pregnancy is being displayed. Social media platforms such as Instagram enable mumfluencers and celebrities to reinforce this idealised view of the maternal body by posting content that displays this physical “perfection”. This

hyper-fixation on a woman's appearance creates a negative view as it serves as a reminder of her subordinate position in society, and perpetuates the idea that physical attractiveness is more important than the act of mothering.

The rise of the yummy mummy figure, has created an increased pressure for mothers to appear a certain way physically postpartum as well as trying to live up to the standards of the perfect mother, wife and worker. The pressure to return to pre-baby weight or look a certain way after childbirth is one that plagues new mothers everywhere and can be incredibly damaging to mental health. From my analysis I have demonstrated how social media and high public figures aid in the construction of motherhood and how images posted on platforms like Instagram, create pressure for women to perform motherhood in a certain way.

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