Optimism and its Bargains: Cultural Discourses of Motherhood and the Accounts of Mothers with Experiences of Anxiety and/or Depression

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Abstract

Aims This project is guided by two research aims. One is to contribute to gender studies and studies of family and motherhood by advancing our understanding of cultural discourses of motherhood and of mothers' experiences of them. This is achieved by integrating an analytical framework derived from the works of Lauren Berlant to theorise the ambivalence of maternal discourses and experiences. The other is to contribute to social theory by appraising the applicability of this Berlantian framework for social-scientific work.

Methods This thesis has three empirical sections. First, I introduce a systematic review of studies about the representation of motherhood in media in any geographical location published after 31 December 2016 ($k = 55$). Then, I present a thematic analysis of the new media presence of five brands targeted at UK mothers ($k = 110$ YouTube videos, $k = 4$ websites, $k = 267$ packages, and $k = 680$ Instagram posts). Finally, I offer a narrative analysis of interviews with mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression, focused on their expectations and lived experiences of motherhood ($n = 15$). This sample was chosen with the goal of exploring some of the challenges of navigating the maternal role and its associated norms and identities.

Findings First, my systematic review of existing literature highlights ambivalence in representations of motherhood, as traditional norms are concurrently challenged and sustained. It also identifies a gap in the literature for theories of that ambivalence. Second, and addressing this gap, my thematic analysis reveals that brand representations position motherhood as an object that can deliver the good life. They simultaneously offer validations and resources to retain optimism when motherhood's lived experiences become too far removed from the fantasy of that good life. These two mechanisms, when combined, help absorb the difficulties of motherhood in a way that protects its promises of fulfilment. Third, my interview study with mothers who have experiences of anxiety and/or depression reveals the expectations they have invested in motherhood, and in how it relates to their sense of the good life. My study shows how feelings of anxiety and depression, and the strategies mothers deploy to navigate them, relate to such expectations.

Conclusions This work contributes to our understanding of motherhood and motherhood norms by proposing to understand both as spaces of bargaining where individuals and hegemonic institutions attempt to preserve mothers' optimism that motherhood will deliver the good life they have fantasised—even in the face of overwhelming and difficult lived experiences. My thesis also extends the works of Lauren Berlant in three ways: it offers a proof of concept for their adaptation to empirical social-scientific work; it provides insights into how the particular affects of anxiety and depression may relate to attachments to life objects; and it further maps out strategies that individuals may use to navigate coming too close or not close enough to their fantasies of the good life.

To mothers

Contents

It is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working.

– Lauren Berlant

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Aims

This project is guided by two research aims. One is to contribute to gender studies and studies of family and motherhood by advancing our understanding of cultural discourses of motherhood and of mothers' experiences of them. This is achieved by integrating an analytical framework derived from the works of Lauren Berlant to understand the ambivalence of maternal discourses and experiences. The other is to contribute to social theory by appraising the applicability of this Berlantian framework for social-scientific work. Both aims thread through the subsequent chapters and are revisited in Chapter 6, which acts as a conclusion.

1.1.1 Aim 1: Advancing Our Understanding of Motherhood

The first aim of this project is to explore mothers' experiences of navigating motherhood and the cultural discourse in which it is embedded. Of particular relevance to this question is the ambivalence that scholars have documented both in cultural discourses about motherhood and family life and in women's accounts of their experiences of

motherhood. To address this, I propose three chapters oriented by three research questions:

- What are the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood? (Chapter 3)
- How can we make sense of the ambivalence found in cultural discourses of motherhood? (Chapter 4)
- How do mothers experience motherhood and its relation to cultural discourses? (Chapter 5)

The chapters have different objectives and use different archives (or datasets) and methodologies. This enables me to consider the problem from different angles. While the primary contributions of this objective are to gender studies and studies of family and motherhood, I also intend each chapter (particularly Chapters 4 and 5) to foster a conversation about what we may learn from attachments to motherhood that is also relevant to attachments to other forms of life. So, this project considers what happens to our understanding of motherhood and motherhood norms when we address their affective dimensions; and what looking at motherhood and motherhood norms can offer to our understanding of attachments to the good life. This is made possible by my engagement with the works of Lauren Berlant.

1.1.2 Aim 2: Extending the Works of Lauren Berlant

The second aim of this project is to appraise the applicability of an analytical framework derived from the contributions of Lauren Berlant for social-scientific work. Berlant, who died a few months before this project began in 2021, is renowned as a foundational scholar in many fields including gender studies, queer theory, literary and media studies, political theory, and geography (Anderson et al., 2023; Butler et al., 2021; Seitz, 2024; Pedwell, 2023; Winant, 2015). Perhaps their most impactful contribution, however, has been to affect theory, a field they helped pioneer (Butler et al., 2021). I will explore some of their central concepts, which derive from all such influences and more, in the chapters that follow. While Berlant's academic history was in the humanities – they were the George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago at the time of their death – glimpses of their conceptual contributions have started to emerge in social-scientific

works (Adkins et al., 2023; Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018; Merikoski, 2022; Pors and Kishik, 2023). But only few in that field have deployed Berlant's works as an analytical framework in its own right, like I intend to do here.

Therefore, a second aim of this project is to bridge Berlant's works with the social sciences. This requires a consideration of the epistemological and methodological compatibility of Berlant's works with social-scientific approaches, which is discussed in Chapter 2 and revisited in Chapter 6. I do not assume that Berlant's framework can be transplanted seamlessly across disciplines. My objective is rather to engage some of their concepts, to test them out in archives Berlant did not explore, composed using methods Berlant did not use, and to evaluate how they hold up. This is particularly addressed in three of the chapters, and oriented by three research questions:

- What are the main scholarly influences and concepts in Laurent Berlant's works, and how might their works be compatible with and relevant for social-scientific research? (Chapter 2)
- What do we learn from introducing a Berlantian framework to the sociological study of branding texts? (Chapter 4)
- What do we learn from introducing a Berlantian framework to the sociological study of interviews? (Chapter 5)

As a result of this approach, the thesis in its form is populated by tensions between social-scientific and humanistic genres. I do not view these tensions as problematic; rather, I see them as necessary symptoms of trying out a new way to generate knowledge–which are the experiment and contribution this piece attempts to make.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

The remainder of this thesis is divided into five chapters, of which four (all but Chapter 6) were written as scholarly articles and included here as such. For this reason, the chapters do not follow one another as smoothly as they might have had this thesis been composed in a monograph model; it was intended that they form stand-alone pieces that may be attended to separately.

1.2.1 Chapter 2

Chapter 2 presents an introduction to the works of Lauren Berlant and considers their compatibility with and relevance for the empirical social sciences. The chapter objectives are to:

1. Trace the foundational theories that most influenced Berlant's thinking;
2. Provide a summary of some of Berlant's key concepts;
3. Consider the epistemological and methodological compatibility of Berlant's works with social-scientific approaches;
4. Consider the relevance of Berlant's works for the empirical social sciences.

1.2.2 Chapter 3

Chapter 3 presents a systematic review of 55 studies about the representation of motherhood in media, in any geographical location, published after the 31st of December 2016. The chapter objectives are to:

1. Understand how motherhood is represented across different media;
2. Understand how the modalities of media domains influence the motherhood representations they offer;
3. Identify the gaps in recent research on the subject;
4. Explore what the results of the above three objectives can contribute to our sociological understanding of cultural discourses.

Chapter 3 received input from Louise Davis, at the time a Research Assistant in the Applied Social Science Group at the University of Cambridge. Davis reviewed a section of the corpus, as specified in the text, to ensure reliability.

1.2.3 Chapter 4

Chapter 4 presents a thematic analysis of 110 YouTube videos, 4 websites, 267 packages, and 680 Instagram posts from 5 brands that target UK mothers. The chapter objectives are to:

1. Understand the ambivalence that has been identified in media representations of motherhood;

2. Understand the terms that may influence how media representations of motherhood are negotiated;

3. Explore what the results of the above two objectives can contribute to our sociological understanding of cultural discourses.

1.2.4 Chapter 5

Chapter 5 presents a narrative analysis of interviews with 15 mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression.The chapter objectives are to:

1. Understand the affects that are mobilised by my participants' experiences of motherhood;

2. Understand the strategies that my participants deploy to navigate those affects while trying to protect their optimism in motherhood's capacity to deliver fulfilment;

3. Explore what the results of the above two objectives can contribute to our sociological understanding of attachments to life objects.

Chapter 5 received input from Dr Tessa Morgan, at the time a Research Associate in the Applied Social Science Group at the University of Cambridge. Morgan reviewed the final draft and provided light comments.

1.2.5 Chapter 6

Chapter 6 reviews the thesis objectives and the structure of the study, and presents the main findings of the different chapters. It develops the key contributions of the study and their implications, before reflecting on its limitations. It concludes by presenting routes for further work.

1.3 Brief Overview of the Literature

1.3.1 Representations of Motherhood

Chapter 3 presents a systematic review of studies about the representation of motherhood in media, and Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the representation of motherhood in digital branding.

Discussions of identity construction, and the role that culture plays in it, have long been a cornerstone of sociological thinking (Cerulo, 1997). Scholarship in cultural studies has advanced that individuals employ cultural resources, both implicitly and explicitly, to construct their sense of self. Therefore, research has examined the meanings and identities that cultural texts offer, and how individuals mobilise, question, and oppose them in their identity work (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2002; Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Levy, 1959; 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), and wondered how this impacts the ways women construct and perform their identities.

In this context, many have seen the mother as a social invention rather than simply a woman with child(ren) (e.g. Badinter, 2010; Lazar, 2000; Lynch, 2005) and argued that representations of mothers play an important role in shaping how we imagine and live motherhood (e.g. Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018; O'Donohoe et al., 2013). According to this view, portrayals of mothers construct an image of who mothers are, how they should mother, and what they should care about (O'Donohoe et al., 2013), and outline the role that motherhood should play in our society (Lynch, 2005). They also construct 'a moral landscape where certain choices and practices are deemed more appropriate than, and even morally superior to, others.' (Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018: 2)

Scholarly work on motherhood representation has proliferated. Studies have investigated how the ordinary life of mothers is portrayed, including how they care for the emotional and physical development of their children, what they consume (Baybars and Dedeoglu, 2021; Krzyżanowska, 2020; Orgad and Meng, 2017), and how their role relates to others, like the role of fathers (Brydon, 2018; Douglas et al., 2022; Feldman, 2021). Studies have also explored how mothers navigate their identity and the cultural texts they are exposed to, for example by examining what mothers say on social media (Abetz and

Moore, 2018; Mackenzie, 2018; Orton-Johnson, 2017) or how minority mothers navigate hegemonic discourse in their everyday practices, such as in the books they read to their children or the labels they use (Reed, 2018). Amidst such growing research, it would be helpful to consider where studies agree and diverge. This would enable us to map out how the role and the ordinary of mothers are represented in contemporary society, and to identify ambivalence and contradictions. In addition, studies of motherhood have often relied on 'ideologies of motherhood' to organise their findings, and it would be useful to review the relevance of this lens on a broader scale. This is what Chapter 3 proposes to do.

Further, recent years have seen increasing maternal research across new media, like social media platforms. That is because new media provide tools for mothers to construct their own narratives, which may destabilise hegemonic discourses. Colleagues have explored social media (e.g. Feldman, 2021; Hernández, 2019; Johnson and Rintoul, 2019; Mackenzie, 2018; Orgad and Baldwin, 2021), web platforms (e.g. Imbaquingo and Davila, 2020), blogs (e.g. Abetz and Moore, 2018; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Hartzell, 2017; Lehto, 2022; McGannon et al., 2017a; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Van Cleaf, 2020) and forums (e.g. Cino, 2020; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Khvorostyanov and Yeshua-Katz, 2020; Miklyaeva and Rumyantceva, 2018) on top of traditional media like advertising (e.g. Barak-Brandes, 2017a,b), magazines (e.g. César et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2022), and TV series or movies (e.g. Brydon, 2018; Douglas et al., 2022; Lachover, 2019; Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). However, no work so far has engaged with how the material, social, cultural, and historical potentials and constraints of media for making meaning – what is commonly known as their *affordances* – shape the motherhood discourses they offer. That is despite works pointing to the relevance of individual affordances, like the possibility to upload selfies (e.g. Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017). This is presumably because working across numerous platforms to allow a comparative framework is often beyond the scope of individual research projects. It would therefore be helpful to undertake a comparative review of existing studies in order to contrast their results under the lens of media affordances. This is another task of Chapter 3.

A review of existing work might expose ambivalent results. Recent work about maternal representations has shown that traditional expectations of motherhood endure (Hays, 1996). Studies find that mothers are still portrayed as primary caregivers who invest their time, emotions, and money into an intensive practice of expertise-based care around which their identity revolves (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Feldman, 2021; Lerner, 2018;

Mackenzie, 2018; Orgad and Meng, 2017). But a growing body of works has found that motherhood discourses also (and, often, simultaneously) acknowledge mothers' difficult experiences and promote a more relaxed approach to mothering (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Cino, 2020; Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019; Van Cleaf, 2020). The candid and seemingly liberatory genre of 'mommy blogs' (Orton-Johnson, 2017) and social media accounts (Feldman, 2021; Johnson and Rintoul, 2019; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017) seems to have made its way into other cultural texts. Therefore, cultural texts about motherhood appear to concurrently 'displace' and 'refix' traditional norms of motherhood, a movement that has also been noted elsewhere (McRobbie, 2008; Renold and Ringrose, 2011). There have been calls for developing a sociological understanding of this ambivalence, which some have argued sits at the very essence of subjectivity under modern conditions–what Renold and Ringrose (2011) call *normative schizoid subjectivity*. Yet there have been few attempts to do so, maybe because we lack a 'sufficiently complex' framework (Renold and Ringrose, 2011). Chapter 4 proposes to address this call, and utilises the works of Lauren Berlant in doing so.

1.3.2 Experiences of Motherhood, Maternal Ambivalence, and Maternal Mental Health

Chapter 5 presents an analysis of interviews with mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression. This sample was selected because it helps shed light on some of the challenges that are opened up by navigating the maternal role and its associated norms and identities. Depression and anxiety are the commonest diagnoses made to women in the years that follow their becoming mothers (Howard and Khalifeh, 2020). Worldwide, about 10% of pregnant women and 13% of women who have just given birth experience a mental disorder, primarily depression (World Health Organization, 2024). The figure is even higher in developing countries: 15.6% during pregnancy and 19.8% after child birth (World Health Organization, 2024). In comparison, an estimated 3.8% of the global population experience depression, including 4% of adult men and 6% of adult women (World Health Organization, 2023b), and an estimated 4% experience an anxiety disorder (World Health Organization, 2023a).

Mental health disorders are complex networks of interacting symptoms (Fried, 2015; Fried et al., 2017) and they often co-occur, as is the case for markers of anxiety and depression (Beard et al., 2016). Markers of depression include 'lowering of mood,

reduction of energy, and decrease in activity', reduced 'capacity for enjoyment, interest, and concentration,' 'marked tiredness after even minimum effort', disturbed sleep and diminished appetite, reduced 'self-esteem and self-confidence,' as well as 'some ideas of guilt or worthlessness.' (World Health Organization, 2019). Markers of anxiety include 'persistent nervousness, trembling, muscular tensions, sweating, lightheadedness, palpitations, dizziness, and epigastric discomfort' (World Health Organization, 2019).

Some have argued that the rise in anxiety and depression among mothers is due to the gendered demands that parenting makes of women (Medina and Magnuson, 2009; Rizzo et al., 2013), a position that is often echoed in popular culture (e.g. Kelly, 2022). The pressure that normative expectations of mothering place on them is correlated with higher stress and lower life satisfaction (Rizzo et al., 2013). It is also increasingly difficult to receive support, as childcare provisions have decreased while prices have increased (Jarvie et al., 2023; Penn and Lloyd, 2013). Unsurprisingly, mothers with lower perceived support report higher levels of anxiety (Capponi and Horbacz, 2008; Chavis, 2016).

Anxiety and depression are associated with an onset of individual medical conditions and poor physical health. Women who experience anxiety and depression report lower physical health levels (Harder and Sumerau, 2019), present higher rates of fatal heart diseases (Eaker et al., 2005), diabetes (Engum, 2007), and strokes (Jonas and Mussolino, 2000), and are more likely to develop worsening somatic symptoms (Niles and O'Donovan, 2019). Niles and O'Donovan (2019) have even argued that anxiety and depression are as strongly predictive of poor future physical health as obesity and smoking. Poor maternal mental health is also associated with negative outcomes for children (Shen et al., 2016) and has economic implications: the present value of total lifetime costs is £75,728 per woman experiencing perinatal depression and £34,811 per woman experiencing perinatal anxiety (Howard and Khalifeh, 2020). For the United Kingdom (UK), the aggregated costs are £6.6 billion (Howard and Khalifeh, 2020).

This has led the World Health Organization to urgently call for services to combat the maternal mental health crisis. In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) has committed to develop and implement maternal mental health services in every area of the country by 2023/24, making almost £12 million per year available for the development of services in 2020/21 and 2021/22 (National Health Service, 2024a). Most research, guidelines, and services about maternal mental health have focused on the perinatal period, which typically includes pregnancy and up to one year postnatal (Howard and Khalifeh, 2020; National Health Service, 2024b). This is presumably because the

perinatal period is the most vulnerable time for the emergence of mood disorders in women (Koukopoulos et al., 2020). However, many mothers face anxiety and depression beyond those early years, and it would be helpful to learn more about their experiences. Mothers whose children are older may also be in a better position to reflect on their difficult affects, and to talk about the strategies they have used to navigate them. The years beyond the perinatal period therefore warrant scholarly attention, and Chapter 5 addresses the experiences and strategies of mothers who have at least one child older than 6 years old.

Further, anxiety and depression amongst mothers in general has been sparsely addressed in sociological research. Studies have been interested in some difficult affects that are mobilised by motherhood, such as guilt (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023; Karademir Hazır, 2024), regret (Miller, 2007), self-doubt (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2024), distress and fear (Staneva et al., 2017), and shame and stress (Forbes et al., 2021). They have also explored the strategies that mothers deploy in everyday life to navigate them (Brouwer et al., 2012; Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2024; Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023). This scholarship has highlighted the relevance of exploring the affective work that mothers deploy in their ordinary. But very few have explored the accounts of mothers with experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression, which may be due to the difficulty of identifying and recruiting from this population. To address this gap, Chapter 5 used the Clinical Record Interactive Search (CRIS) system to access the anonymised clinical records of the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM) for participant recruitment. SLaM is one of the largest mental health services in Europe, serving approximately 1.2 million people. It has a Consent for Contact (C4C) registry, in which service users may agree to be contacted for research for up to five years, and for their anonymised records to be accessible to researchers. This provides a singular opportunity to learn from this under-studied population.

1.4 Methodological Approach

1.4.1 Systematic Literature Review

Chapter 3 presents a systematic literature review of all studies about the representation of motherhood in media texts, in any geographical location, published after the 31st of December 2016. I identified $k = 55$ studies relevant to the search criteria and undertook a thematic analysis of their findings. More details about the sampling and methodological

procedures can be found in Chapter 3 and Appendix A.

Review studies aim to critically evaluate already-published materials (Hulland and Houston, 2020). They can be quantitative or, as here, qualitative. The decision to pursue a systematic review was motivated by three reasons. First, systematic reviews benefit scholars who are relatively new to a research topic (Hulland and Houston, 2020). They not only provide an overview of the populations, topics, methods, and frameworks successfully explored so far, but also reveal gaps that can direct the research of a newcomer. This, therefore, provides a good starting point for a PhD study. Second, systematic reviews are particularly suited to areas where empirical work has proliferated but no synthesis of existing work exists (Short, 2009), which is the case for studies on the representation of motherhood. They are uniquely placed to compare and contrast different approaches and results, identify and explain inconsistencies, and offer directions for further studies, thus advancing the field (Hulland and Houston, 2020). Third, they offer an opportunity to combine the findings of existing research to hypothesise broader conclusions, which would be harder or impossible to do under a single study.

The results of the systematic review influenced methodological decisions in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 4 breaks with the theoretical framework of 'motherhood ideologies' because Chapter 3 results suggest that they are ill-suited to the contemporary media landscape. It also samples materials across different media platforms (rather than concentrating on one domain, as is usually done) because Chapter 3 results suggest that media affordances influence maternal representations in singular ways. The research objectives of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 centre on maternal ambivalence partly because that is one of the central findings of Chapter 3.

1.4.2 Thematic Analysis

Chapter 4 presents a thematic analysis of the new media presence of 5 brands that target UK mothers: Tesco, IKEA, Mothercare, Ella's Kitchen, and Pampers. I identified $k = 110$ YouTube videos, $k = 4$ websites, $k = 267$ packages, and $k = 680$ Instagram posts relevant to the search criteria. More details about the sampling and methodological procedures can be found in Chapter 4 and Appendix B.

Thematic analysis consists in identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data that help respond to the research question at hand (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The decision to pursue a thematic analysis was motivated by three reasons. First, thematic

analysis is not tied to an epistemology (unlike discourse analysis, for example) which makes it well-suited to integrate a theoretical framework of the researcher's choosing (Braun and Clarke, 2021). This was aligned with the goal of developing a framework inspired by the works of Berlant. Second, thematic analysis is flexible enough to include both inductive and deductive phases in the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Again, this was aligned with the goal of developing a framework inspired by the works of Berlant. Finally, thematic analysis is versatile enough to be applied to multiple media (Braun and Clarke, 2021). This was aligned with the motivation to sample across multiple media.

The results of the thematic analysis influenced methodological decisions in the subsequent chapter. The research objectives of Chapter 5 centre on affective investments because that is one of the central findings of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 also deploys a theoretical framework derived from the works of Berlant because the model was successful in unraveling new results in Chapter 4.

1.4.3 Qualitative Interviews

Chapter 5 presents a narrative analysis of semi-structured interviews with mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression. I recruited $n = 15$ participants relevant to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. More details about the sampling and methodological procedures can be found in Chapter 5 and Appendix C.

Semi-structured interviews flexibly follow a rough set of questions and themes highlighted in an interview guide (Bryman, 2012). While most questions are asked and similar wording is used in all interviews, the participant has a great deal of freedom in how to reply, and the interviewee is able to follow their participant's chain of thoughts (Bryman, 2012). The decision to pursue semi-structured interviews was motivated by two reasons. First, semi-structured interviews can provide insights into how participants view, frame, and understand issues and events (Bryman, 2012). This aligns with the motivation to understand mothers' imaginaries and lived experiences of motherhood, and their relation to cultural discourses. Second, semi-structured interviews enable participants some degree of control and direction over their talk, which is welcome, especially given the sensitivity of the research topic. Other methods, like focus groups, would also have failed to provide sufficient privacy for such a sensitive study.

1.5 Reflections

1.5.1 Introducing Myself as a Researcher

Being Transdisciplinary

This study, and I as a researcher, came into being from the intersection of cultural and media studies (which I discovered during my undergraduate degree), consumer research (which I discovered during my master's degree), public health research (which I discovered during my PhD), and gender studies (which I discovered in my personal life before I ever discovered it in research).

My undergraduate degree revealed my interest in the relation between cultural discourses and subjectivities, which is the premise of this project. This is especially reflected in Chapter 4, where I propose to explore the psychosocial factors that shape cultural discourses and how we relate to them. My master's degree equipped me with knowledge about branding and marketing, which proved surprisingly beneficial for Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. In Chapter 3, I propose to consider the relation between the affordances of media and the discourses they carry; in Chapter 4, I propose to incorporate content types to the analytical process. Those ideas are derived from learning to plan and analyse campaigns. During my PhD, I was introduced to public health research, and for this project collaborated with two specialist mental health practitioners and one person with experiences of receiving mental health support relating to motherhood. This influenced every methodological decision taken in Chapter 5, from participant screening to the language used in the write-up of the study. It is also during that time that I first encountered affect theory, especially the works of Berlant. This influenced everything–from the epistemology of my work and the design of research questions and interview guides, to the analytical frameworks mobilised and the words used to write the study up.

Being Feminist

The design of this study has been shaped by feminist values that are important to my personal life and my academic practice. Lane and Joensuu (2018) have argued that exploring motherhood as a subject of study is, in itself, a feminist endeavour, because it removes motherhood from the personal, domestic, and dismissible place in which it has been forced to live. Considering motherhood as a lens that can teach us about practices

of world-making reinstates the value of the emotional, physical, and mental labour that women perform to reproduce and sustain the conditions that enable them and others to live (Lane and Joensuu, 2018). Further, my epistemology draws from Berlantian theory, which is feminist and queer. Berlant posits that life under a heteronormative and patriarchal hegemony can be, and often is, cruel to women (Berlant, 2008b). They also propose that women can find meaning and fulfilment within that system, albeit to varying degrees of success according to their forms of privilege. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, in particular, draw from Berlant's work on women's disappointments with heteronormative romance as *the gift that keeps on taking* (Berlant, 2008b: 1) and propose to adapt this lens to the study of motherhood.

The conduct of this study, too, was touched by feminism, in particular the interviews presented in Chapter 5. There are no agreed-upon standards for what constitutes a feminist interview, and the notion has not ceased to evolve since it was first discussed in the 1970s. From a review of the past 40 years, Herron (2023) encourages viewing feminist interviewing as a paint palette that provides tools which can be combined in creative ways. One such tool, which I used in this study, is to embrace the personal involvement of the researcher in the fieldwork. This recognises that both interviewer and interviewee bring their voice and their experience – in this case, as women – to the research (Herron, 2023). I applied this by sharing personal stories before and after the interviews about my hopes and fears for motherhood, and about my mental health. During the interviews, I also nodded, smiled, or spoke to indicate that I could relate to what a participant had said. Another technique of feminist interviewing is to position the research itself as creating conditions for empowerment (Herron, 2023). I incorporated this by making space for fluidity in the perceived roles adopted during our conversations. Before the interview began, I introduced myself in great detail, and invited the participants to ask me questions. This positioned them momentarily as the interviewer. During our conversations, and when the opportunity presented itself, I asked them for advice and recommendations. This led to discussions about podcasts, books, and practices that the participants suggested I may find interesting or helpful. I also finished the interview by asking them what advice they would give to a new mother, by which I hoped to emphasise their expertise and knowledge. Throughout the entire interview study, I framed their participation as a gift. I underlined that I hoped to help women through my work, and explained that I was trying to produce a sociology *for* rather than *of* women (Oakley, 2016).

During the analysis, my feminist education enabled me to see what is often not made explicit or remarked upon in cultural texts and practices. In the media texts of Chapter 4, for example, I observed the invisible presence of the mental load, or the cognitive labour of anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, making decisions, and monitoring progress that is often carried by women and mothers, with all the stress, frustration, and exhaustion it entails (Daminger, 2019).

Feminist values have also influenced the way that I wrote the study, both tacitly and openly. My citations, for example, have served to promote and support feminist works of both the established and less prominent kinds. Feminists have also long been aware that naming is political, since 'the labels attached to activities establish and justify their social worth', and that women's activities have often been written in ways that undermine their value (Devault, 1990: 15). I have attempted to use words that embodied the value of mothers' labour, including the emotional work they perform incessantly. Beyond this, I have tried to capture and spotlight the importance and relevance of mothers' experiences and affects. This has included attending to their complexity and contradictions by including long, unedited passages of my participants' speech in the final work.

Being a (Young) Woman

I am a woman, and that has impacted the design of this project. I share a subordinate structural position with the population of this study, which has motivated my inquiry into their affects and the conditions that shape them. This has also fuelled my feminist drives, because it is easier to remain aware of (and angry about) what the subjectification of 'woman' entails under a patriarchal regime when one is inside of it.

My gender identity has also shaped how I related to my data and participants and how my participants related to me during the conduct and analysis of this study. Spender (1980) has argued that woman-to-woman talk is singular because women are more likely to listen seriously to each other. It is therefore possible that my participants felt more comfortable talking about their motherhood imaginaries and experiences to a woman, because they assumed that I might both listen and hear. Some of my participants also expected me to engage in 'woman talk' by saying 'you know' or 'you see what I mean' and leaving me to fill in the gap (Devault, 1990). I learnt to notice when this happened and to prompt the participants in response. By doing so, I aimed to encourage them

to express what is often taken for granted and barely registers as conscious, such as assumptions about child and homecare, or the mental load.

I was younger than my participants (significantly so, in some cases) and I do not have children, although I talked about my desire to become a mother later in life. As a result, I observed a younger-woman-to-older-woman dynamic whereby age was acknowledged but transcended by gender: although it was underlined that our contexts and life stories differed, it was assumed that our shared identity as women linked our experiences, and that I would eventually be in the same position (Jen et al., 2020). Participants sometimes drew attention to the differences between our historical contexts, for example noting that social awareness about perinatal mental health has grown since they were younger or had their first child. This was meant to contextualise their speech, educate me, and compare contexts (Jen et al., 2020), but also sometimes to reassure me about my situation. A few participants invoked their expertise, for example by teaching me about perinatal services (Jen et al., 2020). Most participants also demonstrated care by seeking to provide helpful information – asking: 'does this answer your question?' – and offering their good wishes for the project, myself, and my potential future experience as a mother (Jen et al., 2020).

Being an Insider/Outsider

I am not a UK citizen, and as such I was foreign to the British healthcare system before the study began. During the design of the study, I sought the expertise of two specialised mental health practitioners and one individual with experiences of mental health support relating to motherhood to alleviate this lack. They helped to contextualise perinatal mental health and service provision in the UK. For example, I learned about the National Childcare Trust, which many participants later discussed.

During the conduct of the study, this position as an outsider shaped my view of the shortcomings of the UK healthcare system regarding maternal health. It also prompted me to question what others may take for granted, such as the omnipresence of social care's shadow (many participants mentioned not seeking mental health support for fear of losing custody). On rare occasions, it also prohibited my engaging in a deeper critique of mental health provisions during interviews because I did not immediately understand abbreviations or terms.

However, I also have personal experiences of receiving mental health support in the

UK, including as part of my own safeguarding measures during fieldwork. This made me, in some respects and degrees, an insider to my participants' experiences. I could, for example, sympathise with some of the symptoms they described, which facilitated my noticing and writing about them. Because of my experience of searching for and creating meaning in therapy, I was also more sensitive to patterns of storytelling in my participants. Indeed, many participants presented crafted stories and metaphors that seemed to have taken shape elsewhere, presumably in therapeutic work (Bury, 2001). Individuals who receive mental health support often use speech and narratives in therapy to organise difficult affects and sustain optimism (Frank, 2017). I recognised this and was quick to prompt for more details when such stories emerged, because they can teach us a lot about how participants made sense of their affects and chose to navigate them.

I included those metaphors and narratives while writing up the works of Chapter 5. I also received input on early drafts from collaborators with more experience of mental health practice and research. This ensured that my terminology and formulations were correct, for example by talking about *markers of* anxiety and/or depression.

Not Being

Motherhood is an intersectional experience. While I shared a gender identity with all my participants, there are other identities I did not share with them. I am white, middle-class, and able-bodied, which places me outside of the subordinate positions of participants from other minoritised groups. It was important that these diverse experiences were represented in the design of the study, so I used a maximum diversity sampling approach for ethnicity. As a result, my sample is at least as diverse as the national population. However, because these fields do not exist or are often left incomplete in CRIS, I was unable to sample gender identity (all participants are cis-women), sexual identity (no participant mentioned non-heterosexual relationships), education level, and occupation. I also did not pursue diversity sampling for intellectual and physical disability, and it is only by coincidence that one participant had a physical disability. None of the participants in the CRIS shortlist were marked as having experienced social care involvement, so I was unable to sample on that basis. However, many participants mentioned their fear of social care services, and a handful said they had had 'near' experiences of social care involvement. I return to reflections about my sample in Chapter 6.

There are also multiple forms of social relations involved between researchers and

researched (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004), and this influenced the conduct of the study, particularly the interview study presented in Chapter 5. During recruitment, it is possible that potential participants from ethnic minorities declined to be interviewed because of the exploitative dynamic implied by my being a white researcher (an experience documented by others, e.g. Edwards, 1990). This may also have impacted the degree of disclosure that participants who did take part were willing to offer. Although studies have emphasised the ease with which women show vulnerability and openness towards female researchers, Edwards (1990: 486) has argued that 'Black women do not talk about all areas of their lives to white female researchers in the same easy way that white women do, as a result of their structural position and allegiances in society.' I did not sense that this was the case, and made efforts to build rapport, but it is not possible for me to know what was left unsaid. There is also a concern that the identification that is enabled by interviewer and interviewee sharing a social identity was not possible, and that this hindered my capacity to understand some of my participants. Indeed, I do not hold shared assumptions or experiences with my participants who are from the lower end of the economy, are physically disabled, or are not white. Some have argued, however, that this gap in experiences can create space for participants to describe meanings and assumptions that may otherwise remain unspoken, thus empowering them to construct their own narratives (Carter, 2004). I explicitly acknowledged that I was in a different structural position than some participants (Edwards, 1990), and added questions to create such space for their intersectional experiences. For example, I asked them whether and how they felt that their cultural heritage had influenced how they had imagined motherhood. This often arose organically as participants described their own upbringing and families, and I used this to prompt later questions about their maternal experiences. I also noted that participants from lower social classes mentioned their classed experiences organically, which I then encouraged with further prompts. A few participants asked about the profile of the sample, which I discussed with transparency.

The lens of intersectionality was additionally integrated to the analysis of media texts. During the analysis of studies for Chapter 3, I noted when themes (such as 'Support' and 'Struggles and Resistance') only aligned with certain populations of mothers, at the exclusion of others. During the analysis of media texts for Chapter 4, I also documented which ethnicities and relationship forms were represented. By doing this, I intended to reveal the potential lack of representations of certain subgroups–if such a lack there was. I found that Pampers featured mostly white mothers, while other brands included a

diversity of ethnicities. I also observed that IKEA explicitly emphasised heterosexual relationships, with a mother and a father, while other brands did not connote relationship types (for example, not showing a co-parent) or included a mix. However, I did note that only a handful of texts explicitly showed LGBTQ+ mothers. This was beyond the scope of this project but will be included in further work, as outlined in Chapter 6.

1.5.2 Interviewing Vulnerable Participants

Because the study used CRIS to recruit participants, ethical approval had to be obtained from the Health Research Authority (HRA). This was a long, strenuous, and disaffirming process. I had never interviewed participants (beyond my sister and godmother for an undergraduate paper I now realise was already about mothers), let alone participants with experiences of anxiety and/or depression. The HRA demands that a researcher wishing to recruit through the NHS submit a detailed proposal that highlights, among other things, the measures to be taken to safeguard participants. The researcher then attends a panel to provide more information and defend their decisions. The experience was difficult: panel members were dismissive and confrontational, often interrupting me or waving me off. The panel characterised me as being ignorant and lacking empathy, and at risk of harming my participants. This wounded my belief in my capacity to interview people experiencing mental ill health without causing hurt. I worked with my supervisors to reframe the experience, but it shaped my emotions approaching interviews. I was often fearful, and relieved when they had happened 'without a glitch', which meant without having had to make safeguarding referrals. Time and experience alleviated those affects.

During recruitment, I was aware that some individuals who were part of the population of the study would be at high risk of harm, unable to provide informed consent, or unsuited for participating in research. I refined my inclusion/exclusion criteria accordingly, and a clinician was involved in the screening to ensure that individuals who fell in either one of these categories, or in any other high-risk category, were not included in the project. I took precautionary measures to ensure that all of the relevant information about a potential participant, including any event relating to their mental health that may have taken place after participant identification, was known prior to recruitment. I performed due diligence checks and contacted the participant's care coordinator (if the participant was an active patient) before inviting them. I had also

taken measures to make participation inclusive and to accommodate mothers' busy schedules. Participants were informed that they could be accompanied by their carer if relevant (none chose this option), or that I could provide a specialist support worker (none accepted the offer). I proposed to pay for childcare (none accepted the offer), suggested time slots that worked around school hours, offered to do the interviews online (all chose this option), and held some interviews in the evening and during weekends. Some participants had to reschedule multiple times because of changing childcare patterns. Some participants also had childcare responsibilities during the interview, so we paused our conversation when a child demanded attention, and I was lucky to meet some of the children–that is, to wave them hello, be shown a drawing, or see a corner of their forehead as they tried to see what their mother was looking at on her screen.

It was important that the interviews were a safe and supportive space for mothers. I selected semi-structured interviews partly to enable participants some degree of control and direction over their talk, and to allow them to share as much or as little as they wished. Some participants were open from the start, while others were introverted or distant. I respected their pace and the degree of vulnerability they were comfortable offering me, and showed empathy for the stories they were sharing. In most cases, shy participants grew more at ease as the interview progressed. Time was set aside at the start of the interview to introduce myself, at which point I talked about my own mother, my hopes and fears for motherhood, my research, and my experiences with mental health. I invited participants to ask me questions, which was partly meant to equilibrate the power imbalance. Some asked about my family, others about the interview, the study, and my work, and some did not seem to care. A few participants told me that they had appreciated my vulnerability, and that it had made them feel safe. I reminded participants multiple times that they could discontinue their participation without consequences, and without having to give a reason. They were also offered the possibility to pause the interviews whenever they wished. I reassured them that their contribution to the study would be fully anonymised (I explained how the anonymisation worked), that the study was not directly related to their individual care, and that anything they shared with me would have no impact on their care.

It was also important that the interviews did not cause avoidable distress for the participants. I discussed the subjects that the interview would be covering before we began, so that participants could signal whether they would like to avoid a topic. During the interview, I often asked participants whether they felt comfortable discussing

sensitive issues (I knew that some, for example, had experienced particularly difficult births or miscarriages). When the interview ended, I asked participants how they felt, once on the record, and once off-record. I told them that it would be understandable to experience difficult emotions after our conversation, and recommended they reach out to their mental health or general practitioner if such was the case. I also provided a list of relevant services and resources, which I had drafted based on the recommendations of a specialised mental health practitioner. I told them that they could always contact me and that, although I was not a mental health practitioner, I would always be willing to help and to refer them to a professional.

