How the Media Communicates Ideals of Motherhood to Real Life Mothers

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ABSTRACT

This study examined what ideals/expectations related to motherhood are communicated through the media and how real life mothers *feel* about the ideals/expectations of motherhood communicated by the media. These research questions were explored through nine semi-structured interviews that resulted in five overarching themes ("perfect mom," "I felt shame, massive shame," "it made me a little bit psycho," "attainable in bursts," and "let's be real, it's not real") and two subthemes ("the mom who does it all and looks hot doing it" and "the vacation thing). The literature review and discussion connect motherhood to muted group theory (Ardener & Ardener, 1975), cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1976), and the five stages of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969).

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood, a socially constructed role involving nurturing and caring for others, has been portrayed in a myriad of ways throughout history and these portrayals function as dominant narratives in our society (Arendell, 2000; Uttal, 1996; Vandenberg-Daves, 2014). The media, including broadcasting, publishing, and the internet, is mass communication that plays a role in shaping reality and identity. Real life mothers' identities are simultaneously shaped and overshadowed by the representations of motherhood in the media (Forcey, 1994) that become "culturally constructed consensuses" (Lang, 2006, p. 15). These representations communicate various ideals and expectations of what is called good mothering that are often not attainable because they are so "formidable, self-denying, elusive, changeable, and contradictory" and are not reflective of real life, but yet play a pervasive role in shaping the actions and mindsets of real life mothers. (Thurer, 1995, p. xvi). "It influences our domestic arrangements, what we think is best for our children, how we want them to be raised, and whom we hold accountable" (Thurer, 1995, p. xv). After addressing the ideals and expectations of motherhood that are communicated through the media, the current study will explore how real life mothers' identities have been affected by these representations.

Real life mothers often attempt to mother in the ways deemed fit by the dominant group. What the dominant group deems "fit" or "right" relies heavily on the representations of motherhood in the media (Devereux, 2003). Muted group theory (Ardener & Ardener, 1975) explores how communication practices of dominant groups suppress, mute, or devalue the words, ideas, and discourses of subordinate groups. Real life mothers cannot easily articulate their lived experiences because their voices are historically and routinely suppressed, muted, and devalued by hegemonic power structures. In today's society, a lot of mothers search for social support in communities of mothers online through blogs and Facebook groups and these online venues serve as some of the few places real life mothers' voices can be heard (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017). These voices deserve to be highlighted on a broader scale in communication discourse surrounding the portrayal of motherhood in media. This study will aim to capture and represent the individual, lived experiences of real life mothers and promulgate the participants' voices regarding the representations of motherhood in the media.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To understand and analyze motherhood today, an exploration of motherhood throughout history is essential. Investigating the conceptual and historical perspectives of motherhood in America will precede the examination of how the media portrays and represents motherhood. Subsequently, muted group theory will elucidate the exclusion of real life mothers' voices from dominant discourse surrounding motherhood. A review of the literature surrounding motherhood and its representations and portrayals in the media will lay a foundation for the primary research and analysis of a muted group: real life mothers. Real life mothers will be referred to in this paper as an opposition to the concept of the socially and culturally constructed "good mother." Real life mothers will refer to the existent corporeal women who perform motherhood.

Conceptual and Historical Perspectives of Motherhood in the U.S.

Motherhood, the socially constructed role of caring for others (i.e., the way women perform mothering), is culturally derived. Each society (past, present, and future) had, has, and will have its own ideology about motherhood (Thurer, 1995). These ever-changing ideologies encompass beliefs, norms, symbols, rituals, ideals, and expectations. According to Birns and Hay (1988):

> The ideology of motherhood operates under the following central points: all women want to be mothers, a biological mother always loves her biological children, the biological mother is the best caretaker for her children, mothers know intuitively what their children need, infants need the constant presence of their mothers, love and marriage and motherhood are naturally linked, and motherhood within the heterosexual structure of marriage is the best way to raise children (p. 141).

This ideology of motherhood and the way American society views mothering is not inherently right or wrong nor better or worse than any other view of mothering as "our predecessors followed a pattern very different from our own, and our descendants may hew to one that is no less different" (Thurer, 1995, p. xv). The historical concept of a mother in America, though, presents "a sentimentalized image of the perfect mother that casts a long, guilt-inducing shadow over real mothers' lives" (Thurer, 1995, p. xi). The performance of motherhood has evolved through history under the forces of dominant ideologies like patriarchy, capitalism, and feminism. Motherhood is universally associated with women and aspects of femininity but is historically dictated by men and money (Thurer, 1995; Vandenberg-Daves, 2014).

Mothers across the United States operate within the dominant ideology of feminism. "The simplest and least threatening version of feminism" is seen as the push for simple fairness in the United States (Glenn et al., 1994, p. 152). But Bassin et al. (1994) said there is a "divide" in feminist thinking between the "need to build an identity of women and the need to dismantle the category entirely." Feminists have always resisted the constraints and expectations of culturally represented and defined motherhood and "yet loathe to give up their mother right" (p. 250). Some feminists see motherhood as an obstacle in women's liberation that traps women in the home and ties them to cooking, cleaning, and childcare but "early feminist attacks on motherhood alienated masses of women from the movement" (hooks, 1984, p. 134). On the other hand, "motherhood is as romanticized by some feminists as it was by 19th century men and women who extolled the virtues of the 'cult of domesticity'" (hooks, 1984, p. 135). "Since the 19th century, mothering has been presumed to be a primary identity for most adult women" and thus, "womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1193). It is clear that the concept of motherhood is socially constructed by aspects of feminism, but feminism does not present a clear picture of what motherhood is.

