Locating the 'invisible' mum: exploring maternal selfie practices

Su Holmes & Bethany Atkins

Published online: 27 Sep 2023.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 156

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

Check for updates

Locating the 'invisible' mum: exploring maternal selfie practices

Su Holmes and Bethany Atkins

Department of Film, TV and Media, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England

ABSTRACT

This article draws on ten semi-structured interviews with mothers about their maternal selfie practices in order to explore how they use and navigate the form in relation to their motherhood identities and experiences. Whilst work on the form is still emerging, we examine the claim that maternal selfies offer space for a uniquely subjective expression/depiction of motherhood. As part of this, we explore how discussions of their selfie practices – and appraisals of the cultural circulation of the maternal selfie – resist and (re)produce discourses on acceptable digital and cultural paradigms of motherhood. The themes which emerged from these data were 1) the maternal selfie as empowerment, 2) authenticity as regulatory discourse and 3) the risks of negative affect. In drawing on work on neoliberal and intensive mothering frames, the article examines how the increasing emphasis (in digital cultures in particular) on displaying the complex realities of motherhood are implicated within the surveillance and self-surveillance of maternal visibility in ways which may (further) delimit the possibilities for maternal self-expression.

Over the last few years, there has been an intermittent popular discourse on the photographic phenomenon of the 'ghost', 'missing' or 'invisible' mum. With titles such as 'Why Are Mothers Always Missing In Family Photos?' (Pearce, 2018), 'The invisible mothers of family photos' (Collins, 2022) or 'No one takes pictures of moms – so I'm doing something about it' (Thompson, 2019), articles and memes foregrounded the effacement of mothers in family photography (presumably largely referring to photos online). Differing explanations were offered here, such as the loss of identity which motherhood may entail ('symbolically, they seem to gradually disappear from their own pictures' (McMillan, 2020)), the gendered labour of being the 'gatekeepers of memories' ('invest[ing] time and energy into capturing everyone's precious memories but never mak[ing] it into the frame themselves' (Pearce, nd)), and women's 'lower self-esteem' (shunning pictures when their self-presentation is not of 'social sharing' quality (Pearce, 2018)). With little or no recognition of family configurations outside of the nuclear ideal, mothers were exalted to urge 'Dad' to seize the smartphone and get clicking away. But what is of particular interest is that, in these articles, the *selfie* was presented as a 'common countermeasure' or 'necessity' in the face of such ideological, aesthetic and technological invisibility.

Work on the discursive circulation of the selfie has long since foregrounded gendered judgements of digital narcissism and vanity (Burns, 2015; Lazard & Capdevila, 2020). Yet the articles above indicate how these discourses are shaped by different cultural and ideological contexts. On one level, the articles and memes *do* invoke discourses of digital narcissism: mothers are apparently more comfortable taking selfies as part of family photography

because they can control when the picture is taken and how they 'look'. On the other hand, the dominant emphasis is on the apparently more pressing context of ensuring an appropriate photographic legacy for the child. Mothers take selfies to ensure that a photographic family identity exists in ways which are bound up with perceptions of psychological well-being for the child and being a 'good mum'. As Rose observes of her interviews with women about practices of family imaging outside of social media platforms (SMPs), 'to be proper mother is ... in part to manage family photography' (2010: 8), and her participants explained how the project of family photography was to achieve 'family, home and mothering' (2014: 83). In this regard, popular discourse on the selfie and hegemonic constructions of motherhood would appear to be somewhat incongruous. Whilst selfies have been understood as (regrettably) individualistic (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019; Lazard & Capdevila, 2020), hegemonic conceptions of motherhood, such as those articulated by the paradigm of intensive mothering emphasize self-lessness and reduce a mother's identity to her relationship with her child (Hays, 1996).

This article draws on ten semi-structured interviews with mothers about their maternal selfie practices in order to explore how they use and navigate the form in relation to their motherhood identities and experiences. Whilst work on the form is still emerging, we examine the claim that maternal selfies offer space for a uniquely subjective expression/depiction of motherhood (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017). As part of this, we explore how discussions of their selfie practices – and appraisals of the cultural circulation of the maternal selfie – resist and (re)produce discourses on acceptable digital and cultural paradigms of motherhood. In drawing on work on neoliberal and intensive mothering frames, the article examines how the increasing emphasis (in digital cultures in particular) on displaying the 'messy realities' of motherhood (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 9) are implicated within the surveillance and self-surveillance of maternal visibility in ways which may (further) delimit the possibilities for maternal self-expression.

Motherhood and family photography: from photo album to selfie

In debating what is 'new' (or not) in the construction and circulation of family imaging online, existing research has engaged with the technological, aesthetic and ideological legacy of family photography (Barnwell et al., 2021; Moingan et al., 2017; Rose, 2010, 2014). Although there are many facets to this debate, a key argument has been that SMPs do not fundamentally challenge a longer history legacy of family photography which privileges happy images of family cohesion and leisure (whilst eliding hardship, conflict, sadness, illness, work and more) (Barnwell et al., 2021; Lazard et al., 2019; Moingan et al., 2017). Given that myths of family cohesion centre on constructions of motherhood as natural, fulfilling and often self-effacing, it is not surprising that feminist critics (Spence & Holland, 1991; Walkerdine, 1991) have historically understood the family album as 'especially oppressive for women' and as stifling ... the possibilities ... for self-representation' (Rose, 2010, p. 5). But although existing work on the digital curation of family imaging has argued for ideological continuity here, the implications for the representation of motherhood are still emerging, and this includes the aesthetic and ideological affordances of the maternal selfie.

Across SMPs, it is mothers who are the primary generators of family discourse, including family photos (Lazard, 2022). As historians have shown, family photography has been explicitly feminized since the 1900s when mothers were targeted by early Kodak promotional discourse (Goc, 2014; Leonard, 1999). As Goc observes, the implication here was that the 'mother owes it to herself and to her children to capture their childhood moments' (2014: 32). According to Leonard, the effect of this was to repeatedly foreground 'mothers photographing their own perspective on the family' (Leonard, 1999, p. 294), whilst Tiidenberg and Baym observe how 'women's perspectives have long dominated family photography' (2017: 1). Yet given the emphasis on family photos being highly regulated artefacts which pivot on particular scripts about what it means to be a 'good' family (and mother), the idea of visualizing any kind of maternal subjectivity within this context is complex.

This issue then becomes even more resonant with the emergence of the (maternal) selfie which has centralized debates about photographic subjectivity. A selfie is a 'photograph that one has taken of oneself, *esp.* one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media' (OED, 2013). Existing scholarship posits selfies as a form of self-expression, or more specifically a networked *practice* or *process* through which the self/body is imaged, experienced and understood (Warfield, 2017). There is now a wide range of work on existing uses and interpretations of selfie practices (see Cambre & Lavrence, 2019), but key debates have often circled around issues of self-expression and social engagement (Moingan et al., 2017) – especially as couched in questions of agency and power. In terms of how academic work has responded to (and troubled) dominant strands of popular discourse, some scholars have critiqued a binary which either pathologizes selfies or 'celebrates [their] . . . potential to empower subjects and disrupt normative frameworks' (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015, p. 78), and Cambre and Lavrence assert the importance of being 'increasingly attentive to the nuances of selfie practices' across different contexts and groups (2019: 305). Indeed, crucial here is the suggestion that the 'selfie playing field is not level' (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019, p. 506), and early selfie discourse was of course saturated with gendered tropes (Burns, 2015; Lazard & Capdevila, 2020). In this regard, we need to be attentive to the ways in which the selfie practices of some groups are more 'socially policed' than others and the impact this has on their creation and circulation (Senft and Baym, 2015; Cambre & Lavrence, 2019).

