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Constructing a *Mothers' Culture*: Affective Bargains in Branding Discourses

Sophie M Mary
University of Cambridge, UK
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Robbie Duschinsky
University of Cambridge, UK

Barry Coughlan
University of Cambridge, UK
National College of Ireland, Ireland

Susan Dunnett
University of Edinburgh, UK

Abstract

The fantasy of traditional motherhood, according to which women find fulfilment through family care, still dominates market texts. However, there is increasing acknowledgement of motherhood's difficulties, often in the very same texts. This tension is not immediately understandable; neither are its political and economic implications. We propose an explanation by deploying a Berlantian framework to analyse the new media presence of five brands targeting UK mothers. We identify a *mothers' culture*: a market where motherhood's difficulties are organised incessantly. We argue that *mothers' culture* simultaneously validates traditional motherhood's power to achieve the good life and provides therapeutic explanations and tactics to retain optimism when its lived experiences become too far removed from the fantasy of that good life. Combined, these mechanisms absorb the difficulties of traditional motherhood in a way that protects its promises of fulfilment. This prevents a questioning of the system of norms that effectively blocks this fulfilment.

Keywords

Berlant, brand, discourse, media, motherhood

Corresponding author:
Sophie M Mary, Department of Clinical Child and Family Studies, VU University of Amsterdam, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081 BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: sm2597@cam.ac.uk

Introduction

Cultural studies have long paid attention to how market texts are mobilised, questioned and opposed by individuals in their quest for some sense of coherence in themselves and in life (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2004; Klein, 1999; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Feminist scholars, in particular, have scrutinised media as social institutions that produce specific forms of gendered identities, such as normative ways of doing femininity (e.g. McRobbie, 2008) or motherhood (e.g. Lynch, 2005; O'Donohoe et al., 2013). Colleagues have been interested in the shape these norms take in texts (e.g. Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1989; Keller, 1991) and in what negotiating – moving with, around and against – them looks like (e.g. Reed, 2018). Some have argued that market texts mobilise ideas of the good life that are politically and economically beneficial but only produce endless disappointment while blocking out space for critical responses (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002).

Critical media analyses have proven helpful in understanding how motherhood is politically, economically and culturally constructed. For decades, scholars have scrutinised market texts about mothers and found that they offer a conservative agenda of the good life whereby women find fulfilment in domestic care, first as a moral pursuit (Hays, 1996), then as an entrepreneurial one (McRobbie, 2013, 2015). This has strengthened markets created to 'address' mothers' needs while circumventing requests for more welfare support. However, recent years have also witnessed increasing representations of motherhood's difficulties and disappointments. Interestingly, the traditional fantasy and the difficulties it mobilises often co-exist in the very same texts (Mary et al., 2024). We propose to explore and explain this tension through a Berlantian lens.

The Fantasy of Traditional Motherhood

In recent years, works have found that traditional motherhood remains the dominant fantasy represented in market texts (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Feldman, 2021; Lerner, 2018; Mackenzie, 2016; Orgad and Meng, 2017). The traditional scene suggests that women may find joy and fulfilment through being primary caregivers for their families and investing their time, emotions, energy and money into this practice (Hays, 1996). Extending this, McRobbie (2013) has argued that traditional motherhood has been 'brought up to date' to navigate feminist denunciations that it constrains women to a monotonous, exhausting and invisible domestic life. Scholars now find what McRobbie (2013) calls *neoliberal feminist motherhood*, which advertises traditional motherhood practices as an enterprise or small business through which women may attain self-achievement (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Davis et al., 2022; Orgad and Meng, 2017). This bridges the historically conservative 'family values agenda' with a neoliberal feminism that promotes individual self-management as the route to the capitalist good life (McRobbie, 2015).

The sustenance of a neoliberal feminist motherhood fantasy is economically and politically convenient. If family life is imagined as an individualistic and competitive endeavour, support is to be found in individualistic rather than communal solutions. As such, neoliberal feminist motherhood opens up avenues for new markets. Researchers

have identified this in the multiplication of products advertised as means to achieve the good life by 'doing it all', often for mothers who juggle a paid career with their domestic enterprise (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Orgad and Meng, 2017). Mothers themselves have captured this potential, with a rise in mother-influencers (Beuckels and De Wolf, 2024) and *momoirs* (McRobbie, 2013). Neoliberal feminist motherhood is also politically convenient since it circumvents critical feminist requests for, and the increasing absence of, state support. It is thus enabled by, and benefits, the entanglement of political culture, markets, media and social media (McRobbie, 2013).

