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# **The Family Snapshot: Parental Representations of Family and Children on Instagram**

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2018

# **The Family Snapshot: Parental Representations of Family and Children on Instagram**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements of the University  
of Northumbria at Newcastle for the  
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## Abstract

This thesis addresses parental identity and the family snapshot in the age of social media, through uses of Instagram. Tracing the socio-historical development of the family snapshot and its visual tropes, the thesis highlights that family photography has never been an endeavour to record a full, accurate record of family life. Instead it represents a complex social artefact embodying understandings regarding socially desirable depictions of parenting, familial harmony and childhood. This work situates these characteristics as representing inherited social knowledge which shape domestic photographic practice. Over 3 phases of work, visual representation of family life on Instagram is investigated. Using qualitative methods, a comparative approach is taken in considering divergence and retention of analogue characteristics. The first phase of work suggests that Instagram sharing has not fundamentally reimagined the family snapshot from its previous format in family photo albums. Images retain the key tropes of positive representation, omission of negative imagery, and depiction of familial harmony that were present in family photo albums. The second phase of work, through an ethnographic study of 20 successful Instagram accounts of mothers, focuses upon family images as part of long-term maternal narrative building. The reported findings present evidence of mothers visually documenting labour in carrying out Hays (1996) ideology of intensive motherhood. However, this is presented as part of highly aesthetically-driven lifestyle imagery. In the third phase of work, the thesis reports a further secondary analysis of the ethnographic data, drawing upon Belk's (1988) conceptualisation of possessions as pivotal to an extended sense of self. This exploratory work poses that family snapshots contribute significantly towards understandings of contemporary online maternal identity, moving forward socio-cultural discourses on family photography and representation. The thesis makes a number of contributions, deepening understanding of the mediating role of digital photography in online maternal self-expression and family representation; developing a deeper understanding of the role of family snapshots as a social artefact; and demonstrating the viability of developing comparative analysis from literature to interrogate snapshot imagery on social media. The thesis work also holds implications for the development of policy around communication strategies for engaging with new mothers, and concludes with discussion of future possibilities for further visual analysis of Instagram communities.

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## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee at University of Lincoln, where this work commenced.

I declare that the word count of this thesis is 76,535 words

Name: Effie Le Moignan

Signature:

Date:

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Thesis Overview

The main aim of this thesis is to explore family snapshot sharing on Instagram to assess whether it deviates from previous analogue practices and in what aspects it remains unchanged. Family photography is a distinctive genre of imagery (established in Chapter 2) which is described in literature as having a strong set of tropes and conventions which have regulated depictions of family and parenthood. To date, there is a significant absence of literature which directly considers Instagram as a continuation of the genre and comparatively considers Instagram image sharing behaviours in light of these established characteristics.

## 1.2 Research Questions

In seeking to unpack parental engagement with Instagram as a mediated platform for family photography, the following research questions were generated (these are introduced in more depth in Chapter 4.1):

R1 - Has Instagram sharing significantly altered the composition or content of family snapshots from their previous analogue format in photo albums?

R2 – How do mothers use imagery to construct narratives of parenthood on their Instagram accounts and how do these narratives depict daily maternal lived experience?

R3 – How can the images and discourse produced by mothers be interpreted as evidence of extended selfhood (Belk, 1988) via parental identity expression?

As a social networking site (SNS) Instagram has become of increasing interest to research, in part due to its continued growth. The platform doubled its users base in under two years, from 300 to 600 million users (TechCrunch, 2017) and announced in 2018 it has reached 1 billion active users (Instagram, 2018). Demographically, it is reported that 59% of users on the site are aged under 30 (Pew Research, 2016). There has been significant media attention given to “instamums” in reporting and family images shared on Instagram. This coverage includes criticism of the extensive detail in content shared and the idealised depictions of parenthood commonly posted (London Evening Standard, 2017).

With the ubiquitous nature of camera phones, photography has become an everyday activity (Van House, 2011; Gye, 2007; Murray, 2008). Combined with the popularity of SNSs, representation of children on social media has become a burgeoning area of focus both academically and within the media. These commentaries range from the creation of digital identities for children, the monetisation of data held by private companies and the persistence of data 'in the wild' online (Ammari et al, 2015; Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2018; Leaver, 2017).

These concerns include the sharing of photographs. One element of this pertains to the use of the term 'oversharing' (Marasli et al, 2016, p.399). This phrase is employed both within academic and media contexts, along with the variant 'sharenting' (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017). It was one which has unintentionally shaped the direction of this work. The term is curious for its inception as a vernacular term with no accepted, formal definition. The implications of the phrase are problematic due to its entirely subjective nature which describes a perception, and value judgement, by an audience. As such the term has become, in everyday parlance, a term of critique that suggests transgression of acceptable communicative norms. This may be due to the questions it invokes about contemporary society: connectivity, the role of ubiquitous technologies in everyday life and navigating family relationship in a digital age. As such this work intended to explore parental practices on Instagram to interrogate the types of content shared and detailed presentation of family life to produce a clearer understanding of how Instagram is used as an everyday sharing platform by parents. This aimed to comparatively assess if imagery and visual presentation of family has, in reality, been significantly altered over previous forms of family photography.

Research within this area, in particular in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) has focused to date upon more well established SNSs, such as Facebook, when addressing parental online activity (such as Kumar and Shoenebeck, 2015; Bartholomew et al, 2012). For the case of Instagram, there remains a less developed body of literature to draw upon. This represented a gap within knowledge, with little focus paid specifically to the actual images shared by parents. Initial works into parental relationships and use of technology in the home sphere provided interesting insights which stressed that parents valued the portability of mobile technologies and the ability to integrate these into childcare routines of young infants (Gibson and Hanson, 2013). It has been demonstrated that parents have an expectation that their friends will respond to images they share of their

children, and share prolifically, with 98% of new mothers sharing images of their child on Facebook (Bartholomew et al, 2012, p.461).

There is contradictory evidence regarding the reception of these images, with work suggesting posts about parenthood are well received (Kumar and Shoenebeck, 2015). However, other findings highlight the UnBabyMe app which replaces baby photos with substitute image types on Facebook as evidence of the less than universal appeal of images shared by parents on social media (Morris, 2014, p.1272). Kumar and Shoenebeck (2015, p.1307) describe family networks as acting like an economic demand, with parents often strongly pressed into sharing images online for family members to view. These works collectively represent initial findings on parental behaviour, but as a body of literature do not fully contextualise these findings in terms of photographic practice and family photography. Methodologically, those which are image focused rely on parental self-reporting on their photographic practices, resulting in a lack of detailed assessment of the actual snapshot image compositions and content. As a result, it was unclear if the photographs described were a radical departure from traditional family snapshots or photographic practices.

Parental activity on Instagram is a developing area of research. Work in this field provides initial exploration of pregnancy on Instagram (Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017; Leaver and Highfield, 2018), maternal selfies (Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017) and breastfeeding imagery on Instagram (Locatelli, 2017), for example. However, at the time this thesis was initiated there was no available work published which specifically explored Instagram use by parents in terms of focusing upon family snapshots. It was clear that parents were, and are, prolific takers and sharers of family images. As a result, this work is an attempt to provide insight into whether Instagram has revolutionised or altered the essence of family photography and how family photography functions in an Instagram context.

### **1.3 Instagram As Mediated Communication**

There are a number of key positions which underpin this work. In focusing upon family snapshots there is an assertion that they represent a distinct and commonly understood image type, with identifiable characteristics and tropes. These arguably underpin the photographic practices of image production, which are shared (and reinforced) through Instagram use. As such, Instagram is approached in this work as a form of mediated communication, allowing for parental self-

representation and identity expression to occur. This perspective requires a significant degree of inter-disciplinary working which draws upon multiple fields. These include media and communication, cultural studies, photography and sociology. Collectively these form the basis for the consideration of the image as social artefact, expressing inherited social knowledge on familial representation.

These behaviours are of course, shaped by the affordances of the SNS and the technologies used to both capture images and share them. However, understanding social behaviours and emergent social conventions cannot be understood without some grounding in what family photography means as a socially understood practice. This thesis aimed to explore Instagram as less discrete than a simple on/offline dichotomy. In considering the platform as part of the everyday (Hine, 2015 p.156), influences and practices from film photography and albums are considered as the foundation for our understandings of what is emergent – and divergent, online.

#### **1.4 Structure of Thesis**

To address the research questions listed above, the thesis works through a socio-historic grounding in the snapshot and family photography characteristics, a literature review and a programme of empirical work delivered in phases, which is explicated through a number of chapters, which are detailed further below.

Chapter 2 – presents an overview of the development of the family snapshot and family photographic practices. This established the tropes and conventions of analogue image production, which provide the basis for the evaluating deviation in Instagram practices. This material helps to chart the transition to digital practices and raises some of the core concerns for research around familial photographic practices and points to a gap in understanding around Instagram use broadly and expressions of familial and parental identity specifically.

Chapter 3 – literature review. This establishes the pertinent theory and debates in interrogating the online sphere and its use, establishing the theoretical framework which underpins the empirical chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Chapter 4 – introduces and grounds the questions driving this thesis research in more depth and in response to the issues raised by the literature review and overview of the family snapshot. It then makes an account of the

methodological orientation taken to the thesis research through the empirical chapters and briefly discusses matters of ethics arising.

Chapter 5 – begins to present the empirical work of the thesis. This first phase of study explores whether Instagram has fundamentally changed the family snapshot from previous printed formats in terms of composition and content. This work positions Instagram within a wider socio-historic consideration of family photography, posing it as part of an evolving visual culture practice. Drawing upon family photography literature this thesis positions the snapshot online as deeply influenced by its analogue predecessors.

Chapter 6 – presents the second phase of study, which examines how snapshots are used in the context of ongoing posting behaviours by mothers. This work focused on long term narrative building based around family images by mothers with ‘successful’ Instagram accounts. This employs an ethnographic approach to explore the extended format of Instagram beyond the family album, and how the publication of images to an audience can be viewed as evidencing intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996).

Chapter 7 – presents the final third phase of study and re-examines the data collected for Chapter 6, from a contrasting perspective. This focuses upon the images as evidence of the extended self (Belk, 1988). Instagram, by virtue of being image based, is often critically reported in the media as a shallow platform focused on narcissistic images of the self and consumer culture (Halpern et al, 2016; Guardian, 2016a; Telegraph, 2014). Parental Instagram activity is frequently subject to the same media reported accusations of presenting wealthy mothers, engaged in presenting idealised and perfected imagery of parenthood (London Evening Standard, 2017). This work provides an alternate analysis, suggesting the images may be representative of parents extended selfhood, which integrates both possessions and infants as elements which form and support identity work (Belk, 1988). This poses the cultural value of possessions, ownership and objects as visible upon Instagram, and highlights the snapshot as a multi-layered, complex form of representation.

Chapter 8 – draws the empirical work together collectively, presenting a discussion of the work conducted. It reviews the gaps in knowledge and addresses the research questions. In particular this addresses the extent of the influence of analogue snapshots on Instagram practices, and how this influence manifests in the analysis of Instagram images. This highlights the complexity of snapshot images as

multi-layered social artefacts and citing this as making them suited for analysis from a number of theoretical perspectives.

Chapter 9 – concludes the thesis, articulating the key messages and considerations from the work and pointing to areas of future enquiry which this work has opened up, including policy implications for Instagram use by early years professionals.

## **1.5 Thesis Contributions**

The key contributions of this thesis are:

- The extensive literature review novelly draws together interdisciplinary work from a range of sources to consider the snapshot genre from a socio-historical perspective, which provides a grounding for scholars seeking to situate online image analysis in visual culture perspectives.
- The first phase of study provides indicators as to the importance of family photography as influential upon Instagram image sharing practices. This challenges existing perspectives and contextualises Instagram as a continuation of existing photographic practice, and not a radically divergent practice.
- This work develops scholarship addressing intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) within contemporary, online contexts. It extends scholarship in this area through exploration of the snapshot as a representative format which can be used to explore maternal identity expression.
- The thesis offers evidence that image sharing by mothers on Instagram can be considered a form of extended selfhood (Belk, 1988). This reframes academic discussion around maternal selfies and posting photographs of children as explicit forms of mediated identity expression by parents.
- This work makes a methodological contribution by demonstrating the viability of developing comparative analysis from literature to

interrogate snapshot images on Instagram. It also highlights the potential for visual analysis of Instagram imagery to be used in conjunction with theoretical perspectives to generate new insight.

- The thesis opens up deeper understanding of the role of snapshots as a social artefact, and broader online visual cultures which supports an enriched perspective for those (HCI practitioners and Interaction Designers, in particular) wishing to develop new kinds of online photo-based applications.
- Findings from this work have policy implications, highlighting the use of Instagram as a normalised practice for mothers, which must be taken seriously by professionals as a platform which has potential benefits for information dissemination and interaction with these communities of interest.

## **2. The Family Snapshot Genre**

### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the following areas are addressed: the development of the genre of family photography, tropes within snapshot production, and the subsequent move towards digitisation and the online sphere. This is intended to provide a contextual grounding for the snapshot on Instagram as a continuation and evolution of the format, as opposed to the online sphere being conceptualised as discrete, and accordingly divorced from its socio-historical roots.

### **2.2 The Snapshot as a Social Artefact**

Templin (1982, p.121) asserts that photographs act as representations of social reality. This perspective treats images as the product of people actualising their lives, as opposed to simply results generated from cameras. In mirroring understanding about family and its importance in society Hirsch (1981, p.31) highlights that this results in normative representations of family life which depict it as an idealised state. This reflects the cultural value traditionally associated with nuclear family structures as the bedrock of society (Holland, 1991, p.5).

As a consequence of this focus on the family as virtuous, family photography is rife with one-sided representation in depicting the family as universally harmonious and happy (Spence and Holland, 1991; Boerdam and Martius, 1980; Rose, 2012). In adopting a position within this thesis that aligns with these observations, the family snapshot itself is considered as a social artefact. This theoretical perspective asserts that photographic practice itself represents social knowledge which is inherited and culturally understood. This includes the common tropes of representation of what is included and how this is presented, and what is explicitly excluded.

In terms of parenthood, this places family snapshots as capturing the prevailing contemporary attitudes towards being a good parent and part of a family unit. However, Instagram has received criticism in media reporting for the emergent norm of sharing unrealistic, idealised versions of family life (London Evening Standard, 2017; LendEDU, 2017). These social critiques frequently fail to account for the pre-existing social bias within family photography that predates digitisation of photography. The implication that Instagram has altered family photography from a true record keeping activity, towards a false distortion of reality represents a

technocentric evaluation which does not integrate a substantive body of literature evaluating the traditional pictorial representation of the family on film.

Family photography as a medium is strongly influenced by its early advertising and the links this forged to sentimentality (West, 2000, p.38; Walton, 2002, p.36). This early marketing strategy forms the foundation of photographic practice becoming an everyday activity. Presented within this chapter is a brief overview of the establishment and evolution of the family snapshot as an orientation to the defining characteristics and tropes in family photography.

This begins by outlining the basic technical developments which led to the snapshot format, discussion on the family album as non-documentarian, and representation in family photographic practice. The latter portions of this chapter focus upon parental activity on social media and the discuss the current limitations in Instagram research, and subsequent gaps in knowledge around parental activity on the site.

### **2.3 Establishing the Snapshot as an Everyday Pursuit**

Numerous key scholars in this area suggest that the development of the camera phone represents a shift in photographic practice (Van House and Ames, 2007; Van House, 2011; van Dijck, 2008; Murray, 2008). This moves photography into truly an everyday, ubiquitous form. The continued growth in Instagram use, is suggestive that visual based social media is still a growth area in contrast to declining uptake and use of older platforms such as Facebook, as reported in the media (The Guardian, 2018).

However, the positioning of the snapshot as part of everyday life is a deliberately fostered and old strategy from a commercial perspective. Beginning as a costly and complicated process limited to professionals and wealthy hobbyists in the early 1830s, photography did not become accessible to the public for some time (Ward, 1989, p11). Technically the process was hindered by the significant exposure times required to take an image, which required the sitter to remain still for minutes at a time (Martin, 1939, p.5).

It was not until 1860 that the birth of the modern snapshot can be identified. Writing at the time Herschel said "It is...the possibility of taking a photograph, as it were, by a snapshot - of securing a picture in a tenth of a second of time." Coe and Gates (1977, p.6) present this as the first use of the term 'snapshot' is employed as it is currently understood.

Developed by the wealthy as a hybrid of hobby and scientific endeavour to solve the complex chemistry involved, the medium was not conceived as a commercial enterprise. Despite the popularity of photographic studios, once established as a chemically stable process, photography was not purposefully intended to be mass marketed. It is George Eastman who is commonly credited with bringing photography to the general public in the early 20th century (West, 2000, pp.19-36). (The intervening period and technical specifics of Eastman's advancements in film materials and structure are described in detail by Ward (1989) but are extraneous here).

Advertising strategy at this time for the popular Brownie Box camera began to specifically target the parental demographic. Intended to take market share from formal portraiture studios the adverts highlighted the value of natural, un-posed snapshots of children (Coe and Gates, 1977, p.18). A simple point-and-click mechanism rendered the process devoid of need for expertise, training or prior knowledge. The foundations for both modern tropes in family photography, and it as an ordinary activity are identifiable in this period.

Literature (Coe and Gates, 1977; West; 2000; Ford and Steinorth, 1988) has a significant focus on Eastman – whilst there are other relevant figures - Eastman was initially a sole entrepreneur and pioneer in bringing cameras to the mass market in the UK and US. Even in the growth period which followed he retained his position and shaped the marketing for his new products. Kodak focused upon families and women in order to increase uptake of their cameras. Coe and Gates (1977, p.18) outline the early campaigns highlighting the cameras as so easy to use '*even a woman can do it*'. Eastman shaped the genre to come via moving on to foster a link between family snapshots and sentimentality within promotional materials for Kodak products (Walton, 2002, p.36).

In an era where advertising was generally less well developed and sophisticated, it represents a highly astute strategy to cultivate links to family life and the everyday. It recognised the need for affordability for the lower classes without significant disposable income, the role of women in uptake of new technology, and an understanding of the social structure of the family at the time. It is also one which is key to understanding the evolution of vernacular photography and its contemporary place within online visual culture.

In *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (2000, p.1) West summarises the effect of invoking sentimentality, stating

Kodak taught amateur photographers to apprehend their experience and memories as objects of nostalgia, for the easy availability of snapshots allowed people for the first time to arrange their lives in such a way that painful or unpleasant aspects were systematically erased.

This was in itself an evolution in the understanding of what photography was for. In terms of studio portraiture Walton (2002, pp.26-39) provides a detailed account of the planning and thought in commissioning a studio to conduct portraiture was for wealthy women in society. This occasion was not always frivolous, with death portraits frequently the only image taken of those less financially well off. This was particularly true of infant deaths, who were often captured in photographs as memorial objects (Pols, 2002, p.94, 111).

Liberty Walton (2002, p.32) provides a perspective on Kodak campaigns as aimed at women, highlighting that for middle-class, Victorian era women it was an insightful advertising manoeuvre to provide an activity which was record keeping on their inward facing, domestic settings. Still limited in scope socially, and inhibited professionally, photography provided a hobby and leisure pursuit. As such targeted adverts were placed specifically in women's journals. Holland (1991, p.9) asserts this legacy of aligning women with home photography remains the case with photography sold to woman as equivalent to a "domestic skill." Others (Janning and Scalise, 2015) highlight that family photography remains a gendered activity, with the organisation, storage and display of images within the home still falling to women.

In tandem with focusing upon the domestic sphere, early Kodak adverts tied together photographic practice with life and calendar events. This attempted to integrate capture into daily life, and as a commercial result equated to increased profit from increased photographic activity:

the snapshots value as an aid to memory was promoted. The idea that photography could be used to capture and save memories is evident in Eastman's advertising campaign, containing such slogans as '...a means of keeping green the Christmas memories'  
1903: 'A vacation without a Kodak is a vacation wasted'  
1904: 'Where there's a child, there should the Kodak be...'  
(Walton, 2002, p.36)

There may be evidence of the enduring success of this in terms of highlighting key points in the year as times when family photography is prevalent. Bourdieu's (1965/1990, p.32) assessment of "seasonal conformism" in family image practice

taking notes that family photography predictably intensifies around key events such as Christmas. On fostering the link to both the everyday and key events, King (1984, p.8) describes Eastman as “a salesman talking, but he spoke like a prophet, and a persuasive prophet at that.” This may account for the lasting influence which can be attributed to Eastman’s efforts. Batchen (2008, p.130) summarises this, stating

Urging women to become the family’s historian, Kodak aggressively associated the snapshot with memory and loss, and with specifically middle-class values and sentiments, and insisted that photography be regarded as an essential part of everyday life

Procedurally, the camera units were used and posted back to Kodak in a pre-paid envelope included for processing, with the images returned by post (Coe, 1989, p.62). Fundamentally this characteristic of ease has shaped family photography in its entirety. In fact, this model of posting back a film in an envelope remained technically and financially viable on a large scale for approximately the next 100 years. The focus in traditional analogue snapshot photography is on prints being generated “without any technical skill whatsoever” (Gomez-Cruz and Meyer, 2012, p.209). There is little expectation or indeed requirement for the images to be of quality either compositionally or aesthetically. As a result, Green (1974, p.3) describes the term snapshot as “the most ambiguous, controversial word in photography since the word *art*.” Others describe that from the 1880s that:

progressively the term came to be associated with photographs made with simple cameras by non-experts. In fact for some, it virtually became a term of abuse. (Coe and Gates, 1977, p.6)

Improvements in film quality and colour reproduction were made as refinements to the product range on offer - there is little evidence of any angle which attempts to improve the skill or results from a user standpoint. However, with film as the consumable sold, there was little to be gained economically from reducing the number of wasted shots which were too blurry, out of focus or contained an image of the operator’s hand over the shutter. What is fundamental, is the democratisation of availability. Film photography was marketed for the masses. The ordinary family was not excluded and felt that family photography was accessible, approachable, and normal (Musello, 1979; Berger, 2011, p.177). It has been suggested that this change alters understanding of the term photography

fundamentally from 'for people' in the 19th century towards 'by people' by the 20th century (Pols, 2002, p.20).

Gómez-Cruz and Meyer (2012) conceive this as three distinct movements, with the first encompassing the 19th century development of photographic pioneers refining the chemistry and science required to capture images. Photography during this period required not only access to specialist equipment but a knowledge of the chemical processes underpinning it. The second movement from 1900 - 1930 heralded the mass commercialisation and uptake of photography into "part of everyday life" (Gómez-Cruz and Meyer, 2012, p.210). The third movement, in the form suggested by Gómez-Cruz and Meyer, is more problematic. This attributes the widening division between professional and amateur photography from the 1930s through until 1990 as one which was engineered and deliberate in order to establish the cache of the artistic and professional photographic as superior and different to the non-professional (ibid, p.211) This suggestion that there was a need to differentiate may be questioned on the very basis of the characteristic of the amateur snapshot - the results are clearly of a non-professional quality, intent or subject matter and thus presented no challenge to professionals. What is being described aligns more closely to the question of photographic practice's tension to be legitimised as an art form during this period, as posed by Geoffrey Batchen (2008, p.125), than as a response to the masses.

## **2.4 Storing and Displaying Sentiment: The Family Album**

Individual snapshots were typically amassed and stored in family photo albums collectively. These album formats thus become a record of family life as it progressed. They also become a repository of familiar tropes and conventions in the family photography genre. Thus they have a visual homogeneity, which critics describe as banal and "cloyingly sentimental in content and repetitively uncreative as pictures" (Langford, 2001; Batchen, 2008, p.123).

### **2.4.1 Family Album Audiences**

As a visual practice, the family album became the natural repository for the collection of family snapshot images amassed. Typically presented chronologically they marked both the ordinary and the special occasions (Steinorth, 1988, p.27)

However, the physicality and lasting tangibility of photographs had already lent itself as a format to personal record making. These albums - heavy, sizable and leather bound - were not an entirely new form. Pols (2002, p.26) describes that earlier forms of albums existed to store carte de visite (small 10x6 images mounted on card) and cabinet prints (a larger sized version):

They were meant for holding treasured family possessions, and they came to have a sumptuousness that was in accord with their importance. Padded bindings, brass clasps and tooled leather covers all contributed to making the family album a striking focus of drawing room interest. In addition, the pages themselves offered a surface for decoration.

Previous formats storing carte de visites were treated as a creative practice similar to scrapbooking with added illustration and embellishment. These were left out as treasured, fashionable documents to be viewed. The move towards mass photography by the public led to differing forms of family albums which incorporated the powerful advertising messages of sentimentality and positivity.

That is, whilst contemporary work on online image sharing has a tendency to portray family albums as entirely private and SNS sharing as 'public' with a sharp privacy dichotomy implied (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015; Chalken and Andersen, 2017), photographic sharing in analogue forms was significantly more nuanced and broad in its sharing traditions historically than may be perceived. There was an element of performative display to an audience in the parlour presentation of these albums.

#### **2.4.2 Tropes as a Response to Marketing**

As demonstrated by literature (West, 2000; Spence and Holland, 1991) family albums are a social artefact. Analogue albums of family snapshots are a result of an evolution and marketed understanding of what it *ought* to contain. Rose (2010, 2004) explores the mood and aesthetic of family life as presented in family albums comprehensively in her work with mothers. She states

All my interviewees were very clear that their albums were very selective versions of family life. One of my interviewees precisely summed up the criteria for putting together a family album as we looked through one of hers: "You sort of take all the sort of best bits and you know the funny bits and the, and the nicest bits and the big bits you know like birthdays, [the] first photo." (Rose, 2010, p.13)

The criteria outlined here and in Chalfen (1988) appear to foreshadow some of those observed by Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015, p.1302) in describing sharing behaviours of mothers on Facebook. This work asserts “they share cute, funny, milestone, and family and friend photos, but refrain from sharing crying and naked photos” This description of the online as a modern baby book or photo album is echoed in other work (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017).