The work that exists on the maternal selfie largely focuses on breastfeeding selfies or 'brelfies' (Beach, 2017; Boon & Pentney, 2015; Johnson & Rintoul, 2019; Locatelli, 2017; Tugwell, 2019, 2022). As a potential form of 'lactivism', brelfies have been conceptualized as rejecting popular discourse on the insistence of discretion and isolation for breastfeeding practices (Beach, 2017; Johnson & Rintoul, 2019; Tugwell, 2022); challenging the sexualization of the female breast whilst operating as a form of 'intimate exchange between women' (Beach, 2017; Tugwell, 2022, p. 328); offering visual insight into the 'messy' reality of breastfeeding and diversifying the representation of the maternal/lactating body (Boon & Pentney, 2015; Locatelli, 2017); and asserting the mother's subjectivity and sociality outside of the mother/child dyad (Tugwell, 2022). But although some find breastfeeding selfies 'as self-determining and affirmative of maternal subjectivity' (Johnson & Rintoul, 2019, p. 933), the cultural policing of the images is virulent and multifaceted in ways which are intrinsic to their digital circulation (Beach, 2017). Some scholars have also noted the paradoxical relationship that such images have with the 'good mother' ideal and emphasized the continued inscription of a white, cisgender and heteronormative framework (Boon & Pentney, 2015, 1768; Tugwell, 2022).

Aside from some discussions of the family selfie appearing in work on family photography online (Lazard, 2022; Lazard et al., 2019; Moingan et al., 2017), the most sustained discussion of the maternal selfie is offered by Zappavigna and Zhao (2017) who set out a textual taxonomy of the maternal selfies found in 'mommy blogging'. Understanding a maternal selfie as a form of self-imaging which features a mother with her child/children, or an image which offers a perspective on the photographer's life as a mother, Zappavigna and Zhao categorize maternal selfies as presentational (when the face and/or upper body of the mother is visually depicted), mirrored (often including a reflection of the photographer the image with phone and mirror), or inferred/implied (when body parts or objects imply the presence of the photographer). Key to the argument offered here is that selfies can be understood as enabling an interpersonal rather than primarily representational function, and they focus on how the images enact and invite particular social relations between the selfie taker and the audience (2017: 240). In foregrounding the relationship between photographer and viewer (which does seem to rest on the assumption that this practice is somehow less mediated) this offers a means for mothers to articulate 'their own perspectives on motherhood, that is to be "seeing subjects" at the same time' (2017: 246). Rather than a rhetoric of 'look at me', maternal selfies invite a rhetoric of 'look, it is my perspective on motherhood' (Ibid: 242). In this regard, they argue that 'empowerment is inherent in the visual structure' of these selfies (2017: 245).

Zappavigna and Zhao offer an important contribution to understanding the aesthetic and potential affordances of the maternal selfie here. But whilst their article takes in aspects of context (so brief excerpts of comments for example) (2017: 244), such formal questions cannot be considered outside of the networked relations which drive SMPs. Not only do family photographs on SMPs circulate across the far wider concept of 'networked publics' which shape what is shared and how (Boyd, 2010), but as Lazard explains, family photos become 'part of women's identity projects on social media' (Lazard, 2022, p. 551) and a crucial context through which maternal subjectivities are constructed and judged. In making maternal identities highly visible, posting family content is a context in which 'women risk and manage negative evaluation…', and 'digital mothering practices ... add ... to the significant identity work already carried out by mothers within intensive mothering frames' (Lazard, 2022, p. 554).

As this acknowledges, the dominant model of motherhood in contemporary Western society is intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), or what Douglas and Michaels (2005) famously term 'the new Momism' in the US. Central to this predominantly white, middle-class paradigm is a 'romanticized and demanding ideology that emphasizes the need for mothers to spend a great deal of time, energy, and money on child rearing' (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 2) whilst they should feel no sense of loss or sacrifice at [their] ... own lack of freedom, friendships, financial independence, or intellectual stimulation' (Feasey, 2020:; Douglas & Michaels, 2005). Neoliberal policies and discourses which promote a 'self-determined, autonomous family' have been seen as intensifying and complimenting the intensive mother paradigm (Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017: 10). Rather than the concept of it takes a 'village' to raise a child, 'the neoliberal discourse portrays motherhood as essentially an individual enterprise run and managed by one person: the mother' (Güney-Frahm, 2020, p. 849). Paradoxically, the promise (or illusion) of 'having it all' is writ large within this paradigm (Ibid, Greer: 2017). Indeed, 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), spanning the welfare of the family, a good career to a desirable self-image (Güney-Frahm, 2020; McRobbie, 2015).

Whilst not denying the pervasive hegemony of these values, it has been suggested that we have seen a shift in certain representations of motherhood which question or reject 'the paradigm of the perfect' and the self-sacrificing demands of the intensive paradigm (Littler, 2020, p. 499; see also Feasey, 2020; Holmes and Godfrey, 2023). Although the foundations of any discursive shift are complex, this may in part dramatize ruptures and contractions within neoliberal rhetoric and organization in which '*too much* work, both inside and outside the home, is overloaded onto women [original emphasis]' (Littler, 2020, p. 519). Whilst this has been observed across media forms, it is arguably digital cultures of motherhood – with an emphasis on everyday 'authenticity' and more opportunities for self-representation – which have been central here (Van Cleaf, 2020).

Scholarship on family imaging and SMPs is part of wider work exploring constructions of motherhood online, and this scholarship has grown substantially over the last ten years. In focusing on the range of ways in which motherhood is mediated through the technological, temporal and digital affordances of online communication (Rome, 2020, p. 202), some scholars argue for the liberating and transformative potential of the 'mammasphere' in which experiences of maternal struggle, ambivalence, resentment and regret have found greater articulation (Lupton et al., 2016; Van Cleaf, 2020). In enabling the representation of experiences which may be more difficult to express in real life (Ehrstein, 2022, p. 395), online spaces – when compared to 'traditional' media forms – have been seen as offering mothers opportunities to exercise more representational agency. They can produce counternarratives to hegemonic myths of mothering which also normalize the 'messy reality' of motherhood and the idea of (just) being 'good enough' (Archer & Kao, 2018, p. 126; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Such discourses may offer important challenges to postfeminist, neoliberal narratives of maternal 'perfection' (McRobbie, 2015) and the unrealizable demands of the intensive mothering paradigm. But – in ways which in part echo research on the brelfie – scholars have also cautioned against simply emphasizing the transformative potential here: such contexts can also

reproduce and confirm dominant discourses on 'good mothering' and function as regulatory spaces which normalize and heighten surveillance of maternal identities (Pleić Tomić, 2019, p. 8, see also Astudillo-Mendoza & Cifuentes-Zunino, 2022). Thus, the dominant argument emerging from this literature often foregrounds the contradictory functions and experiences of digital mothering contexts which may both reproduce and critique dominant discourses. How the maternal selfie may enter this matrix is explored in relation to our data below.