And, of course, it was important that the interviews did not cause harm to the participants. I had undertaken training with a mental health practitioner before fieldwork began to identify signs of harm and of a mental health crisis. Protocol dictated that I stop the interview if I detected any sign of harm, discontinue the involvement of that participant, and redirect them to their mental health practitioner or, if their problems were severe and acute (e.g. immediate self-harm or suicide), to A&E. This did not occur. Some participants, however, showed difficult emotions, like anxiety, sadness, and grief, and a few participants cried. I offered to pause the interview when I detected any sign of unease or distress, and reminded participants that we could stop at any point without consequences.

Only one of the interviews I undertook for this study proved distressing to me. This participant was not included in the sample because it transpired during the interview that she did not fit all the inclusion criteria. However, she seemed eager to find an output for her narrative, so I carried the interview from start to finish. Very early, the participant avoided answering my questions and preferred directing the conversation. Her story was harrowing, and I found it painful and sometimes upsetting to receive. It eventually transpired that she had only received a few therapy sessions, because that was the free quota she had been entitled to. This awoke uneasy feelings. I later realised that, recruiting from mental health services, the involvement of mental health professionals (or, at least, their shadow) embodied for me a comforting buffer. I felt that I could receive difficult stories without carrying the responsibility of making them feel bearable, because it was someone else's job. In fact, most of my participants could be characterised as having 'worked through' their acutely difficult experiences. Removing this buffer opened up anxiety and fear, of not doing enough, of not knowing what to do.

As her story progressed, she disclosed harming one of her children. Protocol dictated

that I establish whether anyone else had been made aware of this information. I was no longer working to receive her experience, but to protect her children from her–and, potentially, to remove them from her custody. I felt dishonest. What she said barely registered as thoughts ran through my head, including: who has she told, how is the child, what is the protocol again, I should smile, where is the child, how do I make her feel that I am not against her, I should nod, is the child safe, I should say *hhm*. After I had established that social workers had been notified and custody had been removed, she disclosed intent of harm, and the cycle started over again. In the end, I did not need to make safeguarding referrals, but I proposed to refer her for further mental health support and she agreed. The experience had been stressful, chaotic, and painful. Immediately, I contacted my supervisor. We had a phone conversation to confirm the safeguarding decision. We went through my actions and established that I had reacted appropriately, and acted within my remit and in line with my ethics protocols to safeguard both the participant and their child. We discussed my emotions and worked through them as much as we could. I increased the frequency of my clinical supervisions after that, and paused interviews for a short while. From this experience, I learnt that I can uphold protocol even in moments of personal distress, and do so in a way that remains kind to the participant. I also learnt that such kindness should extend to myself.

Overall, my interview study remains one of the most enjoyable parts of this project. My rapport with the participants felt natural and easy. I asked them about recommendations when the opportunity presented itself, like when they mentioned a book, podcast, or series. This was meant partly to equilibrate the power imbalance, but it opened up enjoyable conversations. In some cases, we had a long discussion following the interview. We talked about different topics often beyond motherhood, like yoga or knitting. We laughed, joked, and rolled eyes together. Many participants said that the interview has been a positive and even enjoyable experience, even when they had cried. That was also the case for me. Perhaps this comes from the very sensitivity of the research topic: after all, it is not surprising that some sense of intimacy opens up from being vulnerable.

1.5.3 Reflections on Motherhood: Protecting my Optimism

It is impossible to do research on motherhood without being asked, and being forced to ask oneself, how one feels about motherhood. I am not a mother but I hope to become

one someday, and in that sense I was, throughout this project, and I still am, protecting my optimism regarding motherhood's potentials.

My fantasy of motherhood derives from my relationship with my own mother and my family. Those have influenced my work in ways that I am aware of – as much as one can be – but do not wish to discuss here.

I would like to think that, as a cultural scholar, I am indifferent to discourses of bliss, happy families, healthy nurture, pretty children, yummy mummies, and aesthetic homes. But it would be hypocritical. This made me sympathetic to participants who described scenes of motherhood that may sound stereotypical at best, naive and delusional at worst. Secretly, we often think this may be possible, if not for others, then at least for ourselves. I would also like to think that, as a feminist scholar and person, I am indifferent to heteronormative discourses of romantic love and nuclear families, but this would again be hypocritical. I understood participants who mixed romantic and maternal fantasies, and for whom not providing a father or a co-parent for their children was experienced as an acute crisis. I also caught myself identifying with participants who imagined themselves successfully 'doing it all.' It reassured me when they worked through their difficult affects.

I began my interviews by telling participants about my relationship with my mother, and sharing that I am both excited and scared to become a mother myself. This seemed to be on some of my participants' minds, as they often hesitated to discuss particularly traumatising experiences for fear of 'discouraging me.' I assured them that I would not be undertaking this work if I did not want to hear such stories–which is ironic, because in some ways I would, indeed, rather not. It is strange, uncomfortable, and sometimes threatening to be engaged in work that strives to reveal how cruel motherhood can be while holding on to the belief that it will not be too cruel to me, surely, hopefully, maybe. I often caught myself thinking 'this would not happen to me' or 'I would have dealt with this differently' when narratives seemed too challenging to my optimism. I have also advanced that I know too much about motherhood's double bind to get caught in it. This is false, of course. Generally, it appears that I have unconsciously worked to believe that my participants' stories have no bearing on the potentials opened to me by motherhood. I have embraced the proximity opened up by our interviews, but at the same time have constructed some form of distance, if not from my participants, then from the implications their stories may hold for motherhood as a life object. We all protect our optimism however we can, after all.

2

On the Relevance of Lauren Berlant for the Social Sciences

This chapter acts as a theoretical framework. It seeks to introduce the oeuvre of Lauren Berlant, and to make a case for organising a PhD in Sociology around it – and, indeed, for developing a sociological body of work around it, beyond this thesis – when Berlant was not, in fact, a sociologist. To do this, it tracks the cross-disciplinary foundational theories Berlant declared had most influenced their work, summarises some of Berlant's key concepts, and engages in discussion about Berlant's epistemological and methodological compatibility with and relevance for the social sciences.

2.1 Introduction

Lauren Berlant was a foundational scholar and cultural theorist whose expertise 'lay in mapping institutions for the purpose of evading them.' (Nyong'o in Bordowitz et al., 2021: n.p.) Judith Butler described them[1] as 'one of the most esteemed and influential

[1] Berlant professionally used they/them pronouns.

literary and cultural critics in the United States', noting that their death in June 2021 had been felt 'with a keen sense of loss through the academy.' (Butler et al., 2021: n.p.) Along with senior academics and thinkers, many students have also grieved the loss of an engaged, norms-shifting teacher (Andrzejewski, 2021). The outpouring of anthologies and public support that followed their loss, Turner (2024: n.p.) observed, revealed both 'a devoted following and a shared sense of profound personal connection to someone most had never met,' which says much about the empathetic and affective quality of their oeuvre.

Berlant obtained their PhD from Cornell, where their thesis, later adapted into a first book called *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991), examined the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne to explore the relation between the political, popular, collective and individual, sexual, textual, and utopian and historical in the formation of U.S. national identity. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), Berlant's second book, continued their interest in American citizenship, this time addressing the contradictions of a conservative politics that maintains the sacredness of privacy for all but questions of intimacy, including sex and reproduction. Almost ten years later, though work on the book began in the 1980s (1988), *The Female Complaint* (2008b) chronicled how books, films, and television shows addressed to women construct a fantasy that women's lives are understood by other women and can be relied upon for reassurance and directions. Next followed *Cruel Optimism* (2011a), arguably Berlant's most renowned book, that described how since the 1980s people have remained attached to fantasies of the good life — with its promises of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and durable intimacy — despite repeated evidence that liberal-capitalist societies have failed to provide the conditions for that good life. Their last book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), published posthumously, builds on this scaffold to consider ways of building new forms of life, partly by loosening attachments. Aside from these Berlant generated countless works: they authored and co-authored other scholarly books, articles, essays, and commentaries, attended interviews, radio shows, and podcasts, wrote poetry and auto-ethnography, gave presentations and lectures, and even started and vigorously populated their own blog.

Berlant's work advanced, and continues to advance, many disciplines, including gender studies, queer theory, literary and media studies, political theory, and geography (Anderson et al., 2023; Butler et al., 2021; Pedwell, 2023; Seitz, 2024; Winant, 2015). Perhaps their most impactful contribution, however, has been to affect theory, a field they

helped pioneer and which concerns itself with trying to understand social, cultural, and political life by reading into individual and collective senses and feelings (Butler et al., 2021). Some of us have invested the purpose of advancing their work, what Turner (2024) called 'Berlant Studies' in air quotes. To set this up, there have also been some attempts to introduce and summarise Berlant's ideas (e.g. Anderson et al., 2023; Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015; Traub, 2021). However, no work to date has introduced Berlant's relationship with the foundational theories upon which their own work was built, or attempted a survey of their nodal concepts. There has also been limited dedicated discussion of their potential relevance to the social sciences, with the exception of cultural geography (Anderson et al., 2023).

The limited literature introducing Berlant's work has been complicated by a problem Berlant faced throughout their decades-spanning activity: Berlant's writing is hard to attend to (Berlant, 2013a; Poletti and Rak, 2014: 246). Indeed Berlant themselves said of their prose that it was 'too closed off' and 'kind of intense to read' despite their attempts to learn 'how to write in a way that would make it possible for [their] thought to be found' (Poletti and Rak, 2014: 261).[2] Their work undercut normative expectations that academic writing should have as its main brief to be understandable (Cassuto, 2024: 266). Instead, it had the ambitious goal to help readers both sense and make sense of the ambiguous affects of the historical present, which demanded convoluted sentences with forking pathways that often arrive in two places at once (Bordowitz et al., 2021). For some Berlant's prose is an 'armor against engagement' that serves only to ensure that 'readers have the hardest time possible in following what one is actually saying' (Dean, 2015: 631). For others the reading is tough but worthwhile, as if 'trying to keep up with someone always at least two steps ahead of [you], pulling [you] by the hand—"you, you, you"—but also keeping [you] out of breath.' (Maude, 2024: 216) Many seem to agree, in any case, that Berlant's writing is inextricable from their ideas in its capacity to capture a world in the careful composition of its sentences (Smith, 2021), demanding because it *successfully* captures something that is difficult and complex (Hesford, 2012: 327).

In Ibbett's words:

> It's a big step, and a big reach to try and write about Lauren Berlant's work succinctly: I know from the seminar room, that site of many affective forces, that her writing frustrates and excites more than almost any other text I teach. (Ibbett, 2017: 247)

[2]Eventually Berlant started a blog, *Supervalent Thought*, to test out more accessible ways of writing.

The first aim of this chapter is therefore an ambiguous one: to give the reader *enough* to be able to approach and navigate Berlant's writing somewhat comfortably, in an effort to support those deterred by the perceived density of their style, but not *too much* that it may discourage them from pursuing the primary texts, or plant the idea that this, right here, is all there is to Berlant. One of the mechanisms I use to do this is lengthy quotes deployed alongside simplified explanations, to illustrate Berlant's complexity.

To offer an introduction to Berlant's writings requires two things: first, to provide an account of the interlocutors Berlant engaged, tracing the foundational theories that most influenced their thinking so that readers may have the necessary background knowledge to enter the conversation; and second, to provide a summary of some of their key concepts. This is what the present chapter begins with.

The second aim of this chapter, no less ambitious, is to address the compatibility and bearings of Berlant's oeuvre for a social-scientific audience, and particularly for those engaged in empirical work that seems far removed from Berlant's theoretical tendencies. The academy is organised around and by disciplines, and social-scientific scholars may feel apprehensive or reluctant to engage with work that was not written with our discipline in mind. But, as I will attempt to show, Berlant's epistemology was such that their work invites, if not encourages, creative engagement.

2.2 Interlocutors

Lauren Berlant read widely, and as a result, much of their writing engages in cross-disciplinary conversations that can be hard to follow without the necessary background. When asked about the theories that most influenced their thinking, Berlant often talked about their training in queer and Marxist critical theory (Berlant, 1997, 2017a). Occasionally, they also referred to their reading of psychoanalysis. In fact, many of their central ideas can be traced to psychoanalytic theory, including their most widely known concept, *cruel optimism* (Seitz, 2023: 354).

This section begins by discussing how Berlant, through their reading of psychoanalysis, came to view what an object is and what desiring it may feel like. Moving on to Marxist cultural theory, I then consider how Berlant made sense of the objects individuals come to desire, and why. Finally, turning to their interpretation of queer theory, I examine how Berlant conceptualised the wildness of desire, the need to avoid shaming the desire even for harmful objects, but also how we might imagine alternative

ways of relating to objects.

I have used wording such as 'their training', 'their reading', and 'their interpretation' deliberately, because my focus here will be on Berlant's own accounts of their primary interlocutors. Berlant had a generous approach to citation; inspired by Julia Lesage, they viewed citations as not just a way to 'mark the range of a text's knowledge but also as a device for building alliances.' (Berlant, 1997: 265) Citational practices can be read, therefore, as signalling who Berlant chose to make alliances with, and how. This section registers the references Berlant made to key interlocutors in their writing, including their books, articles, essays, and blog *Supervalent Thought*, and in presentations, interviews, and podcasts, to present an accessible (hence, necessarily simplified) overview.

2.2.1 Psychoanalysis

This section begins with psychoanalysis because it offers routes that came to shape how Berlant conceptualised the object (Berlant, 2011a: 16, 2013b, 2020c), a conceptualisation that provided infrastructure supporting and shaping their other ideas. Berlant engaged widely with psychoanalytical theory, though within the camps of psychoanalytic theorists, they were most drawn to the Independent tradition, as represented by Donald Winnicott, Christopher Bollas, and Adam Phillips. However, Jacques Lacan and Jean Laplanche were also important influences on their thinking about fantasy (Berlant, 2015b; Seitz, 2023), and in Berlant's final years they described being 'enraptured' by self-psychology, such as the works of Philip Bromberg, in thinking about dissociation and coping strategies (Berlant, 2022: 195).

Object

What Berlant calls the *object* derives from what Freud called *object-choice*, which is a metonymic relation. What is meant by *metonymic relation* is that the object is, in fact, the embodiment of *something else*, to which it has become associated in the subject's mind (Berlant, 2012b: 30-31, 2019b: 297). What counts as an object for Berlant is varied: it may encompass a gift, a phone, friends or family, a habit, medicine, or a book (Berlant, 2020e). The key is that all those *things* become *objects* when they also stand in for something else. Varied, too, are those associations that the object might come to embody. For Freud, in Berlant's reading of his work, the object is often an association with the plenitude experienced in childhood. For example, adult men come to desire

women's breasts because they are associated, in their subconscious, with the infant's desire for milk (Berlant, 2012b: 30-31). Berlant departed from this thought.

Berlant believed that individuals attach to objects for at least two reasons that differ from Freud's return to plenitude, and instead extend a direction of thinking that can be found in the Independent tradition (e.g. Phillips, 1997, 2013, 2024; Winnicott, 1965, 1971), and to an extent also in Lacan (e.g. 1977, 1985). First, because the object might help anchor them in the world, since it represents what counts as 'having a life' (Berlant, 2010). For example, entering into romantic love with another person comes to stand in for something bigger than the person to whom the love is attached. It may look like the promise of the nuclear family, being appreciated, feeling seen, giving affection, or *finally getting your shit together*. Second, because the object might help individuals defend themselves against the overwhelm of doing life, since it provides a sense that life and people are coherent, after all, and can thus be relied upon (Berlant, 2007a: 33, 2011a: 24, 2022: 27; Berlant and Stewart, 2012). For example, a romantic partner may become a symbol for continuity, for life unfolding according to some plan; and when the day is bad, at least things remain as they are, or feel that they do.

From their reading of Freud's object-choice as a metonymic relation, Berlant came to see the object as a placeholder for (re)assurances that help individuals navigate life. In summary, they most commonly defined the object as a cluster of projections, that magnetises all sorts of fantasies about how to be in the world and how to survive it (Berlant, 2022: 27; Berlant and Stewart, 2012): 'When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.' (Berlant, 2007a: 33, 2011a: 23)

Desire

If the object is laden with projections, how might it feel to *have* objects, to desire them, and to negotiate our relation to them? To address these questions, Berlant became interested in an aspect of Freud's thinking on desire. Freud is mostly known for his Oedipal model, in which, to say it fast, the subject feels sexual envy for the opposite sex, that envy is repressed, and it manifests in some other form (Berlant, 2012b: 50-51). But Berlant was intrigued by what they saw as a second possible model, in which individuals do not just experience envy for their object, nor hate, but rather a tangle of incoherent feelings (Berlant, 2012b: 50-51):

> Then I read about overdetermination in psychoanalysis: that you do not only love or hate the object of your desire, but that you and your object are in a tangle of tones, causes and effects that vary in intensity over time. (Berlant, 2021: n.p.)

For example, romantic love may involve wanting proximity to the Other, and some control of them, while simultaneously being unable to bear their seeming omnipresence, or only wanting parts of them and resenting the rest:

> In ambivalence, we want and we don't want what we want. Or we want parts but not wholes and resent the added freight. Or we're averse to what we're attached to but can perform neither a reconciliation nor a cleavage. It can be a dramatic state but it's also likely to be a mess of loose live wires that it's hard to put a finger on. (Berlant, 2022: 36)

Berlant thought that the subject might feel this way, with different degrees of intensity, towards all her objects.

As a result, Berlant's reading of Freud suggests that the subject is constantly engaged in managing the intensities of her tangled feelings for her objects. The subject's internal life – her *affects* – are, as a result, always related to the outside world – her objects (Berlant and Hardt, 2012). To say it differently: exploring the subject's affects, or how she feels, can tell us much about how she relates to her objects, however incoherently. This is a key idea for affect theory.

Compulsion to Repeat

Much of Freud's writing is famously oriented by the *pleasure principle*: the subject follows her pleasure, the purpose of the ego is to minimise discomfort, and so objects are desired because they stand in for plenitude, as we have seen (Berlant, 2008b: 221-222). Yet, individuals also attach to objects where the relation of attachment to that object is painful or counterproductive, returning to scenes of failure like bad love, oppressive jobs, and disappointing politics (Berlant, 2001: 5). Those compulsions to attach and reattach to bad objects explicitly deviate from the pleasure principle, which proved problematic in developing Berlant's account of object attachment. But Freud had also noticed these patterns, and Berlant drew on and extended reflections in his work about behaviour 'beyond the pleasure principle.'

Particularly relevant to Berlant was Freud's observation of his grandson who, after his father has departed for the war, is found playing with an object by throwing it away from view, presumably causing the child some distress, before pulling it back, presumably

causing him pleasure. The scene is widely read as a repetition of mastery over loss: the child is learning to preserve a notion that he can will a sense of continuity in the world, rather than feeling thrown off by circumstances he does not control, as he was by the loss of his father (Berlant, 2011a: 286). Were this reading to be extended to the subject's relation to objects, it may look something like: the subject returns to objects and scenes that cause pain because she is learning that her will is enough to sustain her and the world's coherence. However, Berlant returned to this observation to propose an alternative explanation, of which two points can be highlighted here.

Berlant's first argument is that repetition forms its own pleasures, and the subject is therefore compelled to repeat acts, even as they continue failing. Repetition might be pleasurable because it is predictable, and that predictability offers a sense of continuity that appeases the intensities of life–*when the day is bad, at least things remain as they are* (Berlant, 2001: 50, 2011a: 286). It also keeps open possibilities, that what has failed may eventually succeed, and those possibilities motivate a drive, to try again despite knowing better, that generates its own joy (Berlant, 2001: 50, 2011a: 286). The compulsion to repeat attachment to an object that is painful or counterproductive 'can suture someone or a world to a cramped and unimaginative space of committed replication, just in case it will be different.' (Berlant, 2011a: 259)

Berlant's second argument, which extends their reading of Freud's model of desire as an incoherent tangle, is that the subject, when returning to a painful object, is living out the affects she feels towards that and other objects. The game of Freud's grandson is:

> . . . a scene defined by a play with multiple consequences and risks—for example, the risks of possessing, ambivalence, being in control, being out of control, being alienated or dissociated, and/or the pleasures of cycling through these. (Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 79)

From this interpretation, the subject's return to situations and relations that cause pain is therefore an enacted expression of her incoherent affects towards that and other objects.

2.2.2 Marxist Critical Theory

If an object is the embodiment of *something else*, and if that *something else* counts as 'having a life' and provides continuity, one might wonder how that *something else* comes

to be. In other words, what is it that counts as a life? Why? And how is it that some objects, but not others, become invested with it? Marxist critical theory helped Berlant address these questions. According to Berlant, their training in Marxist critical theory derived particularly from the works of Raymond Williams, Frederic Jameson, and the Frankfurt School (Berlant, 2017a).

The Good Life

In Berlant's reading, it is through mass culture that certain objects are invested with associations to 'the good life', or proximity to it, and should therefore be regarded as legitimate and desirable (Berlant, 2011b). More precisely, mass cultural *artefacts* (television, commodities, marketing, films, music, novels), through their representations, articulate for the subject a frame for what should and should not captivate her desire. For example, they propose images of successful femininity that come to shape what becomes expected from women (Berlant, 2008b: 171), or of productivity that come to shape how individuals organise their time (Berlant, 2011a: 105).

For Berlant, therefore, a central idea of Marxist thought is that *mediations* induce in the subject a sense of what should be *fantasised* (Berlant, 2011b, 2017a). This might cause a double-take: in popular thought, fantasies are often associated with the individual, the private, the personal. But in Berlant's reading of Marxist critical theory, the opposite is true: if mass culture articulates the subject's desires, then 'public' and 'private', 'impersonal' and 'personal', and 'structure' and 'agency' become false dichotomies (Berlant, 2017a). This extends beyond the subject's so-called 'internal life': practices, lifestyles, responses to the world, are all oriented by the subject's desires, and therefore also a blur between public and private (Berlant, 2011b). Drawn from Marxist critical theory, this idea shaped how Berlant approached research. Their methods often involved tracking in public, mediated artefacts patterns for fantasies of the good life, and collective ways to organise experiences once such fantasies are left wanting (Berlant, 2011a: 9, 11):

> I am extremely interested in generalization: how the singular becomes delaminated from its location in someone's story or some locale's irreducibly local history and circulated as evidence of something shared. This is part of my method, to track the becoming general of singular things (...). (Berlant, 2011a: 12)

Ideological Critique

Mass culture does not exist in a vacuum. It is articulated by dominant ideologies, which, in Berlant's and our historical present, is neoliberal capitalism. A root feature of Marxist critical theory for Berlant is its ideological critique, which explores how the political and economic systems of capitalism shape the subject's conditions for living. If, as I have just suggested, mass cultural artefacts organise the subject's desires, following Berlant's training in Marxist theory, this implies that it is *neoliberal capitalism*, by the means of mediation through mass culture, that organises the subject's desire (Berlant, 2011a; Letinsky and Berlant, 2013). In other words, the forms of life that are introduced as appropriate are economically and politically profitable. For example, 'the good life' is typically associated with a productive career (where productivity is measured economically), material resources such as the ownership of a house, a car, and other goods, and social reproduction through the appropriate rearing of a nuclear family, where rearing trains the next generation of productive workers (Letinsky and Berlant, 2013).

Thinking with this idea, that the forms of life we come to desire are *economically* and *politically* profitable, leads to questions about whether they also are *individually* profitable, and if so, profitable to whom. In Berlant's version of Marxist thought, the objects individuals are enticed to desire often cause more hurt than pleasure, particularly for those on the lower end of the economy (Berlant, 2020b: 250). Wage society, for example, that sells the 'freedom' of pursuing a career, often looks more like being subjected to exploitation for others' profit (Letinsky and Berlant, 2013). And the 'democratisation' of property, portrayed as the freedom to purchase land rather than needing to inherit it, is more like the theft of colonised territory from those to whom it belongs, and social class oppression through systems of debt and rents (Letinsky and Berlant, 2013). The role of ideologies, like capitalism, is thus to keep individuals attached to systems most of them would profit from leaving. This implies that ideologies are ontologically incoherent, which may be reflected in how incoherently they present in mass culture.

Possession and Perception

If one judges that some objects should or should not be desired, this also shapes one's perceptions of objects in general, or the frames that one uses to interpret the world. Another Marxist thought that made an impression on Berlant is that political ideologies

articulate the subject's *senses* (Berlant, 2007a: 38, 2011a: 31). More precisely, the subject's senses are moulded to focus on what can be possessed, on sovereignty, which is, after all, the tenet of neoliberal capitalism. She is conditioned, in Berlant's reading, to think of objects in terms of property, to 'equate possessive individualism with sovereign freedom, and conflate narcissism with recognition, ethics, and justice' (Berlant, 2011c: 683). This contributes to a limited image of the good life, which is hard to escape, since we know no alternative way of thinking about objects (Letinsky and Berlant, 2013). It also contributes to perceptions about what is problematic:

> [I]n my view, one cannot talk about scandals of the appetite—along with food, there's sex, smoking, shopping, and drinking as sites of moral disapprobation, social policy, and self-medication—without talking about the temporality of the workday, the debt cycle, and consumer practice and fantasy. (Berlant, 2011a: 105)

2.2.3 Queer Theory

While Berlant was skilled to map institutions, dissecting ways that fantasies and senses are mediated by hegemonies, their work was also invested in tactics to evade them. This is to say that they strived to produce new ways of 'having a life' that would not be organised by a hegemonic concept of the good life, and would as a result be accessible to those most oppressed by existing models. Berlant thought through these questions with ideas from queer theory, and was particularly influenced by the works of Eve Sedgwick.

Unshaming and Queering Intimacy

Berlant believed that a fundamental observation of queer work is its attention to objects and desire as wild and creative. In queer theory, particularly in the works of Sedgwick, objects are considered powerful because they have diverse, contradictory, and sometimes harmful associations (Berlant, 2013b). Desire for the object, it follows, is seen as a form of creative knowledge, because its complexity often exceeds the available forms we have for knowing the world (Berlant, 2009b: 1089, 2011a: 122). When conventional forms of life dominate, they deplete the subject's energy for imagining a world (Berlant, 2022: 10, 12, 121); releasing that energy by questioning and detaching from objects can be frightening, because the world now seems at loose ends, but it is also energising in providing the opportunity to recompose the world in ways not before known (Berlant,

2022: 124). Berlant therefore derives significant portions of their epistemology from the queer attachment to 'putting one's attachments back into play and into pleasure, into knowledge, into worlds', admitting that they matter (Berlant, 2011a: 123).

Sedgwick also argued that the subject must de-shame her attachments so that she may understand them and derive knowledge from them (Berlant, 2011a: 122). This might involve, for example, confronting one's attachment to a problematic and harmful love affair that one feels embarassed to return to, but does reinvest nonetheless. Queering intimacy (Berlant, 2012c), in that sense, involves paying attention 'to all the different ways we feel attached to life, attached to getting into the world and moving through it, many of which are not perceived as an event' (Berlant and Stewart, 2012: n.p.). Part of this work is to seek to understand how the object is managed by social norms, and to resist the associations that have been socially invested in it (Berlant, 2012c; Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 117). For example, this may look like asking: What is the couple standing for? What have I come to associate with it? And where did these associations begin?

What Berlant saw as an important contribution of this de-shaming work is that it allows the subject to have more patience with her incoherence, and to develop tools to understand and negotiate it (Berlant, 2011d). Desire in queer terms is regarded as wild, overwhelming, and often exceeding how it is typically talked about (Berlant, 2016: 414), so that the process of de-shaming desire may open up ways of knowing oneself and one's objects in a way that was not before possible:

> Queer work is skeptical about ordinary modes of attachment, repair, survival, and good objects. It describes the ambivalent position of being in desire while being unsure of what to do with what's overwhelming or threatening in it, and it opens the floodgates about what can be an object of desire: persons, objects, ways of life, a landscape, an angle, pets, ideas, and so on. (Berlant, 2022: 16)

Berlant observed that individuals are trained poorly to navigate those appetites, with few tools to manage their attachments to objects in a way that brings satisfaction or is productive. This is due partly to people's struggle to imagine alternative ways of approaching objects that are not organised by hegemonic notions of property, as we have seen in Berlant's discussion of Marxism. Building from this, queering intimacy was seen by Berlant as a way to support individuals to live better relations with their objects:

> What's political about this relation—why we need feminist, queer, and intimacy politics

> generally—is that we are trained so badly and so unimaginatively for normative skills at negotiating love, at recognizing attachments, at cultivating capaciousness and patience where our own impossibility meets the impossibility of others, and where our own needs encounter ridiculously atrophied understandings of what a good life fantasy could be. I could go on... I see the wasted life of confused and blocked attachment and exhausted optimism everywhere. (Lasky and Berlant, 2014: n.p.)

Unlearning

In addition to enabling the subject to learn from her desires, Berlant also believed it was important that the subject *unlearn* her objects. To extend queer theory's thinking on this matter, Berlant used the works of Gayatri Spivak, who wrote mostly on (de)colonialism (Berlant, 2020a). For Spivak, *unlearning* was about unlearning Euro-American monoculturalism, which meant unlearning 'a perspective on the world that reproduces the vertical power presumptions of the West, rationality, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capital.' (Berlant et al., 2022: 28-29) It requires identifying what, in the subject's thinking, is truly theirs. Considering the argument derived from Marxist thought that the hegemony trains our senses of the world, unlearning becomes the process of detangling that training:

> [T]he undoing of your viscera takes forever even as you get so embarrassed by your own mind and ideation. It's like: 'I'm not thinking that; it is thinking itself. And I have to own that because it's in me, but it's not real. It's not what I identify with or want to build. What do I do with all that stuff?' (Berlant, 2021: n.p.)

What is inconvenient and uncomfortable about such unlearning is that the objects the subject sheds also hold up her world, a world that is ongoing, however inadequate that world is, such that she may want to maintain something of them (Berlant, 2022: 151).

Loosening (Rather Than Losing) the Object

Critical theory has often framed its ambition as the abandonment of cruel objects. An example of this position can be seen in the works of Berlant's friend Joshua Clover (e.g. 2016); Wendy Brown offers another example from a scholar whose position is otherwise quite proximate to Berlant's (e.g. 2018). In comparison, Berlant did not advocate abandoning the object necessarily, but de-shaming and unlearning the relations that constitute it. For example, they did not argue for rejecting the couple form or the state.

They advocated instead for changing our objects, by which they meant changing how they become structure, how they become associated with an idea of the worthy good life (Berlant, 2020a). What is comforting in this approach is that the subject is not required to lose her objects, but rather loosen them and shift their meaning:

> Thinking about the object as a patterning that's loosely organized, so that it would be possible to change the object without having to lose everything, is a really important part of this. So rather than saying "I hate the state," or "I love the state," saying "here's what the state can do." Rather than hate the couple form or love the couple form, say "here's what being in a couple can do, and here's the other things I need in order to flourish." Then you start to think of yourself as having a capacity to produce many kinds of patterning and attachment to the world. The problem is always that queer life is exhausting because you kind of have to make it up all the time. There are so few conventions to rest in or cruise in. At the same time, it's also really exciting to think you could be inventing something that will work better than the forms of efficiency that we call normative. (Berlant, 2013b: n.p.)

Berlant called it part of their *queer optimism* that people could produce new ways of what it means to be attached to an object and what it means to have a life (Berlant, 2008a).

2.3 Key Concepts

Berlant sought to develop concepts that would capture what it feels to negotiate challenging attachments in the day-to-day, including by looking for reprieve and sometimes losing grounding. They deployed concepts and phrases 'as objects to open the ordinary to transformation by shifting its associations and resonance' (Berlant, 2022: 12). Reflecting on their process of concept formation, Berlant said:

> I see a pattern, I ask why, then I find out what happened, describe, and conceptualize, to relieve myself of the feeling of too closeness that makes certain stories and objects a mute-making threat and to produce scaffolds that can hold the event just so, so we (ok, I) can see it, walk around it, and move it somewhere else collectively. (Berlant, 2009a: n.p.)

Berlant underlined the challenge of using concepts in this open way, when our societal training is to be rigid and possessive in how we encounter the world, including how we encounter analytical concepts: 'It is hard to avoid making a powerful concept all-absorbent when all you've ever known is how to own, possess, and use action concepts

in defense of your existence.' (Berlant, 2022: 113) To give an example, Berlant felt that the concept...

> ...'sovereignty' badly conceptualizes almost anything to which it's attached. It's an aspirational concept and, as often happens, aspirational concepts get treated as normative concepts, and then get traded and circulated as realism. And I think that's what happened with sovereignty. (Berlant and Hardt, 2012: n.p.)

The following section presents seven concepts with nodal roles in Berlant's thought, that offer valuable entry-points to their approach and its relevance for social science research.

2.3.1 Object

We have already seen that Berlant conceptualised the object in relation to psychoanalytic theory, and made sense of which objects become invested with Marxist critical theory. But, as I suggested earlier, the object provided conceptual scaffolding for many of Berlant's other ideas, so it is worth revisiting key elements developed above before diving into related concepts.

For Berlant, an object is always the embodiment of *something else*, to which it has become associated in the subject's mind (Berlant, 2012b: 30-31, 2019b: 297). We attach to the object because we want that *something else*, and we hope the object might bring it to us, or bring us in proximity to it. What Berlant considered to be that *something else* is twofold: first, a sense of 'having a life', or of being in and interacting with the world; and second, a sense of continuity, or that everything is adding up coherently (Berlant, 2007a: 33, 2011a: 24, 2022: 27; Berlant and Stewart, 2012). As we have seen, the *something else* to which an object becomes associated is influenced by ideas of the good life that are constructed and sustained by hegemonic discourses, such as neoliberal capitalism, through cultural artefacts.

Berlant lists many examples of objects, such as a precious gift, the state, a phone, friends and family, a habit, medicine, or a book, but their favourite example was a romantic partner (Berlant, 2012a). A romantic partner is a person in their individuality, with their capacity to please or inconvenience. But they also stand in for how life may add up to something: they may look like the promise of the nuclear family, ownership through shared finances, being appreciated, or feeling seen. In addition, a romantic partner may become a symbol for continuity, for life unfolding according to some plan.

In summary, an object is 'anything in the world that anchors you there.' (Berlant, 2020e: n.p.) Our important objects are not just things but:

> ...clusters of promise, projection, and speculation that hold up a world that we need to sustain. They are scenes of attachment that at once seem specific the way a beloved person, animal or idea can, while at the same time they represent abstractions that allow speculation about the kind of reliable life they generate. (Berlant, 2022: 27)

2.3.2 Crisis Ordinary

There are time when an object fails to deliver what was invested in it. X doesn't lead to Y; romance doesn't bring appreciation; hard work doesn't bring economic sovereignty; the family form doesn't bring fulfilment; the state doesn't bring security. The discontinuity of experiencing such a failure can mobilise many affects, including panic, since we rely on objects delivering some associations to organise life. For Berlant, this glitch in normative causality, when X repeatedly fails to lead to Y, and our sense of how we expect things to go no longer works, signals a *crisis* (Berlant, 2020f, 2012d; Berlant and Edelman, 2019: 54).

This conceptualisation draws on prior Marxist theorising that saw crisis as having become the normal, banal, and permanent condition of life under capitalism (Lukács, 1923: 68, 101; Mbembe, 1995: 325). Like Berlant, some Marxist thinkers observed a loss of 'natural law' (Lukács, 1923: 101) or 'referents' (Mbembe, 1995: 325) that had left subjects unable to perceive a pattern for how to live. This caused subjects to blame existing institutions for perpetuating failed 'illusions' (Lefebvre, 1981: 771) which, some hoped, might serve as a springboard for proletarian critique and action (Lukács, 1923: 68). For Virno, the subject's loss of fixed customs manifests itself in a shared anguish about how to relate to the world:

> Today, all forms of life have the experience of 'not feeling at home,' which, according to Heidegger, would be the origin of anguish. Thus, there is nothing more shared and more common, and in a certain sense more public, than the feeling of 'not feeling at home.' (Virno, 2004: 35)

Mbembe advocated for the importance of treating crisis as a lived experience that manifests in the ordinary. He called attention to the 'register of improvisations lived as such by people' that had become routineised as the labour of organising life for individ-

uals under such conditions of crisis (Mbembe, 1995: 325-326). However, Berlant was significantly more thorough in their conceptualisation of the ordinary, both responding to and advancing Mbembe's point. Berlant's model also advanced Marxist thinking by attributing the crisis specifically to the *waning of genre* (more on this later), which provided a more precise mechanic to the broader Marxist claim that crisis was due to capitalist exploitation generally.

In Berlant, like in earlier Marxist formulations, crisis is *a glitch in the reproductive system of doing life* (Berlant, 2022: 24). It is the loss of the structure that provided a sense of what life is and how the subject should go about it, resulting in a threat for the subject's sense of how to organise her life productively (Aryal, 2012: 71-72; Berlant and Stewart, 2012).

> In a crisis you become deskilled about how to live. What I mean by crisis is a crisis in the reproduction of life, that there has been a glitch, and everyone can see it. We can see that a certain system that would provide for us a sense of what a life is, is no longer working – that we're here looking at a nothing, or looking at an abyss, or looking at a lot of noise. (Berlant, 2022: 24)

Crisis manifests in a sense that 'nothing from above' is holding the world together solidly (Berlant, 2022: 24), but what it reveals is that what we call the 'structure' of society, like institutions of the couple form, family, meritocracy, or the state, is not in fact an intractable principle of continuity (Berlant, 2022: 25; see also Lukács, 1923: 101). Rather, it is the result of projections commonly invested in objects; and when objects repeatedly fail, this structure begins to fracture, until the fracture is felt so broadly, so commonly, that a sense of general uncertainty or disillusion begins to spread (Berlant, 2022: 25). The resulting affects vary depending on how the subject interprets the situation (a loss, an opportunity, a betrayal, an abandonment, etc.):

> Maybe crisis doesn't feel like crisis: maybe it feels like dissociation, like exhaustion, like depression. Maybe it feels exciting. Maybe it feels confusing. If you have a structure of crisis, what that means is that the conditions of the reproduction of life are threatened, and that you experience that the world might not become what it has been.(Berlant, 2011e: n.p.)

