

‘Some of the episodes are literally like a screen from [my] WhatsApp groups ...’: Mothers Talk About *Motherland* (BBC, 2017–)

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Abstract

Whilst not denying the continued power of hegemonic ideologies of mothering, it has been suggested that we have witnessed a partial discursive shift in cultural/ media constructions of motherhood in which frustration, ambivalence and dissatisfaction play a more visible role. Extant work on this issue has either focused on digital cultures or been based on television texts - leaving the *responses* of television audiences unexplored. This article draws on data from 14 semi-structured interviews to examine how a sample of UK mothers discuss the hit BBC sitcom *Motherland* (BBC2, 2017), considering how they negotiate the programme’s representation of motherhood in relation to their own maternal identities and experiences. We examine participants’ enthusiastic investment in the programme’s portrayal of the ‘messy reality’ of motherhood and apparent rejection of the intensive mothering paradigm, as well as the ways in which it makes visible the (still) hidden aspects of everyday motherwork. At the same time, we explore how the responses speak to the continued regulation and policing of ‘acceptable’ maternal femininity and thus the limits of shifting discourses on motherhood.

Keywords: Motherhood, Television, *Motherland*, Feminism, Audience, Intensive mothering

Introduction

Given the plethora of maternal figures on the television screen, it is surprising that televisual representations of motherhood have not received the scholarly attention we might expect (Feasey, 2012, 2015). This neglect is now compounded by the extent to which much scholarly - and crucially feminist - energy has swarmed to focus on digital mothering cultures and their apparently more 'pluralistic' potential:

From the online worlds of mothers, new narratives of motherhood take shape. The experiences described in these digital spaces challenge representations of motherhood found throughout broadcast media ... Until digital media, mothers have been unable to push back against unrealistic representations, let alone publish their own versions of motherhood (Van Cleaf, 2020: 37).

Whilst downplaying the extent to which online spaces often also reinforce hegemonic ideologies of motherhood (Basden Arnold and Martin, 2016; Gill and Orgad, 2017; Pleić Tomić, 2019; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017), this statement homogenises and simplifies representations of motherhood on television. Although television has historically played a role in upholding 'the good mother myth' (Feasey, 2012, 2015), it has simultaneously portrayed mothers as conflict-ridden, bored, unfulfilled, chaotic or just 'good enough' (Douglas and Michaels, 2005; Feasey, 2012; Rowe, 1990) – especially in the context of the sitcom. Furthermore, Van Cleaf's quote conflates web 2.0 with a form of 'activity' which necessarily affords ideological resistance, a conception which leaves the traditionally transmissional form of television associated with 'passivity'. Although the long history of TV audience research easily complicates this binary (Gillespie, 2005), this binary testifies to the ways in which *responses* to televisual representations of mothering (Feasey, 2015) have not been afforded the space, nuance and complexity which has characterised online research in the field.

This article draws on data from 14 semi-structured interviews to examine how a sample of UK mothers discuss the hit BBC sitcom *Motherland* (BBC2, 2017–), considering how they negotiate the programme's representation of motherhood in relation to their own maternal identities and experiences. Although there has been a substantial amount of research on how media texts articulate ideologies of motherhood, there has been less focus on how mothers *themselves* 'internalize or resist such models' (Pedersen, 2016: 32), or how these images relate to their own maternal experiences and practices (Feasey, 2015). This is particularly so with a range of more contemporary televisual representations which have been positioned as accelerating the critique of 'implausible standards of intensive mothering' (Feasey, 2019: 4; Littler, 2020) germane to postfeminist and neoliberal constructions of motherhood.

Contexts of Contemporary Mothering

Established as both normative and desirable, the dominant model of motherhood in contemporary Western society is intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) (see also Basden Arnold and Martin, 2016; Feasey, 2012; Forbes, Lamar and Bornstein, 2021; Pedersen, 2016), or what Douglas and Michaels call 'the new Momism' in the US (2005). Within this model - which is resolutely white, middle-class and heterosexual - childcare and child welfare are the responsibility of the mother whose identity is reduced to her relationship with her child. As Feasey summarises, the 'good mother' in the intensive mothering paradigm is:

a stay-at-home figure who is always present in the lives of her children... mothers, and only mothers, must supervise each childhood activity, lovingly prepare nutritious meals, review and reward every school assignment, and seek out educational opportunities and culturally appropriate entertainment. The "good" mother finds this intensive maternal role to be natural, satisfying, fulfilling, and meaningful; she feels no sense of loss or sacrifice at her own lack of freedom, friendships, financial independence, or intellectual stimulation (Feasey, 2020: 1).

In this respect, the hegemonic ideology of intensive mothering 'supports a patriarchal society where mothers are set up to fail' (Pedersen, 2016: 34).

The discourses of intensive mothering co-exist alongside postfeminist, neoliberal constructions of contemporary women as being compelled to achieve power 'over everything from the workplace to the home' (Greer, 2017: 333). Indeed, as Orgad argues in relation to postfeminist femininity, 'a woman can only really achieve fulfilment if she is simultaneously a paid labourer *and* a mother [original emphasis]' (2019: 4). In this regard, to 'fail to "have it all"' is to fail as a modern woman' (Greer, 2017: 333). However, this is of course not the full story in so far as this co-exists with a negative discourse around the working mother in which guilt and judgement become *normative* aspects of maternal femininity. As Dillaway and Paré explain, the figure of working mum is vilified for the ways in which she departs from hegemonic ideals of intensive mothering. Because the working mother is seen as 'skirting their "natural" responsibilities of "full-time" mothering, they are still supposed to try as much as possible to appear and act like "good," stay-at-home mothers, as intensive mothering is not really optional' (Dillaway and Paré, 2008: 445).

Since the emergence of the paradigm of the intensive mother (Hays, 1996), neoliberal policies and discourses have accelerated the ways in which the impossible 'balancing' of paid work and 'care work' still remain the purview of the mother (Van Cleaf, 2020: 36; McRobbie, 2013; Orgad, 2016; Vandenbeld Giles, 2014; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017). In particular, the predominance of individualism and the ongoing privatisation of the family cultivate the desirability of a 'self-determined, autonomous family' that is economically and socially self-sufficient (Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017: 10). As a consequence, mother's lives get

‘affectively loaded up’ as social ‘responsibility for family life comes to rest ever more squarely [upon them]’ (Ibid).

Whilst not denying the power of hegemonic ideologies of mothering, it has been suggested that we have witnessed a partial discursive shift in cultural/ media constructions of motherhood in which frustration, ambivalence and dissatisfaction have a more visible role to play (Allmark, 2016; Feasey, 2020; Littler, 2020). Indeed, whilst there is clearly a longer televisual history – from the soap opera, reality TV to the sitcom – which questions the ‘hegemonic hierarchy’ of motherhood (Feasey, 2020: 2; Rowe, 1990), we have witnessed a surge in the cultural fascination with mothers who depart more substantially from the domestic ideal. Although there is no extant scholarship which takes *Motherland* as its primary focus, it has been placed alongside other comedy texts such as the Bad Moms film franchise (2016, 2017) and international TV series such as *The Let Down* (2016–19), *Working Moms* (2017–), and *Catastrophe* (2015–19) as part of a ‘progressive expansion of representations of motherhood which conspicuously reject... the paradigm of the perfect’ (Littler, 2020: 499), and as exploring how motherhood might be ‘frustrating rather than fulfilling’ for the women in question (Feasey, 2020: 4). Across film, television and social media, Littler in particular investigates the discursive terrain of the ‘Mum Behaving Badly’ (MBB) - a social type which licenses both ‘chaotic’ domestic spaces and ‘hedonistic’ behaviour (2020: 499). Littler links the rise of the MBB to neoliberalism and the ‘ruptures and faultlines in contemporary systems of social reproduction...’ and how the figure plays out how ‘*too much* work, both inside and outside the home, is overloaded onto women [original emphasis]’ (Ibid: 519).

