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Redefining Parenthood: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Identity Curation on
Instagram by Mothers and Gender Non-Conforming Parents

by

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Abstract

Motherhood, as a discursive framework, has developed to give visibility to privileged experiences of parenting, prioritizing white, heterosexual and middle-class realities. This framework has erased or rendered invisible the parents whose experiences do not align with the restrictive structures of the motherhood ideal. The traditional mommy-blog allowed mothers agency in the representation of their parenthood as they disclosed their lives in the private sphere to a public, digital audience. Newer forms of social media have expanded the representative ability of mothers and gender non-conforming parents. This research has been contextualized in literature on the history of motherhood and its associated dominant discourses, marginalized experiences of raising children, the use of social and digital media in the construction and development of identity, and the instances in which mothers have historically represented their experiences online. Grounding my research in theories of discourse, gender performance and certain key aspects of feminism, I employed a feminist critical discourse analysis of three different Instagram accounts run by two mothers and one non-binary parent. This research is meant to highlight how parents may utilize social media to constitute their identity while resisting the dominant discourses of motherhood to which they are subjected.

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Introduction

“The natural state of motherhood is unselfishness. When you become a mother, you are no longer the center of your own universe. You relinquish that position to your children.”

—Jessica Lange (n.d.)

The word “mother” alone holds an immense number of interrelated connotations. In Western culture, motherhood might be conceptualized as a new state a person enters once they have children, a role that forever changes them. No one cultural text can sum up how understandings of motherhood influence family relations, and yet, this imagined role of a mother is more or less collectively understood. The above quote only represents one aspect of the attitudes about motherhood that are rather ubiquitous in Western culture. Mothers are expected to be the moral compass for their children and families, to assume a completely selfless disposition in response to the needs of their loved ones, and implicitly, to lose themselves in the role. It is assumed that mothers are predisposed to such traits by virtue of reproductive ability (Buchanan, 2013), exemplified in the above quote which uses the phrase “natural state.” Throughout this research project, I highlight how motherhood has actually been culturally constructed, revolving around restrictive gender norms, and expectations that can only be fulfilled by individuals who fit into a largely heterocentric, white, middle-class framework (Buchanan, 2013).

Nonetheless, many mothers do not fit into these categories. In fact, the discourses of motherhood and the explicit and implicit traits these narratives espouse not only restrict certain individuals from fully realizing them, they also erase the realities of parents who do not fit neatly into a gendered role, such as gender non-conforming and queer parents. Even mothers who may conform in many ways to the ideal imagined by the paradigm of motherhood still face the gendered challenges of raising their children. In recent years, some mothers have chosen to document their experiences through mommy-blogging. Creating and using their blogs, these

mothers would document the ordeals and triumphs of parenthood, connecting with other mothers and engaging in practices that make the personal political as they brought their experiences into the public, digital realm (Orton-Johnson, 2016). Additionally, mommy-blogs have also been a site of resistance for mothers who more obviously contradict these constructs, such as queer, black mommy-bloggers Shana Calixte and Jillian Johnson (2009). For these bloggers, their occupancy of space within the so-called “mamasphere” – the online collective of mothers engaging with one another on the internet (Wilson and Yochim, 2017) – resisted the norms that were perpetuated by their mainly white, heterosexual contemporaries.

As new social media has proliferated in more recent years, many parents have opted to use these platforms to document their lifestyles much like the mommy-blogging tradition. For this project, I chose to focus on how parenthood may be documented on Instagram. This app allows microblogging through the creation of visual images and captions, where parents can “make visual and textual meanings” (Zappavigna, Adami, and Jewitt, 2016, p.272). However, although mothers can use platforms like Instagram to negotiate with dominant ideologies of motherhood, much like traditional mommy-blogs, mothers on Instagram may risk perpetuating gender norms and inequality (Orton-Johnson, 2016). This is why the presence of mommy-bloggers like Calixte and Johnson was significant when the original format of mommy-blogging was more prominent. Moreover, this is also why the presence of subversive portrayals of parenting online is so crucial to highlight as self-representation by parents takes new forms.

In this research project, I endeavour to highlight mothers and gender non-conforming parents who resist the hegemony of motherhood on the basis of their mental health status, sexuality, gender, race and other elements of identity. I have conducted a feminist critical discourse analysis of three Instagram accounts run by two mothers and one non-binary parent who subvert

dominant discursive motherhood in particular posts. In executing the analysis, I strived to answer the following research questions:

- How do mothers and gender non-conforming parents utilize Instagram to negotiate their identities?
- How do the affordances of Instagram allow mothers and gender non-conforming parents to subvert hegemonic and dominant discursive understandings of motherhood?

The accounts I have chosen, and the particular posts I feature in part showcase how parents can utilize their Instagram profile to construct their identity as they share their perception of themselves, their parenthood and how this impacts their children. I relied on theories of discourse developed by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler's gender performance theory and Carol Hanisch's original concept of the personal being political to ground my analysis. Using these theories, I have attempted to make sense of why it is not only significant that parents share their day-to-day challenges with mundane parenting, but also the aspects of their personhood which impact them as individuals and as parents. I believe these accounts, which feature neurodiverse parents, queer parents, and blended families highlight how individuals might begin to negotiate and resist the dominant ideology of motherhood in showcasing their lives on Instagram.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The following literature review places my research within a broad scope of literature on motherhood, digital media, and the entwined world of these aforementioned spaces known as the “mamasphere”. Firstly, I will establish the hegemonic institution of motherhood as it is understood in Western culture and its associated qualities. I will follow this with a brief exploration of literature which provides a picture of parenthood that resists these hegemonic ideals, including the realities of working, queer, and black mothers. I continue my literature review by looking at theories of social media affordances and the general possibilities and limitations of self-representation on platforms such as Instagram. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of different uses of social and digital media by mothers and how dominant ideals are reproduced, but more importantly, resisted, on these platforms. The trajectory of this chapter is meant to give the reader a better grasp on how motherhood is conceptualized through discourse, how this contrasts the lived experiences of different parents and how these discourses are effectively resisted through the affordances provided on digital mediums.

Dominant Discourses of Motherhood

In order to better understand how mothers and gender non-conforming parents subvert dominant discursive motherhood, I have familiarized myself with these discourses as they are outlined in the following literature. Establishing the recent history behind common characteristics associated with the gendered role, this literature specifically explores how these narratives emerged to create a normative framework for motherhood as it is culturally understood in modern society. In outlining this literature, I hope to expose how this framework has developed into a restrictive discourse, failing to represent the realities of many parents.

The social construct of motherhood as it is envisioned by dominant discourse is relatively new. Motherhood's modern associative characteristics began to emerge between the 17th and 19th centuries (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014a; Buchanan, 2013). According to Lindal Buchanan (2013), it was during this time that the concept of two distinct sexes arose, which allowed a connection between the biological body and gender to develop. This conflation of biology and gender entailed the suppression of women's sexuality which was then believed to solely exist for the conception of children, creating a discursive relationship between the ability to conceive and "such defining 'feminine' characteristics as maternal instinct, timidity, domesticity and so on" (Buchanan, 2013, p.16). Buchanan expands on these associations of motherhood by explaining how the gendered role can be understood in binaries that uphold the aforementioned qualities of mothers while demonizing other feminine traits. Using the antithetical terms of god and devil described by Richard Weaver, Buchanan explains that the god-termed "Mother" who represents qualities such as "nourishment, altruism" and "morality" (p.8) stands in opposition to the devil-termed "Woman" who is representative of "self-centeredness, work" and "hysteria" (p.8) as well as a possession of one's own sexuality. Buchanan states that these binaries allow rhetoric surrounding women to be persuasive, "for exalting or denigrating women" (p.9), restricting women both as mothers and as gendered individuals to vague but understood cultural binaries. As these perceptions of motherhood took form, they continually influenced how Western society saw and represented mothers as individuals, as members of a family unit, and as citizens.

The female reproductive system and its culturally established relationship to gender and motherhood has specifically impacted how mothers are expected to connect with and raise their children. Media and artistic depictions have reinforced these expectations. Sturken and Cartwright (2018) note how iconographic representations of mothers with their children in

Western art have often referenced this understanding of mothers having an “essential bond” (p.45) with their children. This idea manifested in assumptions that the mother was an authority who specially raises her children for society (Buchanan, 2013). Vandenberg-Daves (2014a) notes how media bolstered this association as the modern institution of motherhood was in its genesis, quoting several magazines in the 18th century which emphasized the significance of a mother’s patient and nurturing approach to parenting. These media examples further underscore what was an emerging discursive notion; that women have the capacity for selflessly bonding with and raising children.

The norms associated with motherhood, such as the idea that women are oriented for child-rearing also meant that women were increasingly seen as belonging in the home. Buchanan (2013) states that industrialization beginning in the 18th century emphasized this understanding of gender and parenting. This gendered separation of public and private spheres continued into the mid-1900s, where women were continuously conceived as the homemaker and men as the breadwinners (Damaske, 2013). The idea that mothers were especially significant in the upbringing of their children arguably fortified such segregation, as it was in the private sphere where women were expected to engage in the emotional labour and social reproduction involved with raising children (Vandenburg-Daves, 2014a). As certain mothers were bound to their homes and children, others were unable to follow this evolving discourse in their practices of parenting. Nonetheless, as white, middle-class women began entering into paid labour, working mothers were perceived as being more selfish and negligent than their stay-at-home counter-parts (Damske, 2013). The ideal of motherhood, in this respect, failed to accommodate the changing realities of middle-class women.

Although mothers were and are to a certain extent still perceived as having the crucial duty of remaining in the home raising children, much of the literature on mothers states that this discourse only represents specific women. Vandenberg-Daves highlights this exclusivity: “These idealized concepts were invented by white, middle-class Americans...most of the American population could not afford such a neat division of labor and approach to mothering” (2014a, p.2). This statement importantly highlights that many women, including Black, immigrant and working-class mothers, had little agency in resisting or conforming to dominant discursive understandings of motherhood, especially in relation to their cultivation of their domestic environments. The taken-for-granted ability to remain at home which was associated with motherhood meant the institution left out several women’s experiences.