Other observations from Rose (2010, p.13) on printed albums include the understanding demonstrated by participants on what was considered transgressive - and thus inappropriate - for inclusion in printed family albums. This was highly linked to the evocation of positive images. Images deemed to be negative i.e. sad, unhealthy, or depressing were expressed as unsuitable in very strongly loaded language. For example

You only take photos of happy things, happy, happy trip, or party or friends or, so when you open a photo album it's actually happy happy, happy things, happy memories, happy events....

Boerdam and Martinius (1980, p.103) report similar sentiments when exploring specifically if people felt their photo albums represented a fair, balanced picture of their life: “Looking through the albums you'd think we were an ideal little family. Just forget it!(...) These are just the ups, the downs are not photographed”.

Langford (2001, p.3) highlights that there is a strong sense of repetition in viewing family images, attributing this fact to finding the consumption of others family images as a tedious activity to participate in. Whilst not traditionally understood as art, or even artistic in nature, neither is family photography documentarian in a true sense. Both the representations of childhood and influence of sentimentality brought about by marketing influence combine to form a medium which is not unbiased. Social understandings of the album as a place for positivity and solidarity render the narratives created as inherently incomplete. They do not represent a chronological documentary of a family's evolution with a true record keeping intent or result. As a visual practice family photography stands apart with its own highly nuanced intention, conventions and rules. Holland (1991, p.2) suggests that

The children's party may bring tantrums, but the pictures will show laughter. The holiday may be spoilt by rain, but it will be the sunny

days that make it into the family album. The longing or cohesion of the family group is secured in the imagery.

It has been noted that the family snapshot is taken with the same motivation across the West, and as a result “snapshots look basically the same in European countries, in the United States, and in Australia” (King, 1984, p. xvi) This includes the exclusion of elements which do not fit in the narrative or family presentation. These include events such as divorce, juvenile delinquency or ill health. However, larger more complex social issues such as addiction, domestic violence or abuse are also hidden in their entirety (Hirsch, 1981, p.32).

That is, the uniqueness of the family snapshot and album cannot be underestimated as a form. Snapshots are representation of a particular type, shown via a particular aesthetic and with a very specific understanding attached to their production.

The important exception to the happy families snapshot is noted by Chalfen (1987, p.78) who positions the infrequent inclusion of a photograph in albums of a baby crying hysterically or other non-normative image as an acknowledgement that family life is not in its entirety perfect. However, the representation is loaded with the message ‘no harm done’. These are “token representation” and do not represent real harm or distress. The inclusion is a tacit acknowledgement that without this nod to reality the representation would become so idealised as to cross over into not being grounded in reality. They represent a light-hearted visual equivalent to the verbal exclamation “Oops” which mitigate and trivialise any negative events. Whilst a commonly referenced key work, there is to-date little work which explores the assertions of Chalfen (1987) in an online context.

## **2.5 Visual Representation of Family**

Visual representation is arguably always a product of the social context in which it is produced (Rose, 2012, p.17). Contemporary concerns regarding Instagram extend beyond those expressed about other SNSs. These focus specifically on the association of Instagram and narcissistic behaviours as heavily reported in the media (The Standard, 2017; The Guardian, 2016). Criticisms of parental activity online can be posed as a reflection of the prevailing attitudes towards family, and in particular motherhood. Faircloth and Murray (2014, p.3) highlight the need to be perceived as a good mother, with children judged as indicators of parental competence (Hughes et al, 2015; Andersen et al, 2007; Freedman Lustig, 2004).

The visual format of Instagram provides a means for both evidencing parenting as efficacious, but also provides the potential for very specific types of critique as a pictorial format.

Hays (1996) outlines that contemporary motherhood is required to be an intensive, active and resource intensive set of practices. The social pressure to parent in the 'right' way is acutely felt by mothers in terms of appearances and how children are turned out. The cultural pressure of parenting leads to a desire to be perceived as a "certain kind of family" (Hughes et al, 2015, p.606). This intensive mothering itself is carried out within a society that approaches parenting as a political issue, which is judged, scrutinised and debated (Lee et al, 2014; Faircloth and Murray, 2014, p.4). This scrutiny occurs as part of everyday choices enacted by mothers (Faircloth and Murray, 2014, p.3) This places images of children and childhood as particularly loaded in the social messages which underpin familial representation within them.

Visual representations of family are not static. These commentaries fit within a history of shifting attitudes towards child and parenthood. Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.22) noted a change from adults and family groups as central to photographic practice, to a reversal which placed children as the focal point. Photography itself can be viewed as a visual medium which is not discrete from the influence of other visual forms. Considered as a representative medium which followed on from the legacy and politics of oil paintings, cues on children and family can be identified. Prior to the Renaissance babies in portraits were typically depicted as the Homunculus, and thus appeared aged or miniature adult heads placed upon infant bodily forms, as representations of Jesus (Smidt, 2013, p.4). This was a reflection of the significance of the Church within the State and wider society.

Around the Renaissance period the family emancipates itself pictorially from the influence of the Church (Hirsch, 1981, p.35). With increased wealth and social change, individuals commissioning family portraits wished their infants to appear more cherubic and realistic, and less as symbols of devotion via religious iconography. This point is important to photography because it establishes a precedent in portraying the family as a self-contained, exclusive unit. Oil paintings at this point feature the family as the embodiment of virtue and harmony, represented as being in itself a state of grace (Hirsch, 1981, p.28).

This, it could be argued, is the point of development of the desire for babies to appear 'cute' and the family perfect. Whilst this depiction of the idealised family remained visually, and there remained a focus on the traditional family unit, in

modern society there are broader concerns around family breakdown, the structure of society and the relevance of traditional conceptions of parenthood, family and childrearing. Hirsch (1981, p.28) states that “Today we worry not whether a family is in a state of grace but whether it is well adjusted.” Nikolas Rose (1999 p.131) highlights that families function within contemporary spheres which are regulated by the state, and that the onus remains on families to demonstrate they are responsible, decent citizens and not feckless. This aspect of moral judgement is reflected by Furedi (2002, p.40) who highlights that many criticisms of modern parenthood are based on the premise that parenting is viewed as a key determinant of the kinds of adults children grow into and thus is loaded with social responsibility (which by this logic, is justified as being of concern to all).

Hirsch (1981, p.40) argues the omission of negative images of family life remain as a result of the previous values embodied in painted representation. The modern pictorial depiction of the family still conforms to a need to appear harmonious and idealised, as representation is an inherent reflection of the values of society (Williams, 1991, p.187). Whilst society has evolved, the inherited traditions of familial virtue remain visible.

Here it is worth noting the division between a collective representation of a unit, as per an album and the representation coming from one individual, as per Instagram. The individual parent is still acting as a spokesperson on behalf of a family unit in sharing a representation that they belong to part of an overall harmonious family whole. The photograph has long been a tool in representation of identity, with the ‘truth’ created aligned to the most socially desirable perception family life and structure. (Holland, 1992, p.22)

Whilst the family album remained limited to physical audiences, SNS sharing has redefined image distribution to broader audiences. Combined with the ubiquity of the camera phone, the effect of photography is frequently framed in terms of it becoming an everyday practice (Van House, 2011, p.127). This is often reported with a moral bias towards the undesired characteristics of self-promotion or narcissism (Halpern et al, 2016; Moon et al, 2016). However, what this can also be considered as representing is that domestic photography has become a very accessible tool in carrying out individual identity work and expression in an ongoing, granular fashion. Photography is already highlighted by Titus (1976) as a tool in actualising the transition to parenthood, by capturing and documenting the new role being acted out.

## 2.6 The Family on Instagram

This brings about questions which pertain to the relationship between image production, audience consumption and their display. What Bourdieu (1965/1990) and others express in a range of terminology and context is the fundamental need for an image to have an audience, particularly if it networked and online (Van Dijck, 2008; Van House, 2011). Bourdieu views this as no less than defining photography itself, in terms of acting as a social tool within familial groups (Bourdieu, 1965/1990, p.27).

### 2.6.1 Digital Snapshot Production

The family snapshot is now on display to an audience it has never had before and there is little understanding as yet of the effect this enhanced sharing on representation, composition or parental practice. Instagram has reimaged the format of the family album, delivering it from the domestic sphere to a public gallery format. Whilst much has been made of this change, literature does not currently provide an adequate description of this which directly addresses identity expression online in wide sociological terms.

Within generalised SNS works, those within HCI present an over-reliance upon the work of Goffman (1971), suggesting that identity online is accounted for by *The Everyday Presentation of Self*, which asserts that identity is in itself performative. There are few attempts to reference other scholarly conceptions on identity expression widely, partially due to the compatibility of Goffman to companion issues such as privacy, imagined audience, and impression management.

However, the dramaturgical theory was posited as one which specifically related to face to face interactions, including the importance of 'leaked' signals, which would be referred to as non-verbal communication in contemporary terminology. It is also one which Goffman himself noted the limitations of as a theory (1971, p.14). There is a significant lack of critical reflection on the suitability of the work for mediated, digital, and asynchronous forms of interaction. At a more fundamental level, there is a larger question of the relationship between study of the online sphere and the symbolic interactionist perspective which Goffman worked from.

In terms of parenthood there is also a lack of integration on social perspectives on motherhood and social attitudes towards it. It has been asserted

that contemporary parenthood is increasingly politicised and publicly contested (Lee et al, 2014, p.29). This also aligns with other contemporary cultural attitudes towards parenthood as clouded in risk aversion and fear (Furedi, 2002), and motherhood as intensified and all consuming (Hays, 1996; Ennis, 2014; O'Reilly, 2010). There is current lack of understanding of how these perspectives intersect with pictorial representation, particularly on Instagram.

The birth of a child heralds what Chalfen (1987, p.81) refers to as a period of “snapshot significance” where a new film camera was often purchased and packed in a hospital bag ready to capture the new infant on arrival. However, this activity is not framed within sociological terms, but in terms of photographic practice. Titus (1976, p.525) explores this, positing that the photographs of early parenthood are a form of role playing. Parents act out the new roles they inhabit, and document them as a means of actualising the transition to parenthood and gaining confidence within these new identities. Whilst the traditional period of snapshot significance was cited as being a year, with the digitisation of image capture and sharing capacities which now exist, this may in reality have become extended or transformed into a different, related photographic practice which exceeds past this initial intensification. However, at present there is a gap in knowledge surrounding how Instagram or camera phone photography may impact upon this phenomenon.

### **2.6.2 Online Audiences and Family Imagery**

Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.19) said of analogue photography that “there are few activities which are so stereotyped and less abandoned to the anarchy of the individual intentions.” He further observed what can be considered pivotal in considering the representation of children photographically that “the mother who has her children photographed can only meet with approval.” (1965/1990, p.21). Family albums crafted a selective representation of family harmony, which were shown to a somewhat limited audience. The ‘truth’ on show was created and viewed within the domestic sphere and by extended family members to bridge geographical separation. Instagram moves the family snapshot into a different realm. This redefines the audience from one known and present to the album owners to a wider, less emotionally proximal one where aesthetics and aspiration are key (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016, 2017).

This body of strangers cannot be influenced by a (truly informed) emotional or familial investment in the people pictured. Family members (and non-familial close-

tie networks) are liable to participate in relationship maintenance and avoidance of conflict in a manner which strangers are not. The images on an Instagram feed are presented independently of lived realities. This provides a larger creative scope to create an appealing and engaging online presentation for what Marwick and Boyd (2010) term the 'imagined audience'.

The ability to interact with a figure posting content and the posts themselves, alters what has been termed a "para-social relationship" (Horton and Wohl, 1956) into a new form. A para-social relationship develops when an audience responds to a celebrity figure in a personal way, when emotionally invested through consuming their content. Marwick (2015, p.139 also drawing on Marwick and Boyd, 2011) links this to Instagram, asserting that "Social media transform the parasocial into the potentially social and increases the emotional ties between celebrity and fan."

This capacity renders images as a form of social commodity on Instagram (Abidin, 2016, p.3). Murray (2008) and Van House (2011) assert that the camera phone has altered photography towards a medium of the mundane. This has moved it from a device which captured notable moments into one which captures the flow of everyday life. Rose (1999, p.xviii) suggests that "human beings actually live out their lives as "narratives", highlighting that these are constructed from the messages contained within society and culture around us. Marwick (2015) can be interpreted as providing an explanation for elements of sharing the family on Instagram. This work suggests that these everyday stories of daily life are appealing to followers because they become purveyors of lifestyle. Alternatively, accounts may produce specialist, niche content of interest to followers which share that given interest. The family, as shared here, may actually bridge and combine the suggested categories of appealing to either specific interest (parenting) or general daily life (lifestyle) thus giving them broad appeal.

Whilst social media use by parents has been attributed to connecting with family and friends to overcome geographical spread (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015; Bartholomew et al, 2012) this is in fact not a new argument. In 1995 (p.117), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim identified the same cause as driving "parenting mania" where expert advice on parenting was delivered as a substitute for access to community, in particular women's own mothers to pass on advice. This has continued, with Furedi (2002 p.24) describing modern parenthood as risk averse and advised by an army of professionals whose advice encourages parents to overestimate risk. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p.117) argued that the need to be a 'good mother' leads well educated, resourced and connected women to become

highly susceptible to buying into information or advice which promises to provide ultimate reassurance that mothers are doing enough. It would appear that seeking advice may not only be fuelled by maternal insecurity, but ultimately be so prescriptive as to perpetuate it.

Marshall (1991, p.67) provides a pre-internet era analysis of parenting texts and concluded that were extremely and rigidly normative in their message of the maternal role being one which delivers ultimate fulfilment and joy. They allow for only “minor deviations from a positive account of motherhood”. It has been shown that mothers are acutely aware of the audience perception of their images on social media, deliberately showing images which cultivate an appearance of being “the kind of family” which takes part in cultural activities, for example (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015, p.1306). This implies that the rigid social marshalling of maternal experience has continued, however the online sphere has handed control to parents to craft and present their reality, acting as their own PR and content manager to demonstrate they are meeting the required social standards.

This selective depiction of reality and perfected life becomes the currency of Instagram (Marwick, 2015). Chae (2018, p.258) notes that for Korean Instagram accounts, popular mothers were typically both beautiful and wealthy when displaying accounts of their family and lives, and if they do not possess these characteristics they work to present a false reality which provides an illusion of them. The increased access granted via Instagram to view mother’s lives, for successful accounts with a large following appears to equate to demonstrating lives which are not truly ordinary but infused with glamour.

What is of emergent interest is the selfie as taken by parents. The ‘selfie’ has entered common, everyday vernacular as a term understood to describe taking an image which is representational of oneself (Walker-Rettburg, 2005, 2017). Frosh (2015, p.1607) describes the term as understood within its everyday context:

A selfie, whatever else it might be, is usually a photograph: a pictorial image produced by a camera. This banal observation informs widespread understandings of the selfie as a cultural category.

Moon et al (2016) report that there is a link between narcissism and posting Instagram images, which is a link frequently made within media reporting of image posts, selfies and discussions of Instagram culture. This contributes towards the

perception of Instagram having low cultural value, due to its superficial quality (Marwick, 2015, p.139)

Within 'mommyblogging' (Chen, 2013, p.511) the selfie with child has an important role in documenting the daily lives of parents and parenting practices. Zappavigna (2016, p.271) describes images shared on SNSs as representing their own sub-genre of "social photography" and extends this work further in Zappavigna and Zhao (2017) explicitly exploring the conceptual meanings of maternal selfies. This asserts that as an image, a selfie in this context can be viewed as not only representational but as an interpersonal communication between the photographer and its audience.

With Instagram use as a common daily activity, the role of audience cannot be discounted. Even in terms of acting as a potential audience with the expectation of having access to photographs - it is reported in literature that participants reported pressure from families to share Facebook images of their infant in order for their families to see the pictures. This prompted and perpetuated sharing in order to avoid offline conflict (Kumar and Shoenebeck, 2015, p.1307). It was also observed that women appeared to view Instagram as having more of a community feel than Facebook when approaching it for parental use. This point on the more approachable atmosphere of Instagram is affirmed by other work (Marwick, 2015, p.138) in which it is noted that participants felt people came to the platform to like and appreciate images as opposed to a more critical mindset encountered on other platforms.

Representation of children on Instagram begins prior to birth with ultrasound pictures frequently shared (Leaver, 2017). Whilst primarily conducted for routine gestational monitoring and screening purposes, the printed scan images present prospective parents with the first opportunity to own a physical image of their unborn child. Lupton (2013, p.34) highlights that these images facilitate the formation of an emotional bond with the foetus, with the use of baby language by medical professionals compounding this. Some professionals state they have a conscious awareness of the ritual and their role in creating a "Kodak moment" for a family. The scan pictures were frequently referred to as "cute" and in making the foetus 'real' were described in the terminology of baby photographs (Han, 2009, p.276).

In describing family sharing of snapshots online, Wang et al (2014, p.193) assert this maintains family bonds, expresses parental love and identity, and additionally expresses "selfhood" when the images are shown to others. The

sharing of scan images online can be viewed as an extension of the use of baby photography described by Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.22), “by means of photographs, the new arrival is introduced to the group as a whole” Leaver (2015) alternatively frames this as the beginning of intimate surveillance by contemporary parents who record and share detailed information on their infants online and continue to do so after birth.

## **2.7 Lifestyle Commodification and Parental Influencers on Instagram**

The popularity of parenting content and parental figures online has led to accounts which command a significant following. This leads some figures to become well known, and diversify their presence into traditional media such as authoring books, TV and radio appearances and monetising their content to generate income (Marwick, 2015). Influencers across a range of content types have transcended their digital presence to form brands, product lines and collaborations which are highly lucrative. These include beauty, lifestyle and food bloggers, with particular success in youth markets.

Part of the ongoing cultural concern surrounding Instagram is focused upon its effects on the offline world. There has been focus upon the influence on art, culture and experience of museums or restaurants, as reported in the media widely (CNN, 2018; Wired, 2017; The Guardian, 2018a). As a massively popular hobby and endeavour, there is scrutiny about that the implications are for society of vernacular image taking. There is debate about the role of Instagram image taking in new contexts, with it reported some restaurants are banning food photography for Instagram due to its prevalence and disruption to the traditional fine dining experience, for example (The Telegraph, 2017).

This influence on culture is not new. Photography and photographic images have inspired many forms of trends and mass interest in popular culture. These range from the mass “cartomania” inspired by Queen Victoria collecting *carte de visites* (Ford, 1989, p.50) and igniting a trend in it being fashionable to do so, to the popularity of image capture in army officers following the influencer of the day, General Napoleon stopping to have his portrait taken while leading troops (Pols, 2002, p.23).

This form of becoming a well-known Instagram personality or account holder has been conceived in several ways. Microcelebrity has been described as encompassing the actions of “amping up” popularity online via reaching out to

audiences and engaging in self-promotion (Senft, 2008, p.25) and encompassing self-branding (Senft, 2013, p.34). This often appeals to a certain niche interest audience (Marwick, 2015, p.155) or a more generalised lifestyle following (Abidin, 2016) which is based upon daily life. This renders the content produced on Instagram by parents as a commodity both in terms of receiving positive feedback, or as a monetised practice (along with the social factors of support seeking, interaction etc).

Although referring to young Korean influencers and not parents, selfies in particular have become “latent commodities” according to Abidin (2016, p.5) which represent a contrived form of authenticity designed to appeal to audiences. This places users with a following as “influencers” (Abidin, 2016 capitalises the term to denote the significance of the title). De Veirman et al (2017, p.798) describe this as

people who have built a sizeable social network of people following them. In addition, they are seen as a regard for being a trusted tastemaker in one or several niches.

Kapitan and Silvera (2015, p.554) propose that individuals do not blindly follow influencers but engage in judging “dispositional attributions” in matching up their perception of a persona and how closely it matches any endorsements made of external brands, to see if they believe that the individual has an authentic belief in the product they are endorsing. There appears to be a strong theme of the perception of authenticity being important to both convey on Instagram as a content producer, but additionally as a key feature followers value highly in making choices about accounts to subscribe too.

On the structure of the audience, Marwick (2015, p.143) asserts that:

Following on Instagram is unidirectional; unlike Facebook, a user may follow another without permission, and, like Twitter, there is generally no mutual expectation of following.

Abidin (2016, p.7) expands upon this, describing that whilst the structure of Instagram stresses mutual networking and reciprocity, that in this case:

Influencers usually have high follower-to-following ratios, that is, having a large number of (unknown) users subscribed to their account, while them-selves subscribing to only a small number of (known) users.

Chae (2018) concurs, citing that adopting a policy on non-engagement with followers is actually a traditional celebrity tactic, which maintains a distance from fans. It is highlighted that for purely digital microcelebrities that followers may object to this, finding a failure to acknowledge their follower's comments as ungrateful and expressing frustration at the lack of contact. Chae's work stresses that certain accounts profiled appeared to not have any discernible reason for their popularity and simply contained a high degree of self-documentation

Schwarz (2010, p.164) frames this as having altered photography in that: "We are witnessing a shift from photographing others for self-consumption to documentation of the self for consumption by others." This creation of the digital presence is one which not only has the ability to represent identity work but also a lucrative source of income and individual recognition as a "taste maker" (De Veirman et al, 2017, p.798).

Marwick (2015, p138) describes the internet as an "increasingly a visual medium, and more and more individuals are using images rather than written self-descriptions to express themselves." In discussing Instagram, she outlines the concept of Instafame, posing it as a subtype of microcelebrity, but one which takes into account the visual nature and affordances of Instagram. On this point, she asserts "Compared to sites like Facebook that constrain self-presentation within a rigid profile structure, Instagram provides users with a fairly open-ended social media tool..." (Marwick, 2015, p.138). However, in terms of ordinary people gaining significant followings and acting as influencers, this work stresses they mimic the tropes and characteristics related to traditional media celebrities, including luxury goods, high levels of consumerism and enacting traditional ideals of attractiveness and glamour. This work of being an influencer is reported in media coverage as requiring both a high level of skill and effort which goes into the production of photographic images and content, in particular selfies, posed by young professional and semi-professional influencers (for example in The Telegraph, 2018, 2015; Abidin, 2016). Mothers who produce popular content, when interviewed in the media, frequently cite the hidden labour behind the content production as extensive (see New York Post, 2016; The Washington Post, 2018).

However, the influencer market is clearly of interest to businesses, with companies devoting significant budgets towards this form of marketing (BusinessWire, 2007). In addition, there is an additional layer of intermediaries

acting as agents for influencers or brokering deals. Influencers can command significant sums of money for posts which range from one off, to on-going collaborations or coordinated campaigns across a range of influencers simultaneously. The value of using influencers over in-house advertising is commercially driven in Instagram contexts it has been shown that there is a 4.5% increase in purchasing when viewing person made content promoting a brand over a normal ad format. This increases to 9.6% if the follower interacts with the image post (L2 Market Research, 2015). Older demographics value known, established styles of celebrity to act as influencers. In contrast, millennial aged demographics are most accepting of figures recognised as digital producers known for their online persona alone and do not require traditional offline reputations to act as influential (Kapitan and Silvera, 2015, p.565).

The role of influencers is not without disruption to traditional models of marketing and commodification. This has led to both controversy, for example in failure for Instagram figures to disclose sponsorship, as reported in Elle Australia (2017) but also in regulatory efforts. Both the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the UK Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) have warned of the legal required for influencers to mark content clearly as being marketing or product promotion in a clear manner (FTC, 2017). As of 2018 Instagram posts which are disclosed by the account holder as monetised or advertising are marked with a notation of 'ad' on the image. There also remains the convention of adding #sponsoredpost to the hashtags associated with an image. However, the effectiveness of this self-declaration process is currently unknown. Research has demonstrated that for other highly monetised platforms, only 10% of posts contained the full disclosure of affiliate links (Mathur et al, 2018).

Chae (2018) suggests that those acting as influencers in this capacity may generate more feelings of envy by appearing closer to normal people than otherworldly celebrities divorced from daily life, whom appear firmly as 'other' and not relatable. However, whilst parental influencers may be closer to ordinary people and less alien than traditional celebrities they are still very much aspirational.

## **2.8 Parental Sharing Behaviours on SNSs**

There remains a limited, but growing body of work focusing specifically upon parental activity on Instagram (Locatelli, 2017; Leaver, 2018). More widely, there have been attempts to begin to explore parental sharing behaviours online. These

have traditionally focused upon Facebook, and as observed by Rains and Brunner (2015) are generally over reliant upon self-reporting measures by parents. As Faircloth and Murray (2014, p.2) assert, parenting is a highly politicised sphere, and also one which is judged from a moral perspective, where parents are held accountable to wider society. As such, self-reporting measures in this area have the potential to be problematic if overly represented in research design in this area.

Whilst not primarily focused on images and photographic behaviour, the emergent body of literature focused upon parental SNS activity generally provides a context for considering Instagram. Wang et al (2014, p.204) provides a contemporary online example of the complexities of representation and audience response, in their study of birthday images of Flickr. In commenting “Great shot! You are such a wonderful mom” the link between both hosting a children’s birthday and capturing the image as evidence of good mothering is made. The image is treated as an expression of parental devotion and evidence of success within a parental role. The study further explores that criticisms in comments were levelled at technical aspects of the photographic process and results, whereas positive comments frequently included highly positive linguistic expressions such as cute, happy, sweet and beautiful to describe the images of the children.

Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) provide a strong example of the continuation of selective familial representation on SNSs, highlighting the conscious awareness and importance of presenting good parenting. Participants replicated the knowledge described previously here in family album tropes, demonstrating the desire to appear to be a unified, successful family unit with a happy child. They are however more explicit in outlining that this is for an audience’s benefit then when describing family albums.

In moving to a public sphere, the role of impression management becomes significant. Parental sharing is significant with 98% of new mothers and 83% of new fathers sharing images of their child on Facebook (Bartholomew et al, 2014, p.461). This may be aligned with the findings of Titus (1976), which suggested (analogue) photographic activity by parents is a means of actualising the transition to parenthood. Whilst Bartholomew et al (2012, p.7) suggest that Facebook sharing is linked to the expectation of a response from friends and family, it is additionally implicated in gathering support from weaker tie networks - that is those who are less emotionally invested and involved, such as acquaintances (Toombs et al, 2018).