Methodology

Recruitment

The research was interested in how the mothers negotiated the taking and sharing of maternal selfies, so the study was open to anyone who identified as a mother and who was over 18. After ethical approval was received by UEA (Application ID: ETH2223–0920), recruitment was pursued via various channels including parenting groups on Facebook (local and international); parenting websites such as Mumsnet and Netmums; personal accounts on Instagram and word-of-mouth or recommendation. Participants had to have taken and shared maternal selfies via SMPs and as the call explained: 'These may include images taken by you of you and your child/children, or images which depict a view of/or experience of motherhood'. Ten cis-gendered women took part, with eight identifying as heterosexual, one as lesbian and one as queer. The ages of the women ranged from 34 to 61, with the majority sitting in their 40s. The participants had children of different ages, and all but one had children of school age or below. All participants were resident in the UK and lived in a range of urban/suburban contexts. Six participants identified as white British, one as British Jewish, one as white Italian, one as white Canadian, one as white Australian, and one as 'mixed other'. Those who were willing to offer a class descriptor identified as middle-class. In terms of family context, eight of the women lived with a partner, with families defined as both biological and 'blended', and two described themselves as single/solo mothers. Informed consent for publication of interview material was given by participants via a consent form. A participant (P1) who agreed for her selfies to be published as part of the study is featured in Figures 1–3 to illustrate key themes.

It has been suggested that the online parenting sphere is dominated by the voices and experiences of white, Western women and this has been replicated in the majority of feminist work in the field (Ehrstein, 2022). In terms of the current study, although there is some diversity in terms of family context, sexuality and nationality, the sample is somewhat homogenous in terms of ethnicity and class. It is acknowledged here that aspects of the recruitment process (the middle-class bias of some of forums and groups; participants recommending friends; the first named author's status as a white, middle-class mum), played a role in perpetuating this demographic bias in ways which inevitably shape the results. Class issues are relevant to the analysis, whilst the specific limitations of the sample are reflected on in the conclusion.

Procedure

The majority of studies of digital motherhood/family photography on SMPs use pre-existing data available online (e.g. Barnwell et al., 2021; Locatelli, 2017; Moingan et al., 2017; Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017). In this regard, there seems to be an assumption in much work in the field that the photos and selfies (with or without captions) 'speak for themselves' – despite the longer history of feminist work on family photography which has foregrounded the importance of the *practices and contexts* within which the images (Rose, 2010). In focusing on 'the lived experience of selfies' (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019, p. 511), interviews can enable explorations of why images are taken and shared, what they mean to participants, as well as what is *not* shared (and why).

Participants took part in a one-to-one online semi-structured interview with the first named author of the article which lasted between thirty-sixty minutes. The interview schedule covered five key questions including 1) what type of online motherhood content participants engaged

with; 2) what cultural associations (if any) they felt that selfies/maternal selfies carried; 3) why they took and posted such images; 4) how they chose which maternal selfies to post (and which not to); and 5) to what extent maternal selfies offered insight into maternal subjectivities. Following an existing model (Lazard, 2022), participants were asked to email up to five maternal selfies in advance, and these became the core basis for discussion once the interviewer shared her screen to discuss the images. In this regard, it is worth noting here that online interviews based on the sharing of selfie images create a particular technological and interpersonal dynamic in which the participants are watching themselves while looking at their own images. This offers a kind of double layering of maternal self-image in which – as discussed in the analysis below – may have contributed to quite self-conscious and self-reflexive discussions of the photos.

Unlike many other studies of family photographs on SMPs, this research was not focused on a specific platform. Rather, it was on the mothers' experiences of the creation and circulation of the maternal selfie – albeit in ways involve selection, curation and storying of the images. But the platform use was in any case quite narrow: participants only posted maternal selfies on their own Facebook and/or Instagram profiles. Instagram selfies were submitted with their captions intact, whereas for Facebook posts, participants tended to talk through how they had framed their image when they felt it was important.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and anonymized (with participants given a number and child names replaced by initials) and the data approached using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Both researchers read the transcripts separately so as to produce notes on preliminary ideas and observations and to develop a sense of key themes. Although this approach is often yoked to the pursuit of 'accurate' or 'reliable' coding, RTA does not assume that researchers will generate identical themes: the approach is 'collaborative and reflexive, aiming to achieve richer interpretations of meaning, rather than attempting to achieve consensus of meaning' (Byrne, 2022: 1393). In this regard, RTA acknowledges the active role of researcher identity and understands codes as developing from the intersection of researcher perspective, conceptual approach(es) and the contours of the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2019, Byrne, 2022). The first named author is a white, heterosexual, middle-aged solo mum to two children, whilst the second author has no children and is a white, gay, working-class woman. The themes which emerged from the collaborative analysis between the authors were 1) the maternal selfie as empowerment 2) authenticity as regulatory discourse 3) the risks of negative affect. These thematic categories were analysed in detail and data extracts that represented these themes – and the contradictions and complexities between them – were selected for inclusion.

'Hey, look! I'm here as well': putting mum in the picture

The participants took maternal selfies in a range of different contexts including special moments (so holidays, birthdays or a first meet up with family after the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown) and the everyday (co-sleeping selfies, a trip to the park, an image of working from home). The majority of maternal selfies submitted for the study were 'presented selfies' in which the mother is both photographer and participant (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017, p. 242). When asked about why they took and posted maternal selfies, participants gave a range of answers including self-documentation; memory preservation; and social engagement. But one theme immediately related to the popular discourse on the 'ghost' or 'invisible mum'. Indeed, the participants acknowledged that they often had the role of 'gatekeeper' of family memories and were aware of the ideological and technological contexts which rendered them more 'invisible' in family photos. In this regard, they *did* consider that maternal selfies were important to ensure that they were present in a photography legacy for their children. But some said rather more than the existing popular discourse about why maternal selfies could be important to the articulation of maternal subjectivities:

I'm always the one . . . doing something else or taking the picture on other people's behalf . . . So a selfie is a way of saying, 'hey, look! I'm here as well' . . . . And it is for people to see me in them as well . . . you know, my friends and family . . . And I guess on a secondary level, to show society - to say 'I'm not just the caretaker, I'm also doing all these other things . . . ' And . . . I've got agency in my pictures. I'm doing something that's showing me achieving something or doing something or going somewhere . . . rather than conventional perceived ideas of what mothering looks like . . .. (P1)

This participant articulates inclusion in – and then the sharing of – the selfie as potentially challenging ideologies of motherhood as effacing and servile ('I'm not just the caretaker'). Others expressed inclusion in less openly resistive ways which still focused on the importance of maternal visibility. So as one participant explained: 'I think part of it . . . is just to keep myself visible – showing that I'm a mum and I'm proud of being a mum' (P2).

One of the issues which emerged in the data was how the specificities of particular family contexts could shape why selfies were taken and shared. So one participant was mother to a younger biological child, and stepmother to two teenage boys. In contextualizing a selfie with the eldest stepson who was dressed in a suit and ready for his prom, she explained how:

We all we all went to C's [mum's house] . . . for pre prom drinks . . . She had arranged a series of photographs for everyone in the room except me with C . . . I don't think it was deliberate . . . but no one made sure that there was a . . . nice . . . portrait photo of me with C. So I grabbed him at one point and I was like, 'right selfie'. And so I was in this photo because otherwise, I've just been written out of the picture narrative . . . I was very invested in C's prom [she explains the thought that went into choosing his buttonhole and how he won best-dressed] but no one was gonna take a photo of me, so I did it. . . . I empowered myself to take the photo of myself! (P4)

As with the first participant, the maternal selfie – both the taking *and* displaying – is explicitly articulated in terms of agency. But here it is more in ways which speak to the ideological complexities of the stepmother role (see Miller et al., 2018) and navigating a space for a maternal relationship which is actively recognized (*seen*) but not 'over-claimed' (P4).