This restrictive nature of culturally idealized motherhood in relation to separate private and public spheres is indicative of a larger issue with this discourse. Buchanan draws attention to the heterocentric, classist and white-centric ideal of motherhood. Overlooking the experiences of racialized, queer and poor mothers, this ideal ignores “intersectional differences” (2013, p.21). Many of the previously outlined characteristics of “good” mothers do not account for other aspects of identity and lifestyle which may conflict or increase the complex reality of lived parenthood.

Discursively and culturally, the mother has often been understood as a person who is ever available to the needs of their children, an expert in maintaining their homes physically, emotionally and morally. Societal understandings of women have allowed the binding of certain ideal traits to those who bear children, exacerbating the concept of who a mother should and should not be. Common discourses of motherhood are often taken-for-granted as indicative of real-life parenting, restricting those whose identities and lived experiences stray from this norm.

Historically and presently, many individuals' experiences of parenthood differ from the image of mother painted by these discourses. The following literature explores some of these realities.

Realities of Motherhood

As narratives of motherhood have developed in recent years to encapsulate what much of the aforementioned literature outlines, women have grappled with these aspects of hegemonic motherhood in their daily lived experiences. Negotiation with these frameworks of motherhood takes different forms for different women. The choice to engage in paid-labour meant some women felt greater pressure to excel as mothers in light of these frameworks, as support for their parenting did not increase societally. Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) mothers, and queer mothers, have had to contend with these discourses as they oppose necessary aspects of their own parenting and identity. The literature in this section shows how mothers and gender non-conforming parents have dealt with the institution of motherhood in their own lives.

Established earlier in this literature review was the expectation that mothers remain at home in order to be present to the needs of their children, husbands and homes. As the number of women working steadily rose in the mid-20th century, so did tensions about the existence of working mothers (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014b). According to Vandenberg-Daves, women were beginning to work while their children were still young, and increased access to education and contraception meant women were even delaying pregnancy in favour of their careers. Although many women were gradually entering the labour force, meaning time spent with their children was decreasing, Vandenberg-Daves notes that pressures were increasing for women to engage in a form of parenting termed "intensive mothering" (p.258). Coined by Sharon Hays, "intensive mothering" is the expectation that a mother is to be ever emotionally, financially, and self-sacrificially present for her child (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014b). Although intensive mothering was

becoming a discursively prominent concept in the 1980s and 90s, little change in policy and support for mothers was seen during this time (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014b). Damaske (2013) also investigated intensive mothering and its characteristics in tandem with women's increased participation in the labour force. She found that women experienced guilt for deciding to work, but often framed their choices as being beneficial to their children's quality of life, failing to challenge certain gendered ideals of motherhood (Damaske, 2013). Furthermore, mothers in heterosexual relationships still engage in more domestic labour than their husbands, despite increased working hours (Damaske, 2013; Vandenberg-Daves, 2014b). Unlike their own mothers and grandmothers, these women were not only beginning to work, but carried with them increased expectations for their mothering.

Although some of the aforementioned literature on the institution of motherhood highlights the shortcomings of the dominant discourses of motherhood and their failure to represent the lived experiences of women who resist or exist outside of its framework, this literature does not always adequately expand on these deficiencies. These insufficient descriptions of experiences of motherhood which differ from the white, heterocentric, middle- and upper-class model may have to do with the lack of attention that the experiences of BIPOC, working-class and queer mothers have received historically especially. Due to differences in privilege, such as access to literacy, the experiences of middle-class mothers have been well-documented, while that of BIPOC and working-class mothers for example, have been under-researched and represented (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014a). Despite this under documented history, literature has since been written revealing the experiences of these mothers who have and still exist on the fringes of institutional motherhood.

Literature on mothers in lower classes importantly exposes how dominant discourses of motherhood even infiltrate the experiences of those who exist in opposition to stereotypes which are best fitted to middle-class mothers. Despite the low-level of systemic support lower class mothers receive, Vandenberg-Daves remarks that mothers raising children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods felt personally responsible for how their children turned out, reinforcing the ideal of the “unique impact that mothers must have on their children” (2014b, p.267). Even though these women are not fully represented in the ideal of the nuclear family existing in gentrified neighbourhoods and suburbs, these women are still influenced by the individualizing impact of idealized motherhood.

Black motherhood has also received critical attention regarding how the experience impacts Black women. Importantly highlighting the intersection of race and motherhood, Karen T. Craddock looks specifically at the experiences of young Black mothers which have often involved higher rates of poverty and lack of access to healthcare in the United States (Craddock, 2015). She found that young Black mothers, although experiencing oppression at a gendered and racial level, felt that their motherhood was empowering and was a site of resistance in and of itself. Moreover, Craddock highlights a concept of raising children known as “other-mothering” (p.36) where Black children are raised with the help of grandmothers, aunts and other women in the community. This concept also importantly resists the ideal of the biological mother being the sole emotional and domestic producer of their child for society. However, Craddock also found that many of these young mothers felt that bearing children was a rite of passage into womanhood. In this sense, the enmeshment of reproductive capacity and gender noted earlier by Buchanan are still present in some Black experiences of motherhood, showing how dominant discourses are negotiated in light of marginalized identity.

LGBTQ2+ mothers and gender non-conforming parents have also been excluded in critical ways from the framework of motherhood. Reed (2018) highlights this in her research with different queer parents who contend with being called “mother”. Reed exemplifies parent Jelena, who does not identify with the title “mother” as she did not physically give birth to her children and felt her value as a parent existed outside of the gendered term. Charlie, a bisexual woman married to bisexual man Jamie, chooses not to go by the title due to its gendered history and heterosexual implications. However, for other parents in Reed’s study, the title was at times affirming if they had not birthed their children themselves: “Being ‘mother’ whilst identifying outside of the heterosexual framework which legitimates mothers may also be considered a statement of resistance” (Reed, 2018, p. 46). This study highlights how the term mother can be alienating for queer folks, but also a point at which queer parents can negotiate the gendered role, pushing against the dominant discourse in various ways.

The cultural understanding of what it means to be a mother has developed along privileged lines throughout Western history. Centering the experiences of white, middle-class, and heterosexual women, much of what is understood about mothering practices is informed by those who are in greater control of discourse. However, establishing these frameworks, and the mothers and parents whose active choices, passive identities, and existential realities go against these currents of knowledge importantly sets the foundation for what my research will explore. Looking to the digital world, I draw attention to literature which discusses new media, and its possibilities for new representations and discursive understanding of parenthood and motherhood.

Social Media Affordances and Self-representation

In the age of new media, there is arguably a new opportunity for parents who have been misrepresented or ostracized from dominant discourses to represent themselves, furthering their ability to negotiate their role within hegemonic ideals. The structures and practices involved with social media specifically may present new passages for inclusive representations of motherhood. Bucher and Helmund (2017) discuss the structure of digital media and its affordances, which they claim are “relational and multi-layered” (p.242). They approach multiple definitions of affordances, and in summary believe that different platforms influence what is possible for the user. The authors state that the actions of users and “non-human agents” such as algorithms, which provide specific content for specific users based on their activity, influence platform structure and use. danah boyd additionally looks at affordance theory, claiming social network sites and their affordances encourage groups with shared values, goals, or identities known as publics to form “networked publics”, which are both the space existing due to networking technologies and “the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice” (boyd, 2010, p.39). It is in these spaces of networked publics where boyd notes that individuals can “see and be seen” (p.39). According to boyd, the process of formation for networked publics is reciprocal, where qualities such as the building of profiles allow agency in identity curation online for users. These works by danah boyd and Bucher and Helmund have implications for the possibilities digital media has created for self-representation. Specifically relating to my research focus, these works help to establish the context and significance of digital media use by mothers in traditional mommy-blogging, as well as more current media such as Instagram. This connection will be expanded upon in the final section of my literature review.

More specifically, platforms which centre digital photography present particular affordances that may increase visibility for marginalized groups. Digital photography and smartphone cameras have allowed individuals to document their daily realities (Richter and Schadler, 2010; Van House, 2011; Reading, 2008). Van House claims that this expands one's capability for self-representation due to the accessibility of digital photography and allows the private sphere to be represented in a public online space. Although my research is grounded in the possibility for greater representation, the expansion of access to digital photography and self-presentation does not guarantee visibility in the manner that one might assume.

Although the affordances of digital media and photography provide possibilities for self-representation, it is important to acknowledge that in the digital world the potential to be seen does not necessarily equate to visibility in its purest sense. boyd (2010) notes that the democratization of visibility and self-representation, among other traits of networked technologies, may allow marginalization to continue online. In the context of motherhood, this may involve the exacerbation of historical pressures placed on mothers and marginalized parents, and the creation of new pressures to perform motherhood perfectly. Van House (2011) similarly states that the circulation of digital images may encourage the persistence of hegemonic or normative representations of identities and individuals. Moreover, Bucher and Helmund's (2017) description of the relational quality of affordances, exemplified in the algorithm, suggest that democratizing possibilities of platforms may be limited as content is continuously catered to the user based upon what they are already viewing and clicking. Knowing the potential of social media platforms, digital images and increased self-representation, and the realities of how content is created and circulated may provide insight into how one may negotiate their identity as a parent against hegemonic ideals of motherhood and their representation online.

Domestic Photography, Mommy-blogs and the “Mamasphere”

Domestic photography has allowed mothers the ability to represent themselves as individuals, their children and their home life. Noted earlier was the expectation in dominant ideals of motherhood that the domestic sphere was the mother’s domain. This assumed domesticity influenced image making practices, such as the Victorian “hidden mother”, where a mother would be covered head-to-toe in draping while holding their infant child still for a photograph (Riches, 2014). As domestic photography became more prevalent, the maintenance of family memory in things such as scrapbooks was traditionally the responsibility of the mother (Wilson and Yochim, 2015). Moving into the late 20th and early 21st century, documentation of family life remained an important task for mothers. Domestic photography however, has implications for self-representation that go beyond gender. bell hooks importantly highlights how domestic photography for Black folks in the segregated southern United States allowed complex and positive possibilities for representation that were not present in popular depictions of Black Americans during these times (1995). However, hooks notes that her father was the one behind the camera. These examples showcase the discourses that influenced memory making in the domestic sphere, and the agency that is allowed in photographic depictions of home and family life.