In addition to feminism, motherhood has been manipulated by patriarchal prescriptions that ultimately work against women (Uttal, 1996). In colonial America, women's fertility was essential to community survival. Near the end of the American Revolution women were offered "republican motherhood," which did not offer them votes or positions in office but gave mothers the duty to raise sons in morally and virtuous ways to ensure the next generation of men would be suited for maintaining the new government (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014). Patriarchal ideology can be seen in the concept of republican motherhood because "in a patriarchal society, men use women to have their children" (Glenn et al., 1994, p. 143). Men effectively conquered the most essentially female function of all: the reproduction of our species (Ardener, 1978, p. 171).

As men organized much of mainstream history, the mother has been dehumanized by wild idealization (Thurer, 1995). In the years following the American Revolution, the dominant narrative shifted again and mothers were expected to emulate moral motherhood. Moral mothers ideally upheld the virtue of the family while avoiding participation in politics and business for such endeavors had the power to sully their morality. This version of motherhood "exacerbated gender distinctions and legitimated women's economic and political dependence" within the social chaos of a rapidly advancing America (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014, p. 31). While moral motherhood called for virtue and purity, twentieth century motherhood was sexual, but the ideal mother "channeled her sexuality into both marriage and motherhood" (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014, p. 176). Masculine and feminine roles in heterosexual domestic partnerships that result in children tend to favor the man. The woman regularly receives the responsibility of childcare and housework reinforcing the "gendered organization of caring and reproducing hierarchical meanings of gender and devaluation of unpaid work" (McMahon, 1995, p. 228). Patriarchal ideologies begin to intertwine with capitalist ideologies when history presents a time of economic turmoil.

The onset of the Great Depression in the 1930's increased the population of mothers without male breadwinners and capitalist ideologies again shifted the dominant narrative. Mothers' roles were exacerbated by poverty as household chores increased along with the need for income. Many women opened their homes to boarders and charged them rent. Others tried to work outside the home but earned only 56-60 percent of what men were earning and were still expected to shoulder the majority of housework and childcare (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014, p. 107).

As mothers entered the work force either out of necessity or personal ambition, clear expectations of working mothers began to arise and solidify. Mothers were expected to work outside the home and within the home: arguably two full time jobs. However, when work and family come to a head, mothers inevitably must prioritize one or the other and were/are consistently shamed either way. If a mother prioritizes her job, she is ridiculed for abandoning her children and characterized as a bad mother as a "sacrificial willingness to set personal ambition aside was the virtuous proof of good mothering" (Thurer, 1995, p. 287). And if a mother prioritizes her children, she often faces disadvantages and consequences at work. McMahon (1995) said, although mothers who work outside the home are no longer expected to be physically present with their children at all times, the belief that they be accessible and responsible persists making mothers the "on-call" parent. (p. 233-234). Thus, the "good mother" in capitalist and patriarchal ideology is inherently contradictory because it idealizes strength and independence while simultaneously favoring maternal nurturance and domesticity. Women are expected to rear and raise children yet, "the extraordinary talents required to do the long-term work of building human character and instilling in young children the ability and desire to learn have no place in the economists' calculations" (Crittenden, 2001, p. 4).

Domestic realities were/are shaped under the influence of various ideological frameworks. As dominant narratives shift and evolve the institution of motherhood, real life mothers must also change or risk being labeled as a bad mother which further excludes them from expressing their lived experiences. Tracing these changes through history contributes the understanding of how motherhood is conceptualized and sets the stage for representations of motherhood in the media.

How the Media Portrays and Represents Motherhood

Mothers' roles shifted yet again in the face of the Baby Boom and the nation's new pastime: television. Audiences actively engaged with "advertisers from Gap to IBM to Tyson Chicken and Calvin Klein fragrances [who] have turned to photographs of babies to sell their products" (Thurer, 1995, p. xxiii). TV mothers, Vandenberg-Daves (2014) said, "were always married, financially supported by a man, prolific in their reproduction, and content with a life that revolved around serving the needs of children and husband" and women who didn't fit this mold were portrayed as problematic (p. 174). Journals, magazines, and other forms of media followed similar tropes and thus many women tried to emulate this ideal but of course the reality was riddled with contradictions. Motherhood has modernized while media representations of the "good mother" have complicated the construct of motherhood for real life mothers. The media's ideological role continuously impacts the evolution of rearing and raising children while external texts like advertisements, books, television, and magazines transmit the traditional ideology of motherhood so that mothers have internalized images of what is "good" and "right." "Today, we all want to be the mom in the baby food advertisements. (You know her: the mother who is always loving, selfless, tranquil; the one who finds passionate fulfillment in every detail of child rearing)" (Thurer, 1995, p. xiii). Real life mothers may strive to be that aforementioned mom which America sees as the "supermom."