Berlant did not think crises manifested as isolated or catastrophic events; focusing on exceptional shock resulting from catastrophes would imply that individuals ordinarily negotiate intensities neatly, which Berlant did not believe. Berlant's claim, instead,

was that most of the events that force the subject to adapt, most of the glitches they experience in the reproduction of life, are better described 'by a notion of systemic crisis or *crisis ordinariness*.' (Berlant, 2011a: 10; emphasis mine) To say it differently, they form part of the subject's ordinary experiences and induce affects that the subject must negotiate *while going on with her life* (so much so that negotiating those affects may become what her life is about, as we will see). And indeed what is useful in thinking about crisis *ordinariness* is that it forces attention to the actions the subject takes to go on living while faced with crisis (Berlant, 2011a: 81).

Berlant saw present times in the United States, where they lived and worked, as 'a moment in extended crisis' (Berlant, 2011a: 7) where '[t]he class, racial, economic, and sexual fragmentation of U.S. society' has emerged 'not as an exception to a utopian norm but as a governing rule of the present.' (Berlant, 2002: 122) They observed that most discussions in the political sphere were concerned with how to move forward and who was to blame for this infrastructural failure (Berlant, 2011a: 225). And that, despite the different names and accounts people may assign to it, all over people were in sync about their sense that the reproduction of life as it had been was compromised (Berlant, 2012a). Their book *Cruel Optimism*, one of their best known works, attempted to chronicle the ways people adjust to this contemporary crisis (Berlant, 2012a).

2.3.3 Cruel Optimism

Berlant observed that despite being confronted with the systemic, repetitive failure of their objects, – *a crisis in the reproduction of life* – people nonetheless remained attached to those objects. In spite of the couple form failing to bring appreciation, people returned to love stories and tried on new relationships; in spite of hard work failing to bring economic sovereignty, people stayed attached to their jobs, and sometimes worked harder; etc. They attempted to theorise what may entice subjects to maintain their attachment to hurtful or counter-productive objects, and this theorisation led to their most widely known concept of *cruel optimism*.

Let us start with *optimism*. Berlant defines optimism as:

> . . . the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene. (Berlant, 2011a: 1-2)

Conveniently, this brings us back to the earlier discussion of psychoanalytical theory, or to the more recent discussion of the object. All attachment to objects is optimistic, because objects involve projections that the subject may build something from them, that she is interacting with the world through them, and therefore adding up coherently (for now) because of them (Berlant, 2011a, 2020a). What is key here is that the *object of optimism* stands in for a means to *build or have a life*. To say it differently, optimism is not about an object; it is about a relation with that object, but the object ends up representing that relation (Berlant, 2020d).

To arrive at a situation of *cruel* optimism with, say, object X, two conditions are required. First, that you have a relation of optimism with object X, which means that you have attached to object X and you have invested in object X some life-building potential, as we have just seen. Second, that object X threatens precisely what it promises, which means that object X hinders your ability to have the life that you want, or the life that you thought object X would allow you to have. The object that you have attached to *in an effort to flourish* therefore *stands in the way* of that very flourishing (Berlant, 2019, 2020a, 2012d). The result is that *given* (1) your self- and world-sustaining relation with object X, and *in spite of* (2) object X preventing your thriving, you find yourself in a position where losing object X may appear worse than being destroyed by it; or, in other words, that even as object X has become an obstacle to living well, it is hard to shake off since it 'also represent[s] living as such' and so without it you may feel or be said to be not *having a life*. (Berlant and Prosser, 2011: 182). That is a relation of *cruel optimism*. In Berlant's words, now:

> A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. (...) [A]nd, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to *a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.*(Berlant, 2011a: 1-2; emphasis mine)

The central element in Berlant's discussion of cruel optimism is the life-building potentials invested in the bad object. As objects come to stand in for a certain idea of 'having a life', they become attached to certain ways of seeing the world, or certain frameworks for how one should go about living. To admit the object's failure would come uncomfortably close to admitting the failure of those frameworks, which then threatens access to the feeling of having a life at all (Berlant, 2017b). What makes an object cruel is precisely

the sense of profound threat its failure mobilises:

> When your pen breaks, you don't think, 'This is the end of writing.' But if a relation in which you've invested fantasies of your own coherence and potential breaks down, the world itself feels endangered. (Berlant, 2012a: n.p.)

This sense of threat produces conflicts in how to proceed, 'because massive loss is inevitable if you stay or if you go.' (Berlant, 2012a: n.p.) In the face of this double bind, the good life often becomes 'a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it.' (Berlant, 2011c: 27)

Berlant cited and dissected many examples of cruel optimism. Those included the couple form, the love plot, the family, fame, work, wealth, or property, which they all believed to be 'sites of cruel optimism, scenes of conventional desire that stand manifestly in the way of the subject's thriving.' (Berlant, 2011a: 45) They situated a destructive love affair as a basic, paradigmatic form of cruel optimism:

> A bad love is a good way of thinking about cruel optimism because it is a double bind. There are two kinds of attachment that you have. One is to that particular person, who has those particular qualities, and treats you in a particular way. And then the sense that, without that person, you will never love again, or the sense that having that person represents having a world to you. So one of the things that makes particular kinds of objects especially invested with importance is that the object comes to stand in for having a life itself. That's the presupposition of all of my thinking about cruel optimism, that it's a double thing, it is not one thing. Not just the object but the object as a symbolic anchor of people to the world.(Berlant, 2012d: n.p.)

The analytical utility of the cruel optimism concept is that it encourages attention to subjects' attachments to a fantasy of the good life, which are expressed through diminishing yet world-sustaining objects and ways of life (Berlant, 2011a: 27, 2022: 27). This is particularly relevant in discussion about why subjects may return to conventional scenes in spite of their objects' failures: even a bad object provides a holding pattern, without which what is left might look and feel like a free fall.

2.3.4 Genre

I have talked about 'holding patterns' and, just before, about 'frameworks for how one should go about living.' A concept that directs more attention to this structuring of objects and projections is the concept of *genre*.

Genre might make one think about literature, since it is what a novel is often said to belong to–fantasy, romance, science fiction, thriller. And, indeed, it is from the study of literature that Berlant, influenced by Frederic Jameson (e.g. 1975) and Jacques Derrida (e.g. 1980), derived their conceptualisation (Cohen, 2017: 44). Just like a literary genre is a form of 'social contract' between an author and her public about the kind of plot, setting, characters, or feelings they might expect from a book (Jameson, 1975), a genre for Berlant is a set of conventional expectations about the way something unfolds, whether in art or life (Berlant, 2004: 75, 2008b: 4, 2011a: 6-7, 2015a). Some life narratives become normalised (Berlant, 1999: 227-228), and a certain logic is expected from how they will develop (Berlant, 2022: 35; Poletti and Rak, 2014: 269). Romance, for example, has a way of unfolding around particular patterns of desire and institutions – marriage, reproduction, property – that constitute what a life should be, especially for women (Berlant, 1999: 227-228).

There are obstacles to that logic, but even obstacles are expected: love, say, is doomed to cause heartbreak and disappoint. Genre is thus not quite a contract, because the logic may be broken; but even the ways the logic is disrupted are conventional (Poletti and Rak, 2014: 269). Similarly, returning once more to Berlant's discussion of incoherence in psychoanalytical interpretations of desire, genres – just like individuals and the ideologies that may be embedded in them – have the capacity to absorb extreme amounts of contradictions (Berlant, 1988: xi). This reinforces their power, as it makes them less vulnerable to questioning.

Berlant thought that genres were mostly constructed and sustained within everyday life. This is part of the importance Berlant therefore assigned to understanding popular culture. Mass cultural artefacts, after all, are often organised around different kinds of life narratives that suggest different ways one can be, and different lives one could desire (Berlant, 1999: 227-228).[3] The concept of genre is in this sense similar to that of *norm*, in that both suggest conformity to hegemonic conventions. However, genre also calls attention to conventions as *holding* patterns that provide reassuring paths to the subject, and in so doing contributes something *affectively* to help her navigate the intensities of building life (Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015).

Yet, we have just discussed the context of crisis that Berlant diagnosed, where our sense of how we expect things to go no longer works. Indeed, questions arise about what

[3] As Joan Didion in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: 'Here is where they are trying to find a new life style, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers.' (1968: 4)

happens to social genres when the contract is broken, and life narratives do not unfold the way we expected them to. All genres produce drama from their potential failure: romance may not pan out, the hero might die (Berlant, 2011a: 148). Faced with the repeated failure of the genre people use to organise life, they may find themselves lost about how to proceed.

2.3.5 Intimate Public

Faced with the loss of an organising narrative, people are inclined to seek out narratives and models from others, strangers or friends, who are perceived to share overlapping concerns about how to live as an x – whatever x may be; a woman, a man, a sexualised minority, a racialised minority, etc. – now that a holding pattern for living as an x has failed (Berlant, 2008b: 6-7; Manning and Berlant, 2018: 119-120). Proximity to others perceived as like her allows the subject to see how they understand, live, and respond to compromised narratives, so that she may feel held in the impasse and maybe formulate new ways of being.

Addressing this drive for felt proximity, an intimate public operates when a market opens up for a group of x, claiming to circulate things that express their interests and desires (Berlant, 2008b: 5). For example, artefacts that make women *feel like women*, amidst a sense that the pattern for what a woman should be has been lost and is in need of urgent repair; or at least, that the loss must be recognised.

> In an intimate public one senses that matters of survival are at stake and that collective mediation through narration and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, or at least some sense that there would be recognition were the participants in the room together. An intimate public promises the sense of being held in its penumbra.(Berlant, 2011a: 226-227)

An intimate public has two features that underpin its functioning, regardless of the shared identity it claims to express. First, that its participants, that is to say those who consume its cultural artefacts and identify with them, share a sense that their commonality precedes the existence of the market itself. Members of the intimate public come to perceive its existence as the confirmation that, even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed strangers who shared their experiences of the world, including their desires for a certain kind of life and their discontent, struggles, and suffering (Berlant, 2008b: viii, 5). The historical commonality associated with the public

is important to its members' sense of recognition and belonging–*others feel what I feel, others desire what I desire*.

Second, that the public also promises a better experience of social structure to its members in the future, accessible partly through participating in the relevant market and consuming its artefacts, and partly by offering or legitimating ways of being and organising life (Berlant, 2008b: viii). These holding patterns might, and often do, involve old objects: while the narratives perpetrated by an intimate public may include complaints or critiques, for the most part, in Berlant's reading, they mediate hopeful investments or reattachment in the existing social normative order (Tafakori, 2023: 701). This is to say that intimate publics recruit others to 'desire a common idiom–love what I love, dream what I dream, feel what overwhelms me, enjoy what I enjoy.' (Berlant, 2022: 142) In that sense they also allow the subject to maintain her attachments to those objects, even as they were disappointing and hurtful, through renewed investments; they provide ways to *protect her optimism* rather than feel 'lonely and defeated by the wearing and threatening forces of life' (Berlant, 2022: 142; see also 2008b: 3).

Berlant's most renowned example of an intimate public is their conceptualisation of what they called 'women's culture', the first 'mass cultural intimate public' in the United States (Berlant, 2008b: viii). Organised around the experience of femininity, women's culture offers through its mass cultural texts (primarily romantic novels and pictures) a recognition that love, for heterosexual women, is *the gift that keeps on taking* (Berlant, 2008b: 1). Its members are encouraged to express and discuss the failed promises of the couple form (*recognition*), while at the same time they are reassured that the right partner, under the correct circumstances, will bring the desired outcome, such that the couple form should not be abandoned (*direction*). What intimate public helps to see is that conventional objects, such as the heterosexual couple form, are also placeholders for a shared image of how to live, and hence a bundle of shared projections that help subjects feel that they not only have a plan, but also that they belong (Berlant, 2008b: 3). Women, in this scenario, are bonded in a collective identity as disappointed subjects, who share an imagery about what their world should become.

One more thing about the concept of intimate public in Berlant's thinking. While one may seek it out from a deep sense of threat in the face of an impasse, as I have suggested above, one may also stumble upon an intimate public as if by accident. This could be following, for example, 'a curiosity about something minor, unassociated with catastrophe, like knitting or collecting something, or having a certain kind of sexuality'

(Berlant, 2011a: 226-227). Only to find themselves *later* in the midst of discourses of support, solidarity, and direction. This is to say that one may not consciously or actively pursue new narratives for living, but instead find oneself consuming them, without having sought them out, nonetheless.

2.3.6 Impasse

When a loss of narrative genre is experienced, and norms for the reproduction of life as the subject has known it are interrupted – what Berlant called a *waning of genre*, as a response to Jameson's claim that postmodernism represents a *waning of affect* (Berlant, 2011a: 6-7) – the subject finds herself in a space of time Berlant called impasse (Berlant, 2011a: 199). To say it differently: one way of life (*genre*) has been exhausted (*waning*) and the subject is unable to imagine what comes next, such that reorganisation is, for now, impossible, and the subject gets stuck (Berlant, 2011a: 204, 263). Berlant here drew on prior Marxist theory that talked of 'the impasse of capitalism' (Lukács, 1923: 75). In Marxist thought, such as the works of Henri Lefebvre, the impasse is seen as a space of ambiguity that prevents subjects from perceiving, understanding, and reacting to the ideological contradictions that organise their lives (Lefebvre, 1981: 571). The *stuckness*, in Lefebvre's model, is explicitely political, as due to capitalism not working yet remaining, and urgent political action must be taken to resolve it (Lefebvre, 1981: 519). Arguably, Berlant's reading is more concerned with the affective experience of the impasse as a predicament for the individual and with the strategies subjects use to negotiate it.

In common readings, 'impasse' is used to describe a situation where a subject cannot move forward. In Berlant's reading the subject moves, which means she *goes on living*, but this movement does not add up to any sense of direction, since there is no genre to guide it (Berlant, 2007c: 433, 2010, 2011a: 4-5). Marotta and Cummings (2019) have noted that Berlant generally mobilised spatial language to describe the impasse, describing a space held open by the delay in cause-effect relations. For example, Berlant compared the impasse to a cul-de-sac – indeed, the word impasse was invented to replace cul-de-sac – where one keeps moving but, paradoxically, in the same space (Berlant, 2011a: 199). The resulting action resembles dog-paddling:

> Paradoxically, in a crisis people get stuck. How can that be? In a crisis you would think that they would be moving like crazy, the way somebody drowning would be moving. But

> of course they don't know where they're going or what they're doing, they're just trying not to drown. (Berlant in Walsh, 2019: n.p.)

This is not to say that movement is inconsequential, such that the subject may take actions that have no repercussions on her life-building. But while the activity of movement, of living on, can produce events, *it is unclear what those will amount to*, since all sense of causality is lost (Berlant, 2011a: 199).

The situation described above feels hectic and uncomfortable, as a loss of routine might for some people; but others find freedom away from structure, in which case the impasse may be experienced as liberating and even enjoyable. Much of the subject's affective response may be shaped by how the subject finds herself there; Berlant enumerated at least three examples, all with different implications for the affects they mobilise (Berlant, 2011a: 199-200). First, 'there is the impasse after the dramatic event of a forced loss', such as after a broken heart, a sudden death, or a social catastrophe, when 'one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust' (Berlant, 2011a: 199-200). Second, there is what happens when one finds oneself without traction, despite having no cause or event to point to as the source of that loss. One is 'coasting through life, as it were', until they no longer can. Third, there are situations where the loss of a structure is not experienced as a loss but as a pleasure, for what it opens up. Responses to the impasse may similarly seem incoherent; often, Berlant observed, they involve looking for a genre that allows you to be with other people (Berlant et al., 2022: 371).

2.3.7 Bargaining

What the concepts of intimate public and impasse make visible are the collective and individual efforts that are required to foster and sustain narratives that legitimate staying with bad objects, or ways of life that are hurtful or unproductive, when faced with the terror of detaching from them. We have seen in Berlant's engagement with queer theory that detaching from bad images of the good life exacts energy from the subject. But for those who, faced with the conflict of whether to lose or be destroyed by the bad object, opt instead to protect their attachment, costs are high too.

Berlant called 'bargaining with what there is' the process of trying to make a better good life out of limited, problematic objects and genres (Berlant, 2008b: 31). As an analytical levy, bargaining calls attention to what it costs to stay attached to hurtful

yet sustaining ways of live (Berlant, 2008b: 178). The double-take this concept seeks to provoke is in the assumption that resistance is active, and conformance passive. Here, instead, even if the subject chooses to attach to conventionality, the experience of this attachment is not passive; it requires organising the disappointed promises the bad object entails, while protecting one's optimism that things will work out, eventually (Berlant, 2022: 9). The sentimental bargain of femininity, for example, is that the emotional labour women are asked to perform serves also to benefit them, as they can exact the pleasures of witnessing its impact, knowing that they were its source; the costs required are thus justified, since women are always 'at the centre of the story of what counts as life, regardless of what lives women live.' (Berlant, 2008b: 19) That is to say: one is always making 'affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which to keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition.' (Berlant, 2011a: 25)

2.4 Compatibility with the Empirical Social Sciences

Berlant's work offers a rich framework to conceptualise the everyday dog-paddling of maintaining attachments to life, and therefore suits itself well to the social sciences, especially given growing calls to theorise the ordinary (e.g. Mattingly, 2014). But to bridge a theory across disciplines is an uncomfortable exercise, however rewarding it may pan out to be. The humanities and the empirical social sciences have their genres: there are conventions, explicit and implicit, about how the world and research should be approached, and one might feel uneasy introducing a framework that was not imagined with the field's conventions in mind. This section discusses two potential concerns readers might harbour when they consider trying on a Berlant-inspired framework in the empirical social-scientific genre, with the hope of demonstrating that the adaptation is possible and even desired.

2.4.1 Shaping Knowledge

When approaching Berlant's oeuvre, social-scientific scholars may be preoccupied with what they perceive to be an uncomfortable discrepancy between Berlant's approach to knowledge and that of empirical studies. Questions of epistemology were also a concern of Berlant, who, talking of their role as a journal editor, wondered how something should

be deemed as having 'made a satisfactory case for its worthiness as knowledge' (Berlant, 2007b: 674).

However, Berlant was epistemologically heterodox. Eager to challenge the disciplining of how knowledge is constructed, they repeatedly questioned how the genre of research is formed and should be re-appraised (Berlant, 2007b: 671). Talking with Kathleen Stewart, they argued:

> Disciplines are organised by objects that they recognise: every discipline has its normal sciences... Every field has its norms of due diligence. Contesting knowledge has to do with contesting what rigour means, what due diligence means, but due diligence is also a kind of moral phrase. So what we're doing is kind of just fucking up due diligence by asking how do we know this? What are all the things we would have to pay attention to in order to know this? (Berlant and Stewart, 2019a: n.p.)

For Berlant, generating new knowledge required bringing to the table all different kinds of knowledges, so as to produce a writing 'that enables us to walk around a problem and in so doing to change its contours' (Berlant and Prosser, 2011: 186; see also Berlant, 2007c: 425; Berlant and Stewart, 2018, 2019a; Hoberek, 2001: 128-129). This plurality of knowledge includes both scholarly and non-scholarly thinking, since 'everything shapes your knowledge, not just academic work. Nor is academic work the best thing shaping your knowledge, or the most considered thing.' (Berlant and Stewart, 2019a: n.p.) Berlant recognised that the exercise is difficult because it necessitates the bridging of knowledges that are often asymmetrical or incompatible (Berlant, 2011d; Berlant and Prosser, 2011: 186). We have seen earlier that they engaged many interlocutors (Ibbett, 2017: 248-249), mobilising knowledges across disciplines to propose new ways of thinking about a problem, then walking around with that thought and testing it out. All this suggests that Berlant, who was open and flexible about their epistemologies, desired to be used across disciplines. Their intertextuality, in that sense, should be viewed as an open door.

2.4.2 Methodological Compatibility

Another concern that may preoccupy social scientists is a perceived methodological discrepancy between empirical work and Berlant's approach, particularly in relation to the sort of data that should be considered suitable for analysis from a Berlantian lens. Berlant's graduate training was in English literature, and their intellectual home was

in the humanities (Traub, 2021). There is a potential contrast with the social sciences' focus on empirical data and disciplined analysis. Berlant was aware of this tension, and at times explicit that their work was outside of the social sciences. Of *Cruel Optimism*, for example, they wrote that '[t]his book is not offering sociologically empirical cases' (Berlant, 2011a: 11).

Berlant occupied themselves primarily with literary and cinematographic data (or *archives*, the term Berlant favoured). For instance, *The Anatomy of a National Fantasy* (Berlant, 1991), written from Berlant's PhD dissertation, is based on an analysis of the oeuvre of American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. In *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Berlant and Edelman, 2014), Berlant and Lee Edelman interpret works of cinema, photography, critical theory, and literature. And *The Female Complaint* (Berlant, 2008b) offers close readings of U.S. women's literary works and their stage and film adaptations.

However, Berlant explicitly stated their agnosticism towards the nature of the archive to be analysed (Myers, 2014). True to their epistemology, their view was that *anything* that may help address the problem at hand was worth investigating. In response to criticism that their archives sometimes included data that was 'too common', 'bad art', or potentially not 'hard enough', Berlant argued:

> My sense is that everything needs to be read: the materials that most strongly define any present moment are as likely to become historical ephemera as they are to become apparent master texts. The very ephemerality of an archive makes it worth reading. Its very popularity or its effects on everyday life or its expression of emblematic knowledge makes it important. Its very ordinariness requires reflecting on what is merely undramatically explicit. (Berlant, 1998: 107)

This led them to consider a wide array of data. For example, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Berlant, 1997) draws partly on mass media, from Forrest Gump to The Simpsons, and the law, including the testimony of Anita Hill before the Senate Judiciary Committee (about the sexual harassment she experienced while working as an aide to Clarence Thomas, a Supreme Court nominee). More recently, *The Hundreds* (Berlant and Stewart, 2019b), co-authored with Kathleen Stewart, offers an engagement with the authors' encounters, in a sort of ethnographic fashion (Stewart is a specialist and teacher of ethnography).

Most citations in the 'Slow Death' chapter of *Cruel Optimism* (Berlant, 2011a) refer to medical journals or public health reports, websites, and statistics; some of

Berlant's discussion of these citations in the chapter is critical, but in other places, Berlant accepts the medical reports. Indeed, some critics, such as Ward and Crawford, have characterised Berlant as demonstrating excessive trust in medical reports about factors that contribute to weight gain (Crawford, 2017; Kyrölä and Harjunen, 2017; Ward, 2013). Others, for instance Robson, have argued that Berlant's interpretation of the medical evidence is correct (Robson, 2022: 29). In any case, what this debate demonstrates is that one contribution to Berlant's thinking in 'Slow Death', and ensuing debates, is biomedical science and epidemiology, which were not solely subjected to critique, but also drawn upon as a resource for Berlant's thinking. Heather Love, a friend of Berlant's and especially insightful commentator, has observed that some of Berlant's greatest strengths come from this willingness to include everything that shaped their knowledge of a problem, walking around a problem even as this movement took them across disciplines (Love, 2012: 332, 2023).

And, indeed, many scholars have already attempted to submit new archives to a Berlantian lens, and have used social-scientific methods for doing so. For example, while Berlant did not engage directly with the study of digital culture and its effects (or affects) (Azhar and Boler, 2023), researchers in media studies have adapted their concept of 'intimate public' to the online sphere. Copland (2022) analysed male intimate publics in three Manosphere subreddits by combining large data analysis methods of topic modelling and social network analysis with the in-depth qualitative analysis of posts. Arcy (2015) explored the reciprocal nature of feminine intimate publics through the digital affordance of a female-targeted TV network and its interactive platforms. Evans and Riley (2018) provided a Berlantian reading of post-feminist sensitivity on the website TubeCrush, Xu et al. (2024) a critical social analysis of performances by female comedians available online, and Kanai (2017) a discursive analysis of girlhood on blogs and Tumblr.

There has also been engagement, though less, with methods requiring the recruitment and involvement of participants. For example, Morrison (2011) conducted a survey with 250 personal mommy bloggers, informed by Berlant's theory of the 'intimate public'. Cappellini et al. (2019) applied the concept of 'optimism' for making sense of interviews with mothers. I have similarly deployed a Berlantian framework to the study of interviews with mothers who have experiences of anxiety and/or depression (see Chapter 5). Others have also been influenced by some of Berlant's ideas during their analysis of interview studies, though they did not apply Berlant's work as an overarching

framework (e.g. Carbonero and Gómez Garrido, 2018; Merikoski, 2022; Pors and Kishik, 2023). While Berlant did not explicitly draw on this sort of data, or strict social-scientific methodologies for interpreting it, their methodological agnosticism leaves open the door for many an experiment.

2.5 Relevance for the Empirical Social Sciences

I have suggested throughout that Berlant's work offers new ways to think about the historical present, both in a systemic and political sense, and in granting attention to the struggles and joys of daily life. Closing this piece, I propose to pause on three routes for extending social scientific work with the support of a Berlantian model.

2.5.1 On Compliance

First, Berlant's work offers a new way to theorise subjects' attachments to conventionality and its objects. Sociologists have been fascinated that people accept conventions and images of the good life. However, there have also been criticisms of the discipline for a comparatively weak conceptual framework for understanding *why* or *how* this acceptance occurs, and its degrees and vicissitudes. The primary exceptions have been in areas of sociology where these matters are surfaced by the subject in hand, for instance work on medically unexplained symptoms (Greco, 2012), and even there scholars have noted that they have been fighting the tide.

The problems with mainstream approaches to understanding compliance have been subject to criticism from feminist sociologists (e.g. Butler, 2010; Harris and Dobson, 2015; McNay, 2003). Walkerdine (1998), for example, has denounced the 'complete disinterest' (21) of sociology and cultural studies in a working class that does not resist, rejecting assumptions that 'anything that appears conformist is not worth looking at' (123). For her part, Walkerdine proposed that conformity may be viewed as a defence mechanism used by individuals, particularly those most oppressed, to cope with hardships (Walkerdine et al., 2004), in which case:

> If people's thoughts, feelings, actions, can have a complex defensive organisation then the model of culture and resistance in relation to popular media and culture comes to seem hopelessly naive. (Walkerdine, 1998: 42)

As a result, Walkerdine advocated for studying the psychosocial dimensions that motivate individuals to adopt conformist positions (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2011; Blackman et al., 2008).

Influenced by Walkerdine (Blackman, 2023), not only does Berlant's model call attention to compliance, it also provides a rich affective vocabulary that would enable social scientists to view and sense the experiences of participants and other subjects who chase normative fantasies. Their key concepts offer tools to study ordinary activities that do not count as resistance, exactly, but illustrate the subject's life-building energy and labour nonetheless. It reveals that embracing normalcy may not feel like conformance: instead it may feel like coping, adjusting, longing, hoping, desiring, dog-paddling, surviving, or a confusing mix.

2.5.2 The Role of Affect

Indeed a central contribution of Berlant's oeuvre has been to the field of affect theory. The social sciences have concerned themselves for a while now with 'the subject' and what being 'subjected' to a given system might mean. A preoccupying question has been: *what is it like to live as an x?* Berlant's model suggests that the experience of living as an x makes itself known first affectively, which is to say that subjects find themselves responding to the atmospheres and crises of the present as if intuitively, or in a felt sense that *something is up*, before they can sort them into delineated feelings and address them (or not). Regardless of sociological debates about sovereignty or agency, affective responses can therefore be said to exemplify a historical time (Berlant, 2011a: 15). To say it differently, affect becomes a site of enquiry and potential elucidation because it registers how the conditions of life in the present *move across people*:

> As André Green argues, affect is a metapsychological category spanning what's internal and external to subjectivity. But it is more than this too. Its activity saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment that make a shared atmosphere something palpable and, in its patterning, releases to view a poetics, a theory-in-practice of how a world works. (Berlant, 2011a: 15-16)

For example, many sociological critiques have talked of 'neoliberalism' as a homogenous, sovereign power with coherent intentions that produces subjects who serve its interests, such that their behaviours are neatly disciplined by impersonal forces. But what this conceptualisation fails to capture are 'the messy dynamics of attachment, self-continuity,

and the reproduction of life that are the material scenes of living on in the present' (Berlant, 2011a: 15). An affective lens captures the incoherence of being subjected to neoliberalism. This makes at least two valuable contributions for sociologists: it provides a more sincere account of subjects' experiences, and it helps understand impediments to personal and social change (Berlant, 2011a: 16).

It feels important here to reassert a point I have tried to make throughout, which is that for Berlant affects are personal only to the extent that they feel specific; but, in fact, they are shared (Berlant, 2008b: vii). The waning of genre is felt as a collective experience, despite the different labels people might assign it, and thus there are patterns in how individuals respond to it. Affect theory is not a barrier to exploring the collective, as one might presume, because it does not subscribe to the understanding that affects are individual. Studying affects is another way to say studying the social.

2.5.3 Looking at the Ordinary

Finally, Berlant's model finds a way into the day-to-day bustle and quiet of the subject, that so far has interested sociologists mostly for the events it produces rather than what precedes and follows them, or what doesn't quite make it into an event, after all. Their conceptual infrastructure, in particular, offers 'a vocabulary for depleting, difficult worlds.' (Anderson et al., 2023: 119) There have been calls by some to recognise the potential of the ordinary, including its non-events, for providing more accurate accounts of individual and social experiences. Like Berlant, Mattingly (2014) has for example argued that home life does not always produce durable habitus but is characterised by fragility, a precarious achievement that is easily broken. This is to say that a great deal of individuals' energy is invested in protecting the assemblage of their good life fantasies and that, if one's mission is to provide an account of how people live and what occupies and preoccupies them, ordinary life provides the scene of action. Daily life is where worlds are made, and often where they are lost.

Of particular interest to Berlant was the ordinary manifestations of people's ways of coping with the loss of organising life narratives. This seems an urgent preoccupation for social scientists, as conditions for organising life and sustaining optimism fade under 'the structural pressure of crisis and loss that are wearing out the power of the good life's traditional fantasy bribe without wearing out the need for a good life.' (Berlant, 2011a: 7) If people experience crises of all degrees in daily life, those crises come to condition

what living in the present is like, regardless of whether they present as extraordinary enough to warrant sociological attention (Berlant and Stewart, 2018; Lasky and Berlant, 2014).

2.6 Conclusions

2.6.1 Summary of Key Points

I began this piece by stating two aims. The first was to provide an introduction to Berlant's oeuvre, one that would be sufficient for the reader to approach and navigate their work, but would avoid suggestions that Berlant's work could be wholly captured in simplifications and examples. This required tracing Berlant's relation with their interlocutors. I began with a discussion of Berlant's theorisation of the object and desire, and dialogue with psychoanalytic theory. I then considered Berlant's reading of Marxist critical theory, which interrogates what gets to be invested as an object, and why. I finished by addressing Berlant's relation to queer theory, with its attention to the creative potential of desire for imagining better good lives. Having set the scene, I then introduced seven of Berlant's nodal concepts: object, crisis ordinary, cruel optimism, genre, intimate public, impasse, and bargaining. Throughout I have used lengthy quotes from Berlant's primary texts and interlocutions to illustrate their style, and prevent readers from imagining that my simplified account may be all there is to it.

The second aim I declared was to address the compatibility and bearings of Berlant's oeuvre for a social-scientific audience. To do this I tracked Berlant's accounts of their epistemology, showing that they were heterodox in what they regarded as 'worthy knowledge' and about what should compose their archive, having themselves used a variety of materials, including medical work. I finished by considering three contributions that could be made by engaging Berlant in social-scientific work, in conceptualising and studying compliance, affects, and the ordinary.

2.6.2 Relevance for the Thesis that Follows

Berlant's work is distinctly helpful in at least two ways to help us understand how mothers experience motherhood and the cultural discourses in which it is embedded.

First, by refusing to take one's attachments to normative objects like motherhood for granted (Berlant, 2013b), Berlant's work drives us to question and explore how mothers

relate to motherhood and, in tandem, to its normative discourses. As Duschinsky and Wilson (2015) and Walkerdine (1998) have argued, most existing theories used in sociology have generally read conformance to normative objects and discourses as a passive phenomenon. Similarly, most existing research has read maternal experiences and affects in relation to specific norms of mothering, without questioning what may drive mothers to subscribe to such norms, and how this may shape their affects and behaviour (Cappellini et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2023). Yet, for Berlant, individuals pursue life objects because they embody proximity to a sense of the good life, and this conditions their relation to such objects. In order to understand how mothers relate to motherhood and its norms, it is therefore important to first understand the fantasies that motherhood magnetises for them.

Second, by exposing the relation of cruel optimism and the double bind that underline most of our attachments, Berlant's work offers a new route to understand the difficult affects that mothers may experience, and how they may navigate them. Most existing research has read maternal affects, and mothers' reactions to them, in relation to mothers' (in)ability to perform specific norms of mothering (Cappellini et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2023). Mothers' strategies, then, may be understood as creating ways to meet or discard social expectations. Yet, for Berlant, what drives difficult affects is our ambivalence toward life objects. Mothers' strategies, then, are best understood as creating ways to hold on to the form of motherhood that is projected to deliver fulfilment, while navigating the disaffirming scenarios and difficult affects it mobilises. This locates motherhood, including its experiences and its labour, in a broader project of life-building, where what is at stake is not (only, or simply) to sustain social norms. It also suggests that cultural discourses may play a role in protecting mothers' projections of the good life while helping them navigate their difficulties.

The lens of optimism and the good life, therefore, provides a refined understanding of the relation between norms and individuals, which stands as the central preoccupation of this work. The remainder of this thesis implements a Berlantian framework by proposing to understand motherhood and motherhood norms as spaces of bargaining where individuals and hegemonic institutions attempt to preserve mothers' optimism that motherhood will deliver the good life they have fantasised—even in the face of overwhelming and difficult lived experiences. It also extends the works of Lauren Berlant in three ways: it offers a proof of concept for their adaptation to empirical social-scientific work; it provides insights into how the particular affects of anxiety and depression may

relate to attachments to life objects; and it further maps out strategies that individuals may use to navigate coming too close or not close enough to their fantasies of the good life.

3

Representations of Motherhood in the Media: A Systematic Literature Review

This chapter, which serves as the first empirical work of this thesis, seeks to contextualise the construction of the maternal and the family form in the mass culture of the historical present. To do so, it introduces the results of recent research that has looked at representations of motherhood in mass media. The archive of works studied here concentrates on new forms of market media, such as social media and advertising, and away from traditional forms, including films and novels. This is due to both my disciplinary background in media and consumption studies and to calls to deploy Berlant's model in the study of digital mass culture (e.g. Pedwell, 2023; Azhar and Boler, 2023; Hakim, 2018). Building from the theoretical background developed in Chapter 2, and particularly from Berlant's engagement with Marxist critical theory and its ideological critique, this chapter explores the contradictions that populate ideologies about how to live life as a mother. This chapter's conclusion is the starting point of my enquiry: that maternal ideologies are ontologically incoherent. The political and affective implications of this incoherence will be the subjects of Chapters 4 and 5.

Because of the disciplinary genre of systematic reviews, this chapter embraces an overtly social-scientific methodology and tone, and as a result, is the furthest removed from Berlant's style. By the time the thesis was submitted, this chapter was published in *Information, Communication, and Society* in the form presented below.

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Context

Implicitly and explicitly, media representations of mothers have shaped and continue to shape expectations and experiences of motherhood (Bassin et al., 1994; Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018). Portrayals of mothers in the media construct an image of who mothers are, how they should mother, and what they should care about (O'Donohoe et al., 2013), and outline the role that motherhood should play in our society (Lynch, 2005). They also provide tools that individuals – women, mothers – use to construct their self-identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). This shapes the way that mothers *do* mothering, but also the parameters others use to judge their performance (O'Donohoe et al., 2013). In Johnston and Swanson (2003: 21)'s words: 'Culture tells us what it means to be a mother, what behaviours and attitudes are appropriate for mothers, and how motherhood should shape relationships and self-identity.' Regardless of whether these cultural discourses are absorbed, negotiated, or resisted, therefore, they play a role in shaping mothers' relations to their role, to themselves, and to others. The maternal scripts found in media thus warrant our attention.

In today's hypermediated society, these scripts emerge across many different media (Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018). Films, magazines, books, and advertisements all contribute to the construction of maternal scripts (O'Donohoe et al., 2013). The rise of new domains like blogs and social media also entails that many representations are now concurring, across but also within different media. And each media domain possesses its socially- and culturally-shaped resources for making meaning, which have been constructed through regularities of use and are influenced by consumption contexts – what I call 'modes' or 'modalities' (Jewitt, 2009). Online platforms, for instance, have democratised motherhood discourses by enabling mothers to share their experience (Pedersen, 2016). While many studies have explored motherhood representations, we are yet to see a comparison of findings and a reflection on the relation between such findings and the media domains from which they emerged.

This systematic review thus aims to answer the following questions: (i) How is motherhood represented across different media? (ii) How do the modalities of media domains influence the motherhood representations that they offer? (iii) What are the gaps in recent research on the subject? In analysing the corpus, I also consider the tensions between and within different motherhood ideologies.

3.1.2 Motherhood Ideologies

To explore maternal representations, we must first recognise that the mother is a social invention rather than simply a woman with child(ren) (Badinter, 2010; Lazar, 2000; Lynch, 2005; O'Donohoe et al., 2013), and that part of this construction occurs in the media ecosystem (Heffernan and Wilgus, 2018). Studies of motherhood have found it useful to establish and/or use seemingly cohesive models that offer a set of expectations for 'good motherhood' – what I hereafter call 'motherhood ideologies', following Johnston and Swanson (2003)'s terminology – as analytical tools. These have enabled researchers to foster a dialogue with concurrent and past studies. Motherhood ideologies have been studied both longitudinally (especially before the turn of the century, e.g. Keller, 1991) and synchronically (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2003).

Arguably the most widely used ideology is Hays (1996)'s theory of *intensive motherhood*. According to this model, a woman is and should be the primary caregiver for her child(ren) and motherhood is framed as 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996: 8). The mother is grounded in the domestic sphere and positioned as an all-caring and self-sacrificing individual. Hays' model remains a reference in contemporary motherhood literature and is still used as an analytical tool (e.g. Lerner, 2018).