As documentation of the day-to-day has moved into digital realms, some mothers have chosen to document their personal, domestic lives through the mommy-blog. Orton-Johnson (2016) writes about the significance of mommy-blogs as they “celebrate the personal as political” (p.14), bringing the domestic sphere into public view. The author claims that the circulation of domestic story-telling is influential in how mothers act and perceive themselves. Mommy-blogs are part of a much larger matrix of online communities of mothers,

representations of motherhood, parenting advice and products known as the “mamasphere” (Wilson and Yochim, 2017). Although Orton-Johnson acknowledges how mommy-blogs may reproduce gendered notions of the domestic nature of motherhood, she claims that the “mamasphere” is diverse in its composition of women and parents. This assumed diversity has proven somewhat problematic for mothers who subvert the white, middle-class, heterosexual framework of motherhood. Calixte and Johnson (2009) share their experiences as queer, Black mothers who both wrote their own mommy-blogs. They critique this notion that the “mamasphere” has a range of voices and the idea of the internet being “inherently democratizing” (p.76) sharing that they both felt that they had to mute their experiences as queer, Black activists and mothers in order to appease their primarily white audiences. Jones (2016) notes that the monetization of mommy-blogs may also contribute to hegemonic discourses of motherhood to be prized in the “mamasphere”. These critiques of the “mamasphere’s” assumed diversity considered in conjunction with the work of boyd and Bucher and Helmund on affordances trouble the concept of the internet being an equal playing field.

Still, visibility and resistance to dominant discourses contained in mommy-blogs is possible. Calixte notes that the personal is political in mommy-blogging in the sense that race was often a topic in her posts. Although they critique the “mamasphere” as perpetuating a white supremacist framework of motherhood, Johnson notes that as a queer, Black, single mother, even her participation alone in the “mamasphere” is agitative of this structure. Representing oneself through mommy-blogging, and within the larger “mamasphere” can involve a resistant relationship to the hegemonic representations that permeate online mothering communities.

As social media has increased in popularity, the “mamasphere” increasingly includes parents like Calixte and Johnson, expanding possibilities both for the continuation of and

resistance to normative mothering. Wilson and Yochim (2015) note that digital media such as Pinterest has the potential for power in their encouragement of daily use, especially by women and mothers. Zappavigna et al. (2016) makes similar claims about Instagram, explaining the ability this platform affords mothers to build their identity and represent their relationships to their children and family. Zappavigna et al. notes the “micro-blogging” (p.280) quality of Instagram, which arguably allows traditions of mommy-blogging to continue on its platform, encouraging mothers to construct their identity through their posts encapsulating their daily life as parents.

The “mamasphere” and its permeation of platforms such as Instagram poses new possibilities for parents to use their feed to share their own unique experiences. Much of the literature on mommy-blogging and the construction of identity through social media still centres the experiences of parents who fit normative conceptions of motherhood. Although literature exists about queer parenting, and queer identity and parenthood online, there seems to be a lack of writing about specific experiences such as that of non-binary parents and trans parents or parents existing at other intersections. There are possibilities for expansion in these realms, showing how parents negotiate their role and identity in online spaces, subverting common notions of motherhood on the basis of race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation and other identity markers. I hope to aid in this expansion with my research focusing on Instagram use by parents who subvert dominant discourses of motherhood.

Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology

This chapter is meant to outline the research questions, theoretical framework, methodological approach and data collection process that will guide my analysis of the self-presentation engaged in by mothers and gender non-conforming parents on Instagram. First and foremost, I want to highlight my positionality as a researcher. As a cis-white woman, it is important I acknowledge that I am conducting this research from a place of privilege, and that I kept this in mind as I attempted to represent the experiences of Black parents and parents of colour, as well as parents who are gender non-conforming. As a queer, feminist woman, I am interested in analyzing the dominant discourses and gendered dynamics of motherhood, especially in relation to how queer parents negotiate with heteronormativity and its ubiquity in narratives of motherhood.

I importantly specify that my research will look at motherhood *and* gender non-conforming parenthood, namely because this distinction gives visibility to the non-binary parent in my data set. Additionally, I make this distinction because through my research, my aim is to expand the way we conceptualize motherhood, or feminized versions of parenting. As certain parents are gender non-conforming and others simply wish to shed the gendered expectations tied to their actions and personhood as parents, I believe research in this area will require researchers and scholars to look beyond traditional motherhood in order to appreciate how parenthood is experienced at different intersections by different people. The focus of this project is articulated in the following research questions:

- How do mothers and gender non-conforming parents utilize Instagram to negotiate their identities?

- How do the affordances of Instagram allow mothers and gender non-conforming parents to subvert hegemonic and dominant discursive understandings of motherhood?

These research questions importantly illustrate the methodological and theoretical standpoints from which I will conduct my research. The negotiation of identity, and the subversion of hegemonic discourses are all important facets of discourse theory, which is the major foundation for my thesis. Moreover, my research looks at the representation of motherhood and parenthood, which will require analysis based in theories on gender and feminism.

I have chosen feminist critical discourse analysis as my primary methodology, as it combines theories of gender and feminism with discourse. I have combined my theory and methodology in a single chapter, as my methodology is heavily informed by feminist theory and theories on gender, and my theoretical framework is enmeshed in my methodological framework. Throughout this chapter, I will outline how my theories and methodology will allow me to investigate the experiences of parents as they construct their identity online, specifically on Instagram.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis of my research is discourse as theorized by Michel Foucault. Interpretations of Foucault's work concerning discourse convey it as "...groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking" (Rose, 2012, p.136). Indeed, Foucault acknowledges the importance of language and how this governs discourses and their interpretation by individuals and groups (Foucault, 1972, p.27). In addition to the significance of language in discourse, Foucault and other theorists have stated that discourse is *intertextual*, meaning that discourse is formed in a diversity of texts and images

(Rose, 2012). *Intertextuality* makes visible the different sites at which discourses are embodied and/or expressed, and how they begin making meaning.

However, grasping the workings of discourse also requires examination beyond written and spoken words. Foucault and other theorists who have since interpreted his work insist that discourse is not solely existent in explicit text, but also in the “never-said” (Foucault, 1972, p.25). It is additionally built around what is left up to interpretation. Gavey (1989) asserts that discourse is much broader than words, referring also to mechanisms of meaning production that are “specific to particular groups, cultures and periods” (p.464). Gavey exemplifies this by focusing specifically on discourses of what makes a “good mother”, stating that this discourse is informed not only by literary and media representations of mothering, but also by the associated actions of “good” mothers, such as being attentive and intuitive to their child’s needs. Discourse is produced and perpetuated in literal and visual texts, but also in the actions of those subject to particular discourses.

Additionally, as subjects aid in the perpetuation and evolution of discourse, discourses also produce these subjects by defining explicitly or implicitly the characteristics that individuals are meant to possess, and the actions they are meant to take depending on the discourses they are subject to (Mills, 2004a; Rose, 2012). In the words of Foucault, discourse can be understood as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p.49). Looking back at Gavey’s example of the “good mother” it is evident that the actions of mothers impact discourses of motherhood, but also that the goodness of their motherhood is gauged and shaped by them.

Furthermore, scholars state the importance of power, knowledge and truth in the theory. Much like discourses produce subjects, they also determine what is known, what is deemed true,

and the people and institutions who influence these two matters (Mills, 2004a). Foucault states that power is not something a person or institution has and wields over others, but rather a range of actions and practices that take place at all levels of society, impacting “possible forms of behaviour as well as restricting behavior” (Mills 2004a, p.17). According to Mills (2004b), this idea of how power operates also allows resistance at all levels. Grasping how power functions in discourse requires an understanding of its ubiquity. Particular discourses become dominant due to their hegemony, their ability to persuade individuals and societies that they are natural. This appearance of naturalness results in them being accepted as basic truth (Gavey, 1989). The idea that dominant discourses develop what is believed to be true is known as a *regime of truth* (Rose, 2012, p.138). Power, knowledge and truth are all closely related and function together in discourse theory.

The production of subjects, power, knowledge and truth are all key points of discourse theory that will guide my research. For example, it is often assumed that mothers have an inherent connection to their children, and this idea has been underscored by media and artistic representations of motherhood (Vandenburg-Daves, 2014a; Sturken and Cartwright, 2018). However, this is a result of discursive understandings of motherhood, rather than a biological disposition of mothers. The concept that discourses produce subjects and truth can be applied to discourses of motherhood and parenthood, revealing the behaviours mothers and parents are expected to exhibit and the roles they assume because of these expectations. Additionally, discourses of motherhood produce subjects in part by influencing how mothers and parents may construct their own identity, intentionally and unintentionally. Therefore, a discursive conceptualization of motherhood acknowledges that many of the qualities associated with

mothering are not inherent to an individual's biology, but rather an amalgamation of that which is expressed and understood about motherhood.

However, despite the control and presence of dominant discourses, many theorists agree that discourses are complex, dynamic and competing (Mills, 2004a; Gavey, 1989). This intricacy allows individuals agency in the way they interact with and enact discourses (Gavey, 1989). This caveat is important for my thesis, as it points out how mothers and gender non-conforming parents, who must contend with dominant discursive embodiments, representations and ideals of motherhood, subvert that which is expected of them. This important clarification of what discourse encompasses will be useful in my analysis as I examine each parent's Instagram posts and interpret signifiers of motherhood, gender, and identity. This deeper interpretation, which takes the complexity of discourses into account will be discussed in depth in my methodological framework and analysis sections.