The phenomenon of the American supermom (the "good mother") who represents and embodies the ideals and expectations of motherhood, has been portrayed in the media and solidified through discourse. D'Amore (2012) said, "superwoman and supermom became terms that implied women could shoulder immense burdens to work and raise families" (p. 1227). The culturally defined representation of the supermom associates traits like strength and capability with mothers who can "do it all" creating simultaneously empowering and limiting ideals for real life mothers. "Once advertisers discovered the new, working mother, the image of the superwoman who could 'have it all' was everywhere" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 180h). But soon the media adopted a new narrative with a very clear subtext aimed at mothers who worked outside the home. Media panics about satanism, abductions, and molestation from 1983-1984 told working mothers that their "most unforgivable sin was exposing their children too soon to the outside world" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 107). As if these messages were not enough to juggle, the 1980's also brought mothers the "rise of the inescapable model of motherhood, the always gorgeous, always sexy, always devoted celebrity mom" emulated by Princess Diana (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 109). Children became fashion accessories in women's magazines while the media hyped "crack babies" –a syndrome that it turns out does not exist—in order to further stereotype bad mothers (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Thurer, 1995). The stereotypes for "good mothers" and "bad mothers" were solidified by the media.

The media dictates much of what society sees and believes about motherhood and "there are clear linkages between media representations of the social world and the existence and persistence of social inequalities" (Devereux, 2003, p. 107). Motherhood, and its portrayal in the media, shapes not only how society sees women, but also how women see themselves and women's gender identity is reinforced by mothering (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Greenlee, 2014; McMahon, 1995). "It is easy to see that real women are much more different and more diverse than their representations in the media would seem to suggest" (Devereux, 2003, p. 131). Social media often presents mothers in an "untrue reflection of reality" and affects the way social media users (who are mothers) feel

about themselves as mothers and about other women as mothers (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2017, p. 24). "Media images of happy, fulfilled mothers, and the onslaught of advice from experts, have only added to mothers' feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety. Mothers today cling to an ideal that can never be reached but somehow cannot be discarded" (Thurer, 1995, p. xxiv). This phenomenon leads to incongruent identity formation and enactment.

Women's identities as unique individuals are often overshadowed by their identity as mothers and the ideals the media forces upon them. "One's face is an extension of one's self-identity that is modified with thought to cultural expectations and social desirability" (Heisler & Ellis, 2005, p. 449). As a result, mothers may experience turbulence when presenting and enacting their identity and may struggle to express their self-identity because mothers, and Americans in general, "have become highly judgmental about the practice of mothering, and especially about ourselves as mothers" (Thurer, 1995, p. xi). New and existing mothers might struggle to "balance their constructed mother image, and acknowledge their insecurities, need of connection, support, and advice from others" (Heisler & Ellis, 2005, p. 446). Thus, a lot of mothers search for social support in communities of mothers on online forums. Djafarova & Trofimenko (2017) said the "majority of mothers follow other mothers' profiles to get inspiration and social support" (p. 24). Mommy blogs and Facebook groups provide discussions boards/pages where mothers can find information, engage in asynchronous conversation, ask questions, find common interests, and share concerns (Skrba, 2022). "Facebook is an informative and supportive vehicle of communication for mothers," said Djafarova & Trofinmenko (2017), and is perceived to be "comprehensive in providing mothers with support" (p. 25). Likewise, mommy blogs provide encouragement, support, and instant advice (Charleston Moms, 2018).

These platforms provide an online space where mothers can connect and express themselves, but unfortunately the discourses of these mothers are still subordinate to the discourses of the dominant group(s). Unattainable ideals and unmeetable expectations of motherhood portrayed in the media continue to impact real life mothers' identity expression, affect mothering actions of real life mothers, and exclude the mothers' perspective. Mothers remain a muted group.

Muted Group Theory and How it Applies to Mothers

Muted group theory questions whether everyone in society has equally participated in the generation of ideas and their encoding into the narrative discourse that creates and reinforces dominant ideologies. The theory explores how communication practices of dominant groups suppress, mute, or devalue the words, ideas, and discourses of subordinate groups (Ardener, 1975). "Muting, by dominant groups through control of dominant discourse, is refracted through and embedded in many different social spaces" and women compromised "a conspicuous case in point" to the genesis of muted group theory (Ardener, 2005, p. 51). Ardeners' theory has been used extensively in feminist analysis and is often used to compare the communication of men and women. Muted group theory guides gender and communication research and "argues that not all speakers are equally served by their language since not all speakers are equal contributors to formulating the language" (Turner, 1992, p. 1). Men hold status in American society and therefore predominantly determine the communication practices of American culture (Ardener, 1975) and determine what ideas constitute the dominant discourse, so dominant discourse is "well suited to their (men's) experiences and communication needs" (Turner, 1992). However, this has consequences for women as the female-centered experience of mothering is consequently defined by men.

Therefore, mothers constitute a muted group because the mother's perspective and voice are far removed from the experience of motherhood (Ardener, 2005; Thurer, 1995). Rather than simply applying muted group theory to the binary and discrete categories of men and women, this study will apply the theory to mothers, a category of women that has unique and particular involvement with articulating their motherhood experience(s). As the preceding literature review manifests, real life mothers have been manipulated and controlled by dominant ideologies in society and by the expectations and ideals thrust upon motherhood by the media. "In effect, they (dominant groups) have invented a motherhood that excludes the experience of the mother" (Thurer, 1995, p. xviii).

The resulting society presents a need to restore to real life mothers their own presence by making space for their voices in dominant and academic discourse (Thurer, 1995). Thus, real life mothers' voices will be the focus of this study. The study will attempt to capture and represent real life mothers' lived experiences through several in depth interviews with contemporary mothers in America.