Equally, a solo mum who had conceived their child through a sperm donor and who was thus parenting alone described a smiling selfie of her sat on a plane with her baby daughter in a sling:

So this is us setting off on our first flight . . . I was just really nervous about - how it would go and it was all fine, so . . . [this picture of me and her is saying] 'Oh my God, I can't believe I pulled this off!' . . . I realise as I'm saying it that it might sound like I'm saying 'oh I'm a great mum and you're all losers'. [But] it is just because I am proud of myself . . . like I've done something out of my comfort zone. (P5)

This scenario is a useful reminder that for single/solo mothers, the selfie can be the default mode of family photography rather than specific cultural or technological choice. But the quote highlights how the participant sees the maternal selfie as enabling visual expression of her subjective experience and achievement. Although the concept of maternal pride – especially within the intensive mothering and neoliberal discourse – is often yoked to the child and thus linked to 'good' mothering and childhood outcomes (Lazard et al., 2019, p. 4), the selfie here enables the participant to articulate and depict *self*-pride ('*I* pulled this off!'). Yet the qualification 'it might sound like I'm saying "I'm a great mum and you're all losers'" suggests that putting oneself in the picture has to be carefully negotiated in relation to external judgement (here, the risk of being read as too 'smug' or 'boastful').

As this begins to indicate, the suggestion that maternal selfies can afford unique possibilities for maternal subjectivities is aesthetically and ideologically complex (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017), especially when placed within the networked contexts of their circulation. So the same participant who spoke of the maternal selfie challenging 'perceived ideas of what mothering looks like . . .' (p1), also spoke of how conscious she was of her selfies fulfilling understandings of 'good motherhood' (see also Lazard, 2022). In speaking of a smiling outdoor selfie depicting her toddler on her shoulders (Figure 1), the participant reflected how:

Figure 1. Particpant 1: '[I]t is also an image of how I want to be perceived as a mum - as active and my child having an outdoor life'.

> [I]t is also an image of how I want to be perceived as a mum - as active and my child having an outdoor life. So B in that picture, [he] looks really healthy. It probably says that we feed him really well and he has a good diet and all these other messages just from that simple picture. (P1)

Drawing on neoliberal discourses of healthism (and the ways in which mothers have familial responsibility for managing this domain), several participants choose active outdoor selfies with their children, and as one explained, they 'remind … me of nice activities that I do with my kids, where I feel like … I'm a good mum …' (P9). In this regard, the participants were striving to adhere to external constructions of 'good motherhood' in ways which question and circumscribe subjective agency.

With regard to typologies, the inferred/implied selfie (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017) can clearly offer a mother's *visual* point of view. But in terms of the presentational mode discussed here, the space for maternal subjectivity is less clear. In making motherhood and maternal identities visible, such possibilities jostle for space with existing scripts of neoliberal, intensive motherhood as they intersect with particular regimes of digital self-display.

'It's not a badge of honour to … be covered in sick': navigating authenticity in the maternal selfie

Many of the participants were aware of judgements around 'sharenting' online – a pejorative term used to describe the perceived 'oversharing' about one's children on social media (Lazard, 2022, p. 541). In mapping out the 'normative parameters of social acceptability around parental posting' (Ibid: 542), this can take in concerns over the visibility and privacy of children in public

forms, the frequency of posting, to judgements around 'humblebragging'. Needless to say, it is mothers who are the main focus of disapproval here (Lazard, 2022, p. 542). But although the participants often referred to these issues, they did not perceive that selfies in general, nor maternal selfies, carried negative value judgements ('they are just mainstream now' (7)). Yet whilst the practice itself was not denigrated, participants invoked explicit judgements about 'good' and 'bad' maternal selfies in ways which offer insight into the aesthetic and ideological imperatives which shape the possibilities of the form.

Within the study of social media, authenticity is a much debated and contested term (Nguyen & Barbour, 2017), and as selfies show a 'self enacting a self' (Frosh, 2015: 1621), they are especially ripe for debate here. Participants often drew on what scholars have termed affective authenticity (Nguyen & Barbour, 2017; Warfield, 2017) – when a comparison is enacted between the individual and their visual representation ('I ... identify with that as me' (P3)). At the same time, they acknowledged how selfies of course also involve strategic self-representation: 'Oh I'm certainly aware of my best angles ... and will always delete the ones where I've got a double chin ... So there is self-editing there, and vanity' (P3). In this regard, their posting practices were shaped by regulatory discourses concerning the presentation of 'acceptable' femininities/maternities (as has been argued with selfies more widely (e.g. Burns, 2015; Warfield, 2017)). As in Warfield's study, criteria for posting a selfie often combined affective relationality with gendered tropes of self-display in ways which are potentially contradictory: it had to 'look good but also feel authentic' (Warfield, 2017, p. 85).

Within these contradictory demands, there was a recurrent emphasis on the 'good' maternal selfie being as spontaneous as possible, something that is 'captured' by, rather than staged *for*, the photo. As one participant explained: 'So it is like the excitement of "ohh we are on holiday – yay!" and then ... we'll just kind of ... put arms around each other ... rather than like "ohh let's take a selfie" kind of moment' (P8). This idea of authenticity and spontaneity could also take in questions of appearance ('so on this camping trip I liked how we both had mega fly away hair and we were both tired!') and/or aesthetics ('so that is the toddler launching himself to the floor again. I think it must have been just as I was taking it, as he's all blurry') (P7). Participants were routinely critical of what they termed 'staged', 'posed' or 'contrived' maternal selfies:

> So with an influencer mother ... on Instagram - they've got these 'lovely' posed photos, but the reality is a lot of the time, that the kid is gonna headbutt you ... [But] we've all seen [these images] ... before ... and they're just quite boring ..... (P7)

Or:

> [I've seen those] with a mum lying in bed with a newborn and it's just idyllic and she is fully made-up ... They are the ones that make me angry as ... they are very, very contrived. I think those are the ones that are almost set up to make you feel bad about yourself. (P5)

So ranging from simply 'boring' to being potentially detrimental to one's mental health, perceptions of curation, performance and especially the ideological image of motherhood conveyed were crucial to assessments of the 'bad' maternal selfie.

As this suggests, there is a complex intersection here between 'good/bad' maternal selfies and the image of motherhood portrayed. There is a long history of cultural and media narratives around 'good' and 'bad' mums which are necessarily raced and classed, and these take in the intersecting contexts of family configurations, physical appearance and moral values (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Feasey, 2012; Littler, 2013; Tyler, 2008). A particular political and cultural instance of this in the UK context was the circulation of a binaristic contrast between the 'yummy' and 'slummy' mummy (gaining visible traction around 2005/6) (Littler, 2013). Exemplifying the commodification of 'appropriate' maternal identities under neoliberalism (Littler, 2013; McRobbie, 2013, 2015), the middle-class 'yummy mummy' is youthful, well-groomed, tight-bodied and situated within a romanticized and aestheticized glamorous domestic life (Littler, 2013; Orton-Johnson, 2017). In contrast, the working-

class 'slummy mummy' is 'unfeminine', lazy, has 'let herself go' (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 2) and her domestic domain invites judgement rather than commodification.

Even the most cursory survey of the internet suggests that these highly classed terms still retain a currency, but this also makes evident something of a reappropriation of the term 'slummy'. As the *Daily Mail* predictably and fervently worried in a headline from 2017: 'Feeding their toddlers frozen fish fingers, swigging gin from baby cups and potty mouthed ranting about their kids online: Why ARE so many women boasting they're slummy mummies?' (Mangan, 2017). As the headline suggests, what is being referred to here are often digital cultures (from forums celebrating 'wine mom culture' (Fetters, 2020) to 'slummy' mummy bloggers) (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 2), although these are inseparable from a number of high-profile books written by mothers using the same terminology (Kinsella, 2005; Neill, 2007). The term 'boasting' in the *Daily Mail* headline is also indicative of a reappropriation of the (once abject) moniker of 'slummy' in ways which appear to invert classed categories: as the article also observed, we can 'hazard a guess' that the children of these 'resentful, gin-soaked mothers . . . who are in reality predominantly middle-class . . . are actually very well cared for, enjoy organic fruit and vegetables and sleep in clean pyjamas' (Mangan, 2017). As such, lifestyle markers are both deeply classed ('potty-mouthed' mums cooking 'cheap' food) yet also removed somewhat from their class moorings as the 'slummy mummy' becomes shorthand for a mum 'who is honest', 'makes no apologies', and 'does her best'. At the same time, such critical engagement with intensive mothering discourses is clearly founded on – and made possible by – a more secure position of classed and/or racial privilege (Littler, 2020), so class continues to be present in its (apparent) absence.