In addition to discourse theory, certain aspects of feminism are built into my theoretical framework. I decided not to base this framework in any particular branch of the theory, although there are multiple, varied and specific feminisms. I made this choice for a few reasons. The examination of my chosen Instagram accounts is grounded in feminist critical discourse analysis. I believe this framework effectively blends the properties of feminist theory that I wish to employ for my research with my preferred methodology. A major part of my analysis of the Instagram accounts will involve examining how individuals negotiate their parenting role along with their identities, on the basis of their gender, race, sexual orientation, and other features of their identity. This concept of negotiation is significant for feminist critical discourse analysis, which will be further discussed in my methods section. Furthermore, I utilize specific feminist concepts and theories to guide this project, particularly those of Judith Butler and Carol Hanisch.

In constructing my theoretical framework, I found that these authors spoke directly to the themes I wish to explore in my analysis. Overall, my choice to include a few foundational feminist concepts in my methods and theory will allow me to construct a research project that utilizes critical and foundational feminist ideas, while also allowing other theories to direct my research on the representation of parenthood.

My theoretical framework in-part borrows from Judith Butler's critical work on gender. In her work *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Butler challenges the culturally established gender binary that has been arbitrarily connected to biological sex (Butler, 1988). Butler opposes essentialist concepts of gender, which often imply or explicitly state that gender is expressed from some core identity. Rather, much like the title of her work suggests, Butler explains that gender "is an identity tenuously constituted in time - a stylized repetition of acts" (p.519). Butler asserts that gender is performed, rather than expressed, as the term "expression" relies on the concept that gender comes from something inherently internal. Butler wishes to avoid essentialism in her theory, as this overlooks the multiple avenues for gender performance, and the vagueness of a singular gendered ideal for individuals to aspire to.

Furthermore, Butler asserts in her theory that attention should not only be paid to acts that produce an appearance of gender on the individual level, but also to the dominant discourses which guide these actions, or "corporeal styles" (Butler, 1988, p.524). Suggesting a dual nature to gender constitution, Butler says that gender is not an entirely individual choice and presentation, nor is it "imposed or inscribed upon the individual" (p.526). Cultural ideals that code individuals as a particular gender are perpetuated, and these create the boundaries within which a person enacts their body to perform their gender. Butler founds this argument within her theory by referencing the feminist idea that the personal is political. This theory will be

explained in greater depth later in this section, but in relation to Butler's theory, the personal being political illustrates how one's personal choices in their gender performance inform socio-political structures and situations, and vice versa.

Butler also addresses the discomfort that is felt when a person actively subverts gender norms. She exemplifies how encountering a transgender individual may cause discomfort in certain people, because this person "...constitutes a reality that is in some sense new, a modality of gender that cannot readily be assimilated into the pre-existing categories that regulate gender reality" (Butler, 1988, p.527). In other words, she writes that the trans individual troubles cognitive distinctions of the difference between how one appears and the reality of their gender. Given that gender is performative, appearance and reality evade distinction in Butler's theory. Butler states that this anxiety speaks to the fragility of the binary, and our collective knowledge of its nonessential nature.

Finally, Butler believes that her theory about gender could be useful for feminism, although a theory such as hers would require a change in the feminist ethos (Butler, 1988). The gender binary, namely womanhood, has been centralized in feminist theory to back political desires to end women's oppression. Butler states that feminists may be apprehensive to let go of its tight grasp on womanhood in fear that it may jeopardize the feminist project. However, she claims that this fear of detachment may attempt to universalize the non-uniform experiences of women and feminized individuals, while also upholding the restrictions of the binary. Acknowledgement of sexual difference and patriarchy are important to Butler, but she believes it would be better to also understand how the binary is constructed and nonessential. She proposes the solution to the cultural climate surrounding gender would be to remove gendered coding

from all clothes and manners of enacting the body, while accepting the complexity of gender and gender performance.

Butler's essay expands my theoretical framework, especially when paired with the discursive concept of the production of subjects. Much like mothers can be thought of as subjects resulting from discourses on motherhood, the gendered aspects of the role and the actions taken by mothers and gender non-conforming parents can be linked to discourses about gender. Butler's work will also be useful in the analysis of the Instagram account of the non-binary parent in my data set as they navigate their own gender and the gendered expectations they are held to on the basis of their parenthood. In a general sense, gender performance theory will be useful to my analysis as I investigate the ways in which parents subvert gendered discourse.

Another key feminist concept which will be crucial to my research is "the personal is political". It is a term that is often credited to Carol Hanisch, although she asserts that she did not come up with the infamous phrasing of the concept (Hanisch, 2006). In an introduction to the essay featured on her website, Hanisch (2006) states that the use of the word "political" in the essay means "...the broad sense of the word as having to do with power relationships..." (para.2). In her essay *The Personal is Political*, Hanisch writes about herself and other women who would meet in groups during the 1960s to discuss the problems they encountered in their personal lives (Hanisch, 1969). The women would all take turns sharing before relating their personal issues to greater structures of women's oppression. Hanisch describes these sessions as "political therapy" (para.6), because it provided a space where women involved in feminist counter-cultural movements could shed the expectations that they felt restricted them in order to organize in an unconventional way and discover how oppression manifested in their daily lives. The phrase and its historical meanings can aid in pinpointing the political implications of how

parents enact themselves individually and in relation to raising their children. Additionally, the idea of the personal being political underscores why research on mothers, whose work has historically existed in the feminized private sphere (Mills, 2004b), is worthy of critical analysis.

Furthermore, ‘the personal is political’ is also crucial for framing the study of mommy-blogging on Instagram. As was discussed in my literature review, mommy-blogs are an excellent example of the personal being political, especially for mothers and parents who experience marginalization not only on the basis of gender, but also race, class, and sexuality (Calixte and Johnson, 2009). In these spaces, mother’s and gender non-conforming parents’ experiences of parenting, their gender and other facets of their identity have been shared with significant followings. Although the platform that I wish to research differs from the traditional mommy-blog, the personal being political still holds true in the same ways as it did for bloggers like Calixte and Johnson.

Methodology: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is the primary methodology I will be using in my thesis, enmeshed with my aforementioned theoretical framework. Feminist critical discourse analysis builds upon the work of Foucault regarding discourse, exploring how power exists in all areas of society and how this “omnipresent” (p.72) quality of power allows women to resist oppression in their daily life (Mills, 2004b). This concept of power and discourse is significant in emphasizing how the seemingly trivial nature of an Instagram feed can be a crucial area in which parents can negotiate their role and their identity.

In addition to acknowledging the ability to resist at all levels, FCDA stresses that individuals have agency in their response to and embodiment of the discourses they are subject to. FCDA aims to understand and reveal the nuance that is embedded in discourses of gender,

showing how power relations “...are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007, p.142). The notion that one has the ability to negotiate their subjugation was crucial to my choosing of FCDA as my methodology. This method allows me to research how the hegemony of motherhood, femininity and gender influences parents, but also how parents have options in terms of challenging the expectations created by these discourses. The combination of discourse theory and feminist theory in FCDA acknowledges the different ways femininity is experienced, expressed and negotiated on the basis of one’s race, gender, sexual orientation, class or other intersectional differences (Mills, 2004b; Lazar, 2007). Given that the parents in my data set all have different experiences of parenting due to identities which diverge greatly from one another, FCDA’s interest in subversion will aid in show-casing these diverse experiences of my data set.

Data Selection and Analysis

I have consulted a plethora of literature that explores histories and perceptions of motherhood in Western culture, select concepts from feminist theory, theories on discourse and methods related to feminist critical discourse analysis. The history of motherhood and its discourses, many of which were discussed in my literature review section, will serve as a vital foundation for my research. The notion that mothers are inherently nurturing individuals (Vandenburg-Daves, 2014a), the idea that working mothers are neglectful and self-centered (Damske, 2013), and the under-representation and, at worst, erasure of the experiences of Black and POC (people of colour) mothers and parents (Vandenburg-Daves, 2014a) will all be importantly considered against the subversive identities of the parents in my data set.

The discursive concept known as *intertextuality* that was explained earlier in this chapter will be an important tool for the analysis of my data set. Lazar (2007) asserts that this concept is

particularly useful within FCDA, as it is important to analyze language and other texts to gain an understanding of how gendered discourses manifest. I plan to utilize the concept of intertextuality to articulate the ideals mothers and gender non-conforming parents are compelled to align with, and the manner that my data set both feeds into and strays from such discourses. Together, I will analyze a selection of visual images from each account, their accompanying captions, in consideration with other captions and images on their profiles and the literature explored in my literature review. Using intertextuality, I hope to reveal the discourses that concern parents in their negotiation and structuring of their identities online.

Analyzing each individual post and caption, I will be using Gillian Rose's (2012) process which she calls "discourse analysis I" as she outlines two different forms of discourse analysis, this one being the first. Rose claims that this process of discourse analysis looks primarily at visual images and "their social production and effect" (p.141). Essentially, this form of discourse analysis is concerned with images, related or surrounding texts and their cultural implications (Rose, 2012). For the remainder of this chapter I will refer to "discourse analysis I" as discourse analysis for simplicity. Utilizing discourse analysis for my thesis, I will critically consider how each image and its accompanying caption, in the context of each account builds upon and subverts discourses of motherhood.

Discourse analysis in general is a somewhat fluid approach to research in comparison to other methods. Rose (2012) emphasizes that although discourse analysis looks for recurring visual cues, words and themes much like content analysis, it differs in significant ways. She asserts that looking at the details and reading between the lines of the image are crucial aspects of discursive interpretation. Gavey (1989) makes similar assertions, claiming that one must analyze texts for "discursive patterns of meaning, contradictions, and inconsistencies" (p.466).

Considering all these elements and interpreting images and captions beyond face value characterize the methodological approach of this thesis.