In balancing the desire to share, mothers noted an awareness of issues of privacy but their response to the concerns was more varied. Boyd and Hargittai

(2010) previous identified this as paradoxical, noting that concerns are not equivalent to action taking online to protect it or reducing sharing accordingly. Particularly in terms of image sharing, there appears to be a strong awareness for these concerns. Chalklen and Anderson (2017, p.1):

A gorgeous baby photograph is a joy to share, but worries around digital footprints and maintaining control of images and information are factors that stop many mothers from fully embracing the Facebook experience

However, they conclude that mothers utilise a complex array of strategies to mitigate these concerns and protect their data. Minkus et al (2015) conducted a computer based interrogation of publicly shared images of children on Facebook. From this, a form of network analysis was used to discern information about their family networks including names, familial links, locations and political affiliations. It is worth noting that whilst this study was successful at achieving ethical approval and passed peer review, it presents serious questions. Whilst this is illuminating as to the possibilities - and consequences - of interrogating SNS data, it also demonstrates the ethical issues arising from exploring this within research contexts.

Whilst it has been demonstrated that other SNSs may play a role in parenthood online, this is less well understood. Choudhury et al (2013) report findings which are indicative of the potential effectiveness of Twitter in monitoring mothers for postnatal depression (PND). This would have obvious implication for the capacity of SNSs for support seeking during the transition to parenthood. However, Morris (2014) abandoned data collection for Twitter during data collection on parental activity online due to the low use of Twitter reported by mothers in the study.

This is suggestive that consideration of SNSs as a genre may be unhelpful due to the differing characteristics of each platform. This is comparable to the findings of others, such as Gibson and Hanson (2014) who cite information seeking as key. Their findings provide a larger context to the study of technological use by new mothers. This highlighted the importance of both the scale of hardware in being portable and smaller than ever. This essentially allowed for integration into routines around caring for a young infant, such as scrolling through news on a phone during night feeds. In tandem its findings position internet access as a key resource for seeking out information and support during the transition to parenthood.

Jessner et al (1970, p.209) had previously identified a state termed “anticipatory parenthood” which allows mothers to visualise their impending motherhood while pregnant. This may account for the findings of the findings of Leaver and Highfield (2018) and Lupton (2013, p.34) which highlight the increasing normalcy in sharing ultrasound pictures online, with it becoming an accepted “rite of passage”. Whilst Leaver (2015) had previously asserted that this practice amounts to intimate surveillance by parents and thus has a range of associated concerns, the state of anticipatory motherhood it may be aligned with, has demonstrable maternal benefits. Those who conducted identity work in pregnancy were significantly associated with increased success in negotiating the transition to parenthood and reported higher levels of self confidence in their maternal capacities at three months post-partum (Deutsch et al, 1986).

Titus (1976, p.529) had previously identified that the role of photos to families may lie in “ritualization” where those in pregnancy (in particular the first) might “be part of the separation ritual from the dyadic life style” The images of the infant after birth are framed as representing a role play which affirms commitment to parenthood; as a result images may record caretaking activities (performing parenting), observing the child (portraits) and developing a family image via photographs of the family group and wider familial networks.

Kirk et al (2006) highlighted that with the large quantity of digital images taken, a significant amount of pre-sharing work occurs with images being filed, stored and organised. Janning and Scalise (2013) report that the curation of family photographs, even digitally, still primarily falls and to mothers and is strongly gendered, reporting that this is linked not only towards the work of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) but additionally towards sharing with wider family as performing the role of a traditional nuclear family unit. Later work by Tee, Brush and Inkpen (2009) stressed that extended families express a strong desire for the sharing of news regarding children and grandchildren. This is focused around photographic sharing, with images strongly used to bridge geographical separation as a proxy for face to face contact. This is in strong accord with Bourdieu’s (1965/1990, p.22) observations on the printed photograph being used by families as an introductory device to induct an infant into geographically disparate family structures. Image sharing for family bonding purposed appears to be an enduring motivator in domestic photographic practice.

Others highlight that when children become adolescents and become divergent into their own digital identities on social media, they frequently remain friends with their families with 40% of Facebook users having a parent or child on the site (Burke et al, 2013, p.41). Other work is indicative that for mothers of children aged 0-5years, the response to photographs posted represents enacting good mothering and receiving a positive audience response acts as a validation process (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015). It is well documented that support and social contact is equated with increased maternal outcomes on a number of measures including mother-child bonding, health, confidence in parental efficacy and family resilience (Gibson and Hanson, 2014; Budds et al, 2017; Lee et al, 2014). Gibson and Hanson (2014, p.313) highlight that the potential for technology to facilitate interaction in online contexts is “immense” and this clearly has the potential to have significant value to contribute positively to parental wellbeing.

It is reported that 96% the UK population between the ages of 25 - 34 years now own a smartphone, rendering them a key tool in contemporary parenting landscapes (Statista, 2018). Whilst parental sharing on social networking sites is frequently framed within the context of concerns regarding privacy and data permanence, Jang and Dworkin (2014, p.490) posit that “because the core purpose of the SNS is to allow individuals to maintain and enhance social relationships, time spent using SNSs could be understood as an investment in social relationships” and allow for the exploitation of both strong and weak tie relationships. This is however, nuanced and varying factors that may feed into the success of this activity in boosting wellbeing, for example McDaniel et al (2012, p.1515) demonstrate that the feeling of connectedness and support derived from blogging by mothers was correlated with the frequency of posting.

In terms of content shared, Joinson (2008) identified seven key uses of Facebook, one of which was specifically the motivator to view others photographs and share one’s own. For parents, the use of Facebook has been demonstrated to evolve behaviourally during the transition to parenthood. Bartholomew et al, conducted in 2012, reported that mothers used Facebook more frequently than fathers, and both roles reported increased use over the transition to parenthood. This included questions to participants directly related to their image sharing activities. 58% of mothers and 44% of fathers indicated they visited Facebook on a daily basis (although more mothers reported having a Facebook account overall) demonstrating a high level on engagement with the platform. The most key finding for online

contexts is that when asked about this type of post in which an image was shared. When asked how likely it was that this post was engaged with by the audience in both likes and comments, 93% of mothers reported it was 'likely' or 'very likely' the posts would receive positive attention (Bartholomew et al, 2012, p.7). This is substantially higher than the 71% reported by fathers – although both figures represent a very strong indication of the expectation of an audience response.

This may partially be accounted for by the work of Bakhshi et al (2014, p.965) which in its investigation of Instagram images reported that images with faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more likely to receive comments than those which do not. This effect is attributed to the hardwired psychological response to human faces and additionally, Hildebrandt and Fitzgerald (1978) outline the responsiveness to babies faces in particular being due to their physical features as much as social conditioning to be polite.

## **2.9 Summary**

Smartphones are of value in both parenting and the transition to parenthood. Their flexibility allows for information seeking and support gathering, in a portable familiar form. However, communication via mobile phone had already placed it as tool for remote parenting in a pre-internet enabled smart phone era. Photography in this context is also a tool in negotiating the transition to parenthood and exploring the new identity this life change brings about. This can be a powerful tool in actualising the new self and role (Titus, 1976) which may account for the intensification of photographic activity that has been noted in the first year of a child's life (Chalfen, 1987, p.81).

The link between family life, nostalgia and sentimentality which underpins this has been described here as one which was fostered and reinforced by Kodak advertising in particular, who targeted the domestic sphere as a space where photography was an easy, casual activity. This normalisation both increased photographic practice as a normative form of record keeping, but also led to the development of strong tropes regarding what is appropriate for capture. As a result, family albums are not truly documentarian, presenting a repository snapshots which demonstrate a perfected and idealised account of reality. This marketing driven shaping of perception towards image taking also introduced the foundations for photography to become a ubiquitous, everyday activity.

These characteristics form visual tropes and conventions of image production for analogue snapshots and family albums. These photographic practices are social knowledge which are passed on as a form normative visual behaviours, contributing towards an understanding of these images as typifying positive and biased accounts. In this light, the family snapshot represent a social artefact. As such family snapshots are a valuable source for interrogating the representation of maternal identity.

There is currently a gap in contemporary literature which addresses parental activity on Instagram within the socio-historic context outlined here. Whilst descriptions of parental behaviours on social media are beginning to emerge, these do not provide analysis of the images themselves as representative forms. As such, it is unclear the effect on snapshots of sharing on Instagram, or how these images can be understood from theoretical perspectives which treat Instagram as mediated communication.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1 Overview**

This chapter begins with an overview of attitudes towards social media and its perception within society. This places the snapshot on Instagram within its wider contemporary context, and subjects of debate surrounding the use and meanings of smartphone images shared online. This contrasts the tropes of the family snapshot previously established in Chapter 2, within theories and debate of their use in a social media context.

This includes discussion of the positions which conceptualise the difference between the on and offline, and the implications for this theorisation on research into Instagram as an SNS. The chapter concludes with an outline of the theoretical framework which underpins the data used with the latter Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis.

### **3.2 Instagram: Cultural Value Perception**

Critique often links selfie culture, Instagram and social media imagery as representative of a contemporary move into narcissism and self-obsession, with low cultural value (Senft and Baym, 2007). There remains a limited understanding as to the implications for family snapshots shared in this context. Initial HCI research on online parenthood has to-date typically focused upon other platforms, such as Facebook (Kumar and Schoenebeck 2015; Bartholomew et al, 2012; Chalken and Andersen, 2017). Literature that addresses parental sharing on Instagram does not focus on family snapshots specifically, instead providing insight into maternal selfies (e.g. Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017), pregnancy and scan images on Instagram (e.g. Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017; Leaver and Highfield, 2018) and breastfeeding images (e.g. Locatelli, 2017). Alternatively, there is focus on the role of influencers (e.g. De Veirman et al, 2017; Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016).

Instagram has done little to alter the perception of vernacular photography in a positive direction. As outlined in Chapter 2, family snapshot images are critically assessed as lacking in artistic or expressional merit (Batchen, 2008; Slater, 1995). Additionally, as artefacts they do not represent advanced photographic mastery (Langford, 2000).

Moving into SNS contexts, the cultural evaluation and summary has shifted. The snapshot in this new territory is reframed as being a vapid, self-absorbed and narcissistic practice of capturing the self, obsessively. Media headlines such as “*Instagram users admit they’ve created the most narcissistic social network on the planet*” (MarketWatch, 2017) and “*Me! Me! Me! Are we living through a narcissism epidemic?*” (Guardian, 2016a) reflect a contemporary concern with what ubiquitous photography means.

Both Tiidenberg (2018) and Abidin (2016) highlight that the locus of the contemporary critical judgment around smartphone photography is around selfies. The Irish Times reported the comparison that 29 people had died whilst taking selfies in 2017 – a tally taken in only mid-June - compared to only 5 of shark attacks (Irish Times, 2017) as evidence of the absurdity of practice (although clearly the commonality of selfie-capture versus encounters with sharks makes the comparison somewhat statistically disingenuous).

This implied social decline however, is an important feature of the perception of Instagram culture. Abidin (2016, p.1) describes how the quotation in the title of her paper “*Aren’t These Just Young, Rich Women Doing Vain Things Online?*” was elicited in response to her line of research on Instagram influencers and epitomised attitudes encountered. The newness of social media, including Instagram, as a daily, pervasive presence in society renders its role and perception in a state of flux as norms emerge and are debated.

In terms of parental image sharing, even academically the terms ‘sharenting’ and ‘oversharing’ (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017; Marasli et al, 2016) are uncritically invoked, without interrogation as to defining their meaning as a subjective assessment or questioning if they are terms which replicate exclusion.

In researching the visual, considerations such as exclusion, contemporary social context, and specificity of medium are posed by Rose (2012, p.17) as necessarily integral components of interrogating visual materials and representation. Social contexts of production and the implications for stances in researcher positionality are stressed as of particular importance in photographs as representational artefacts.

### **3.2.1 Popular Culture and Moral Critique**

McRobbie and Thornton (1995) highlight that the role of mass media has altered, rendering moral panic as a phenomenon which acts in multi-mediated

channels in modern societies. The language and sentiments associated with social media and Instagram have characteristics of moral panic, including amplification by the use of emotive language and coverage by the media. This serves as acting in “the space of public opinion” and serves to suggest that an issue is one of declining standards which act as a threat to traditional practises and attitudes (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995, p.562).

The associations with Instagram as fostering and encouraging a move towards a shallow, self-obsessed culture is one which has similarities with earlier formats, such as that highlighted by Pearson (1983, p.63) in which Hollywood cinema was linked in the 1930s to a decline in the value of leisure time in the UK. This was posed as social erosion of traditional British pastimes and thus a negative turn in the cultural value of social activities. In fact, Pearson (1983, p.29) highlights that in the 1930s

Cheap literature, popular music, cinema-going, the newly acquired habit of listening to the radio, advertising gimmicks, educational bankruptcy and ‘Americanisation’ were all targeted as symptoms of decline.

This decline was thought to be both societal, moral and linked to a decline in identity as an expression of traditional values, the state of the family and a loss of community. None of these arguments are unfamiliar in modern societal commentary. They do however, serve to illustrate that popular culture is frequently aligned with concerns regarding decline in personal constitution which is strongly infused with both nostalgia and morality. The arguments of self-obsession, the fostering of narcissism and frivolity levelled at Instagram are neither unique, nor particularly original in tone or content. McRobbie and Thornton (1995, p.562) stress the role nostalgia in the process of navigating social change, asserting that “moral panics in society act as a form of ideological cohesion which draws on a complex language of nostalgia”. It can be argued this nostalgia is present within contemporary discourse surrounding selfies, Instagram and narcissism. The Irish Times (2017) typifies this rhetoric within media reporting, in addressing the concern over selfies altering photographic practice:

It’s difficult to think of a more appropriate, or more depressing, symbol for this shallow, social-media-obsessed age than death by narcissism. Even when selfies don’t end in death or injury, there is something deeply unhealthy about a society in thrall to such a contrived, self-aware and fundamentally needy form of expression.

Photographs used to serve a social purpose. Families and groups of friends would huddle together squinting and hissing at one another to smile. The best results were often the imperfect ones – the ones with a toddler’s fist in a sibling’s hair; where someone is laughing and someone else is looking away.

This projects a quality of visual hubris onto the family images. Interestingly this critique is framed as nostalgia for the snapshot in a previous, imperfect form. This overlooks that these images were in fact subject to their own critique for being essentially technically poor and uninteresting photographs compositionally (Slater, 1995; Batchen, 2000, 2008; Langford, 2000).

Evidence suggests there is a relationship between clinical narcissism and selfies. However, this is described as evident in individuals with measurable traits of narcissism whom may use selfies as self-affirmation as part of a larger abnormal focus on the self (Halpern et al, 2016). However, this is a wider cultural perception on Instagram which attributes narcissism as a far more broadly reaching critique than in a true clinical sense. Images of the self, have become far more prevalent in a very short period of time (although these self-portraits are visible from the earliest days of camera ownership and the impetus to photograph oneself is by no means new). Within Halle (1991, p.227) when describing the display of images in a domestic home environment, that “solitary” pictures of adults “triggered alarm”. Participants were baffled by the premise of taking or displaying images of themselves, describing it as egotistical and expressing discomfort at the idea. This highlights that the conventions surrounding the capture and display of images within domestic settings evolve. Not only has digitisation moved photography forward in a very short space of time, but that as a social practice the understanding of what this means has yet to be reconciled socially. Instagram is still a poorly understood and rapidly expanding medium in this regard.

This work conceptually approaches the Instagram activity of parents as a collective activity – the images types are considered collectively as a practice, as opposed to a focus on a particular image type such as selfies, for example. This daily practice of image capture and sharing is approached as self-expression and potentially valuable identity work. When viewed from this theoretical perspective, the images have significant potential for examination of the representation of contemporary parental experience and depiction of modern parenthood online.

### 3.2.2 Parental Sharing as A Vernacular Activity

Media portrayals of parental sharing on social media focus on oversharing (for example, Guardian, 2016), 'sharenting' (Independent, 2017) and reports of the negative consequences of sharing images. The Telegraph, (2015b) increased the hyperbolic tone in reporting, hybridising the terms into "over-sharenting". The image sharing behaviours of parents has become a source of debate and satire which explores parental behaviour on social media, for example in the popular blog *STFU, Parents* in which submissions from parent's social media are submitted by third parties, and posted with accompanying humorous critique (STFU Parents Blog, 2018).

However, whilst it is apparent from the consideration of literature in Chapter 2 that family photography has distinct characteristics, and is critically devalued there remains a lack of evidence on how sharing on Instagram has influenced the snapshot format specifically.

Wang et al (2011, p.204) describe that audiences are careful to frame responses to family images on Flickr as critique of the photographic technique and not as a reflection on the family members included. The commentators invoke the images as evidence of parental efficacy and engagement. Kumar and Shoenebeck (2015, p.1307) describe Facebook as a modern day baby-book, noting mothers describe sharing images for family, but with an acute awareness that images represent them as being a certain kind of family to audiences. Existing literature does not as yet, adequately describe the synthesis in terms of effects on the photographic tropes, forms and compositions by Instagram sharing. Those which do address image sharing reference literature on analogue family photography in limited ways, typically citing limited key literature such as Chalfen (1987) in isolation. There remains a lack of comprehensive overview of the socio-historic of analogue family photography, as a measure by which to assess the effects of image sharing on Instagram.

In response to this gap in literature (as outlined in Chapter 2) and the limited conceptual framings (and reporting) of Instagram and vernacular parental image sharing on Instagram outlined in this chapter, the central aim of this thesis is comparative in nature. Taking the characteristics, compositional tropes and representations common to the analogue family snapshot and family albums, this work considers if Instagram photographic practices deviate from or retain these key characteristics.

### **3.3 Conceptualising Motherhood in Online Contexts**

As a socially and politically complex loaded sphere (Faircloth and Murray, 2014, p.2), there is a well-developed body of theory surrounding motherhood and maternal identity (Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 2010; Lee et al, 2014). However, this work is theoretically grounded in the offline and remains underexplored in both online and visual contexts. This work draws upon intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) as theorising that motherhood is a socially pressured role, which requires a high degree of 'doing' to enact. This resource and time intensive mothering places a significant burden upon mothers to parent the 'right' way in everyday life. With Instagram activity becoming a daily, vernacular practice, this situates it as a sphere in which this parental approach may be depicted and recorded visually.

#### **3.3.1 Intensive Motherhood**

If motherhood is theorised to encapsulate the characteristics described by Sharon Hays (1996) on the intensification of motherhood, there would be an expectation they would be visible in online content mothers produce. That is, mothers on Instagram, while trying to appeal to an audience ought to replicate and display features which they understand to be the most positive, normative and socially desirable. Hays work, and subsequent works which builds upon the theory placing it in a more contemporary context (see Lee et al, 2014; Budds et al, 2017; Thompson et al, 2011; Ennis, 2014) can be used to extract a matrix of behaviours it would be reasonable to hypothesise would be demonstrated, or 'evidenced' visually.

In drawing upon literature in order to provide a theoretical baseline understanding this can be used to consider Instagram within larger, ongoing social perceptions of motherhood. This hypothesis relies on the acceptance that the identity of motherhood is indeed performed on Instagram and this online space is grounded in the everyday (Hine, 2015, p.156). Whilst it is commonly asserted that childhood is itself a social construct (James and Prout, 2014, p.3), the same can be said of motherhood. Bortolaia Silva (1996, p.1) underlines that mothering has continually been a subject of societal debate due to its link to ascertaining and exploring women's position within society. She stresses that feminist perspectives in particular assert that motherhood and the practice of mothering are not inherently natural, but borne out of historic, cultural and social constructs. Both childhood and mothering are complex social roles with diverse expectations, understandings and limitations.

If ethnographic research methods are positioned as examining the sense-making individuals carry out within society, then the conventions which apply to their lived experience must be considered as relevant. Motherhood is a complex sphere but this work focuses upon image sharing as a visual practice linked to maternal identity and an everyday adoption of technology. This daily practice of Instagram activity can be framed, as in Hays (1996), as doing motherhood. The affordances of Instagram mean this doing is presented in a public, visual fashion.

This not only allows for an audience to respond but directly feedback to a parent their assessment of the parenting on display. This builds an ongoing narrative which evidences and displays successful mothering (or at least the appearance of). Lawler (2000, p.1) links interest in motherhood to a contemporary introversion which focuses upon the kind of selves we are. This is intrinsically linked to the belief we are, at least partially, formed by our experiences of being parented. This is highlighted as placing particular weight on the importance of maternal influence:

Certainly, language – as a contested, changing and changeable medium – is implicated in how meanings get constructed, but meanings are also produced and reproduced through social practices. It is not only an issue of the way we talk about things; it is also about what we do (and what we are constrained to do)

This aligns with Hays (1996) on the importance of motherhood being an active state, instead of an identity inherited by the biological status of having a child and thus being a mother. Motherhood is both constructed and carried out by conducting the labour of mothering. Budds et al (2017, p.341) describe this as being broken down into three areas with mothers as committed facilitators, creative providers and offering caring/careful monitoring of their children. This encompasses the desire to provide continual stimulation via interaction with an infant, providing toys and activities designed to actively promote development. The mothers within Budd's (2017) study describe guilt as an everyday experience stemming from the feeling of not doing enough if everyday life required them to deviate from sole focus on their baby. This extended to the diligence in choosing childcare providers, positioning them as proxies of care, chosen to reflect the priorities of intensive motherhood held by the mothers.

Others, such as Furedi (2002) have described the need to parent in a fashion which crosses into the anxious and risk averse as "impossibly burdensome" for parents (Furedi, 2002, p.45). Arendell (2000, p.1194) highlights that the message of intensive motherhood is both socially normative and continually reinforced because "literary, film, and other cultural representations portray and reinforce the

conventional notions of mothering and motherhood". This aligns with Hays (1996, p.8) description of motherhood as amplified to become "child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive."

Deviation from this intensification of parental practice, even out of economic necessity is commonly associated with maternal guilt (Guendouzi, 2006). Budds et al (2017, p.339) state this "leads to a parenting culture where the stakes are high and even minor considerations of child-rearing are taken out of the private family sphere". As a result, this becomes linked to concern on the state of society as a whole, and long-term consequences for infants if they are not subject to a regime of intensive parenthood. Faircloth and Murray (2014, p.3) suggest that as a consequence, the minutiae of daily parenting becomes subject to scrutiny and judgement on feeding, behaviour, attire and behaviour.

In response to this pressure, mother's discourse and framing become telling in highlighting their perceptions and adaptation to the doctrine of intensive parenthood. Hays (1996, p.98) asserts

As you listen to these mothers, it may seem at times that they are simply speaking in clichés, trite truisms, and all too well-work phrases. But clichés and truisms should not be underestimated or discounted – they often highlight recurring cultural themes.

Guendouzi's (2005) ethnography of mothers examined the language mothers use to portray their mothering activity. This work summarised that, linguistically, the characteristics of a good mother were identifiable in everyday talk as being: protective, nurturing, caring, socializing (the infant with others), proud and organised. Interestingly this encompasses not only physical labour and direct attention, but emotional labour in having the appropriate response of pride in their infant as a requirement. Whilst Hays (1996) work is often cited in regards to the intensification of maternal labour as physical and practical in investing resources, it does highlight the role of the emotional. The currency of the domestic sphere is highlighted as maternal love, in opposition to in wider society where the currency is focused upon the monetary and productive employment (Hay, 1996, p.124)

Both the everyday practices, and presentation of maternal engagement with parenting are complex social phenomenon. Instagram provides a currently under-researched sphere to examine both these visual presentations of family and framing of the everyday in terms of intensive practices.

### **3.4 Debates in Conceptualising the Online Sphere**

With the online sphere presenting a number of new avenues of research, the development of platform specific methodologies for SNS research, and the potential for the application of existing theory in new contexts – there is a need to conceptually situate the online world in relation to the offline world. This fundamental consideration of the online world remains contested, and there is variance across disciplines and approaches to online research in how this is conceptually addressed. This work employs an ethnographic approach to Instagram, in Chapter 7. As a method in which space, situatedness and context are of specific, and inherent concern, ‘digital’ ethnography encapsulates a number of key debates in this area.

#### **3.4.1 ‘Digital’ Ethnography and Situating the Online**

Associated typically with digital anthropology or digital sociology, works on the practice and theoretical underpinning of online ethnography are complex and contested in regard to online contexts. Miller and Horst (2012, p.3) provide a techno-positive perspective, asserting that “The digital should and can be a highly effective means for reflecting upon what it means to be human, the ultimate task of anthropology as a discipline.” This work suggests that the increase in digital technologies for communication does not render it “one iota” more mediated. Others (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Garcia et al, 2009) also assert there is no divide between the online and offline contexts in terms of representing spaces in which social interactions occur.

Miller and Horst (2012, p.4) additionally suggest that the digital can be used to reframe and reconsider analogue culture – but that is framed as a state to which digital anthropology will progress towards. However, Hine (2015, p.3), whilst suggesting that they reject any notion that mediated communication is not appropriate or “sufficient” as a research setting for ethnography also provides a contradictory statement in

where mediated communication are a significant part of what people do, I feel it should be self-evident that the ethnographer needs to take part in those mediated communications alongside whatever face-to-face interactions may occur.

Whilst simultaneously positioning the online as part of the everyday, mediated communication is “troubling” (p.3) for an ethnographer because, it is suggested, they leave the researcher unable to comprehend a situation from a unified perspective. In citing Facebook in reference to this, Hine (2015, p.3) suggests that whilst one can ask a participant to elaborate on their post, you cannot discern “quite what his friends make of what he writes” or whom has seen it. This stance appears to subjugate the SNS interactions available as text as somehow less insightful or valuable than offline observational data. It also places them as less informed, via failing to account for the rich interactional affordances of SNSs which inform observations made during online ethnographic fieldwork.

In contrast Garcia et al (2009, p.52) provide a more integrated view of online ethnographic practice, stating

The distinction between online and offline worlds is therefore becoming less useful as activities in these realms become increasingly merged in our society, and as the two spaces interact with and transform each other.