Research Questions

Djafarova & Trofinmenko (2017) studied how mothers' self-presentation on social media related to self-esteem using qualitative methodology. Heisler & Ellis (2008) utilized surveys to ask participants (all mothers with at least one child) to recall messages they may have received about motherhood and the source(s) of those messages. A second portion of the same study asked participants to indicate, on a Likert scale, their personal need to communicate and construct their "motherhood face" (p. 451). Moon et al. (2019) explored mothers' attitudes

towards the internet and social media as sources of parenting information and health information regarding their infant children. Mothers/motherhood and the media have been studied extensively in academia; however, the specific ideals and expectations communicated through the media deserve more extensive analysis.

RQ1: What ideals/expectations related to motherhood are communicated through the media?

Furthering RQ1, it is my understanding that there is limited qualitative research on real life mothers' perspectives regarding the specific ideals and expectations of motherhood communicated through the media. RQ2 aims to unmute and center the voices, emotions, and experiences of real life mothers' by gaining a qualitative understanding of their feelings regarding the ideals/expectations communicated to them about themselves as mothers and about other mothers around them.

RQ2: How do real life mothers *feel* about the ideals/expectations of motherhood communicated by the media?

METHODS

This study applied qualitative methods and the interpretive paradigm to interviews conducted with real life mothers. These interviews provided a broader understanding of the perspectives of modern mothers regarding the impact of media on their lives.

Methods Description

My study focused on qualitative data gathered from interviews and driven by interpretivism. Qualitative research seeks to study specific phenomena in context in order to better understand the phenomena of interest and "provides an intimate view of human communication" (Esterberg, 2002; Keyton, 2011). I made sense of muted group theory and its application to mothers through use of the interpretivist paradigm on the data collected during my qualitative interviews. Interpretivism was the best paradigm for my study because interpretivism strives to see and understand the world through other's eyes and believes in multiple subjective realities. Similarly, qualitative data gathering and analysis strives to capture and represent the participants' voices, embraces multiple realities, and values individual subjective experiences (Esterberg, 2002).

Therefore, interviews with real life mothers fueled the qualitative data and the interpretive paradigm by opening up a space for real life mothers to communicate their perspectives and experiences. Conducting interviews and using the resulting qualitative data with the goals of interpretivism in mind constituted the best approach to my study and yielded valuable results.

Participants

Women who are mothers and perform mothering were the focus of this study. These mothers were of various ages (all over the age of 18) and represented a range of occupations and socioeconomic status. Mothers who work outside the home and stay at home mothers were included in the participants for this study. I interviewed nine participants for this study before reaching data saturation.

Recruiting these participants began in my interpersonal circle of mothers I had access to. This nonprobability convenience sampling yielded seven participants from different communities, various careers outside the home, and various ages. I then asked these participants to refer/recommend other mothers who may want to participate. This secondary approach would be considered snowball or network recruitment and this yielded the last two participants.

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with nine real life mothers in order to gain data for this study. These 30-60 minute interviews began with rapport building that lead into open-ended interview questions and concluded with clearing house question(s). Participants were asked several questions that prompted them to share their lived experiences and promulgate their perspectives regarding the ideals/expectations surrounding motherhood that are portrayed in the media. The open-ended interview questions accounted for various forms of media (TV, magazines, streaming services, social media, etc.) and the answers shed light on how real life mothers *feel* about the ideals/expectations of motherhood and how these ideals/expectations affect real life mothers' actions and interactions.

These semi-structured interviews were primarily conducted through Zoom, but some were completed through written responses to the interview questions. The virtual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for later reference; notes were taken by the researcher throughout the interviews. Thorough analysis was conducted on these recordings and transcriptions while ensuring participant anonymity. Participants were referred to with pseudonyms when quoted in the research findings and analysis.

Analysis

When examining my gathered data, I used thematic analysis described by Braun & Clarke (2006) as a method often used in qualitative research to identify, extract, and report themes and patterns. The method often goes deeper, though, and opens the door for interpretation on various aspects of the researched phenomena. This was an effective method to utilize on the hours of audio recording and numerous pages of transcribed interviews. Familiarizing myself with the data was achieved through several readings and re-readings and concentrated note taking/marking of utterances that are interesting and/or repeated.

Focusing on one research question (RQ) at a time, I began coding for utterances in the transcripts that address each RQ by assigning each RQ a color and highlighting accordingly. I then organized these codes into digital piles that seemed similar and used these piles to search for themes and subthemes within the content. I then reviewed and refined the codes, searching for three to six major themes that provided answers/insights for my research questions.

RESULTS

The following section examines each of my research questions as separate entities. Each research question was examined using four question-specific themes that emerged from the participant interviews and includes analysis of each theme.

RQ1: What ideals/expectations related to motherhood are communicated through the media?

"Perfect mom."

Every single one of my participants used the word(s) "perfect" and/or "perfect mom" during their interview. After frequent engagement with media and copious hours of media and motherhood research this was not surprising as it was my understanding and belief that "perfection" and the "perfect mom" were certainly themes at play. However, it was valuable to realize through my participants' perceptions and experiences that this idealized "perfect mom" didn't just mean a perfect mom. This meant a perfect house, a perfect body, a perfect husband, and yes, perfect kids. When asked about a memorable portrayal from the media a participant noted that "you [mom] should always be available, always be patient, always be serving home cooked organic meals, always be engaging them [kids] in some kind of creative activity… it's really intensive perfect mothering." Another participant noted the intensity of parenting magazines when she said "they [parenting magazines/experts] say if you want your kids to be happy, healthy, and smart then you have to do *exactly* this…" What's "this" a mom might ask? Perfection. The ideal/expectation of perfection is undeniably erosive to real life mothers lived experiences especially when perfection encompasses appearances, behaviors, and finances.