I chose to analyze three Instagram accounts by three different parents whose approaches to parenting and representing themselves counter normative ideations of motherhood. I focused my analysis specifically on three posts from each account in order to keep my data set manageable, while looking to other posts and captions on their profiles to enhance my interpretation. The posts I chose to interpret contained themes of parenthood, self-representation, self-perception or a combination of these themes. Searching for the accounts that are now in my data set, I used Google and Instagram to find parents who are gender-conforming, in non-heterosexual and/or non-monogamous relationships, Black and POC parents, and parents who openly discuss their struggles with parenting and mental health online. The first account that I envisioned to be part of my data set was @margejacobsen, the Instagram of a non-binary, queer, Black, polyamorous parent of two. I found Margaret's account through google in the fall of 2018 while completing research for a previous essay on visual culture, self-representation and parenthood. I used Google and Instagram's search engine feature to find my remaining accounts. On Google, I used search terms such as "queer mothers Instagram" and looked through list articles, for example *18 Lesbian Moms we Love on Instagram* (Bendix, 2017). I also sifted through a number of posts on the Instagram application's search feature using hashtags including #postpartumdepression, #transmama, and #queermama. Keeping a working list of around nine different accounts, I chose not to analyze accounts that featured influencer content, although this could be an interesting dimension for a possible future research project. I also eliminated certain parents whose captions tended to be shorter, as I wanted to use detailed accounts of parenthood for my interpretation and analysis. Through Instagram, I found @mamas.wildflowers using the

hashtag #momswithmentalillness. The account belongs to Ally, a mother to two children who is destigmatizing mental illness and motherhood online. Finally, I discovered the account @babbling_blonde which is run by bisexual step-mother Beth. I found Beth's posts through the hashtag #queermom. The three parents whose social media I analyzed represent nuanced, diverse and subversive experiences of raising children. With that in mind, this thesis is not attempting to represent all experiences of marginalized parenthood. It is meant to be a snapshot of self-representation and subversive parenthood in the present climate of social media.

The theoretical and methodological frameworks I have chosen are suitable for my research in how they account for nuance and agency in parenting, gender roles and dominant discourses, especially feminist critical discourse analysis. This is important for my study of parents who subvert typical notions of motherhood, as the production of subjects under discourse helps clarify the choices parents make in constructing their identity within and against discursive motherhood. Additionally, feminist theory, especially Butler's theory concerning gender performance and Hanisch's *The Personal is Political* highlight how gender and discourse can be approached theoretically, and the significance of this research. Together, these methods and theories underscore why self-representation by mothers and gender non-conforming parents on Instagram is worthy of inquiry, and how these might be researched.

Chapter 3: Analysis

Instagram provides an effective platform for mothers and gender non-conforming parents to negotiate their identity, both as bearers of children, and as individuals. Particularly, the accessibility of digital photography (Richter and Schadler, 2010) and Instagram, the platform itself (Zappavigna et al., 2016), have expanded possibilities for self-representation. This potential has implications for the ways in which parents and mothers may subvert the standards they are held to on the basis of their role, their gender, and the intersection of these and other markers of identity. In completing a feminist critical discourse analysis of posts made by three different parents on Instagram, I have analyzed the ways in which these users employ digital images, captions and profiles on the platform to effectively negotiate their position. Although these parents still define themselves against certain traditional traits, understandings and conceptions of motherhood, the users analyzed utilize their profiles and posts to frame crucial aspects of identity and lived experience within and against the hegemony of motherhood.

Adherence to Dominant Discourses of Motherhood

The primary focus of this thesis is how certain parents use their Instagram profiles to depict themselves and their lives in manners that subvert dominant discursive frameworks of motherhood. However, the feminist critical discourse analysis which I have conducted reveals that these parents still define themselves and the importance of family relationships against certain key tenets of hegemonic motherhood. I have highlighted these findings from particular chosen posts in order to reveal that subversive experiences of motherhood often involve negotiating with dominant aspects of family structuring and mothering.

One such example is a post made by @mamas.wildflowers, an account run by 25-year-old Alley Marie, mother to Violet and Flora. Alley has the hashtag #MomminWithMentalIllness

in her Instagram bio, and while many of her posts portray what might be perceived as “normal” depictions of mothering and family life, a number of posts address her own struggles with mental illness diagnoses and the difficult balance of maintaining one’s mental health while parenting (Alley Marie, n.d.).



Figure 1 (Alley Marie, 2019a)

In *Figure 1*, Alley is pictured sitting on a couch covered in blankets, in what one might presume to be her own home. The domestic setting of the image is indicative of the private sphere which mothers are typically associated with (Buchanan, 2013). In the caption, Alley is critical of her

own weariness and exhaustion with balancing parenting and her mental illnesses. She writes “How is it only 3:30 and I’m already drained? How is it I get home from work with no energy and can’t even muster a little bit of happiness for my kids?” (Alley Marie, 2019a). Although Alley’s explicit expression of her mental health difficulty is subversive, other aspects of her post indicate that Alley feels ashamed and guilty for the exhaustion she experiences as a mother. Alley repeatedly uses phrases such as “How is it...” throughout her caption, indicating that she feels critical of her own feelings of weariness. This is explicitly stated when she writes “How is this motherhood thing so effortlessly easy for some and yet I sit here everyday cursing, shaming, and hating myself for being such a failure for my children?” (Alley Marie, 2019a). The phrase “effortlessly easy” implies that Alley believes that for some mothers, the emotional, and physical labour involved with parenting comes naturally to them. She feels that as a mother, her fatigue and frustration are indicative of failure, and a lack of a key assumed aspect of motherhood - a natural inclination to the needs of their child above all else (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014a). Although posts like this one bring visibility to the emotional and mental limits of parents, and the impacts of mental illness on motherhood, the caption also reveals that for mothers it may be difficult to navigate these challenges while cultivating an identity as a “good” mother.

Navigating motherhood does not only mean grappling with the belief that a mother should embody an instinctual patience and love for one’s children at all times. Other posts in my analysis have exposed the perceived importance of one’s own biological relationship to their children and the implications this has for their bond. Marge Jacobsen created a post that contends with these principles. Marge Jacobsen is a black, queer, polyamorous, non-binary parent to Riley and Beck (Jacobsen, n.d.). Several of these aforementioned aspects of Marge’s identity subvert

the hegemony of motherhood. However, Marge expresses the significance that their biological connection to their children has, especially in regard to their own identity as a child of adoption.

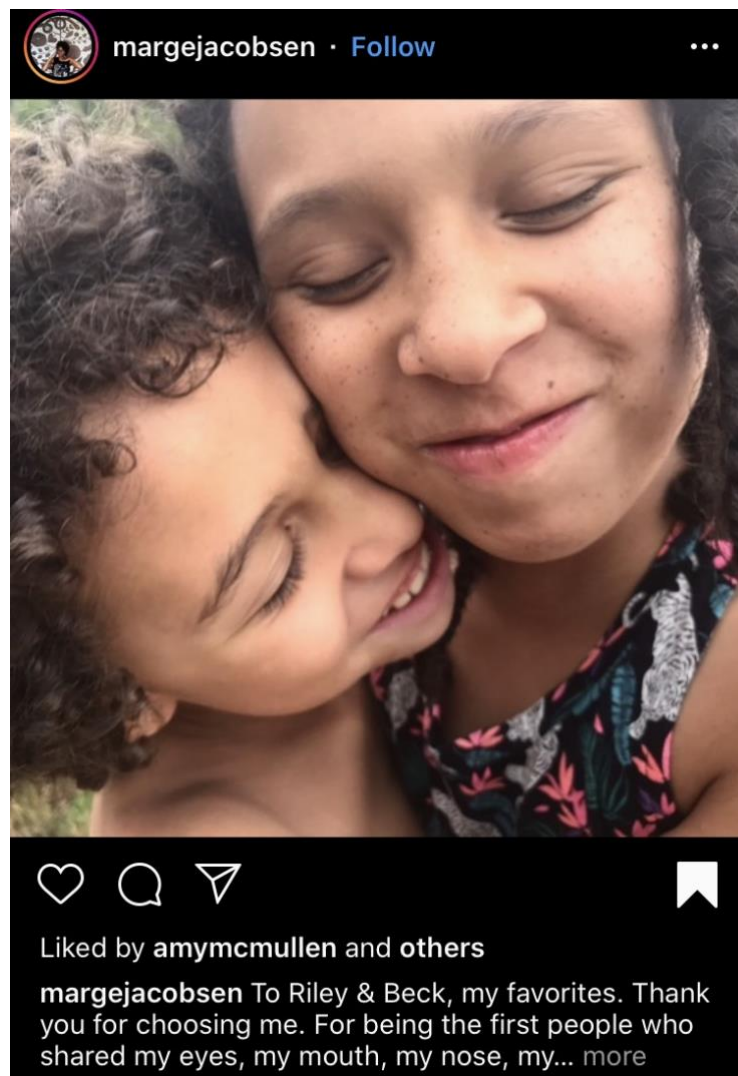


Figure 2 (Jacobsen, 2019a).

Riley and Beck are pictured up-close with their faces near one another. Both smiling, Marge addresses Riley and Beck in the caption, expressing gratitude for their children “choosing” them, and “For being the first people who shared my eyes, my mouth, my nose, my mannerisms” (Jacobsen, 2019a). Marge implies that this biological relationship to their children is a meaningful aspect of their bond. Despite the fact that Marge believes their genetic relationship to

their children is significant and meaningful, it is important to note that this is due to the fact that Marge was adopted, “You know I miss a biological mother I never met, while loving the one who chose me. You know I feel lost without those who share my DNA...” Here, Marge highlights a dual aspect of their identity. Marge recounts the displacement they have felt as a child of adoption, and the healing they have encountered as a result of bearing biologically related children. In the same caption, Marge acknowledges the love of a mother they are not related to. As a parent, Marge finds a purpose in their relatedness to Riley and Beck, “Thank you for helping me start our family line. It’s us. Thank you...” This post by @margejacobsen underscores certain associations that are often made between a parent and child on the basis of biology and what that means for their bond (Sturken and Cartwright, 2018). However, the post is subversive in the way it brings visibility to Marge’s unique experience as a parent and adopted child.