As acknowledged in the introduction, much recent feminist work on how mothers negotiate cultural and media constructions of motherhood has focused on digital discourse, from ‘mummy bloggers’, internet forums to different platforms on social media, often with an emphasis on how intensive mothering ideologies are confirmed and/ or resisted (e.g. Basden Arnold and Martin, 2016; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Pleić Tomić, 2019; Pedersen, 2016; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017; Tiidenberg and Baym 2017; Van Cleaf, 2020). Some have cautioned against over-emphasising the transformative potential of ‘new’ media here as such contexts often articulate and reassert ‘deeply embedded notions of good and bad mothering’ (Pleić Tomić, 2019: 8; see also Basden Arnold and Martin, 2016). But particular emphasis has been placed on how they make visible ‘the messy reality of motherhood’ (Orton-Johnson, 2017: 9) in a way unparalleled by mass media discourse. That said, there are clearly different affordances associated with each platform here. Instagram, for example, has been as much associated in popular discourse with promoting ‘perfect’ and polished images of motherhood as offering glimpses of the ‘raw’ (Tiidenberg and Baym 2017). But whether through ‘confessional’ blogs; the #badmom trend on Twitter, or ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mum threads on Mumsnet, emphasis has been placed on how ‘the digital footprint ... represents different ways of articulating the “doing of motherhood”’ (Van Cleaf, 2020: 36) and how it offers greater scope for intervention in motherhood discourse.

Yet it seems important not to create an unsustainable binary between ‘new’ and ‘broadcast’ media here. Not only does this simplify questions of agency and power in both

traditionally transmissional and participatory contexts (Fuchs, 2014; Holmes, 2004) but - despite Feasey's insightful *Mothers on Mothers: Maternal Readings of Popular Television* (2015) - we do not have a much *longer* history of how representations of motherhood in broadcast media have been negotiated. Such a duality between the two media contexts also ignores evident processes of cultural exchange. As discussed below, much of the work on digital motherhood is pertinent in discussing responses to *Motherland* and it may be more helpful to see them as responding to the same cultural moment, albeit in different media and empirical contexts. Despite television programmes obviously being discussed online, much television viewing is still privatised, rendering the meaning making processes less 'knowable' (Ang, 1991). Empirical research thus contributes to making this more visible, and there is a longer history of feminist work which seeks to make the historically privatised experiences of motherhood both seen and valued (Maushart, 1997; Oakley, 1979; Rich, 1976; Wolf, 2002).

But it is useful to recognise here that there are different strands and discourses being discussed under research on shifting cultural constructions of motherhood: 'wine mum culture' (Fetters, 2020) is not the same as critiques of maternal perfection, or the visibility of maternal ambivalence. Nor are all these meanings new: there is a long history of feminist work since the second wave which has highlighted experiences and discourses of maternal ambivalence and the gap between cultural constructions of motherhood and 'reality' (Oakley, 1979; Rich, 1976; Chapman and Gubi, 2022; Hager, 2011; Hollway and Featherstone, 1997). So, to foreground all of this as 'new' is to further silence the ways in which women have often had to ignore or deny such experiences and collude with mythic idealisations of motherhood. As such, it may be that contemporary media and digital cultures in particular have made certain ways of thinking about motherhood *more* visible. But how mothers negotiate and contribute to these meanings should be situated within a longer history in which it has not been permissible to articulate such experiences, so they have not always been captured or heard.

Feminist research is beginning to discuss how media and cultural narratives of motherhood may be incorporating a more visible critique of the intensive mothering paradigm, but there is little work on this with respect to television, and none which focuses on questions of audience or reception. In this regard, audience response should be central in exploring questions about generic shifts or changing representational paradigms (Mittell, 2004) (rather than as an adjunct to textual analysis). As such, in focusing on responses to *Motherland*, our aim here is to contribute to how mothers make sense of contemporary media paradigms of maternalism (and their inherent contradictions) in the still emergent field of the explicitly 'imperfect' mum.

Methodology

Feminist *Motherland* can be positioned as part of a post-2000 breed of sitcoms which dispensed with a laugh track, utilised a single camera set up and exploited the idea of 'cringe

comedy' (Mills, 2005, 2009; Middleton, 2014). It is penned by a primarily female writing team (Sharon Horgan, Helen Serafinowicz, Holly Walsh, Barunka O'Shaughnessy and Graham Linehan) and has to date seen three series air on BBC2 between 2016-2021. The sitcom features a group of friends – Julia (Anna Maxwell-Martin), Liz (Diane Morgan), Kevin (Paul Ready) and Meg (Tanya Moody) navigating the challenges and of parenthood in what appears to be a middle-class London suburban setting – and their interactions with alpha 'yummy mummy' Amanda (Lucy Punch) and her acolytes. The characters are all presented as (at least) middle-class in terms of domestic and cultural location, with the exception of single mum Liz, who is depicted as Northern and working-class. The main cast are white, with the exception of Meg, a Black British woman, who was introduced at the start of series two. Although the programme focuses on the interaction between the group, Julia is ostensibly presented as the centrifugal point of the series – and the focus of debates for the frustrated and overwhelmed Mum – and she indeed dominates the focus of our data here.

Recruitment

We were interested in how the women negotiated the representations in the programme in relation to their own identities and experiences as mothers, so the study was open to anyone who identified as a mother. Ethical approval was received by the University of East Anglia in April 2022 and the interviews were undertaken in April-May the same year. Recruitment was pursued via various channels including parenting groups on Facebook (local and some national); parenting websites such as Mumsnet; and word-of-mouth or recommendation: some participants came forward because a friend had taken part, and two participants suggested friends who may be interested in being interviewed. It was not a pre-requisite for a participant to like the programme, but all who came forward expressed a keen enjoyment in *Motherland* and were eager to share why it appealed to them.

The Sample

Fourteen cis-gendered women took part, with thirteen identifying as heterosexual and one as lesbian. The ages of the women ranged from 33-55, with the majority sitting in their 40s. All the women in the sample had children of school age or below, but they had come to motherhood at different stages of their lives, ranging from their early 30s to their late 40s. Thirteen participants identified as white British, and one as South Asian. With regard to class, the majority ($n=10$) described themselves as middle-class, with the remaining participants ($n=4$) positioning themselves as 'working-class living a middle-class lifestyle', 'between working-class and middle-class', or 'working-class with some middle-class privileges'. All the women worked either part-time or full-time. In terms of family context, the sample included nine women who lived with a partner, and five who described themselves as single or solo mothers. This included participants who had separated from their partner, or women who had chosen to conceive a child/ children through a sperm donor.

It is acknowledged here that the demographics of the sample – primarily white, middle-class and heterosexual – parallels the representational bias within *Motherland* itself. Whether the programme is more likely to attract this demographic is not possible to say here. But it is acknowledged that aspects of the recruitment process (Mumsnet’s middle-class bias; participants recommending friends), as well as the authors’ own identities and networks (both are white, middle-class mums) may play a significant role in perpetuating this bias.

Procedure

Participants took part in a one-to-one semi-structured interview which lasted between thirty-sixty minutes. The majority of the interviews were undertaken online or via the phone, and two were in person. The interview schedule covered seven key questions including: what they liked about the programme; whether they saw it as something new in representations of motherhood on TV; how they responded to the popular reception of the text as offering a more ‘honest’ depiction of mothering; whether the programme offered comment on the judgement inherent in mothering culture; the representation of gender in the programme (e.g. parenting roles across men and women, the role of the working mum); the role of comedy; if there was anything they would critique about the representations in *Motherland*.