However, it is easy to imagine that mothers' lived experiences may be – to varying degrees – removed from the good life that this scene attempts to sell (Rizzo et al., 2013). That has also found echo in market texts. Research has observed that representations increasingly acknowledge mothers' difficult experiences and promote a more relaxed approach to mothering (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Cino, 2020; Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019; Van Cleaf, 2020). Interestingly, seemingly liberatory glimpses are found *alongside* neoliberal feminist representations, including in the same texts. So, market texts about motherhood concurrently 'displace' and 'refix' traditional motherhood (Mary et al., 2024; Renold and Ringrose, 2011). Such tension is not immediately understandable (Renold and Ringrose, 2011). Neither are its implications for motherhood's political, economic and cultural (de)construction. Here, we propose to conceptualise this form of ambivalence and find the works of Lauren Berlant helpful in doing so.

Sustaining the Fantasy in the Face of Disappointment

Berlant's queer inquiry aimed to understand what motivates people to stay attached to ways of life that wound them (Berlant, 2008, 2011). They explored market texts to trace how the good life is constructed and, most importantly, how its promises are sustained when individuals' lived experiences seem to contradict it. Although they seldom explored traditional motherhood, their work on sustaining the fantasy of heteronormative romance appears relevant to our question.

Berlant argued that market texts about heteronormative romance, like romantic movies, construct an intimate public they called *women's culture*. The texts of *women's culture* position heteronormative romance as an object that yields the potential to deliver the good life. Heteronormativity, therefore, becomes emotionally and collectively invested as a cluster of promises about what life may look like and how it may coherently come together (Berlant, 2011: 23). In this intimate public, women are encouraged to identify with one another as part of a collective identity of womanhood that revolves around this fantasy and to collectively manage the disappointments it might engender (Berlant, 2008: 170). Indeed, when heteronormativity mobilises disaffirming experiences that prevent the very fulfilment it was projected to deliver (a twist of *cruel optimism*; Berlant, 2011), *women's culture* provides a space for its members to vent their disappointments, see them acknowledged and be (re)assured that love's promises of coherence remain within reach. By offering mechanisms to organise and overcome disappointment, *women's culture* sustains the hegemony of heteronormative romance even in the face of contradictory realities. Love becomes 'the gift that keeps on taking' (Berlant, 2008: 2).

In mobilising women's emotional difficulties and their expectations, hopes and dreams, *women's culture* begins and ends with affect (see also Berlant et al., 2022). In this way, Berlant's thinking is part of a broader context of affect theory that highlights the importance of affect in both organising and destabilising social relationships (Gregg et al., 2010; Seigworth and Pedwell, 2023). Here, we propose to deploy Berlant's affective framework to understand the ambivalence many have identified between the fantasy of neoliberal feminist motherhood and concurrent representations of difficulties and disappointments. Berlant's conceptual tools have stirred considerable interest, including from this journal (e.g. Adkins et al., 2023 on ordinary crisis; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018 on intimacy; Merikoski, 2022 on compassion; Pors and Kishik, 2023 on hope). But few have deployed it as an analytical framework in its own right.

We will show how thinking of a *mothers' culture* can explain how market discourses may harness mothers' psychosocial motivations in complex and personal ways to sustain norms (Walkerdine, 1998). We will argue that the market texts of *mothers' culture* work to simultaneously validate the power that neoliberal feminist motherhood holds to achieve the good life (McRobbie, 2013, 2015) and provide therapeutic explanations and tactics to retain optimism when its lived experiences become too far removed from the fantasy of that good life (Berlant, 2008: 179). These two mechanisms, when combined, help absorb the difficulties of neoliberal feminist motherhood in a way that protects its promises of fulfilment. This, in turn, prevents a questioning of the system of norms that promised mothers fulfilment but seems able to deliver only glimpses of it.

To do this, we look at the digital media presence of five major brands that deal with motherhood in the UK. We find brand presence in new media particularly interesting because it complicates a traditional model of top–down communication (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). Brands may mobilise the affordances of seemingly democratic spaces, like blogs, videos and social media, to ensure that mothers feel their difficulties are heard. But they simultaneously depend on the systems that often produce those difficulties – like capitalism and neoliberalism (Berlant, 2011). This provides the premise and the genre upon which the ambivalence that interests us takes hold.

Method

Sampling

We devised a list of consumer markets likely to carry representations of motherhood because of the products they sell. We kept different motherhood contexts in mind, especially considering: the stage of motherhood (e.g. newborn versus young children), spatial context (e.g. inside versus outside the home), individuals (e.g. dyad versus triad) and activities (e.g. homecare versus quality time) likely to be represented. We reviewed top brands in the UK for each market and removed those markets that did not carry (many) representations of motherhood, like washing-up liquids and travel agencies. We also excluded markets organised around sub-practices, like formula feeding, because they do not speak to a general motherhood audience. This left us with a shortlist of five: groceries, furniture, motherhood brands, baby food and diapers.