Researchers have also used frameworks made of multiple successive and/or concurrent ideologies to contrast different representations and to align findings with their socio-political context. In her longitudinal analysis of magazines, Keller (1991) identified four motherhood ideologies across time: the traditionalist, feminist, neotraditionalist, and economic-nurturer ideologies. Later studies (Johnston and Swanson, 2003; Pedersen, 2016) suggest that the four models coexist in contemporary media representations. The traditionalist and neotraditionalist models are similar in positioning the mother as a self-sacrificing, full-time caregiver. Whilst the traditionalist mother never enters the workplace, the neotraditionalist mother has resigned – possibly part-time – to focus on

childcare. This choice is often justified through a postfeminist rhetoric of 'choice', suggesting that the woman is an empowered neoliberal subject who independently decided to focus on childcare. Neotraditionalist mothers also strive to educate themselves to inform their mothering, often consulting expert advice on childcare. The feminist model, in comparison, suggests that a 'good mother' strives to acquire a sense of self-efficacy through the pursuit of personal interests and rewarding work. To this aim, she is supported by a community and accessible services; both the child's and the mother's wellbeing are valued. Like her feminist counterpart, the economic-nurturing mother seeks employment outside the home, but primarily to provide goods and services to her children. She compromises her career aspirations to maintain a balance between work and family demands. She is also likely to remain the primary caregiver.

In my review, I consider elements that align with these motherhood ideologies and point to elements that these ideologies overlook. In the discussion, I return to a reflection on the analytical tools deployed in studies of motherhood and their relation to the lived experience of mothers.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Database Search

I conducted a systematic review of all studies investigating the representation of motherhood in media texts, in any geographical location, published after 31 December 2016. This restricted timeframe enables me to create a dialogue between studies of similar scholarly and historical contexts, and to present the most recent developments in the field. This review was conducted in accordance with current PRISMA guidance (Page et al., 2021), which aims to optimise transparency and validity by inviting researchers to keep systematic notes.

I searched the following seven online databases: Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts, ABI/INFORM Collection, Business Source Ultimate, Humanities Index, Scopus, Social Science Database, and Web of Science. These databases were selected because they are widely used in the social sciences and in consumer culture research. My search strategy included fifteen search terms, which were divided into three levels: population (e.g. mother*), research focus (e.g. identit*), and text (e.g. advert*). The complete search strategy can be found in Appendix A.1. In total, I identified $k = 6753$ citations. Using Endnote 20, I removed $k = 1386$ duplicates.

3.2.2 Title and Abstract Screening

I imported the remaining $k = 5367$ citations into Rayyan for title and abstract screening. Together with a Research Assistant[1], I reviewed the titles and abstracts of $k = 260$ articles ($\pm 5\%$ of the corpus) for relevance based on a decision flow chart, which can be found in Appendix A.2. The kappa score for this screening was 0.66, and I screened the remaining $k = 4025$ articles.

3.2.3 Full-Text Review and Quality Assessment

I identified $k = 54$ articles for full-text screening. I screened $k = 54$ articles (100% of the corpus), and a Research Assistant screened $k = 27$ articles (50% of the corpus). I determined that $k = 8$ articles did not fit the review criteria and I was unable to access the full text of $k = 2$ articles. I contacted the corresponding authors but did not receive a response. All in all, $k = 44$ articles passed the full-text review stage. I reviewed their bibliography and identified $k = 11$ articles that passed my inclusion criteria but had not been identified in the database search. I suspect this is due to the keywords' selection: some of these articles did not refer to a media domain or referred to a specific platform (e.g. Mumsnet) in their title and abstract and were consequently not scoped by the text level of my search. My review discusses a total of $k = 55$ articles.

I assessed the quality of the articles using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2018) checklist for qualitative research, informed by the contribution of Hannes (2011). The checklist, which is presented in Appendix A.3, revolves around three central questions: Are the results of the study valid? Does the study present clear and coherent results? Does the study contribute to existing research? (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018) It enabled me to systematically review different dimensions of the studies and highlight shortcomings in research practices which I discuss in my findings.

3.2.4 Thematic Analysis

I extracted key information for each article in the corpus, including: sample, method(s), theoretical framework, and key findings. I then thematically analysed the corpus using Braun and Clarke (2021)'s five-step method, regularly discussing results with the research team. The flexibility of thematic analysis made it possible to include inductive and

[1] Louise Davis, at the time a Research Assistant in the Applied Social Science Group at the University of Cambridge.

deductive analytical phases, which enabled me to draw independent findings whilst simultaneously reflecting on the applicability of the motherhood ideologies introduced above. I began by (i) familiarising myself with the data by reading each article. I inductively (ii) developed codes and used a mind map to (iii) generate themes – e.g. 'mother works' and 'mother stays at home' were grouped under 'career'. I (iv) reviewed the themes through the lens of motherhood ideologies – e.g. evaluating whether I could claim that one ideology was dominant in one media domain or in a group of studies. This review was inconclusive and led to reflections I further develop in my conclusions. I therefore (v) defined and named themes based on my original grouping.

3.2.5 Limitations

My findings reflect the disciplinary biases and sampling limitations of the studies whose results populated them. Some domains (e.g. advertising) were explored less than others (e.g. user-generated content) and are thus less likely to present internal tensions. Some domains are also not represented in my final tables (e.g. websites) because they were analysed by less than three studies in my sample. I particularly miss investigations of websites, podcasts, books, packaging, and online resources.

I chose not to impose spatial restrictions and it was thus impossible to appropriately contextualise all the findings presented here, for reasons of clarity and space. Similarly, further observations can be drawn by exploring studies published before and after my chosen time range. Studies of magazines were for example particularly popular in the 1990s, and relevant insights may have been missed.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Overview of Research Practices

Overview

Studies (an overview of which can be found in Appendix A.4) originated from a variety of disciplines and perspectives. Alongside fields like communication, media, and discourse studies, linguistics, family and gender research, queer studies, and feminist scholarship, I identified contributions from celebrity studies (Bayard, 2018; Davies, 2021), education (Jezierski and Wall, 2019), medical humanities (Allen, 2017), religion (Hernández, 2019), and sports and exercise (McGannon et al., 2017a,b).

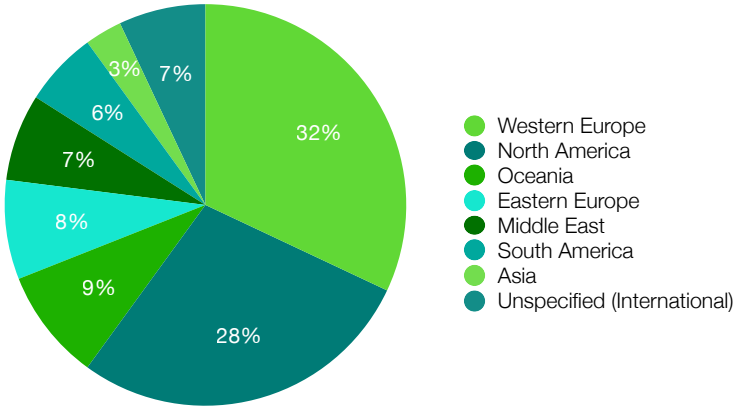

Figure 3.1: Overview of Research Contexts

The geographical and cultural contexts studied too are diverse, and I observed that the location of the samples influenced the questions explored. Studies that analysed media texts from the Middle East asked whether representations of motherhood reinforced conservative ideologies (Aronis, 2019; Barak-Brandes, 2017a,b; Lachover, 2019), a topic that was less prominent elsewhere. Studies that investigated non-normative forms of motherhood were often set in Western Europe or North America (Feasey, 2021; Lerner, 2018; Reed, 2018; Waldron and Mullin, 2023). These discrepancies in research questions mean that I am unable to compare media representations based on their cultural contexts, because they were examined with different motives and lenses. As a result, I will not attempt to contrast the motherhood ideologies that dominate different cultures. I have reviewed my findings to ensure that cultural context was not a determining factor in the themes that I identify (i.e. that a theme was not solely found or overly prevalent in one given cultural context but not others); when this is the case, it is explicitly mentioned in my results. An overview of the locations of the samples can be found in Figure 3.1, while details can be found in Appendix A.4.

Most studies analysed media texts as their primary data, and often used synchronic (critical/visual) discourse analysis, content analysis, and/or thematic analysis. A minority used interviews to explore how mothers negotiate media texts in the construction of their identity (Baybars and Dedeoglu, 2021; Lehto, 2022; Malatzky, 2017; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Reed, 2018).

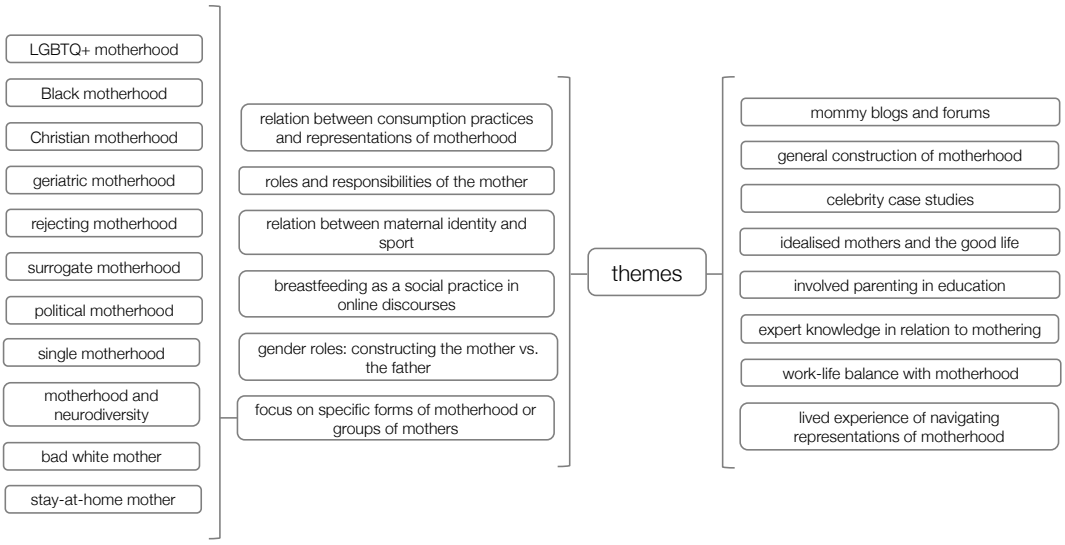

Figure 3.2: Overview of Research Themes

I observed increasing research exploring motherhood representations on social media (Hernández, 2019; Johnson and Rintoul, 2019; Orgad and Baldwin, 2021) and web platforms (Imbaquingo and Davila, 2020), blogs (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Hartzell, 2017; Lehto, 2022; McGannon et al., 2017a; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Van Cleaf, 2020) and forums (Cino, 2020; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Khvorostyanov and Yeshua-Katz, 2020; Miklyaeva and Rumyantceva, 2018), with a platform-specific focus on Instagram (Bayard, 2018; Cornelio, 2021; Lehto, 2022; Palomeque Recio, 2020; Vergara and Carter, 2021; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017), Mumsnet (Mackenzie, 2018; Orgad and Baldwin, 2021), and Reddit (Feldman, 2021). I mention interesting correlations between the themes identified and the media domains studied throughout my findings, and develop them further in my conclusion. There, I also introduce tables (see Appendices E–I) that compare the presentations of themes across different media.

The topics covered are broad, but are grouped schematically in Figure 3.2.

Quality

I observed diversity in research questions, disciplines, and theoretical frameworks; I am optimistic that the field is rich and promising. The strongest studies in the corpus went beyond analysing media representations and explored what individuals do with the label

'mother' (e.g. Mackenzie, 2018; Reed, 2018). Other studies demonstrated strengths in reflecting on how the analytical tools used in studies of motherhood conditioned their findings (e.g. Brydon, 2018).

However, I also observed that studies in the corpus had common limitations. Despite concentrating on a specific domain (e.g. advertising) and/or case study (e.g. a celebrity mother), most studies did not reflect on the relation between those parameters and the findings they produced. This is especially important when arguments appear to contradict those of another study. For example, studies that disagreed on whether mothers resist normative prescriptions online often sampled different threads and communities but failed to reflect on the impact of these choices. When a specific case study had been selected (e.g. one mother), it was sometimes unclear why this case should embody certain motherhood experiences. Some studies did not provide a detailed account of their sampling approach, neglecting to mention the number of texts in their corpus or to justify their sampling choices. Multiple studies also failed to detail their methodological approach, e.g. failing to explain how themes had been derived from the data.

3.3.2 Results of the Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Defining 'Mother'

Most studies did not propose a definition of 'mother' nor reflect on the criteria used for the sampling of what they considered to be 'representations of motherhood'. But a handful of studies critically reflected on the meanings associated with the label 'mother' both for women and researchers.

Reed (2018) explored how LGBQ mothers respond to motherhood imperatives identified in popular representations. She found that many see 'mother' as the placeholder of a typically heteronormative hegemony because it is often portrayed as part of a heterosexual family unit where a ciswoman gives birth to her child(ren). These mothers felt that asking to be labelled differently – like being called by their own name or through made-up labels such as 'vessel parent' – enabled them to articulate their role outside of the traditional script. However, other participants found comfort in the association of the sign with the traditional family unit. In placing the individual woman within a culturally intelligible framework, 'mother' can help legitimise the role of a parent who does not have a reproductive relationship to their child(ren) – as is often the case for LGBTQ+parents (Waldron and Mullin, 2023). Some of Reed (2018)'s participants also

underlined the opportunity to challenge the meaning of 'mother' without resorting to alternative labels. Lesbian mothers, for example, aimed to associate 'mummy' with representations of strong independent women outside of the heteronormative framework. In this context, media representations embody imaginative resources that allow mothers to 'offer models of mothering practice which promote different possibilities for gender and identities.' (Reed, 2018: 48)

Brydon (2018) reflected on the disciplinarity that research deploys when studying motherhood representations by proposing to separate 'mothering' from its gendered implications. His argument follows a feminist understanding of 'mothering' as 'a state of gendered (historically female) action rooted in physical, time-consuming, hands-on care for children' which 'begins for many women at pregnancy, birth, and/or breastfeeding, but extends beyond that to long-term, daily nurturance and caregiving' (2). Brydon suggests that, as women are not always or automatically mothers, mothering can be imagined as a cultural performance that can be enacted by people who do not identify as women. Brydon is especially interested in 'male mothering', or mothering by cismen. This perspective 'differentiates mothering performance from motherhood or maternalism as a cultural construct, the latter more rooted in mother as a specific, gendered entity.' (2) Brydon's theoretical questioning is valuable for studies of motherhood because '[t]aking a more performance-based approach allows us to identify a set of parameters to define what mothering could mean in a culture or specific discourse, who is performing it, and what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' mothering.' (2)

Theme 2: Career

On the one hand, studies found that the 'good mother' is represented as a woman who prioritises the development and wellbeing of her child(ren) above her career interests (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; César et al., 2020; Kuvychko et al., 2018; Orgad and Meng, 2017). For example, César et al. (2020) found that, in Portuguese parenting magazines, the professional activities of mothers are portrayed as secondary, especially compared to those of fathers. The magazines featured portraits of mothers who celebrate leaving their careers to concentrate on childcare. This aligns with what Keller (1991) and Johnston and Swanson (2003) identify as a neotraditionalist ideology. But while the mother is constructed as a neoliberal subject in charge of her own life decisions, the class and privilege that allow her to make these decisions are silenced in the texts sampled.

On the other hand, the mother is told in the same texts and in others that she can (or should?) 'juggle' home- and child-care with her career and needs not prioritise one over the other (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Brydon, 2018; McGannon et al., 2017b; Orgad and Meng, 2017; Priyatna et al., 2019; Palomeque Recio, 2020). Bayard (2018), for example, notes the emergence of Instagram photos portraying celebrity mothers breastfeeding in the workplace, thereby not only combining maternal 'responsibilities' and career, but doing so in the first few weeks following birth. Although such framings of motherhood promote a feminist ideology by encouraging mothers to find fulfilment in their careers (Johnston and Swanson, 2003; Keller, 1991), they ignore the support system that is required for these aspirations to be fulfilled (Sørensen, 2017). For example, the lack of appropriate spaces and facilities for mothers to breastfeed in the workplace is overlooked.

This second strand of articles reinforces Hochschild (1989)'s idea of the 'second shift', a new sexual contact which imposes that mothers should be both labourers and carers – especially when we know that most studies found mothers were portrayed to be primary caregivers, as we will see below. In this context, De Benedictis and Orgad (2017) wondered whether stay-at-home mothers (SAHM), like those represented in the first strand of studies discussed, could embody a resistance to this new contract. However, they found that representations of SAHM show them subscribing to the aesthetic labour, self-surveillance, and beauty practices demanded by neoliberalism. This suggests a new dimension to Hochschild's theory: even when mothers are not expected to enter the workforce, they remain expected to subscribe to neoliberal labour – albeit in a different form.

Theme 3: Primary Caregiver

Mothers were portrayed as primary caregivers across news media (Aronis, 2019), magazines (César et al., 2020; Jezierski and Wall, 2019; Priyatna et al., 2019), advertisements (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Orgad and Meng, 2017), social media (Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Feldman, 2021; Mackenzie, 2018), and web and TV series (Douglas et al., 2022; Lachover, 2019; Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). Studies found that the responsibilities involved include domestic chores, caring for and spending quality time with the child(ren), and ensuring their safety and wellbeing. But different aspects seemed to be foregrounded on different domains: advertisements prescribed that mothers should manage their family through appropriate consumption (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Orgad and Meng, 2017), whilst

magazines indicated that mothers should instil the right mindset and values in their child(ren), motivate and monitor them, and provide them with the appropriate environment to flourish into desirable citizens (César et al., 2020; Jezierski and Wall, 2019). This can be explained by the modalities and motivations of these domains: advertisements focus on tasks that can be completed through consumption, while magazines focus on development because they benefit from extensive space and exist to serve a demand for guidance. As such these findings confirm and expand Hays (1996) theory of intensive motherhood by showing how this ideology is refracted through the interests of different media domains.

The other parent, who is often a father (Hidalgo-Marí and Patricia Palomares, 2020), is a limited presence across domains (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Bayard, 2018; César et al., 2020; Lerner, 2018; Orgad and Meng, 2017; Priyatna et al., 2019; Rodgers, 2019). He may even be portrayed as a 'complication' because of his inability to appropriately care for the child(ren) (Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). Studies on both Reddit (Feldman, 2021) and Mumsnet (Mackenzie, 2018) found that mothers make little allusion to their partner when discussing childcare, whilst fathers do mention their partner (Feldman, 2021).

Theme 4: Support

Studies also found that mothers are not portrayed as receiving support with childcare even when looking beyond the 'other parent'. Such support only figured in samples that explored 'non-normative' experiences: LGBQ motherhood (Reed, 2018), male mothering (Brydon, 2018), 'imperfect' motherhood (Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019), and Black motherhood (Ayee et al., 2019; Orgad and Baldwin, 2021). Lerner (2018), for example, describes the episode of a web series about 'imperfect' motherhood in which a mother is unable to watch over her children due to work commitments and relies on a friend to 'mom-share'. This seems to extend the observation of 'other-mothering' practices noted in African American communities by Black feminist scholars like Collins (1995) and hooks (1984) to other non-normative groups. These practices have revolutionary potential because they take place 'in opposition to the ideas that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearers.' (hooks, 1984: 144)

Studies of user-generated content found that mothers may receive emotional support

from other mothers.[2] This can be explained by the (inter)personal nature of user-generated content and its modalities for dialogue. Researchers observed that digital platforms provide the infrastructure for mothers to unite through feelings of mutual recognition (Van Cleaf, 2020) and to learn from each other's experience (Cino, 2020). Mommy blogs[3] become spaces of reassurance in the face of 'often seemingly incompatible identity expectations' (Orton-Johnson, 2017: 6). On the flip side, because mommy blogging practices spring from a desire to feel that one is 'doing ok' as a mother (Abetz and Moore, 2018), narratives that do not comfort but instead challenge the personal experiences of mothers may lead to open conflicts. In an increasingly individualised context, mothers online may begin to view mothering as a combative practice and apprehend narratives that do not echo their experience as challenging their own mothering capabilities (Abetz and Moore, 2018).

Theme 5: Criticism of Mothers

Studies found that the affordances of the digital ecosystem facilitate social surveillance, as narratives are monitored by other mothers and women may receive criticism if their mothering practices differ from others' (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Feldman, 2021; Lerner, 2018; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Consumers of mommy blogs, for example, tell Abetz and Moore (2018) that they have witnessed 'mom-shaming' (of mothers by other mothers) for 'anything' – from the way a mother feeds her baby to the way that their child falls asleep. Dorofeeva et al. (2021) talks of the *territoriality of parenthood* to describe the ambiguity between private and public practice in the judgement of mothering online. Contrasted with the previous section, this highlights the ambiguity of maternal narratives in user-generated content: just as online support may take on an intimate dimension, criticism is more likely to be targeted. In addition, Feldman (2021) observed that mothers may pass this judgement *on themselves* and express feelings online of having failed in their maternal role.

Although the public criticism of mothers is facilitated by the affordances of user-generated content, it is also noted in news media (Allen, 2017; Aronis, 2019; Davies,

[2]It is worth noting that this trend was observed only in studies that analysed texts from Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As mentioned previously, it is not possible to determine whether this is due to the (absence of) phenomena observed by the researchers or to their research focus.

[3]A term which follows from 'The Mommy Blog' created by mother Melinda Roberts in the early 2000s.

2021; Orgad and Baldwin, 2021). The genre of news media is indeed often incriminating in tone, partly because it exists in response to unfolding, mostly negative events. Aronis (2019), for example, analysed the press coverage of a baby formula scandal in Israel. She found that the mothers of the babies who had consumed the contaminated formula were portrayed as 'incompetent' and 'guilty' because they had deviated from their 'natural' maternal role by opting out of breastfeeding. Feasey (2017) and Lerner (2018), in their analysis of TV shows, concurrently observe that mothers are portrayed as 'incompetent' when they place their own interests above their child(ren)'s, effectively deviating from the ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996). One character is criticised by her friends – who are also mothers – for arranging to have 'child-free' time to go to the spa.

Theme 6: Struggles and Resistance

Studies reported that mothers' difficulties may also be normalised as a natural part of motherhood. This was observed across domains (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; César et al., 2020; Lerner, 2018; Feldman, 2021; Imbaquingo and Davila, 2020; Johnson and Rintoul, 2019; Orgad and Baldwin, 2021; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Rodgers, 2019; Tardivo and Zolin, 2021; Vergara and Carter, 2021; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017) apart from news media. These difficulties and their solutions are framed differently in different domains. The mother in magazines showcases concerns and fear for her children, but it is suggested that these can be resolved by letting go of 'trying to be perfect' (César et al., 2020). The mother in advertisements, on the other hand, will find the solution to her anxieties, confusion, tiredness, and frustration in consuming the right products (Barak-Brandes, 2017b). The concerns of the mother in user-generated content are centred around her own performance and a sense of inadequacy or failure, as well as difficulties adapting to her maternal role; they can be alleviated by seeing her narrative validated by her peers (Feldman, 2021; Imbaquingo and Davila, 2020; Johnson and Rintoul, 2019; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Vergara and Carter, 2021; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017). Narratives of anxieties in visual entertainment media are the only ones not to be directed towards a solution, instead voicing the complicated relationships mothers entertain with normative expectations (Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). This may be because movies and TV series aim to explore the depths of individual experiences without working towards an explicit goal like providing guidance (e.g. magazines), selling a product (e.g. advertisements), or offering support (e.g. user-generated content). Importantly, some authors note that

these difficulties can only be expressed within white privilege (Guillem and Barnes, 2018), as Black mothers are not expected to be able to fulfil traditional white motherhood expectations in the first place (Handyside, 2021). Struggles in this context are not 'natural' but rather an expected, racialised 'failure'. This confirms the need for what Collins (1995) has called an 'Afrocentric feminist analysis of Black motherhood' that moves away from analyses rooted in white middle-class perspectives to address the role of race in motherhood expectations.

Occasionally, studies noted that these negative feelings materialised in explicit resistance to normativity. This was observed especially in user-generated content, perhaps because of the latter's affordances for engaging in critique (Feldman, 2021; Imbaquingo and Davila, 2020; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Vergara and Carter, 2021). Johnson and Rintoul (2019) and Zappavigna and Zhao (2017), for example, observe that women use breastfeeding selfies to challenge the myth of the serene and selfless breastfeeding mother by introducing dimensions of exhaustion, frustration, and pain. In this context, social media may provide resources that mothers can use to (re)constitute norms in offline mothering practices (Orton-Johnson, 2017)). Feldman (2021: 46) similarly observes that Mommit can offer a perspective whereby 'there is no singular way to be a mother, a woman is not singularly a mother, and mothering comes with highs and lows.'

However, studies generally agree that this framing is ambivalent, at once resisting and reinforcing the norm. Lerner (2018) analysed three Italian series that challenge constructions of 'the perfect mother': she notices that perfect motherhood is constructed as something that the characters both admire and criticise. This is true too of user-generated content, where resistance to and reinforcement of the hegemony co-exist (Orton-Johnson, 2017). This can be attributed to the fact that entertainment media and online platforms do not have a single objective to direct their narrative and may reflect tensions both between characters/users and inherent to the characters/users themselves.

Theme 7: Knowledge and Skills

Authors observe that user-generated content and websites also present mothers with information and advice to 'enhance' their mothering (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Cino, 2020; Cornelio, 2021; Feldman, 2021; Fuentes and Brembeck, 2017). Neotraditionalist expectations are able to flourish (Johnston and Swanson, 2003; Keller, 1991), for motherhood is presented as a practice which requires training and

professionalism. This again plays into the ambiguity of user-generated content: these resources may reassure the mother by offering guidance, but they may pressure her by suggesting she should learn more. The guidance may originate from institutionalised experts. Fuentes and Brembeck (2017), for instance, observe that branded websites offer expert advice and provide opportunities for mothers to ask questions to childcare professionals. This echoes maternal discourses of the past century (Agudelo-Gonzalez and Chapman-Quevedo, 2021; Proctor and Weaver, 2017).

But authors also remark that user-generated content has created possibilities for mothers to position *themselves* as specialists (Abetz and Moore, 2018; Cornelio, 2021; Feldman, 2021).[4] This yields potential for the investigation of a new space of representations. Cornelio (2021), for example, analysed the Instagram accounts of mothers who offer childcare advice both on the platform and through paid services. She argues that, although online resources arguably embody an added pressure for mothers, they are inherently dependent on active demand. This entails that mothers may go online to seek guidance regarding their maternal role, in a similar way to mothers who consume parenting magazines.

Maternal knowledge was also found to be used as a tool for framing consumerist discourses. Studies found that advertisements, magazines, and influencer/celebrity content portrayed mothers using their 'expertise' to purchase the 'right' products for their home and children (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Bayard, 2018; Davis et al., 2022; Fuentes and Brembeck, 2017; Orgad and Meng, 2017; Priyatna et al., 2019). Orgad and Meng (2017), for instance, observe that the portrayal of 'the good life' offered by advertising often depicts a middle-class mother who can enjoy quality time with her children because of her consumption practices. This aligns with the economic-nurturer ideology (Johnston and Swanson, 2003; Keller, 1991), a narrative which imposes socio-economic barriers to accessing 'desirable motherhood' by making mothering dependent on a capacity to purchase (Krzyżanowska, 2020). It also grounds mothers in the domestic sphere by placing them 'in a position of personally needing to know everything but being seen to use this professional knowledge for a singular maternal purpose.' (Davis et al., 2022: 52). Barak-Brandes (2017b: 65) has criticised these representations for recruiting 'feminist rhetoric to promote traditional maternal tasks on the pretext of granting women influence

[4]It is worth noting that this trend was observed only in studies that analysed international texts and texts from Spain and the United States. As mentioned previously, it is not possible to determine whether this is due to the (absence of) phenomena observed by the researchers or to their research focus.

and personal empowerment.'

3.4 Conclusions

In response to my first research question – *How is motherhood represented across different media?* – I find seven themes that stand in external contradiction (with one another) and internal tension (incoherent within themselves). Discourses are simultaneously orthodox and heterodox, at once pushing to and pulling from traditional normative expectations. I also observe that motherhood ideologies themselves are populated by tensions. When studies found appeals to feminist models, for example, these representations overlooked the structural issue of accessing the support necessary for women to pursue personal interests and a fulfilling career whilst balancing childcare. Further, ideologies appear greatly permeable. Media domains feature representations that correspond to more than one ideology at the same time, like user-generated content that sports feminist aspirations but reinforces neoliberalist rhetoric.

This yields questions about the experience of discourse consumption: it seems that mothers are not exposed to linear and cohesive narratives, but that their own media ecosystem instead presents them with competing and contradictory elements of which they must make sense. Forcing representations into the boxes of motherhood ideologies fails to express the complexity of this picture. Is our object of study, to use Wiegman (2012: 10)'s words, 'diminished by the worldly limits in which it is forced to live'?

In response to my second research question – *How do the modalities of media domains influence the motherhood representations that they offer?* – I find that the objectives and affordances of domains play an important role in emphasising and silencing elements of motherhood, thus influencing the maternal scripts that become dominant in different media and therefore the hegemony of maternal ideologies at a given time and place. For example, the consumerist purpose of advertising drives a representation of good motherhood that is dependent on appropriate consumption but cannot portray difficulties that a brand could not resolve. The role of media domains in shaping discourses becomes more apparent on online platforms (e.g. Cino, 2020) and research on user-generated content has picked up on this influence. I aim to extend this consciousness across media domains.

I notice that magazine narratives are particularly prescriptive and make high demands of mothers – especially regarding the development of their child(ren) into 'good

citizens'. This may be because they benefit from extensive space that facilitates in-depth discussion, and because parenting magazines exist to serve a demand for guidance. In contrast, visual entertainment media and user-generated content both offer narratives that partially resist normative expectations. In visual entertainment media, the mother is at once pushed to and pulled from normative expectations, for example regarding childcare responsibilities, support, and personal aspirations. This may be because shows and movies benefit from space and depth to reflect on the inner tension of a character and oppose different ideologies via different characters, and because they are not constrained by a single objective. But this relation takes on an individualised dimension in user-generated content, since it provides opportunities for sharing personal accounts and responding to that of others. The mother is offered space to challenge normativity by sharing and receiving validation about her experiences, but she may also encounter narratives or critiques that (she believes) directly challenge her own mothering capabilities in a way that is more impactful because it is more personal. The ever-growing multiplication of content online can also confront her with resources to improve her mothering that may at once reassure and overload her.

Overall, my argument is that insufficient attention has been granted to what motherhood ideologies do for us as analytical tools and for mothers as identity resources, and to how motherhood expectations are refracted through the modalities of different media domains. Having just outlined my answers to both questions, I offer a framework that summarises and contrasts different aspects and domains – see Appendices A.5, A.6, A.7, A.8, and A.9. The first seven rows present the themes that were derived from my analysis, contrasting how these diverge across different media. The eighth row reflects on the role of modalities in shaping maternal scripts. The remaining three rows explore tensions within and between motherhood ideologies, elements that these ideologies must bypass or silence, and characteristics that are required to access the 'good motherhood' that they portray.

Going forward, and in response to my third research question – *What are the gaps in recent research on the subject?* – I suggest that more research is warranted on the ways that mothers negotiate motherhood discourses and the normativities that they organise. Some studies of media texts offered insights into the tensions that are inherent to motherhood representations, and I hope to see this trend continue. But I found that the handful of studies that used interviews with mothers offered particularly novel insights into the ways that mothers negotiate those tensions, and especially their complicated

relation to normativity (Bayard, 2018; Lehto, 2022; Malatzky, 2017; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Reed, 2018). This opens a promising dimension to studies of motherhood.

4

Constructing a Mothers' Culture: Affective Bargains in Branding Discourses

Proceeding from the argument made in Chapter 3, that ideologies about how to live life as a mother are ontologically incoherent, this chapter concerns itself with theorising that incoherence, including its benefits to neoliberal-capitalist institutions (here, brands). To do this, I introduce Berlant's concept of *women's culture*, adapted into *mothers' culture*, to the sociological study of branding materials that target mothers in the UK. This archive is somewhat close to texts that would have interested Berlant, though again it concentrates on new forms of market media. I think with Berlant's concept of *genre* to theorise the lifestyles that these brands' mass discourses construct as desirable for mothers. Of particular interest are the incoherences they absorb, which reflect and walk around the inconsistencies between mothers' fantasies for the good life and their lived experiences of family life under present conditions. Helpful, too, is Berlant's concept of *intimate public*. With it, I explore the affective mechanisms that are mobilised to construct the fantasy that mothers' lives are understood by other mothers. My final argument is that mothers are encouraged to live with and to desire the forms of family life

that have historically denied them legitimacy and autonomy. The affective experience of this inconsistency will be the subject of Chapter 5. By the time the thesis was submitted, this chapter was published in *Sociology* in the form presented below.

4.1 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 (Levy, 1959; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Holt, 2004; Klein, 1999; 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 (McRobbie, 2008) or motherhood (Lynch, 2005; O'Donohoe et al., 2013). Colleagues have been interested in the shape these norms take in texts (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1989; Keller, 1991) and in what negotiating – moving with, around, and against – them looks like (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 (see Chapter 3). I propose to explore and explain this tension through a Berlantian lens.

4.1.1 The Fantasy of Traditional Motherhood

In recent years, works have found that traditional motherhood remains the dominant fantasy represented in market texts (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Feldman, 2021; Lerner, 2018; Mackenzie, 2018; 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, 2017a; 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, 2017a; 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' (Renold and Ringrose, 2011) traditional motherhood (see Chapter 3). Such tension is not immediately understandable (Renold and Ringrose, 2011). Neither are its implications for motherhood's political, economic, and cultural (de)construction. Here, I propose to conceptualise this form of ambivalence and find the works of Lauren Berlant helpful in doing so.

4.1.2 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, 2008b, 2011a). 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 my 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, 2011a: 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, 2008b: 170). Indeed, when heteronormativity mobilises disaffirming experiences that prevent the very fulfilment it was projected to deliver (a twist of *cruel optimism*; Berlant, 2011a), *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, 2008b: 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 and Seigworth, 2010; Seigworth and Pedwell, 2023). Here, I 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.

I 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). I 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, 2008b: 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, I look at the digital media presence of five major brands that deal with motherhood in the UK. I 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, 2011a). This provides the premise and the genre upon which the ambivalence that interests me takes hold.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Sampling

I devised a list of consumer markets that are likely to carry representations of motherhood because of the products they sell. I 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. I 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. I also excluded markets organised around sub-practices, like formula feeding, because they do not speak to a general motherhood audience. This left me with a shortlist of five: groceries, furniture, motherhood brands, baby food, and diapers.

I chose the UK market leader for each segment (Global Data, 2022; Statista, 2021b,a, 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 my project was limited, and I favoured sampling multiple markets to increase context diversity over various brands in one market. I do not assume that each brand offers a representative account of the discourses in its market.

To refine the scope of research I 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). I felt this offered a balance between domains with seemingly 'bottom-up' (YouTube, blogs, Instagram) and 'top-down' affordances (ads, websites, packaging).

I developed different inclusion criteria to reflect the nature of each media domain. For example, I 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 Appendix B. Overall I discuss $k = 110$ YouTube videos, $k = 4$ websites, $k = 267$ packages, and $k = 680$ Instagram posts.

4.2.2 Analysis

I started by 'mapping out' the content types offered by the brands across media. This helps me understand the brands' strategies, as they often follow a content plan that sets out the different content types to be generated across platforms. I show elsewhere that it helps reveal the relationship between the affordances of media domains and the discourses they carry (see Chapter 3). For example, I found that the possibility to add longer text on websites increased the brands' tendency to propose guidance, which influenced their motherhood discourses. I 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). I found this useful to discuss findings and refer to my categories in the results.

I then undertook a thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2021)'s 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 my analysis. I began by inductively developing initial codes, adapting my technique to the different media. For example, each video was individually coded; but to navigate the high number and repetition of Instagram posts, I reviewed posts under the same content type until

I judged that I had reached saturation because no new themes emerged and repeated this process until all content types had been reviewed. I did not integrate a theoretical framework at this stage. I organised the codes into themes using a thematic map, to which I integrated the content types identified in the first stage. I selected three themes that most clearly exhibited an affective dimension and integrated a Berlantian framework.

To map out my mothers' culture I 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 I 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, 2008b). 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 (1976)'s 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, my 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.

4.3 Results

I organise my findings into three themes that reflect brands' positions: I 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 my analysis is theoretical, I 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).

4.3.1 You're Not Alone, You're Not the Only One: Mothers' Culture Through the Brand

If I were to measure my 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 *mother's culture* that interests me. 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 I 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 judgment (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, 2008b: 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, 2011a: 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; 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, 2008b: x).

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

Creating a platform for solidarity does not suffice to organise belonging to a *mother's 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 this 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 jokes. 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, 2008b). 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, 2011a; Pors and Kishik, 2023). Navigating

this ambivalence requires containing difficulties so that they do not threaten the fantasy motherhood has come to embody (Berlant, 2011a).

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.

4.3.3 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. I 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 décor 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 wellbeing 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 amidst 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 which 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, 2013). 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, 2011a). 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 which threatened that fantasy, or the market discourses that created it, in the first place.

4.4 Conclusions

My study of brand discourses introduces the construction of a *mothers' culture*, building on Berlant (2008b: 5)'s 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. I 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, 2008b: 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 4.1.

Table 4.1: 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

The culture identified in my 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 which 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). My 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, *mother's culture* prevents the questioning of the social failings which 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 (see Chapter 3) 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?

5

Affects and Strategies of Maternal Optimism: The Accounts of Mothers with Experiences of Anxiety and/or Depression

The final empirical chapter of this thesis gave it its name; it is concerned with the experiences of optimistic attachment to motherhood, and especially with how attachment to motherhood is lived and negotiated in the face of ambivalent, disaffirming, wounding, and counterproductive experiences. For this purpose, the chapter mobilises a sociological analysis of interviews with mothers who have experiences of anxiety and/or depression, which is to say difficult affects. Berlant never pursued research with human participants, so this chapter is somewhat removed from their usual practices, although Berlant's model informed the design, conduct, and analysis of the interviews. While Chapters 3 and 4 both established and theorised the inconsistencies that populate social genres for how to live life as a mother, this chapter is concerned with the experience of those inconsistencies. I was particularly supported by Berlant's concept of *cruel optimism*, which helped me to capture ways that forms of motherhood can be at once profoundly

hurtful and life-sustaining. Important too was Berlant's idea of *bargaining*, to capture strategies my participants used to try to make better lives out of limited objects and genres. By the time the thesis was submitted, this chapter had been submitted to a journal in the form presented below and was undergoing light revisions.