However, this is again tempered by a qualification which ‘others’ the online, asserting that “While some social phenomena exist solely online, we found that there are very few research topics that justify limiting the field to online phenomena.” This statement minimises the online as a normalized research space, where fieldwork occurs as a valid form of enquiry to investigate any number of human interest topics. In fact, this ambivalence is replicated across multiple sources, in differing forms.

There appears to be assumptive statements which extend to the methodological procedure itself, with Garcia (2009, p.57) suggesting the ability to technologically record ethnographic activity during fieldwork “changes the role of field notes and how findings are reported.” Whilst this may be the case in recording metadata or multimedia, there is no fundamental structures which alter the process of researcher observation and notation as a process. A digital research context does not necessarily equate to a fully digitised fieldwork process in recording or observational record keeping.

In referring to the debate on observational versus participatory ethnographies online, there are two central debates. The first lies in ethical approaches to ‘lurking’ in online contexts and the invisibility of the researcher. However, Marres (2017, p.29) suggests digital sociology presents a remediation of existing research methods, which reframes questions on the researchers position as opposed to fundamentally

creating new ones. The other facet of debate refers to the ethnographer as a participator within the online sphere, and whether this is necessary in order to fully comprehend the context being studied. Garcia et al (2009, p.60) suggest “the ethnographer should attempt to experience the online site the same way that actual participants routinely experience it.” Others, such as Heath et al (1999, p.460) present a more overt stance, stating that

If we take seriously the imperative to locate ourselves within political, historical, and cultural processes of the practice of research, then we do not believe that lurking online, as a singular mode of ethnographic research, is a satisfactory means to understand and/or relate to our subject matter.

Again, this perspective relies on the online as representing a unique sphere, which requires a differing orientation. This essentially places the core orientation of a researcher as requiring interaction to generate insight, as opposed to first person observation and in-depth study of the interactions between others as generative of knowledge. The tensions expressed may be due to the emergent nature of online ethnography during the past two decades. Some early works are primarily referring to list-serv, website, or forum settings online and are not specifically geared towards social media contexts. However, there may still remain the phenomenon observed by Kendall (2004, p.127) that there is a cultural belief that online interactions are not fundamentally “real.”

It has been observed that “Current online ethnographies tend to privilege textual aspects of the data and do not adequately integrate visual, aural, and kinetic phenomena” (Garcia et al, 2009, p.65). Whilst this study intentionally focuses primarily upon family images as the key sharing format on Instagram, there remains a deliberate intention to fully integrate textual, visual and interactional exchange data, thus treating the snapshots as part of narrative constructions by mothers.

Methodologically this allows for the role in building narrative threads to be studied beyond individual posts. Instagram images studied as discrete images lose a rich context visible in accounts which continually build, reaffirm and share insight into daily parental activity. This reflects Guendouzi (2005) in that parental norms are continually reaffirmed as both everyday knowledge of how mothering ought to be done, but also confirm to an audience that it is being carried out sufficiently in line with these socially normative approaches.

As such an ethnographic approach represents one which endorses both the value of the pictorial, but also of the textual and considers them simultaneously. The

following section addresses the challenges and debate specific to researching the visual.

### **3.5 Conducting Visual Ethnography Online**

In considering the visual, Rose (2012, p.17) highlights three main critical approaches for visual culture. It must “take images seriously” in placing them within not only their main context, but in terms of representation and its effects. This thesis can be argued to represent an example of considering the visual within this critical approach, having grounded the SNS images firmly within larger socio-historical contexts of photography, but also within sociological theories of intensive motherhood.

The second criteria suggested by Rose (2012, p.17) is that research must consider the social conditions which shape and drive visual culture production. The final criteria suggested is that analysis of visual culture must acknowledge the researcher’s position in interpreting the images during analysis. This is summarised as “visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledge.”

These practices are embedded in the sense making approach used in ethnography. Murthy (2008, p.838) suggests that “As ethnography goes digital, its epistemological remit remains much the same. Ethnography is about telling social stories.” These stories are posited as providing insight into everyday lived experience. This is supported by Garcia et al (2009) who conceptualise social interaction as one broad sphere which is mediated through both traditionally understood mediums and newer, technologically mediated forms. These methods of accessing the social world become more advanced but do not represent a fundamentally different, other social space online.

However, whilst the inherent aims of online ethnography remain the same, others, such as Beneito-Montagut (2011, p.723) suggest that online research does require “a technologized researcher.” This suggestion relies on the need for researchers to have an awareness of the technological affordances and thus context of the interactions they are observing. Essentially, this is an assertion of the need for the researcher’s sense making to be informed and sympathetic to the context being observed.

Ardévol (2012, p.78) highlights that there has been a significant gap between visual analysis and online ethnography. However, she highlights that in considering

the visual along with textual content that “This may require developing a new set of skills and data-collection methods similar to those already used by visual anthropologists and sociologists.” This highlights the overlap between disciplines across digital sociology, visual anthropology and cultural geography when focusing upon identity expression and sociality online.

In this instance, an integrated approach to content on Instagram is required, resulting in a research design which fully contextualises the images shared. Not only are the individual factors of caption use, audience interaction, relative weighting of parental identity Vs individual identity expression and long-term narrative building all important – but important that they be considered simultaneously. This is framed by Ardévol (2012, p.76) as a two-fold characteristic of online ethnographies, where the content shared is both the artefact to be studied whilst simultaneously also forming the structure of the environment the ethnography is being carried out in.

### **3.6 Theorising Parental Instagram Image Production**

The second theoretical framework within this work approaches mothers Instagram feeds as image production and use of the site. Whilst the images can be viewed as identity expression, and theoretically considered as evidence of intensive motherhood, they can alternatively be used to consider what the image taking practice itself can be understood to represent.

The discussion focuses primarily on Belk’s (1988) work *‘Possessions and the Extended Self’* and the 2013 extension which interrogates and updates the original work in an online age. This aims to explore the images posted by mothers with the objects included treated as sociologically and anthropologically important elements which form part of the mother’s identities. This approaches both consumerism and ownership as having significant cultural and personal value. This economic anthropology, as described by Appadurai (1986, p.6), highlights the “social potential” of commodities in everyday life.

Additionally, this perspective includes a critical response to elements of the conception of the digital world posed by Belk (2013) and provides an alternate extension of his 1988 publication. Belk’s 2013 work addresses points that are poorly described within the scope of the original theory, about how the extended self may be expressed photographically. Key is that it explores children as part of extended parental selves and how this may manifest on Instagram.

Appadurai (1986, p.6) asserts that material possessions are inherently a “thoroughly socialised thing” and thus their circulation and discussion online in a mediated form would be expected to be commonplace as part of cultural material practices.

The central premise of this ‘extended self is that possessions form an integrated and distributed conception of individual identity. What is owned not only defines us externally, but also internally. Both Belk (1988) and Belk (2013) draw widely upon the works of other scholars across a wide range of disciplines to support the assertion of the extended self. This suggests that in examining the consumer behaviours (Belk, 1988, p.139):

It is based not only on the premise that this relationship is of importance to understanding consumer behaviour, but also on the premise that understanding the extended self will help us learn how consumer behaviour contributes to our broader existence as human beings

Consumer behaviour is not conceptualised as simply the act of purchasing, but how these items become integrated into our identities, why items are amassed into an extended self and how this embodied self may operate. In fact, “possession” is used in reference to the item being related to as selfhood. This does not equate to tangible objects necessarily but the possessional relation and gaze by the possessive subject. This encompasses both non-material aspects of ownership, such as the brand perception and gravitas or desirability imbued by packaging, reputation and the experience of purchasing (Slater, 1997 p.193). Appadurai (1986, p.5) concurs, describing how commodities have vast cultural, social and political values which far exceeds their simple economic currency and role. Contemporary participative, performative acquisition is typified by phenomenon such as individuals queuing for several days to be the first to purchase a new iPhone model release. This exceeds the premise of the physical item, or inherent value in being one of the first owners. Ellis (1985, p.114) observes that people exert influence not only over objects of functionality, but over “objects of aesthetic appeal” in integrating them into their identity. González (1995, p.133) describes the personal importance of objects in terms that frame the ongoing psychological importance, in terms of prosthesis:

No less integral to the subject, such physical interactions of the psyche – trophies, photographs, travel souvenirs, heirlooms,

religious icons, gifts – take the form of autobiographical objects. These personal objects can be seen to form a syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity – what I call an autotopography.

This literal embodiment allows for curation of the self, visibility of selfhood and the capacity to demonstrate to others who our internal selves are. Thus, not only is the extended self an internal process, but fundamental to how individuals present themselves to the world socially and relate to each other. Others (Belk 1988; Ricoeur, 1990) additionally draws attention to the capacity of possessions to be personally bound to temporality. Possessions not only form a conception of our identity but bridge to past selves, experiences, and suggestion of future selfhood. Linguistically there is an alignment in common vernacular with possessions and emotional states in ‘holding a torch for’, ‘carrying baggage’ or being ‘weighed down’, for example.

In acquisition, conceptions of the extended self frequently take the form of positive, forward facing futures which incorporate the newly acquired possessions as bringing improved self-confidence and status. That is, the feeling of anticipation surrounding driving a new car, wearing a new outfit or inhabiting new role professionally or personally is anthropologically associated with the extended self. This includes building memories surrounding an item of the extended self, and the process of “post acquisition object bonding” where relationships and attachment develop over time (Belk, 1988, p.140).

This may be in terms of bonding with pets once they are home, or less literally developing a rapport with an object of familiarity. This may also be due to the care, energy and diligence which is invested in maintenance, personalisation or improvement, such as restoring machine, dilapidated house or item or furniture. In smaller, daily forms this may take the form taking care of plants, or amassing collections of items (Belk, 1988). Possessions form a complex construction of selfhood which is comprised of both purchasing power, but is related to ownership, the world facing persona adopted by individuals and control in personal curation of the embodied self. In a digital age Belk (2013, p.477) asserts that “the possibilities for self-extension have never been so extensive.”

However, the ‘self’ described is not well evaluated as a term within Belk’s works. This work is aligned with that of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p.4) who stress the importance of defining an approach to the concept of

'real selves'. Those positions which work from the premise of a 'real' inner self which is authentic, suppose that additional, public layers are somehow less authentic. This raises the question of what they are for and what motivates the construction of a 'less true' external self. In place of a true self which navigates the world by adopting behaviours, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) propose an alternative model. They suggest that instead of an innate self which guides our identity construction, that the process is complex, ongoing and goal orientated. This conception of identity construction as negotiated in response to lived conditions and social environment is termed as identity cultivation (Rochberg-Halton, 1979). Belk (1988) is then positioned here as part of identity cultivation, as ongoing negotiation and responsive to changes in the environment. On the role of possessions in identity, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p.15) are in agreement with Belk's position, asserting that

It is also relatively easy to admit that the things people use, own, and surround themselves with might quite accurately reflect aspects of the owner's personality. Not surprisingly, the clothes one wears, the car one drives, and the furnishing of one's home, all are expressions of one's self, even when they act as disguises rather than as reflections. But it is more difficult to admit that the things one uses are in fact part of one's self; not in any mystical or metaphorical sense but in cold, concrete actuality.

In addressing possessions and the self this work begins by conceptualising the relationship between content posted on Instagram, the mothers as producers and their audience, as functioning within Instagram's wider business model. The relationships between these bodies form an important context to the accounts profiled, which exceeds those of simply platform affordances. This also frames the position of this work in relation to Instagram as mediated communication, as conceptually divergent from Belk's (2013) position on internet activity as 'other' to offline communicative mediums. (this is addressed in more detail in the following section of this chapter.)

It also explores the extended self as captured photographically, with focus on capture of the domestic sphere. Rose (2012, p.265) highlights even in a digital age, family photographs have retained their importance in domestic spaces as everyday visual objects, pinned on fridges for example.

Whilst collectively there are multiple conceptions of the self as extended by physical possessions, as psychic energy (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton,

1981, p.4), as autotopographical (González, 1995, p.133) and as extended selfhood (Belk, 1988), these do not provide a well-developed description of how the lived experience of this assembled selfhood would be expressed. Belk (1988) in particular provides multiple assertions of the importance of photographs as meaningful possessions, but little reference to their production as a reflection of extended selves.

### **3.6.1 Instagram As Mediated Communication**

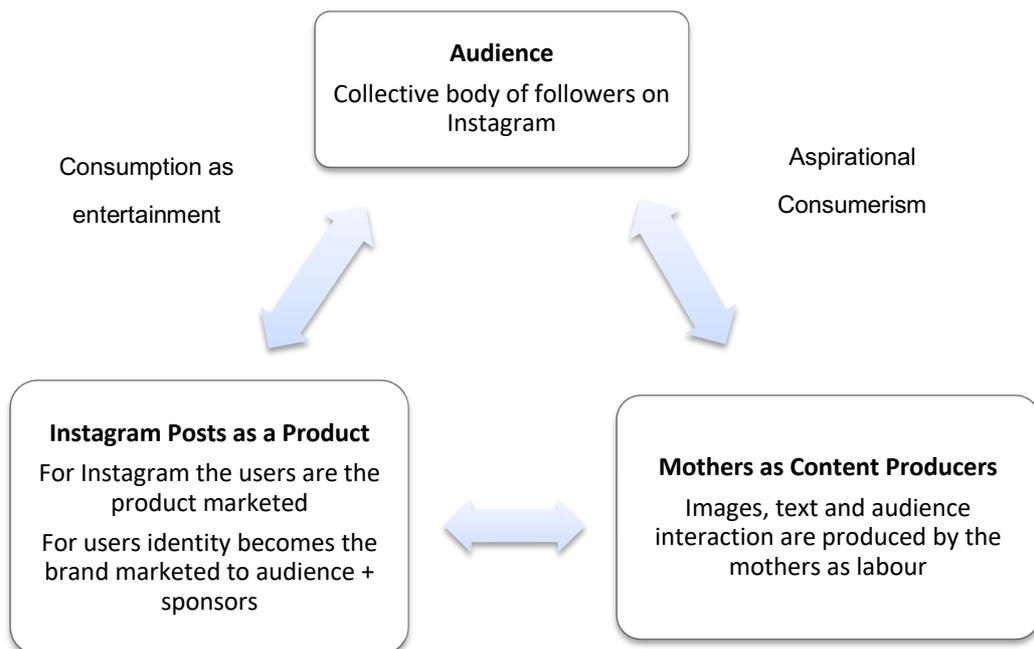
Whilst discussions of social media activity often refer to platform affordances as shaping the activity, the extended self requires a broader consideration of the relationship between the mothers as producers of their images, Instagram as the medium and the collective body of followers (as audience). This doctoral work not only positions the photographic snapshot as social artefact, but also positions Instagram as a platform for mediated communication.

Belk (2013) asserts that there is a perceived feeling of control and unified identity online on social media, via self-expression, but that the ephemeral and dematerialised nature of the online renders this as an illusion, and a false perception. This conception of the internet as 'otherly' renders identity and self-expression in online context as not truly authentic, and as thus lacking inherent validity in assessing identity expression. Similarly to the previously outlined debates regarding the on and offline in research contexts as ethnographic spaces, there appears to remain a high degree of tension in situating and conceptualising the online more generally.

As a result, this thesis is posed as an alternate position to Belk's (2013) conceptualisation. This thesis positions Instagram as a legitimate avenue of identity expression which does not approach the online, socially or individually, as discrete from the offline. In light of this, there is a need for the relationships between the audience, the account holders, and their content to be codified in relation to each other, as articulated in the model within this chapter (Figure 1). This forms the theoretical approach to Instagram, which underpins the work in Chapter 7. This codifies the positions held within this work, contributing a framework which underpins the 3 phases of analytical work undertaken in the empirical chapters 5, 6, and 7.

In this model, the mothers act as producers of their Instagram accounts. This is in essence, creative labour which is extensive in the high production values on display. As social artefacts, snapshots represent both internal tropes of format, subject and style of photographic practice. However, they also act to encapsulate representations of wider sociological phenomenon (Rose, 2012, p.17).

Here the images express a range of social understandings on motherhood, family and consumerism. It is important to note that these artefacts are layered, complex forms of representation. The extended self is one facet of identity expression, which does not compete or replace expressions of intensive motherhood, photographic practice or other identity work. This account of the doctoral studies intends to highlight the nuance and social complexity of the family snapshot, whereby one theory does not account for or resolve all the themes encountered in the data collected.



**Figure 1 - Conceptualisation of relationship between account producers, audience and Instagram**

In terms of the extended self, the focus here is on the mothers as they record their spheres of self. Literally depicting what is closest and most importantly

integrated into their selfhood, the production of a successful Instagram account would be expected to reflect this by encompassing the key elements of style, family, domesticity and status objects. This co-presence of the physical and the cultural value of owning items is described by Appadurai (1986, p.2) as representing “an intercalibration of the biographies of persons and things”. In producing content, the mothers are providing free labour for Instagram to populate the site, even if they are paid by a third party for its provision.

Written as a literal update to his previous analogue work, Belk’s 2013 conception of the digital sphere is arguably problematic in several regards. The philosophical premise of the work assumes the digital world and the offline are inherently different, and as a result are treated as separate. The platforms involved are disregarded as simply providing the means to own and use ‘digital possessions’ which have a differing dynamic of ownership than physical equivalents.

This also minimises the role of technology as a facilitator of communication or an extended medium in which identity is expressed. In contrast, the conceptual approach within this work places a higher degree of importance on the capacity for identity expression to occur on Instagram as a platform, than conceiving digital images as dematerialised versions of printed photographs. The dematerialisation process outlined by Belk (2013, p.481) suggests that

digital possessions as well as most digital devices lack the soft tactile characteristics of clothing and furniture that make it possible to almost literally embed our essence in such possessions

It is additionally asserted there is a lack of control over digital items due to their disembodied nature, and resultingly: “Such assessments suggest that, while digital possessions can be objects of self-extension, they may not be as effective as material possessions.”

Belk (2013) explores social media in a limited manner, focusing discussion around Facebook. Partially the critique presented here is reflective of the age of the work and it having been conducted prior to the rapid growth and development of SNS platforms and use which has occurred since it was published. There is a focus on the concept of re-embodiment in the creation of avatars and participation in virtual environments such as The Sims or Second life which mimic reality and bring about the creation of virtual selves. Primarily concentrating on Facebook as a

selective record of 'real life', Belk makes a number of notable observations. The concept of context collapse (Marwick and Boyd, 2011) is observed (although not cited or termed as such) in managing audiences online and is described as being more complex in online contexts. Belk hypothesises that despite the capacity to explore creatively and create multiple selves, the cognitive load associated with managing this may actually result in individuals expressing a more uniform selfhood than they would in offline contexts.

Belk also describes the creation of a Facebook feed as identity work, which is ongoing and alters in line with life transitions in line with pre-digital and offline selves (again the specific term 'identity work' is supplementary to the original text). However, this is positioned within a larger framing which asserts that this user perception is in fact, unsound. This is ascribed to the fundamental characteristic of online activity being separate from 'real' identity expression as carried out in the physical world.

As a result, the largest theoretical divergence from Belk's original 1988 work is that the assertion that "there is no singular core self" (p.483) online. The description of social media persona creation reads as analogous to earlier conceptions of the extended self, and there is a stated rejection of online identity as either "vacuous" or "as fragmented or fluid as some postmodernist theorists suggest" (Belk, 2013, p.483). Despite this there remains no coherent, unified position adopted by Belk (2013) as to why extended opportunities for identity expression online are equated to the improbability of a core self. Individually addressing points within the original 1988 description of the extended self has resulted in multiple, conflicting positions which are situated within an overarching philosophical assumption of the online as a sphere in which individual activity is divorced from the offline. This leaves it theoretically fragmented, and as a consequence subject to multiple, conflicting assertions on individual points.

In this proposed model (Figure 1), the account holders become their product. Instagram encourages a model of the self as the brand (Abidin, 2016). These feeds are additionally the product that Facebook, Instagram's parent company leverage to marketers based on site traffic. Instagram account holders gain audiences, retaining them on the platform and encouraging repeated site visits, populating the site with content for Instagram, as freely provided labour in return for hosted exposure and participation. Marwick (2015, p.139) highlights that:

While Instagram makes it possible for “regular people” to attract the mass audiences historically limited to broadcast media, the Instafamous tend to be conventionally good- looking, work in “cool” industries such as modeling or tattoo artistry, and emulate the tropes and symbols of traditional celebrity culture, such as glamorous self- portraits, designer goods, or luxury cars. I argue that Instagram represents convergence of cultural forces: a mania for digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and microcelebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption.

This engagement is driven by entertainment value (as opposed to informational value from news, for example) which is provided by account holders. The audience have not only content to view, but a direct line of interaction with the mothers as creative producers. This is partially fuelled, in this demographic, by the aspirational qualities of the accounts. It has been noted that even among influencers whom are mothers, that they still enact this whilst remaining conventionally beautiful and with lives sufficiently privileged enough to be out of the ordinary (Chae, 2018; Abidin, 2017).

The visual representations within the mother’s accounts, represent an opportunity to view content which is high quality but also the author is known. This renders the aspirational figure as known unlike in celebrity or magazine content where they are beyond reach or set apart. This direct line of communication renders the dynamic as extending the ‘parasocial’ relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956) of identifying with content producer as an individual through consuming their creative output. These lines of direct communication allowed by social media are observed to have the capacity to hold potential for converting the parasocial admiration without contact, into social relationships in which communication is two way (Marwick, 2015, p.139).

This model represented in Figure 1 thus represents the theoretical position this work develops on Instagram and its relationship with mothers as content producers, and their audience. This provides an alternate position to Belk’s (2013) positioning on the online as ‘other’ to the offline world, providing an alternate perspective by which to consider the applicability of Belk (1988) to maternal presentation of self on Instagram.

### 3.7 Summary

This chapter highlights that if Instagram is considered as part of popular culture, that critique and reporting of its effects and value are part of a longer trend of moral panic about the negative impact common forms of media have upon society. As a vernacular, everyday activity which is based upon the visual, the value of Instagram as a novel, technologically mediated format is particularly prominently debated.

Central to the tensions in both common perception and academic conceptualisation of the online sphere, is the relation and interplay between the on and offline. Instagram activity, particularly for female users, is framed as a vacuous activity akin to wasting time online (Abidin, 2016). Belk (2013) exemplifies the challenges in adapting existing theory to integrate consideration of the online, and the reliance this work has upon a theoretical stance on the relation between online activity and the 'real' world. This work proposes an alternate position of Instagram as a legitimate platform for identity expression and communication, via technologized mediation. Whilst reliant upon platform affordances, Instagram activity is not treated within this work as separate and fundamentally 'other' to the offline.

Within this conceptual positioning as Instagram as mediated communication and visual expression, the capacity for visual representation of family and parenthood renders Instagram as having significant potential to explore the sociology of contemporary maternal experience. This includes the social pressure to parent in the 'right' ways (Faircloth and Murray, 2014). This allows for an avenue to reconsider the work of Hays (1996) in a contemporary sphere, via the visual narratives presented by mothers on Instagram.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Overview

The literature outlined in Chapter 2 identifies a lack of knowledge which links the socio-history of analogue photography with contemporary image sharing behaviour by parents on Instagram. This work situates these contemporary digital snapshots within this context as part of continuation of the genre, as opposed to a discrete, radical departure.

This work was structured across 3 phases to undertake its aim of exploring contemporary familial representation on Instagram.

- Phase 1 of this work interrogated the family snapshot on Instagram to establish whether its distinctive tropes and characteristics from earlier analogue family album contexts persist digitally.
- Phases 2 of work undertook an ethnographic study of Instagram, representing an increasing focus on maternal narrative building and identity expression. This utilised the theoretical perspectives of Hays (1996) on intensive motherhood.
- Phase 3 reanalysed the data from Phase 2 and was focused upon Belk (1998) and the role of image production and Instagram use by the mothers in supporting an extended parental selfhood visually.

In particular, the fast pace of expansion in Instagram user numbers and popularity has rendered a gap in knowledge surrounding its use by differing demographic groups. Instagram practices have gained both significant media coverage and represent an area of increased research focus. These include that works on Instagram influencers (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016) and highlights the low cultural value placed upon Instagram as a contemporary activity which is perceived as shallow and a reflection of narcissism and consumer culture.

In response to these issues raised within Chapters 2 and 3, this work poses several key research questions, covering the effect of image sharing in this context upon family photography.

The phases of work directed study toward addressing the stated research questions:

**R1** - Has Instagram sharing significantly altered the composition or content of family snapshots from their previous analogue format in photo albums?

**R2** – How do mothers use imagery to construct narratives of parenthood on their Instagram accounts and how do these narratives depict daily maternal lived experience?

**R3** – How can the images and discourse produced by mothers be interpreted as evidence of extended selfhood (Belk, 1988) via parental identity expression?

The research questions form an overall investigation into Instagram as part of a visual socio-historical consideration of family photography. Silverman (2000, p.8) highlights that a qualitative research paradigm inherently works from a perspective that data cannot be divorced from its context and is thus suited for a study of everyday activity or 'real life', as applied here. This work poses the everyday and the mundane as representing the bedrock of family life.

Accordingly, this approaches the study of Instagram from an essentially social constructivist stance. That is, both photographic practice and image sharing behaviours are treated as the expression of beliefs and value systems which are socially constructed (Templin, 1982, p.121). Snapshots are positioned within this work as social artefacts, with family photography regulated by norms and conventions of practice which are passed on as inherited social knowledge.

This aimed to provide an interdisciplinary approach to contextualising existing works within HCI in particular. The research agenda was intended to broaden understanding of photographic practice outside of conceptions which focus primarily on the online as discrete from the offline world. This focused upon visual analysis of naturalistic SNS data, using qualitative approaches.

## **4.2 Instagram As an Ethnographic Space**

As highlighted in Chapter 3, there remains a high degree of disciplinary and conceptual tension in considering the online. In particular, there remains little resolution within literature on the relationship between the on and the offline. This includes their relationship and influence upon each other when considering social phenomenon. This work approaches the imagery, discourse and captioning on Instagram collectively as representing mediated communication. This aligns with

Pink (2012, p.131) in asserting that there is “normalised tech” in daily life and Hine (2015, p.157) that the online world can be considered as part of the everyday, in terms of contemporary research design.