"The mom that does it all and looks hot doing it."

We've all seen it and we know what/who she's talking about… "supermom." The phenomenon of the supermom solidified through discourse and portrayed in various forms of media and social media has shaped the paradigm of motherhood. The culturally defined representation of the supermom associates traits like strength and capability with mothers who can "do it all" creating simultaneously empowering and limiting ideals for real life mothers. "Super mom can do anything, so I wanted to do everything. I wanted to be that mom that other people looked at and thought oh wow, I want to do that with my kids or be like her," said one participant. Another participant said she always jokes that "I want to be a mom in the 90's because they could yell at their kids, send them outside until dinner, drink cab, watch soap operas, and smoke cigarettes." Another participant, however, whose three daughters are adults living on their own now noted that she's worried about the "increasing pressure on young moms with the perfect images and unrealistic behavior in the media." Pinterest, a social media platform known for its aesthetics, is really a breeding ground for the "perfect pictures and the perfect times with the perfect angles and the perfect filters," said a relatively younger mom whom I interviewed.

The recently coined phenomena of "influencers" suggests that there is a certain someone (or group of someones) that have specialized knowledge, authority, and/or insight into creating and altering perceptions of a given niche. In the case of motherhood, there are influencers who portray "the perfect house, home cooked meals, expensive French linen sheets on every bed, bread in the oven, homemade Christmas ornaments, a beautiful latte in the morning, and not to mention the perfect body," said a participant in this study. Another participant mentioned Chrissy Teigen, arguably an influential mother figure, who has "*that* body, *that* house, *that* husband," etc. Chrissy Teigen, along with other influencers on social media today, encapsulate and reinforce the historically prominent image of Wonder Woman.

In 1972, the narrative and image of Wonder Woman, a woman who could "do it all," became an icon for the feminist movement and was quickly associated with the narrative of the supermom. "I watched a lot of TV as a kid," said a participant, "and it really communicated that mothers do all, that they are the central part of the household." According to D'Amore (2012), "Superwoman and supermom became terms that implied that women could shoulder immense burdens to work and raise families" (p. 1227). Today, "mom should do everything… take care of the kids, make sure the house is clean, cook dinner, and still go to work full time," said a participant. Another participant said, "moms can have a full-time job but are *still* expected to be there for their kids *all the time.*" "We have an engrained view of the ever-present and ever-nurturing mom, but now she works full time too!" echoed yet another participant.

Historically, necessity drove women into the workforce and oftentimes in present day it is also out of necessity that real life mothers work outside of the home as well as inside the home. It is easily recognizable in our capitalist society that monetary status is highly valued. Money not only flows to keep food on the table and a roof over families' heads. It also can mean the difference between a thrifted pair of sneakers or brand new school clothes and the difference between a trip to the local, community park or a luxury vacation.

"The vacation thing…"
Aside from portrayals by actors/actresses on TV and portrayals by influencers on social media there are also the portrayals from "friends" on one's feed. It wasn't a total shock to hear that these portrayals from friends, family, and acquaintances often impacted my participants. It was easy for several of my participants to perceive that their "friends" on social media were "always on vacation," quoted one participant. "Oh, you're on *another* week long trip to Costa Rica," quoted another. The constant portrayals of vacation mode on social media induced the belief in several mothers that "well, this is what I'm supposed to be doing" said a participant. She continued to say that "as a mom I'm supposed to be providing them [kids] with opportunities" and those opportunities took the form of expensive vacations plastered on a Facebook page. "It was so freaking expensive," said one participant, "and we just couldn't swing the beach vacation, but I tried so so hard…" She took her kids to "every free national park" she could drive to and yet felt she should have been doing more.

The ideals/expectations communicated through the media to real life mothers take many different forms. Not only did the heroic working mom who's always on vacation communicate ideals/expectations to real life mothers, they also made my participants *feel* something.

RQ2: How do real life mothers feel about the ideals/expectations of motherhood communicated by the media?

"I felt shame, massive shame."
"There are pretty universal expectations of mothers," said a participant, "and people are really hard on moms as a result." The vast majority of my participants mentioned experiencing shame, guilt, or "mom guilt" as a result of the ideals/expectations communicated by the media. The moms shared feelings of inadequacy and inferiority in the face of media portrayals from influencers and from friends. "A lot of people tend to post the positives like their kid's successes and achievements," said a participant, "so then if you're having a negative experience with your kid it can really make you feel like a failure." She continued to say that she often found herself "falling into this pit of not being good enough and not doing a good job" and that induced feelings of guilt. This was echoed by another participant who said she often questions "wow, am I good enough?" after seeing portrayals in the media.

One participant mentioned that she likes to follow influencers for inspiration but saw a "stunning photo" of a friend on Facebook and thought "dang, I should really step it up." A different participant noted that she can still feel inadequate even knowing that "99% of the population doesn't have a full house staff and a glam squad like the influencers do." Thus, one can see that whether the ideals/expectations are portrayed by friends or influencers, feelings of guilt and shame are likely to arise for real life moms. These feelings can lead to "lower self-esteem" said one participant, "and it [guilt/shame] makes me more cautious as a mom." This was highlighted by a second participant who said that the ideals/expectations can "drive him [her child] and I apart." The ideals/expectations can compel real life mothers to fit a mold and the mold is not a hard and fast rule. The mold can be, and should be, different for all moms, kids, and situations, but nonetheless becomes a prevalent issue for real life mothers that can threaten their experiences of mental well-being.