The participants were not asked to re-view any episodes of the programme: it would have been difficult to isolate particular episodes without prioritising specific aspects or themes in the series, with the added factor that (as we were interviewing busy working mums) we did not want to make participating too demanding or onerous. Indeed, in ways which parallel some of the themes within the programme itself, interviews often took place either side of rushed school runs, were rescheduled due to child sickness; or were forgotten or delayed because of work pressures or childcare changes. Within these contexts, some participants were discussing a programme that they had seen recently, whereas others were going back months or more, and it was indeed the case that some women talked in detail about narrative moments, whilst others spoke more generally about the characters. We fully acknowledge the complexity of memory work here (Kuhn, 2002), and how such variations may have shaped the data. But this distance also gave rise to interesting data in itself: why particular scenes, for example, were often remembered over others.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed, and the participant data was anonymised at the point of writing. The data was then analysed by both authors within a poststructural, discourse-analytic framework which offers insight into how identities or experiences are constituted in the transcripts. Feminist poststructural work sees discourses as actively constitutive of identities and experiences (Foucault, 1972), producing subjectivities within intersecting relations of power. This position acknowledges that whilst identities are constructed within discourse, subjects nonetheless exist as ‘social agent[s] capable of resistance ... produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices’

(Weedon, 1996: 124). Hence, we explored how participants moved through multiple positions in which they critiqued and confirmed ideologies of mothering in shifting and nuanced ways.

Within this poststructural framework, we drew on the coding strategies of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We worked independently (to develop a sense of what the key themes were and to 'test' the reliability of our perceptions) and then together in generating the issues and categories to focus on. The first stage involved familiarisation with the data, reading and re-reading transcripts, and producing notes on preliminary ideas and observations. Second, this process was used to generate initial codes across the full data set. Third, these codes were then used to generate broader thematic categories (producing the recurrent themes which we discuss below). Fourth, the thematic categories were then analysed in detail and data extracts which represented these themes - as well as the complexities and contradictions within them - were selected for inclusion.

It is pertinent to note here, however, that in undertaking audience research, one of the challenges and (potential pleasures) is that we do not always receive the data we might anticipate. One of the issues which was not hugely significant nor rich in the data was the role of comedy (despite one of the interview questions specifically probing this). Participants talked about comedy and humour in so far as they discussed what made them laugh and the ways in which this related to their pleasure in the text. But this issue did not often emerge as explicitly central in ways which engendered a rich and significant theme. It is not entirely clear why this was the case. It may have been the ways in which the questions were framed, or the fact that once comedy is so intrinsic to a text, it is difficult to unpick the role it is playing – almost as if its apparent 'obviousness' defies analysis (Mills, 2009). We *do* bring out issues of comedy and genre where relevant, but because of the nature of the data we collected, the article contributes more to research on the reception of media images of motherhood than on the relationship between *Motherland*, sitcom and sitcom audiences.

Finally, although the primary focus of this article is the responses of the women, we also foreground aspects of the text where relevant. In this regard we draw upon what Brita Ytre-Arne conceptualises as 'reader-guided' textual analysis, an approach which questions the conventional polarisation of audience studies and programme analysis. This method 'aims to focus on the dimensions that readers define as important to their experiences' (Ytre-Arne, 2011: 214). In this regard, we often expand the text 'around' the examples given by the participants, or in ways which enable a fuller understanding of the themes discussed. This still requires interpretation of the text by the researchers, but our focus on the programme is led by the participant responses (rather than a bid to challenge or critique the meanings they offer).

'All that crap about how to be mother': Challenging Perfection

In her study *Mothers on Mothers: Maternal Readings of Popular Television*, Feasey observes how 'mothers in the audience are struggling to see their lived experiences played out' on

television (2015: 158) and how her empirical data points to a 'dearth of appropriate or appealing mothers on the small screen' (Ibid: 105). Whilst firmly acknowledging Feasey's argument that television has offered a longer much longer history of mothers who are just 'good enough' rather than the paragon of maternal perfection, the fact that our participants *did* connect their lived experiences to *Motherland* may indicate something of shift in how such maternal images are being constructed and negotiated. That said, there was no agreement in the interviews about where *Motherland* fitted into wider representations of motherhood: whilst some did perceive it to be 'absolutely new' and 'ground-breaking' (P8) because it offered a more 'honest', 'real' and 'gritty' depiction of motherhood, others saw it as related to broader shifts in mediations of mothering, whether this referred to television (so mentioned here were indeed programmes such as *Working Moms* or *The Let Down*); or digital iterations (the rhetoric of the 'slummy mummy' blogs or blogs/ books such as *Hurrah for Gin: A book for perfectly imperfect parents* (Kirby, 2016) (see also Littler, 2020). For many, however, it was positioned as occupying the 'extreme end' of a textual and cultural continuum which explored the 'grimy bits [of motherhood] that no one really wants to be honest about' (P10).

A range of studies have examined perceived realism in television, or how realism is negotiated at the level of television reception (Ang, 1985; Busselle and Greenberg, 2000; Press, 1991; Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Research to date suggests that viewers can mean a range of different things when they use this term in relation to television – whether referring to aesthetics; characterisation; plausibility of events; perceived similarity between the fictional portrayal and the 'real' world; or comparison with other texts in the genre. As with existing research, the participants in our study used this term in different and often contradictory ways (see Ang, 1985).

A central theme in this regard was the way in which *Motherland* was seen to reject ideas of maternal 'perfection' – a discourse that McRobbie (2015) describes as central to postfeminist and neoliberal configurations of middle-class motherhood, and which Littler (2020) links to the figure of the MBB. Often the rejection of 'perfection' was explicitly used by the participants in explaining what they liked about the programme, and it was directly related to *Motherland's* perceived realism:

I just liked how it didn't mess around. Rather than some perfect image, it showed what the reality is of being a mother. It didn't have rose-tinted glasses. It showed what it's really like (P13).

[I]t is part of that idea of ... admitting that things aren't always perfect [It] ... overturn[s] the idea of maternal perfection and all that crap about how to be a mother ... (P5).

Its apparent realism is here defined at an ideological level, in so far as it apparently departs from particular or previous images of maternal perfection. The first participant largely calls

out the pleasure in recognition ('shows what it's really like'), whilst the second more explicitly positions this perspective as a critique, and this reflects the ways in which discussions of the 'perfect' were ideologically various in the study. One of the most significant features of the interview data was the ways in which the women use the programme to make sense of their own everyday experiences of mothering. Although 'Yummy Mummy' and 'insta-perfect' Amanda is an obvious point of consideration in terms of discourses of maternal perfection (and some did discuss the significance of her perfection unravelling somewhat by the end of series three following her break-up from husband Jonny), it was primarily Julia who emerged as the key focus for discussion here:

[T]he fact that Julia always seemed to feel like she was messing up ... that really was something that struck a chord with me because I always felt like I'm never quite good enough, or as good as I should be at this and why... everyone else seemed to, you know, have a really nice tidy house. And I just can't seem to get on top of my house. It always feels like it needs hoovering and there's junk everywhere and there's piles of dirty laundry and the kids haven't done any homework ... You know, I'm sure other people's lives weren't perfect at all, but it just it always felt like I was failing a bit. Like I was doing a bit of a Julia ... [So] I really loved [the programme]... at the time... I found it therapeutic in its honesty (P11).