We chose the UK market leader for each segment (Global Data, 2022; Statista, 2021a, 2021b, 2023) because they are more likely to possess symbolic dominance and thus influence the construction of normativities in the marketplace: Tesco, IKEA, Mothercare, Ella's Kitchen and Pampers. The scope of our project was limited, and we favoured sampling multiple markets to increase context diversity over various brands in one market. We do not assume that each brand offers a representative account of the discourses in its market.

To refine the scope of research we focused on new media and selected four domains: YouTube videos (TV ads and others), products on online stores, websites (sometimes including blogs) and Instagram posts (profile and story highlights). We felt this offered a balance between domains with seemingly 'bottom–up' (YouTube, blogs, Instagram) and 'top–down' affordances (ads, websites, packaging).

We developed different inclusion criteria to reflect the nature of each media domain. For example, we shortened the timeframe for Instagram posts to manage their large numbers. Detailed information on the text selection and navigation of each domain can be found in the Online Supplementary Materials. Overall we discuss n = 110 YouTube videos, n = 4 websites, n = 267 packages and n = 680 Instagram posts.

Analysis

We started by 'mapping out' the content types offered by the brands across media. This helps us understand the brands' strategies, as they often follow a content plan that sets out the different content types to be generated across platforms. We show elsewhere that it helps reveal the relationship between the affordances of media domains and the discourses they carry (Mary et al., 2024). For example, we found that the possibility to add longer text on websites increased the brands' tendency to propose guidance, which influenced their motherhood discourses. We noted parallels and organised the content types into categories, like *general promotion* (e.g. ads, product presentations), *guidance* (e.g. videos of experts, blogs) and *resources* (e.g. guides, recipes). We found this useful to discuss findings and refer to our categories in the results.

We then undertook a thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) method. The flexibility of thematic analysis provided the freedom to apply a theoretical framework drawn from Berlant's work and to integrate inductive and deductive phases in our analysis. We began by inductively developing initial codes, adapting our technique to the different media. For example, each video was individually coded; but to navigate the high number and repetition of Instagram posts, we reviewed posts under the same content type until we judged that we had reached saturation because no new themes emerged and repeated this process until all content types had been reviewed. We did not integrate a theoretical framework at this stage. We organised the codes into themes using a thematic map, to which we integrated the content types identified in the first stage. We selected three themes that most clearly exhibited an affective dimension and integrated a Berlantian framework.

To map out our *mothers' culture* we wanted to understand the emotions it mobilises, the tone it takes, the tools it offers and the shared path to fulfilment it defends. To do so we turned to the other Berlantian concept of *genre*. Akin to the genre of a romantic

movie, a crime novel or a poetry set, but applied to the arguably larger project of life-building, genre for Berlant is an emotionally invested set of expectations that people have about *something* (life, romance, motherhood) and the way that *that something* comes together coherently (Berlant, 2008). It helps them to organise their feelings, impressions, struggles and hopes in a way that provides (re)assurances by setting out a frame through which they can be read, organised and tidied up (see also Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015). It is similar to Foucault's (1976/1998) idea of *norm* as that which guides our self-discipline and our discipline of one another but adds an affective dimension that makes visible the ways that norms fall into the complex assemblage of the imaginary and lived experiences of individuals (Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015). So, our analysis asks: what is the genre of motherhood that is constructed by the digital media presence of these brands? The fictional lexicon used throughout (e.g. fantasy) is not judging. Rather, it aims to make visible strategies that mothers and consumer texts use to create and maintain meaning in a cultural, political and economic system that positions motherhood as essential and fulfilling yet precarious and confusing.

Results

We organise our findings into three themes that reflect brands' positions: we talk of a *mothers' culture* through brands, where brands mediate the sharing of individual experiences; then with brands, where brands enter the conversation by offering empathy and reassurance; and finally in brands, where brands become care infrastructures. All three themes were consistent across the brands sampled, except the first, which was not found for Pampers and Tesco. Unsurprisingly, the difficulties and emotions harnessed varied to accommodate the solutions brands could offer; for example, IKEA focused on lack of space and Pampers talked about health. Because our analysis is theoretical, we choose an integrated approach where data and analytic narrative are combined and the ratio of analytic narrative to data is high (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

You're Not Alone, You're Not the Only One: Mothers' Culture *through the Brand*

If we were to measure our themes by the portion of texts in the sample that carry them, this first one would be the smallest. But it sets a tone and scene that are important to the construction of the *mothers' culture* that interests us. In it, brands mediate the exchange of experiences, advice and emotional support between mothers. They harness the democratic genre of amateur videos and interviews to seemingly make space for mothers' difficulties and wisdom. In doing so, they create a scene of solidarity rooted in mutual recognition – which is, after all, the premise and the promise of an intimate public. This discourse seems to say: 'I have this friend who told me the same thing – let me put you in touch, maybe she can help!'