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1 Context

Lauren Berlant was interested in what people hope patterns of living might make possible for them (Berlant, 2011a). They explored the emotional investments we place in such patterns in relation to the good life we anticipate they will bring closer. For example, one may fantasise that a love affair will draw near a life of happiness. This is particularly true for conventional forms, like heteronormative love affairs, that are socially reinforced as a path to the good life (Berlant, 2008b). Berlant's lens helps us understand what is at stake in our relation to life patterns, particularly when we fear losing, lose, or leave them (Berlant, 2011a); When one leaves a love affair, for example, one leaves not only a situation (which can be a good thing, if the situation is wounding) but also an anchor to feeling that one has a life at all (which is frightening and makes leaving difficult). This framework helped Berlant explain why people stay attached to forms of life that wound them, even when there is overwhelming evidence that they will not deliver on their promises. It also begs the question of what managing such ambivalent attachments looks and feels like.

Among the various patterns individuals use to prop up their lives, we know that motherhood is often socially constructed as especially important. Scholars have shown that cultural texts offer an 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). They have also tracked the conventional paths discourses offer to achieve this fulfilment (for a review see Schmidt et al., 2023). For example, mothers are told to manage their family through appropriate consumption (Orgad and Meng, 2017), secure the child's successful development (Jezierski and Wall, 2019), integrate productive employment into motherhood (Brydon, 2018), or become 'knowing' through self-education (Cornelio, 2021). Research has underlined that maternal norms are often contradictory, so that paths to the good life may feel confusing.

We also know that motherhood can evoke difficult affects (Lane and Joensuu, 2018;

Raneberg and MacCallum, 2023), like guilt (Karademir Hazır, 2024), regret (Miller, 2007), distress, fear (Staneva et al., 2017), shame, and stress (Forbes et al., 2021). Some have linked mental health struggles to the difficulty of attaining and sustaining maternal conventions (Medina and Magnuson, 2009; Rizzo et al., 2013). Depression and anxiety are, after all, the most common diagnoses for new mothers (Howard and Khalifeh, 2020), 13% of whom are diagnosed with a mental disorder (World Health Organization, 2024). And we know that conditions for attaining conventional forms of motherhood, like accessible childcare for the 'working mother', are shrinking rapidly (Jarvie et al., 2023; Penn and Lloyd, 2013).

What we know less about is what managing ambivalent attachments to motherhood looks and feels like. Thinking with Berlant, I wonder what hopes or expectations mothers invest in patterns of living, and how this shapes how they (i) affectively experience and (ii) navigate motherhood. In this regard, talking to mothers who experience difficult affects seems particularly relevant. So, I interviewed $n = 15$ mothers with experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression and asked what a Berlantian framework might reveal about their affects and strategies.

5.1.2 Theoretical Framework

Berlant's works, though widely popular in fields like affect theory, are sparsely used in sociological motherhood research (for an exception see Cappellini et al., 2019). This may be because Berlant's writing is intertextual and thus complicated, or because Berlant did not apply their ideas as a methodology in social-scientific work, making the exercise novel and thus difficult. Yet, I will show the relevance Berlant's work on optimism bears for understanding how mothers invest in, experience, and organise motherhood.

Optimism and Genre

I rely particularly on two of Berlant's concepts. The first is that of *(cruel) optimism*, which I have already discussed without naming it. Berlant observed that people are driven 'to bring closer the satisfying something that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene' (Berlant, 2011a: 2). So, they were curious about what people hope patterns of living – or *objects*, the term I will use here – might make possible for them. Motherhood,

for example, can be invested as an object that will deliver bliss, impact, meaning, and fulfilment. Hence, women may invest in it fantasies of their own coherence and potential.

But life objects have the potential to enrich us, hurt us, or both. Forms of motherhood, for example, may mobilise wounding experiences, like exhaustion, overstimulation, and confusion (Rizzo et al., 2013). Hence, objects that we hope will bring happiness may become objects that deteriorate the conditions for happiness. Their presence, however, still represents the possibility of happiness as such, since we have invested much in them. More precisely, 'they also represent living as such, and so without them many people feel or are said to be not "having a life."' (Berlant and Prosser, 2011: 182) So, 'losing the bad object might be deemed worse than being destroyed by it.' (Berlant, 2017: para. 7) Those are relations of *cruel optimism*, where something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing (Berlant, 2011a). Here, I am interested in mothers' optimism, in how that optimism may become cruel, and in how such cruelty is negotiated and bargained with–by which I mean, what happens when mothers must decide whether losing the form of motherhood that wounds them should be deemed worse than or preferable to being destroyed by it, and what happens next.

What makes motherhood particularly interesting in relation to cruel optimism is that hurtful patterns may become tied to a child that one can hardly leave. In toxic love affairs, one might decide to walk out on their partner and pursue romantic fantasies elsewhere. But conceiving life as liveable after having abandoned one's child is much higher stakes (Memarnia et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2019). Hence, even when one resolves that bad patterns must be left, the child still cannot. So, affective and behavioural adjustments become central to surviving the demands and ambivalence of motherhood.

The second Berlantian concept I find helpful for this study is that of *genre*, which helps me capture what mothers invest in and expect from motherhood, and thus what is at stake in their bargaining. Genre, as a social as well as an aesthetic form, is a structure of conventional expectations people rely on to access affective assurances about patterns of living (Berlant, 2008b: 4). This structure enables people to perform identities through 'variations within a conventional expectation of self- and world- continuity', as opposed to dramatically breaking lose from any sense of individual and communal coherence, which risks being overwhelming (Berlant, 2008b: 4). Examples include 'love' or 'femininity'. Genres' conventions relate *fantasy* to ordinary life, and in so doing protect individuals' optimism, by offering ideas of the good life that patterns of living are said to make possible (Berlant, 2011a: 6). Genres are sets of conventionalities that are repeated and

stretched, such that they may feel both generic and personal.

Thinking of motherhood as a genre means thinking of the conventional expectations mothers rely on regarding, say, possibilities for how to enact being a mother, what mothers may work towards or fantasise about (Salecl, 2004: 109), and the degree to which motherhood should feel central or peripheral to the sense of self (Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015). While it bears similarities to the concept of *norm*, *genre* invites us to attend to normality as both a site of hegemonic convention and a source of affective (re)assurances that may help stabilise and sustain people as they move through life. Here, *genre* enables me to capture both how mothers orient their expectations for motherhood and how those expectations contribute to anchoring and heartening them (at the same time as they might overwhelm them).

Application

Whilst Berlant made passing references to the challenges that are produced by our cruel attachments to life objects, they did not provide an account of particular affects.[1] Yet, they underlined the relevance of affects like anxiety and depression, which they read both as ordinary moods and as feelings that can get out of hand, to understand our relation to conventionalities.

They appear to have read anxiety as the affective response to the ambivalence that is mobilised by having objects that embody the good life we desire but hurt us along the way (Berlant, 2008b: 13, 173; Berlant, 2011c: 687; Berlant, 2022: 118; Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 8). Depression (sometimes called 'despair' or 'reparation') could be understood as the recognition that bargains with our objects are not working out – which may evoke reinvestment in optimism, or not (Berlant, 2008b: 175, 180). They argued that the anxiety and depression that are opened by our complicated attachments mobilise 'therapeutic genres of bargaining' whose aim is to keep us close to our objects while surviving that closeness (Berlant, 2008b: 170).

I propose to explore how mothers experience and bargain with their optimism in relation to motherhood. I aim to understand (i) the affects that are mobilised as mothers navigate their attachment to motherhood and (ii) the strategies they deploy to protect their optimism in motherhood's capacity to deliver the good life. I refer to

[1] Although their last work explored dissociation in depth (Berlant, 2022), indicating that they were travelling in that direction.

these as the *bargains of maternal optimism*. I do this by applying a Berlantian lens to interviews with mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression. This sample sheds light on some of the difficult affects and adaptations that are opened up by navigating motherhood and its conventionalities. My research is the first to conceptualise the affective bargains of motherhood from the viewpoint of mothers with experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression, presumably due to the difficulty of accessing this population for sociological work, and to develop a Berlantian study of anxiety and depression.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Sampling

I designed the study with two specialist mental health practitioners and one individual who has received mental health support relating to motherhood. I obtained ethical approval from the Health Research Authority (23/NW/0048) and the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cambridge.

For recruitment, I used the Clinical Record Interactive Search (CRIS) system to access the anonymised clinical records of the South London and Maudsley National Health Service Foundation Trust (SLaM). SLaM is one of the largest mental health services in Europe, serving approximately 1,2 million people. SLaM has a Consent for Contact (C4C) form, through which service users may allow researchers to contact them and use their anonymised records.

Patients with C4C were included if they i) were identified as female[2], ii) had at least one child aged between 6 and 15 years old, iii) had custody of their child(ren), iv) had received a diagnosis of anxiety and/or depression since 2021, and v) understood English. Research has focused on perinatal mental health because mood disorders typically emerge then (Koukopoulos et al., 2020). But mothers with older children may be better placed to reflect on their difficult affects and how they navigate them. I used a diversity sampling approach for ethnicity. The complete inclusion criteria, including justifications, can be found in Appendix C.1.

According to ICD-10, the diagnostic system used by SLaM, markers of depression

[2]The gender field in CRIS is binary, and it is unclear whether service users are asked the gender they identify with. Changes to this approach are underway at SLaM. I asked participants the gender they identify with and use this response in the paper.

include 'lowering of mood, reduction of energy, and decrease in activity,' reduced 'capacity for enjoyment, interest, and concentration,' diminished 'self-esteem and self-confidence,' 'marked tiredness after even minimum effort,' and 'some ideas of guilt or worthlessness' (World Health Organization, 2019). Markers of anxiety include 'persistent nervousness, trembling, muscular tensions, sweating, lightheadedness, palpitations, dizziness, and epigastric discomfort' (World Health Organization, 2019). But mental health disorders are complex networks of interacting symptoms (Fried et al., 2017; Fried, 2015) that often co-occur (Beard et al., 2016).

5.2.2 Recruitment

My sampling strategy identified 65 potential participants, and I accessed their health records. I verified their C4C and the assessment of their capacity to consent. I reviewed their information with a mental health practitioner and excluded those we judged might not be safe to include in the research.

I contacted potential participants by telephone or email. If they expressed interest, I sent an email with more information and a consent form they were asked to complete and return. They received a £50 voucher of their choice as a token of gratitude. Recruitment documents can be found in Appendix C.2.

I stopped recruitment when I reached $n = 15$ participants as I felt I had reached information power for a study with narrow aims, rich data, and existing theoretical background (Malterud et al., 2016). An overview of the sample can be found in Table 5.1. My participants were on average 40.7 years old, ranging between 31 and 50. They had between one and five children, two on average. Two thirds were *White British*, the rest being *Black British/Caribbean* ($n = 2$), *Hispanic* ($n = 1$), *Asian* ($n = 1$), and *White Other* ($n = 1$). Eight participants had diagnoses of depression, one of anxiety, and six had received both.[3] All names are fictitious.

Table 5.1: Overview of Sample

Name	**Ethnicity**	**Age**	**No. Children**	**Age Youngest Child**	**Age Oldest Child**
Alex	White British	38	2	2	6

[3]Based on three time points: their (i) first ever and (ii) most recent diagnosis of anxiety and/or depression, and their (iii) most recent mental health diagnosis.

Amélie	White British	33	4	4	13
Anaïs	White Other	44	2	7	15
Charlotte	White British	31	1	6	6
Coco	White British	47	2	7	12
Emma	White British	45	1	11	11
Iris	White British	47	2	9	14
Kate	White British	43	2	6	8
Keira	Asian	39	1	7	7
Lilly-Mary	Hispanic	42	2	7	11
Margaret	White British	42	5	11	24
Mathilde	Black British, Caribbean	31	2	6	11
Olivia	Black British, Caribbean	33	2	7	8
Pauline	White British	50	2	11	15
Sophie	White British	46	1	7	7

5.2.3 Interviews

Participants could take part in the semi-structured interview in person (with childcare and carer costs covered) or online, and all chose online. I held the interviews on Microsoft Teams, with cameras turned on. Interviews lasted around 90 minutes, excluding 10 minutes of introduction and 5 minutes of debrief. They were audio-recorded and consent was confirmed on the record. We discussed participants' expectations and lived experience of motherhood; the interview guide can be found in Appendix C.3. I worked with participants to ensure the interviews were safe and comfortable; details of the protocol can be found in Chapter 1 and Appendix C.4.

5.2.4 Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, including hesitations, repetitions, and non-verbal expressions. Participants could comment on the transcript (Varpio et al., 2017): only one did, to correct typos . I adopted a narrative analysis because it aligns with my objective to understand the arcs of participants' descriptions of motherhood. Narrative analysis relies on extended accounts rather than fragmented sections organised in thematic categories (Riessman, 2008). It has proven useful in feminist (Herron, 2023), mental

health (Frank, 2017), and motherhood research (Juberg et al., 2020).

I alternated between across-case and within-case analyses, identifying key storylines for each participant and contrasting those across the sample (e.g. Ayres, 2000). I identified two trends through this iterative process. The categories that I use, therefore, did not emerge from holding up fragments of my participants' stories and looking for a fit, but from noting parallels between storylines that might help me say something about different ways of living motherhood. To illustrate them, I chose the four narratives that provided most richness and depth in their discussion of maternal genres and affects.

5.3 Results

Informed by my Berlantian lens, I remarked that my participants' experiences were organised around different variations of a conventional *genre* of motherhood. In some cases, participants could organise their lived experiences around that genre, and sustain hope that it would deliver their fantasy of the good life. This was reassuring, though wounding to sustain, leading to relations of cruel optimism. Sustenance strategies were mobilised in response. In other cases, lived experiences were too far removed from the participants' expectations, and could not be organised by the genre. Often, this led participants to lose hope that their fantasy would materialise. This was frightening to the participants' sense of self- and world-continuity; adaptation strategies were required to protect their optimism. Therefore, participants' affects and bargains varied when the genre 'held' or 'did not hold' (see Figure 5.1).

Following the above, I talk of the genre 'holding' when it permits a viable level of continued access to optimism. Participants represented early signs of their genre 'failing to hold' as inabilities to sustain expected behaviours or organise their lived experiences through conventional frames. So, they could not access the genre's stabilising force. The tipping point of their 'genre failing' often occurred when the discrepancy between the genre and their lived experiences became too large to sustain hope that their fantasy of the good life would materialise. So, they could not access the genre's sustaining force.

In most cases, the participants' genre of motherhood 'did not hold' ($n = 8$). Two participants struggled with the loss until circumstances (a new relationship and a second child) enabled them to reinvest in optimism. In other cases, the participants' genre of motherhood 'held' ($n = 3$). The rest were 'outliers'. Two participants had lost their own mothers, precipitating depression; one participant located motherhood within a

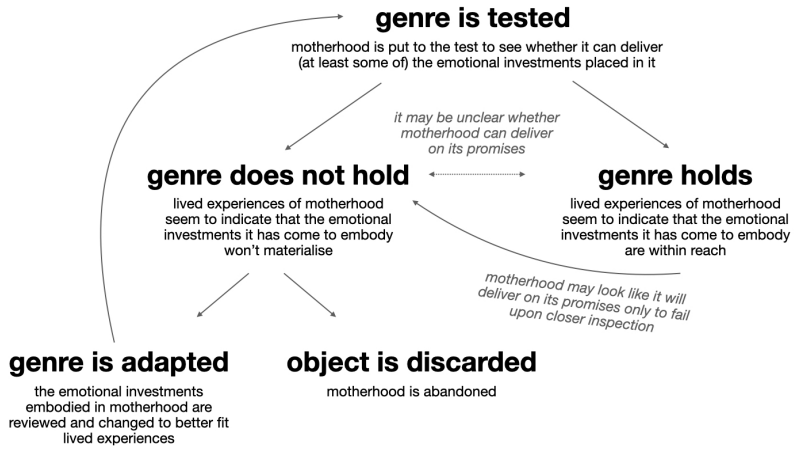

Figure 5.1: Schematic Summary of Framework

broader battle with obsessive-compulsive disorder; and one participant was left disabled from pregnancy, causing her to lose optimism (Berlant, 2022). Below, I introduce four participants whose motherhood was informed by different variations around a genre. Two saw their genre 'hold', two did not. Each pair deployed similar strategies to cope, but participants experienced them differently.

5.3.1 Genre Holds: Exhaustion, Fear, Struggle

Amélie

Amélie has four children, two of which have additional needs. Their father 'works away a lot' so she is the primary caregiver; she never mentions him. She lives in a 'lower class area' and refers to mothers in 'a class above', suggesting she identifies as working class. She is a stay-at-home mum and is White British.

Amélie wanted motherhood to be 'as perfect as possible.' She pictured a rosy and pretty environment, with her children well 'presented' and her house decorated for holidays. She imagined a calm and loving nuclear family that is 'wholesome' with no tension, raised voices, or bickering. She makes a parallel with 'happy families' in popular

media.

For Amélie, motherhood delivers on its promises. With tears of joy, she describes loving home scenes and her happiness in browsing photo albums reminiscing that everything 'c[a]me together.' She mostly stays home to enjoy her picture of motherhood, so she has neither friends nor hobbies:

> I absolutely love my life. It might be somebody's complete nightmare, somebody who's with their kids 24/7. But for me, this is everything. I look around and I'm like... (...) And I just, I feel so lucky. I feel like I can't believe... It's almost like I wait for something to happen. That's the only... And I don't like saying it out loud, because I feel like then it will happen. But it's like, I'm so content. I can't believe this is, these are my children. When I look at my children... We had a Christmas; they had a Christmas photoshoot. I look at the pictures and I'm, like, I just can't believe they're mine, and I've done this, and it's going so quick, and I hate how fast it's going. But there's always that little bit at the back, like, this isn't going to last.

The suspicion that *this isn't going to last* can be overpowering: since becoming a mother she has received diagnoses of depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. There is not a second 'where [she's] not thinking something about [her children].' She worries 'constantly,' from how things are at school to what will become of her family in 20 years. This 'consumes' her, especially when her children are not home: 'I don't like being out of control.'

And indeed, there are glimpses of the genre slipping: the children bicker, she is late to the school pick-up, someone takes their football, she raises her voice when they are slow to leave. These moments open up anxiety. Discussing them leads Amélie to tense up and shake off, as if to shake off the possibility of the genre failing. The temporary glitch propels her into action, and she deploys all-consuming efforts to prevent those slippages or patch them up:

> It's almost like I wait for a punishment. It sounds a bit strange. It... I feel like I have to... If there's something I felt, like, it's probably so normal to other people, like, they might be a bit rushed in the morning, but to me, it's like: 'Noooo...! Why did you just shout at them to put their shoes on? Or, you know, you got a bit annoyed because they weren't eating their breakfast quick enough.' And so then it's like, it's like I've got a tally chart in my head. So that goes on the bad side, so then I need to do something good to balance it out. So that might be getting them a treat whilst I'm at the shop. Or it might be ordering them a takeaway that night. I feel like I have to do something. And then it even branches

> into, like... I donate. [laughs softly] I don't have a lot of money, I don't have the spare money, but it's like, okay, if I donate to this child, I've done something good to balance out–I can't even say something bad, because saying it out loud, it's not. But to me, it is.

Sustaining the genre demands exhaustive and exhausting control. For Amélie, fear presupposes hope; only because she has grounds to believe that motherhood will come through on its promises is she anxious lest it – or she– fail to deliver.

Sophie

Sophie has one child and works part-time. She assumes more caregiving responsibilities than her husband. She mentions that he has a high-paying job and that they manage to save money, suggesting they are somewhat comfortable financially. She is White British.

She paints her maternal expectations as a rationally weighted picture, suggesting the 'proper life' as a way to the 'good life': she describes financial security, a heteronormative nucleus, and a safe environment. Her objective was to *nurture* in the best possible way. .

Like Amélie, she hoped that control might deliver the motherhood she imagined. While pregnant, she kept her body 'pure' to avoid 'damag[ing] the child' (following two miscarriages). She discarded chemical products, like nail polish, and worked towards a water birth. However, she loses control when she has to be induced and undergo a C-section. Immediately after comes another loss, that of breastfeeding, which was 'the absolute most important thing.' When it becomes apparent that she cannot breastfeed, she becomes depressed. She feels so ashamed that she hides to bottle-feed in public. Her reaction is thus pain and mourning, and discussing the experience causes her to tear up.

Her immediate response is to deploy urgent efforts to recover the motherhood to which she aspired. She describes becoming 'so, so controlling' of her home and son. Sophie experienced anxiety and depression before becoming a mother; she believes that motherhood has reduced the latter 'because you don't have time to get depressed,' but increased the former. She keeps her son pure by forbidding sugar and does not allow him to watch TV except scientific programs. She precludes him from visiting friends whose parents have values she disapproves of, like homes with too many plastic toys or screens. This is hard and demanding, but she feels somewhat successful.

Anxiety, for Sophie, is also mobilised as she tries to gauge what she should aspire to–or, what shape her genre should take:

> And I'm constantly worrying about... You know, like child prodigies, you know that – I mean, yes, there is a natural talent in there – but a lot of it is about what the parents, the parents' input in the child. (...) And you just think, if I put more time in, I could make him a better human being. And I have this constant struggle of... How? What do you want from them? What do you want to mould them into? What tools do you want to give to them? Do you want them to be an Olympian? Do you want them to be an opera singer? What should you give them? Because children are sponges. So whatever you focus on, they will take on. And if they've got natural talent in there as well, they could be- I find that, urgh, a constant struggle.

5.3.2 Genre Does Not Hold: Grief and Discontinuity

Kate

Kate has two children and a high-paying and socially-valued career. She shares caregiving responsibilities with her husband, though does more. She is White British.

Kate was often told as a child that she could do anything, which seemed true, so motherhood was inscribed along a path characterised by self-sufficiency and success. She imagined being 'a bit of a superwoman, just being able to juggle it all without it being too difficult or having a big impact on [her] emotionally or mentally.' She pictured herself as a *yummy mummy*:

> But I think I just pictured myself as being like... I guess like a yummy mummy, one of those mums who just can manage to work three days a week, and still have a tidy house, and have children that don't have meltdowns in the middle of the supermarket. [laughs]

Like the *yummy mummies* she would be 'out having coffee and going to the baby yoga classes and things' and would have time to look after herself, probably with a nanny. The picture would be effortlessly pretty, with 'Montessori toys and just a really beautiful, neutral-toned home.'

Having her first child challenges her convictions of self-sufficiency. Her expectations about her natural capacity to mother are unmet:

> Like, I'm so used to being able, to being such a capable woman and able to do everything. And now I've got this tiny little thing that... Everyone has... Like, time immemorial, people have raised kids and managed to do so. How is this so difficult? It just, it felt really... It produced a lot of anxiety.

The experience is both puzzling and wounding. She feels 'powerless'. It triggers severe anxiety and fantasies of accidentally stabbing her baby.

Like Sophie and Amélie, she reacts in bouts of activity to keep the genre holding. During her maternity leave, Kate fixes things around the house and attends all the baby groups. Her midwife becomes exasperated because she has been digging up her garden shortly after giving birth; Kate seems proud when telling the story. She judges that her difficulties are 'not a big deal' and does not pursue help.

Things change when she becomes pregnant again. She enters a mood of deep sadness. She imagines that she will not have time for her first child and feels deficient for being unable to cope with work, a toddler, home, and her pregnancy without it causing overwhelm. It becomes evident that her genre of motherhood only held until it did not, and the fantasy is lost. Because her genre revolved around self-sufficiency, Kate chastises herself:

> Interviewer: You say that you failed. What does that mean for you?
> Kate: I think it's, again, that kind of thought of being able to cope with everything that life [laughs] throws at you without it impacting on you. So, the fact that I wasn't managing work, and a toddler, and being pregnant... [laughs] I thought: 'Oh, there must be something wrong, you should be able to cope.' And also, I think part of the anxiety and the depression was I was feeling guilty. I was feeling quite guilty about the fact that I wasn't there as much for my eldest. And I was thinking: 'Well, maybe you shouldn't have gotten pregnant again. You had this perfectly lovely baby. Now you're making yourself — it's always "making myself" — I'm making myself ill. And why?'

She is diagnosed with mixed anxiety and depressive disorders. She 'bounce[s] back' quickly, partly by exposing *yummy mummies* as a fraud. She talks about a friend who has a 'picture-perfect' life with 'her beautiful art deco house in the Hollywood Hills, and amazing Christmas displays, and her daughter doing really cute things' but who she knows also has marital difficulties. She believes that mothers who appear to sustain the genre struggle when the camera is off. This adaptation alleviates the role that she had construed to have played in failing to sustain the genre and reinstates her self-sufficiency. She is now 'a lot more accepting of the fact that [her] house will be in a constant state, that [they]'ll eat ready-meals, and that's just how life is.' Kate has therefore borne with this phase of depression and disorganisation and emerged from it, reorganised around and by a new genre.

Anaïs

Anaïs lives alone with her two children, one of whom has additional needs. Their fathers are not involved and provide no financial support. She works and studies. She is 'not exactly working class, but then maybe not really middle class, just somewhere in between.' She identifies as White Other.

Anaïs describes expectations of motherhood that sound stereotypical. She pictured 'the movie situations' where 'you see, like, they talk, they eat at a big table, and it's all calm.' She daydreamed about a heteronormative nucleus with 'mum and dad, and putting up the Christmas tree with the kids, and making decorations' that involves 'both parents doing things together–even the dad just falling asleep in a chair with a newspaper.' She would nurture her family like a 'traditional mum' who stays home, cooks from scratch, cleans, cares for husband and child, and is loving and patient.

Immediately, there are glimpses that lived experiences do not match the genre. When she has her first child, she is alone; the father is abusive and will not pick her up from the hospital. Her image of a nurturing self is also wounded:

> I remember when I gave birth, and they told me to change her nappy. And I never had anything to do with children, I never held a child. Then again, it was only the movies. I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to change the nappy. I was looked upon as some weirdo: 'How come you don't know how to change it?' I was asking: 'Do I have to put some powder on¿ And they said, like: 'Why?' 'Because I don't know, I've seen that in the movies. They do it like that.' [laughs]

This triggers markers of anxiety and depression. She describes a 'hectic' and 'lonely' experience of 'not having a clue'. She recalls how her anxiety manifested in small tasks:

> I didn't have a clue. And I remember standing by the traffic lights holding on to the buggy so tight, because I was scared the buggy might slip and slide onto the road, sweat was dripping from my hands; I was holding on so tight. It was scary.

She illustrates her mental health diagnoses with this anecdote, '[b]ecause it's not normal, like when I'm telling you that I was holding on to the buggy so tight. Those little things, it's just not normal.' She eventually leaves her partner but has no close friends. While he was not violent with their daughter, the girl suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder from witnessing her mother's abuse. Anaïs is afraid to seek help for fear of losing custody. Eventually, her daughter's daycare demands that the child receive a

psychological assessment, and Anaïs pursues support for herself. She is diagnosed with mixed anxiety and depressive disorders and a mild depressive episode. She recalls her hopes but 'it's nothing like this.'

Adapting the genre takes time. She proceeds in fits and starts and often reverts. She initially improvises a new genre whereby she follows her intuitions, and that seems to provide respite. Yet, she runs back to the original genre when two friends have babies as she has her second. The pregnancy is unplanned and the father absent, so her heteronormative picture is again found wanting. But she sees her friends 'cook everything from scratch, they get the carrots, they don't buy the jams, but they blend the carrots, they blend the broccoli and everything' and she imitates them. She just wants 'to be like one of those [traditional] mums, you know' but the experience leaves her exhausted.

Finally, she discards the genre. The adaptation is painful, and her loss is followed by hostility. She repeatedly mocks the *celery stick mums* who feed their 'poor kids' 'humus, celery sticks, and a carrot,' and it eventually transpires that she is envious of their having what she hoped for:

> Do you know what? I think maybe I was looking at them with a little bit of envy as well, because obviously they had a partner who would be working, and maybe she would be working, but they'd have that stress off their shoulders that they're not by themselves. So maybe that was me with the celery sticks, maybe it was just a little bit of envy. (...) I wanted to get married, and then have children, and have a happy home. Because it's something I didn't have, so I was really keen to have that. And my life couldn't be further off from what I wanted. I've got two children, two different dads, none of them around.

For Anaïs, adapting the genre is slow and arduous but also painful and frightening. The longing for her fantasy does not diminish, but her hope of its being realised fades.

5.4 Discussion

Building on Berlant's concept of *genre*, I show how my participants orient their expectations of motherhood, and how those expectations contribute to anchoring and sustaining them (at the same time as they might overwhelm them). All participants talked about variations around a genre of motherhood and related the genre to different fantasies of the good life. I find that relying on *genre* rather than *norms* provides a more precise lens to explore maternal affects and experiences.

Unlike earlier works that have taken for granted the reasons mothers may embrace conventional ways of life, I relate conventionality to psychosocial mechanisms that people deploy to sustain themselves amidst a life that can feel exciting, overwhelming, and unbearable (see similar critiques in Walkerdine, 1998). For example, Anaïs performs intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) because she hopes it will deliver the heteronormative picture she mourned in her childhood, and Sophie because she hopes it will help her have an impact by nurturing the best child. I notice these motivations influence which aspects of the convention mobilise difficult affects: Anaïs is distressed when she cannot cook, while Sophie feels pressure regarding her child's development. This contributes to existing work about maternal affects (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023; Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2024; Forbes et al., 2021; Karademir Hazır, 2024; Miller, 2007; Staneva et al., 2017). Which norms are embraced also varies according to maternal fantasies. For example, cooking is central to Anaïs because she fantasises herself as caretaker and nurturer for her imagined husband and children, but it is secondary for Amélie, who prioritises cleaning and decorating to have a pretty home. Finally, *genre* encourages us to read motherhood as a scene that includes yet exceeds the practice of mothering.

Building from this and Berlant's work on *optimism* (Berlant, 2011a), I propose that relations to the maternal genre – too much or not enough affiliation with a genre of motherhood – may provide important context for understanding markers and drivers of anxiety and depression (see Table 5.2). When affiliation with the genre is viable, difficult affects may arise from the demands of sustaining patterns of motherhood. When affiliation with the genre is unviable, difficult affects may arise from losing conventionality's anchoring and heartening potentials.

Table 5.2: Berlantian Readings of Anxiety and Depression

	Anxiety	**Depression**
Genre Holds	Fear that motherhood will not (always) deliver on its promises and affective struggle from staying attached to motherhood as it is fantasised	Exhaustion from staying attached to motherhood as it is fantasised and sadness that motherhood has not come through on all its promises without giving it up

Genre Does Not Hold	Frightening discontinuity that motherhood as it was fantasised is lost, together with the good life it was meant to deliver	Grief of having lost motherhood as it was fantasised, together with the good life it was meant to deliver, and hopelessness about what to do next

5.4.1 Anxiety

When the genre holds, I observe that anxiety is marked in participants by a heightened fear that it will not hold forever. Amélie, who has gotten close to her maternal fantasy, describes an intense distress that 'this isn't going to last.' Similarly, Sophie worries that there is always more to do and it feels like 'a constant struggle.' This mobilises perpetual worry, persistent nervousness, and physical tension. It feels especially urgent when some of motherhood's promises are already lost, like with Sophie's childbirth and breastfeeding.

The response to this fear may be to launch into action. Then, anxiety is marked by the affective struggle that arises from staying attached to the genre. Amélie develops a tally chart that wounds her mentally and financially. Similarly, Sophie deploys considerable energy to maintain control. In that sense, motherhood opens up ambivalent affects for participants: it promises and delivers fulfilment at the same time as it exhausts and wounds them. This profile of anxiety looks like the affective copy of that ambivalence when it gets out of hand and hinders their capacity to live a life.

When the genre does not hold, I observe that anxiety is marked by the affective experience of discontinuity caused by losing the genre and its associated fantasy. The loss is a double one, as discussed above: It takes Kate long to admit that she cannot maintain her 'superwoman' genre because this not only destroys the motherhood she had expected but also the life trajectory and consistency she had imagined. In the meantime, she experiences anxiety and fantasises violent scenarios. My participants described feelings of panic, fear, and heart palpitations.

5.4.2 Depression

When the genre holds, I observe that depression is marked by exhaustion from sustaining a demanding genre. Anaïs cooks from scratch, Kate juggles an exhausting career with child- and homecare, and Amélie keeps everything happy and pretty. All this is strenuous; participants described feelings of tiredness and guilt. Sometimes, exhaustion barely

registers on the senses: Sophie does not 'have time to get depressed' and Kate carries on for long before admitting depression. The action that their anxiety triggers shields them, at least for a while.

When the genre does not hold, I observe that depression is marked by the grief of having lost – or failed to retain – its organising assurances and promises. My participants' drives become too damaged by their difficulties to sustain optimism that their fantasy will materialise, and they become depressed. Anaïs expresses intense sadness about failing to deliver the heteronormative scene she had fantasised. Similarly, Sophie still cries when discussing breastfeeding.

The response this provokes is not unlike grief. Mourning may take different shapes–for example, based on how responsibility is construed. Kate blames herself for failing to sustain the genre and therefore responds with shame and reduced self-esteem. Anaïs, on the other hand, expresses anger. Participants described low mood, agitation, and feelings of worthlessness.

5.4.3 Bargains

Some participants cannot make sense of lived experiences through their genre of motherhood, or sustain it, and feel that the fantasy it was expected to deliver will not be reached. So, they must rewrite their genre of motherhood to make its promises accessible or bearable again. Kate must relinquish her 'superwoman' expectations and Anaïs must discard her 'traditional mum' aspirations.

They experience the adjustment as a crisis, but we can imagine that some adjustments are more of the ordinary kind–as when we review our expectations of a friendship or our hopes for a job. It may require time to accept one's need to adjust. Kate masks her difficulties and carries on despite anxiety. The adjustment may also look messy, often proceeding in fits and starts. Anaïs runs back to her genre and gives it another go before accepting that 'it's just not [her].' It is tempting to embrace the belief that the fantasy is attainable even when all signs indicate otherwise.

Interestingly, social models may help organise how one feels about what has been lost. Kate copes by discarding the *yummy mummies* as unreal. But it may also complicate adjustment when what has been lost by one has proven possible for others. Anaïs projects anger towards mothers who seemingly sustain the genre, and Sophie experiences social shame. As such, yearning may persist long after one is forced to move

on.

Finally, for participants whose genre holds, I observe that conventionality becomes a strategy to sustain themselves and protect their optimism. We have seen that Amélie and Sophie deploy intensive mothering as a response to the fear of losing their genre and its promises: motherhood becomes an all-encompassing practice in which they invest time, energy, and money, and around which their identity revolves (Hays, 1996). Conventionality, therefore, enables them to cope and defend themselves against anxiety at the same time as it mobilises it.

5.5 Conclusions

Informed by a Berlantian lens, my interviews with mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression reveal the expectations for self- and world-continuity they invest in motherhood. I show how their feelings of anxiety and depression relate to such expectations. I also reveal the strategies they deploy to maintain their optimism that, despite the difficulties it mobilises, motherhood will deliver the good life they fantasise. Overall, I demonstrate how repeated affective and behavioural adjustments are central to surviving the demands of motherhood; and I confirm the damage to women of their perceived difficulties to sustain, or failures to realise, the good life that motherhood had seemed to promise.

I show the relevance Berlant's work on optimism bears for understanding how mothers invest in, organise, and experience motherhood. I also extend this work in two ways: I provide insights into how anxiety and depression may relate to our attachments to objects, and I further map out strategies individuals may use to navigate coming too close or not close enough to their fantasies of the good life.

This work is of broader sociological importance because it provides a lens and vocabulary to articulate our complex relation to life objects, and the emotions this relation mobilises. In that sense I do not only explore what happens to our understanding of motherhood when we address its affective dimensions, but also what looking at motherhood does to our understanding of affective attachments to the good life (Lane and Joensuu, 2018). My work also underlines the ordinary as a place of struggles and efforts of world-making that warrant attention, aligning with growing calls for a sociology of the mundane (e.g. Mattingly, 2014).

Beyond motherhood, there are many attachments we invest in, struggle for, and

live. Some attachments, like work under capitalism or material aspirations under austerity, may also elicit anxiety and depression. Some objects, like family and romantic relationships, may embody particularly loaded promises difficult to relinquish. Some genres, like those related to beliefs or politics, may often collapse. The affects our objects mobilise may be of the ordinary kind, and they may get out of hand. It is only by asking what these objects embody that we can begin to understand how we relate to them, and to imagine better attachments for better optimism.

6
Conclusion

6.1 Overview

This project was guided by two research aims. One was to contribute to gender studies and studies of family and motherhood by advancing our understanding of cultural discourses of motherhood and of mothers' experiences of them. This was achieved by integrating an analytical framework derived from the works of Lauren Berlant to understand the ambivalence of maternal discourses and experiences. The other was to contribute to social theory by appraising the applicability of this Berlantian framework for social-scientific work. Both aims threaded through the preceding chapters.

Each chapter, written as scholarly articles, aimed to answer a distinct question:

- What are the main scholarly influences and concepts in Laurent Berlant's works, and how might their works be compatible with and relevant for social-scientific research? (Chapter 2)
- What are the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood? (Chapter 3)

- How can we make sense of the ambivalence found in cultural discourses of motherhood? (Chapter 4)
- How do mothers experience motherhood and its relation to cultural discourses? (Chapter 5)

Each of the empirical chapters used a different archive (dataset) and methodology, although they were designed to foster a conversation. Chapter 3 presented a systematic review of $k = 55$ studies about the representation of motherhood in media in any geographical location published after the 31st of December 2016. Chapter 4 presented a thematic analysis of $k = 110$ YouTube videos, $k = 4$ websites, $k = 267$ packages, and $k = 680$ Instagram posts from 5 contemporary brands that target mothers in the United Kingdom (UK). And Chapter 5 presented a narrative analysis of interviews with $n = 15$ mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression.