The multiple domains listed here are evocative of McRobbie's paradigm of maternal perfection – a grid which functions as a 'kind of neoliberal spreadsheet, a constant benchmarking of the self ... a calculation of one's assets, a fear of possible losses' (2015: 9). The response also plays out the extent to which even whilst mothers may recognise hegemonic ideologies of motherhood as unachievable ('I'm sure other people's lives weren't perfect at all'), they still exert influence on their own subjectivities *and* judgements of others (Feasey, 2012: 6). Whilst the participant recognises the construction of motherhood at work here, Julia is still positioned as 'messing up' and 'failing' because she falls short of this same ideal that the participant suggests is repressive. The extent to which this 'messy' 'reality' was valued by the participants as *reassuring* ('therapeutic in its honesty') was mentioned time and time again:

[T]here are many times during my day/week when I am absolutely winging it and being late for a baby class - today for example I nearly arrived at a class with slippers on and when I noticed I do think 'oh my god I am in an episode of *Motherland*' and it instantly makes me feel better, even though I know those are fictional characters it still makes me feel better as though it's kind of normal (P4).

So the emphasis here is less on domestic than sartorial perfection - with appearance very much part of neoliberal discourses on motherhood (Littler, 2013; McRobbie, 2015). Here, the participant does not go to class in her slippers but she *nearly* does, indicating the significance of self-regulation. But the quote above also suggests that the programme effectively gives the participants 'permission' to *normalise* departures from 'perfection'. This indicates how pervasive such ideologies are, even whilst they are called out as culturally constructed and repressive by the women.

This can be related to Susan Maushart's (1997) discussion of the 'mask of good motherhood' – a performance which upholds dominant idealisations of motherhood and silences women. The mask(s) of motherhood represent a public identity that offers an 'assemblage of fronts, mostly brave, serene and all-knowing, that [mothers]... use to disguise the chaos and complexity of [their]... lived experience' (Maushart, 1997: 21). Indeed, participants spoke of this duality quite clearly, as sometimes mapped across the different maternal types in *Motherland*. Speaking of the chaotic Julia as compared to sardonic Liz or smoothly capable Meg, one participant reflected how:

... [U]ltimately I suppose it's quite a comfort – that those inner moments of chaos ... can happen to everybody ... I suppose it is the inner versus the outer in terms of how you are feeling and you feel like the Julia even if you are coming across as ... Liz... or Meg ... (P7).

Other participants used specific sequences from the programme to discuss their own lives and often seized upon examples which they felt mirrored their experience. So one episode that was mentioned often by participants was the one in which Julia arrives at the school gates with her two children but has forgotten that it is World Book Day (WBD) (S3: E3). She whips off her stripy jumper, revealing her bra underneath, and puts it on her daughter Ivy:

And I *love, love* the part where ... she turns up at school and she's forgotten that they have to dress up ... I'm like, 'Oh my God, that's so happened to me' - literally just a couple of weeks ago. So she tears the top off and like, there you go. You are Where's Wally. So for my child, I was like ohh God... 'You want to be Pokémon, right? Fine. Put this cap on – it's red. And those shoes on. It'll be fine. Wear a T shirt'... Ohh honestly, I was like the world's worst [original emphasis] (P14).

In ways which prefigure this example, work on social media and 'confessional' maternal blogs has explored the articulation of 'true tales' of 'embarrassing' motherhood experiences which portray motherhood in all 'of its messy mundanity' (Orton-Johnson, 2016: 18) (and it can be noted that WBD is a rich site of discussion for parenting prowess and 'fails' online). In this work, there is an emphasis less on apology or embarrassment than on 'gleefully' violating such expectations and sharing them with peers (Basden Arnold, 2016: 48; Orton-Johnson,

2016). There are clearly echoes of this in the quotation here and in the interviews more widely: participants were only too *keen* to talk of incidents such as this and really revelled in the on-screen recognition they experienced ('And I *love, love* the part where..'). Although the participant above says 'I was like the world's worst' in recognition of perceived inadequacy and judgement, this was far from a dominant strand in the data (and the way in which it was articulated in this interview was with a knowing recognition of such 'failures'). To be sure, *nearly* forgetting WBD or *nearly* going to a baby class with your slippers on may not seem like radical 'transgressions' of motherhood ideals. But the fact that these incidents were remembered, pleasurably recounted and celebrated by the participants may suggest some of the inherent contradictions of these particular images of contemporary motherhood. On one level, the restrictive paradigms of intensive mothering mean that simply 'everyday' events and 'normal' mothering experiences fall squarely outside of its purview (and we recall how these paradigms ensure that 'mothers are set up to fail' (Pedersen, 2016: 34)). At the same time, the affective reach of such disciplining is not total: whilst discourses of intensive mothering may prescribe the narrow boundaries within which 'good' mothering takes place, they simultaneously produce an opportunity to take pleasure in 'transgressions' in ways which call into question the validity of such dictates in the first place.

There are questions here, however, about the implications of such an investment in the 'imperfect' 'reality' of the programme on a broader scale. Historically, claims to realism and to reflect real life have been treated with suspicion in TV and Media Studies as they are bound up with power (Fiske and Hartley, 1978) and thus an obfuscation of the *constructed* nature of the text. In this regard, an investment in the reality of a text is seen as 'leaving unquestioned the ... limits of representation itself' (Long, 1986: 609). Yet this was not necessarily evident in the participant responses in this study (and it should be noted here that one of the interview questions did ask if there was anything to critique about *Motherland*). Although much of the interviews *were* taken up by discussions of the various ways in which the programme offered a more 'honest', 'authentic' and 'real' image of motherhood, some participants simultaneously reflected on the class and racial biases of the text, including those pertaining to maternal perfection. In recognising the ways in which cultural and media constructions of 'good' and 'bad' mothers are both classed and raced (Johnston and Swanson, 2003; Pedersen, 2016), the women who identified themselves as sitting on a boundary between working and middle-class were more apt to discuss the programme's dynamics in this regard (also positioning themselves as 'insider-outsiders' in terms of their own circles of predominantly middle-class mother friends). So Julia's *privilege* to be chaotic and messy - whether in domestic management, childcare arrangements or appearance - was specifically called out here by such participants: '[I]f the main character was a working class Black woman that did the things Julia does, it would be ... seen differently' (P6), or she would not have the same scope to behave that way if she 'had a different accent or a different colour skin...' (P7).

This idea that Julia in particular could be seen as 'every mum' was reinforced by some of the popular coverage surrounding the text: so the BBC-produced meme 'Which Julia are you today?' collates a range of images showing the character in various states of emotion

from champagne-drinking celebration to a rictus grimace (@bbcbitesize 24.9.21). Such intertextual discourses (and assumption that we are *all* Julia) further works to obscure the privileged nature of the 'ordinary' here. This dovetails with Littler's exploration of the MBB trope in so far as class and race are constitutive factors in 'who is allowed to inhabit' this mode and she argues that the figure is 'frequently blind to the... classed and racialised nature of its own privileges' (Littler, 2020: 513). Indeed, as one participant recognised, 'the absence of discussion of race [in *Motherland*] is very obvious' (P6). *Motherland* appears to go out of its way to present Meg, the only Black character, as the ultimate, over-capable super-mum who effortlessly 'has it all' - what one participant described as an example of the (contested) paradigm of '#Black Girl Magic' (P5) (e.g. see Toliver, 2019) – whilst scarcely making any reference to her ethnic identity. The programme does at least enable some examination of *class* dynamics through the character of Liz, who is subject to different judgements by Amanda in particular and is afforded different economic opportunities to her friends (see also Littler, 2020). But even whilst this may be less prevalent in the text (if Littler's argument is fair), the participants were not 'blind' to the privileges of how maternal 'failure' were represented, even whilst they remained highly invested in its claim to the real.