This shift has a complex relevance for the data presented in this study. In assessments of the 'good'/'bad' maternal selfie, class was not often explicitly (nor even implicitly) evident. Whilst this may itself point to aspects of class privilege, it also illustrates the mainstreaming of ideas about what now counts as 'authentic' and desirable motherhood within the contexts of *digital* display. So with regard to a selfie which depicted her sporting a smiling toddler next to a newborn on her lap, P1 (Figure 2) explained how her toddler had previously been struggling with the changes wrought by a new sibling:

Figure 2. Participant 1: 'I wanted to still honour the fact that I'm really tired'.

I liked [this selfie] because it captured a really positive moment for the three of us . . . But also in that picture I . . . look like shit and I didn't try and make myself look any better than I was actually looking . . . I wanted to still honour the fact that I'm really tired. I haven't been able to brush my hair and I haven't . . . been able to get dressed properly. So that was important for me to keep that in there. [I] don't want people to feel like . . . I'm [being] disingenuous. (P10)

Although the mothers were keen on making sure that selfies showed their 'best side' and didn't include 'double-chins' or make them 'look chunky' (P3, P4, P8), we can see here how an emphasis on offering an 'authentic' maternal selfie jostles for space with norms which regulate the presentation of maternal femininity ('I . . . look like shit . . . that was important for me to keep that in there'). In this way, the response attests to the selfie as a performance for particular imagined viewers (Frosh, 2015). Although the 'slummy' realities of sharing the 'messy' lived experience of motherhood were initially articulated as a critique of intensive motherhood paradigms, the extent to which such discourses may *themselves* become imbricated within the policing of an acceptable image of maternal femininity is also suggested here ('[I] don't want people to feel like . . . I'm [being] disingenuous'). Indeed, this is no longer something to 'boast' about (as the *Daily Mail* article anxiously worried), but more of a convention that is taken *as given*. This normalization is clearly articulated by the following participant:

I think for women . . . we carry so much burden of shame around being proud of how we look or how we're doing in some way, and I think . . . why should I be ashamed of doing alright and doing well and not looking bedraggled?! And you know what? It's not a badge of honour to have bags under your eyes and be covered in sick. Yeah, it's the reality. But that doesn't mean that you're a better . . . or more authentic mum than someone who's put makeup on and done their hair. (P3)

So the same participants who railed against the 'inauthenticity' of perfect maternal selfies – idealized domestic setting, polished self-display – could acknowledge how demonstrating an acceptable image of the 'reality' of maternal experience was *also* a pressure which silenced or marginalized other forms of self-expression. The extent to which these competing demands may regulate the construction of maternal subjectivities within (ever more narrow) confines was clearly vocalized by one participant when she observed how the 'mum can't win':

So I think that with maternal selfies - there's some that look quite authentically real and honest because they've got all the kind of detritus of family life in the background. And then there are some that you can see are 'right, we're going to plan this . . . to look absolutely perfect . . . ' I think both sets could be judged because . . . with the first one with all the family crap in the background [people] would be like 'why on earth didn't you clear that up before you took the photograph?' And the other one is . . . well not real life. So I think in both cases the mum can't win. So if she makes it look really fabulous . . . then . . . it can seem . . . incredibly vain and self-serving. And if you take a photograph . . . [be] cause . . . you're feeling tired or you just wanna reach out and say, this is what motherhood looks like . . . well then you can get judged for that too. (P6)

Arguably led by online cultures which have made a particular space for the 'digital mundane' (Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017: 16), such responses are less evidence of the mandatory requirement to pursue maternal perfection (McRobbie, 2015) than indicative of how mothers are required to negotiate competing forms of aesthetic/ideological social surveillance which both demand *and* police the 'real'.

'You don't want to look like you don't love your child if you're not smiling': managing negative affect

There were few selfies submitted for the study which did not feature smiling faces all round, and any that did not (such as a mum accidentally being whacked in the face whilst co-sleeping with a baby (P7)) were contextualized and 'recuperated' by humorous captions, or other forms of explanation. So one participant submitted an image featuring a high angle selfie of her face – displaying a look of 'weary resignation' (P1) – and a smiling baby visible in play ring on the floor (Figure 3). Taken during

Figure 3. Participant 1: 'So you don't want to look like you don't love your child if you're not smiling. . ... '

the covid lockdown of 2020 and depicting what the participant described as a 'really hard day', she reflected how:

> So you don't want to look like you don't love your child if you're not smiling . . . That's why I wrote quite a long caption to it to say that it isn't that I'm not enjoying B. It's just this whole situation of COVID and . . . everything else around it, which is making me feel this way . . .
>
> Interviewer: But would it be OK if you were not 'enjoying B' 100% of the time?
>
> P1: Yeah, but I'd be less inclined to share it publicly (P1).

Key to the paradigm of intensive mothering is the notion that motherhood is fulfilling, worthwhile *and* emotionally satisfying (Hays, 1996). Indeed, 'good' mothers under neoliberalism are 'cheery, positive, confident, resilient, and good-humoured – if they do admit to difficulties' (Delaney & Sullivan, 2021, 1701, cf Gill and Orgad, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

All of participants in the study said that they would not take nor post a 'negative' maternal selfie, whether this referred to routine but less desirable aspects of motherwork ('so [I've] . . . got a . . . bucket full of pooey clothes downstairs 'cause my son's just got over a sickness bug. I'm not gonna post that' (P3)), or discourses of negative affect (such as difficulty, sadness, frustration or anger). Emotion and affect cannot be easily disentangled (Ahmed, 2014, p. 6) and as Rome observes, mothers are 'susceptible to a wide range of affects and feelings when unable meet the impossible demands of ideal motherhood as prescribed by neoliberal and postfeminist culture' (2020: 31). SMPs 'afford the means for affects to move fluidly' (Ibid: 32), yet the responses in this study also speak to

the very purposeful and deliberate regulation of (negative) affect, and the risks that such 'fluidity' may pose for the management of maternal identities.