This work contributes to our understanding of motherhood and motherhood norms by proposing to understand both as spaces of bargaining where individuals and hegemonic institutions attempt to preserve mothers' optimism that motherhood will deliver the good life they have fantasised—even in the face of overwhelming and difficult lived experiences. My thesis also extends the works of Lauren Berlant in three ways: it offers a proof of concept for their adaptation to empirical social-scientific work; it provides insights into how the particular affects of anxiety and depression may relate to attachments to life objects; and it further maps out strategies that individuals may use to navigate coming too close or not close enough to their fantasies of the good life.

6.2 Key Contributions to Gender Studies and the Studies of Family and Motherhood

6.2.1 Reading Cultural Discourses of Motherhood as Spaces of Bargaining

Summary

In Chapter 4, I have argued that cultural discourses of motherhood are best understood as spaces of bargaining where maternal optimism is negotiated incessantly. I have shown that brand representations position motherhood as an object that can deliver the good life–fulfilment, meaning, and impact. However, motherhood may bring about

disaffirming scenarios that seem far removed from the fantasy of that good life. Therefore, I have also shown that brand representations simultaneously offer validations and resources (like reduced expectations, guidance, frameworks for understanding, recognition, promises, and affective reliefs) that can enable mothers to retain optimism in such difficult circumstances.

My argument is that these two mechanisms, when combined, help absorb the difficulties of motherhood in a way that protects its promises of fulfilment. This, in turn, prevents mothers from questioning 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 fantasy itself may be prevented, and optimism may endure. By offering mechanisms to help mothers maintain the assemblage of their fantasy, therefore, cultural discourses prevent the questioning of the social failings which threatened that fantasy in the first place—or, indeed, of the hegemony that created it.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This finding makes three key contributions to existing literature.

First, it addresses and explains the contradictory results of existing research about cultural discourses of motherhood. Chapter 3 reveals that studies about maternal representations in the media present conflicting findings, both contradicting one another and highlighting tensions within their own results. On the one hand, works show that traditional expectations endure (Hays, 1996) as mothers remain portrayed as primary caregivers who happily invest their time, emotions, and money into an intensive practice of expertise-based care around which their identity revolves (Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Feldman, 2021; Lerner, 2018; Mackenzie, 2018; Orgad and Meng, 2017). On the other hand, a growing body of works has found that motherhood discourses acknowledge mothers' difficult experiences and promote a more relaxed approach to mothering (Barak-Brandes, 2017a; Cino, 2020; Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019; Van Cleaf, 2020). This echoes tensions found in other fields, such as in representations of teen girls (McRobbie, 2008; Renold and Ringrose, 2011). There have been calls for developing a sociological understanding of this ambivalence, which some have argued sits at the very essence of subjectivity under modern conditions (what Renold and Ringrose (2011) call *normative schizoid subjectivity*). Yet there have been few attempts to do so, maybe because we

lack a 'sufficiently complex' framework (Renold and Ringrose, 2011).

Chapter 4 addresses this gap by proposing that such tensions are necessary, because they enable political and market cultures to uphold the hegemony of traditional motherhood in the face of mothers' disaffirming experiences of it. Indeed, mothers' lived experience may contradict the depictions of bliss, impact, and fulfilment that capitalist representations attempt to sustain. I have therefore argued that discourses of motherhood must find ways to acknowledge and organise these contradictions in ways that make them less threatening to the fantasy of motherhood they attempt to sell. This explains the seemingly contradictory findings of recent studies, showing that tensions are not only common but essential.

This finding is located in a context of what McRobbie (2013) has called 'neoliberal feminist motherhood'. Through this term, McRobbie points to a new scene of motherhood, where what was previously understood as 'traditional motherhood' is now painted as a fulfilling enterprise or small business which the mother may choose to pursue and subsequently lead successfully (see also Barak-Brandes, 2017b; Davis et al., 2022; Orgad and Meng, 2017). Such a scene emerges from the combination of individualistic, neoliberal values and a feminism that emphasises self-management as a route to empowerment (McRobbie, 2015). This new take on domestic life elevates mothering as a fulfilling and worthwhile path towards the capitalist good life, thus reversing feminist denunciations of housework and childcare as monotonous and exhausting. In so doing, it brings up to date, and aims to make appealing, a historically conservative 'family values agenda'–what we have mostly read, in this work, as representations and performances of 'intensive mothering' and 'traditional motherhood'.

By offering a new gendered dimension to the mantra of individualism and competition, this discourse opens avenues for new markets, like 'child-friendly coffee shops and so-called "school run fashion" for the so-called "yummy mummies"' (McRobbie, 2013: 130) while circumventing the needs for, and the increasing absence of, welfare support. This becomes obvious in the promotion of mother-influencers (Beuckels and De Wolf, 2024) and the rise of *momoirs* (authored mostly by middle-class white women, like Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg whose book McRobbie dissects skilfully) that often emphasise self-sufficiency and resilience–or, indeed, in the materials encountered in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of this work. As such, this discourse is enabled by, and benefits, the entanglements of political culture, markets, media, and social media.

The ordinary of contemporary motherhood, for McRobbie (2013: 136), therefore

becomes a 'moralistic playground of lifestyle and consumer culture, predicated on young women making the right choices and adopting, at an early age, the right kind of life plan.' In Berlantian terms, this implies encouraging women to pursue the *proper life* as a way to the *good life* (Berlant, 2011a: 164). And, as we have just seen, it requires bargaining with contradicting experiences to sustain the promise that fulfilment will come, in the end. Through McRobbie's efforts to encapsulate a rising cultural genre of *traditional motherhood* as *neoliberal feminist motherhood*, we understand how promises of the good life become entangled with political and market agendas to sustain a disguised form of traditional domesticity. This, under the pretence of a feminist empowerment in corporate terms, sustains an absence of welfare support that wounds both women and feminism.

Second, it offers a more nuanced understanding of motherhood ideologies, used broadly in studies of maternal representations and experiences. Studies of motherhood have largely relied on seemingly cohesive models that offer a set of expectations for the 'good mother'–what Johnston and Swanson (2003) have termed 'motherhood ideologies'. For example, Hays (1996: 8)'s framework of intensive motherhood observed that women are portrayed as the appropriate primary caregivers for their children and that motherhood should be 'child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive.' Other frequently used frameworks include the 'traditionalist', 'feminist', 'neotraditionalist', and 'economic-nurturer' ideologies first conceptualised by Keller (1991). These have been popular because they enable researchers to organise their findings and to foster a dialogue with past studies, for example showing an evolution from traditionalist to feminist models. They have been used in studies about representations of motherhood (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2003; Pedersen, 2016) but also as a prism to understand mothers' emotions, experiences, and affective work (e.g. Cappellini et al., 2019).

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 refine this theoretical framework by revealing that motherhood ideologies are populated by internal and external tensions that are necessary to their sustenance. Chapter 3 suggests that motherhood ideologies are permeable, as media feature more than one ideology at the same time, and are populated by internal tensions. This suggests that mothers are not exposed to linear and cohesive narratives, like 'motherhood ideologies' might suggest. Chapter 4 explains these tensions by proposing to view discourses of motherhood, not as closed and coherent clusters of meaning, but as spaces of bargaining where contradictions are constantly worked through

and brushed aside. For example, 'traditionalist' and 'neotraditionalist' representations must admit the difficult affects that their demanding values may mobilise, and rationalise them as worthwhile if they wish for mothers to subscribe to the fantasy they attempt to sell. In this way, contradictions are not a flaw of motherhood ideologies, but their ontology.

Third, and finally, it demonstrates the relevance of looking at media affordances – understood as the material, social, cultural, and historical potentials and constraints of media for making meaning – to understand cultural discourses of motherhood. Scholarly work on motherhood representations has proliferated, and recent years have seen increasing maternal research across new media. Colleagues have explored social media (e.g. Feldman, 2021; Hernández, 2019; Johnson and Rintoul, 2019; Mackenzie, 2018; Orgad and Baldwin, 2021), web platforms (e.g. Imbaquingo and Davila, 2020), blogs (e.g. Abetz and Moore, 2018; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Hartzell, 2017; Lehto, 2022; McGannon et al., 2017a; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Van Cleaf, 2020) and forums (e.g. Cino, 2020; Dorofeeva et al., 2021; Khvorostyanov and Yeshua-Katz, 2020; Miklyaeva and Rumyantceva, 2018) on top of traditional media like advertising (e.g. Barak-Brandes, 2017a,b), magazines (e.g. César et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2022), and TV series or movies (e.g. Brydon, 2018; Douglas et al., 2022; Lachover, 2019; Lerner, 2018; Rodgers, 2019). However, no research so far has engaged with the relation between the affordances of different media and the motherhood discourses they offer, despite scholarship pointing to the relevance of individual affordances (e.g. Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017).

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 address this gap by relating media affordances to discourses and affects of motherhood. Chapter 3 demonstrates that the objectives and affordances of media play an important role in emphasising and silencing elements of motherhood. This influences the maternal scripts that become dominant in different media and, therefore, the hegemony of maternal ideologies at a given time and place. It offers a framework that summarises and contrasts this phenomenon across media. Extending from this, Chapter 4 reveals how such affordances serve maternal discourses to harness different emotions. It reveals, for example, that the democratic genre of amateur videos and interviews can serve to create a scene of solidarity rooted in mutual recognition; that social media humour and the humorous tone of videos can serve to reduce disaffirming scenarios to common, comical anecdotes; that the emotional tone of videos and photos can serve to construct motherhood as fulfilling and impactful; and that the genre of video series and the tools of blogs and websites can serve to provide reassurance and

guidance and alleviate doubts. I have shown, and summarised above, how this in turn enables hegemonic discourses of traditional motherhood to sustain. This demonstrates the relevance of combining scrutiny of affordances and an affective lens to understand media discourses of motherhood.

Implications for Further Work

This work considered what happens to our understanding of motherhood and motherhood norms when we address their affective dimensions. In this regard, the present finding has at least four implications for further research. First, it encourages further work about cultural discourses of motherhood to address the tensions found in their results through the lens of optimism. For example, the framework provided in Chapter 4 may serve as a starting point. Second, it encourages further work about cultural discourses of motherhood to explore how motherhood is constructed as part of the good life, including instances when hegemonic discourses of motherhood and the good life are questioned. For example, there has been rising work about user-generated content, and it is possible that some users may question the traditional fantasy of motherhood and propose alternatives they perceive as more accessible. Third, it encourages further work about cultural discourses of motherhood to consider how the affordances of media harness specific affects, and to what aim. Fourth, and more broadly, this work offers a way to bridge the gap between two strands in the field of studies of motherhood: those that have explored representations of motherhood, and those that have investigated maternal experiences and affects. It reveals that both work together to construct mothers' fantasies of the good life and protect their optimism that it will materialise. Therefore, it suggests that both strands can learn from one another.

By looking at motherhood and motherhood norms, this work also contributes to our understanding of attachments to the good life. It reveals the mechanisms that hegemonic discourses may use to organise the ambivalence of our attachments to life objects, like motherhood, in ways that protects the fantasy they aim to sustain. This aligns with scholarship that has called for more attention to conformity (e.g. Walkerdine, 1998; Walkerdine et al., 2001), because it suggests that subscribing to normative discourses has affective motivations. This is further discussed in the following section.

6.2.2 Relating Maternal Affects and Experiences to Optimism

Summary

In Chapter 5, I have argued that motherhood experiences and affects are best understood in relation to mothers' efforts to protect their optimism in motherhood's capacity to deliver the good life. I have shown that mothers invest personal expectations in motherhood, and in how it relates to their sense of the good life. This entails that motherhood exists as (a) a lived experience and (b) a set of projections about how it may bring fulfilment. Losing out on those expectations, as such, would imply losing out on an imagined path to the good life, which is frightening. However, maternal expectations may be wounding to uphold, and mothers may be unable to do so. Therefore, I have shown that mothers may experience anxiety and depression as a result of holding on to, or failing to sustain, their expectations. I have also shown the strategies they deploy to retain optimism that, despite the difficulties it mobilises, motherhood will deliver the good life they fantasise, in the end.

My argument is that mothers are engaged in incessant efforts to sustain their emotional investments in motherhood, because losing the proximity to the good life that motherhood has come to embody would be too threatening. It is wounding to them, both because it requires constant energy and because, when they fail to uphold their fantasy, they encounter a frightening sense of discontinuity. This locates motherhood within a larger affective regime whereby individuals work to protect their optimism in achieving the good life they fantasise–even in the face of contradictory experiences.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This finding makes five key contributions to existing literature.

First, it addresses a gap in sociological work about maternal anxiety and/or depression and demonstrates the relevance of exploring the experiences of this population. Depression and anxiety are prevalent experiences in society (World Health Organization, 2023a,b) and among mothers more specifically (World Health Organization, 2024), being the commonest diagnoses made to women in the years that follow their becoming mothers (Howard and Khalifeh, 2020). Maternal anxiety and depression are associated with worse physical health (Niles and O'Donovan, 2019), negative outcomes for children (Shen et al., 2016), and important economic costs (Howard and Khalifeh, 2020). Yet, they

have been sparsely addressed in sociological research, despite works attending to other difficult affects that may be mobilised by motherhood–such as guilt (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023; Karademir Hazır, 2024), regret (Miller, 2007), self-doubt (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023), distress and fear (Staneva et al., 2017), and shame and stress (Forbes et al., 2021). This may be due to the difficulty of identifying and recruiting from this population.

Chapter 5 addresses this gap by analysing interviews with mothers who have experiences of clinical anxiety and/or depression. To overcome the difficulty of identification and recruitment, I used the Clinical Record Interactive Search (CRIS) system to access the anonymised clinical records of the South London and Maudsley National Health Service Foundation Trust (SLaM). SLaM is one of the largest mental health services in Europe, serving approximately 1.2 million people. Beyond exploring the experiences of this under-studied population, Chapter 5 also shows the sociological relevance of doing so. My analysis reveals that mothers' markers of anxiety and depression may relate to their fantasy of motherhood, and to whether that fantasy upholds. This provides a lens to understand how mothers relate to cultural discourses of motherhood and what happens when such discourses are too hard to attain and sustain. It therefore illustrates the relevance of exploring what experiences of difficult affects, loss, and pain, and how those are managed, can teach us about making meaning and seeking relief (Wilson, 2012).

Second, it provides more depth to the understanding of motherhood norms (and their attractiveness) that is prevalent in studies of motherhood. A growing body of works has attended to the experiences and emotions of mothers as they try to conform to cultural discourses of motherhood, such as intensive mothering (Cappellini et al., 2019; Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2024; Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023; Forbes et al., 2021), social norms of feeding and foodwork (Brouwer et al., 2012; Karademir Hazır, 2024), or ideas of 'the good mother' (Schmidt et al., 2023; Staneva et al., 2017). However, these works have not addressed why mothers may pursue certain norms in the first place, presumably assuming passive conformity to hegemonic discourses (Duschinsky and Wilson, 2015).

Chapter 5 addresses this gap by showing that mothers may strive to uphold motherhood norms because they embody proximity to their sense of the good life. For example, Amélie, one participant encountered in Chapter 5, performs intensive mothering because she hopes that it will enable her to attain and sustain the happy and pretty

home she has fantasised since she was a child. In contrast, Sophie, another participant encountered in Chapter 5, exhibits a similar behaviour because she believes that it will enable her to nurture the best child. This reveals the affective aspirations that motivate attachment to certain maternal norms, and questions whether such behaviour should be regarded as 'passive'.

Third, and extending this, it reveals that motherhood norms are not absorbed uniformly by mothers. Instead, it shows that mothers' relations to norms vary according to the role such norms play in their sense of the good life. As discussed above, works have explored mothers' attempts to conform to cultural discourses of motherhood like intensive mothering (Cappellini et al., 2019; Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2024; Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023; Forbes et al., 2021), social norms of feeding and foodwork (Brouwer et al., 2012; Karademir Hazır, 2024), or ideas of 'the good mother' (Schmidt et al., 2023; Staneva et al., 2017). In so doing, they have often adopted an umbrella view which assumes that mothers strive for the same ideals in similar ways.

However, Chapter 5 demonstrates that this fails to consider how discourses of motherhood might play different roles in mothers' fantasies of the good life. For example, cooking is central to the experience of Anaïs, a participant encountered in Chapter 5, because she fantasises herself as the caretaker and nurturer for her imagined husband and children. Yet, for Amélie, another participant encountered in Chapter 5, nurture is secondary, and she prioritises cleaning, decorating, supporting, and looking after her children to sustain the pretty and happy home she has fantasised. Both participants entertain different relations to the social norm of maternal feeding, because their mothering is motivated by different fantasies of the good life. This shows that, to understand how mothers negotiate and conform to norms, it is relevant to contextualise motherhood as part of a larger endeavour to pursue the good life.

Fourth, it extends works about mothers' affective work by showing that the strategies mothers deploy are better understood through a lens of optimism. Studies have been interested in the ways that mothers navigate their difficult affects (Lane and Joensuu, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2023), most often in relation to their experiences failing to match up normative expectations. They have suggested that mothers may rely on strategies like a Goffmanian split between 'front-stage' and 'backstage' behaviours (Brouwer et al., 2012), or increasing (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2023) and lowering (Fielding-Singh and Cooper, 2024) their expectations of themselves. In so doing, they have read maternal experiences in relation to mothers' perceived ability to meet a fixed set of norms, and

have proposed that the strategies they deploy aim to alleviate the affects they might encounter for failing to perform normative mothering.

Chapter 5 extends this work by showing that, beyond working through feelings about their self-ability, mothers are more broadly engaged in affective labour to protect their fantasy of motherhood. For example, Anaïs, a participant encountered in Chapter 5, discusses difficult feelings in relation to her failure to cook meals 'from scratch'. However, cooking, in her story, is not (only) a prescription of normative maternal feeding discourses. Instead, it stands in for the fantasy of finding joy through nurturing her nuclear family, which will not materialise because she does not enjoy cooking, has no energy for it, and does not have a nuclear family. This explains her anger towards mothers who prepare snacks for their children; these mothers do not embody a task she would have liked to perform, but rather a scene she would have liked to access. Therefore, I show that the strategy that Anaïs deploys, one of complicated mourning and adjustment, is best understood through the lens of failing to attain her fantasy of motherhood, rather than failing to attain the norm of healthy feeding. This demonstrates the relevance of exploring mothers' affective work beyond their own sense of self-efficacy, and through the lens of optimism.

Fifth, and finally, it demonstrates the relevance for studies about maternal anxiety and/or depression to look beyond the perinatal period. Most research, guidelines, and services about maternal mental health have focused on the perinatal period, which typically includes pregnancy and up to one year postnatal (e.g. Howard and Khalifeh, 2020; National Health Service, 2024b). This is presumably because the perinatal period is the most vulnerable time for the emergence of mood disorders in women (Koukopoulos et al., 2020).

Chapter 5 shows that mothers navigate anxiety and/or depression beyond the perinatal years, and that their difficulties may be related to later life stages rather than and/or in addition to their transition to motherhood. To qualify for the study, participants had to have at least one child aged between 6 and 15 years old and have received a diagnosis of anxiety and/or depression since 2021. For most, this meant that they had received a diagnosis of anxiety and/or depression outside of the perinatal period. The interview study revealed that, while one's expectations of motherhood may collapse as soon as motherhood is encountered as a lived experience, motherhood is a space of adjustments in which constant efforts are deployed to uphold one's fantasy much beyond that time. For example, Amélie and Sophie, two participants encountered

in Chapter 5, still deploy ever-consuming energy to uphold their maternal fantasy, which manifests in markers of anxiety. What is more, they experience their children starting school as a threat to their fantasy, because they are now exposed to external influences that risk destabilising their fragile equilibrium. This mobilises new affects and demands new strategies, demonstrating the relevance of exploring maternal experiences beyond the perinatal period.

Implications for Further Work

This work considered what happens to our understanding of motherhood and motherhood norms when we address their affective dimensions. In this regard, the present finding has at least five implications for further research. First, it encourages further work about experiences of motherhood to address the life stages of mothers beyond the perinatal years. For example, a longitudinal analysis of maternal affects and experiences may provide insights into how mothers protect their optimism throughout different moments of adaptation, such as when children start school, enter their teenage years, or leave home. Second, it encourages further work about cultural discourses of motherhood, and mothers' experiences of navigating them, to explore mothers' affective motivations for upholding certain norms. For example, studies using qualitative interviews may opt to begin with a discussion of how participants imagine(d) motherhood and themselves as mothers before addressing their lived experiences. Third, it encourages further work about mothers' experiences to resist the assumption that mothers uphold maternal norms uniformly, instead pushing them to consider which aspects of maternal ideologies participants subscribe to, and why. For example, analyses should engage with what certain practices, such as feeding, may embody for participants. Fourth, it encourages further work about maternal affects to understand the difficulties that mothers encounter in relation to their efforts for achieving the good life. Fifth, and more broadly, this work demonstrates the relevance of looking at motherhood as a place of life-building, where systemic threats to mothers' projects of the good life must be held off incessantly.

This work also considered what looking at motherhood and motherhood norms can offer to our understanding of attachments to the good life. In this regard, it illustrates how the ordinary becomes a space where individuals incessantly work to protect their optimism against systemic and ordinary menaces. It also shows how this labour is embodied affectively in individuals, in this case, through feelings of anxiety and/or

depression. It finds that motherhood is a particularly relevant position to explore attachment to fantasies, because it cannot be relinquished when the fantasy dissipates, as one may choose to pursue romance with a different partner. Motherhood is therefore an interesting case study for understanding how individuals hold on to their fantasies or strive to adapt them when no alternative seems bearable. But it is one among many attachments that individuals invest in, struggle for, and live. As such, this work opens questions about attachments to objects such as work, material aspirations, friends, family, or religious or political beliefs.

6.3 Key Theoretical Contributions: Extending the Works of Lauren Berlant

6.3.1 Epistemological and Methodological Reflections

Summary

In Chapter 2, I introduced the works of Lauren Berlant and made an argument for the relevance of adapting their framework for use in empirical social-scientific work. Part of this argument included a discussion of their epistemological and methodological compatibility with social-scientific approaches. I showed through Berlant's own accounts of their epistemology that they were heterodox in what they regarded as 'worthy knowledge' and about what should compose their archive, having themselves used a variety of materials, including medical work. I also considered three contributions that could be made by engaging Berlant in social-scientific work, in conceptualising and studying compliance, affects, and the ordinary.

Having set the scene, I engaged Berlant's theoretical framework in Chapters 4 and 5. Motherhood is an experience that has often been associated with ordinary, domestic life (Lane and Joensuu, 2018) and characterised by affective experiences (Cappellini et al., 2019). For some, encounters with these affects may even be the defining feature of mothering (Lane and Joensuu, 2018). Further, much works in studies of motherhood have explored cultural discourses of motherhood and mothers' experiences in relation to compliance to a set of norms, as I have just summarised. The case of motherhood thus offered an ideal scene to explore the potential contributions of conceptualising and studying compliance, affects, and the ordinary through a Berlantian lens.

I did this in two ways. First, staying close to Berlant's interest in mass cultural

texts, but integrating a social-scientific approach for selecting and analysing such texts, I proposed a thematic analysis, informed by Berlant's model, of online branding materials targeted at UK mothers. Of particular relevance was Berlant's work on the intimate public of *women's culture*, which I extended to propose a theorisation of *mothers' culture*, understood as a market domain where a set of difficulties associated with managing the imaginary and lived practices of motherhood are expressed and organised incessantly. Second, departing more drastically from Berlant's practices, I offered to analyse qualitative interviews with mothers who have experiences of anxiety and/or depression, informed once again by Berlant's model. Of particular relevance was Berlant's discussion of *cruel optimism* and ambivalent desire, which I extended to theorise mothers' projections in, attachments to, and ambivalence towards, motherhood. Of relevance too was Berlant's concept of *genre*, which helped to shed light on ways that patterns for how life as a mother should be desired and lived refracted in my participants.

Overall, I have shown that Berlant's analytic, with its attention to compliance, affects, and the ordinary, is particularly well suited to the sociological study of both cultural texts and lived experiences. In this case study, a Berlant-informed lens has helped me to conceptualise motherhood and motherhood norms as spaces of bargaining where individuals and hegemonic institutions both set and prop up mothers' optimism that motherhood will deliver the good life they have fantasised.

In relation to compliance, Berlant's works have helped me show that mass cultural discourses embed motherhood as one important object for the larger project of life building, where threats to the fantasy of the good life must be held off incessantly. This prompts mothers to invest loaded expectations into forms of motherhood, and thus complicates detachment from them, because of the fantasies they have magnetised. As a result, compliance to maternal norms is not read as passive but as a defence against a loss of direction, which is awkward and threatening.

In relation to affects, Berlant's works have helped me theorise the ways in which mass cultural discourses addressed to mothers construct a fantasy that mothers' lives are understood by other mothers, and that those discourses can therefore be relied upon for reassurance and direction. Berlant's works on affect theory have also helped me engage the affective responses of my participants, particularly in defence against threats to their optimism.

Finally, in relation to the ordinary, Berlant's works have helped me track the energy that is mobilised daily by mothers to sustain their attachments, a work that becomes

particularly visible in the face of the overwhelming and difficult lived experiences that can and often do characterise mothers' historical present.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This makes two key contributions to existing literature.

First, it supports the applicability of a framework inspired by Berlant's works to the sociological thematic analysis of new media texts. Berlant occupied themselves primarily with literary and cinematographic archives. For instance, *The Anatomy of a National Fantasy* (Berlant, 1991) analyses the oeuvre of American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne; *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Berlant and Edelman, 2014) interprets works of cinema, photography, critical theory, and literature; and *The Female Complaint* (Berlant, 2008b) offers close readings of U.S. women's literary works and their stage and film adaptations. However Berlant had declared their agnosticism to the nature of the archive, that showed in their study of mass media, from Forrest Gump to The Simpsons (Berlant, 1997), the law, including the testimony of Anita Hill before the Senate Judiciary Committee (Berlant, 1997), medical works, including public health reports, websites, and statistics (Berlant, 2011a), and even their encounters with daily life (Berlant and Stewart, 2019b). And, indeed, many scholars have already attempted to submit new archives to a Berlantian lens, including new media texts (Azhar and Boler, 2023; Pedwell, 2023).

Chapter 4 supports these initial efforts by incorporating some of Berlant's key concepts to a thematic analysis of new media texts. The texts, which encompassed $k = 110$ YouTube videos, $k = 4$ websites, $k = 267$ packages, and $k = 680$ Instagram posts from 5 contemporary brands that target UK mothers, were sampled according to traditional social-scientific methods. This involved justifying, for example, the selection of the brands and when data had been judged to have reached saturation. While Berlant would not have used such a sampling approach, favouring instead the selection of texts they judged relevant to the problem at hand, the social-scientific sampling of texts is compatible with Berlant's agnosticism towards the principles of formation of the archive.

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2021)'s method, a standard in empirical social-scientific work. Thematic analysis is particularly suited to the sociological integration of Berlant's work because it provides sufficient flexibility to integrate a theoretical framework of one's choosing. Using some of Berlant's key concepts, it is

possible to generate themes of interest; in the case of this work, two ideas derived from Berlant's works proved especially relevant to organise the thematic analysis. Adapting Berlant's concept of *women's culture*, I aimed to map out the affects that are captured by mass cultural texts addressed to mothers, and the lifestyles they offer. Having coded inductively, I used the concept of *mothers' culture* to organise and refine themes in a way that would illuminate the mechanisms used in hegemonic discourses of family life. In turn, this contributed to making the sociological observation that mothers are expected and encouraged to live with and to desire the forms of family life that have historically denied them legitimacy and autonomy. In addition, Berlant's training in Marxist critical theory, and particularly their argument that ideologies are ontologically incoherent, influenced my treatment of contradictory codes and themes. Unlike conceptual tools like 'motherhood ideologies' that promote the formulation of coherent discourses, Berlant's model encourages attention to the ambivalences that empower hegemonic genres by enabling their capacity to absorb lived experiences that contradict them. This is helpful to organise diverging themes in the sociological analysis of texts.

Second, it supports the applicability of a framework inspired by Berlant's works to the sociological analysis of qualitative interviews. Though Berlant engaged in ethnographic work (Berlant and Stewart, 2019b), they never conducted or analysed qualitative interviews, a staple method of social-scientific literature. Nonetheless an increasing body of works have applied individual concepts to the discussion of interview studies (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). Some of their concepts have even been applied specifically to the study of interviews with mothers (Cappellini et al., 2019). It is unclear whether Berlant's framework has ever been used to inform the design of interview studies and materials, such as interview guides.

Chapter 5 addresses this gap by incorporating some of Berlant's key concepts to the design, conduct, and analysis of semi-structured interviews with human participants. Here interviews were conducted with $n = 15$ mothers who have experiences of anxiety and/or depression. Once again, sampling was conducted according to traditional social-scientific methods. This involved pursuing maximum diversity sampling for ethnicity, for example, and justifying inclusion/exclusion criteria. The interview guide was organised by some of Berlant's key ideas. Their argument that an *object* magnetises fantasies, for example, informed questions about what participants had imagined from motherhood, and their theorisation of *cruel optimism* and ambivalent desire encouraged attention in

the guide to difficult affects.

The analysis of interview transcripts followed a narrative approach. Narrative analysis is particularly suited to the sociological integration of Berlant's work because it provides the infrastructure to track how organising life narratives, what Berlant has called *genres*, shape individual experiences. Two ideas derived from Berlant's works proved especially relevant to organise the narrative analysis. As I have just hinted, I used Berlant's concept of *genre* to understand how life narratives that are societally desirable had refracted in my participants' imaginaries and experiences of motherhood. I tracked their fantasies for motherhood, including how they had been formed, had evolved, and how the participants felt about them now, in the narratives participants offered. In turn, this contributed to making the sociological observation that the fear of losing those organising narratives, or indeed the experience of losing them, organised mothers' energy and mobilised in them ambivalent affects. This observation was further scaffolded by another of Berlant's ideas: influenced by Berlant's reading of psychoanalysis, embodied in their concept of *cruel optimism*, I documented how participants felt compelled to repeat forms of motherhood that were hurtful or counterproductive.

Implications for Further Work

This work has broadly demonstrated the relevance and compatibility of integrating a theoretical framework inspired by Lauren Berlant's oeuvre to empirical social-scientific studies. It has been particularly successful in connecting the study of texts and that of interviews with participants. Berlant's epistemological and methodological openness and curiosity have enabled me to approach the problem at hand from different angles, and subsequently to combine diverse forms of knowledge to disturb and advance sociological accounts of maternal discourses and experiences.

The present contribution therefore has promising implications for further research. In relation to the sociological study of texts, it encourages further work to integrate Berlant's conceptual toolbox by means of a thematic analysis. Particularly well suited to this exercise is the concept of *intimate public*, since it was organised by and for Berlant's study of mass culture. It may also prove interesting to explore efforts to loosen objects, for example in political activist and user-generated content. In relation to the sociological study of qualitative interviews, it encourages further work to investigate the potential of a Berlant-informed framework by means of a narrative analysis. Berlant's

reading of psychoanalysis, mobilised in concepts like *cruel optimism*, is suited to exploring participants' rapport to compliance and their compulsion to return to objects of failure. For multi-method studies and those that also include the analysis of discourses, Berlant's discussion of Marxist critical theory opens a way to integrate cultural and individual accounts. Finally, for researchers who attend to new ways of imagining the good life – what traditional sociological models might call *resistance* – Berlant's discussion of queer theory might prove a fruitful springboard.

6.3.2 Theorising Anxiety and Depression

Summary

Berlant's model suggests that the experience of living, for example that of living as a woman or as a mother, makes itself known first affectively. This is to say that subjects find themselves responding to the atmospheres and crises of the present as if intuitively, or in a felt sense that *something is up*, before they can sort those affects into delineated feelings and address them (or not). In Chapter 5, I have argued that affects like anxiety and depression are therefore best understood as sites of enquiry and potential elucidation that register how the conditions of life in the present move across mothers. An implication of Berlant's model is that the affects I have documented are typically *shared*, even as they may feel specific. And, indeed, I have argued that mothers exhibit similar patterns of affective responses, which has enabled me to map and theorise those responses.

My argument is that anxiety and depression are mobilised among mothers in response to the fear of a loss, or indeed to the loss, of a form of motherhood that was invested with their fantasies of the good life. The loss is a double one, since it entails losing both a lifestyle or style of mothering, *and* what that lifestyle embodied, with all its promises. As such it may be avoided, when it can be; but staying attached to the chosen form of motherhood can be painful and counterproductive too. This is to say that, whatever one chooses, anxiety and depression can occur if one stays or if one goes.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This extends Berlant's theory by providing insights into how the particular affects of anxiety and depression may relate to individuals' investments in and attachment to important objects. Whilst Berlant made passing references to the challenging feelings that are produced by our attachment to objects, they did not provide an account of

particular affects. Yet, they underlined the relevance of ordinary moods like anxiety and depression to understanding our relation to the systems that mobilise them. They appear to have read anxiety as the affective response to the ambivalence that is mobilised by having objects that embody the good life we desire but hurt us along the way (Berlant, 2008b: 13, 173; Berlant, 2011c: 687; Berlant, 2022: 118; Berlant and Edelman, 2014: 8). Depression could be understood as the recognition that bargains with our objects are not working out–which may evoke reinvestment in optimism, or not (Berlant, 2008b: 175, 180; Berlant,2007a: 35; Berlant).

Chapter 5 extends this work by providing an analysis of anxiety and depression through the lens of attachments to the good life, applied to the case study of motherhood. I show that both can be understood in relation to whether narrative genres hold when confronted with lived experiences. I argue that, when genres hold, anxiety is marked by a heightened fear that one's life objects will not always deliver on their promises, and the affective struggle that arises from staying attached to one's objects. Depression, in this case, is marked by exhaustion from sustaining demanding attachments. I also argue that, when genres do not hold, anxiety is marked by the affective experience of discontinuity that is caused by losing the sensed proximity to the good life that the object embodied. Depression, in this case, is marked by grief at having lost one's fantasies, and hopelessness about what to do next.

Chapter 5 thus aligns with Cvetkovich (2012) in understanding depression as one affective regime of social and cultural phenomena. Like her, I see what gets called despair and anxiety as ordinary feelings that may get out of hand but may also be barely discernible from 'just the way things are' (Cvetkovich, 2012: 14). However, while Cvetkovich explores a context of keeping up with and getting neglected by the professional conditions of neoliberal global economic politics (Cvetkovich, 2012: 12, 26), my focus is on pursuing attachments in our intimate family lives, and I deploy the lens of optimistic investments in the good life. For Cvetkovich, depression is 'getting stuck' under the demands and oppressions of late capitalism and colonialism (Cvetkovich, 2012), and creativity provides a way out of the impasse because it sits outside of productive demands. In contrast, Chapter 5 advances that anxiety and depression arise from a plethora of conditions that include losing direction but also holding on and moving forward. The way out – or, *back in* optimism – may be creativity, albeit it is not found in crafts and spirituality (Cvetkovich, 2012) but in imagining more bearable and attainable fantasies. And sometimes, it is conventionality rather than creativity that appears to

save the day.

Implications for Further Work

This work has contributed to Berlant's oeuvre by exploring how specific affects, here anxiety and depression, are mobilised in response to crisis. The present contribution therefore has promising implications for further research. It encourages further work to explore the study of affects in participant interviews through a Berlantian lens. In particular, more work is welcome to explore affects other than anxiety and depression, in order to further extend Berlant's theory. For example, Berlant became interested in dissociation, proposing to theorise it in their final book *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Berlant, 2022). It would be interesting to consider the accounts of those with experiences of dissociation to further develop this work. There have also been indications in Berlant's work to disaggregate affects, for example, looking within depression at detachment, despair, and suicidality. This suggests avenues for more refined work. More work is welcome, too, on affects of anxiety and depression in additional contexts. Berlant was particularly interested in how individuals sustain optimism under systemic attrition, or under 'the structural pressure of crisis and loss that are wearing out the power of the good life's traditional fantasy bribe without wearing out the need for a good life.' (Berlant, 2011a: 7) Their work might therefore be well suited to the study of communities within motherhood and beyond that experience increased structural crises, such as those under economic hardships, single parents, queer individuals, or those with experiences of social care involvement.

6.3.3 Tracking Strategies for Sustaining Optimism

Summary

In Berlant's model, the ordinary is the location of the subject's life-building labour, since attaining the life one wants to have exacts much, if not all, of one's creative energies. Of particular interest to Berlant were the strategies subjects use to sustain their fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes characterised by incoherent and disaffirming scenarios (Berlant, 2011a). In Chapter 5, I have proposed some of the strategies that mothers use to respond to their environment, where the path to having the life they want to have is often incoherent, demanding, unsustainable, and/or unattainable. An important idea in Berlant is that crises occur not as an exceptional event, but in the

ordinary–so much so that they may not register as events at all, since adaptation to them has become part of what it means to live a life. I have incorporated this idea to explore how mothers incorporate strategies to navigate crises in their ordinary labour, tracking the energy that is siphoned from them along the way.

My argument is that, in addition to the reproductive labour mothers perform in the name of the family form, mothers are also engaged in life-building labour to maintain attachment to their fantasies of the good life. Since mothers, as I have suggested, are encouraged to live with and to desire the forms of family life that have historically denied them legitimacy and autonomy, this labour is ambivalent; it is both disaffirming and sustaining. As a response, they develop strategies to navigate such ambivalence.

Contributions to Existing Literature

This extends Berlant's theory by further mapping out strategies that individuals may use to navigate coming too close or not close enough to their fantasies of the good life. Berlant argued that our objects, and our pursuit of the fantasies they embody, often exhaust and wound us, such that coming too close to them may be hard to bear. At the same time, they argued that losing the promises our objects embody is too threatening, so that coming too far from them may be hard to bear, too. They hinted that navigating this equilibrium requires strategies, making the ordinary a place of 'adaptation, adjustment, improvisation, and developing wiles for surviving, thriving, and transcending the world' (Berlant, 2008b: 2) amidst the systemic attrition of the conditions for the good life. However, they did not provide a detailed account of how such strategies may play out in the ordinary of individuals.