As an ethnographic space Instagram allows for exploration of visual representation and narrative expression surrounding parenting. Space is used within this work, in part to differentiate between the traditional ethnographic fieldwork ‘site’, and Instagram as a (web) ‘site’ as terminology. The scale of Instagram as a platform has led to accounts frequently functioning with a specific theme, or topic. This homophily results in subcommunities across health, fashion, celebrity and mothering. (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016). Mothers describe the perception that Instagram has an increased feeling of community in comparison to Facebook (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015, p.1308), describing the site as “supportive”.

Not only does Instagram provide a record of posts and comments in forming a feed, but this record presents a linear, chronological account of identity expression and community participation. Regular posting behaviours (as were expected to be associated with popular, high follower accounts) result in data which is a rich visual record of daily lived experience.

#### **4.2.1 Interrogating the Everyday**

Instagram represents an informal practice of image capture. The public sharing of snapshots on a daily basis, represents a visual documentation of the everyday. Hine (2015, p.157) asserts that for online ethnography, as a ubiquitous sphere, this non-intrusive method has potential for “capitalizing on the potential that the Internet provides for searching visible traces of everyday life”

As noted by Van House (2011, p.127) prolific image capture is attributable to ubiquitous camera phone photography shifting pictures being of something specific into a capture of ‘the now’ as a daily activity. For parents, this allows for Instagram to form a visual capture of daily life in a level of both detail, and continued practice which exceeds other platforms in potential for image-based analysis.

This allows for an exploration of the vernacular imagery posted by parents. The images represent a daily, normalised practice of sharing. As a result, this sharing activity can be considered as both notable, and of significance to parents

using Instagram. The imagery allows for exploration of depictions of the parental self and experience within normal life. As such it provides a density of individual images for analysis and commentary beyond the format of analogue family albums.

As a normalised practice, Abidin (2016) highlights that Instagram is frequently posed as simply messing about online and of little value. However, as an emergent and normalised aspect of parental sharing, this daily vernacular has potential for understanding navigation of the transition to parenthood (Lee et al, 2014; Faircloth and Murray, 2014; O'Reilly, 2010) which is noted as a challenging period. Photographic practice in analogue form has been noted as a potentially powerful tool and method of actualising and adjusting to the transition to parenthood, through recording the rituals of 'doing parenthood' (Titus, 1976). As such, the everyday is positioned here as having both the potential for significant insight into parental representation, but also that these everyday practices may have significant value to parents.

#### **4.2.2 Positionality**

From an ethnographic perspective, the role and positionality of the researcher is key, particularly online (Hine, 2015; Pink et al, 2016, p.3). Given that parenting is a sphere which is highly politicised (Faircloth and Murray, 2014, p.3) and subject to intense scrutiny and judgment over the "everyday" aspects of feeding, clothing and caring for children, including a strong element of how children are presented to the world in term of appearance (Andersen et al, 2007; Hughes et al, 2006) - my own perspective in interpreting the data must be taken into account.

The accounts are centred on family life which are primarily with children in their early years. These accounts are 'read' and influenced by my own maternal identity. This provides an informed (via lived experience) perspective on the potential pressures, challenges and practical realities of the lived experience of mothering in the early years period. As Banister (1999, p.6) highlights, researching female centred experience in particular, as a female researcher, presents a potential for both sympathetic reading of the content of the data, socially inferred nuance, but additionally what is absent or minimised in its inclusion in narratives of life experience for being taboo or sensitive.

In tandem, the situatedness of Instagram no doubt influences my own interpretation of the data. The nuances of privacy, affordances, and literature

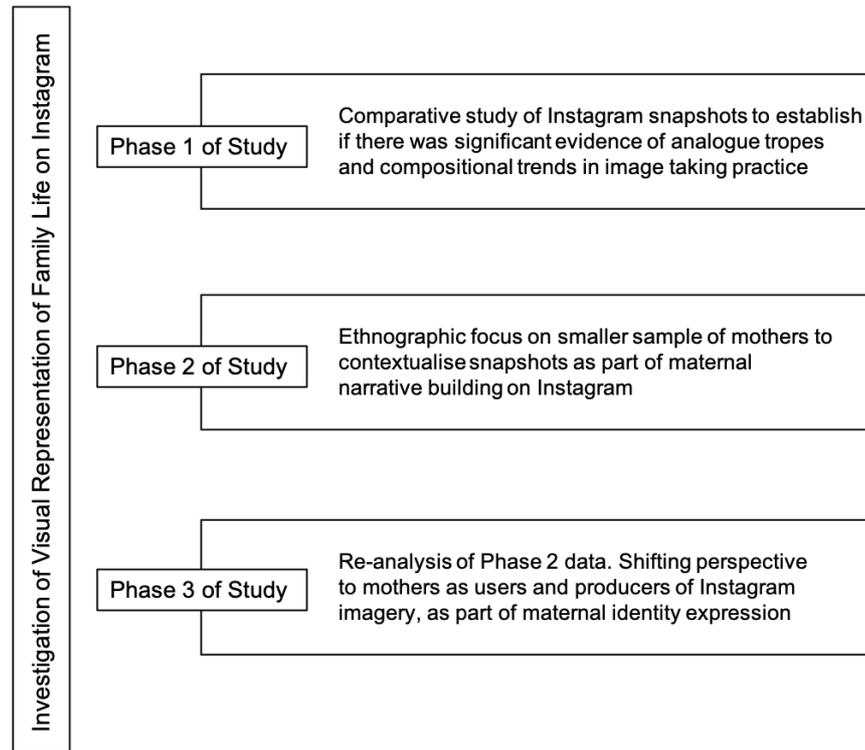
surrounding both maternal behaviours and photographic practice within HCI render my perception of the platform environment as significantly different to that of a lay user or account producer. Whilst the content is an interrogation of the everyday, these daily narratives represent a confluence of a number of larger disciplinary areas of interest, to the researcher's gaze.

More significantly, my perspective is not one of contemporaneous life experience, but a retrospective application and reflexivity on my own experience of the early years and transition to parenthood. Instagram was not released until my own child was 5, and as such I have a contrasting perspective on the same period of parental activity without its presence and use as an everyday practice.

### **4.3 Visual Analysis Study Design**

The 3 phases of study were highly inductive in nature, and as novel "in the wild" (Hine, 2015, p.157) online work, were responsive to the previous phases of study in their formation. As a result, the study design is an overarching exploration of visual representation of parenthood and family life on Instagram. This is divided into 3 phases of work with a shifting focus in sample, focus and interpretative lenses on the data. These phases are illustrated below in Figure 2.

Without a previous body of work with contextually similar methodologies to draw upon, these phases of work were designed with specificity to the nuances of the data being collected and to the affordances of Instagram.



**Figure 2 - Phases of work conducted**

#### **4.4 Phase 1 – The Family Snapshot in an Instagram Context**

Phase 1 of study was designed as a comparative exploration of the family snapshot, drawing upon analogue literature. The work contained within Chapter 2 was conducted as a process of establishing the tropes, conventions and characteristics of the family snapshot. This included consideration of the development of the family snapshot and factors which shaped it both socially and practically as a film based medium. This provided a well-defined set of characteristics by which to evaluate Instagram sharing. This intended to provide an insight which had not yet been provided by other work as to the degree of influence analogue photography has upon contemporary camera phone practices in this demographic.

The Instagram API was used to collect images between July 7<sup>th</sup> and July 14, 2015. Background research was initially conducted on Instagram to explore parental hashtags. This was used to identify those which were well populated and in common use, via Instagram and Iconosquare web viewer (this service is no longer available without a subscription). Search results display those terms relevant

to the search in descending popularity. There was a visible and significant drop off between search results for popular hashtags and those which were not commonly applied to images. Once search terms had been identified, they were paired with a relevant term of the opposite gender: “motherhood” for example was paired with its equivalent “fatherhood”.

Whilst HCI work is typically divided into study by gender in maternal or paternal SNS activity this approach was employed to capture a range of family snapshots shared. A wide sampling of family hashtags was used to reflect that little data was available to inform the study design. No work was at that time published which outlined parental activity by hashtag or specific image type. Essentially this approach cast the net widely in order to ascertain a preliminary view of what was being shared and by whom. This intended to provide data from which to assess the content, subjects and composition of the family snapshot as shared on Instagram.

Methodologically the study is based on a comparison of snapshots in their previous analogue format. In order to assess the influence of sharing in this public sphere it was necessary to establish a baseline of characteristics for those not shared online. A substantial review of literature pertaining to the history of photography, family albums, family snapshots and vernacular photography was carried out. The findings were summarised and distilled into a set of criteria it would be expected to be observable within the Instagram sample.

This process of “triangulation” (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p.126) utilises multiple sources to establish convergence, which was used for the generation of themes and categories within the genre. This “systematic approach” employed during triangulation provides a basis for establishing the credibility of the themes derived, by demonstrating a broad consideration of the field and highlighting emergent consensus. This approach is one which at this time had not been applied to this area of research, but intended to provide a robust grounding in literature, as a methodologically comparative evaluation of the images.

This methodological position provides a context not only to this data, but a larger context on the results of other HCI studies which describe parental image sharing, such as Kumar and Schoenebeck’s (2015) observations of Facebook as a modern day baby book. It cannot be asserted that behaviours observed on an SNS are new or novel, if there is not a rigorous review of family photography as it existed prior to SNS sharing.

#### 4.4.1 Analytic Process

The review of literature (summarised in Chapter 2) was used to derive codes. These referred to commonly noted snapshot subjects and composition types. These included 'no harm done' imagery (Chalfen, 1987, p.81), and those noted across a range of sources such as holidays/days out, and recording of milestones. This included the provision of 3 codes of expected content which would be present within the data, but not in analogue albums: celebrity images, those made into digital montages or with text added, and photos which were irrelevant to the hashtag (to account for spam, advertising or the tag being applied to non-family imagery for terms such as 'baby' with alternate vernacular meaning). This process generated 11 coded image types.

A randomly selected, 50 image sample of the Instagram dataset was coded with this initial codebook, with each image coded with one code which best fitted the image. Whilst not a commonly employed coding strategy, it was felt that the categories were visually discrete and would be best represented by single coding. Images which did not fit within the existing code categories were subsequently used to generate new codes.

This extended the codebook significantly, taking the final codebook to 32 codes which were applied to the entire corpus of images. Due to the lack of previous work in this area, the codebook was expanded to a fine level of differentiation between content types. As an initial work without comparable literature, this level of content type cataloguing was necessary to examine if family snapshots were in fact the dominant image type posted within the hashtags sampled. This primarily expanded the codes for external content, such as advertising and inspirational quotations (and whether these were respectively relevant to the hashtag or irrelevant).

Upon data collection being completed, those hashtags which did not return 500 results in total for the week were discarded from analysis. This reduced the number of hashtags included in the visual analysis to 8 in total. A total of 4000 images were taken forward to the next phase of the study and subject to visual analysis with the full codebook. Notably, this excluded the step-family and step-parenting search criteria only.

The results of this study are published as “Has Instagram Fundamentally Altered the Family Snapshot” and were presented at ACM SIGCHI 2017, following the peer review process (see Le Moignan et al, 2017).

What is methodologically novel is the combination of socio-historic consideration of the snapshot as a format combined with an Instagram visual analysis. This contextualises the findings within a broader continuum of visual culture. This cross-disciplinary analysis (the literature used to characterise the analogue snapshot covered both media, photography, cultural critique and communication studies) is one which contributes multiple perspectives to situate Instagram activity within wider contexts in literature.

#### **4.5 Phase 2 – Maternal Narrative Building on Instagram via Family Images**

Whilst remaining qualitative in methodological terms, Phase 2 extended upon the individual image focus of Phase 1. This aimed to contextualise snapshot images to interrogate their role in building long term narrative by mothers. As a result this focused upon a smaller sample of users, as opposed to sampling by hashtags or image criteria.

This design was responsive to the findings of Phase 1, of which there was no precedent or anticipated findings derivable from literature or comparable work, in advance. Having established that the family snapshot appeared to retain characteristics from its previous analogue form, this suggested that the images would be present on user feeds amongst as part of ongoing narratives regarding parenthood. This phase of work intended to explore the snapshots as part on ongoing presentations of family life on Instagram.

An ethnographic approach was used to profile 20 successful Instagram accounts run by mothers (25 were collected: those not communicating primarily in English and those who subsequently deleted or made their accounts private were excluded). Whilst the previous work looked at decontextualised snapshots, Phase 2 approached them within their larger contexts on a user feed. Whilst current literature focused upon the change from private to public sharing as a key change from family albums, this aimed to explore an alternate perspective of the potential for mothers to narrate their lived experience in an ongoing way.

While family albums provide a generally linear and chronological account of family life, they are generally devoid of significant narrative captioning from the photographer or album creator. Instagram captions provided an extended format, with the capacity for engaging with follower's comments or questions. Here the role of the snapshots in building larger narratives of parental experience and identity were subject to analysis across textual and visual expression. So-called 'mommybloggers' have been noted for their patterns of sustained, detailed disclosure of content (Orton-Johnson 2017, p.2). This suggested that there would likely be a rich and dense quality to the data collected in this manner.

This study employed the theoretical lens of intensive motherhood as described by Hays (1996). This work suggests that motherhood has become intensified and is required to be a labour intensive, all-consuming status in order to achieve legitimacy as mothering. With internet use posed as an everyday activity (Hine, 2015, p.157) and maternal images shared online posed as social photography by Zappavigna and Zhao (2017), Instagram can be posed as having significant potential in identity expression and carrying out parental identity work.

With motherhood in particular a sphere in which parents perceive peer judgement based on children's appearance (Andersen et al, 2007), parenting as an increasingly risk averse endeavour (Furedi, 2001) and with social accountability leading to the everyday parenting being subject to scrutiny (Faircloth and Murray, 2014, p.3), contemporary child rearing appears challenging to navigate. Hays (1996) provides an account of the framing and types of activity in which mothers engage in order to meet the standards of intensive motherhood. These regulate the everyday actions and approaches of parenthood, which given Instagram's focus on self-documenting the granular detail of lived experience, place it as a space in which these may be observable.

#### **4.5.1 Analytic Process**

This encompassed visual analysis of 4000 images, representing a 200 image sample per user. The accounts sampled were all successful Instagram accounts, defined as having at least 500 followers and communicating in English. They were identified via a combination of participation with UK broadsheet newspaper coverage regarding their Instagram activity as a parental account or from the "Most popular" image tab on Instagram for the search term #motherhood.

The associated image captions and comment threads with the image were included in the analytic process. The image dataset was collected via the Instagram API from April 13<sup>th</sup> 2016 by username. The first 200 images returned were included in the sample - this means that for each user the sample represented a different time frame. That is, there is variance within posting frequency which means prolific posters reached the 200 image sample within a shorter time period. However, it was expected that accounts with this number of followers were liable to post with relatively high frequency. In total, 98,554 comments were read across the 4000 images.

The image sample was located on a user's feed by manually scrolling on Instagram and viewed in its authentic context on the platform. Additionally, the API results separate comments, folders of images and captions collected into separate spreadsheets, which are linked. This fragments the data, disrupting its integrity as a collective entity for analysis.

Firstly, any links contained within the Instagram biography account header were followed. Generally, these linked to an associated blog authored by the mother. The 'About' tab was read, along with the first 5 -10 posts to gain a grounding in the mothers niche or particularly branding. This was used to ascertain where traffic was being directed to by posts, and whether branding of the self was coherent across these explicitly linked sites.

Analysis was a multi stage process. Initially, the 200 images were scrolled through sequentially, from the oldest to the most recent post, using the 'next post' button. This looked at images only, and disregarded likes, the image captions or comments. After this process, initial impressions on the images as a complete set were made. This noted frequency of particular compositions or motifs, notable or unusual images in the sample, and account aesthetics or theming.

The account was then re-visited in detail, again from the earliest image posted to the newest. This was a close reading, in which the image was considered along with its caption posted by the mother. Observations on content, language, hashtag use and prevalence, tone, framing and sentiment were made, along with how these aligned with the images themselves. The comment thread associated with the individual post was then read in its entirety.

Fieldnotes were recorded by hand as the accounts were studied. The notes for each account were reviewed once it had been profiled, and additional detail or

observations were added. Key quotes and biographic information from the account profile were additionally collected via copy and paste into a scrivener document associated with each user, with this process noted in the fieldnotes.

After all 20 accounts has been analysed, the fieldnotes were read collectively. The data was then revisited as a recursive process, revisiting any noted images which were observed as unusual or notable. Accounts with similarity were scrolled through, and compared and contrasted. Due to the high volume of comments and number of images, immersion within the data was a time-consuming process. This revisitation partially ensured that those accounts visited initially were both recalled and viewed with the same perspective on the data, as those in the latter stages.

This process generated new observations within the fieldnotes, which began to highlight the key themes of commonality across the account narratives and the use of imagery to present family life. The data was frequently revisited during this process with the completed fieldnotes, to ensure the themes reflected the nuance and complexity of the visual narratives described.

#### **4.6 Phase 3 – Family Snapshots on Instagram as Evidence of Parental Selfhood**

The final phase of work is posed as interrogating the ethnographic data further, from the perspective of Russell Belk's (1988) conception of possessions and the extended self. The 2013 update to this work for a digital age, was also used as an analytic lens. This work aimed to explore the visual accounts as a form of identity expression, through Instagram use and image production by the mothers.

Instagram is noted for the high levels of images and discourse surrounding the role of owning and purchasing items, with this forming a key part of influencer culture (Marwick, 2015). This focus has been identified as being framed as superficiality (Abidin, 2016) and contributes towards perceptions of Instagram as having low cultural value in promoting narcissistic displays and consumerism, as reported within the media (Guardian, 2016a; Irish Times, 2017). However, Belk (1988) provides an alternate lens by which to consider the objects, people, and materialism present in photographs, as part of a complex form of extended selfhood which is documented visually.

A model was developed to demonstrate the conceptual relationship between Instagram account holders, their content and Instagram as a platform to support the analysis contained within Chapter 7 (this conceptual framework for Instagram is included in Chapter 3 as part of the development of a qualitative analytical scaffolding for the empirical work outlined in this Chapter). This was developed from both reference to the works of Belk and the literature on Instagram (as outlined in Chapter 2 and 3).

In approaching images as social artefacts, the displays of ownership and objects within both the photographs and discussion represent environmental context to the physical selves captured. Mothers have been shown to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of the brands they dress and use for their children, and the associated connotations on how this reflects upon them as a parent (Hughes et al, 2015; Andersen et al, 2007; Freedman Lustig, 2004). This further aimed to explore the link between the often-critical reception of successful Instagram accounts in particular, and possessions as culturally and socially valuable signifiers. Belk (1988) provides a theoretical lens by which to evaluate these accounts as conducting ongoing identity work, and expression, as parents.

#### **4.6.1 Analytic Process**

Textual thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2013, p.174) was conducted on both Belk (1988) and Belk (2013) to draw out themes and points relevant to the existing data set.

This phase of study was informed by the themes arising from the analysis outlined in Chapter 6 and elements which were not fully explored as they exceeded the scope of that work. Due to the immersive nature of Phase 2 of work in the ethnographic study of narratives, there was a high degree of familiarity with the data set, its key characteristics, and nuances. This allowed for an analysis of Belk (1988) to be conducted, which highlighted those key themes and observations which had the highest applicability to this context, to be identified. This looked for reference to snapshots, photographic practice, capturing childhood, how an extended self may be depicted visually and observations on the cultural importance of photographs. However, more broadly, relevant passages on extended selfhood which were applicable to an Instagram context were highlighted.

Both the images collected from the API and the ethnographic fieldnotes from Phase 2 were re-examined (re-read, then notes made) with particular reference to features which were identified as representative of characteristics outlined by Belk (1988). These were distilled into a number of key observations and overlap in their applicability.

The first of these provides the theoretical underpinning of this work, as a change in focus. This framed that Belk can be used to consider mothers as producers and users of Instagram, working within its platform affordances (as per the model developed and outlined in the previous chapter). The other key issues arising pertained to children as part of extended selfhood, and the role of consumerism as anthropologically complex within communities and self expression.

The analytic process was formulated by combining this textual consideration of Belk, with the images and fieldnotes as an aggregated process to assess the theoretical position put forward. The reporting of findings was supported by the inclusion of vignettes (of both images and comments thread posts) to illustrate the theoretical positions outlined.

Qualitative coding was conducted on a subsample of 600 images to explore Belk's suggested theory of hierarchies of items/people which are integrated into an extended selfhood, to ascertain if these were visible within the images and if so, if they conformed to the expected frequency suggested. Sampled from 3 accounts (chosen at random) these applied 1 code, which recorded the snapshot contents in terms of people present, or objects depicted. These used Belk's (1988, p.141) published listed order or hierarchy with suggested that the self is of more prominence, then followed by items/people most closely integrated into that selfhood, then less closely integrated ones.

Belk's (2013) work was critically analysed and discussed in the context of the developing thesis and its conceptual concerns, with less reference to the data. The analysis is focused upon critique of the outdated conceptual position and justification of why it is unsuitable for contemporary consideration of the online (and SNSs in particular).

#### **4.7 Sampling and API Use**

The focus was initially comparative in nature for Phase 1 of study. Research at the time did not provide a full description of the actual snapshot images shared

by parents. As such there was a significant gap in understanding as to the compositions, content and appearance of snapshot images shared by parents on Instagram. As such it was not apparent what, if any, effect sharing online would demonstrate as a deviation from previous analogue formats.

The API allowed for sampling of parental hashtags, across 8 terms for parenting. This allowed for the inclusion of a range of both family types and both mothering and fathering tags. This intended to sample broadly, with a strategy which focused on the individual images themselves. This allowed for consideration of individual images, across a wide range of accounts to ascertain broad trends in the kinds of compositions shared with parenting hashtags applied.

Phase 2 narrowed the focus, prioritising the context of images. Phase 1 sampled discrete images, to form a representative sample of family snapshots shared. With little literature to draw upon, there was no predicted features or trends for analysis. As such, the results of this fully informed the subsequent sampling strategy of Phase 2 as an increased focus on individual accounts.

Phase 1 analysis established that snapshot images demonstrated little deviance from the tropes of traditional family photography. This suggested the following phase focused on the imagery as part of ongoing patterns of posting and the extended format of Instagram beyond a family album. Thus, the sampling strategy altered to collecting images as contextualised sharing within user feeds. Whilst the API was used to collect sequential 200 image samples from 25 accounts (20 were carried forward for analysis), this presented a differing data context.

The API interrogation returned the textual data (comments and captions) and the images as separate data. This provides a flexibility in analysis of them as separate data types. However, in treating posts as a combined visual and textual communication, this division rendered the data as fragmentary to the integrity of the data as a whole. In order to preserve the posts as intended, as an ethnography of these visual narratives, the sample period was analysed in-situ on the Instagram desktop site.

Phase 3 of work re-analysed the data collected in Phase 2 of work, with a shift in the theoretical lens employed in exploring the data. As a result the API was not required to collect any new data for this final phase of work conducted.

## 4.8 Ethical Considerations

Social media research has unique ethical considerations within this context. Highfield and Leaver (2016) assert that whilst images may be shared publicly on social media, parents cannot be assumed to have full informed consent in navigating complex privacy settings. However, Instagram has a simplified account privacy structure, with a binary choice of public or private, locked accounts. Data from locked accounts is not included in API search results and is therefore not accessible as research data. Marwick (2015, p143) additionally highlights that Instagram has a differing perception and design in the way it treats followers. This differs from Facebook and the language (and intention) of 'friends' lists, with Instagram referring to 'followers'. This is a less reciprocal relationship based on following a user for content, as opposed to known identity. As such it is more publicly facing than other platforms, with more in common with Twitter in this regard than Facebook.

Extant work on SNS ethical issues in this area typically has a broader cross platform focus (Litt, 2013; Markham and Buchanan, 2012) or focused upon Facebook (Chalklen and Andersen, 2017; Zimmer, 2010). Instagram specific work is beginning to emerge as it becomes an area of increasing research interest. Within this work, the ethical viewpoint is broadly aligned to that of Leaver and Highfield (2018). They provide commentary on the researcher conflict of resolving the contradiction of wanting to conduct potentially sensitive research as a valuable study but wishing to remain as ethically responsible and sensitive to the material context as possible. They suggest a rationale which suggests that whilst settings may be binary in nature as 'public' or 'private' that those shared publicly represent a spectrum of expected openness by users.

Users here which are focused upon in detail represent high follower accounts, whom frequently have a wide-ranging online presence with blogs, paid content sponsorship and participation in media and PR content. These accounts are active in publishing content and maximising its reach, and thus actively utilise Instagram as a distribution platform. This deliberately uses the reach and capacity to post in a public forum and thus can be broadly expected to comprehend the public nature of their sharing and audience scope.

Despite having ethical approval for the works carried out<sup>1</sup>, there is an area of concern when approaching image-based research with the inclusion of legal minors. In treating the images for publication or in results, the reproduction of images becomes a question to be addressed. Locatelli (2017) takes an approach which does not reproduce images (except for two accounts where permission was gained) and relies upon description, others (Zappavigna and Zhao, 2018) place obscuring rectangles over faces. The images are reproduced and published in this anonymised, edited form. This eliminates the capacity for reverse image searching to be conducted by altering the original and obscuring the identity of individuals.

Leaver and Highfield (2018, p.33) highlight the age of the image as a factor. Less recent images have a reduced likelihood of being recognised and identified and thus represent a mitigated form of uncensored reproduction. This work reproduced images from Chapter 5 for publication but elected to include images which did not include children's faces or identifying information on location or identity, given the wider circulation of the paper and conference presentation audience. These included the back of children's heads or examples of images which featured rooms or outdoors scenery. It was decided this represented an approach which both minimised concerns the topic may raise during the review process and conformed to best practice in this area at that time.