"It made me a little bit psycho."
Several moms mentioned that they relied heavily on "expert" advice through parenting magazines, books, and on social media, especially for their first kid. "I read like a million books," said one participant, "because I had

no freaking clue what to do… and honestly it made me a little bit psycho." Another participant said that "it [expert advice] can really make you feel like you can screw this whole thing up because they're [babies] so new and so fragile and so perfect." One participant explained how her first of four children had "literally an in-home preschool." "The kid was reading and doing puzzles and we practiced numbers" she said, "and by my second kid that whole thing started to fall apart and by my fourth I could barely keep dibs on all of them." Several of the moms expressed that they had a strong desire to be a mom but also a strong sense of the type of mom they *should* be. From these lived experiences we can begin to understand how the immense pressure of ideals/expectations can invade real life mothers' psyche and manifest in their actions and behaviors.

For example, one participant emphasized how she was "always *creating* the moment [for social media] rather than just letting shit happen and being involved in the moment." She often altered her behavior to work on the aesthetics of a moment and take pictures that could then be posted on various social media platforms. However, these pictures are just snippets of the larger picture of mothering. They show a moment, and that moment might have been perfect, but those moments cannot be achieved all the time.

"Attainable in bursts."

Everything can be going right; you're picking your daughter up from school and she inquiries, "mom, what's an orgasm?" and suddenly you have to be prepared to answer that at 3:30 on a Wednesday. You might have spent a great deal of time and energy on a homemade, bright red fire truck cake for your daughter's 2nd birthday and suddenly you're being scolded on Facebook for posting a picture of the cake with a knife next to it. Evidently it was much too close to your daughter's tiny hands. Or maybe you get the whole family together for a dinner date at your local restaurant and suddenly your son is having a meltdown because you got sat at a table instead of a booth. All of these are true stories from my participants.

"It's a constant battle between trying my hardest and knowing when enough is good enough," said one participant. "I wish every mom could look at social media and not have a feeling of inadequacy," said another. She continued to say, "you can fail and suck at things; you don't have to be super mom." Another participant echoed this with, "it's okay to lose your cool, it's more about how you act afterwards." Most of the mothers found teaching moments and/or lessons in the outwardly appearing downfalls. They were able to objectively understand that everything wasn't going to be perfect all the time. Sometimes they might be super mom and other times they might just be doing the best they can with the tools they have; and that is okay.

"Let's be real, it's not real"

Eventually, my participants came to the sound conclusion that the ideals/expectations communicated through portrayals of perfection are simply not real; they are fabricated versions of small snippets of scripted lives. They are *created* and they are not organic. One participant said, "I've just come to realize in my life that it's just not me… I gave up on the stereotypical perfect mom because I was just too tired." Another said, "I was just done, D-O-N-E, done." The majority of my participants echoed similar realizations that it just simply wasn't going to be them; they pushed back against the ideals/expectations by noticing the unrealistic nature of the portrayals. Several of my participants were also quick to point out their roles in the perception and creation of the portrayals. Three participants noted that "it's what you surround yourself with" and it's "up to you to perceive what you want." One participant said, "It's not Facebook's fault that I'm perceiving perfection, that's on me." It was inspiring to see these mothers acknowledge their ability to view the ideals/expectations and not let them govern their thoughts and actions.

"We're all doing our best with the tools we have," said a participant and "it's important to not let other moms feel like they are doing a shitty job," said another. There was a lot of discussion about being graceful towards other moms and lifting other moms up during the interviews. Several participants made self-deprecating jokes and comments but demonstrated nothing short of support and admiration for other moms. "In addition to it [motherhood] being hard, it's often very funny," said one participant, "and I try to lead with the funny and if someone tries to engage in a competitiveness, I can definitely sense that and I try to distance myself." As they've all come to notice and realize, being a mom is hard and passing judgment and/or fostering competition with other moms is unproductive. However, as much as my participants may try to remain realistic and learn as they go, the ideals/expectations can still permeate their lives.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine what ideals/expectations related to motherhood are communicated through the media and to understand how real life mothers *feel* about the ideals/expectations of motherhood communicated by the media. After explicit attention to the gathered data, thorough analysis of the results, and inclusion of anecdotal evidence there were several unsurprising findings, but also some valuable and

novel connections to phenomena outside of my original muted group theory (Ardener & Ardener, 1975). My discussion of this study links the results of my interviews to my original literature review, examines overarching themes that emerged, and explores how motherhood may be associated with cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1976) and the five stages of grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969).

Each original research question was examined using the ample amount of data gathered from the interviews and overarching themes emerged. A pervasive yet unsurprising theme was the ideal/expectation of the "perfect" mother. The literature review illustrates a clear continuation of the "perfect" mom archetype throughout history up to the present day. The interviews support and confirm that this archetype is still interfering with and influencing real life mothers and their mothering actions. Mothers are entrenched in the inevitably unattainable push for perfection. This perfection, though, ripples outside the scope of mothering. The idea of the "perfect mom" reaches into mothers' careers and work outside the home as well.