Chapter 5 extends this work by revealing some of the strategies that mothers use to navigate their fantasies, and how those unravel in their ordinary. I show that individuals may adjust their fantasies in order to make their promises accessible again. In cases where adjustment is experienced as a crisis, it resembles a process of grief. Individuals may first deny that the fantasy is inaccessible, because the loss is too threatening. Even when adjustment seems to have begun, they may thus proceed in fits and starts. Adjustment is further complicated if one construes oneself as responsible for the loss, which mobilises feelings of guilt and shame. Markers of depression often appear, too, as highlighted above. My findings also illustrate how social models may help organise how one feels about the loss, such as discarding a fantasy as unreal because models

appear unauthentic. However, they may complicate adjustment when others seem able to achieve the fantasy that had to be relinquished, in which cases anger may be mobilised and projected onto such others. I also show that individuals may utilise norms as a response to their fear of losing their fantasy. Those provide (re)assurances by offering a shared path to upholding a fantasy, although they are also wounding.

Implications for Further Work

This work has contributed to Berlant's oeuvre by further exploring the strategies subjects may use to navigate their attachments to objects. The present contribution therefore has promising implications for further research. It encourages further work to consider attachments to varied forms of objects, including and beyond Berlant's interests, through the study of lived experiences. Some attachments, for example capitalism or material aspirations, may require particularly convoluted strategies because of the demands they exact. Others, like family and romantic relationships, may embody particularly loaded promises difficult to relinquish. Further, while the premise of this work has been in exploring the strategies subjects use to protect their optimism, maintaining attachment may not always be the motivation. For example, Berlant's more recent works explored what happens when subjects no longer want to attach to life, and lose their optimism (Berlant, 2022). This indicates a need for different strategies; I hope to develop this in further work, as outlined below.

6.4 Limitations

Chapter 3 explored the representation of motherhood in media, and Chapter 4 provided an analysis of maternal representations in branding. However, cultural discourses take shape across environments that both comprise and exceed media texts. For example, studies have demonstrated the relevance of exploring how cultural norms are passed through women's relationships with their own mother, and how this shapes their imaginaries of motherhood (Bartholomaeus and Riggs, 2017). The interview study of Chapter 5, indeed, revealed that many participants had constructed their genre and fantasy of motherhood based partly on what they had appreciated, or felt they had lacked, in their own upbringing. I hope to explore this in future work, as outlined below. Further, the studies analysed in Chapter 3 disproportionately emphasised some media (e.g. user-

generated context) and overlooked others (e.g. websites, podcasts, books, packaging, and online resources). More attention is warranted to those domains.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 imposed time restrictions and excluded studies and branding texts published before 2016. This enabled me to create a dialogue between studies of similar scholarly and historical contexts, and to present the most recent branding representations of motherhood. However, further observations can be drawn by exploring materials published before and after my chosen time range. Longitudinal studies of magazines, for example, have yielded interesting results (Keller, 1991). It is also important to recognise that mothers' fantasies are not only shaped by contemporary hegemonic discourses but also by discourses they encounter in early life. Participants in the interview study of Chapter 5, for example, alluded to representations they had seen as children when describing their imaginary of motherhood.

Chapter 3 did not impose spatial restrictions on the sample of studies, and it was thus impossible to appropriately contextualise all the findings for reasons of clarity and space. I reviewed the findings to ensure that cultural context was not a determining factor in the themes I had identified (i.e. that a theme was not solely found or overly prevalent in one given cultural context but not others). When such was the case, it is explicitly mentioned in the results. Beyond this, cultural discourses do not exist in a vacuum, and it is important to bear in mind the political and economic contexts that underpin them. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, on the other hand, focused on texts and experiences that are anchored in a UK context. They do not assume that those results extend beyond this specific setting. For example, maternal mental health provisions follow national guidelines (National Health Service, 2024a,b), which entails that mothers in other countries may encounter different experiences of support.

Chapter 4 selected the market leader for each market domain covered, but looking beyond the top brand could bring additional insights, especially about the intersectionality of maternal fantasies. Budget brands, for example, may paint different scenes that are more accessible under economic hardship. It would be interesting to contrast the fantasies painted across the economic spectrum of, for example, a single market domain. Beyond this, attention is warranted to the intersectional dimension of representations of motherhood. For example, studies have pointed at the racial prejudice of representations of 'good mothers' (Guillem and Barnes, 2018; Handyside, 2021), confirming the need for what Collins (1995) has called an 'Afrocentric feminist analysis of Black motherhood' that moves away from analyses rooted in white middle-class perspectives to address

the role of race in motherhood expectations. During the analysis of Chapter 4, I found that Pampers featured mostly white mothers, while other brands included a diversity of ethnicities. I also observed that IKEA explicitly emphasised heterosexual relationships, with a mother and a father, while other brands did not connote relationship types (for example, not showing a co-parent) or included a mix. I noted that only a handful of texts explicitly showed LGBTQ+ mothers. These findings were beyond the scope of this project and were not included for reasons of space and clarity, but I hope to investigate them further in future work. It would be interesting, for example, to investigate the evolution of intersectional representations through longitudinal work.

This holds true for the exploration of maternal affects and experiences, too. Chapter 5 used a maximum diversity sampling approach for ethnicity, and its sample is at least as diverse as the national population. But it is important to note that the narratives introduced in the write-up represent the experiences of four white participants. This is because the two trends that arose regarding participants' affects of anxiety and/or depression, and their strategies, did not appear to be influenced by participant's ethnic identities. I therefore selected the four narratives that would best illustrate the arguments made in the work. However, I observed that participants' ethnic identities often influenced the emotional investments they placed in motherhood. For example, many talked about cultural norms. I hope to investigate this further in future work, as outlined below. Because these fields do not exist or are often left incomplete in CRIS, I was also unable to sample gender identity (all participants are cis-women), sexual identity (no participant mentioned non-heterosexual relationships), education level, and occupation. I also did not pursue diversity sampling for intellectual and physical disability, and it is only by coincidence that one participant had a physical disability. None of the participants in the CRIS shortlist were marked as having experienced social care involvement, so I was unable to sample on that basis. However, many participants mentioned their fear of social care services, and a handful said they had had 'near' experiences of social care involvement. Finally, this work only addressed the accounts of mothers with experiences of anxiety and/or depression who had received therapy. I do not presume that only this population of mothers experiences difficult affects; living and surviving takes many shapes.

6.5 Further Work

6.5.1 What Makes Our Fantasies?

This work has focused on the fantasies of the good life and motherhood that are constructed in media discourses, and on the work that capitalist institutions and mothers deploy to protect them. However, it has not elaborated on how mothers come to construct their sense of the good life, including what influences them.

Berlant hinted that the good life is a 'collectively invested form of life' that becomes increasingly fantastic as it loses footing with how people can live (Berlant, 2011a: 11), suggesting a shared imaginary that is only loosely rooted in the conditions of the present. They also proposed that capitalism offers having a *proper life* (a stable job, material security, with friends and a family, maybe) as a route to the *good life* (Berlant, 2011a: 164). This suggests stability as the end goal, a sort of fighting forward to achieve a scene characterised by having no need for further movement. It also aligns, to a certain extent, with McRobbie's work on neoliberal feminist motherhood (discussed above) which paints the *proper life* under a corporate individualistic genre and managed through self-regulation as the correct and desirable path (McRobbie, 2015, 2013). Berlant's and McRobbie's studies of cultural texts also presumes their impact on collective fantasies, and their power to define a path for getting there.

The interview study conducted for this work revealed how all the dimensions enumerated above play out in mothers' fantasies of motherhood and the good life, but it was beyond the scope of this project to explore them in detail here. Interestingly, I observed that mothers' ideas of the good life varied in fantastical degrees. For example, Anaïs, a participant encountered in Chapter 5, described a scene similar to daydreaming that can be characterised as naive, while Sophie, another participant encountered in Chapter 5, outlined her maternal fantasy as a plan of aspirations rooted in a specific set of circumstances. This suggests that individuals' investments into a shared form of good life may be more or less rooted in the circumstances of the present. I also noted that many referred to the *proper life* as a way to the *good life*: they talked about establishing a stable career, financial security, material conditions (owning a house and car), getting married, and some went as far as wanting two children because they thought it was the norm in the UK. Further, many participants brought up cultural discourses organically when they described their fantasy of motherhood. Anaïs referred

to 'those American movies' like The Bill Cosby Show and Full House, and Kate, another participant encountered in Chapter 5, described the *yummy mummies*. However, a few participants also underlined how they resisted those discourses, and it seemed that they had made efforts to construct their fantasies against such mainstream representations.

The interviews also revealed aspects that Berlant discusses less. For example, almost all participants started to describe their fantasy of the good life by talking about their own family and childhood, in both good and bad terms. This is not a surprising observation (Bartholomaeus and Riggs, 2017) but it begs the question of how our early experiences are integrated into our hopes for the good life. Crucially, mothers' fantasies of the good life also seem marked by their intersectional identities. For example, Anais, who did not grow up in the UK, talked about observing cultural norms in her friends' houses when growing up. She described how strongly it had influenced her own expectations of and investments in motherhood, to the point that she tried to mimic the behaviour of friends who share her cultural background in her mothering practice. In tandem, I had noted the intersectional ramifications of the good life representations that brands offer during the analysis of Chapter 4. For example, I noticed that Pampers featured mostly white mothers, that IKEA explicitly emphasised heterosexual relationships, with a mother and a father, and that only a handful of texts explicitly showed LGBTQ+ mothers. Again, this is not surprising if we believe Berlant's claims that cultural discourses influence our fantasies, and that those fantasies are often inaccessible to minoritised groups, but it would be relevant to explore this further.

Overall, the question of what makes our fantasies of the good life, both around motherhood and beyond, seems a fruitful one to explore. The interview study conducted for this work provides some insights into this, which I hope to develop in further work. In particular, the interviews were designed to discuss media discourses of motherhood, and the participants were shown ads portraying motherhood and asked to share their reflections. Studying their accounts would bridge the findings of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 both by revealing how mothers relate to specific media discourses of motherhood in constructing their fantasies, and what other factors have contributed to shaping their sense of the good life.

6.5.2 Losing Optimism

This work has explored the labour that institutions and mothers deploy to protect mothers' optimism in motherhood's capacity to deliver the good life. However, it has not considered in detail what happens when that optimism is lost.

Berlant was travelling in this direction with their latest work, published posthumously (Berlant, 2022). They became interested in ways that individuals manage the wounding intensities that having objects of attachment often mobilises and, more precisely, what happens when one loses their confidence in anchoring, world propping objects (Berlant, 2022: 133). They offered a study of 'dissociation', which they did not understand as a style of disorder that leads to illness and diagnosis; rather, dissociation for Berlant is (among other things, because it is at least five kinds of things (Berlant, 2022: 118)) a 'scene for life' where individuals become displaced from their objects such that they do not pursue 'a way of life' or 'a good life' but do not quite give up on living either (Berlant, 2022: 145). Berlant posits that dissociation is not only ordinary in varying degrees and ways, but also a condition of the systemic wearing out that characterises contemporary life.

This echoed the experiences of Charlotte, whom I met as part of the interview study for this work. Charlotte had not given much thought to what motherhood may look like for her because she had busied herself with other objects, mostly her career. Yet motherhood came, and it opened up especially wounding intensities. She found childcare extremely difficult and has still not accessed the 'gushy feeling' that she was vaguely expecting. Motherhood for Charlotte also brought about a rare medical condition that has left her permanently disabled, such that she has been unable to return to her paid job. Not only did motherhood not deliver fulfilment, therefore, it also displaced her from the other life-building objects that helped her sustain optimism, like her career. Charlotte describes feeling in a limbo:

> But yeah, that was it really, it just kind of happened. I was very career-driven. I think if I hadn't had my son, I would be... you know.
>
> I've been left in limbo a bit. Maybe that's not just motherhood, I think that's the way my life's panned out at the minute. It has a lot to do with stopping work, being ill, and things like that. So maybe it's not just motherhood. (...) I feel like I'm in the middle of somewhere right now, I'm not who I used to be and I'm not where I should be–if that makes sense. Not where I'm expected to be, but where I see other people. I just feel like

> I'm in the middle of something that I'm not at either end of.

The framework developed in this work is ill-suited to describe Charlotte's experience, because she is not deploying efforts to sustain her optimism, or adjust her fantasy. Rather, she has lost both an object that anchored her to life building (her career) and her confidence in the world-propping capacity of another (motherhood). She is attached to life, in a way, but seems to be sat on the side of the road to the good life so as to catch her breath and figure out her next step. In my view, Charlotte's story opens up at least three lines of enquiry.

First, in its most obvious reading, it begs questions about the experience of losing optimism, if but temporarily. This case is particularly relevant because it highlights the experiences of those who are pushed out of life-building by conditions that are so disaffirming that maintaining optimism, even for as magnetic an object as motherhood, does not seem possible. As Berlant has argued, such experiences are growing under contemporary living conditions. What are possible styles of living those experiences in ways that guarantee continued attachment to life? And what affects might they mobilise? Further theorisation on the loss of optimism will benefit from the strong springboard already developed in Berlant's last works.

Then, there is the question of whether optimism was accessible to everyone and anyone to begin with. I have been particularly struck by discussions with colleagues whose research operates in the context of social care. As we discussed conversations they had had with young people raised in care, I described ways Berlant talked of dissociation, which is to say as a state of disengagement with life-building objects; this led my colleagues to nod in recognition. What do we make of the 'surplus populations' for whom there is no structural basis for optimism as a way to be socially possible? It would be fruitful to explore the accounts of those with heightened experiences of social exclusion, for whom optimism may have only ever been vaguely on the cards, if at all.

Finally, Berlant was adamant in their defence of optimism, arguing that it is required to thrive in relation to the world:

> In the current version of my life, a lot of my friends in queer social theory were very insulting to me about the word optimism in my work and thought. They didn't want it there. 'Why don't you call it something else?' Because they thought optimism made you stupid. And I always say, well not the stupid kind. It has occurred to me from time to time, and this is my relation to the place of the concept of flourishing in psychoanalysis,

> which is that if you don't have an attachment to the world, you die from failure to thrive. And the phrase 'failure to thrive' is a weepy phrase to me. I see it everywhere, I can't bear it. And interrupting 'failure to thrive' motors my politics, it funds it. The opposite of failure to thrive is what I mean by optimism. You have to have it to exist. I think that the people who are cynical just can't bear it. They can't bear the realist way of thriving, they want it to be in fantasy... being an intellectual, being a person who believes that concepts change things, and being political are fundamentally optimistic orientations, in the good sense. I'm not afraid of that, I'm not afraid of that attachment to thriving. (Berlant and Hardt, 2012: n.p.)

The premise of their thought is that attachment to the world is required to thrive, which is to say that one can only thrive by projecting life-building possibilities onto other objects, whether things, people, lifestyles, or worlds. What about our society makes it so that we need optimism? And what would it mean to imagine a society where it is not presupposed that optimism is the condition for living? Addressing those questions requires a demanding level of theoretical abstraction and engagement with theories that disagree with Berlant's. Joshua Clover, for example, has proposed that optimism is a blockage to political change, which requires objects be destroyed rather than loosened (personal communication; see also 2016). But if we remove optimism, what is left?

Afterword

It is ironic, or perhaps it is the pinnacle of reflexivity, to write a thesis about ambivalent attachment and cruel optimism as an early career researcher. If there is a case study in cruel optimism, it is academia, or at least, it is British academia in the state it is in as I write these words.

I began a PhD because I fantasised that it would bring me closer to a scene of intellectual stimulation, perpetual learning, celebrated curiosity, enriching interactions, and enjoyable work. To varying degrees, it did. I also imagined that it would deliver the flexibility to have other objects, and it seemed coherent with my narrative arc in ways a psychoanalyst may be better placed to encapsulate. This still holds true. Hopeful academics often hold on for the promise of this good life that, upon closer inspection, our supervisors do not seem to live. And, when we move past our projections to encounter academia as a lived experience, we often discover that early career research is cruel in many ways. In some respects, this cruelty is the very quality through which we relate to one another; in my first year at Cambridge, there was a sign in the PhD working area that read "Rule n.1 of the PhD: don't ask how the PhD is going." It underpins our social identity so much that I have caught myself sighing publicly at times when my research was, in fact, going quite well. The principle seems to be that doing research can be disaffirming, and it most often is, but we also find our conditions of possibility within it. We simply could not do anything else, sometimes quite literally.

In some ways, I have avoided or escaped academia's cruelty. I have been tremendously lucky to encounter a kind and supportive supervisor and mentor. His efforts to nurture and guide me through an experience and career where one is often left to their own devices have shielded me in ways that have enabled me to thrive. He has helped create a path that felt not only bearable but enjoyable, thrilling, and fulfilling. I have been guided, too, by two generous co-supervisors who have made time to help

and celebrate me, including to protect my wellbeing during fieldwork. Doing research at Cambridge opens up a new set of potentials for the good life, and it is difficult to resist the urge of embracing the path that academic culture and your colleagues assume you will want to pursue. My research group emphasises personal motivations and goals to resist assumptions about the expected fantasy; I have been able to integrate this philosophy, at least to some extent. Our research group also holds 'surviving and thriving' meetings during which we discuss how doing research sometimes wounds us, and try to imagine ways to have kinder experiences.

In other ways, doing research has wounded me. I have encountered difficult interviews and circumstances. I have spent three years in my own head, which is great fun until it starts to feel lonely. I have taken on too much and burnt out because my schedule of writing, teaching, interviewing, analysing, convening, networking, presenting, applying, and volunteering had worn me out. I have found it difficult to write research derived from the lives of human beings, because I am afraid that I will not do justice to their stories or that they will disagree with my analysis. I have found it disaffirming to realise that universities depend on free and underpaid labour, and that gender often underpins who performs this labour. I have found it intimidating that others may read my work and find it bad or wrong. As I write this, I have not quite yet accepted that 'the thesis I have written' will never be 'the thesis I wanted to write' or even 'the thesis I thought I would write.' And I am faced with the precarity and competition of the academic job market, which is a whole other form of cruelty.

Like my participants, and unwilling to detach from my object, I have bargained with academia to make its fantasy more bearable. I have engaged in mental contortions to imagine new ways of attaining and sustaining my expectations when the intensities of ordinary life were getting out of hand. I have reviewed how much teaching was *really* necessary, how fast fieldwork should *actually* go, how many articles I could *realistically* produce, which career path might *also* work out. It has been at times hard to convince myself that taking a different path than most social models around me, or than I had originally envisaged, may get me to the same destination. In some ways, I still look around frantically in search of one other person following the same route, or one that makes mine feel safe and reassuring in comparison.

Some adaptations have been made easier by what they opened up, or by promises that they had worked for others, too. I have learnt that research is slow, and that while you write and wait and write again, there are many ideas that will never see the light of

day. But that has opened up a reassuring sense that very few people will, in fact, notice if you take one more day to finish a draft. I have learnt that one does not simply come up with a systemic theory – probably ever, certainly not during a PhD – and that this makes work much lighter and fathomable. I have also learnt that you can never write what your participants thought you would write or wish you had written, but that it is a conundrum many navigate, and eventually live with.

Other adjustments have been, and still are, frightening and wounding. It has been a difficult realisation, and one I have long resisted, to accept that research is a funding game, with research freedom rationed and unequally distributed. Under these circumstances, I have found it difficult to sustain optimism and imagine new ways of making the fantasy accessible through projects that do not quite align with where I thought I would go next. Slippages have been frequent and hurtful, and I may at times zone out or daydream to avoid them until they become overwhelming. I still yearn for a sense of complete academic freedom, despite losing faith that it will materialise. I wonder whether this yearning ever goes away, and I secretly hope it will, if I could only get to the next step, to the next job, to the next project.

But my experience of doing a PhD has also opened up new potentials for creating meaning and sustaining my optimism that academic research can, and will, deliver at least some fragments of a good life. This has encouraged me to hold on, like my participants who can make out the shadows of their fantasy just around the corner, and sometimes even experience it, if just for a moment. I now believe that sitting with a participant for one hour is already contributing something both to their life and to mine; that if we embrace academia's possibilities to keep learning and listening, we can become kinder, fairer, and better; that spending so much time thinking about life and people makes both life and people much more interesting and worth knowing; that living through similar difficulties can create intimate publics that make optimism accessible again; that writing about things makes them relevant, which is important; and that being surrounded, guided, and mentored by the right people can improve your experiences tremendously, and even change your life.

Berlant said: 'For me, the best work in affect studies is equipment for living, tools for living in the world. Being able to produce an analysis or account of how you're feeling and what's going on is also part of having the tools you need in order to figure out what your next move is going to be.' (Berlant et al., 2022: 373) In that sense, this work has equipped me in so many, valuable ways. Perhaps what my experience of this study

and of doing a PhD has shown me most is that the next step will be found in collective imagining. If we come together to critically review our fantasies for academia; if we work to make its promises accessible for others; if we create spaces for lateral agency that make things bearable; if we use our privileges and experiences to shield each other from cruelty, at least in small ways; if we make the rules of the game explicit to all of its players; if we insist that our capacities for support, mentorship, and kindness matter as much as the quantity of research we produce; if we begin to admire improvisation and show others that different routes are not only possible but more breathable; if we refuse cruelty as our social condition and question the structures that enable and sustain it; I believe things could happen.

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A

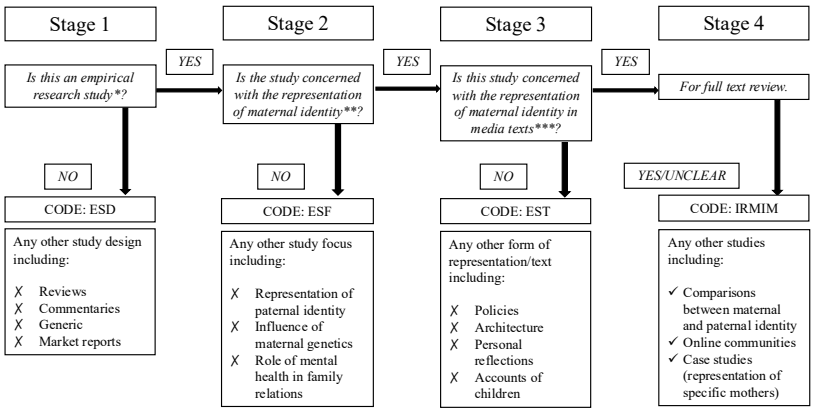
Appendix "Representations of Maternal Identity in the Media: A Systematic Literature Review"

A.1 Search Strategy

#		Search term	Business Source Ultimate (EBSCO)	ABI/ INFORM Collection (ProQuest)	Humanities Index (ProQuest)	Social Science Database (ProQuest)	ASSIA (ProQuest)	Web of Science	Scopus
1	1	mother*	7,126	4,174	232	5,370	1,968	86,189	79,896
	2	maternal	1,595	1,974	31	2,302	1,194	89,864	77,395
	3	[mom]	1,298	568	2	707	311	3,348	2,382
	4	[mum]	266	4,177	9	893	166	762	773
	5	m?mmy	120	58	6	126	37	544	626
	6	= 1 OR 2 OR 3 OR 4 OR 5	9,762	9,282	249	6,684	2,364	152,971	134,407
2	7	identit*	18,151	12,532	394	8,768	1,448	150,424	123,451
	8	role	153,168	49,509	588	19,225	4,908	1,495,922	1,251,190
	9	representation	16,750	16,572	320	6,334	1,118	199,164	151,496
	10	= 7 OR 8 OR 9	182,680	55,932	666	21,430	5,151	1,795,804	1,483,691
3	11	[media]	58,933	45,053	364	15,634	4,174	474,547	436,307
	12	advert*	30,017	4,074	85	1,995	345	21,954	17,978
	13	consum*	156,231	34,810	218	9,329	1,691	520,787	448,444

	14	commercial	52,073	17,144	118	3,807	517	207,882	183,798
	15	brand*	93,047	9,721	100	3,432	546	34,204	31,474
	16	magazine	7,989	2,987	99	1,584	179	6,868	4,539
	17	marketing	59,319	10,314	53	2,810	364	281,902	36,356
	18	= 11 OR 12 OR 13 OR 14 OR 15 OR 16 OR 17	388,168	60,379	527	20,045	4,862	1,396,121	1,068,766
#1 AND #2 AND #3			121	368	177	729	1,927	1,870	1,561

A.2 Decision Flow Chart



**Empirical research study* is defined as research achieved through the observation or measurement, either qualitative or quantitative, of data (e.g., interviews, statistical analysis).
***Representation of maternal identity* is defined as the implicit or explicit depiction of the role of the mother, and/or of the experience of women as mothers.
****Media* is defined as means of mass communication, including broadcasting (e.g., advertising, cinema), publishing (e.g., magazines, books), and the internet (e.g., social media).

A.3 Quality Indicators

1. Are the aims of the research clearly stated?
   (a) What were the goals of the research?
   (b) Why was the research considered important?
   (c) Why was the research considered relevant?

2. Is the research design appropriate to address the research aims?
3. Has the researcher addressed why this design was selected?
4. Was the recruitment/sampling strategy appropriate?
    (a) Has the researcher explained how the participants were selected?
    (b) Has the researcher explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study?
    (c) Are there any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)?
5. Was the data collection appropriate?
    (a) Has the researcher clearly explained how the data was collected (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews were conducted)?
    (b) Has the researcher justified the data collection method?
    (c) Was the setting for the data collection justified?
    (d) Is the form of the data clear (e.g. notes, video materials)?
    (e) Has the researcher discussed saturation of data?
6. Was the relationship between researcher and participants considered?
    (a) Has the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias, and influence?
    (b) How did the researcher respond to events during the study, and did they consider the implications of any changes in the research design?
7. Were ethical issues considered?
    (a) Are there sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained?
    (b) Has the researcher discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)?
    (c) Has approval been sought from the ethics committee?
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?
    (a) Is there an in-depth description of the analysis process?
    (b) If thematic analysis is used: is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data?

(c) Does the researcher explain how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process?

(d) Is sufficient data presented to support the findings?

(e) To what extent are contradictory data taken into account?

(f) Did the researcher critically examine their own role, potential bias, and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation?

(g) Is there a coherent relation between the method and the theoretical framework chosen to analyse the data?

9. Is there a clear statement of findings?

   (a) Are the findings explicit?

   (b) Is there adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments?

   (c) Has the researcher discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)?

   (d) Are the findings discussed in relation to the original research question?

   (e) Are the participants' voices clearly represented?

10. Is the conclusion justified?

    (a) Is there an explicit link between the findings/observations and the final conclusion?

A.4 Overview of Studies

Author(s)	Date	Topic	Sample Location	Method	Sample
Abetz & Moore	2018	Combative mothering (i.e. the mothering ideology that normalises constant competition between mothers, especially in terms of parenting philosophies, practices, and choices)	United States	Content analysis	UGC: blog posts ($k = 30$)
Agudelo-Gonzalez & Chapman-Quevedo	2021	Representation of motherhood in medical discourses	Columbia	Unspecified	Media items, course manuals, and other studies
Allen	2017	Representation of bad mothers in autistic families	United States	Unspecified	Media stories ($k = 2$) and films ($k = 3$)
Aronis	2019	Representation of maternal responsibility and guilt	Israel	CDA	Journalistic items ($k = 109$)
Ayee et al.	2019	Representation of black motherhood through Michelle Obama's tenure as First Lady	United States	Unspecified	Unspecified
Barak-Brandes	2017	Representation of motherhood in general	Israel	CDA	TV commercials ($k = 64$)
Barak-Brandes	2017	Representation of motherhood in general	Israel	CDA	TV commercials ($k = 64$)
Bayard	2018	Role of photos of breastfeeding mothers published on social media	Unspecified/ International	DA	UGC: Instagram photos ($k = 50$)

Baybars & Ozhan-Dedeoglu	2021	Relation between consumption practices of feminist mothers and their identities as both feminists and mothers	Turkey	Interviews ($k = 17$)	N/A
Brydon	2018	Gendered practices of mothering in Pixar animated films	Unspecified/ International	Unspecified	Film ($k = 1$)
César et al.	2020	Gender roles in parenting discourses	Portugal	Content analysis	Magazine items ($k = 16$)
Cino	2020	The role of 'responsibility', 'risk', and 'protection' in constructions of parenting – and especially mothering	Italy	Unspecified	UGC: Online platforms, including website ($k = 1$), forum ($k = 1$) and blog ($k = 1$)
Cornelio	2021	Representation of motherhood in relation to feminism and expertise	Spain	Participant observation (digital ethnography) and content analysis	UGC: Instagram posts ($k = 5184$)
Davies	2021	Case study of actors Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman and the relation between their demothering and their portrayal of intensive mothering on screen	United States	Unspecified	Unspecified
Davis et al.	2022	Maternal knowledge	Australia; United Kingdom	Visual DA	Magazines

De Benedictis & Orgad	2017	Construction of the stay-at-home mother in popular representations, based on two examples of SAHM figures: Jools Oliver and Bridget Jones	United Kingdom	Unspecified	Media texts and novel ($k = 1$)
Dorofeeva et al.	2021	Public/private judgement of mothering practices	Russia	CDA	UGC: posts on social networks ($k = 6$), discussions on forums ($k = 7$) and publications in blogs and media ($k = 17$)
Douglas et al.	2022	Role of gender in the representation of parenthood	Canada	Quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis	TV shows for children ($k = 16$)
Feasey	2021	Representation of 'geriatric' motherhood through representations of Meghan Markle's pregnancies	United Kingdom	Unspecified	Magazine features
Feasey	2017	Representation of the 'good mother' in TV shows and reaction of audiences	United States	Unspecified	TV programme ($k = 1$)
Feldman	2021	Differences in parenting expectations between mothers and fathers	Unspecified/ International	Cyber ethnography and DA	UGC: Reddit subforums ($k = 2$)
Fuentes & Brembeck	2017	Relation between baby food practices and ideals of motherhood	Sweden	Frame analysis	Websites ($k = 4$)

Guillem & Barnes	2018	Representation of the 'bad' white mother in the case study of TV show Mad Men, and the relation between the figure of the 'bad' mother and white privilege	United States	Semiological and ideological analysis	TV show Mad Men
Handyside	2021	Representation of black single motherhood through case study of media images of Doria Ragland, Meghan Markle's mother	United Kingdom	Unspecified	Media images ($k = 3$)
Hartzell	2017	Relation between motherhood and antiracism	United States	Unspecified	UGC: blog ($k = 1$) including blog posts ($k = 104$)
Hernández	2019	Representations of Christian motherhood in TV show 19 Kids and Counting and discourses surrounding Christian motherhood on social media	United States	Qualitative content analysis	UGC: Social media posts
Hidalgo-Marí & Patricia Palomares	2020	Representation of maternal identity, comparing the USA and Spain	United States; Spain	Content analysis	TV series ($k = 6$) with focus on female characters ($k = 125$)
Imbaquingo & Davila	2020	Representation of motherhood in general	Ecuador	CDA	UGC: Web platform ($k = 1$)
Jezierski & Wall	2019	Representation of involved parenting	Canada	Longitudinal thematic analysis and DA	Magazine articles ($k = 42$)

Johnson & Rintoul	2019	Relation between the myth of maternal femininity, representations of the Madonna del Latte, and social media posts about breastfeeding	Unspecified/ International	Visual analysis	UGC: Artwork and social media photos
Khvorostyanov & Yeshua-Katz	2020	Stigma surrounding surrogate motherhood	Russia	Qualitative content analysis	UGC: online forum posts ($k = 15,602$)
Krzyżanowska	2020	Representation of motherhood as a commodified role in public discourses	Sweden; Poland	Feminist CDA	Magazine articles ($k = 201$), adverts, blogs ($k = 5$)
Kuvychko et al.	2018	Construction of the concept of mother in Russian versus Danish media articles	Russia; Denmark	Linguo-culturological analysis	Journal articles ($k = 6$)
Lachover	2019	Representation of conservative and alternative motherhood in TV series	Israel	CDA	TV series ($k = 2$), including ($k = 76$) episodes
Lehto	2021	How mothers who represent themselves online negotiate the rules that govern maternal femininity on social media	Finland	Interviews ($n = 4$) and online participant observation	UGC: blogs ($k = 4$) and Instagram accounts ($k = 4$)
Lerner	2018	Contradictory discourses of motherhood	Italy	Unspecified	Web series ($k = 3$)
Mackenzie	2018	How mothers negotiate the subject position of motherhood	United Kingdom	DA	UGC: Mumsnet thread ($k = 1$)
Malatzky	2017	How mothers negotiate with mediated representations of the yummy mummy	Australia	DA	Interviews ($n = 29$) and magazines/books/pamphlets

McGannon et al.	2017	Representation of recreational athlete mother identities	North America	CDA and visual DA	UGC: blog ($k = 1$) including stories ($k = 30$), reader comments ($k = 177$), and images ($k = 102$)
McGannon et al.	2017	Representation of elite athlete mothers through stories about Kim Clijsters' comeback	North America; United Kingdom	Ethnographic content analysis	Media stories ($k = 45$) and images ($k = 38$)
Miklyaeva & Rumyantceva	2018	Representation of motherhood in general	Russia	Content analysis	UGC: Web forum entries ($k = 667$)
Orgad & Baldwin	2021	Negotiation of the meanings of motherhood through the media representation of Meghan Markle as a mother	United States; United Kingdom	Unspecified	News media items + UGC: Twitter, Mumsnet
Orgad & Meng	2017	Representation of idealised mothers in relation to 'the good life'	China; United Kingdom	Thematic analysis	Outdoor advertisements ($k = 29$)
Orton-Johnson	2017	(Re)construction of the identities and role of motherhood on "bad mummy" blogs	United Kingdom; United States; Australia	Interviews ($n = 32$)	N/A
Palomeque Recio	2020	Postfeminist performance of motherhood through Chiara Ferragni	Italy; United States	Netnography, content analysis	UGC: Instagram posts ($k = 271$)
Priyatna et al.	2019	Representation of motherhood in general	Indonesia	Unspecified	Magazine articles ($k = 17$)
Proctor & Weaver	2017	Representation of motherhood in relation to schooling	Australia	Unspecified	Magazine articles

Reed	2018	Negotiation with media representations by lesbian, gay, and queer mothers	United Kingdom	Interviews ($n = 19$)	N/A
Rodgers	2019	Representations of the maternal master scripts versus the 'messier reality' of mothering	United Kingdom	Unspecified	TV series ($k = 1$)
Sørensen	2017	Discourse of work-life balance in relation to motherhood	Norway	DA	Print media items ($k = 220$)
Tardivo & Zolin	2021	Representation of rejecting motherhood	Brazil	Interpretative reading	Novel ($k = 1$)
Van Cleaf	2020	Theory of the digital maternal gaze	United States; Australia; United Kingdom	Textual analysis	UGC: mommy blogs ($k = 47$)
Vergara & Carter	2021	Representations of breastfeeding Latin American mothers	Hispanic/Latin America	Qualitative content analysis	UGC: Instagram posts ($k = 926$)
Waldron & Mullin	2021	Representation of queer athlete non-biological mothers	United States	DA	Media stories
Zappavigna & Zhao	2017	Role of selfies in the representation of motherhood	Unspecified/ International	MMDA	UGC: Instagram posts

A.5 Overview of Representations in Advertising

Category	**Description**
Responsibilities	The mother assumes prime responsibility for the wellbeing and development of her child(ren). Specifically, she manages her family and home through appropriate consumption. The latter enables her to ensure her child(ren)'s safety and welfare, for example through healthy nutrition, and to spend quality, intimate moments with her child(ren).
Criticism of Mothers	The mother does not receive any criticisms about her mothering.
Skills and Knowledge	The mother is educated and informed in effective consumption, although she sometimes requires support and guidance from 'experts'. As an empowered individual, she is free to make her own consumption choices. The mother also displays creativity in solving domestic issues.
Career	The mother may work, but thanks to her appropriate consumption, her career does not interfere with her ability to perform her maternal role; she is able to spend time with her child(ren) anyway. The 'good life' centres around this time spent with her child(ren).
Personal Interests	The mother is not represented pursuing personal interests outside of the domestic sphere.
Support	No other parent is involved in caring for the child(ren), suggesting that the mother bears prime (at least) or total (at most) responsibility for childcare.

Struggles and Resistance	The mother may experience mental distress such as anxiety, which materialises in worries about her child(ren)'s wellbeing, or in confusion about appropriate consumption. She may also experience negative emotions, such as tiredness and frustration. It is suggested that her negative experiences can be alleviated through consumption. Further, if she enacts desirable consumption practices, the mother is assured that she will become part of a universal community of mothers, and find comfort in a sense that she is 'doing it right'.
Modalities	The inherent objective of advertising is to drive consumption and brand popularity. As such, the discursive tone is often argumentative and occasionally affective. Advertising narratives are: (i) limited in depth – outdoor advertisements offer only one image with limited textual components, whilst TV advertisements are short in length and straightforward in verbal content; (ii) limited in dimension – they must offer a clear message that consumers are able to process quickly; (iii) constrained to align with the brand and the product they promote; (iv) constrained by the power of consumers – they cannot risk alienating existing and/or potential consumers; (v) oriented towards positive associations with the brand/product. As a result of these modalities, advertising narratives are less likely to display internal tensions, which would risk confusing the consumer. (Tensions may arise between ads due to the difference in brands/products they promote.) They are also less likely to depict negative experiences of motherhood, and if they do, those must be resolved within the advertisement in order to guarantee positive brand associations. Hence, advertising narratives are likely to frame consumption as a positive solution to individual issues supposedly experienced by mothers, thus placing it at the centre of motherhood practices.

Barriers to Entry	The mother must be able to afford the economic means to provide for her family through appropriate consumption. Similarly, she must be able to dedicate time to her child(ren). As such, mothers who belong to socially and economically lower classes may have less ready and stable access to the implied status of 'good mothers'.
Discursive Tensions	Internally, the narrative offered by advertising is coherent; this may be attributed to the modalities pointed above. Externally, the narrative offered by advertising is in tension with the feminist discourse that sees women finding fulfilment outside of the domestic sphere. It negotiates with this discourse by representing the mother as happy and proud of prioritising her family (she is depicted sharing photos of intimate family moments on social media), relying on a postfeminist rhetoric of choice. Further, the advertising narrative is in tension with the egalitarian discourse which sees parenting as a task shared by parents rather than a component central only to mothers' identity. It holds this discourse at bay, with no mention of an involved second parent.
Parameters Overlooked	The advertising narrative puts aside the experience of non-heterosexual and non-attractive mothers. Further, it puts aside the aspirations that some women may hold of finding fulfilment outside of the domestic sphere, such as in hobbies, their social life, or a time-demanding career. The advertising narrative additionally silences the structural experience of the gendered 'second shift' by emphasising individual agency, suggesting that women wish to provide care for their child(ren) after a work shift with no apparent support. Similarly, the absence of tension between career and childcare silences the structural issue of accessing (or not being able to access) the support necessary for women to pursue both.