There are broader questions here about what kinds of discourses of realism are at work in the women's responses. In *Watching Dallas*, Ang famously talks about the nuances of 'emotional realism': that whilst the (incredibly affluent) world of *Dallas* and its melodramatic happenings may not fit the fans' perceptions or experiences of external reality, they can recognise its emotional contours within everyday life: 'rows, intrigues, problems, happiness, misery' (Ang, 1985: 45). Although generic differences between soaps and comedy should in any case be respected here, this does not appear to be what is happening with *Motherland*. It is less a sense of abstract (emotional) reality that is foregrounded in the data and more a very *specific* recognition of particular scenarios and experiences of motherhood that seem very much like 'real life'. The significance of certain narrative settings and events is suggested by the WBD discussions above, or by the comment that 'some of the episodes are literally like a screen from [my] WhatsApp groups ...' (P14). This suggestion of bringing what are often (semi) private or rarely screened aspects of mothering is clearly suggested in observations such as:

So it takes everyday stuff – in that first episode – [such as] the school run. How many other programmes have actually featured a school run as a thing yet it's something that we do twice a day ... it's a daily task that doesn't get covered very much ...? (P7).

This making visible was related to many aspects of the programme (as developed more in relation to the working mum below). In this regard, participants could be seen as both responding to and pinpointing a particular kind of *gendered* realism – something not examined in existing work on perceived realism (e.g. Busselle and Greenberg, 2000). By this we mean that they see *Motherland* as representing mothering tasks and motherwork that do

not receive, on television at least, regular visibility. As such, because the participants very much align the programme with aspects of their own everyday maternal realities, they were universally critical of the ways in which *Motherland* might be positioned as part of the representational trend of 'Mothers Behaving Badly', and they focused little on the 'hedonistic' pursuit of alcohol which characterises this type (Littler, 2020). As one typically explained: 'Well I take issue with the word "badly" [laughs]... [F]or the most part they are just doing *normal* life' [original emphasis] (P1). As this makes clear, however playfully the term is used, the idea of the 'mother behaving badly' was understood as being embedded within hegemonic constructions of motherhood. This idea of judgement is returned to below, but one of the ways in which 'doing normal life' was explicitly discussed by the participants was in relation to the concept of the woman 'juggling' paid work *and* mothering.

'[T]here's a lot of truth in that – the working mum'

The participants often observed how *Motherland* offered a self-conscious discourse on the gendered division of labour which structures parenting. We see little of any of the fathers in the series and when Julia's husband Paul features he is usually on the phone enjoying leisure time (a stag party, go-kart racing, cycling, a coffee shop) whilst insisting that he is right 'behind her' to offer support in ways which are framed as comically ridiculous, ignorant and inadequate. As he explains in one episode when Julia is trying to work and plan her daughter's birthday party: 'Right now but it's just a case of learning to juggle everything, and if you drop something, I will always be there to pick it up and toss it back to you so you can keep on juggling. OK?' (S1:E1). The majority of interviews mentioned Julia's relationship with her husband Paul and it was here that issues of *comedy* were probably most visible in the data. The responses here play out the long-standing debate about the extent to which comedy enables the exploration of politically challenging or subversive discourses or (alternatively) renders them 'safe' or inconsequential due to generic context (Mills, 2009). The participants generally – and unsurprisingly – saw the portrayal of gender relations here as an explicit critique and had opinions on the political significance of comedy. Whilst one suggested that 'comedy is the easiest way to challenge something' (P2) another commented that it was an important generic space to offer a critique as 'it's much more palatable in comedy isn't it?' (P7). Although open to interpretation, these comments could be read as suggesting that comedy is a way to 'smuggle' in forms of social critique that would be seen as too pointed and direct in other genres. But this is precisely why scholars have debated whether comedy may also laugh social issues 'away':

They're really homed in on [gender] ... I think. You know, *they're not really doing it in a serious way either*. Like the men seem to be very deliberately set up at the as these kind of like caricatures of, like the shifty husband who is,

like, inattentive, and he doesn't do anything. And yeah, so they're kind of like these one dimensional, you know, comedy figures [our emphasis] (P10).

Here, comedy appears as a non-serious or anti-realist genre which will struggle to make any 'serious' social commentary. But in the same breath, such scenarios were often then rationalised as in fact also deeply *real* - simply an exaggerated form of 'real' life:

You know, it was pure comedy, but in reality it seems like so many people are going through this same thing.... Being part of Facebook groups which are 99% women, so many of the posts talk about this sort of behaviour from their partners (P10).

Or:

[A]s I was watching the programme I was always meeting up with my NCT [National Childbirth Trust] group ... I was the only solo mum, and I thought 'it can't be this bad'. But you know what I was talking to them ... and they were saying *really really* similar things and I thought God, you know, that was like four out of five ... [it is] actually mirroring what I'm seeing [original emphasis] (P3).

Of those with male partners, two mothers in the sample contrasted their own contexts with the gender disparities depicted in *Motherland* ('I wonder if it's a little bit unfair [to men] actually') (P12) – offering an example of how one's own social experience necessarily shape judgements of television realism (Busselle and Greenberg, 2000).

The series explicitly explores the 'juggle' of mothering – a term which itself suggests an uncomfortable 'precariousness and trickery' which is impossible to sustain (Maushart, 1997: 12). Indeed, the programme often playfully refers to popular discourse on women 'having it all' (as Julia grumpily says of new character Meg: 'I thought we agreed it was unfeminist to try and have it all?') and the ways in which this sets up competitive relations or 'mummy wars' (Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017: 11) between working and stay-at-home mums. Julia is presented as the more 'realistic' attempt to do this: Amanda runs her vanity project shop 'Hygge Tygge' and insists that she is finding 'having it all quite manageable really' (S2: E2) whilst having other people work in her store and collect her children from school. Hyper-efficient super-mum Meg flies back from a meeting in Germany to watch her daughter's race at sports day (emotes for two seconds) and then heads off down the M4 for a work event in Reading (S2: E6). In this regard, it was again often Julia who was the primary focus of discussion here.

In series one Julia works outside the home in the field of events, but due to an unsympathetic male boss and the fact that she is offered a 'promotion' which involves doing 'three people's jobs', she takes redundancy and sets up a freelance PR company from home

in 'FMLG' ('fast moving luxury goods'). Subjected to the neoliberal 'pressures of intensifying and precarious working cultures' (Littler, 2020: 510), Julia does not find working from home any more manageable, and series two gives particular attention to this unfolding narrative tension.

As with the wider everyday spaces, rhythms and challenges of mothering, participants spoke of the importance of *Motherland* simply making the tensions around paid work and motherhood visible to a wider audience:

[W]hat I found really interesting about the programme is the representation of the kind of third shift that often the primary carer, the woman is doing ...In other things I've watched it is invisible and I think in *Motherland* we tend to see the really complex struggles that are happening amongst this network of women just to make life happen you know - the intensity and the labour involved in just getting through a day of paid work as well and all the kind of different networks that are needed just to.. care for these children and put food on the table... So for me *Motherland* was great at really bringing that to the front and centre – what women as primary carers do (P14).

For several participants, this making visible again led to significant recognition:

Yeah, [work] ... is a massive part of why ... [Julia] struggles and it is a massive part of why I currently struggle in life ... [T]here is a lot of truth in that – the working mum. It's the trying to split yourself in half really and I really identify with that... It's quite sad, actually. I think Julia's character is quite sort of sad in the sense that she's trying to parent and she's trying to hold down... a high-powered job and not doing either very well. And that's a really common. I think that's a really common feeling (P6).