It is most explicitly manifest in videos shared by Ella's Kitchen, Mothercare and IKEA on YouTube, Instagram and their websites. Most videos are presumably recorded by the mothers on their smartphone, which makes them look intimate and therefore

authentic (Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018). In a series of videos they call *Weaning Wisdom*, for example, Ella's Kitchen introduces us to five mothers (and one father) who offer their 'top tips' for weaning. They suggest methods like sitting on the floor to avoid the child pushing food off their highchair, using a bib and a plastic cover to avoid 'spending all day trying to scrape Weetabix off your floor' and picking a highchair whose covers can be removed and put away in the washing machine. They also encourage mothers who may be struggling: 'weaning isn't a one day's job' so they should take it 'slow and steady' and 'keep trying until [they] get there'.

Around and outside of practical advice, the narrators also address the difficulties they have faced in navigating motherhood. This objective is made explicit in a Mothercare series called *World Breastfeeding Week*, where the amateur videos of four mothers are compiled in a patchwork of experiences about breastfeeding. The brand's intention is advertised as follows: '[N]o two experiences are the same. We hope sharing their difficulties helps reassure mums that they're not going through it alone.' A recurring theme appears to be the external judgement that these mothers have received, as illustrated below:

> [C]ertain family members do end up making comments like 'oh, maybe you're not producing enough milk, that's probably why [the baby] is taking so long [to feed]' and it's not what you want to hear as a new mum. (Anonymous mother for Mothercare)

> We ended up bottle feeding, which I felt very, very guilty about. And I think that's partly my feeling, but also how I was made to feel by other mums and – unfortunately – I would say family members. (. . .) I still feel guilty even today that I didn't breastfeed. (Anonymous mother for Mothercare)

Often, these negative experiences are used as a springboard to construct a scene of solidarity and to set out ways that new mothers should navigate similar criticisms:

> Mums have enough to deal with without beating ourselves up about whether or not we breast- or bottle-feed. (Anonymous mother for Mothercare)

> Don't feel bad about using [baby food] pouches. I've been mum-shamed a few times by a few friends for doing it. (Sophie for Ella's Kitchen)

> If you are struggling, you're not alone, you're not the only one. (Anonymous for Mothercare)

The mediation of maternal difficulties may also get blurred in videos that seem to be doing, at least partly, something else entirely. For example, IKEA presents a series they call *Live Lagom* (lagom is the Swedish word for a sense of balance – 'not too much, not too little'). These videos are more polished than the others and take the genre of interviews with mothers who talk about their lives at home and what they find difficult. Each video concludes with a 'hack' that they use to save money (and the planet), though confusingly enough, the hack does not seem to resolve the difficulties mentioned. One mother, for example, tells us that she struggles with the *second shift* (Hochschild, 1989) of motherhood: 'By the time that you come home, your job actually starts again. (. . .)

It's just too much sometimes, and I'm not happy about that.' She goes on to reveal that she has switched to energy-saving light bulbs. Another mother tells us that her kids are causing 'headaches left, right, and centre' before showing off the washing-up bowl that enables her to save water. The discourse we find in this theme may therefore be both grounded and fleeting, central and peripheral to a larger genre.

It is gendered (by which we mean: from, about and for women, with all the shared oppression that implies), though ambivalently so. The audience is intended to appear inclusive as the descriptions of Ella's Kitchen's videos advertise a desire to help 'other parents'. But almost only mothers are interviewed about their wisdom – 'who better?' asks Mothercare, reinforcing a notion of maternal expertise (Davis et al., 2022). The negative experiences discussed, like *mum-shaming* or the second shift, are gendered too.

One could thus talk of a *mothers' culture* where brands invite women to recognise and identify with one another as part of a collective identity of motherhood that centres around their experience and expertise. This culture feeds on negative experiences assumed to be shared; here it harnesses a sense that motherhood is demanding and threatening because society places responsibility for the child's development on the mother's shoulder yet offers her little help. We see this in the emotions evoked above: guilt, sadness, exhaustion and failure. Against this, this brand discourse offers mothers support by setting out reduced expectations ('mums have enough to deal with') and guidelines based on lived experience ('mothering tips'). It also mobilises the negative emotions (anxiety, vulnerability, guilt) that are linked to the social visibility of that responsibility, which often transpires in public scrutiny and external judgement (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Dorofeeva et al., 2021). And it offers a path to navigate this judgement ('don't feel bad') in return.

Importantly, this discourse also creates a scene of belonging. *Mothers' culture* constructs a sense of intimacy between mothers that rests on 'an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience' (Berlant, 2008: viii). The embrace of the culture and its conventions is thus symptomatic of a search for dependability and legitimisation, as the mother is (re)assured that her difficult experiences are part of a shared path to the good life – *they're 'not alone'*. Normativity is framed 'as aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging' (Berlant, 2011: 167).