As stated in the literature review and as is obvious still today, if a mother prioritizes her children she often faces disadvantages and consequences at work. According to Correll et al. (2007), these "disadvantages are not limited to pay… mothers who prioritize their children are often rated as less competent and less committed… less dependable and more irrational" than mothers who put their job/work first or than women who do not have children (p. 1298). In the United States "the ideal worker is one who enters the workforce in young adulthood, works 40 or more hours per week, is always available to the employer, works consistently for 40 or more years, and does not take time off for raising children" (Fuegen et al., 2004, p. 740). Thus real life mothers hardly have a chance to be considered the "ideal worker" and it was clear through the interviews that participants in this study were/are also experiencing this never ending battle. The ideals and expectations of motherhood are inherently contradictory because they idealize strength and independence while simultaneously favoring maternal nurturance and domesticity. Real life mothers are expected to wear many hats "both feminist and domestic, equal and dependent, worker and mother" all of which work in opposition to each other and therefore presented extremely unattainable ideals for real life mothers (D'Amore, 2012, p. 1231).

The media plays a prominent role in prescribing these ideals/expectations to real life mothers. The image(s) from influencers and their manufactured version of motherhood defines and influences real life mothers because "the parenting role defines women's social roles to a great extent, creating social expectations of nurturance and selflessness that extend beyond the boundaries of home and family life. Consequently, motherhood shapes not only how women see themselves, but also how society sees them" (Greenlee, 2014, p. 6). Because the mothering role becomes integral to women's lives, it is understandable that the ideals/expectations surrounding it spur intense and undeniable feelings.

Since the literature review posits that the ideals/expectations surrounding motherhood are inherently contradictory and therefore arduous to achieve, it was not surprising that real life mothers feel shame and a little bit crazy as a result of these ideals/expectations and feel that they are only within their grasp sometimes. The participants in this study expanded and solidified my understanding of "mom guilt" and its relentless grip. Mom guilt induces constant worrying that one is making a mistake and arises from the unrealistic ideals/expectations surrounding motherhood. All mothers, including the mothers in this study, are susceptible to mom guilt and experience it regularly. Whether a mother is feeling shame about losing her temper, regretting not being able to finance a vacation, or feeling bad about serving Mac & Cheese instead of a vegetable tray, all of these feelings can manifest into fanatical and seemingly unhinged behaviors.

Several participants noted the purposeful curating of moments through pictures online. Participants often did this in response to seeing other moms (influencers and moms they knew personally) and their curated feeds; a sort of "keeping up with the joneses" moment. What did come as a surprise during the interviews was the repeatedly mentioned vacation theme. This theme is relatable to the proposed cognitive bias created by mean world syndrome. Mean world syndrome comes from George Gerbner's (1976) cultivation theory which is integral to communication studies. Cultivation theory says that those who spend more time interacting with media are more likely to internalize and reflect what they have seen. Applying this theory to real life mothers demonstrates how participants in this study, and other mothers outside of the study, likely develop and solidify their conceptions of social reality. Mean world syndrome, specifically, is the phenomena that people may perceive the world as more dangerous than it is based on routinely being exposed to the "bad" stories on the news and media. Similarly, mothers in this study perceived other moms and families to "always be on vacation" because of continually seeing vacation pictures in their Facebook feeds. Of course, these other mothers are not always on vacation, but nonetheless real life mothers become accustomed to seeing a certain trend on social media and this trend influences the feelings they have about themselves as mothers, about other women as mothers, and about the ideals/expectations of mothers.

The interviews conducted during this study provided a space for real life mothers to communicate their lived experiences with motherhood which was a small step towards combatting the muteness real life mothers have

been subjected to. Overall, the findings from the interviews suggest that real life mothers are, in their own unique way, experiencing and living a grief process. The five stages of grief, developed and coined by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969), are reflected in my participants' words. There are instances of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and eventual acceptance. However, because real life mothers' experiences, discourses, and ideas have historically and perpetually been muted by dominant groups and ideologies, mothers have been largely unable to communicate this grieving process.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As far as future directions for this research, I strongly believe that the grief/grieving process and the five stages of grief should be studied in conjunction with motherhood. It is my perception, after conducting this study, that real life mothers experience grief in a unique and pertinent way. It is also my belief that mothers remain a muted group in hegemonic society and that future research should aim to promulgate mothers' voices both in general and specifically in the context of grief and mothering.

Although my participants perceptions on the subject of motherhood in the media was overwhelmingly consistent, we know that media is diverse in platforms and content. Anecdotal evidence suggests to me that counter narratives to the previously engrained "supermom" trope are being brought to society's attention. TikTok, which hosts user-submitted video content, has created a space that is comparatively inclusive and facilitates the emergence of counter narratives. For example, TikTok user @uselessploads voiced her brutally honest take on motherhood that "motherhood is a scam, it's a f*cking scam" (Deguara, 2022). TikTok and it's relationship with mothers and motherhood would comprise a rich site for future research.

LIMITATIONS

It was my intention to interview 10-12 participants for this study. My 10th participant was unable to find the time for a 30-60 minute interview and since I had reached data saturation after nine interviews I decided to respect the limitations of this working mother and move onto the analysis phase of my research with the data collected from nine interviews. All of the synchronous interviews took place over Zoom while two asynchronous interviews were conducted through written questions and written responses. As the entirety of this research posits, real life mothers are engaged in various forms of mother work in and outside the home and often have a multitude of laborious commitments. This manifested in relatively minor limitations for this study, but is worth addressing nonetheless.