Whilst the ideological history of family photography is clearly relevant in understanding some of the ideological parameters within which maternal selfies are constructed, the affordances of SMPs necessarily intersect with and help to (re)produce such affective norms in particular ways. So for some participants, their reasoning for not posting images of maternal struggles related to their wider perceptions of SMPs. As one explained: '[F]or me, social media is a place of kind of support and happiness . . . If I . . . was finding something tough, I wouldn't go to social media to talk about it' (P3), whilst others acknowledged the curated and performative nature of their SMP identity by explaining that they wouldn't share a less positive maternal selfie because 'Ah, well, it's not me, [or] . . . it's not the me that everybody knows, is it?' (P6). More critically, another participant returned to the risks of judgement by explaining that 'I mean, it's self surveillance more than anything actually . . . and just . . . not wanting to be the person who gets eye-rolled?' (P8). Although blurring discussions of their own Facebook feed and wider parenting groups or forums, another participant made these perceived risks explicit when she reflected how:

> I have found that there is a still an incredible amount of lack of empathy for mothers who are struggling – there is a 'just get on with it' attitude . . . It isn't helpful at all and actually makes you a target for . . . like hate speech. (P2)

But although studies of family photography on SMPs, as well as wider studies of selfies online, have foregrounded the lack of emotional diversity in so far as 'self-portraits do not demonstrate sadness, withdrawal, inner turmoil or depression' (Orekh & Bogomiagkova, 2017, p. 1241), this is not necessarily the case when it comes to the digital curation of the maternal selfie in other contexts. Tending to appear in closed Facebook groups related to parenting (at least in the experience of the first author), there is a trend of what we might call the 'maternal selfie in distress' - a self-portrait in which the mother stares directly into the camera, eyes brimming with tears, or actually crying. The child is often absent or only partly visible, and it is the maternal self which takes up the frame and holds the gaze of the viewer. Sometimes the selfie is accompanied by a lengthy explanation of what the mother is struggling with, or they can simply be captioned with a sentence (e.g. 'I'm done. I can't do this anymore'). Perhaps because of their potential connection to mental health, such images/posts tend to receive high numbers of comments and responses.

Not all of the participants in the study referenced such images, but when they did, they became another benchmark for marking out the limits of what were considered appropriate maternal selfie practices. So rather than simply discussing the potential judgement of their own identities or their relationships with their children, participants spoke of how a maternal selfie 'in distress' may reflect on the identity of their child. So, more than one interviewee articulated the worry of 'shaming' one's child in this regard: 'I . . . don't want to embarrass or shame C by posting, you know, 'God, motherhood is messy and hard' (P4). Or:

> [T]o me it's . . . this dichotomy between private and public because I have no problem in shaming my kids or complaining about my kids with friends or work colleagues . . . But I wouldn't do that on a social media platform because I don't control the reactions . . . Like I can use a negative narrative, but in areas that I know I can control them with people I can trust. (P9)

The second participant specifically emphasizes the affordances (or hazards) of SMPs and their destabilization of the boundaries between public/private. She refers to the worry that her family imaging/discourse may exceed her control – foregrounding the risks of both invisible audiences and an 'unknown future digital footprint' online (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 7). It is also interesting to note how these concerns over shaming one's child contrast with the playful 'confessional' humour of 'slummy mummy' discourse online (where it is permissible to say 'my daughter is a bit of a bitch') (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 20, see also Pederson, 2016). In comparison, our data suggest that it is hard to even admit to having a really 'hard day' in the maternal selfie (or that this is at least something that needs to be carefully negotiated). Indeed, the comments by P4 and P9 above reflect back on the

difficulties in navigating a space for maternal subjectivities: with respect to the maternal selfie in distress, even an image in which the mother is directly and unashamedly addressing the viewer with her experience is ultimately reframed in relation to the wellbeing of the child.

The idea that sharing family images on SMPs invokes a more acute awareness of our networked affective relations with those who view them (Warfield, 2017, p. 84) emerged as a regulatory discourse in other ways:

> If I posted something like that, that would go to my mother . . . I don't necessarily want her to worry about me or . . . yeah, people from work. My people from work don't need to know that I'm . . . falling apart at home. (P2)

In speaking to long-standing debates about context collapse on SMPs (Boyd, 2010), such considerations navigate both 'digital intimacy' and 'real-world intimacy' (Berryman and Kavka, 2018). There is a desire not to worry and concern the people close to you, but also a reference to the risks of sharing aspects of the self with a more heterogenous audience (who may not even primarily know you as a 'mum').

The fact that the participants would not use selfies to express the struggles and difficulties of motherhood may ultimately reflect on Moignan et al.'s conclusion to their study of family photos on Instagram:

> [W]e should be mindful of the need to keep separate the different elements of self in a 'faceted' social media world. It is interesting, for example, to contrast the happy, positive images shared on Instagram with the kinds of despair sometimes shown by parents on information sharing sites such as Mumsnet . . . Honesty here becomes a social norm, but is supported by the communication being primarily text-based and an interesting issue for future research concerns the extent to which photographic sharing might reduce social authenticity (2017: 4943)

So it was explained in the interviews that 'if I am finding something tough . . . I might talk about it more anonymously in some of the [Facebook] groups that I'm in. I wouldn't ever include a selfie . . . because that would feel quite exposing actually' (P3), or 'I guess if [a post is] . . . just the text, it's kind of more anonymous . . . but . . . with an image – obviously you're just completely putting yourself out there' (P7). The idea of the photographic image being a more of intimate expression of oneself ('exposing', 'out there') (Haverty Rugg, 1997, p. 4) was not the only reason participants gave for not using the selfie in this way. Although they did not consider that selfies (still) carried marked judgements around narcissism or self-absorption, such associations *could* emerge into view when evaluating the maternal selfie in distress. So it was suggested that 'I wouldn't ever post anything of myself . . . crying . . . I feel like it's quite . . . not narcissistic but kind of . . . quite attention seeking . . .' (P7). Others reflected on how incongruous it would be to take a photo of oneself in this context as 'a photo wouldn't really be a priority' (P6). Another participant – who had struggled with a newborn in lockdown – recalled how they 'didn't do very much sitting around and crying because there's too much parenting to do. And what good would it do?. . . [But if I did] I wouldn't reach for my phone to take [a selfie] . . .' (P5). Although there was no suggestion at all that participants were not sympathetic to mothers who may be struggling and may use maternal selfies in this way, there is the implication here that the practice could be interpreted as self-indulgent and self-serving and above all as focusing on oneself rather than the needs of the child. Given that it is these maternal selfies that are arguably the most transgressive of the historical conventions of 'happy' family photography, and perhaps the most overt in offering an arresting visual image that seeks to assert a mother's point of view, these responses are further revealing in suggesting the difficulties of locating a space for maternal subjectivity in the construction and circulation of the selfie.

Conclusion

In drawing on interviews with mothers about maternal selfies, the article demonstrates the importance of exploring the practices, conceptions and processes underpinning the digital material and identities we see online (Lupton et al., 2016, p. 737). In recognizing this, and given the critical nature

of our discussion here, we acknowledge that there is no simple way in which feminist research gives 'voice' to women, and there is often a tension between the desire to 'listen carefully and faithfully' to the women's experiences and the impetus to 'critically assess the discourses . . . from which their voices are made . . .' (Saukko, 2008: 77). This is especially so in terms of exploring questions of agency and power which in return reflect back, particularly from a feminist point of view, on the relationship-(s) between the researchers and researched (Tang, 2002). But rather than an epistemological and political dilemma engendered by repeated claims to empowerment and autonomy in the data (Gill, 2007), the mothers in these interviews were *not* generally arguing for the liberating or progressive affordances of the maternal selfie.

Although mothers have long since faced contradictory social imperatives in the judgement of maternal identities (Douglas & Michaels, 2005), our data add weight to the argument that – whilst at the same time affording opportunities for self-expression – digital cultures may have *intensified* this framework (Lazard, 2022, p. 544; Moingan et al., 2017, p. 4943). There are some contextually specific examples of how the taking and posting of maternal selfies may offer participants a sense of agency in particular circumstances (challenging ideological scripts of motherhood; control over representing relationships; expressing self-pride and achievement). But beyond this, our data make it difficult to agree that maternal selfies are 'inherently' empowering, or that they clearly (or straightforwardly) offer a space for the articulation of maternal subjectivities (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017). In this regard, our case study offers support to the wider argument that self-imaging practices are not 'inherently emancipatory' because the selfie-taker is object/subject simultaneously (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019, p. 515).