A.6 Overview of Representations in Magazines

Category	Description
Responsibilities	The mother assumes prime responsibility for the wellbeing and development of her child(ren). Her responsibilities are grounded in the domestic realm, including household chores, taking the child(ren) to school, bathing them, and cooking. On top of this, intensive involvement is required to instil the right mindset and values in her child(ren), motivate and monitor them, and provide them with the appropriate environment to flourish into desirable citizens. Above all, it is important that the mother is present.
Criticism of Mothers	The mother does not receive any criticisms about her mothering.
Skills and Knowledge	The mother is exceptionally well informed in domains such as sustainability, health and wellbeing, and educational pedagogy. She acquires this professional level of knowledge to perform adequate caring consumption for the wellbeing of her child(ren).
Career	The professional activities of the mother are secondary. If she opts to work, the 'super mother' takes pride in balancing her career and her maternal role, and in being able to prioritise her child(ren) still. She may also integrate her maternal role into her career, for example by undertaking projects that she considers more 'meaningful' because she is 'inspired' by her motherhood.
Personal Interests	The mother is not represented pursuing personal interests outside of the domestic sphere.
Support	The mother may be 'supported' by the father, but he usually assumes a secondary educational or playful role, whilst she is in charge of, and accountable for, the child(ren)'s development.
Struggles and Resistance	The mother may experience mental distress such as anxiety, which materialises in expressions of concerns and fear for her children. It is suggested that her negative experiences can be alleviated by letting go of trying to be perfect. This could involve, for example, accepting that the house does not need to be spotless, but she should never compromise on the time spent with her child(ren).

Modalities	The inherent objective of magazines is to provide information and advice. (Note that this implies readers are actively seeking such information.) They may also aim to drive consumption. As such, the discursive tone is often informative and/or affective. Magazine narratives are: (i) rich in depth – they benefit from extensive space; (ii) constrained by the subject of the magazine and the profile of its readership; (iii) constrained by the power of readership – they cannot risk alienating existing and/or potential readers. As a result of these modalities, magazine narratives are more likely to be prescriptive and development-oriented regarding motherhood, and to provide more detailed accounts of 'desirable' performance. They are likely to frame motherhood responsibilities within the subject area of the magazine. They may also offer a sense of commonality through their use of testimonials. It is possible that they offer internally incoherent discourses because of their multiplicity of content and issues. Tensions may arise between magazines due to the difference in subjects/readership they represent.
Barriers to Entry	The mother must be able to afford the economic means to provide for her family through caring consumption. In order to foster the right environment for her child(ren)'s development, the mother must also possess the time, social capital, and self-confidence that is more accessible to middle-class mothers. As such, mothers who belong to socially and economically lower classes or minorities may have less ready and stable access to the implied status of 'good mothers'.
Discursive Tensions	Internally, the narrative offered by magazines is incoherent in balancing the demands it makes of mothers with the acknowledgement of their mental distress. Whilst it suggests that mothers hold the responsibility not only of domestic chores but also of the nurturance of their child(ren) into 'good citizens' – a role which arguably places considerable pressure on their shoulders – it simultaneously suggests that mothers' mental distress originates in their own internalised pressure.

	Externally, the narrative offered by magazines is in tension with the feminist discourse that sees women finding fulfilment outside of the domestic sphere. Like for advertising, it negotiates with this discourse by representing the mother as happy and proud of prioritising her family (through testimonials of mothers who chose to opt out of career ambitions), relying on a postfeminist rhetoric of choice. Further, there is tension between this narrative and the feminist discourse which sees mother's wellbeing valued. As developed above, the magazine narrative attempts to absorb the latter but does so incoherently. There is also tension between this narrative and the egalitarian discourse which sees parenting as a task shared by parents rather than a component central only to mothers' identity. The magazine narrative attempts to absorb this discourse by addressing both parents and using the gender-neutral sign 'parent', but it is always mothers whose reflections and experiences are drawn upon.
Parameters Overlooked	The magazine narrative puts aside the experience of non-middle-class mothers. Further, it puts aside the aspirations that some women may hold of finding fulfilment outside of the domestic sphere, such as in hobbies, their social life, or a time-demanding career. The magazine narrative additionally silences the structural experience of the gendered 'second shift' by emphasising individual agentivity, suggesting that women wish to provide care for their child(ren) after a work shift with no apparent support. Similarly, the absence of tension between career and childcare silences the structural issue of accessing (or not being able to access) the support necessary for women to pursue both. The magazine narrative silences the structurality of the lack of support in nurturing 'good citizens' by overlooking the responsibilities of other institutions (such as the school or the state) in a child's development. Indeed, it assumes that a mother who is sufficiently involved will be able to guarantee her child(ren)'s 'desirable' development, overlooking external influences as well as the importance of a child's receptivity.

A.7 Overview of Representations in News Media

Category	**Description**
Responsibilities	The mother assumes prime responsibility for the wellbeing and development of her child(ren). She is for example responsible for feeding and must provide care and close attention to her child(ren).
Criticism of Mothers	The mother is held accountable and criticised as 'incompetent' or 'guilty' for any undesirable outcome regarding childcare.
Skills and Knowledge	N/A
Career	Both a successful career and desirable motherhood require time investments. As such, a mother who attains fulfilment in her career whilst concurrently performing desirable motherhood is 'exceptional' and an 'inspiration' for finding the perfect balance, in such a way that her children do not 'suffer' from her career. This 'fairy tale' is however hard to attain, and a working mother who is not able to spend time with her children has 'failed' in her maternal role. For this reason, it may be preferable to opt out of career ambitions in order to ensure that time can be spent with the child(ren).
Personal Interests	The mother is not represented pursuing personal interests outside of the domestic sphere.
Support	The mother may receive (paid) support to be able to balance her career and maternal responsibilities, but this support is downplayed.
Struggles and Resistance	There is no representation or discussion of the affective experience of the mother.
Modalities	The inherent objective of news media is to provide information. As such, the discursive tone is often informative. News media narratives are: (i) limited in depth – they are often restricted in length;

	(ii) constrained by the unfolding news they can cover and the profile of their readership; (iii) constrained by the power of readership – they cannot risk alienating existing and/or potential readers. As a result of these modalities, news media narratives are more likely to focus on one specific aspect of motherhood, or on one specific mother. Depending on their cultural context and their political positions, they are also likely to offer opinionated accounts of motherhood and to pass explicit judgement. Tensions are likely to arise between news media outlets due to their difference in positioning.
Barriers to Entry	The mother must have the time and material means to be present for her child(ren). As such, mothers who belong to socially and economically lower classes or minorities may have less ready and stable access to the implied status of 'good mothers'.
Discursive Tensions	Internally, the narrative offered by news media is incoherent in its approach to working mothers. Whilst the ultimate success in mothering seems to reside a mother's ability to 'juggle' domestic and economic labour, working mothers are criticised for failing to spend time with their child(ren). The 'bar' for being judged a good working mother thus appears unattainable, bar for a few exceptions. Externally, the narrative offered by news media is in tension with the feminist discourse which sees mothers finding fulfilment in their career because they can rely on the appropriate support structure. It holds this discourse at bay by overlooking the discussion of the system that enables some mothers to successfully pursue a demanding career. Further, the news media narrative is in tension with the egalitarian discourse which sees parenting as a task shared by parents rather than a component central only to mothers' identity. It holds this discourse at bay, with no mention of an involved second parent.
Parameters Overlooked	The news media narrative puts aside the affective experiences of mothers, especially the mental distress which mothers may experience.

	It additionally silences the structural experience of the gendered 'second shift' by framing the mother as responsible for issues in childcare, overlooking the role of a second parent. Similarly, the additional support structures which should support the desirable development of her child(ren) are also overlooked. This narrative silences the structural issue of accessing (or not being able to access) the support necessary for women to pursue both a career and childcare, by framing the mother herself as responsible for difficulties in balancing both.

A.8 Overview of Representations in Visual Entertainment Media

Category	**Description**
Responsibilities	We notice internal tension: Sometimes, the mother assumes prime responsibility for the wellbeing and development of her child(ren). She manages and directs the family life, provides physical care and nurture. Her maternal identity must take priority as her role is child centred. But in other cases, caregiving is not the sole nor the primary responsibility of the mother. Instead, she shares childcare with the other parent and a support system.
Criticism of Mothers	The mother may be judged as 'incompetent', either by other characters or by the audience, if she places her own interests above her child(ren)'s.
Skills and Knowledge	N/A
Career	The mother may work and find fulfilment in her work. She receives the appropriate support to pursue her career.
Personal Interests	We notice internal tension: Sometimes, the mother may decide to spend time outside of childcare, although it is not specified what she will be doing.

	But in other cases, a mother who prioritises her own interests, and takes time away from childcare to pursue them, is criticised for failing in her maternal obligations.
Support	The mother is helped and emotionally supported in her experience by other mothers. We notice internal tension: In some cases, the mother shares childcare duties with the other parent and her family, such that childcare becomes a task limited in time, rather than a component of her identity. In other cases, although the father may 'help', the father is only the secondary carer, and usually represents an additional complication.
Struggles and Resistance	The mother may experience mental distress such as anxiety. She may also experience difficulties physically and emotionally adapting to her maternal role. Simultaneously, she may struggle to meet normative expectations of motherhood. As such, those expectations are both aspired to and criticised. These feelings may materialise in open resistance to normativity.
Modalities	The inherent objective of visual entertainment media is to provide entertainment through affective experiences. TV shows also aim to achieve and maintain a satisfying level of viewership. Children's movies and shows aim to provide educational content. As such, the discursive tone is often affective. Visual entertainment narratives are: (i) rich in depth – they benefit from extensive length; (ii) rich in dimension – they can offer multiple messages through different storylines; (iii) constrained by the power of viewership – TV shows cannot risk alienating existing and/or potential viewership. As a result of these modalities, visual entertainment media narratives are less likely to be explicitly prescriptive, because they do not strive to offer a solution to motherhood issues, but are instead likely to be affective, because they speak of the experience of mothers. Visual entertainment narratives are likely to display many internal tensions and to offer incoherent representations of mothers. Tensions are likely to arise between movies and shows.

Barriers to Entry	The exploration of struggles and resistance within motherhood may require racial privilege, as Black mothers are often judged more harshly and 'expected to fail' in acquiring the implied status of 'good mother'.
Discursive Tensions	Internally, the narrative offered by visual entertainment media is incoherent in many ways. Mothering is both central to the identity of the mother and a timely task that she must perform. The mother both carries motherhood responsibilities on her own and is supported by a community. Interestingly, one internal tension is made explicit: the mother simultaneously aspires to and resists normative expectations of her role. Externally, the narrative offered by visual entertainment media is in tension with the feminist discourse that sees women finding fulfilment outside of the domestic sphere. Unlike in advertising or magazines, it negotiates with this discourse by making the tension explicit: while mothers are represented as pursuing such interests, they are simultaneously criticised for doing so, which may reflect the lived reality of some women. The visual entertainment media narrative additionally absorbs the feminist discourse which sees mother's wellbeing valued. It does so by normalising complicated feelings which mothers may be experiencing.
Parameters Overlooked	The visual entertainment media narrative puts aside the experience of non-heterosexual and non-attractive mothers. It confronts the structurality of gendered parenting practices such as the 'second shift' by making them explicit (even when mothers end up obeying those prescriptions).

A.9 Overview of Representations in User-Generated Content

Category	**Description**
Responsibilities	The mother assumes prime responsibility for the wellbeing and development of her child(ren). The mother is child-centred: she is responsible for raising 'good children' and for providing care and nurture through (breast)feeding.

Criticism of Mothers	The mother may receive judgement and criticism from other mothers if she is judged to have performed 'inappropriate mothering'. These criticisms may escalate into open conflicts between mothers. The mother may also pass this judgement on herself, and express feelings of having failed in their maternal role.
Skills and Knowledge	The mother strives to be the best version of herself in terms of motherhood. For this reason, she looks for information and tips online to improve her practice. The areas of knowledge she covers can range from education to child-focused health. Simultaneously, the mother is herself an 'insider' who possesses the expert knowledge of motherhood through experience. She is able to provide advice and support to other mothers.
Career	The mother balances a career with motherhood responsibilities. She may either succeed at 'having it all' by achieving a good balance, or she may struggle managing her time, and specifically finding time for 'herself'.
Personal Interests	The mother has other hobbies and personal interests, which she pursues. Those enable her to develop an identity outside of her child(ren).
Support	The mother receives both educational and emotional support from other mothers online. The emotional support she receives usually consists of validations that her experience is 'normal'. She does not often receive support from another parent, and if she does, she remains the main caregiver.
Struggles and Resistance	The mother may experience mental distress such as anxiety, which materialises in expressions of doubts about her own performance, and a sense of inadequacy or failure. She may also experience negative emotions, such as exhaustion and pain. She may experience difficulties emotionally adapting to her maternal role, or bonding with her child. It is suggested that her negative experiences can be alleviated by seeing her narrative validated as 'normal' by her peers. These feelings may materialise in open resistance to, or critique of, normativity.

Modalities	The inherent objective of user generated content is to express personal opinions and experiences. It may also aim to drive consumption through commodification discourses, or to amass social capital. As such, the discursive tone is often informative and/or affective. User-generated content narratives are: (i) rich in depth – they benefit from extensive space; (ii) rich in dimension – they benefit from an ever-growing multiplicity of messages; (iii) constrained by the functionalities of the platforms – such as moderation rules, internal laws, character limitations; (iv) constrained by the implicit practices of the platforms. As a result of these modalities, user-generated content narratives are more likely to reflect support because of their affordance for dialogue, and to frame the mother as development-oriented because of their affordance for learning content. Similarly, they are more likely to focus on the affective experience of mothers because they allow for personal accounts of such experiences. User-generated content narratives are likely to display internal tensions because of the ever-growing amount of discourses constructed by different users and online communities, and because of their affordances for dialogue.
Barriers to Entry	Learning opportunities are not equally distributed: they can be hindered by the digital divide (i.e. lack of digital skills and/or means to access the platforms) but also by the affordances of the platforms, which can facilitate or hinder the agency of certain individuals. If she wishes to receive support, the mother must also possess the self-confidence (and social capital, if she does not wish to post anonymously) to voice her experience online.
Discursive Tensions	Internally, the narrative offered by user-generated content is incoherent in many ways. The mother both succeeds and fails at balancing her career with childcare. She is both a learner and an expert. She is both supported and criticised by other mothers. She both aspires to and resists normative expectations of motherhood.

	Externally, the narrative offered by user-generated content is in tension with the egalitarian discourse which sees parenting as a task shared by parents rather than a component central only to mothers' identity. It holds this discourse at bay, with no mention of an involved second parent, but sometimes makes this tension explicit in a resistance framing. The user-generated content narrative additionally absorbs the feminist discourse which sees mother's wellbeing valued. It does so by normalising complicated feelings which mothers may be experiencing. Yet, its affordances simultaneously enable judgement and critique to flourish, deepening maternal distress.
Parameters Overlooked	The user-generated content narrative confronts the structurality of gendered parenting practices such as the 'second shift' by making them explicit (even when mothers end up obeying those prescriptions).

B

Appendix "Constructing a Mothers' Culture: Affective Bargains in Branding Discourses"

B.1 Sampling Overview

Brand	Videos	Websites	Packages	Instagram Posts
Ikea	26	1	N/A	148
Tesco	25	1	30	N/A
Mothercare	22	N/A	N/A	176
Ella's Kitchen	24	1	219	145
Pampers	13	1	18	211
TOTAL	110	4	267	680

B.2 Video Sampling

I included videos if they had been released between January 1st 2017 and November 1st 2022 – start of sampling – and they featured or made explicit reference to a female-presenting individual marked as having familial caring responsibilities for an individual under 18 years of age. I excluded videos if this individual was explicitly designated as not a mother (e.g. a grandmother, nanny, or older sibling). A decision breakdown can be found below.

Brand	Channel	Total	Include	Exclude
Ikea	@ikeauk	113	26	87
Tesco	@tesco[1]	300	25	275
Mothercare	@mothercare[2]	66	22	44
Ella's Kitchen	@ellaskitchen[3]	46	3	43
	@ellaskitchenweaning[4][5]	139	21	118
Pampers	@pampersUKIre	35	13	22

B.3 Website Sampling and Navigation

All websites ($k = 4^6$) were archived on web.archive.org on December 5th 2022. The analysis was performed on the website in their archived form.

I started by reviewing the homepage of each website, browsing it from top to bottom, and making notes of the features on the menu list(s). When applicable, I clicked on buttons and/or vignettes on the home page, and reviewed the results. I then navigated the menu, exploring each of the main pages. Again, when applicable, I clicked on buttons/and or vignettes, and reviewed the results. When I judged that I had reached saturation because no new themes emerged, I moved on to the next page on the menu list. I repeated this process until all of the pages on the menu list had been reviewed.

B.4 Packaging Sampling and Navigation

All webpages ($k = 3^7$) were archived on web.archive.org on March 29th 2023. The analysis was performed on the webpages in their archived form.

I navigated to the 'products' page of Pampers, which featured $k = 18$ results; I reviewed the photos of their packaging as provided on the website.

I navigated to the 'shop' page of Ella's Kitchen, which featured $k = 219$ results; I opted to sort the results by age range (rather than occasions). I noticed that the brand offered a number of product types (e.g. snacks, veggie pouches), and that packages within the same product type were similar. As such, I reviewed the photos of the packaging of

[1] I did not identify a UK-specific YouTube channel for this brand. However, I note that it was founded and has headquarters in the UK. I also excluded videos in languages other than English.

[2] See footnote (1).

[3] See footnote (1).

[4] See footnote (1)

[5] Ella's Kitchen is the only brand that I identified as having two channels in the same language (English). I chose to include both.

[6] Mothercare no longer owns a website.

[7] Due to the nature of the products that they sell (furniture, clothes), Ikea and Mothercare do not offer traditional packaging.

the products under the first product type until I judged that I had reached saturation because no new themes emerged; I then moved on to the next product type. I repeated this process until all the product types within one age range had been reviewed. I then moved on to the next age range, and repeated the process until all of the product types in all of the age ranges had been reviewed.

I navigated to the 'baby & toddler' page under the 'groceries' tab of Tesco. Using the filter, I refined the results to show only products of the Tesco brands. This resulted in $k = 30$ products; I reviewed the photos of their packaging as provided on the website.

B.5 Image Sampling and Navigation

I sampled all the Instagram posts published by the brand on their official Instagram page between April 1st 2022 and March 31st 2023 – start of sampling – as well as the story highlights available on the brand's official Instagram page on April 1st 2023. I noticed that the brands offered a number of publication types (e.g. advice regarding childcare, posts about socio-political actions of the brand, humorous posts celebrating parents, etc.), and that posts within the same publication types were similar. As such, I reviewed posts (including the image(s)/videos and accompanying captions) under the same publication type until I judged that I had reached saturation because no new themes emerged; I then repeated this process until all the publication types had been reviewed. A breakdown can be found below. I also reviewed all of the story highlights available as stipulated below; hard to quantify, they are not included in the count.

Brand	**Channel**	k
Ikea	@ikeauk	148
Tesco	@tesco [8]	N/A
Mothercare	@mothercare[9]	176
Ella's Kitchen	@ellaskitchenuk	145
Pampers	@pampersUKIre	211

[8] I did not identify a UK-specific Instagram page for this brand. However, I note that it was founded and has headquarters in the UK.

[9] See footnote (8).

C

Appendix "Affects and Strategies of Maternal Optimism: The Accounts of Mothers with Experiences of Anxiety and/or Depression"

C.1 Sampling Criteria

Inclusion	**Comment**
The patient is identified as female	There is no alternative to identify mothers (as opposed to fathers); it would be beyond the scope of the project to review the free text of the medical records of patients who are parents to identify mothers who are not identified as female on their records.
The patient has at least one child aged between 6 and 15 years old	Mothers who still perform care at home for their child(ren) are more likely to reveal difficult affects linked to mothering. Mothers who are beyond the perinatal period may be better placed to reflect on their difficult affects and how they navigate them.

The patient has custody of their child(ren)	Mothers who still perform care at home for their child(ren) are more likely to reveal difficult affects linked to mothering. Note this does not exclude patients who have lost custody in the past but have regained custody by the time of screening.
The patient has received a diagnosis of anxiety and/or depression since 2021	Mothers with a recent diagnosis may be better placed to speak to their difficult affects and how they navigate them.
The patient understands English	The interview uses vignettes (videos) in English; participants who do not understand English may be unable to engage with the vignettes.

Exclusion	**Comment**
The patient has a past or current diagnosis of active psychosis	Requested by the HRA Research Ethics Committee
The patient has a past or current diagnosis of a learning disability	Requested by the HRA Research Ethics Committee
The patient is a current in-patient	Safeguarding concerns

C.2 Recruitment Documents

C.2.1 Recruitment Email

Dear [insert participant's name],

I hope you're well.

My name is Sophie Mary and I'm a doctoral researcher at the University of Cambridge. I'm carrying out a research project to understand how mothers who experience(d) anxiety and/or depression navigate their role as a parent. I'm also interested in the relation between their self-perception and the media they consume. I understand that you've sought support from the NHS for symptoms of anxiety and/or depression and that you've consented to being contacted for research; So if you agree, I'd love to hear about your own experience during an interview.

The interview takes 60-90 minutes and is relaxed. You'll be asked questions about your expectations of motherhood and your experience as a mother. I'll also share some adverts which we'll discuss together, and ask you about representations and ideas of motherhood that have made an impression on you (for example in adverts or films, or in

your family).

If you agree to take part, I'll meet you at a date, time, and location that works for you. We can provide (free) childcare during the interview. If you have a disability, your carer is welcome to attend–we can alternatively provide a specialist support worker. The interview can also take place over the phone if that's more convenient. Your responses will be kept confidential; each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal information is protected during the transcription and analysis of the findings. To compensate for your time, you'll receive a £50 voucher for a store of your choice.

I'm available next week xxx. But I'm flexible and if none of those dates/times work we can easily find an alternative that suits you better. If you're interested in sharing your experience, please get in touch with me (sm2597@cam.ac.uk) by xxx.

I've attached a document with more information, but don't hesitate to reach out with any other questions or concerns. I look forward to meeting you!

Warm wishes,
Sophie

C.2.2 Recruitment Phone Call Script

Hi, good morning. Is this [participant's name]?

It's nice to meet you. My name is Sophie Mary and I'm a doctoral researcher at the University of Cambridge. I'm contacting you because you've given consent to the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust to be contacted for research, and I'd like to ask whether you might be interested to take part in a research project I'm carrying out. Is now a good moment to talk?

I'm carrying out a research project to understand how mothers who experience or experienced anxiety and/or depression navigate their role as a parent. I'm also interested in the relation between their experience and the media that surround them. I know that you've sought support from the NHS for symptoms of anxiety and/or depression and that you've consented to being contacted for research. So I was wondering if you'd like to tell me a bit more about your experience during a paid interview. Is this something you might be interested in?

The interview would take between 60 and 90 minutes and be very relaxed. I'd ask you questions about your expectations of motherhood and your experience as a mother.

I'd also share some adverts which we'd discuss together, and I'd ask you about representations and ideas of motherhood that have made an impression on you (for example in adverts or films, or in your family).

If you agree to take part, you can choose a date, time, and location that works for you. We can provide some free childcare during the interview. If you have a disability, your carer is also welcome to attend, or we can provide a specialist support worker. The interview can also take place over the phone or on Microsoft Teams if that's more convenient. Your responses will of course be kept confidential; we'll assign a number code to each interview to help ensure that personal information is protected during the transcription and the analysis–and you'll get to choose the fake name under which your reflections might appear in publications. And to compensate for your time, you'll receive a £50 voucher for a store of your choice.

Do you have an email address through which I could get in touch with you? I'll send you a document with more information, but don't hesitate to reach out with any other questions or concerns. If everything works for you, you can respond to my email by suggesting a date, time, and place (that can be a call) that would suit you for the interview.

Thank you, I'll be in touch and I look forward to meeting you! Have a lovely rest of your day.

C.2.3 Participant Information Sheet

Introduction My name is Sophie Mary, and I'm a doctoral researcher at the University of Cambridge, Department of Sociology (Free School Ln, Cambridge CB2 3RF). I'm working with a team of three researchers at the University of Cambridge and the University of Edinburgh who are supporting and supervising me on this project.

What is the purpose of this research project, and what does it involve? The aim of this research project is to understand how mothers who experience(d) anxiety and/or depression navigate their role as a parent. We're also interested in the relation between their experience and the media that surround them. Earlier studies have found that anxiety and/or depression is on the rise among mothers, but no research has investigated the relationship between mothers' mental health and media. To explore this, we're carrying out interviews with 20 mothers who experience(d) anxiety and/or depression. We think the project will take one year, and we're hoping that it will improve awareness about the experiences of mothers and highlight directions for further support.

Why are we inviting you to take part? Because you've sought support from the NHS for symptoms of anxiety and/or depression and have consented to being contacted for research.

What will you have to do if you do agree to take part? You'll be asked to take part in an interview with me, that will last 60-90 minutes. During this interview, you'll be asked questions about your expectations of motherhood and your experience as a mother. I'll also share some adverts which we'll discuss together, and ask you about representations and ideas of motherhood that have made an impression on you (for example in adverts or films, or in your family). It might be useful to think about this ahead of the interview if you have time.

We want you to feel comfortable during the interview. We can do it at a date, time, and location that works for you. We could do it while going for a walk, or we could draw instead of just using words, for example. We can also provide (free) childcare during the interview. If you have a disability, your carer is welcome to attend–alternatively, we can provide a specialist support worker. The interview can also take place over the phone if that's more convenient.

During the interview, I'll record the audio to help analyse the information you share with me. After the interview, I'll send you a copy of your transcript via email and you can make amendments, provide clarifications, and/or remove things. You're still welcome to take part if you don't consent to your interview being audio recorded, but your data won't be used in the study.

To compensate for the time that you give us, you'll receive a £50 voucher for a store of your choice.

What are the potential disadvantages and risks of taking part? You might find it uncomfortable or upsetting to talk about your personal experience, including struggles, as a mother. We've taken precautions to try to avoid this, and I'll offer a list of resources in case they're helpful. Taking part in this research project won't affect the mental health support you're currently receiving.

Do you have to take part? No, it's your choice whether to take part or not–it's entirely voluntary. You can withdraw from the project at any time, including during the interview, up until the end of the study when the anonymised data is published. If you'd like to withdraw from the project, please reach out to the research team via email (sm2597@cam.ac.uk and rd522@medschl.cam.ac.uk), and let us know that you wish to opt out; you don't have to provide a reason.

Who has reviewed this research project? This project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committees of the School of the Humanities

and Social Sciences, University of Cambridge, the Health Research Authority (REC reference 23/NW/0048), and the NIHR Maudsley Biomedical Research Centre (CRIS). Two mental health professionals have been involved in the design of the project; among other things, they've helped train me for issues that may arise during the interview. A mother who has experienced anxiety and/or depression has also been involved in the design of the study. If you're an active patient, your care coordinator has been contacted to approve your invitation to participate–as required by ethical governance.

What will happen to the information you share with us? The information that you share with me during your interview will be anonymised in your transcript. It will be used, in its anonymised form, as part of my PhD thesis and/or in peer-reviewed publications.

Everything you say is confidential, unless you tell me something that indicates you or someone else is at risk of harm. In that case I'd contact your general practitioner, whose name and contact details I'll ask you to share at the start of the interview. I'd discuss this with you before telling anyone else.

What will happen to your personal data? Your personal data will be stored on a secure and protected server. Only members of the research team will have access to this server, through a two-factor authentication process.

Please see a statement from the University of Cambridge, which will act as controller for your personal data: The University of Cambridge is the sponsor for this study based in the United Kingdom. We will be using information from you in order to undertake this study and will act as the data controller for this study. This means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The University of Cambridge will keep identifiable information about you for 5 years after the study has finished. Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personally-identifiable information possible. You can find out more about what will happen with your data by following this link: how we use your personal information (for research participants).

Who should you contact for further information? Don't hesitate to contact the research team via email (sm2597@cam.ac.uk, rd522@medschl.cam.ac.uk and hod@sociology.cam.ac.uk) if you have any additional questions, or if you'd like to raise a concern.

C.3 Interview Documents

C.3.1 Interview Guide

Intro (approx. 5 mins)

1. *Introduce what the interview will be like.*
    (a) *Explain that the interview will start by discussing their family life, including their expectations and experiences of motherhood, and then you will then watch two videos and discuss their thoughts on them.*
    (b) *Underline that they should feel free to go off on a tangent and to follow their chain of thoughts.*
    (c) *Remind them that the interview is likely to last between 60 and 90 minutes.*
2. *Reassert their consent and rights.*
    (a) *Reassert that the transcript of the interview will be anonymised, and anything shared during the interview will be confidential, unless they disclose something that indicates they or someone else is at risk of harm. Ask for the contact details of their GP.*
    (b) *Ask them to avoid discussing identifiable information, like names or services.*
    (c) *Confirm that the interview can be paused at any point, and that they have the right to withdraw at any time during or after the interview, up until data is published, without disclosing a reason.*
3. *Introduce yourself.*
4. *Ask them for basic demographic information.*
    (a) *Gender.*
    (b) *Ethnicity.*
    (c) *Age.*
    (d) *Number and age of children.*
5. *Start recording and confirm consent.*
    (a) *Reconfirm permission to record the interview.*
    (b) *Test the microphone.*
    (c) *Start recording.*
    (d) *State the ID number.*

Participant Background (approx. 5 mins)

1. To start, can you tell me a bit about what life looks like for you day to day? Who lives at home with you?

2. Do your family call you 'mum', 'mummy', 'mother' or such at home? If not, why not? What do you use instead?

Imaginaries of Motherhood (approx. 15 mins)

1. Have you always wanted to become a mother? Why? Why not? If not, what changed?

2. What did you expect from motherhood? Where do you think these expectations came from?

3. What does being a mother mean to you? How would you define being a mother? How would you describe a mother?

4. What would it mean to be a good mother in your view? What about in the eyes of your family? And society in general?

5. What would it mean to be a bad mother? What about in the eyes of your family? And society in general?

Lived Everyday Experience of Mothering (approx. 20 mins)

1. Can you tell me a bit about what life as a parent looks like for you day to day? What do your day-to-day parenting responsibilities involve?

2. Do you receive support in parenting? If so, from whom? Where do you go for support? Or for information? Which institutions have been helpful?

3. What would you say are the worst things about being a mother? Why?

4. What would you say are the best things about being a mother? Why?

5. How would you say you have changed since becoming a mother? Would you describe yourself differently now than before having a child? Why? In what way(s)? Why not? How do you think you would feel if you had never had children?

6. How do you feel that your mental health has been impacted by being a mother? What does anxiety and/or depression mean to you? What do you think triggers your anxiety and/or depression in your family life?

7. As I understand it, you receive mental health support for your experience with anxiety and/or depression. How do you feel like this support has impacted your feelings about motherhood? Did it change your experience of motherhood? Did it change your view of yourself as a mother? Why? In what way(s)? Why not?

8. Does being a mother help you to feel close to or distant from other women? Why? In what way(s)? Why not? How has your relationship with other women changed since becoming a mother?

Role of Media Texts (approx. 15 mins)

1. Are there any representations (e.g. an ad, a movie) of motherhood that you relate to or find memorable? Which one(s)? Why? In what way(s)? Are there particular mother figures from popular culture that you aspire to? Or mother figures that you are trying not to resemble?

2. Are there specific media or platforms that you have started using since you became a mother? Specific influencers you follow? Specific brands you use and like? Specific series you like? Which one(s)? Why?

3. I'm going to show you a few texts, one at a time, and I'm going to ask you for your thoughts on each. *Present first vignette.* Take your time looking at it. You can watch it as many times as you need. *Once the participant indicates they are ready to discuss it:*

   (a) Have you seen this before?

   (b) What is your initial reaction on seeing this? How does it make you feel? Why? In what way(s)? Could you point to specific elements that made you feel this way?

   (c) How does this relate to your own experience (of mothering)? Does this echo or contrast with your own experience? In what way(s)? What are the most important aspects of being a mother that you think it leaves out?

4. Remove the first vignette and present the second vignette. Repeat questions a-c.

5. Remove the second vignette and present the third vignette. Repeat questions a-c.

Warming-Down Questions (approx. 5 mins)

1. Is there anything you would like to mention about your experience that wasn't covered in the previous questions?

2. What advice would you give to other mothers? What advice do you wish you would have received?

3. How did the interview feel?

   Stop the audio recording.

Close (approx. 5 mins)

1. *Thank them for their time and valuable contribution.*
2. *Ask them how they feel, and if they have any questions now that the recorder has been turned off.*
3. *Explain that you will follow up with an email that includes a document with resources if they feel negative emotions following the interview. Reassert that, while you will try to help as best you can, their first point of contact if they feel distressed should be their GP.*
4. *Remind them that they will receive a transcript via email within the following two weeks, and will have the opportunity to correct it.*
5. *Add that you will be in touch via email to coordinate the voucher for a store of their choice.*
6. *Thank them again, and underline that you are always available to help however you can.*

C.3.2 Interview Vignettes

Vignette 1a

Brand: Mothercare
Title: Discussing Breastfeeding with Mothercare Mums
Type: Testimonials
Theme: You're Not Alone, You're Not the Only One

Video: Discussing Breastfeeding with Mothercare Mums [play 2'42" to 5'24"]

This video compiles extracts of mothers (who presumably work for Mothercare) sharing their experience of breastfeeding. The shots are relaxed, visibly taken at home on a low-quality camera. The discussion covers, among other things, the assumptions these mothers made about breastfeeding, the struggles they experienced, and the external judgement they suffered from.

Includes: "[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." and "We ended up bottle feeding [due to medical complications], 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."

Vignette 1b

Brand: Ella's Kitchen
Title: Sophie – Weaning Wisdom
Type: Testimonials
Theme: You're Not Alone, You're Not the Only One

Video: Sophie – Weaning Wisdom [play full length 30"]

This video portrays a mother offering her tips about weaning. The shots are relaxed, visibly taken at home on a low-quality camera. The discussion covers judgement received from friends about using food pouches.

Includes: "Don't feel bad for using pouches. I've been mum-shamed a few times by a few friends for doing it. They're quick and easy when you're out on the run somewhere. Our family meals also weren't as healthy as we would've liked. So they were useful to introduce new foods that we don't eat as a family."

Vignette 2

Brand: Tesco
Title: Tesco Food Love Stories — Olly's 'Thank You' Finest Burgers
Type: Advertisement
Theme: Welcome to the Club

Tesco Food Love Stories — Olly's 'Thank You' Finest Burgers [play full length 30"]

This video portrays the efforts of a mother who supports her son learning to read by encouraging him to decipher recipes as they cook together. The video concludes with the grown-up son reading a thank-you letter to his mother, now that he is able to read and has figured out the trick she used.

Includes: "I always struggled with reading. So, you said I should forget about it, and have fun cooking instead. And it became our thing. Of course, I didn't realise what

you were doing at the time. But then, you've always been a bit sneaky like that. Thanks Mum."

Vignette 3

Brand: Tesco
Title: Jamie's Traybakes — Tesco with Jamie Olive
Type: Advertisement
Theme: Becoming the Support System

Jamie's Traybakes — Tesco with Jamie Olive [play full length 30"]

This video portrays a mother who attempts to dress in the changing cubicle of a swimming pool while her children are rowdy. Upon her daughter asking "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." The video ends on a shot of the mother sharing dinner with her two smiling children.

C.4 Safeguarding Documents

C.4.1 Follow-Up Email

Dear [insert participant's name],

Thank you for making the time to meet me earlier, and for trusting me with your personal story. I felt very lucky to be able to listen to it all, and really enjoyed it. From the bottom of my heart, thank you!

I hope you also enjoyed our chat, but if it's left you feeling some negative emotions that's very understandable. I'm attaching a document with some guidelines and resources you might find useful, and I'm also happy to reach out to your GP if you feel that's needed. Never hesitate to reach out to me, too; I'm not a trained mental health practitioner, but I'm happy to help in any way I can.

The next steps for me will be to import your audio recording into a protected server, to transcribe it, to correct the transcript, and to make sure it doesn't disclose any identifiable information. Once that's done, I'll send the transcript for you to correct and/or approve. I'll try to send this within the next two weeks.

And as I've said, let's not forget to make sure you're compensated for your time. You can receive a £50 voucher for a store of your choice. I know that Tesco, Sainsburys, Boots, Amazon, and IKEA all offer vouchers, but you can also choose another brand and I'll see if vouchers are available. Which store would be most useful for you?

Thank you again!

Warmest wishes,
Sophie

C.4.2 Participant Resource Sheet

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your experience with me.

I hope you enjoyed our conversation, but I can imagine that it might have brought up difficult memories, experiences, and/or thoughts. If you experience distress after the interview, please do share this with your mental health practitioner, with your general practitioner, and/or with me. I am always available to help if I can, so never hesitate to reach out.

Here is a list of resources you might also find helpful:

- For acute distress, please call 999 and/or go to your local A&E.
- For crisis support, please call Samaritans on 116 123 (this is free of charge and will not appear on your phone bill) or email jo@samaritans.org.
- The Maternal Mental Health Alliance (https://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org) offers a hub of resources and services available to support you, and is especially helpful to identify specialists for specific maternal mental health issues.
- Netmums (https://www.netmums.com) offers tips and advice for parenting-related questions.
- Maternity Action (https://maternityaction.org.uk) offers advice on your rights.

As a reminder, you can always choose to withdraw your participation at any point, up until the end of the study when the anonymised data is included in publication.