Ideally, the participants would have also represented a range of ethnic backgrounds and would have included members of the LGBTQ+ community. Due to my nonprobability convenience sampling and network recruitment, I was unable to access any members of the LGBTQ+ community, but I was able to interview two Asian-American mothers for this study which resulted in rich and relevant data that addressed various cultural factors.

PERSONAL IMPLICATIONS

This study is relevant to society both academically and in general. The future directions section presents valuable insight into potential areas for further development of academic knowledge and the study as a whole communicates that society and its people devote the time and attention to real life mothers that they merit. Whether one is academically inclined to study motherhood and its boundless facets or is simply morally inclined to value rather than suppress real life mothers voices, either would satisfy my hopes for the outcomes of this study. My goal was to capture and represent the individual, lived experiences of real life mothers and promulgate my participants' voices. It is my sincere wish that this study and my research will incline others to do the same.

This study was inspired by the fortitude, dignity, and grace demonstrated by my own mother and mother figures in my life. Through my research and interviews, my appreciation and admiration for all mothers has only expanded. It is my belief that the research, interview, and discussion processes have elevated my practical and professional skillset. Similarly, my research into motherhood and the first-hand experience from my participants will improve my ability to communicate with and understand mothers and increase my aptitude for mother work in the future.

The breadth of this study far exceeded the scope of any previous academic endeavors in my undergraduate career. From intensive reading and annotating for my literature review, to assiduous navigation of interviews, to clear and concise communication of my findings, I have developed and honed invaluable skills that will serve me in future ventures. It is my belief that this study is an exemplary representation of the competence and expertise I have cultivated throughout my undergraduate career with the aid of professors and peers.

CONCLUSION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As the literature review, the results of the interviews, and the discussion establish, motherhood operates under a pervasive archetype. The collective belief is not necessarily that moms can do it all, but that moms *should* do it all regardless of the very real restrictions, limitations, and obstacles that present themselves to real life mothers. Although it was not entirely shocking to uncover the convergence of grief and motherhood, it was certainly distressing and presents a compelling case for future research. However, it was encouraging to hear, firsthand, the common theme of benevolence. All of my participants emphasized the importance of self-compassion and compassion towards other women who are mothers because the art of mothering is truly a process of learning as you go. Not all women experience mothering and motherhood the same way and the ideals/expectations surrounding it can be combated with compassion.

I want to express my sincere gratitude and admiration for the nine mothers I interviewed for this study and for the strong mother figures in my own life that inspired this project. I see you, I hear you, I'm learning from you.

Along with my participants and my inspirations, I'd like to thank Dr. Ashley Hanna-Edwards for her continued support, expertise, and fellowship.

And to my momma, I love you #BME.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. Warm-up/Rapport Building
   a. Reduce uncertainty: Give a comprehensive explanation of what I'm doing, why I'm doing it, and how I'm doing it. Ask them if they have any questions.
      i. What: "I am researching the portrayal of motherhood in the media…"
      ii. Why: "I am passionate about this topic because I have so many strong mother figures in my own life and I want to be a mother someday. I also feel that real life mothers' voices are underrepresented so I want to create a space where they can be heard."
      iii. How: "So, I'm conducting interviews with real life mothers, like yourself, to gather qualitative data and represent your individual lived experience and perspective."
   b. Let them know they can trust me: Explain that everything is confidential (names, locations, etc. will be changed). Let them know that they can stop talking at any time, and/or decline to answer any questions, and/or ask me to stop recording.
   c. Ensure the safe environment: Explain that there are no right or wrong answers.
   d. Transition to first interview question: Make it clear that we are now moving from the rapport stage to the specific interview questions.
2. Preliminary Questions
   a. Please answer the following demographic questions:
      i. Age
      ii. Occupation
      iii. Race
      iv. Socioeconomic status
      v. Number of children
      vi. Sexual orientation
      vii. Marital status
      viii. Please give me some insight into your mother network/circle of moms
3. How did you learn to mother/be a mom?
4. Interview Questions
   a. RQ1 (What ideals/expectations related to motherhood are communicated through the media?) Questions:
      i. How often do you engage with forms of media such as TV, magazines, streaming services, etc.?
      ii. Why do you use these forms of media?
      iii. How often do you engage with forms of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, etc.?
      iv. Why do you use these forms of social media?
      v. When engaging with these differing forms of media, how do you see motherhood being portrayed? (Follow up questions will likely be necessary here)
         1. What are some memorable portrayals?

        vi. In your opinion, what kinds of ideals/expectations are communicated about motherhood through the media? (Follow up questions will likely be necessary here)
           1. What are some memorable ideas/expectations?

  b. RQ2 (How do real life mothers *feel* about the ideals/expectations of motherhood communicated by the media?) Questions:

        i. When you see these ideals/expectations about motherhood in the media, how do they affect the way you see yourself as mother?

        ii. … how do they affect the way you enact your mothering in real life?

        iii. … how do they affect the way you see other women as mothers?

        iv. … how do they affect the way you engage with other mothers on social media?

        v. … how do they affect the way you engage with women who are mothers in your personal life?

        vi. Overall, how "accurate" are these ideals/expectations? (If they need clarification about what I mean… Are they attainable? Do you think they are "fair?")

5. Clearing House Questions

        i. "Is there anything you'd like to expand on?"

        ii. "Is there anything else you'd like to bring up?"

        iii. "Is there anything you have any questions about?"

        iv. "Do you know any other mothers who may be interested in participating in this study?"

6. Thank you!