A mother's relation to this public and its members may be ambivalent. As some narrators mention, external judgement is periodically received from other mothers off- and online (Abetz and Moore, 2018; CS Mott Children's Hospital, 2017; Orton-Johnson, 2017). This discourse invites mothers to find solidarity that may not have been found elsewhere (like with the family and friends who *mum-shamed* them) within an imagined mothering community. But its members may experience negative feelings (judgement, envy, jealousy) towards one another. Those will need to be repressed to sustain a sense of alignment. As such, their relation to their belonging to the public may be 'limited, episodic, ambivalent, ejecting, or mediated by random encounters with relevantly marked texts' (Berlant, 2008: x).

Welcome to the Club: Mothers' Culture *with the Brand*

Creating a platform for solidarity does not suffice to organise belonging to a *mothers' culture* and the consumer system that oversees it: 'Just because we are in a room together does not mean that we belong to the room or each other: belonging is a specific genre of affect' (Berlant, 2016: 395). Brands (the room, in our story) therefore organise a scene of affect around and in themselves by performing recognition – a felt sense of being seen, understood and valued – towards members of their public. They do so by admitting and legitimising the difficulties of mothering. This requires harnessing the humorous tone of videos and social media comedy and the meaningful tone of videos and photos. If this theme could talk, it would say: 'Haha, tell me about it – what a pain, isn't it? But you go, girl. You've got this.'

In the first instance, brands – mostly those that address an early childhood market: Ella's Kitchen, Mothercare and Pampers – acknowledge unpleasant scenarios and paint them as common (thus normal) and comical (thus tolerable). In a video shared on Pampers' Instagram page, for example, we meet two parents who are hurriedly packing a nappy bag to leave the house with their newborn. They run around, pull panicked faces, throw their hands in the air and nappies at each other. When everything is finally in the car, the mother realises that her baby has had a *poonami* (a word of Pampers' making, the contraction of 'poo' and 'tsunami'). She looks shocked, then desperate, and covers her face with her hands. We chuckle with her as she introduces the solution: Pampers diapers, of course. Videos may also use a different tone, as in a Mothercare TV ad where we are introduced to some mothers (and a few fathers) who attempt to put their children to sleep – or indeed, keep them asleep. The video is slow and calm, as if to keep us quiet to avoid waking the children, too. Only a handful of moments are explicitly comical, as when an exhausted-looking mother turns to place the baby phone on the face of a father who looks comfortably asleep.

Social media's more relaxed tone is also used to poke fun. For special occasions, for example, Ella's Kitchen break their usual content of recipes, discounts and promotions to offer gifts that we must pretend come from the children. On Mother's Day, mothers are offered IOUs for some time to themselves: 'Whether it's being able to drink a full cup of tea before it goes cold or having a wee in peace + quiet. 😄 🚽 It's the little things that mean the most!' For Valentine's Day, it is a voucher for one full night's sleep. In a similar vein, Mothercare populate their Instagram page with comical posts that make light of the everyday frustrations of mothering:

> What my baby really loves: me
>
> What I wish they also loved: sleep
>
> I could've sworn I tidied the house this morning. . .
>
> You know you're a parent when. . . you sleep more in their nursery than they do
>
> Reason 3,841 why they can't go to bed. . . 'But I slept yesterday!'

> At least the loud, unpredictable and slightly inconsiderate alarm clock gives good cuddle
>
> Me as a new mum: I haven't slept, I need a shower and I had chocolate for breakfast
>
> Also me: maybe I'll just stay here and cuddle them forever

These anecdotes are depicted as a *rite of passage* best illustrated by Mothercare's recurring slogan: *Welcome to the Club*.

In the second instance, brands paint mothers' sacrifices as fulfilling (thus meaningful). Mothercare's humorous Instagram posts, for example, alternate with aesthetic photos that depict mothers smiling while they hug or play with their child(ren), and quotes like: 'Together is where we love to be.' Most of the videos shared on their YouTube channel follow this tone, too. They show mothers (and, occasionally, a handful of fathers) who cuddle, (breast)feed, bathe, cook, laugh and play with their children in slow motion while a peaceful and joyful tune plays in the background. In a particularly stereotypical instance, we meet children dressed in Christmas-themed outfits who eat cookies and play with decorations. Later, a mother is with them in bed, smiling as they open their gifts. Motherhood is associated with a mood like bliss – a specific form of joy that seems to come from achieving a sort of *good life* that cannot exist without a family. Difficulties and bliss may even feature in the same content: in the last post by Mothercare quoted above, for example, the mother who has not slept, showered or eaten is also a mother who daydreams as she lovingly stares at her child.