Similarly, @babbling_blonde, an account run by queer step-mother Beth, includes several posts that detail her journey of becoming a step-parent in a blended family (McDonough, n.d.). Jen, Beth’s wife, adopted her daughter Mia in a previous marriage. Beth and Jen share custody of Mia with this former partner. Beneath a picture of Beth, her step-daughter and her wife, Beth explains a fragility she has felt in her familial bonds by virtue of her step-motherhood.



Figure 3 (McDonough, 2019a).

Beth describes how being apart from her partner and step-child during custodial time at one point made her feel disconnected, “Three or four years ago I would have turned down most opportunities to travel during our custodial time...I lacked confidence and security within the family unit I had created. I felt fragile, like the foundation of us as a step-family would crumble if I wasn’t present all the time...” (McDonough, 2019a). Beth goes on to write that she has since learned to trust in the bond she shares with her partner and her step-daughter. This trust allows her to not feel insecure about her career, which may require her to be away while Jen and Beth

have custody of Mia. Beth also feels in building this trust that she allows space for the bond her wife Jen has with their daughter. This post demonstrates experiences of motherhood that counter norms of biological relation between parent and child. In this case, Beth in particular has had to work through uncertainty about her blended family based on its inability to fit into norms of genetic parenthood.

Exemplified in the above three posts is how even subversive online representations of parenthood must navigate the dominant discourses traditionally placed on mothers within a family unit. Particularly, each of these parents in one way or another must consider the relationship their biology plays in their roles as parents, be it Alley's self-perception that she lacks a natural patience with her children, Marge's healing from the displacement of adoption in bearing children that are biologically their own, or Beth's growth in confidence about the strength of her blended family unit. Although these individuals are in conversation with somewhat hegemonic ideals of family and parenthood, this reveals how the experience of hegemony and subversion are never homogenous.

Subversive Parenthood

The primary purpose of this thesis was to find examples of mothers and gender non-conforming parents who subvert dominant discourses of motherhood in their online profiles. Particularly, I am interested in the ways in which parents navigate their roles, and the responsibilities that come with child-rearing on Instagram. In this section I will highlight posts from my data set which exemplify parenting that is not only in conversation with the dominant discursive portrayals of motherhood, but actively resisting them.



Figure 4 (Alley Marie, 2019b).

Figure 4 is a post made by @mamas.wildflowers, which shows Alley once again sitting on a couch in what appears to be her family home. Seated on a sofa strewn with blankets, family photos can be seen on the wall behind her. She holds a letterboard that says, “Some days I feel trapped as a mom” and her demeanor appears weary. In the image alone, Alley is blatantly sharing a sentiment that goes against the expectation that mothers should be predisposed to loving sacrifice for their children, no matter the cost. Alley states “I want to run away. Far, far away. And I don’t want anyone to look for me or anyone to find me. I want to recreate my life...”

(Alley Marie, 2019b). She continues writing, “Motherhood is exhausting, aggravating, boring, mind boggling, and lonesome to me at times.” In Alley’s candid description of her frustrations and distress with motherhood, she subverts the dominant discursive ideas that mothers are meant to be patient in their approach to parenting, an attitude that has been encouraged in mothers in Western society since the 18th century (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014a). This resistance to such attitudes is emphasized when she says that there are days when “I can’t wait for it to be over even though I know it will be the same frustrating mess again tomorrow.”

Although Alley’s post is in many ways an overt contradiction of hegemonic ideals of motherhood, other parts of the caption reveal that Alley is aware of the expectations that she is held to as a mother. This is seen when she uses clarifying statements such as, “I make a lot of happy posts on here, and they ARE real, but this is real for me too” (Alley Marie, 2019b). Alley also states “Some of us just don’t get fulfilment from motherhood like others do. Some of us don’t have this engrained in our DNA and deep-rooted within us.” Here, Alley once again momentarily expresses that she believes that there is a connection between biology and parenting. However, these statements standing next to her expressions of exasperation around being a mom reveal the manner that feminist critical discourse analysis locates a woman’s agency in navigating and resisting dominant discourses “with the seemingly powerless positions they have been allotted” (Mills, 2004b, p.84). Alley is simultaneously a mother who loves her children but is also an individual who cannot always live up to the high-expectations placed on her.

In addition to Alley’s negotiation of her motherhood and the limits of her mental health, the parents in my data set also subvert the ideals of the traditional family structure that is

associated with motherhood. Marge Jacobsen discusses their non-traditional family structure in the following post:



Figure 5 (Jacobsen, 2019b)

The image captures Marge’s ex-husband playing with their two children. They write “When I was pregnant with Riley, I imagined the life Leif and I would lead. Together...I never pictured divorce...” (Jacobsen, 2019b). This picture, which fondly captures Marge’s ex-husband and children, is representative of shifts in the mid-20th century involving the “decoupling of marriage and motherhood” (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014b, p.250). Vandenberg-Daves notes that as

divorce increasingly became a reality for American families, the traditional family unit was still held as a “national icon” (p.254).

Against this ideal, Marge creates space for their divorced family, and even celebrates the conversations they are able to share with their kids about their family unit. “I have appreciated my children’s continued dialogue around their family life. Around divorce and my other relationships, especially with their step-dad. It’s hopeful, it’s vulnerable, it’s beautiful.”

Additionally, Marge references their polyamory in the caption. This reference to their “other relationships” is an implicit allusion to a prominent aspect of Marge’s sexuality. Simply by being a parent that is non-monogamous, Marge counters ideals that those who rear children are not meant to be in charge of their sexuality, understood in the binary concepts of the god-termed Mother and devil-termed Woman described by Richard Weaver (Buchanan, 2013, p.8). Marge’s alternative approach to relationships may be indicative of what many saw as “threats to the American family as an institution” (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014b, p.254). However, Marge is celebratory of this family structure and their children’s opinions on that structure when they say “It’s hopeful, it’s vulnerable, it’s beautiful” countering these anxieties that arise from the dominant discourses that attempt to govern Marge’s parenthood.

Marge also resists dominant narratives of parenthood that surround family structure when mentioning their daughter Riley’s discussion of how being bi-racial and a child of divorce impacts her identity: “At our Seder on Saturday Riley shared what her narrow place was: our divorce and being mixed. Existing in two spaces while being one person” (Jacobsen, 2019b). This quote is subversive as it highlights a key aspect of Marge’s children’s race, and how this impacts their identity. More generally, Marge’s inclusion of their daughter’s thoughts regarding her race and identity reveals possibilities for resistance akin to Calixte and Johnson’s experiences

as queer, black mommy-bloggers who felt that their very presence online resisted the white-centric quality of the “mamasphere” (Calixte and Johnson, 2009). In celebrating their discussions with their children around race and a blended family unit, Marge subverts restrictive frameworks of parenthood and family life that uphold white, heterosexual and monogamous lifestyles.

Beth, the queer step-mother who runs the Instagram account @babbling_blonde comparably celebrates her non-traditional family structure in her self-representation online.



Figure 6 (McDonough, 2019b).

Figure 6 features Beth, her wife Jen and her step-daughter Mia. Mia holds her step-mother's hand and looks up lovingly at her. Beth writes "When I was added to the list for school pick-up, that was a moment where I truly felt like I had 'made it' as a step-mom. I was in. I was trusted by everyone enough to get her from school" (McDonough, 2019b). For Beth, her motherhood is defined by the trust she is afforded as a caregiver to Mia, rather than a biological connection. This counters the idea that biology is more-or-less a definitive aspect in the relationship between a mother and child (Buchanan 2013). Beth also notes that she was told that "Mia lights up when she's told I'm the one waiting outside to pick her up and it made me feel SO validated and important." This further subverts the connection between biology and motherhood, as Beth feels valid as a mother because of her step-daughter's excitement to see her.

Interestingly, Beth sees domestic activities that she can perform for Mia as evidence of the validity of her motherhood. "Mia and her teachers look at me as part of the McDonough pack. A caretaker. A lunch-packer. A mom" (McDonough, 2019b). Although these activities would fit into how dominant discourses expect mothers to act - perceived as homemakers and caretakers for their children (Buchanan, 2013) - Beth sees these activities as a way to bond with her step-child and to reinforce her role as a parent to Mia. This aspect of how Beth represents her own motherhood shows the non-uniformity of gendered discourses, how they impact women, and how women may negotiate these roles (Mills, 2004b). I would also argue that Beth's bisexuality would change the coding of such domestic activities, as the heterocentric model for the division of private and public labour (Damaske, 2013) is possibly less defined in her marriage to a woman. For Beth, these activities are not necessarily related to oppressive structures. Rather, they reinforce her motherhood which breaks tradition.

Resisting dominant discursive frameworks of motherhood can take many forms. These three posts give a small window into how that subversion might take place while individuals construct their identities as parents specifically. Arguably, the accounts of these individuals alone may contain many more examples of such subversion of parenthood. However, for the length of this project I chose to focus on these posts which addressed what I believed to be pervasive hegemonic themes in order to show how individuals may bear children and still resist the hegemony of motherhood.

Negotiating Identity Beyond Motherhood

In exploring how mothers and gender non-conforming parents subvert hegemonic discourses of motherhood online, I also wanted to research posts where the parents in my data-set represented their identities beyond parenting. The aforementioned god-termed Mother and devil-termed Woman binary which feminized individuals, especially mothers, are held to, poses certain qualities as being unable to exist simultaneously (Buchanan, 2013). For example, “hysteria” and sexuality aside from reproductive purposes cannot coexist with “nourishment” and “morality” (p.8). In including the posts featured in the following section, I endeavor to highlight how these parents subvert motherhood by highlighting their own personal experiences that do not necessarily concern their children.