A substantial proportion of the data was taken up by participants talking of the myriad of contradictory and ambivalent ways in which maternal identities are surveilled online, and how this is played out in relation to the construction and circulation of the maternal selfie. The presentational mode (Zappavigna & Zhao, 2017) appears to be particularly fraught with risk when it comes to the management of maternal and digital self-display. In particular, historical ideas of 'good' and 'bad' motherhood are reappropriated and translated by (often) digital imperatives which create aesthetic and ideological norms which mothers need to negotiate. Whilst being able to move in this sphere is itself bound up with class privilege, it is clear that far from simply offering 'counter-narratives' to hegemonic ideals of motherhood (Van Cleaf, 2020), these discourses themselves become imbricated within normative value judgements of maternal identities in ways which are ever shifting.

Although much work has suggested how 'the digital terrain of motherhood can both liberate and constrain' (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 1), the nature of this dynamic evidently differs across technological contexts and forms. What was seen as socially permissible within the maternal selfie was far more regulated and delimited than that in other studies of maternal cultures online (e.g. Ehrstein, 2022; Fetters, 2020; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Pederson, 2016) (and this in turn differed from the existing work on the affordances of the breastfeeding selfie). Although Moignan et al. suggest the need for more work on how 'photographic sharing might reduce social authenticity (2017: 4943), we would not want to endorse a binary in which 'happy images' are 'inauthentic' and examples of less positive affect more 'real'. Sometimes emerging in our data in ways which exceeded the limits of this particular study, 'happy' family images can be posted by mothers as form of 'digital repair' or temporary relief from the struggles of motherhood (Lazard, 2022, p. 553).

As acknowledged in the discussion, there is evidence of how maternal selfie practices can be shaped by the particular contexts of maternal identities within different configurations (step-mum, solo mum). Given this indication, the homogenous nature of the sample in terms of class and ethnicity is a particular limitation, suggesting clear and pressing avenues for future research. Given that the history of family imaging has been located within 'Eurocentric and classed social aspirations of "good" family life' (Lazard, 2022, p. 542), *and* the fact that agency to challenge or rework existing discourse on mothering identities is shaped by social privilege, such intersectionality is crucial in understanding the cultural and political possibilities of the maternal selfie.

This article began by detailing the popular discourse on the 'ghost', 'missing' or 'invisible' mum in family imaging and the invocation of the selfie as a solution to this technological and cultural

paradigm. One participant noted how 'once you become a mum like your identity ... it's very difficult to hold it' (P2). Whether the maternal selfie can offer a means to produce, explore and 'hold' maternal identities and subjectivities in new ways in less clear. Scholars in Media and Cultural studies have long since argued that visibility alone is not inherently 'empowering' and in relation to the selfie, this 'assumes that meaning-making happens entirely between the subject/object and the camera, which ignores broader, stratified patterns of looking' (2019: 515). This is especially so in terms of the discursive dynamics of networked *circulation*. Within this context, the destabilization of the boundaries between public/private spheres engendered by SMPs allows for the functioning of a kind 'of panopticon in which we are not only observed, disciplined, and repressed, but we also observe, evaluate, and repress ... thereby normalizing the surveillance and self-surveillance' of motherhood (Astudillo-Mendoza & Cifuentes-Zunino, 2022, p. 389). This is a dynamic which implicates us *all*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Su Holmes is Professor in Television at the University of East Anglia. She is the author/ editor of numerous books on popular television and celebrity culture. In more recent years she has published on feminist approaches to eating disorders (in journals such as Feminism and Psychology, Journal of Gender Studies, Journal of Cultural Studies), and cultural/ media constructions of solo motherhood (Women's Studies international Forum). She is also particularly interested in the ways in which media forms – from TV to digital cultures – may navigate critiques of intensive mothering paradigm. She has work on the TV series Motherland forthcoming in Participations.

Bethany Atkins is a PhD student in the department of Film, TV and Media at the University of East Anglia. She is currently completing her PhD thesis on how women negotiate celebrity selfies in relation to their own self-imaging practices.

References

Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142

Archer, C., & Kao, K. (2018). Mother, baby and Facebook makes three: Does social media provide social support for new mothers? *Media International Australia*, *168*(1), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X18783016

Astudillo-Mendoza, P., & Cifuentes-Zunino, F. (2022). Mothering on the web: A feminist analysis of posts and interactions on a Chilean Instagram account on motherhood. *Feminism & Psychology*, *32*(3), 376–393. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535221094251

Barnwell, A., Barbosa, B., & Ravn, S. (2021). Captured and captioned: Representing family life on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, *25*(5), 921–942. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211012791

Beach, S. (2017). The embodiment and discourses of a taboo: #brelfie. *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, *16*(4), 43–59. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/127641799.pdf

Berryman, R., & Kavka, M. (2018). Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, self-exposure and the productivity of negative affect. *Convergence*, *24*(1), 85–89.

Boon, S., & Pentney, B. (2015). Virtual lactivism: Breastfeeding selfies and the performance of motherhood. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 1759–1774. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/3136/1398

Boyd, D. (2010). Social Network sites as networked publics: Affordances, dynamics and implications. In Z. Pappacharissi (Ed.), *Networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites* (pp. 39–58). Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health*, *11*(4), 589–597.

Burns, A. (2015). Self(ie)-discipline: Social Regulation as enacted through the discussion of photographic practice. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 1716–1733.

Byrne, A. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, *56*, 1391–1412.

Cambre, M., & Lavrence, C. (2019). How else would you take a photo? #SelfieAmbivalence. *Cultural Sociology*, *13*(4), 503–524. https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975519855502

Collins, L. (2022, February, 12). 'The hidden mothers of family photos', *The New Yorker*. The Hidden Mothers of Family Photos | The New Yorker. Retrieved March 27, 2023.

Delaney, H., & Sullivan, K. R. (2021). The political is personal: Postfeminism and the construction of the ideal working mother. *Gender, Work, & Organization*, 28(4), 1697–1710. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12702

Douglas, S., & Michaels, M. (2005). *The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined us all*. Simon and Schuster.

Ehrstein, Y. (2022). "Facilitating wife" and "feckless manchild": Working mothers' talk about divisions of care on Mumsnet. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32(3), 394–412. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535221094260

Feasey, R. (2012). *From happy Homemaker to desperate Housewife: Motherhood and popular television*. Anthem Press.

Feasey, R. 2020. "TV representations of mothers.'." In *The international encyclopaedia of gender, media, and communication*, K. Ross Ed., pp. 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc171

Fetters, A. (2020, May, 23). 'The many faces of the "mom": Some see her as a symptom of a problem with modern parenting; others just see her as a good time'. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved March 29, 2023. from https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/05/wine-moms-explained/612001/

Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kinesthetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1607–1628.

Gill, R. (2007). Critical respect: The difficulties and dilemmas of agency and "choice" for Feminism: A reply to duits and van Zoonen. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14(1), 69–80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506807072318

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. 2017. Confidence Culture and the Remaking of Feminism', New Formations. 91. https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:91.01.2017

Gill, R., & Orgad, S. (2018). The amazing bounce-backable woman: Resilience and the psychological turn in neoliberalism. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(2), 477–495. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418769673

Goc, N. (2014). Snapshot Photography, Women's Domestic Work, and the "Kodak Moment," 1910s–1960s. In E. Patton & M. Choi (Eds.), *Home Sweat Home : Perspectives on Housework and Modern* (pp. 27–48). Relationships: US.

Greer, A. (2017). I'm not your mother!': Maternal ambivalence and the female investigator in contemporary crime television. *New Review of Film & Television Studies*, 15(3), 327–347.