In a different genre that comes closer to storytelling, we are shown the direct relation between mothers' efforts and their impact. A Tesco TV ad introduces us to a mother who tries to teach her son to read by making him read out the steps of a recipe while they cook. The video concludes with the grown-up son reading (!) her a thank-you letter. The look on her face is not bliss, exactly, but emotion at having made a difference – the sort of impact that makes us feel meaningful. This sense also comes from having a place in a family, as in IKEA's register, which shows us the different faces of *family time*. Their videos, TV ads and website introduce us to families cooking and sharing meals, playing in their living room or their garden and even tidying up together. A section on the website dedicated to Christmas, full of snapshots of families sharing moments, tells us: 'Gather your family for a beautiful winter dinner and fun winter baking activities. Not only do you get delicious goodies at the end, cooking and baking are also cosy ways to bond with your loved ones during the holidays.' The good life is lived together, after all, even if that means spending an hour cleaning the kitchen after everyone else has moved on.

Here, *mothers' culture* becomes a space where the sacrifices of motherhood as a set of practices are recognised, organised and legitimised. The culture mobilises a sense of disillusionment that may arise from the everyday reality of mothering: the lack of sleep, absence of peace, constant stimulation, dirty house and child, and unpleasant chores. Such feelings may be transient for some but overwhelming for others. The present discourse offers to navigate and contain those hardships by reducing them to comical anecdotes. It also channels mothers' sacrifices of their time, energy and well-being to point them towards an image of fulfilment – a mood of bliss, impact and belonging. *Mothers' culture* thus offers recognition (notice and empathy), frames to organise the difficulties

of motherhood as a set of practices (by normalising and minimising them) and legitimising promises that mothers' sacrifice is impactful and thus meaningful.

This discourse also ensures that motherhood is allowed as a space of adversity but not disenchantment (Berlant, 2008). While the branding texts we have just encountered express mothers' suffering and sacrifices, and while those embody obstacles to mothers' immediate happiness, they stay directed towards optimism. This speaks to the ambivalence of motherhood as a life object. We have seen that market texts position motherhood – at least, a neoliberal feminist form of it (McRobbie, 2013, 2015) – as a route to the good life. This is explicit in the above portrayals of bliss. Socially, motherhood also remains perceived as a meaningful signpost in women's lives (Bartholomaeus and Riggs, 2017). Therefore, while motherhood mobilises disaffirming scenarios that may deteriorate the conditions for happiness (Rizzo et al., 2013), it simultaneously remains the symbolic possibility of happiness (Berlant, 2011; Pors and Kishik, 2023). Navigating this ambivalence requires containing difficulties so that they do not threaten the fantasy motherhood has come to embody (Berlant, 2011).

It is politically and economically convenient to absorb the difficulties that the neoliberal feminist fantasy of motherhood mobilises, since it brings mothers to brands and away from political demands. But it may also be individually comforting. It is difficult and frightening to feel, even for an instant, that motherhood may remove one's conditions for well-being and leave one without the prospect of joy or fulfilment. To varying degrees, overwhelming difficulties can destabilise mothers' life projects and sense of coherence. There is value in being reassured that things will work out.

For both markets and mothers, disaffirming experiences that threaten the assemblage of the fantasy are awkward and dangerous. As such, the present discourse operates on two dimensions: it helps mothers organise the difficulties and sacrifices of motherhood as a set of practices, like we have seen, but it also helps them navigate their guilt, uneasiness or fear towards their feeling disillusioned in the first place.

Becoming the Care Infrastructure: Mothers' Culture *in the Brand*

Many branding materials took the form of guidance and resources, which often did not mention the products sold. We attribute this partly to the brands' increasing need to provide *add-on* services that stand out in over-saturated markets, and to the affordances of the multiplying channels where brands are expected to be present (Acunzo, 2022; Smulders, 2022). This final theme seems to say: 'Let us give you a hand with that.'

In the most illustrative instance, Ella's Kitchen proposes a video series they call *Weanursery*. We are introduced to mothers (and one homosexual couple) who bring up their difficulties to a child nutritionist and receive advice in return. The scene takes place in a decor that mimics a nursery, hence the series' name, where the parent presumably becomes the child who needs raising. The website doubles down on this tone; we can browse through weaning advice sorted out by age, and all sorts of other 'helpful stuff'. In a similar vein, Pampers' blog answers many questions: *How Much Screen Time Is Too Much?*, *How to Keep Children Busy During Holidays?* or *What to Pack for a Day Out?* Contents on the websites take the shape of blog posts, step-by-step guides, recipes, checklists and other tips and ideas. Those are shared in reduced formats on the brands'

Instagram pages, too. Even packages become spaces for guidance: Tesco's food pouches sport a list of 'developmental purposes' like 'exploring textures'. The origin of this content is mixed, with only some attributed to institutionalised experts. The rest is presumably authored by brand representatives.