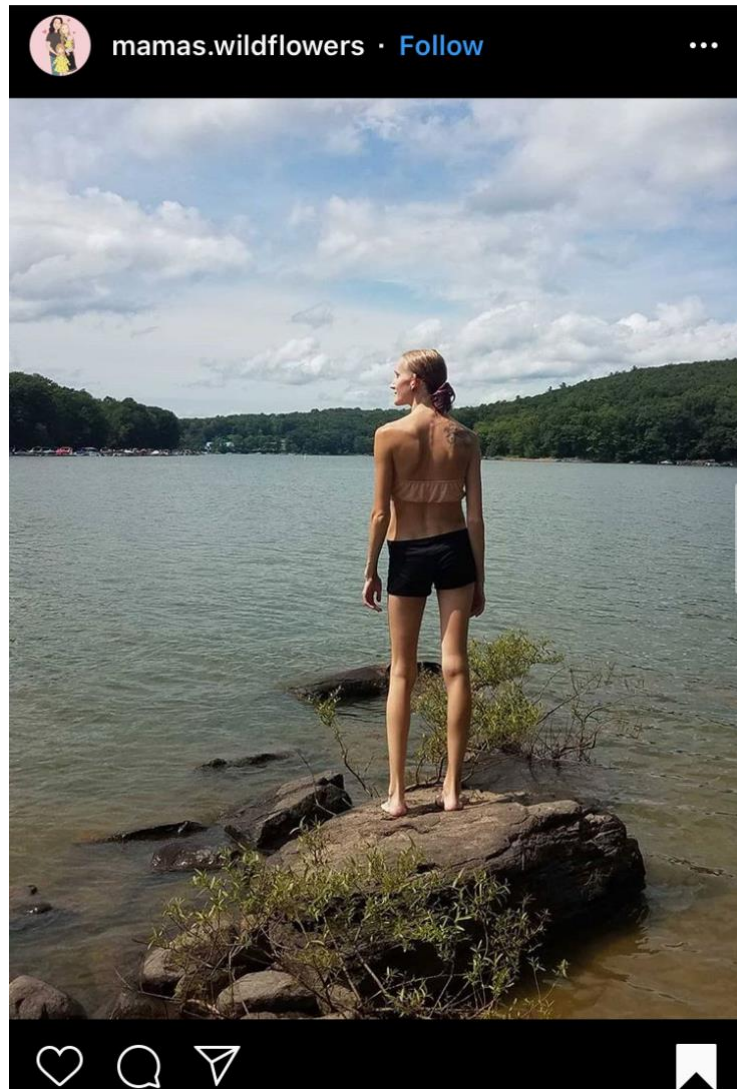


Figure 7 (Alley Marie, 2019c).

The above post is centered almost entirely around Alley's struggles with mental illness, but the post mainly concerns how Alley experiences this as an individual, rather than as a mother. In the caption, Alley says "...even though I have known #mentalillness all my life it does not define who I am as a person or my worth" (Alley Marie, 2019c). Alley continues, discussing the stigmatization she has experienced as a person living with multiple mental illnesses and the different approaches she has taken to maintain her mental health, including self-medication with psychedelics. She is purposefully making her mental illness visible, which is a subversive act in

and of itself. Alley arguably embodies the devil-term Woman which opposes the god-term Mother in this particular post, displaying “irrationality” in broadcasting her mental health struggles, and “self-centeredness” by creating a post that addresses her difficulties separate from her children (Buchanan, 2013, p.8). However, Alley negotiates these traits that have been implicitly classified as incompatible with motherhood when she poses the question “Am I going to be able to care for my children the way they deserve?” Although she can separate the “mother” aspect of her identity from the part of herself who struggles with mental illness, she also understands that this is a part of her which impacts her children. Alley exemplifies how subjects act within “discursive frameworks” (p.16), or margins within which one may comply with and resist the discourses they are bound to (Mills, 2004a). Alley is an individual who struggles with mental illness, she is a mom, and in this post, she implies that these qualities can exist separately and simultaneously.

Alternatively, parents not only define their identities online by sharing their mental health related adversity, but also by displaying their gender and sexuality. This was something I took note of in researching my chosen Instagram accounts.

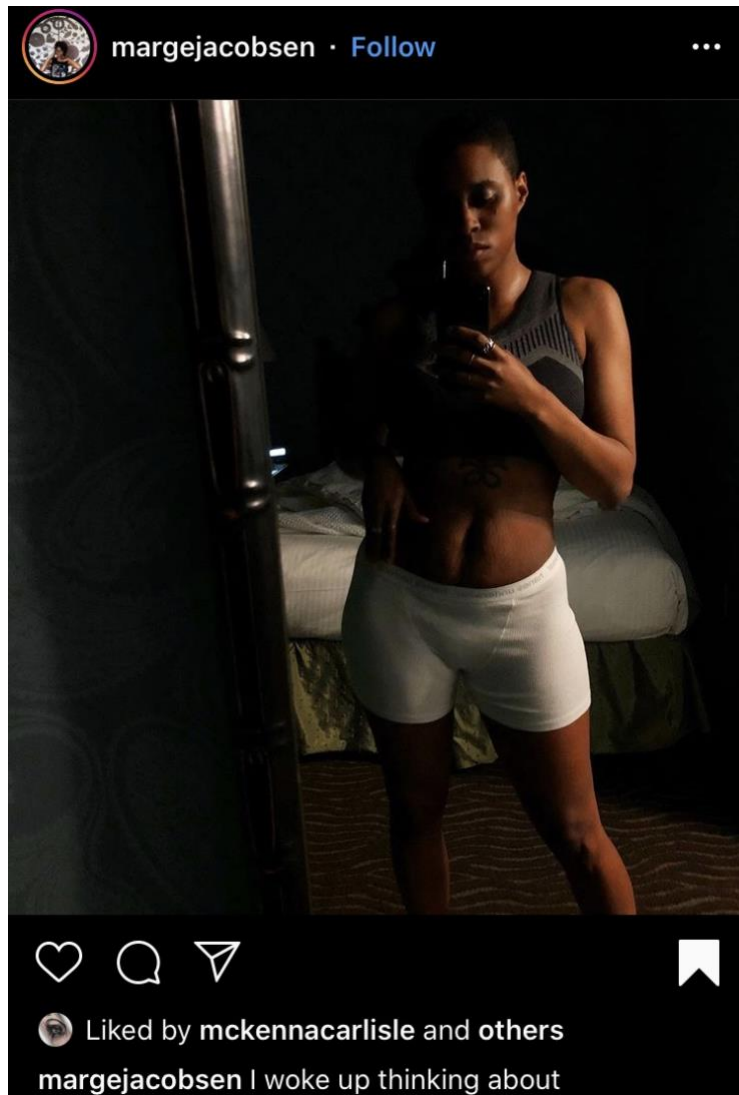


Figure 8 (Jacobsen, 2020).

Figure 8 is a post made by @margejacobsen where they describe their experience being non-binary. Although Marge posts on their story and has made posts previously about this aspect of their identity, I chose to analyze this post in particular as it addresses their struggles with being a black, femme, gender non-conforming individual:

While being non-binary doesn't look one way it is so often associated with the white, thin, androgynous humans who often present masc centered. I struggled to come out as

non-binary because my body is not what people see as a person who doesn't exist in the gender binary. My body fits into what people see as a woman (Jacobsen, 2020).

Here, Marge is enacting resistance as they are making their presence as a queer, black, non-binary parent online visible. This is comparable to the way in which Calixte and Johnson (2009) described their presence as black, queer mothers online as a form of subversion.

Marge explains that although they are perceived as a woman, this perception does not influence their gender identity:

If I needed to change how I appeared to be 'more' non-binary I'd still be adhering to some type of binary and isn't that what I don't want to be the very most?...I like to make the joke that if you are in form of a relationship with me in the dating sense, even if you don't identify as queer perhaps now you are (Jacobsen, 2020).

This quote is also resistant because they see their non-binary identity as fortifying of their queerness.

Marge acknowledges the fact that they are perceived as a woman on the basis of their body and presentation but resists this perception in their caption by expressing that their body and the way they dress do not influence their gender, "Off to continue wearing makeup and tight and small clothes and heels." Judith Butler notes how the discursive links that have been created between sex, gender, and heterosexual attraction are "an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests" (Butler, 1988, p.524). It is arguable that because Marge bore their own children, and they are at times feminine-presenting, that Marge is misgendered due to the dominant discourses which link motherhood, and Marge's identity as a parent, with a specific gender identity. In this sense, this post made by Marge is subversive because it disrupts discourses of femininity and parenthood linked to gender.

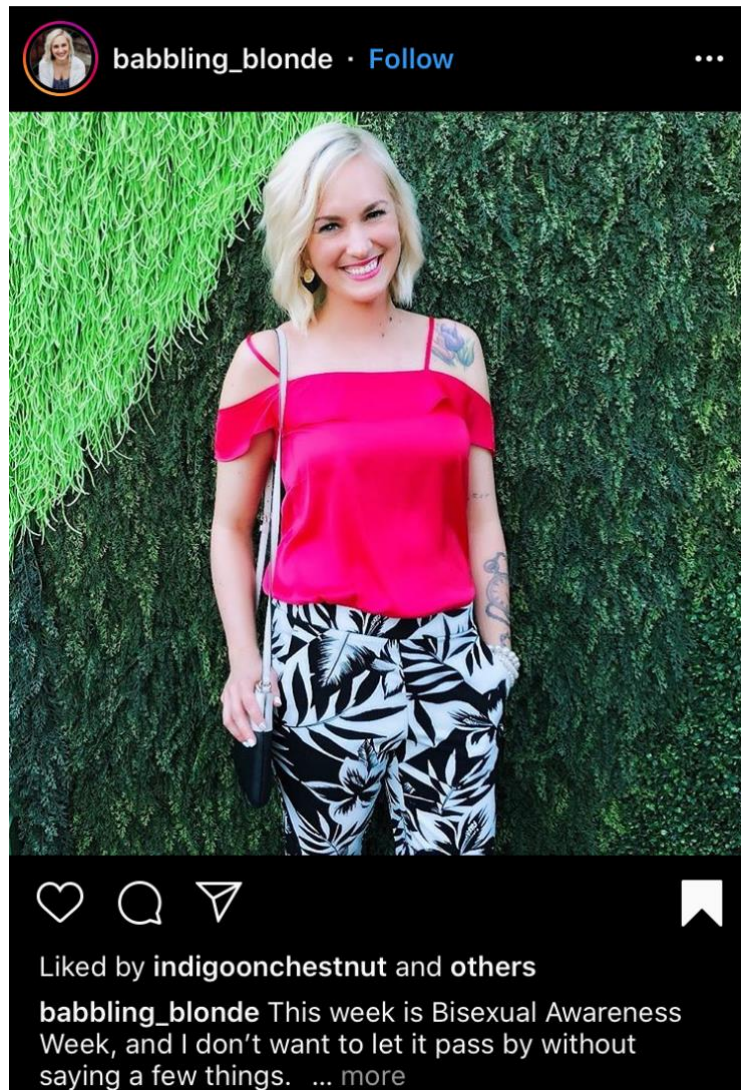


Figure 9 (McDonough, 2019c).