There is a slippage here between not doing either 'very well' and the '*feeling*' that this is the case, further recognising the pervasive role of ideologies of mothering in policing how women understand and experience their own mothering practices (Douglas and Michaels, 2005; Feasey, 2012; Maushart, 1997).

One of the episodes or storylines which appeared more than once in the data was the start of Julia's freelance work from home. Even though series two was made before the global Covid-19 pandemic, participants found this home-working narrative to be especially resonant in relation to this fraught context. As one participant observed, 'It is interesting that what's happened since is that we are *all Julia* – we are all working like that [original emphasis]' (P5) (although again the privileged nature of this should be noted: lower-paid jobs are less likely to accommodate home-working (i.e. Baska, 2020)). This was a period in which, as feminist research and commentary has explored, more mothers than fathers lost their jobs; up to 75% of UK mothers had to reduce their working hours; and the amount of childcare and domestic

duties performed by women increased – widening existing inequalities (see Whiley, Sayer and Juanchich, 2021: 614; see also McClaren et al., 2020). Indeed, on a global scale, feminist research has foregrounded the acceleration of existing gender inequities in this period with the pandemic ushering in a ‘triple burden’ for women (McClaren et al., 2020; see Chauhan, 2021; see also Del Boca et al., 2020). This was all while when, despite the difficulties of home-schooling being quite widely discussed, social media in the UK was ‘abound with the lived experiences of some mothers who [were]... savouring baking banana bread’ and relishing extra time with their children (Whiley, Sayer and Juanchich, 2021: 614).

In ways which were often typical in the data, one participant discussed the fraught context in which Julia was trying to work and linked it to the specific working/ mothering challenges of the pandemic:

[T]he bit I remember most is [Julia]... trying to get a computer set up in her bedroom but nothing is working... She is trying to like set up a civilised space and it just isn't. And she is constantly *constantly* being interrupted - so the doorbell rings and there's a parcel and then something else *and* something else... I can relate to that because you know especially during covid a lot of mums were working from home and trying to find office space at home, but everything is going on around you... (P1).

Or:

I think the programme makes an interesting observation that you would think that [home-working/ freelancing] would be freeing for Julia... But actually she becomes wedded to the house and to everyone else... She just becomes more embroiled in the kind of second and third shift in that space and place. And I really identified with that especially because of COVID and, you know, being in the job that I do as well working from home... It is just expected that I ... pick up all of these other jobs at the same time and it's absolutely infuriating. There was a point when [Julia]... was taking deliveries... and ohh ... that happened so many times to me in real life and that that moment was just a ‘yes’ moment for me. Just yes [original emphasis] (P14).

Meg actually tells Julia in this episode (S2: E3) to make herself ‘less available’ and remove her working space from home so that she can better extricate herself from the ‘mother’s load’ a recognition of how difficult it is to dismantle and disrupt the equation between women, caregiving, family, and home (Dillaway and Paré, 2008: 444). These scenes were recalled by multiple participants as highly resonant of pandemic work and beyond, and as the quote above suggests, some went on to share their own experiences of this shift in ways which mirrored the gender inequalities explored by the series. This is very far from an aspirational, postfeminist neoliberal model of ‘having it all’. Indeed, the responses of the participants, and

how resonant these sequences were perceived to be, may suggest that they did a good deal to expose what is:

[A]n impossible position for women—to be the ‘perfect’ Insta-mother and the ideal worker who ‘has it all’; to be ‘good’ mothers who are constantly available to nurture the success of their children (so that they too one day will be productive workers) all the while being constantly available as highly productive workers...and do not forget to dress ‘sexier’ and at the same time appear more professional on Zoom meetings (Whiley, Sayer and Juanchich 2021: 614–615).

As feminist work such as this has explored, it is problematic to simply see these discourses as an exceptional response to the pandemic, or as only telling us about the gendered inequalities of domestic and paid labour in this period. Indeed, as Whiley et al. also observe, ‘lockdown brought down the fragile façade of separation between home and work that allowed women to be mothers at home and transform into professionals at work’ (Whiley, Sayer and Juanchich, 2020: 614-615). In terms of the responses in our study here, the fact the women start out talking about the pandemic and then end up reflecting on their *general* experience as mothers who engage in paid employment is somewhat revealing, particularly in terms of a problematic gendered binary of work/home.

But the discussion of Julia’s ‘juggle’ did not stop at recognition. As Feasey found in her empirical study, participants are often reluctant to openly engage in judgement of images of motherhood in recognition of the challenges of the role and an understanding of how expectations of perfection are both impossible and repressive (2015: 162). Nevertheless, and as in Feasey’s study, whilst there was a real celebration of Julia and other characters in *Motherland*, participants *did* judge the models of mothering on offer. This is examined in more detail in the final section in relation to discourses of maternal ambivalence and selfishness. But Julia’s efforts at a work/life ‘balance’ were also the subject of critical debate.

For example, a minority of participants suggested that she ‘just needs to be more organized. It was a bit frustrating, you know, ‘time box’ your time, like ‘*This is my work time*’... [original emphasis]’ (P13) or ‘Yeah, she does have that whole struggling to juggle it all, but she’s not helping herself either’ (P11). It was the single mums in the sample who were more apt to give this topic greater space and reflection, particularly in relation to their own experiences of mothering and combining motherhood with paid work:

With Julia trying to do it all it looks really tough and it *is* really tough... she is also obviously in a really terrible relationship where she is doing absolutely everything, so she is basically behaving like a solo mum, but any solo mum would have sorted their childcare out? You just couldn’t live your life like that - it is *impossible*. So it is partly a portrayal of her as a working mum but it is also a portrayal of a really bad relationship ... She is always being let down –

like you can see why she hasn't sorted childcare as she is supposed to have it on tap [original emphasis] (P2).

Another single mum - who lived in an isolated part of the country away from any family - asserted of Julia's predicament that:

Maybe it's harsh of me... but well, you know, [she is]... saying she has got no support, but I think 'you do'. You do have bits. Yeah, sometimes when Julia's finding it hard, I suppose I'm thinking it's really not that hard [for you]. Like, your situation there... I think that's the bit where Julia tries to hire a nanny and that annoys me. I think it is the fact that she's got the options [but doesn't take them] that I find irritating... [original emphasis] (P6)

Although the sample in the study is too small to make concrete suggestions of demographic differences, it did appear that – as with class – those who occupied a more marginalised position in relation to the on-screen portrayal were apt to be more critical of Julia's character. So precisely because Julia is seen as making it look 'harder' than they have it, the single/ solo mums in the study sometimes moved between suggesting that they felt close to her because she too was effectively a 'single' mum, to acknowledging how her coupled or economic status could distance this connection.

These responses also return us to postfeminist neoliberal constructions of motherhood. On the one hand, the participants clearly recognise and value the attention given to a critique of patriarchal privilege here. Yet at the same time, they invoke ideas of neoliberal individualism in which the mother's work-life balance is seen as a matter of *personal* skill (Littler, 2020; Rottenberg, 2018; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017). In this regard, we see a complex negotiation whereby participants value the ways in which the programme makes (more) observable some of the ideological and practical challenges of life as a working mum, and especially the gendered and porous boundary between home/ work. At the same time, some also nod toward neoliberal conceptions of self-regulation and governance – from which perspective Julia is seen as somewhat lacking.