All these resources offer to resolve concerns mothers are expected to feel, from the grand picture of appropriate child-rearing to the daily challenges of caretaking. In that way, *mothers' culture* addresses a sense that knowing what is best for the development and well-being of the child, while crucially important, is overwhelming and unclear. The lack of a single directive for child-rearing, which may have started with market discourses expanding problems to solve them, can precipitate experiences of anxiety (Abetz and Moore, 2018). These texts offer to break down the mother's fear of wrong-doing (or of choosing wrong what she does amid a plethora of options) into bite-sized guidelines that she can rapidly process and apply. In so doing, the culture promises mothers both tangible rules on how to behave *and* alleviation from their affective sense of uncertainty. The solution, of course, is to be found in consumerism.

Indeed, it seems that the lack of support faced by mothers is introduced to demonstrate the reliability of the capitalist marketplace as a new form of institution. IKEA, for example, offers a series on their YouTube channel they call *Designed for Life*, which mimics the genre of renovation TV shows. We meet families that struggle to organise their lives because their house is crowded and messy and the parents lack space. Two mothers tell us that they are 'out of their depth' and '100% need help' before they welcome IKEA employees, come to re-design the house to solve those issues. We leave the families, mostly led by mothers, as they emotionally thank the brand for their help. The genre of comedy may also be of use. In a short ad broadcasted by Tesco, we meet a mother who desperately attempts to dress her two rowdy children in a swimming pool cubicle. When her daughter asks 'Mommy, what's for dinner?', she suddenly realises that she has forgotten to arrange food and becomes visibly anxious. The voiceover empathises: '[T]oday, she's had a mare. Oh dear. Could this day get any worse?' Her difficulty in managing childcare is however resolved by the brand, for 'Tesco has got loads of quick and tasty meals. Like this delicious traybake! That's dinner sorted.' We leave the family as they share dinner, smiling. The positioning of the brand is telling: it is present at the dinner table when no other adult is – it has become the co-parent.

This theme builds against a socio-economic context that constantly fails to provide the necessary support for mothers. Childcare costs have for example steadily increased, while provisions have decreased (Jarvie et al., 2023; Penn and Lloyd, 2023). In the Tesco ad discussed above, the absence of a co-parent and the lack of intergenerational support are brushed off. Structural injustices are kept in place, yet it is the genre of fantasies rather than the institutions that this discourse proposes to adapt (Berlant, 2011). Mothers are not encouraged to ask more from social structures but are instead reassured that leaning on the resources of the neoliberal capitalist institution will alleviate their difficulties. This underlines one of the political implications of *mothers' culture*: by offering the mechanisms that can help mothers maintain the assemblage of their fantasy, it prevents the questioning of the social failings that threatened that fantasy, or the market discourses that created it, in the first place.

Conclusions

Our study of brand discourses introduces the construction of a *mothers' culture*, building on Berlant's (2008: 5) notion of *women's culture*: a market domain where a set of difficulties associated with managing the imaginary and lived practices of motherhood are expressed and organised incessantly. We argue that the discourses mobilised by this culture work to simultaneously validate the power that neoliberal feminist motherhood holds to achieve the good life and provide therapeutic explanations and tactics to retain optimism when lived experiences become too far removed from the fantasy of that good life (Berlant, 2008: 179). This is aided by the tones of traditional and new media, like comical and emotional ads, amateur-looking videos, social media humour and drama, and the tools of blogs and websites. The structure of this culture is schematically represented in Table 1.

The culture identified in our study harnesses three clusters of negative emotions associated with motherhood. First, it mobilises a sense that motherhood is demanding and threatening because society places responsibility for the child's development on the mother's shoulder yet offers her little help. This responsibility is socially visible as the mother is scrutinised and judged: the negative emotions (anxiety, shame), which are linked to this visibility are also addressed. Second, it channels a sense of disillusionment that can arise from mothers' sacrifices and the everyday practice of mothering – the lack of sleep, dirty house and unpleasant chores. Feeling these difficulties may be uncomfortable, not least because they threaten the idea that motherhood will deliver the happiness and fulfilment it promised to materialise. As such, *mothers' culture* also mobilises the guilt or fear linked to feeling disillusioned. Third, it addresses a sense that knowing what is best for the development and well-being of the child, while crucially important, is overwhelming and unclear. And it harnesses the anxiety that this confusion may precipitate.