In conducting ethnography, a process of researcher interpretation of the data is conducted (Hine, 2015, p.20). This interpretative process, is supported here with elements of the data. The usernames of the account are anonymised, and children's names were omitted from inclusion when referencing the account holders. However, whilst guidelines commonly conformed to within HCI works within this area, such as the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2012) guidelines suggest that quotes should be paraphrased to avoid the potential to be located via search engines, this process is unsuited for ethnographic study. Rewriting participants words introduces researcher bias and distorts the nuance of expression, as doing so would be an interpretative exercise.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethical Approval was granted by University of Lincoln where this work was started and where the data was collected.

## **4.9 Data Collection and Management**

The Instagram API allows for data collection, however, this access is subject to alteration and does not remain static (Instagram API documentation, 2018). The study data collected for the initial study would no longer be accessible using the API in the same fashion and reflects the changing research environments in SNS research.

Facebook, as Instagram's parent company have reduced access to data on their platforms via the API. Initially a requirement for access to be via approved code, submitted for approval with associated documentation and demonstration of use was introduced. The code initially deployed for the first study was used to interrogate the API was submitted to Instagram for verification and approval.

However, in 2018, functionality was reduced to introduce parity with Facebook data access structures (Facebook for Developers, 2018). This required the formation of new code to be written, and submitted again for verification. This provides collection for business accounts only, and at this time no personal account data is accessible to researchers. As a result, the code deployed in data collection for this work is redundant and no longer functional. The data collected via the API for this work includes only publicly shared data, and conform to all term and conditions of API access at the time of collection. As such, no technical detail is included on the process, as it is not replicable at this time.

## **4.10 Summary**

This work utilised a novel combination of qualitative methods to investigate representation of family life on Instagram. This took a comparative approach to snapshots on Instagram, considering them in light of literature on analogue practices, and previous characteristics of family imagery. Over 3 phases of work, data from the Instagram API was interrogated, with an increasing focus and with alternate theoretical lenses.

The first use of the API collected discrete images as the search criteria, as a selective sample by hashtag. As previously outlined this aimed to begin the exploration of family images and representation in this area by establishing to what degree the reported tropes and key characteristics from analogue photography are visible in snapshots on Instagram. These findings are reported within the next chapter.

## **5. (Phase 1) The Family Snapshot in An Instagram Context**

### **5.1 Overview**

The literature contained within Chapter 2 outlines the strength of conventions which regulated the production of images contained within analogue family photo albums. This work interrogates the family snapshot in a digital context on Instagram to explore deviation and evolution in the format.

At the outset it should be recognised that Instagram not only makes it simple to take and edit photographs but also promotes the instant sharing of these, either publicly or across a defined social network. Of particular interest is whether this taking and sharing combination might have changed the composition and nature of the family snapshot. Specifically, this phase of work sets out to address the following questions:

- Has Instagram changed the composition or nature of the family snapshot?
- How do the family images of children shared on Instagram deviate from the strong visual tropes documented in printed family albums?

### **5.2 Data Analysis**

The literature outlined in Chapter 2 was collectively considered to establish the characteristics of the analogue family snapshot. This was then extended by analysis of family snapshots on Instagram to assess if there is evidence of significant deviation in the genre when posted in an Instagram context. The coding process (outlined in Section 4.3.1.1) for the data generated a final codebook seen below in Table 1. The results and visual data summarised within Table 1 are illustrated and discussed in the following chapter, in Sections 5.3 onwards to evaluate where deviation from family albums occurs and when there is evidence of the continuation of tropes and conventions within the imagery.

<b>Initial Codebook</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Additional Codes (Full Codebook)</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Daily Narrative</b>			
Everyday life (casual snapshot)	909	Animal / Family pets	112
		Food	95
Posed / look at camera	925	Home interiors / décor	16
Relevant imagery (no people)	136	Nursery / child's room	7
'No harm done'	5		
Negative representation	1		
<b>Life Events</b>			
Holidays / Days Out	337	Scenery / Landscape	61
Special Occasions	55	Age recording of infant (<1 year)	10
Pregnancy	44	Memorial to loved one	2
<b>External Content</b>			
Celebrity	10	Information / Guide	13
		Film / TV screenshot or book cover	19
		Campaign / cause promotion	12
		Non-photographic (irrelevant imagery)	54
		Non-photographic (relevant imagery)	33
		Information / Guide	13
		Relevant Advertising	174
		Other Advertising (relevant)	73
		Memes / Humour	72
		Religious content	20
		'Inspirational' quote (relevant)	112
		'Inspirational' quote (irrelevant)	70
		Personal response to tag	10
Phone / Web screenshot	40		
<b>Photo Montages</b>			
Montage / Text added	367		
<b>Other</b>			
Photo irrelevant to tag	143		

**Table 1 - Final codebook for Instagram snapshot data**

### **5.3 Retention of Analogue Tropes**

The integration of sophisticated image capture capability into smartphones has had a transformative effect on the user experience related to snapshot photography (Gye, 2007).

One obvious impact of this is the phenomenal rise of the selfie, with the number of such self-portraits posted between 2012 and 2014 increasing by 900 times (Souza et al, 2015). Smartphones have also had an impact upon family photography (Sarvas and Frohlich, 2011, p103) and the advantages offered to parents through such technology are various and diverse.

On a mundane level, the capacity to capture a virtually unlimited number of family snapshots at, effectively, zero cost and share them in a single step via social media has removed the need to expensively print and distribute photographs to share with close family and friends (Van House, 2011, p.128).

Perhaps more profound is the capacity for social media to elicit responses from such close family which can confirm that 'good parenting' is taking place (Goodwin, 2018; Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015). The sharing of digital snapshots can also be used to gain support from weaker-tie networks, in addition to immediate friends and family (Morris, 2014; Jang and Dworkin, 2014). Research indicates that such online sharing can be a positive source of support, as well information gathering, for all, but particularly new, parents (Bartholomew et al, 2012; Gibson and Hansen, 2013)

#### **5.3.1 New Parenting**

The sharing of child photographs historically begins with the birth of a child; however new patient-centred clinical practices coupled with new media technologies now offer opportunities for some parents to initiate the sharing prior to their child's birth (Leaver, 2014, 2018; Lupton, 2013). The fetal ultrasound, or sonogram, provides parents with the first view of their child; these are often treated as "baby pictures" and may facilitate the formation of an emotional bond with the unborn fetus by asserting kinship (Han, 2008, p.276). Scan pictures are frequently referred to as "cute" and shared with friends and relatives (ibid). Healthcare professionals also state they have a conscious awareness of such rituals and their role in creating a "Kodak moment" for a family (Lupton, 2013, p.3). The New York

Times ran a cartoon as far back as 2011, satirizing the popularity of sharing these images on social media, featuring the common sharing icons directly overlaid on the screen during a pregnancy ultrasound (New York Times, 2011).

Such online practices could be considered as an extension of the sharing of baby photographs as described by Bourdieu: “by means of photographs, the new arrival is introduced to the group as a whole” (Bourdieu, 1965/1990, p.22). The birth of a child brings about a period of “snapshot significance”, particularly in the first year when photographic activity is increased (Chalfen, 1987, p.81). This can take the form of recording milestones (Chalfen, 1987), introducing the infant to its wider network of relatives (Bourdieu, 1965/1990, p.22) and actualising the transition to parenthood for parents (Titus, 1976).

Within this data, there was an absence of pregnancy ultrasound (or private 3D scan) images noted by Leaver (2014) as common on Instagram. However, these may be shared under dedicated hashtags as opposed to the ones collected here. In contrast, there were a number of images shared under #babies in particular, which captured the early newborn phase. These include those taken in the hospital, immediately post birth, as seen in Figure 3.

Here, within Figure 3 there is recording of initial introduction to likely siblings and grandparents (as seen in images H and K). Additionally, there is, contained within image B, an example of Titus’ (1976) documentation of the transition to inhabiting a parental identity. By enacting and capturing the new role, the identity is assumed. In Image B, the parents are cooperatively – and intensely - focused on their infant and the activity of feeding the baby, as a new caring task associated with their parental status.

Images D, F and L represent a strikingly similar portrait of bland hospital backgrounds framing the new mother cradling her new infant. These moments are outlined by Chalfen (1987) as previously ones in which a new film camera was acquired for, loaded with film and packed into the hospital bag in readiness. These are also highlighted by Chalfen (1987, p77.) as the rare occasions when hospitals or people in bed are featured in traditional albums, due to the occasion not being one associated with sickness or negativity.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 3 - Introduction of new infant**

There was also a smaller portion of images shared of newborn photoshoots of a professional quality. These tend to be staged, focusing on the small size and (peaceful) sleeping form of the babies. As seen in Figure 4 these tend to be well lit, with artful backgrounds and the use of textures such as fleece, wicker baskets and sheepskin to pose the infant against. Nappies are commonly removed as bulky and visually unappealing / distracting from the form of the infant.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 4 - Professional imagery of infants**

Such images are shared extensively on social media, with the expectation of some acknowledgement and positive response; 93% of mothers and 71% of fathers who reported sharing a photograph of their baby on Facebook expected the image

to be acknowledged by their friends list (Bartholomew et al, 2013, p.461), and indeed the audience responds positively to these baby photos (Kumar and Shoenebeck, 2015). This expectation of positive reinforcement of picture sharing continues through the toddler years. Studies show that, between the ages of 0-3, posts containing a child's name gain more attention (likes and comments) on social media than those which do not (Morris, 2014, p.1278).

Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.21) stated "the mother who has her children photographed can only meet with approval". For parents of very young children, such approval comes at a time of great change and sometimes increased social isolation, so it is not surprising, then, to note that both fathers and mothers might turn to social media in order to seek social support and approbation at this time (Dotty and Dworkin, 2014).

As children get older, however, the sharing becomes slightly more complex, particularly for fathers who fear a negative response to postings of older children, particularly daughters, and who screen the snapshots more carefully for suggestive content (Ammari et al, 2015). Durrant et al (2009) explore teenagers' use of digital photography and display, but report that, within the communal spaces of the home, it is mothers that retain the role as the curator of family images. This has previously been noted (Rose, 2012; Janning and Scalise, 2015), that even in a shift to digital images and storage, the work of organising and curating family photograph collections still typically falls upon mothers.

### **5.3.2 Life Events**

Life events typically form a significant part of traditional family albums: births, birthdays, graduations, weddings and key anniversaries are all commonplace. In this dataset, however, there were a limited number of clear instances of such occasions featuring children; examples of those which were encountered are in Figure 5. There are frequently symbolic representations of celebration in the form of cakes or balloons which make the images identifiable as a defined celebration.

The low frequency of these image types may be suggestive that these events have specific alternative hashtags associated with them that was not captured within this data - such as #birthday. Hashtags appear discrete, with those for family terms not being mixed with others to account for children as participants in key life

event depictions, for example. As a result, there does not appear to be #wedding also simultaneously tagged with #kids, for example.

Images C, E and F appear to feature baby shower or gender reveal parties, with cupcakes with baby shoe decorations on the top in Image C, themed balloons in Image E and a celebration of the latter stages of pregnancy depicted in Image F. Having grown in popularity, these particular celebratory occasions are more common in online sharing due to their lower occurrence in pre-digital photographic album eras (Pasche Guignard, 2015). Image A is thematically aligned, either representing a new baby or a baby shower event, with a cake featuring the words “Baby” on the top.

In other research regarding the value of social media, it is recognized that people can fall too easily into established practices – the images they have seen from others become the images they try to create on their own timeline. Thus, for example, one of the participants in the study reported in Zhao and Lindley (2014, p.2437) stated: “I guess it’s the way it’s presented, you know? Like when you graduate, it’s like a big banner and she’s graduated. She’s got a new job.”, recognising the way that certain photographic traditions come to dominate.

What may differ here is the specificity afforded by applying hashtags against individual images. Hashtagging practices provide a means to catalogue and present family images in a more segmented manner which focuses on the given occasion or image contents at a granular level.

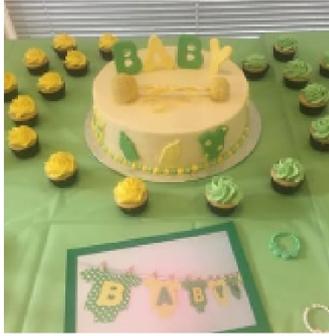


Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 5 - Images of celebrations and special occasions**

### 5.3.3 Omission of Negativity

In the dataset, posts that depicted parents dealing with difficulties were rarely encountered, nor were there many posts that mentioned “extended families” e.g. those following a break-up, in hashtagging practices. It is worth noting that where there were posts that recognized family struggles, these were often accompanied by images or memes found online, rather than family snapshots. These uses of alternate content types are described independently within Section 5.4.1 later in this chapter.

#### 5.3.3.1 No Harm Done

Chalfen (1987, p.78) suggested that the infrequent inclusion in photo albums of babies crying, or children with minor injuries, represent a token acknowledgement that family life is not, in its entirety, easy and without mishap. However, such images also imply that no significant, long lasting, or substantial harm has occurred.

As previous research has found, mothers refrain from sharing images on Facebook which showed mess, blood, injury or their child as anything but “happy-go-lucky” (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015, p.1307). This study confirmed this is also the case on Instagram. The sample contained no images which were categorized as showing negativity or children in an unflattering light as being naughty, destructive or mean.



Image A



Image B



Image C

#### Figure 6 - Examples of ‘No Harm Done’ images

Images which did contain mess were presented as cute, endearing snapshots of babies or toddlers with food on their faces, for example. Moreover, the code which specifically recorded minor injury and images demonstrating ‘no harm done’ comprised just 5 images, such as those demonstrated in Figure 6.

One image depicts a crying toddler, and another a broken bowl on the floor beneath a high chair (Image A), where the infant is positioned safely out of any danger. Only two images suggest harm of any form has occurred. Both feature children – neither appear upset or even slightly distressed – with plasters (Band-Aids) on their face (Image B). The plasters themselves further reinforce the positive message, featuring bright, playful designs commonly found on products marketed specifically for children.

The final image in this category featured a child proudly displaying a hand covered in dirt to the camera, accompanied by his smiling mother (Image C). These snapshots therefore strongly align with the expected norms of traditional family albums. Competent parenting is implied in managing any injury or taking care of a child with appropriate diligence. This serves to reinforce the message that children are safe, protected and healthy – a further testament to good, attentive parenting which manages potential risks and mitigates harm.

### **5.3.3.2 Familial Harmony**

Aside from no harm done, there was no pictorial evidence present in the dataset of any family discord or unhappiness. Again, this concurs with evidence that depictions of family discord or breakdown are notably missing from the traditional family album (Hirsch, 1981; Spence and Holland, 1991).

Images such as those in Figure 7 were particularly concentrated in the hashtags, #family and #children. The images of siblings (or friends/relatives of a similar age) posted under these hashtags depict harmonious play and quality time. Images B, H and K typify snapshots of playful activity in which multiple children are engaged in the same activity, laughing and happy.

Image A exemplifies an image type where families are captured collectively having fun doing a joint activity or day out together. All the members included are happy, smiling and physically grouped together. For family shots – where the focus is on the unit as opposed to the family in a given activity context or place – the family are captured physically cuddled up, such as Image I. Similarly, Image L depicts a family harmoniously bundled together in such an exaggerated form that it becomes comedic for the people in the shot.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 7 - Harmonious family imagery**

However, in collecting data from the hashtags #stepmother, #stepmum, #stepfather, #stepdad and #stepparent the sample size returned was significantly lower than the threshold for analysis. As such the data collected was excluded from

analysis. This may stem from the strong tradition of non-documentation of family breakdown photographically and subsequent reforming into a blended family unit. This suggests a further need for research into Instagram use by parents from non-traditional family units, those with disabled children, and stepfamilies to establish what patterns of usage they display.

#### **5.3.4 The Cute Child**

Mothers state they share images that they deem to be 'cute' (Fullard and Reiling, 1976) whilst exhibiting an awareness of not wanting to be seen as oversharing photos of their children generally (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015).

With this in mind, the initial codebook referenced images which were specifically 'cute'. However, in reality, this raised another point regarding external audience perception. The images (demonstrated above in Figure 8) which were identifiable as being intentionally endearing, funny or sweet included those with obvious costumes, dressing up, face paint, or with pets present. The images which could be categorized by an outside observer as cute all featured clear novelty value. Whilst parents may themselves have perceived other images within the sample to be cute or funny these were not identifiable to a researcher. Without prior knowledge, or a close tie to the individuals featured, it may be less clear to others that an image evokes a sentimental response to those involved. The quality of cuteness, or an image being endearing is visually recognisable by number of qualities or features. These include: exaggerated facial expressions or response to things, novelty outfits, studious engagement in an activity which is strikingly grown up, or comedic.

Within Figure 8 this is represented by the care and attention given in Image A, for example, in dressing up the pet dog in a headband. The girl captured in image I, engrossed in playing with plastic dinosaurs in the bath represents another example of how concentration on a task can be recorded and perceived as cute. In contrast, the composition in Image K is comedic for the fed-up expression on the small boy, sat by a sleeping baby (presumably a younger sibling) and sleeping cat.

Image D provides an example of another image type in which the child is the sole focus of the image, with their facial expression the key capture of the snapshot as endearing.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 8 - 'Cute' images of children**

Dressing up, or wearing costumes present opportunities for out the ordinary, or novel images of play. The children (Images, B, C, E, F, H, J and L) present a range

of images which are notably attributable as being recognisably endearing. Image E depicts a small child wearing clearly adult flipflops, with a comedic result in the mismatched scale. The sample applies to image J, where the scale of both the basketball and the witch's hat are oversized to the small girl they are pictured on.

Images of babies are clearly common in family albums, and on Instagram. Those in sunglasses (Image C), dressing up as superheroes or fairies (Images B, H) remain present here as examples of typical activity captured as visually appealing. The baby in image L typifies the 'cute baby' image, with the focus on the infants features - noted as psychologically provoking the response as cute by Fullard and Reiling (1976), but also the novelty outfit with animal ears on the fleecy hood.

### **5.3.5 Days Out / Holidays**

Days out and holidays were popular analogue images within the family album. Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.32) described them as a form of "seasonal conformism" in image taking. Holland (Spence and Holland, 1990, p.2) describes that:

The children's party may bring tantrums, but the pictures will show laughter. The holiday may be spoilt by rain, but it will be the sunny days that make it to the family album. The longed-for family cohesion of the family group is secured in the imagery.

Within the data here, these depictions of outings or summer holidays were popular and frequently encountered.

Images such as those in Figure 9 were particularly concentrated in the hashtags, #family and #children. The images of siblings (or friends/relatives of a similar age) posted under these hashtags depict harmonious play and quality time. Images E, H and K typify snapshots of playful activity in which multiple children are engaged in the same activity, harmoniously.

There was a high frequency of images featuring days out at the beach within the data, such as images B, K and L. The photographs typically capture the child or family members, with sufficient background environment included to situate the image as recognisably on a day trip to the location. Image H is a key examples of this framing, demonstrating to the audience the unmistakable message that "we are here, together" on a family holiday. The mountains in the background convey this is

unlikely to be an everyday scene but a replication of the key trope of recording annual family holidays (Spence and Holland, 1990; Ford and Steinorth, 1988)



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H

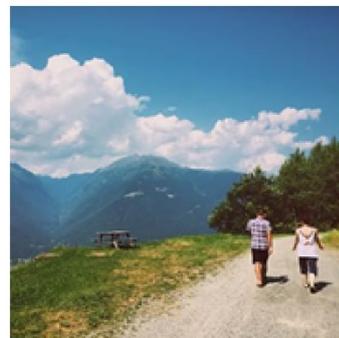


Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 9 - Days out and holiday snapshots**

Others, such as Image A depict more mundane trips out, as in the case here to soft play or the park (images C, E and J). It is observable these photographs, even when of more everyday trips to a park, feature blue skies and contented children. The images do not appear to capture grey or gloomy trips out, but skew strongly towards summer and bright occasions. This aligns with Holland's (Spence and Holland, 1990 p.2) observation on analogue images presenting a particular representation of family reality in which the dismal or failed outings are absent photographically.

Children are recorded doing key activities – fun, or novel activities - such as in Image D where the girl rides a pony on a group trail activity. For smaller children, as in Image G, the engagement with the day out is captured with looking and pointing at a boat in a harbour. Captured in a sun hat and with a backpack, the impression is of an activity which has been prepared for and is worthy of capture.

Togetherness is a key element of the familial harmony presented in analogue family albums (Hirsch, 1981; Rose, 2012; Boerdam and Martinius, 1980). In tandem to the images featuring blue skies and sunshine, when children are captured with others, they appear to be doing the activity closely together and agreeably, in line with the trend described in Section 5.2.3.2 previously of familial harmony.

#### **5.4 Deviation From Analogue Photographic Practices**

Whilst there is evidence in the data of retention of key tropes such as holiday snaps, there are some deviations. Primarily, there is an increased level of granularity in the image data set. The introduction of digital image capture, and the contemporary ubiquity of the camera phone appears to result in increased depiction of daily life on Instagram. Van House (2011, p.127) outlines that digital capture has moved photography into an everyday practice, however for family photography specifically the capture of minutiae of daily routine appear to exaggerate the qualities of ordinariness which critics previously critically observed (Slater, 1995; Langford, 2001; Batchen, 2008).

### 5.4.1 Increased Levels of Mundanity - Daily Narrative

The data shows that the daily imagery might include a tray of pasta, slices of pizza, children eating snacks or standing in a supermarket. These are ordinary, repetitive activities, and highly mundane snapshots of elements of family life.

This represents an exaggeration of the visual tropes found in family albums, as opposed to a deviation from them. The images retain the bland, safe and frequently replicated compositions which are so highly critiqued in literature. However, the banality is increased as the images become even more mundane. Other images for instance, reflected a trip to the high street, a ride on a bicycle, eating of a meal, care of a pet, a ride in the car or watching TV. Examples of these images are in Figure 10, below which demonstrate the presence of a camera on a trip to the supermarket. The ubiquity of the camera phone brings image taking capacity into these everyday scenes, whereas a mundane activity would not have been notable enough to bring a film camera specifically for capturing this.



Image A



Image B



Image C

**Figure 10 - Examples of supermarket shopping as exemplar of mundanity**

These images suffer however from the all too familiar online notion of context collapse: abandoned crayons or completed drawings becomes as valid a photographic subject as a holiday or trip to the swimming pool. Many of the images of children certainly did not mimic traditional portraiture: many shots taken were observably from behind a child, including multiple instances of children watching TV, loading the dishwasher and walking in-front of the photographer along sidewalks with no scenery or location included. Instead, this visual daily narrative captures the minutiae of life without self-consciousness, or concerns of being boring, inane or not worthy of sharing.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K

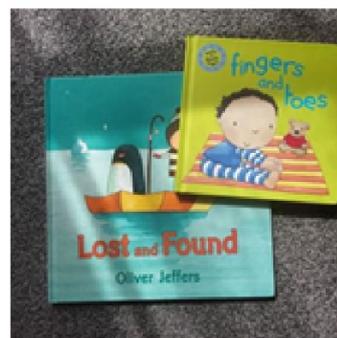


Image L

**Figure 11 - Everyday imagery**

These images would likely not have been recorded on a regular basis on film or included in a formal album of photographs, due to the waste of film as a

consumable. They also represent low value in an imagined 'display index' of image subjects for framing or showing to others; instead they simply document the everyday practice of parenthood and family life. These images exceed simply a capture of the present, altering the compositions to include those without people, or so focused on an activity that there is no wider visual context present to suggest location, time of day or people present. Examples of these image types are shown above in Figure 11.

Chalfen (1987, p. 94.) asserts that in analogue family snapshots you would not see images of people reading, writing, on the phone or:

watching television, playing cards or board games. When ordinary, normal, and usual incidents of everyday life are photographed, it is probably because a slight variation has been introduced to alter, or humourously comment upon, the activity.

Clearly there is deviation on Instagram apparent in Figure 11, with Images C, H and K depicting exactly the activities Chalfen describes as not notable enough for capture. So how can these images be made sense of if they are unlikely to be either displayed or meaningfully shared? What is their function? In other domains, people tend to be over-inclusive in their documenting of the everyday and then struggle to make meaningful use of the stored data. Indeed, people will typically reject such images as trivia when they show up in automated or semi-automated biographies such as Facebook's 'Look back' or 'MySocialBook (Thomas and Briggs, 2016).

However, Bamberg & Georgakopoulou (2008) have argued that the 'small stories' of everyday living help people create a sense of who they really are, and this identity work is particularly important as part of parenting. The 'instant' nature of photo sharing and capture on Instagram supports the creation of these small stories, but critically, these are likely to provide value for identity work conducted in the moment, rather than for reminiscence in the longer-term (Zhao and Lindley, 2014).

#### **5.4.2 Pets**

As members of the family – and as highly popular image type on the internet – there was a presence of animals within the data. These images focus on domestic

pets (cats, dogs) most commonly. There were a few instances of budgies or reptiles as pets, however these were rare in comparison to more standard pet types.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 12 - Images of pets**

Whilst traditional albums would certainly have contained images with family pets in, images purely of pets at home would have been less common with such frequency. Photographs J, K and L within Figure 12 below typify portraits of pets without people present. These images highlight the changing nature of the subjects when digital capture removes cost and consumables as a factor which previously restrained image taking practices.

However, as also demonstrated in Figure 12 animals are also subjects of days out to zoos, wildlife centres and parks. Images, F, E and G feature children posed against a leopard enclosure, in a petting enclosure with a small rabbit, and stroking zebras. As subjects, these images intersect with both days out, and with familial belonging depicted as a happy, idealised state.

Image D demonstrates that 'togetherness' extends towards family pets, with a dog shown affectionately licking a toddlers face whilst he sits in the bathtub. Or, as in images A, B and C, where pets are captured at home in proximity to new babies.

#### **5.4.3 Food**

This increased level of granularity over the traditional album is also typified by the presence of images of food. These images feature either very ordinary meals at home, or are snapshots of eating out as an experience. As image compositions, these have an increased level of daily narrative recording, which exceeds the traditional analogue album.