In the above Instagram post, Beth stands and smiles to celebrate Bisexual Awareness Week. She explicitly states that she is bisexual, and that she grew up unaware that she had a choice beyond heterosexuality until she met her wife. First, Beth notes how she has experienced erasure of her bisexuality, “Lots of people refer to my wife and me as a lesbian couple. I don’t mind, but that does erase my identity. I’m still bisexual, regardless of the gender of my partner” (McDonough, 2019c). She expresses the alienating experience of having one’s sexuality erased,

even as an individual existing in a queer relationship. Beth goes on to encourage the parents that follow her to allow their children to explore the option to date people of any gender, rather than assuming heterosexuality. Similar to Marge's post, Beth intercepts the links that people often make between gender, sex and sexual orientation as noted by Butler (1988) by describing her own upbringing with a suppressed sexuality and encouraging that parents forfeit this structure in parenting their children.

All three parents counter prevailing ideals of motherhood in their posts by expressing particular aspects of their identity that contradict key traits associated with child-rearing in feminine-presenting individuals. Both Beth and Marge subvert the idea that a mother or parent's sexuality should be repressed, and only exist for reproduction (Buchanan, 2013). While Marge exhibits this resistance in reinforcing their gender non-conforming identity and queerness, Beth does so by explicitly stating the nuance of her own sexual orientation. Alley alternatively enacts resistance in highlighting how her life and identity have been influenced as a person managing mental illness. All three of these parents utilize these three specific posts to bring visibility to aspects of their identity that are not inherently linked to their parenthood.

Implications of Social Media

The parents featured in this analysis all use Instagram in particular to portray their unique personhood, and their subversive experiences of parenting. The digital photography that is central to the platform allows these individuals to record their everyday experiences (Richter and Schadler, 2010; Van House, 2011; Zappavigna, et al., 2016) and it is argued this act of documentation is powerful in and of itself (Wilson and Yochim, 2015). However, I would argue that the use of Instagram in the above examples goes beyond a representation of mundane parenthood to construct nuanced identities. Particular affordances that come together on

Instagram's interface allow a constitution of self to take place. The creation and distribution of digital images allows users to actualize themselves and the roles they engage in "individually and collectively" (Van House, 2011, p.131). Generally, throughout this analysis, these different parents portray and realize their roles and individuality in the curation of their digital images and posts which detail subjects such as their relationships to their children, their sexualities and their mental health. Profiles, created and curated by users, are also said to be representative of the individual (boyd, 2010). Each individual in this thesis has curated a profile and developed a feed which allows their followers to view their lifestyle as parents and their perception of themselves. Additional affordances such as captions allow users to "ground the image in the user's private experience" (Zappavigna et al., 2016). In analyzing the captions that accompany each post, this contextualization of each image is interpreted in depth. Some of the images are arguably curated and posed, such as those taken by Beth with her wife and step-child (McDonough, 2019a), Alley's images on her couch (Alley Marie, 2019b), or Marge's mirror selfie (Jacobsen, 2020). Nonetheless, the captions associated with these photos develop the meaning of these images and create a more nuanced display of each parent's experience, contextualizing the subjects of the images and their greater significance to that particular user's identity.

Instagram use by these parents also has implications for the visibility of real-life, modern parenthood, and the subversion of dominant discursive motherhood. Instagram affords users the ability to distribute their digital content instantly, and this arguably has a democratizing impact on who can share their experience of parenthood and with whom (boyd, 2010). Despite this supposed democratization, boyd asserts that this aspect of digital media does not guarantee any particular user an audience. Although each parent in my data set has a public profile with follower counts in the thousands to tens of thousands, there is no guarantee that their profiles are

necessarily contributing largely to shifts in cultural notions of motherhood. Algorithms and user activity additionally impact the distribution of content on social media sites (Bucher and Helmund, 2017). Therefore, although these three parents exemplify resistant forms of motherhood and parenthood, they are still subject to the realities of how social media is constructed.

Indeed, the use of Instagram by parents does create possibilities for visibility, both for the act of parenting and the constitution of identity in online spaces. Although these users have presented subversive portrayals of child-rearing, this does not mean that normative representations of motherhood cannot endure online, as pointed out by boyd when she stated that inequality *can* indeed persist digitally (2010). For example, there are likely parents I did not study whose followings are much larger than those in my data set. Furthermore, I avoided parents who have influencer content in my analysis. Such mothers and parents may have greater influence in shifting – or maintaining – dominant discourses of motherhood in their more widely distributed and/or sponsored content. Moreover, scholars such as Calixte and Johnson (2009) have critiqued the concept that the “mamasphere” is inherently diverse due to its accessibility to mothers and parents, as it has traditionally been heterosexual and white-centered. Critiques like these point out that although this data set was meant to intentionally stray from the traditional portrayal of motherhood, many mothers on Instagram may still comply in significant ways with the status quo.

With these limits in mind, I still believe this analysis underscores the significance of the resistant work each parent in this data set engaged in, knowingly or passively. As stated earlier in this chapter, scholars Calixte and Johnson each saw their digital position as Black, queer mommy-bloggers as a significant act of resistance (2009). Similarly, I believe the three parents

researched in this thesis exemplify a similar subversive power. Although the reach and influence of each of these parents may be contested in the greater scheme of social media affordances, I still believe their existence online, and candid portrayals of their lives and unique identities contribute in meaningful ways to shifting the gendered dynamics associated with motherhood.

Conclusion

In researching the Instagram accounts of Alley, Beth and Marge, I discovered a plethora of ways parents not only construct their identities online, but also how they enact resistance in their presence and deliberate internet activity. Using their profiles, visual images and captions, each parent employed the affordances of the app to represent themselves along with their family life in ways that subvert the dominant discursive frameworks of motherhood. Applying the ability to add text to their posts, the parents were able to generate nuanced and unique accounts of their approaches to parenting, their perception of themselves and their family relations. Parents such as Marge and Beth both share particular posts that contest the heterocentric paradigm of family life and traditional family structures. Although Alley's family structure and accounts of parenting with mental illness differ from that of Beth and Marge, her transparent input regarding her struggles with being a neurodiverse mother push against the ideals that mothers should be intuitively predisposed to the needs of their children at all times. Additionally, as a gender non-conforming parent, Marge's profile is truly unique in its portrayal of what parenthood can look like when a person chooses not to or cannot resign themselves to the paradigms of traditional motherhood. Each individual's family life, and experience with gender norms on the whole vary greatly. In all fairness, there is not a single generalization that can be drawn from how all of these parents enact themselves online other than their diverse experiences with parenthood speaking to the limiting construct of motherhood, and the potential to resist such a construct.

This project has implications for our understanding of social media and the ability it affords users in constructing identity. Where the traditional mommy-blogger introduced a public audience to the challenges and daily occurrences of parenting in the private sphere, the Instagram

accounts of the parents I researched both build upon and diverge from this tradition. Each parent in my data set was able to chronicle their experience of having children, while also sharing other parts of identity that both relate to their parenthood and exist apart from this aspect of their identity. The subjects of this project took advantage of Instagram's interface – which allows the construction of a profile – to center their account on themselves, and to reveal how their identity is shaped by parenthood. The ability to pair captions with images allows parents to follow the mommy-blogging tradition where the parent writes detailed accounts of raising children. However, the parents showcased in this thesis also utilized this feature to elucidate the parts of their life that do not necessarily relate to their parenthood. Moreover, the accumulation of different photos in each user's feed allows their online identity to increase in dimension, creating a more complex display of self. I believe this challenges the tradition of mommy-blogging, which was heavily centered on bringing the experience of parenting to an online platform. The parents in this data set, and likely many others using social media platforms such as Instagram, reveal a new kind of agency in online self-presentation which presents opportunities for subversion of dominant discourses in an online format.

Although there were cases within this analysis where the parents appeared to adhere in certain ways to traditional understandings of motherhood in their images and captions, these cases were often embedded in subversive accounts of parenthood and identity. This is exemplary of the locus of feminist critical discourse's conceptualization of a subject's interaction with hegemony, where they negotiate their position rather than having the discourse fully imposed upon them or entirely discarded (Mills 2004b). Furthermore, by simply allowing viewers into pockets of their daily life, each user was engaged in powerful discussion with discourse, which exists relationally and contextually (Lazar, 2007).

This research project also has significant implications for the future of motherhood and parenthood. As individuals converse with and contest these dominant narratives, new possibilities emerge for how parents of all genders might enact their parenthood. Despite the scope of this thesis only allowing a general reading of a smaller data set, I believe the different experiences of each mother and parent reveal how the cultural links that have been reinforced between gender and parenthood are restrictive and may perpetuate harmful marginalization. In presenting a few cases of parents resisting these norms, the possibilities for parenthood's future forms are much more inclusive than the ideal of mother long upheld by the collective imagination.

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