Güney-Frahm, I. (2020). Neoliberal motherhood during the pandemic: Some reflections. *Gender, Work & Organisation*, 27(5), 847–856. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12485

Haverty Rugg, L. (1997). *Picturing ourselves: Photography and autobiography*. University of Chicago Press.

Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural Contradictions of motherhood*. Yale University Press.

Holmes, S., & Godfrey, S. (2023). 'Some of the episodes are literally like a screen from [my] WhatsApp groups . . .': Mothers talk about motherland (BBC, 2017-), forthcoming Participations, November, 2023.

Johnson, C., & Rintoul, J. (2019). From nursing virgins to brelfies: The project of maternal femininity. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(8), 918–936. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1607267

Kinsella, S. (2005). *Undomestic goddess*. Bantam.

Lazard, L. (2022). Digital mothering: Sharenting, family selfies and online discursive practices. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32(4), 540–558. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535221083840

Lazard, L., & Capdevila, R. (2020). She's so vain? A qualitative study of selfies and the curation of an online self. *New Media & Society*, 23(6), 1642–1659. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820919335

Lazard, L., Capdevila, R., Dann, C., Locke, A., & Roper, S. (2019). Sharenting: Pride, affect and the day-to-day politics of digital mothering. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 13(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12443

Leonard, J. (1999). Photography, Feminism and the good enough mother. In M. Hirsch (Ed.), *The familial gaze* (pp. 293–310). University Press of New England.

Littler, J. (2013). The rise of the "yummy mummy": Popular conservatism and the neoliberal maternal in contemporary British culture. *Communication Culture & Critique*, 6(2), 227–243. https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12010

Littler, J. (2020). Mothers behaving badly: Chaotic hedonism and the crisis of neoliberal social reproduction' in Littler. *Cultural Studies*, 34(4), 499–520. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2019.1633371

Locatelli, E. (2017). Images of breastfeeding on Instagram: Self-representation, publicness, and privacy management. *Social Media + Society*, 3(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117707190

Lupton, D., Pedersen, S., & Thomas, G. (2016). Parenting and digital media: From the early web to contemporary digital Society. *Sociology Compass*, 10(8), 730–743. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12398

Mangan, A. M. (2017, May, 15). 'Feeding their toddlers frozen fish fingers, swigging gin from baby cups and potty mouthed ranting about their kids online: Why are so many women boasting they're slummy mummies?' *The Daily Mail*. Retrieved March 29, 2023. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-4508726/Why-women-boasting-slummy-mummies.htm

McMillan, K. (2020). *Lessons: Reflections taken from early motherhood*. Independently published.

McRobbie, A. (2013). Feminism, the family and the New "mediated" Maternalism. *New Formations*, 80(80), 119–137. https://doi.org/10.3898/newF.80/81.07.2013

McRobbie, A. (2015). Notes on the perfect: Competitive femininities in neoliberal times. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30(83), 3–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485

Miller, A., Cartwright, C., & Gibson, K. (2018). Stepmothers' perceptions and experiences of the wicked Stepmother Stereotype. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(7), 1984–2006. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X17739049

Moingan, E. L., Lawson, S., Duncan, A. R., Mahoney, J., & Briggs, P. (2017, May). Has Instagram fundamentally altered the 'family snapshot?. In CHI '17: Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025928

Neill, F. (2007). *The secret life of a slummy mummy*. Arrow.

Nguyen, L., & Barbour, K. (2017). Selfies as expressively authentic identity performance. *First Monday*, *22*(11). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i11.7745

OED (2013) 'Selfie'. https://www.oed.com/dictionary/selfie_n?tab=meaning_and_use#302967200

Orekh, E., & Bogomiagkova, E. (2017). Being on trend": Selfie as a social Phenomenon'. *International Journal of Digital Society*, *3*(1), 1328–1243. https://doi.org/10.20533/ijds.2040.2570.2017.0152

Orton-Johnson, K. (2017). Mummy blogs and representations of motherhood: "bad mummies" and their readers. *Social Media & Society*, *3*(2), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117707186

Pearce, S. (2018). Why are mothers always missing in family photos? The Carousel, 5 April, Why are Mothers Always Missing in Family Photos? (Thecarousel.Com), Retrieved March 27, 2023.

Pederson, S. (2016). The good, the bad and the 'good enough' mother on the UK parenting forum mumsnet. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *59*, 32–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2016.09.004

Rome, J. M. (2020). Exploring constructions of "good" motherhood on social media: Navigating neoliberal mommy rhetorics and the negative affective Entanglements of women's discourses on Pinterest, Facebook, and Instagram. In *A dissertation presented to the faculty of the Graduate College of the University of Nebraska in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the degree of Doctor of philosophy*. https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/dissertations/AAI27836185/

Rose, G. (2010). *Doing family photography: The domestic, the public and the Politics of Sentiment*. Ashgate.

Rose, G. (2014). How digital technologies do family snaps: Only better. In J. Larsen & M. Sandbye (Eds.) *Digital snaps: The new face of photography* (pp. 67–86). I. B Tauris. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103509-6

Saukko, P. (2008). *The anorexic self: A personal, political analysis of a diagnostic discourse*. State University of New York Press.

Senft, T. M., & Baym, N. K. (2015). What does the selfie say? Investigating a global phenomenon: Introduction. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*, 1588–1606.

Spence, J., & Holland, P. (Eds.) (1991). *Family snaps: The meanings of domestic photography*. Virago.

Tang, N. (2002). Interviewer and interviewee relationships between women. *Sociology*, *36*(3), 703–721. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038502036003011

Thompson, K. (2019, September, 11). 'No one takes pictures of moms—so I'm doing something about it'. *Today's Parent*, No one takes pictures of moms—so I'm doing something about it - Today's Parent (todaysparent.com). Retrieved March 27, 2023.

Tiidenberg, K., & Baym, N. K. (2017). Learn it, buy it, work it: Intensive pregnancy on Instagram. *Social Media + Society*, *3*(1), 1–13. January-March. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116685108

Tiidenberg, K., & Gómez Cruz, E. (2015). Selfies, image and the re-making of the body. *Body & Society*, *21*(4), 77–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X15592465

Tomić, B. P. (2019). "How could a mother do that to her children?": Filicide and maternal ambivalence in Croatian media and online discourse. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, *3*(1–2). https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/5921

Tugwell, S. (2019). Breastfeeding selfies as relational practice: Becoming a maternal subject in the digital age: A single case study. *International Breastfeeding Journal*, *14*(23), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13006-019-0218-9

Tugwell, S. (2022). Online breastfeeding publics: Sociality, support and selfies. *Feminism & Psychology*, *32*(3), 318–335. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535221104877

Tyler, I. (2008). Chav mum, chav scum: Class disgust in contemporary Britain. *Feminist Media Studies*, *8*(1), 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770701824779

Van Cleaf, K. M. (2020). The pleasure of connectivity: Media, motherhood, and the digital maternal gaze'. *Communication Culture and Critique*, *13*(1), No.1. pp.36–53. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz045

Walkerdine, V. (1991). *Schoolgirl fictions*. Verso.

Warfield, K. (2017). MirrorCameraRoom: The gendered multi-(in)stabilities of the selfie. *Feminist Media Studies*, *17*(1), 77–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1261843

Wilson, J. A., Yochim, C., & , E. (2017). *Mothering through precarity: Women's work and digital media*. Duke University Press.

Zappavigna, M., & Zhao, S. (2017). Selfies in "mommyblogging": An emerging visual genre. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *20*, 239–247. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.05.005