'All joy has gone from it – and that is very sad ...': Absent Children; Maternal Indifference

The paradigm of intensive mothering does not simply prescribe what a 'good' mother should do, but also how they should *feel* about their children and their maternal role. So the intensive mother role and identity is 'all-consuming, emotionally satisfying' (Pedersen, 2016: 33) and exists within 'unwavering, unconditional love' (Feasey, 2020: 1). Given that this ideology 'reduces a mother's identity to her relationship with her children' (Feasey, 2012: 7; Douglas

and Michaels, 2005: 22-23), the fact that *Motherland* gives little narrative space to the latter is interesting, and something repeatedly noted during the interviews:

I ... like the way that although it was about mothering, you never really saw much of the children (P9).

[I]n other [sitcoms] the children are quite heavily featured – whereas this doesn't really focus at all on the children... As soon as you involve children and it's something to do with women, the focus becomes the child – not on the mothers? And not on women... Like especially women in their 40s – they do tend to fade into the background. But this is the opposite ... this is them in the foreground and making the children and the men fade into the background... (P7).

I think that's probably what makes it different ... it's about what being a mother does to the character rather than the interaction with the child ... perhaps other programmes do less of how it has altered being a woman - what it does to your identity? (P3).

The second two quotes indicate how what was seen as a generic and cultural departure was enjoyed and relished by some participants, and it is presented as something of a progressive step in representations of motherhood. The fact that the children are deliberately not central was also linked to how the affective relationship between the parents and children was characterised:

I suppose one of the things I like about it is that it doesn't centre the children or doesn't even centre the relationship with the children and it doesn't do that thing of 'oh but I love them really so it's all worthwhile!' or it doesn't do that a lot, and I think that's quite nice as it means it can be a bit sharper on some of the harder aspects– the bits that are sort of *thankless* but also quite funny in how rubbish they are ... [original emphasis] (P5).

Another participant referred to the absence of 'Disney' or 'cuddly' moments in its depiction of mother/ child relationships (P10). Indeed, when this more sentimental approach was (unusually) apparent in relation to another aspect of the programme - the final episode of series three when Julia's husband tells her he really does 'love [her]... you know' following her confession that she had a crush on their builder Gary – it was almost universally critiqued by the participants as out of keeping with their expectations of the series' tone. Yet in relation to the depiction of motherhood, whilst the absence of this 'cuddly' approach was applauded, it also had a more contested role in the responses of the participants when it came to the claim to evoke the 'reality' of motherhood.

One participant noted how maybe Julia's cynicism toward motherhood was almost 'too much – I think maybe they've just gone a bit far?' (P1), whilst another went further in suggesting:

Yeah I like they didn't really show the kids but at the same time I kind of ... think they did that to the extreme. I think [Julia] approached it like it was an absolute full-on job – and I know it is – but there was no other... side to it. I remember ... thinking 'well what's she doing it for?' why not just get out, you know, especially with her husband as well. I think that's why I was getting a bit annoyed thinking – 'oh come on, it can't be this bad'. But we chose to do it... but I suppose I was judging as I was getting impatient with her around that? For me it shows... motherhood is a job in itself. But it can make you lose sight of what you actually chose to do and why you're doing it ... (P4).

So whilst Julia's exasperation and frustration with the trials and everyday grind of motherhood is central to the humour of the programme and the pleasures the participants discussed, her apparent ambivalence toward motherhood is also a source of concern and critique or something that has perhaps been taken 'too far':

Julia ... seems to give her ... children the least thought? ... [L]ike her life is too many blocks to move in the right place at the right time and all joy has gone from it – and that is very sad ... [There are those worries that] 'oh my god' you haven't read a book with your child in a week and does that make you an awful parent and that type of thing. But... [Julia] doesn't have that worry about being a bad parent ... it's not like she seems to feel the same worry that she hasn't *done* stuff with her children ... she doesn't even seem to spend the time with them to worry about that [original emphasis] (P2).

In terms of mainstream discourses, although the working mum is seen as unable to be a 'properly' intensive mother, she is still 'held accountable' for intensive mothering: she needs to 'compensate' by engaging in bursts of 'extreme parenting' or be 'constantly strategizing to limit ... time away from the children' (Dillaway and Paré, 2008: 449). But the participant's response above implies that Julia is doing just the opposite: indeed, she does not seem to be worrying or judging herself (enough). In the programme, Julia does experience judgements from *others* about her mothering identity and choices. So as Amanda comments in the pilot, she *would* work but the guilt would be too overwhelming as she would just 'hate [her]self too much', to which Julia quickly replies 'oh I *do* hate myself too much'. She also later tells her boss that she is only providing 'entry level mothering' when he asks her to take on more work (S2: E2). But as the participants' comments suggest, moments such as this are rare. This could be read as part of the programme's rebuttal of the repressions of the intensive mothering discourse which – as has been discussed – was elsewhere welcomed by the participants.

Above however, the concern appears to be that Julia is *not* being intensive enough: why *isn't* she worrying about her children's well-being, and the ways in which her mothering practices will be judged?

There is a longer history of feminist work on the concept of maternal ambivalence (Rich, 1976; Hollway and Featherstone, 1997), and this can be defined as that 'mixture of loving and hating feelings that all mothers experience towards their children, and the anxiety, shame and guilt that the negative feelings engender in them' (Almond, 2011: 2, cited in Chapman and Gubi, 2022: 93). Because the idea of being a 'good mother' is so bound up with being a 'good' (and 'normal') woman, the suppression of maternal ambivalence often reinforces the mythic construction of motherhood (May, 2008). This is why feminist research has been key in seeking to give voice to (and to normalise) such experiences, which have often been framed as pathological. But it is not entirely clear that what is being called out in *Motherland* is maternal ambivalence as much as maternal *indifference*, or the fact that Julia's feelings are absent or difficult to read. The idea of a 'mixture of loving and hating feelings' (Almond, 2011: 2) indicates a *passion*, a strength of feeling, that perhaps is not apparent here: after all, the participant above refers to how she seems to give her children 'the least thought' (P2). Indeed, some participants described how they effectively filled in the textual 'gaps' here, perhaps because they found it troubling: so 'my assumption is that that [loving moments] happen but that isn't the point of the show. The love is there '... (P1). The absence of 'instinctual' maternal love is seen implicitly as a cause for concern and as sitting less squarely within social constructions of motherhood which the programme – and the mothers – pleurably take to task.

As with the other themes in the data, however, responses in this regard were contradictory, and the presentation of Julia's relationship with her children could be defended by comments that a father would not be judged in the same way, or that:

As a mum, she's supposed to be just maternal and soft and you know, lovely. And she isn't. I mean none of the characters really are, except Kevin... So you know, if you're not living up this insane representation of motherhood, like, it's a problem (P10).

Others discussed this aspect of her character as both understandable and reasonable:

All the things she has to contend with make it very difficult to see the children as anything other than an obstacle along with all the other responsibilities that she has and the mental load that ... goes with being the main parent ... so of course, resentment is going to be part of that ... (P5).

The same duality was evident in discussions of Julia as a 'selfish' mother. Although there was a great deal of discussion of Julia as a figure of both identification and empathy, a marginal but persistent discourse on Julia's apparent 'selfishness' was still apparent in the data.