Mothers' culture in brand discourses works in two ways to help mothers sustain optimism: it confirms that their difficulties should be read as *nothing out of the ordinary*, and it provides a tone and tools to organise them and *tidy them up* in a way that does not threaten neoliberal feminist motherhood's fantasy, or the system in which it is embedded. Indeed, neoliberal feminist motherhood may bring about disaffirming scenarios like the ones listed above that, to an extent, deteriorate the conditions for happiness (Rizzo et al., 2013). However, market texts still position it as the route to fulfilment – bliss, even (McRobbie, 2013, 2015). And motherhood remains generally perceived as a meaningful signpost in women's lives (Bartholomaeus and Riggs, 2017). Our argument, therefore, is that *mothers' culture* supplies resources (expectations, guidelines, frameworks for understanding, recognition, promises and affective reliefs) that can enable mothers to navigate this contradictory relation between the imaginary and the lived experience of their role without needing to open a broader questioning of the system of norms that promised them fulfilment but seems able to deliver only glimpses of it. Difficulties are admitted, legitimised, broken down and organised, so that a destabilisation of the neoliberal feminist fantasy may be prevented, and optimism may remain. By offering mechanisms to help mothers maintain the assemblage of their fantasy, therefore, *mothers' culture*

Table 1. Schematic summary of the structure of *mothers' culture*.

	'You're Not Alone, You're Not the Only One'	'Welcome to the Club'	Becoming the Care Infrastructure
Description	The brand mediates (= through) the exchange of experiences, advice and emotional support between mothers.	The brand participates (= with) in the exchange of experience, advice and emotional support by admitting and legitimising difficulties.	The brand offers (= in) guidance, resources and help.
Emotions	Work through (1) feelings that the role of mother is overwhelming in carrying responsibility for the child's development without support, and (2) the negative emotions linked to the social visibility of that responsibility.	Work through (1) the disillusionment that may arise from the everyday practice and sacrifices of mothering, and (2) the guilt linked to experiencing this disillusionment.	Work through (1) the sense that knowing what is best for the child is unclear, and (2) the lack of recognition and support in coping with this uncertainty.
Properties of genre	Offers (1) reduced expectations, (2) guidelines for how to behave and (3) a path to organise and navigate the social dimension of motherhood.	Offers (1) a sense of recognition, (2) frames to organise adversity in a way that makes it less threatening and (3) a legitimising promise that mothers' sacrifices are impactful and thus meaningful.	Offers (1) to break down the mother's fear of wrong-doing into bite-sized problems, (2) guidelines for how to behave and (3) an alleviation from the negative emotions that arise from uncertainty.
Bargains	Ambivalences that populate a mother's relation to the mothering public and its members must be brushed aside.	Adversity that relates to motherhood must be minimised to anecdotal difficulties and organised as meaningful.	Uncertainty in the management of the child's development must be minimised to small-scale problems with broken-down solutions.

prevents the questioning of the social failings that threatened that fantasy in the first place – or, indeed, of the hegemony that created it.

This framework, in other words, helps us read motherhood discourses not as closed and coherent clusters of meanings that can be deployed and passively consumed, but as mechanisms that are used to absorb contradictions in a way that makes them less threatening to a mother's overarching life project and the system that creates and oversees it. For the neoliberal feminist fantasy of motherhood to uphold, tensions are not only inevitable but necessary – so long as motherhood is admitted as a place of disappointment but never disenchantment.

More broadly, deploying a Berlantian framework helps to re-imagine cultural discourses as a regime of bargaining. It sheds light on the affective facet of discourses that keeps subjects returning, thus adding to our understanding of how norms are maintained. It asks us to reimagine how norms fall into the lived experience of subjects who bargain with normalcy to keep their fantasy intact, manage the difficulties that life throws their way, and who, in the midst of it all, try to have a day that feels both coherent and meaningful.

This raises important questions about the experience of those who cannot access conformity because its parameters are exclusionary, like LGBTQ+ and ethnic minority mothers, or those living with limited economic capital. It probes us to wonder what happens when the distance between the fantasy and the lived experience of motherhood becomes so great that bridging the gap seems impossible. And it drives us to ask: how can we provide mothers with fantasies that are less cruel?

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ORCID iDs

Sophie M Mary https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3251-2011
Robbie Duschinsky https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2023-5328
Barry Coughlan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1484-6491
Susan Dunnett https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5163-2599

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Sophie M Mary is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Clinical Child and Family Studies, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and a Visiting Researcher in the Department of Public Health & Primary Care, University of Cambridge.

Robbie Duschinsky is Professor of Social Science and Health in the Department of Public Health & Primary Care, University of Cambridge. He is also a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

Barry Coughlan is a psychology Lecturer at the National College of Ireland and a Visiting Researcher in the Department of Public Health & Primary Care, University of Cambridge.

Susan Dunnett is Professor and Personal Chair of Consumer Culture and Society at the University of Edinburgh Business School.

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