Considering the essence of critique surrounding printed family albums was the banality and ordinariness of the subjects (and repetition across the genre) - images of food in particular serve to highlight that this characteristic appears magnified in this data, as opposed to deviated from.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H

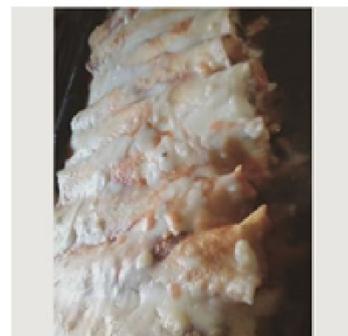


Image I

**Figure 13 - Images of food**

There are a number of image types present. Image I represents an example of simple compositions of home cooking, as the sole focal point of the image. Other variants include family members eating (as in Images H and E).

When not a family occasion (group shot), the images are frequently portraits of children consuming food or treats. These are frequently, as in Image C, of a child sat in a highchair consuming food. Alternatively, for older children the portrait is as demonstrated in Image F where a girl is photographed eating an ice cream. Food becomes significant for its contextual flexibility as a treat, as part of familial togetherness, and as potential for cute imagery when small children are poorly adept at eating and become covered in chocolate, for example.

Images D and G represent an alternate form, in which images are focused around healthy eating and nutrition, as opposed to meals. These feature lunch boxes, fruit, and healthy snacks. Whilst there is an increase in the granularity of these images, food serves as an example of the sheer diversity and social nuance readable in images of 'the ordinary'.

## **5.5 Extended Content Types**

As a social media platform, Instagram subsumes many elements of popular online culture; therefore, many of the images noticed in the study, though also tagged with the list of family snapshot hashtags, contained content not directly related to the area of interest, but studied elsewhere. However, these included: visual memes and humour, images of celebrity parents, nostalgia, advertising, religious content, screenshots (of both desktop and mobile devices, including grabs of text message conversations), stills from films, cartoons, digital art and text, motivational quotations, including many quotations related to parenting, and motherhood. These images types, of course, would not be found in family albums. These categories form a typology of content found within parental hashtags on Instagram, and cover a diverse range of content.

### **5.5.1 Montages and Text Treatments**

The images containing children in a montage (such as those demonstrated in Figure 14 below), three divisions in content were apparent. Firstly, these were mundane images typically featuring domestic scenes – children sat on a sofa with a pet dog, brushing their teeth, or eating snacks, for example. These retain the same quality of mundanity, as in individual image compositions, simply combined in multiple sets.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 14 - Examples of 'Photo Montages' images**

Secondly montages were used to showcase a particular holiday or outing, often depicting family or selfies (with or without others included) within scenery. One composition for example featured a couple with a child taking a group selfie from a boat in front of a scenic Mediterranean-looking harbor (Image D). Such snapshots were carefully framed to include the background view projecting the family identity: 'we are on holiday together as a unit' at the moment of capture. There appeared to be little middle ground between these montage types, which were either very clearly domestic scenes at home (such as Image E), or starkly representing a holiday or day out.

Thirdly, all images contained within the montage feature portraits of the child, frequently with multiple shots taken in succession, as opposed to combining a range of different images from a camera roll or album into the montage (as seen in Image C)

The ability to assemble creative, varied compositions was not seen as an emergent trend in the data. What is notable here is that despite the creative scope for photo treatment, varied images in a montage and experimentation with capturing the images themselves – the same terminology could be used to critique the snapshots on Instagram as in albums: homogenous, lacking in experimentation or artistic endeavour, and the use of repetitive imagery. It could be suggested that this lack of creative expression can be attributed to the strength of the visual tropes found in family albums, which have been inherited in a skeuomorphic fashion from film photography and printed albums. Even as an increasingly social activity, family photography remains understood in a normative manner, as a fundamentally non-creative practice.

### **5.5.2 External Context**

The image types vary from those created or imported for sharing on Instagram by a user, to those which are user created, such as artworks. Such materials were often used to express tension, frustration, problematic or conflicting emotions, albeit often using humour as a vehicle (see Figure 15 for examples of these). When posted online in tandem with personal images, a diverse content range can be observed across parental hashtags. This results in a highly personalized parental feed combining multiple content types.

Whilst this has little in common with recent family photo albums, it does, in fact, have parallels with the Victorian period when hybrids between scrapbooks and photo albums were common (Pols, 2002, p.27).



Image A

You know you're a mom when going to the dentist is relaxing.

@onmysideoftheroom

Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

Figure 15 - Examples of external content

### 5.5.3 The Good Parenting Selfie

Smartphones have brought about a democratization of access to photography removing any barriers to the photograph as an everyday means of expression (Nightingale, 2007). This alteration in practice is described as “a kind of archive of personal trajectory or viewpoint on the world, a collection of fragments of everyday life” (Okabe and Ito, 2006, p.15).

In exploring the consequence of these advances in photographic practice, Murray (2008) determines there is a clear transformative impact. Using analysis of Flickr images, they demonstrate a movement away from photography as a tool to

capture any defined, special moment and towards a more transient, immediate way to capture the mundane and frame small things. This movement towards the mundane, and an everyday practice has, somewhat paradoxically, been accompanied by an increased desire to share these moments with others, facilitated by the rise of sites such as Instagram (Instagram, 2016).

Research has begun to explore the role of such sites in terms of the digital curation of self, including work devoted to the role of the selfie (Dugan and Laumer, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018) as a means of sharing identity information with others (Souza et al, 2015). Selfies are relevant in the context of this work, not because they are representative of the kinds of practice that typify family photography, but because the existing research conducted on selfies can inform us about the way personal images are shared as a means of both self-expression (sometimes more critically described as a form of narcissism, e.g. Sorokowski et al (2015) and as a means of social engagement (Svelander and Wiberg, 2015) and impression management (McAndrew and Jeong, 2012).

The camera phone has heralded the introduction of the term 'selfie' (Senft and Baym, 2007, p.1588) Clearly selfies represent a new potential addition to snapshot compositions commonly found in traditional printed photo albums. There was a prevalence in the data of parents taking selfies which depicted themselves and a child, often either asleep or engaged in another activity – such as those in Figure 16. This, for instance, took the form of a parent in the driver's seat of a car taking a selfie to include a child (Images D, G and H) or children asleep in the rear of the vehicle. This composition could easily be taken directly without the inclusion of the parent, but the choice is clearly deliberate to include the self within the composition. This alters the composition from a single message ('the children are tired and asleep in the car') to a visual message which conveys something more.

This suggests that the image includes both an expression of parental identity: 'these are my children' but simultaneously that good parenting is occurring ('here they are sleeping while I drive them'). Other examples included a child in the background engaged in their own activity such as playing on the floor, sleeping or drawing. Alternatively, compositions were a form of baby photography with a sleeping infant sat or laid upon the adults' shoulder or lap with the parent's free arm used to lift the camera phone to capture the image (as seen in Images A B, E, F and I). This differed from a further selfie format which captured tightly formed groups of children around a parent's shoulders, knowingly participating in the photo

and looking at the camera phone. Both types of image were evident throughout the dataset.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 16 - Examples of 'Good parenting selfie' images**

## 5.6 Key Themes

The dataset of 4,000 images acquired from Instagram shows that modern forms of sharing can have an impact upon contemporary photographic practice, although many of the (critically unfavourable) traditions of the family snapshot have been maintained. Below the results of this analysis are more broadly interpreted and discussed under three key themes - documentation of the everyday, retention of analogue tropes and the presentation of the 'perfect family'.

### **5.6.1 Retention of Tropes**

This chapter has illustrated the ways in which the established cultural norms are preserved in modern forms of family photography. Family snapshots are illustrative of a desire to evidence good parenting and to appear a respectable, cohesive family unit pictorially.

Parents consciously exclude negative imagery of children and family life, sending a clear photographic message to their audience that all is well and, critically, also lay down a record that offers some reassurance that things are just as they should be. This retains the visual tropes apparent within traditional albums of images functioning as an artificially positive representation of family life. This inheritance of photographic norms results in the form and social function of snapshots of children retaining their visual characteristics overall.

That is, the critiques in literature of the repetitive and inoffensive compositions remains applicable. This retention of the visual cliché provides an explanation for the lack of creative expression found within the family hashtags surveyed. The public sharing of images may bring about an awareness of audience perception and increase the pressure to be seen to be practicing “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996). This may account for the record of the mundane which is recorded and displayed as a demonstration of maternal competence. This positioning of the family snapshot as a means of identity reassurance is, as yet, relatively unexplored.

### **5.6.2 Documenting the Everyday**

As discussed previously, literature on the family snapshot is historically critical of the snapshot as mundane, thematically ordinary and lacking originality in composition and subject matter (Batchen, 2008; Slater, 1995; Langford, 2001). Analysis showed that image sharing on Instagram, arguably, accentuates this.

Traditional family albums would almost universally feature a day out at the beach or the park, with the outing captured as part of the family memory or might feature an “evening in”, with the entire family gathered around a board game. With Instagram, these become still more mundane, an image of an ice-cream cone or a snapshot of a monopoly board with the game in progress. In the data, the capture of everyday trivia can be recognised, and it becomes harder to understand the longer-term value of these images.

The findings suggest that the capabilities and affordances of both smartphones, and social media platforms, such as Instagram, are key facilitators in parental behaviour and practice that adopt photography as an everyday, low key, activity resulting in a process of daily narrative capture. This narrative is thus present in addition to the traditional and familiar snapshot compositions, such as the chocolate covered baby, or holiday beach snap. This represents somewhat of a deviation from previous generations of film-based family photography, in that it results in the formation of a record, containing fine granular detail, of the framing of life as an immediate capture of 'the now'.

The previous parental concern of evidencing and documenting significant or meaningful occasions is still present – however it is now typically harder to discern amongst postings that focus on the mundane and everyday aspects of simply being a parent. The outcome therefore remains unexciting for the audience overall. In keeping with tradition, family snapshots tend to be rather visually bland, but perhaps the goal here is not to entertain but to lay down the 'small stories' of everyday life in order to make sense of what it is to be part of a family. Bamberg and Georgaopoulou (2008, p.378) describe this as a way to deal with the 'identity dilemma' of 'clinging onto the illusion of staying or actually "being" the same through simultaneously changing all the time'. They argue that the small stories of still unfolding events are seemingly uninteresting titbits that can nevertheless help reconcile this sense of staying the same through changing times. For a family, this might be particularly salient.

Whilst technology can provide information and reassurance to new parents (Gibson and Hanson, 2014) it also allows them to evidence that 'intensive parenting' (Hays, 1996) is being practiced (Ennis et al, 2014; Hogan, 2010; Leaver, 2016). By documenting the daily 'instagrammable' moments a sense of continuity becomes more apparent and communicates parental competence.

As a result, the findings reconcile both the record of daily minutiae as a function of Instagram with other findings which suggest that social media can be interpreted as a medium in which primarily the best, most audience pleasing content is shared (Hogan, 2010).

### 5.6.3 The Perfect Family

In this data, there was also an abundance of what might be termed “group shots” within the data set, affirming and demonstrating the relationships between family members. This serves to affirm the prior observations on the family as presented harmoniously; there is no discord or tensions apparent within the images presented. The digital family curation conforms to the same social rules of presenting a united, cheerful façade as its printed predecessor, although it is possible, given the prevalence of shared images on social media, that we are becoming less tolerant of what Zhao and Lindley (2014, p.2437) would call ‘inauthentic history’.

Taken together, the snapshots that represent the ‘good parent selfie’, ‘no harm done’, ‘and ‘step-parenting’ themes show us how many positive images of parenting dominate sharing practices. This firmly supports the accordant present in literature that family photography has never been documentarian, but a selective and biased representation. Whilst family photographic practice itself appears fundamentally unchanged by online sharing, placing it within a public sphere may serve to intensify the perceived social pressure to conduct “intensive mothering” and thus “good mothering”. One should be reminded of Goffman (1971) in this respect: seeing parenting as a performance on Instagram.

In the data, parents can be seen conducting identity work on behalf of both themselves and their child all of which is in keeping with the work on both impression management in social media (Joinson, 2008; Krämer and Winter, 2008; Zappavigna, 2016). However, one should be mindful of the need to keep separate the different elements of self in a ‘faceted’ social media world (Farnham and Churchill, 2011). It is interesting, for example, to contrast the happy, positive images shared on Instagram with the kinds of despair sometimes shown by parents on information sharing sites such as Mumsnet (Gambles, 2010). People feel they can be honest about parenting difficulties on such sites, and yet they can also be very harshly judged – i.e. both the initial postings and the responses can be highly negative (Phillips and Broderick, 2014). Honesty here becomes a social norm, but is supported by the communication being primarily text-based and an interesting issue for future research concerns the extent to which photographic sharing might reduce social authenticity.

It is worth considering the psychological cost of a social media system in which contributors do not show authenticity in their behaviour, i.e. are prone to

present an idealised self. When this happens on Facebook, it can lead to negative affect (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2015; Lee, 2014) and has even been linked to depression (Feinstein et al, 2013). In Instagram sharing, the study findings suggest that the opportunities for making 'upward comparisons' that might adversely affect the wellbeing of the viewer are many, again one might speculate about where the support for struggling families might come from in such a pictorial exchange.

However, as a visual platform Instagram includes the ability to include externally sourced content (visible within this data) confirming that whilst family photographic practice is a medium with strongly inherited tropes and norms, it can be adapted and messages subverted by this additional material. In becoming a social exchange and means of self-expression, the ability to convey frustration or negativity can be projected and displaced with internet culture via memes, visual humour or satire in both pictorial and written form. Thus, Instagram expands the social functionality of photography as a means of identity and role expression, allowing for exploration of problematic and contradictory emotions surrounding parenthood and family life.

## **5.7 Summary**

This chapter has presented a novel combination of visual analysis of Instagram images, against a codebook derived from extensive literature on the family snapshot and traditional family albums. This contributes an approach which has not been applied in this context prior to this work, demonstrating that images retain the key characteristics of family snapshots within family hashtags.

This socio-historical perspective places Instagram within a wider continuum of domestic photographic practice in which previous forms of representation remain influential and evident as image capture technologies become ever more sophisticated. This is supportive of the perspective that photographic practice is inherited social knowledge, as this digital form retains the characteristics of earlier analogue film images.

## **6. (Phase 2) Long-Term Maternal Narrative Building on Instagram**

### **6.1 Overview**

This chapter presents an ethnography focused upon 20 successful Instagram accounts posted by mothers. Building on the previous phase of study, this places images of parenting and childhood within their ongoing narrative contexts. This aimed to address the second research question:

- How do mothers use imagery to construct narratives of parenthood on their Instagram accounts and how do these narratives depict daily maternal lived experience?

Drawing upon daily, vernacular expression of maternal identity, both everyday use of Instagram and expressions of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) are explored.

### **6.2 Deliberate Capture**

Overall, the care and attention paid to the images and styling is one of significance. Early on in conducting the ethnography the professional quality of the images produced became apparent. The mothers frequently appear to use both a combination of camera phone pictures and images produced from DSLR cameras. They show an awareness of the principles and conventions of photography. This includes lighting, with reference to the 'golden hour' (the light quality of the sun in the period before it sets, which is typically golden toned and provides a flattering illumination for photographs) and multiple images utilising it: "A shout out to hubby for helping me find the perfect light tonight for my daily photo" (#004).

This represents not only an advanced level of understanding and digital skill acquisition, but also a substantial amount of labour expended in the production of the accounts. Figure 17 demonstrates the care which is taken in producing the photographs as visual artefacts. These represent careful, deliberate effort to capture images as a conscious practice, as opposed to casual snapshots. There are no flaws which imply 'on the fly' image capture, and which occur as a result of truly casual, spontaneous image taking practice. As such, these accounts collectively present a significant departure from Kodak's original promotion of the family image as unstaged. The casual family snapshot was marketed as directly oppositional to the skills, process, and equipment of the professional studio (Steinorth, 1988, p.29).



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

### Figure 17 - Common composition types

Here, the end result are images which are vibrant and aesthetically engaging as individual photographs. Collectively the images form a modern, minimalistic depiction of parenting as a lifestyle.

Additionally, Figure 17 illustrates the common image compositions which are frequently encountered throughout the data. As highlighted in Chapter 2, analogue family snapshots were frequently critiqued for their formulaic compositions. These visual tropes of framing and subject matter rendered the images as considered “boring and repetitive” (Langford, 2001 p.5).

Image A provides an example of the type of image encountered which encapsulates the deliberate nature of the photographic practice. Russian doll style toys are laid out in a neatly symmetrical arrangement. Clearly conceived, planned and meticulous aligned when laid out, there are no elements which are accidental. There is a deliberate productive impetus to form the image and execute its recording. This intention is most apparent in compositions which do not feature people, due to the degree of control in styling inanimate objects.

Compositionally, none of the images in Figure 17 are representative of the traditional snapshot as marketed by Kodak. This advocated the capture of children and family life within a natural, un-posed setting which promoted the unstructured and casual capture of life (Coe and Gates, 1977, p.47). In contrast, these compositions are more orderly. This can be viewed in meticulous selection of content (as in images A and H), where items are curated and photographed. Alternatively, this deliberate intentionality is visible in posing the individuals (images B, C, D, E and G) or by staging the capture by utilising equipment specifically for the given environment (as in images F, H and I). These capture photographs underwater, using a stabilising tripod, and using a stepladder to capture the scene from above. These are conscious capturing and recording of the scenes contained within the images.

Image H provides a thematic variant on the types of staged, created imagery within the feeds. Whilst reminiscent of a magazine or marketing image composition, this image displays both an understanding and execution of depth of field. This results in the cocktail glass in centre of the image in sharp focus, with the background discernible but artistically blurred. Whilst camera phones (and post-production editing in Photoshop can create an effect reminiscent of shallow depth of field) can autofocus on one aspect of an image, it is more likely this was captured using a DSLR camera given the clarity of the effect. This level of photographic knowledge and execution extends beyond that of the average camera phone user.

Image J becomes an unintended act of self-reflection, in which the tripod set up to capture images as an invisible piece of equipment becomes part of an image.

When it captured the attention of the infant, it becomes visible as a prop in an unplanned shot. It is, in essence a form of behind the scenes, backstage image. The use of staging and props is common. Even in Image C, if the composition had developed organically through a process of 'family time' and evolved into an idea for an image – the incidental elements of all the children having matching pyjamas stylistically suggest something to an 'ordinary' maternal reading. Aspiration and an elevated lifestyle are subtly implied. These are derived from understandings of the likelihood of multiple sets of coordinated pyjamas being owned, laundered, and agreed to be worn by all four children simultaneously without dissent. Whilst it makes for an appealing image, there is a recognisability that this is not fully a portrait of the ordinary. It is a photogenic display of beautified familial harmony and not a true snapshot in the traditional sense. Whilst family photography has always been a selective representation of family, it is the visual quality and aesthetic which is specifically divergent in this context.

Images D and G highlight a highly common composition type. A single child is posed against a wall, typically outdoors and facing the camera directly. Whilst often captioned as part of a daily narrative suggesting 'we are doing X activity' or linked to it being a particular day of the week, these visually combine as an ongoing showcase of the child(ren). In these examples, Image G represents a day out involving a short haul flight and forms part of a documentary of various stages of the day. The airport background 'themes' the portrait, situating the child within their travel context at this point.

Image D represents a deliberate, ongoing capture which replicates variations of this composition regularly. The background and attire on the child alter for each iteration of the same composition. This forms a show reel of outfits, which are consistently well put together and coordinated.

Image B displays a common image type in other communities on Instagram. A staple feature within fashion and lifestyle accounts are OOTDs (outfit of the day) (Marwick, 2015). The image elements here are selected for visual impact. The co-ordination of the shade of pink coat to match the balloon, which is tonally coordinated with the shoes demonstrates the care and attention which was directed into the outfit. The use of colour very often suggests that an ensemble has been carefully planned with the contrast, tones and palette selected for visual cohesion or impact. Again, there is strong sense of deliberate intention and directed effort in selecting with aesthetics in mind.

The narratives are not incidentally presented within a visual medium, they are highly tailored towards being inherently visual in nature. This effort to plan and photograph regularly – with a small child (or multiple children) to care for – is recognisable to the average mother as unsustainable in resources, time, and energy to devote to a practice which is not contributing towards an immediately practical purpose. Image B, for example, relies on the popular background scenery of locating a well-lit, appealing outdoor wall scene and essentially staging an individual photoshoot. These are not convenience staging; nowhere in this data is there an unappealing wall. There is no pebbledash, unfashionable or outdated wallpaper, dirty concrete or (ugly, non-artistic) graffiti visible.

### **6.3 Aestheticisation**

The presentation of family life as both beautified and as aspirational can be considered a process of aestheticisation. Within the data there are considered depictions across three main areas: people, interiors and lifestyle. These all present visually engaging depictions of the lived experience of mothering, across a range of image contexts.

#### **6.3.1 Interiors**

In terms of personal expression of an aesthetic identity, there is strong evidence that this underpins the persona of certain accounts. User #001, for example, provides a name and self identifies as “modern vintage” as a theme for her blog and places her long-term home renovation as central to her practice and self-expression. This is delivered in a manner which communicates a uniquely middle-class lifestyle (a term she associated with herself as a persona and her content, directly). The locality is identified - and thus is identifiable as a gentrified area, but also communicates that the house was purchased as a project to modernise and renovate. Within this context, aesthetics are representative not only of wealth, but of taste and identity expression. Additionally, on Instagram it suggests an openness about a financially privileged status without money ever being explicitly mentioned by name or detailed. Access to resources and beautiful homes is demonstrated – but also time to engage in photographing and documenting it.

There is a key point here on aesthetic content representing a number of issues converging related to audience perception, consumerism, aspiration, and

authenticity. The complexity of photographic images as socially produced artefacts both in production and consumption, is highlighted in this context in particular.

Across multiple accounts there is a common aspect of the importance and priority afforded to aesthetics which is not sacrificed for having young children. In reviewing the images collectively it becomes apparent that childhood detritus is not documented in an ordinary way. Figure 18 represents images of domesticity which appear to enact an erasure (or absence) of the lived 'messiness' of the family sphere.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D

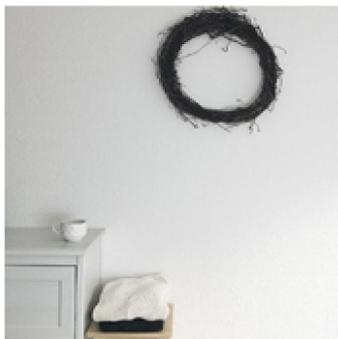


Image E



Image F



Image G

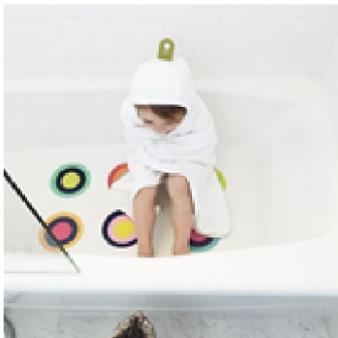


Image H



Image I

**Figure 18 - Domestic scenes**

Within these images of home, there is not a single incidence of what could be termed 'clutter'. Where ornamental items appear, these are carefully arranged and orderly. There is no visual evidence of children modifying the environment with equipment, safety features or shaping the domestic scenes. Whilst images A, H, and I contain children, these are placed within pristine homes.

The environments appear as show homes may be marketed in brochures, with tasteful interiors which do not convey a significant air of being lived in. Within these scenes people are situated physically, but they have little grounding to the scenes to connect the home to the families. This is typified by image A in which there is nothing personal on display to convey - if the audience wasn't informed by familiarity with the account - that this is the family home of the mother and daughter photographed. There is nothing apparent to denote there are multiple children (or indeed any occupants at all) residing in this dwelling full time. That is, the children lack an air of embeddedness within the snapshots. Homes as comfortable places to relax among familiar possessions and the material hubris of family life are visually absent here.

The only visual concession to childhood is the anti-slip bath insert in image H. Even within this image, whilst artful with the contrasting colours of the mat against the brilliant white surroundings, it is perhaps notable from a parental perspective there is no external bathmat or duckboard on the floor to collect water when the child exits the bath itself. The practical eye of parenthood again influences the perception of the images as slightly 'otherly' to the reality of everyday family life.

There is an obvious leaning towards brilliant white and cream tones for the domestic scenes. These are uniformly pristine and do not depict any visual sense of wear and tear. In fact, the images without children in particular convey a sense of stillness and calm. Image D, in particular, bears a resemblance to an artwork as a composition which captures a still life of the flowers. These vignettes of domesticity, are not particularly domestic, in a practical sense. Resembling editorial staging of homes, art galleries or marketing materials for lifestyle products there is little evidence of the daily routines of childcare.

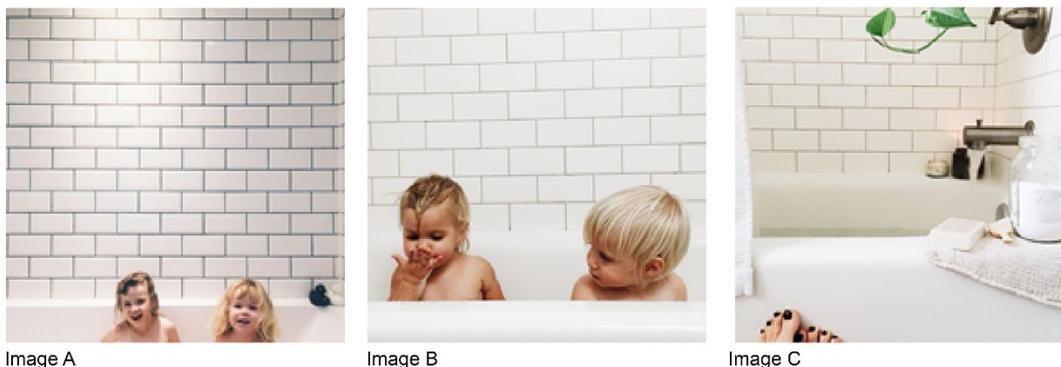
Image G extends this to the outdoors, where even gardens are pristine. Untouched by sandpits, swings, slides, ride on toys or playhouses, this is shown as an adult appropriate space.