Because challenging conceptions of selfless femininity has been so central to feminism's bid to intervene in cultural constructions of gender, 'selfish' is a particularly politicised term for women (Tyler, 2007). In this regard, the 'selfish' mother is often central to constructions and perceptions of 'bad' mothers (Feasey, 2015). As the participants in Hays' original book on intensive mothering are keen to emphasise, a bad mother is 'a mother who neglects her kids for selfish reasons, because she is more concerned with her personal fulfilment, her leisure... her material possessions, and her status than she is with her children' (Hays, 1996, cited in Pleić Tomić, 2019: 9). Yet this does not have an easy fit with *Motherland*, nor the participants' responses to Julia. In the series, we never really see Julia do anything for 'personal fulfilment'. As one participant observed, this is comically portrayed in a five second moment when we see her 'lying on the settee spooning yoghurt into her mouth [laughs] ... *That* is like her leisure time! [original emphasis]' (P5). Nor do the participants critique Julia for being more concerned with 'her material possessions, and her status' (Ibid) – as these are not issues really raised by her character nor narrativised by the text. Indeed, Julia spends much of her time trying to sort out *childcare* so that she can work, yet it was here that the term 'selfish' could sometimes appear in the data:

I do see [selfishness in her character] sometimes ... Like the 'someone else has got to look after my kids for me and deal with everything!' - like my kids are someone else's problem and I've got all these other problems (P3).

Interestingly, however, participants who used this term would then also find it difficult to actually pinpoint how or why Julia was 'selfish' when they appraised the domestic power relations within which she mothered:

Some moments she's kind of viewed as quite selfish character. She is always on the look-out for a favour, looking for like someone to cover, and ... her whole world is through that lens of how can I get support here? ... But actually as an observer, she's just trying to get stuff done. She doesn't have enough time or support to do it. She is forced to be quite kind of cut-throat... (P12).

Or:

She does come across as being unkind - very kind of self-centred and selfish, but also it's just like what she has to do just to get through the day with, you know, having kids and managing a job and motherhood at the same time...? ... There is a sort of drivenness to her trying to find solutions for it, but maybe you know you can't really enjoy mothering that much if you're constantly worrying about how you can do your work? (P9).

Interestingly, in the second response, this then reflects on Julia's apparent lack of 'joy' in motherhood which here is rationalised as understandable: it is *only* because she is trying to juggle competing responsibilities that she is not enjoying her role. The idea that motherhood might not be enjoyed *full-stop* was not entertained in the data, apparently sitting outside the parameters of permissible textual readings and acceptable maternal identities.

Conclusion

There are clearly limitations to our sample here in terms of size and demographic composition. There is a preponderance of white, middle-class and heterosexual mothers in ways which parallel the representational bias within *Motherland* itself (and feminist media studies audience research more broadly). This is particularly notable given that – although our data is limited – factors such as class, familial context, and relationship status *do* seem to interface with how participants invest in and critique the text and its maternal representations. Equally, as discussed in the article, there is much more to be done here about the role of comedy and genre in structuring and normalising paradigms of the 'messy reality of motherhood' (Orton-Johnson, 2017: 9) – something which our data did not lend itself to in this instance.

Although work that has investigated the relationship between media discourse and lived experiences of maternal identity is surprisingly limited (Feasey, 2015; Pedersen, 2016), media images play a significant and complex role in 'prescribing ... norms for maternal behaviour' (Warner, 2006: 4). But as discussed in the framing of this article, a binary between online and 'broadcast' models of both representation and reception is not helpful here. Indeed, in terms of recent feminist work in the field, there is a danger that the rush to understand digital cultures of mothering (over the last 15 years) has left 'older' media such as television marginalised and simplified – and crucially outside of the nuances of *empirical* research. This article seeks to reinvigorate this terrain and to argue for the ongoing importance of maternal voices in understanding televisual discourses of motherhood. Our data here suggests that such negotiations continue to evolve and develop in ways no less dynamic and culturally revealing than the 'mamasphere'. Indeed, there is the opportunity for conceptual *and* empirical dialogue between these fields (whilst respecting the affordances of particular media forms and the ways in which responses are procured). It is clear from our sample that *Motherland* can productively be situated within a particular cultural moment in which there is a certain departure from the hegemonic dominance of intensive mothering – at least for those with certain levels of cultural privilege.

If, to repeat Feasey's earlier finding, 'mothers in the audience are struggling to see their lived experiences' on television (2015: 158), then *Motherland* is indicative of a shift in how maternal images on television are being constructed, used and negotiated. Much of the data was concerned with participants' enthusiastic investment in the perceived *reality* of the series, whether this was defined in relation to existing cultural/ media images of motherhood

(and how *Motherland* was considered to depart from these); or ‘hidden’ aspects of everyday mothering which do not often receive mainstream media representation (its depiction of the minutiae of everyday motherwork such as the school run, or the gendered rhythms and pressures of the ‘third shift’ for the working mum). Indeed, the fact that so much of the data was focused on what might be conceived as the everyday and ‘mundane’ routines of motherwork may suggest how much of this labour *still* remains hidden from media visibility – despite being the focus of feminist work on mothering from the *start* (Oakley, 1979).

As with (some) work on digital motherhood cultures (Basden Arnold and Martin, 2016; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Pleić Tomić, 2019; Pedersen, 2016), there is evidence of a push and pull between participants both naturalising and critiquing dominant ideologies of motherhood. It would of course be strange indeed if the responses of our participants operated entirely outside of hegemonies of motherhood given the pervasive role these play in shaping the lived experience of mothering and the judgements of others. At the same time, the participants were keen to critique ideologies of intensive mothering – a construction which requires mothers to suppress the lived reality of their experiences, to occupy competitive relations with other mothers, to deny their own needs, and to be consumed by a single-minded focus on their children (Valtchanov, Parry and Glover, 2016: 132). In relation to our case study here, and further suggesting the relevance of work on digital contexts, *Motherland* appeared to open up a space in which the participants could articulate, normalise and relish practices and experiences that fall outside the purview of intensive mothering. The fact that this is so needed suggests how such ideologies exert considerable influence on the construction of maternal identities, even whilst they are self-consciously critiqued and resisted.

At the same time, there were limits to the critique articulated by the participants here. In Feasey’s work, she argues that ‘the extremes of perfect motherhood and selfish parenting’ (2015: 4) mark out the outer limits of critique within which her respondents negotiate discursive constructions of mothering. In our study, however, and negotiating the specifics of *Motherland* as a text, the idea of the ‘selfish’ mother does skirt the acceptable parameters of the ‘chaotic’ and ‘messy’ mum. But it was perceptions of Julia’s affective relationship with her children that marked out the *real* outer limit for our participants. Whilst embracing and relishing aspects of the ‘imperfect’ mother and the bid to reject the intensive mothering paradigm, the idea that mothering might not be enjoyed *at all* was effectively sitting outside this terrain. This suggests that while the boundaries of ‘good’/‘bad’ motherhood paradigms may be subject to ongoing renegotiation, they remain anchored to deeply entrenched perceptions of acceptable maternal femininity. In this regard, future work in the field – across media forms – could productively invest more attention in feelings and experiences sitting at the more ‘taboo’ end of the continuum. So the topic of maternal regret, for example (Donath, 2015; Matley, 2020) productively ‘transgresses the notion of bearing and raising children as women’s essential biological function’ (Matley, 2020: 2) and is beginning to find more cultural and media visibility (Ibid). In exploring the discourses, images and experiences which are more difficult to absorb into historically hegemonic constructions of motherhood, we can play an important role in making such resistance more visible.

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Teleography

Motherland, 'Pilot' (BBC2, 6 September, 2016)

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Motherland, Series 2: episode 2: 'A Soft Opening' (BBC2, 14 October, 2019)

Motherland, Series 2: episode 3: 'Mother's Load' (BBC2, 21 October, 2019)

Motherland, Series 2: episode 6: 'Good Job' (BBC2, 11 November, 2019)

Motherland, Series 3: episode 3: 'Mother's Day' (BBC2, 10 May, 2021)