Image F, for a home with a mobile and clearly active young toddler depicts both floor level plants and a stove with no guard or surround. Visually there is no concession to the practical lived reality of spilled soil or the infant compulsion to

place every object in their mouth. Not a single image here contains elements of the often ugly, but practical array of items required to meet the basic needs and safety of the very young. Visually there is no sense of pervasive nature of raising small children as all-consuming in most areas of life. These mothers are not harried, do not appear exhausted, and there is no sense of chaos or loss of control in the face of parenthood, within the environments.

Either visual intrusions are removed for image capture (thus the images are more highly staged than is discernible to audiences and the effort considerable), carefully framed compositions to exclude them from view, or the detritus of child rearing is carefully contained and confined from view. This effort to retain control over the domestic sphere as beautified and pristine is considerable in either scenario.

The ability to consider appearance is one which is afforded by resources and exceeds things simply having necessary function. It also provides a level of aspiration to the images, despite the mundane scenes sometimes featured they are situated within aesthetically considered lives. As a result of this conformity to current fashion and prevailing trends, some images, whilst from different accounts have a striking similarity. This is demonstrated below in Figure 19, which depicts the bathrooms from different families and different accounts. Not only does this show the prevailing trend in interiors, but again highlights the emergence of tropes within the data set on compositions and framing.



**Figure 19 - Similarity in interior imagery**

### **6.3.1.1 Play**

Toys are typically tasteful and carefully chosen, but rarely visible. There is no sense of childhood being characterised by large numbers of plastic toys in loud

primary colours which take up a significant amount of space and garner attention. Even equipment – when rarely glimpsed – such as highchairs, are muted and minimalistic. This is aspirational, where lives are beautiful and curated with a high level of emotional (and literal) labour invested in creating an environment which reflects this. Infants appear to fit into this aesthetic instead of diluting or disrupting it.

Play here is presented with the impression it is neat and contained. Children, as demonstrated in Figure 20 below, are presented playing with a limited number of items, calmly. There is no evidence of play as ongoing with previous activities on display that have been moved on from. Even play is depicted as artful and minimalistic, not sprawling, creative, messy or chaotic.



Image A

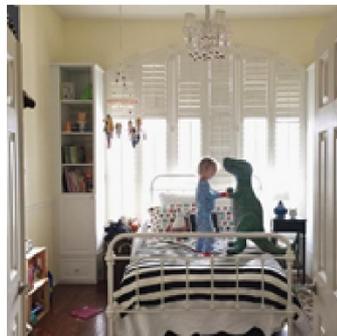


Image B



Image C



Image D

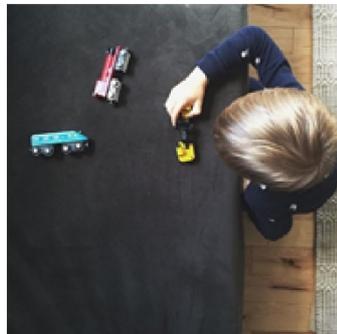


Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 20 - Images of play**

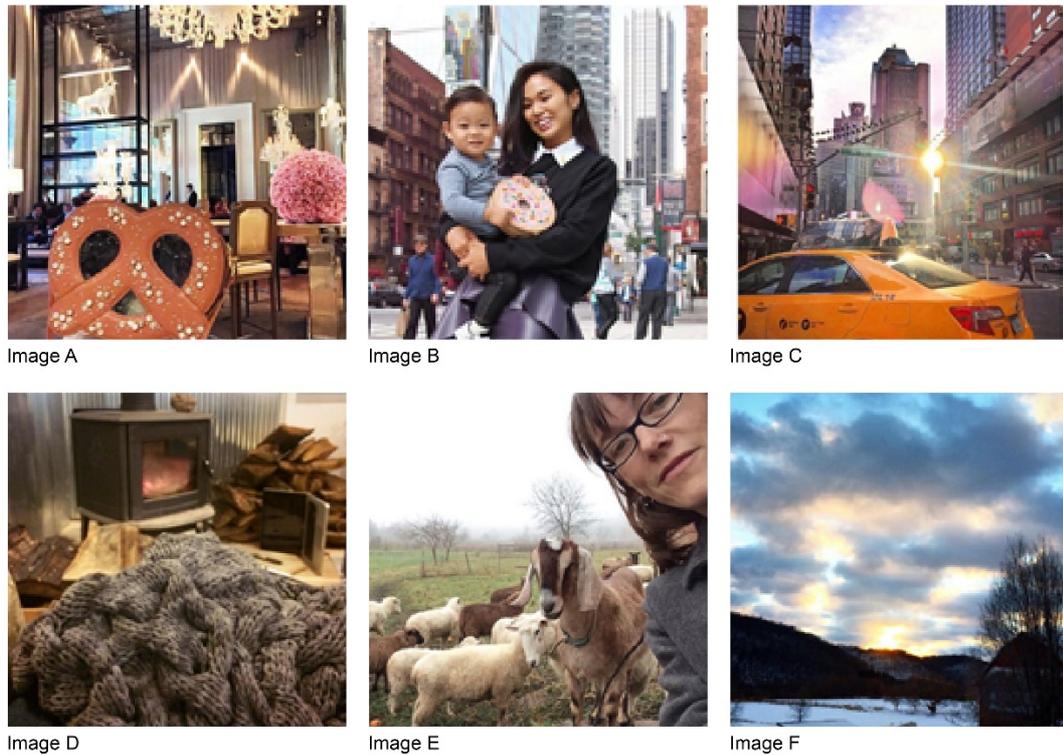
Image B portrays playful activity but within a pristine bedroom. There is no evidence of this activity as boisterous – in fact there is very little inclusion of toys for the suggestion these are children playing.

This minimalistic play takes place in front of ubiquitous, pristine white walls, with natural wood tones for flooring and furniture. In these accounts the children are centred both visually and sentimentally. However, in the presentation as being aesthetically appealing and the images as perfected reality, there is a quality of discipline in containing parenting into acceptable, relentlessly tidy, forms. The overall visual quality is high quality, but the consistently pristine nature of the homes and daily scenes renders them as artistic representations of normality. This may in fact account for their popularity: they are consumed by audiences as something more aspirational and editorial than simple narratives of realism.

### **6.3.2 Depictions of Mothers**

There was a significant amount of detail to be read in the personal appearance of the mothers. This was not only linked to brands visible, but in sartorial and personal appearance and personal signifiers, i.e. tattoos, jewellery and visible adherence to fashion trends. For example, #018 lives on a remote farmstead smallholding and is involved in daily animal care routines and physical labour. Attire within this context is based on practicality. In contrast #013 resides in New York, dividing her time between there and her native South Korea. Whilst contrasting the rural to the urban, the expected differences are apparent but contain interesting nuances. The rural abode is based on classic American folk styling and crafts - quilt making, baking pumpkin pie and integrates Native American motifs into crafts. What #013 introduces is cultural reference of contemporary Korean pop culture and beauty ideals. Asian culture places a value on 'kawaii' - small, cute, brightly coloured and often kitsch styling of objects (Cheok and Fernando, 2012). This includes producing common, everyday items in novelty forms. Both the women have businesses with product lines aligned with their locality, aesthetic and persona - one a range of handmade organic skincare products and the other a range of premium novelty handbags shaped like common food items, such as pretzels (despite the novelty these are not throwaway items costing around three hundred US dollars per bag).

In essence these examples typify the generation of a sense of self by combining a range of social, cultural and individual factors into an identity conveyed via the resultant images. This contrast is shown in Figure 21 below. The image styles and compositions closely align; however, the content is highly tailored towards a particular lifestyle and aesthetic.



**Figure 21 - Comparison of image compositions across two mothers**

As matched pairs, Images A and D present images which as compositions and framing, perform identical functions despite the difference between the accounts. Both images present a grounding visual element at the bottom of the image (a knitted blanket, versus a novelty handbag). These elements ground the individual within the larger scene which forms the background of the image. In image A this is high class New York restaurant, complete with a significant chandelier and spotlighting against an opulent dining space. In contrast, Image D provides the same information to 'read' the scene. Light is provided from the glow of a wood burner, with the wood pile visible. Immediately the small scale, rustic nature of the environment is conveyed.

The use of light and environment is replicated in image pair C and F. The quality of light through the clouds over the rural landscape is the main image

feature. This places the weight of focus at the top of the image at the sky; this is the identical feature and draw of image C. However, here the light is between buildings on a cityscape and in place of mountains to shape the lower image, it is the silhouette of a New York cab. The recurrence of iterations of the same image, 'themed' by the account holder is replicated across the accounts. The examples here provide the highest contrast between account lifestyle in the city in contrast to the rural idyll.

Images frequently demonstrate the daily narrative of 'doing'. Images B and E contextualise this doing within a place. The care in appearance in image B, pictured against the urban environment suggests a modern, fashionable mother. It can be read that appearance matters to the mother in the top row of images. Image E is equally overt in asserting place, and as a value indicator. Both images use the background as key in communicating how they view their own lifestyle and sense of identity. However, in E this is a renewed visual importance of the features of smallholding life, namely animals and their care. The mother here deliberately includes the goats as taking up the majority of the composition, with her included enough to suggest 'I am here with my livestock'. This serves a similar record of what is important, and due diligence in being responsible, as the maternal selfies identified in section 5.4.3

Intensive motherhood recorded pictorially extends not only the labour required towards maintaining the appearance of the domestic space, but also the self. Whilst it would be expected that the appearance and outfits of children would be perceived (and interpreted by others) as evidence of intensive parenthood, the mothers would have been less visible in traditional albums. When captured in informal analogue snapshots, mothers typically appear ordinary, with their resources and care directed into their offspring (as described by Hays (1996)). Here, the mothers are conspicuously visible. The accounts are controlled, created and shared by the mothers who have control over their own presentation of self.

Even pregnancy becomes part of an aesthetic narrative. The visual presentation and style does not alter or significantly deviate in the images, as seen below in Figure 22. Stylistically the images remain the same, and equally as deliberate and considered. Here, even pregnancy is a glamorous state in which aesthetics are not temporarily side-lined or abandoned. The image is again a simple composition which reoccurs through the feed in varying iterations of outfit and location.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

## Figure 22 - Iterations of compositional form

This public presentation results in image types which deviate from the traditional images of motherhood in family albums. This is both in terms of individual image compositions, but also in their repetition as ongoing variations of the same image which form a series of portraits. These often feature the mother alone (but not exclusively). Posed, and deliberately captured – these are again not spontaneous, casual snaps – they act as a showcase of personal style and appearance. The images are a regular feature in one of the mother's feeds. Whilst some of the images do feature her son, the function of these images does not appear to be primarily one which communicates maternal labour or bonding, in

contrast to the mother-child portraits (as seen in Figure 29, later in this chapter). These photographs depict the mother as stylish, glamorous and fashionable even as she carries out mothering. This extends the labour of 'doing motherhood' into appearing as equally well resourced, calm and well put together as the ideology of intensive motherhood required children to appear in public.

### **6.3.3 Depictions of Children**

Unfailingly there are multiple instances on every account of children being described as "cute" but also the terms gorgeous, beautiful and precious appear with extreme regularity. There is a spread of lesser commonly invoked terms such as: adorable, "cherub" (in reference to #004s own child), "little poppets" (#006) or "darlings". Followers also comment with observations that children have grown or are "looking so grown up!". This is often an addendum to an exclamation about the cuteness of a child.

There is a significant commentary on the outfits children are dressed in, which are included in expressions of them being cute. As seen below in Figure 23 outfits are frequently in monochrome colour palettes, with a high frequency of stripes and bold prints. As such, these outfits are very modern, with a move towards a more bold and gender neutral palette than was traditionally apparent on children's clothing as a highly gendered product type.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 23 - Children's outfits**

### 6.3.4 Place and Nature

A sense of place is communicated in a few instances, and in these cases is of particular significance to the mother. #001 moved to a city in the South West of England with her husband, where they purchased a dilapidated house as a long-term restoration project into a family home. The locality is used as a backdrop for staged photos and is openly shared, with an affinity and fondness for the city appreciable. #013 uses New York City as her backdrop for images and communicates her love for residing there and participating in iconic city life, documenting life in recognisable visual tropes, yellow cabs, central park, hot dogs, eateries and the view from the top of the World Trade Centre Memorial Tower. Variants of this show a connection with nature and the landscape as opposed to a given place specifically - both #018 and #008 demonstrate strong connections with their vistas and outdoors, rural environment and scenery.

Wider networks of support and family are also strikingly absent from the images. As such the families appear in some cases geographically embedded in their localities. However, this is a link to place and not communities. The accounts are ongoing portraits of individual families and their lives. The focus is introspective and intensely people focused on its members (as opposed to others).

What do appear are images which have come to be understood as very 'Instagrammable' vistas. There are typically photogenic scenes of nature and the outdoors. Typically well-lit and sunny - or featuring dramatic weather such as heavy snow - they serve to demonstrate both freedom and connections to nature. As seen below (Figure 24), rustic retreat is conveyed by images such as sitting by a fireside (Image A), cabin living (Image B) and scenery free from people or urban infrastructure (Images C, E, F). Here the natural world, seasons and weather dominate and frame the photographs, such as the frozen trees in photograph D and dramatic sky captured in Image E. This access to beauty becomes linked to the aspirational lifestyle.



Image A



Image B



Image C

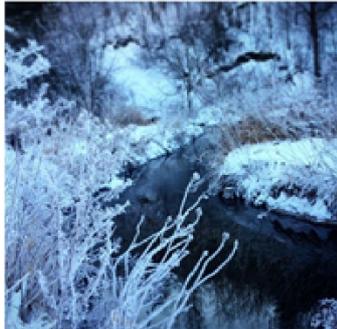


Image D



Image E



Image F

### Figure 24 - Outdoor scenery

In this family lifestyle there is both free time and the resources to go and relax at idyllic locations, where happy family days out happen. In none of these scenarios does the reality of squabbling children, carsickness or mishap become relevant. The audience read the images and reflect back the successful projection of unity and oneness. On her travel diary #003 says

We've had lots of rain and wet clothes with no chance to dry them, and our camper van smells a bit like mildew, and there is sand in our sheets, and we haven't showered in days. But...I wouldn't swap this for anything or anywhere else in the world. Spending all day everyday with these five adventurous people makes me happier than anything else. This is all that matters, this little family of mine in this big, beautiful world [star emoji]

Posts are repeatedly framed in terms of children and family as a lens which renders life experience as positive and wonderful. A follower mirrors this back at the mother, commenting that "all your photos are so lovely to look at but what stands out for me in all of these pictures is love [two heart emoji]".

There is a value placed upon making memories and family as equally important as formal education structures. Several mothers openly state they have let their child miss school to go on an outing with them or participate in home

schooling. This is met with the prevailing attitude that “making memories” is of value and there is no harm in missing education or associated socialisation. These are framed as adventures, with their own value attached. One mother documents her day out with her child, posting images as they take a (sponsored) short haul flight to another city for the day and participate in activities there. This sun-drenched quality time is again projecting an image of the happy, carefree family engaged in activities together which are treasured by all.

There is a contrasting lifestyle choice visible. The introspective nature of the accounts generally is tempered by the extreme levels of togetherness and aspirational nature of the lifestyles displayed. This is frequently glossy, and with an implied value on having a beautiful home, family and lifestyle. However, carried to the extreme these characteristics take on a new character. There was a distinct air of isolation to several accounts which home educate their children. These aligned typically with an alternate value system which promoted nature, natural living and ecological concerns. None were suburban and were extremely rural, isolated localities. There was no evidence of regular play with others, regular time without parental supervision or easy accessibility to friends (or outside resources) in person. This setting appears to further reduce the capacity of the children to be independent (one account features older, preteen children) as there is no easy access to other locations such as libraries. This remoteness is framed as precious time together and asserts the need for children to live simple, free lives. It still seeks to present an idyllic lifestyle, but the focus of the idyll is somewhat modified in this lifestyle.

However, whilst different to the consumerist lifestyles, this is in itself a Haysian (1996) form of parenthood. This intensifies doing parenthood into the role of educator. This takes on additional labour which is traditionally the responsibility of professionals and outside the parental scope. It is clearly the maternal figure who is pictured as undertaking the daily work of acting as educator and carries out the practical daily labour associated with this endeavour, within these accounts. The mothers here who undertook this work did so as the main educator, with a husband who worked outside the home and had little involvement in the daily reality or labour.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D

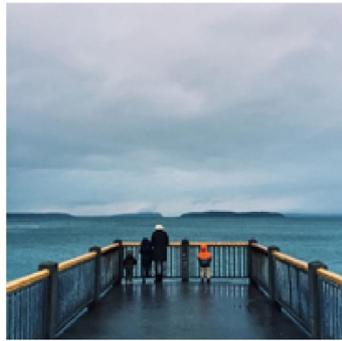


Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

### Figure 25 - Nature and the environment

Images A, B and D demonstrate the presentation of children within a rural environment. Wider scenery illustrates the rurality, and continually reinforced the insolation when visually reiterated across the accounts in the long term. Images F and G represent portraits which are strongly linked to 'child within place' where the environmental context and background are the key to interpretation for the audience.

Images G, E and I as compositions reflect the framing of figures within the image by a large expanse of sky. Thus, these portraits are wider shots when compared to the those where the focus is on people, which tightens the frame to hone the attention onto the face and form of the individuals captured.

Images C and H combine both depictions of the rural landscape with framing of the idyllic, harmonious family unit.

#### 6.4 People and Sentimentality in Image Taking Practice

The link between family, sentimentality and photography is close, with the practice invoked and reflected upon as one which is tied up with familial belonging and identity work. One biography on Instagram describes taking pictures as done “with my camera and with my heart” (as seen in Figure 26). Another (#005) on her blog biography, linked directly from her Instagram profile states she is “an obsessed photo taker of her twins”. Another mother actively frames her family photographs as objects of sentiment for the future, taking family images on a monthly basis and outlining she does this specifically in order to look back on them later.

writer, mother. I take a lot of pictures, with my camera and with my heart. Author of New York Times Bestselling [REDACTED]  
More: [REDACTED]

**Figure 26 - Instagram biographic text example**

Participant #011 demonstrated a similar attitude but frames the images as a legacy for her infant when he is older, to look back on, rather than as for herself. In a post reflecting on her visual practice as part of false ideals and narratives on show via Instagram, (i.e. perfected and with a beautiful life, but simultaneously also appearing ‘real’ and authentic) she was challenged by a follower. The interaction questioned that if she felt this pressure and on some level objects, then why does she participate in something potentially problematic? Her response framed that she has an issue with the politics and not the images themselves. She simultaneously highlights that she enjoys it as a hobby activity which generates “pretty” images which she can display. She links back to this a few posts later, asserting that she believes that the early years of childhood represent the “best years of our [her and her husband, with their infant son] lives”.

Whilst traditional snapshots typically required someone to operate the shutter (or at least set a timer and then place themselves into the frame) this very often resulted in a parent being missing from the images. In using a tripod and remote shutter control with a DSLR camera one mother states that she deliberately

makes an effort to stage shots which include her spending time with her children so that this is not invisible. This links back to the performative element of mothering when documented intensively and publicly. It is no longer enough to know that she plays with her children, this is documented and evidenced to substantiate the all-consuming nature of doing motherhood. This record acts as a means of communicating the demands of intensive motherhood are being met and evidenced. In recording it, she prevents her interaction with them from being without any pictorial evidence (#014). Another mother draws the same comparison, stating

Lucky for a hubby and friends who take a pretty decent pic and are happy to help me preserve motherhood moments with me in them. If you don't have that, try using yourself timer though! We do that too sometimes and it's a great way to be in the shot-- something you and your kids will love someday!"

Within the data, the images of children are presented as conforming to the presentation of family life as a happy experience, with no discord or conflict. Figure 27 presents a selection of portraits which typify the imagery encountered.

Images A and D present examples of how familial harmony is typically depicted within the images. Images which feature siblings (either of differing ages, or in the case of image A, twins) show them physically close, engaged in the same activity, and smiling. No images – or indeed references in the captions – refer to sibling rivalry, argument or tension. This maintains the observation of Boerdam and Martinius (1980, p.103) that family snapshot images are “uncomplicated” moments which are equally as defined by what is missing and not included, as what is.

Images C, G and I, also bear a resemblance to traditionally encountered snapshot of babies/toddlers as laughing, contented and cute. Here the children are clearly healthy, cared for and contented. They are responding positively to their photograph being taken.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

### Figure 27 - Happy, photogenic children

Image E extends this, capturing a moment of domestic happiness which includes both mother and child, following a swimming activity. This dually evidences not only that the narrative of family is idealised emotionally, but acts as a piece of evidence that intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) is being enacted. The mother has taken her child out to an activity, and documents the moment with the child, demonstrating her focus as child-centred.

As a similar activity, image D not only depicts happy siblings, but highlights the multiple messages given off to an audience – the children are clearly outside and depicted frolicking in leaves in a natural setting. As discussed later in this

chapter, there is a particular framing and value attached to the natural world as acting to counteract modern, technologic lifestyles.

Images B, F and H represent a recurrent style of portraiture in which children are both happy, but also represent 'cute' images frequently. These are either due to the pose or stance of the child (for example, the child's hand by his face in image H) or by their outfit or costume. Image F is broadly framed by the wide smile on the girl's face, but also as a composition by her sun hat as a dominant feature in the image. There is a strong mix again, of the care and prominence given to aesthetics, which aligns with sentimentality. Not only are the images of children visibly smiling or laughing, but they do so in outfits and settings which are attractive and appealing.

Image B demonstrated that this care given to items as being fashionable, hip and attractive is not more acutely focused on girls. Here the boy has matching wellies and a striking red rain coat. The details of the oversized coat requiring the sleeves to be rolled up, combined with his obviously pleased expression combine to form an overall reading of the image as what audiences refer to as "adorable". These images are equally as aesthetically considered regardless on the gender of the child (although the responses are gendered in boys being handsome and girls gorgeous or pretty, for example).

#### **6.4.1 No Harm Done**

A strong trope from printed albums – and established in Chapter 5 as remaining identifiable on Instagram – is that of the omission of negative images. Even in these account contexts, the only exceptions encountered were #012 posting about her child falling out of an upper bunk bed and injuring themselves enough to warrant considering whether to go to A&E. However, in typical presentation, this information is conveyed as a caption to an image the next day where the child is pictured smiling, with no obvious signs of visible harm or injury (Chalfen, 1987, p.78).

The same is noted with another account (#013) where a happy toddler is pictured but the caption reveals he threw up copiously in the taxi en-route. #005 recounts her own response, turning the account of her child falling off a log and scraping their face into a humorous anecdote at her own expense. She details how in the aftermath she cried because the child cried and she gave them

chocolate in order to stop them crying so that she would too. Again, the child is pictured before the event, stood on the log and happy with the actual incident (or aftermath) not displayed.



**Figure 28 -'No harm done'**

The overall tone becomes a light-hearted recounting of a minor mishap of parental experience with no lasting or significant consequences.

What does appear to generate a visceral response from followers is the elicitation of disgust. There is a strongly worded set of comments to a set of images recording a home water birth. The mother's older daughter - around 5 - was present in the pool during the process. This provoked a range of negative follower comments which implied that 'no harm done' (Chalfen, 1987, p.78) had been breached by exposing the child to blood and the birth process. Other comments were quite hostile in tone, which appears to be viewed as proportionate to the degree of perceived social transgression documented - for example, "WTF - gross!" or "Why would you let your kid see this?" The mother herself asserts that birth is beautiful and women ought to have the process demystified so they are not frightened of it. This account had an unmarked link in their Instagram biography, which when followed opened and auto-played a YouTube video of the water-birth.

### 6.4.2 Mother-Child Portraits

Within the images of mothers and their children, as seen below in Figure 29, the trend of relationships being depicted as conflict free, and unambivalently positive is also observable. This aligns with the assertion of Hays (1996) that the domestic currency is one of love (combined with intensive resourcing and attention).



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 29 - Mother and child portraits**

The images share a composition in which mothers and their children are physically close, facing to face and are focused on each other. Even image E, in which the infant stares at the camera, is focused upon his mother's outstretched arm to take the selfie of her holding her baby. The proximity implies a positive, well

bonded relationship between mother and child, when these images form a pattern of ongoing positive depiction. These compositions are supported by language which described motherhood in idealised terms of being “blessed” or “so lucky” with children described in glowing terms as delightful. The typicality of terrible twos, phases of challenging behaviour or upheaval due to life events are absent either pictorially or linguistically.

Images A, C and D demonstrate a form of visual mirroring frequently encountered. Elements of the image in clothing, posture or body language are replicated between mother and child. Within image A, the outfits of mother and child are thematically aligned in tonally similar, textured winter jumpers. Image C is a variant on the face to face pose, with mother and child both in woolly hats. The pose places them at nearly equivalent eye level, suggesting a harmonious, close interaction. This visual ‘togetherness’ is reflected within image D by the pyjama/lounge wear outfit of both mother and infant.

The children are positioned in parallel to the mothers, whether sitting, standing or laying down. These photogenic depictions of momentary interactions between the mothers and their children, when posted repeatedly, build a perception of the parental relationship. This characterises the relationship as close, uncomplicated and positive. The relationships are affectionate and thus ultimately rewarding and fulfilling. Here, the intensive nature of Hays (1996) ideology of parenting is not only carried out, but the depiction is that this all-consuming role is in fact an emotionally fulfilling lifestyle.

### **6.4.3 Familial Harmony**

Snapping this picture today made the word "grateful" resonate so deeply with me. Being a parent means that your life is part chaos and part bliss, and today was one of those rare days when things just flowed and fell into place. (#017)

Overall there was an overt and hyperbolic representation of family dynamics. The mothers presented not only idealised depictions of motherhood which centre upon their children being virtuous, but this was extended towards husbands. This traditional family structure not only positions the mothers as lucky to be parents, but also as being “blessed” to have husbands whom are described in wholly positive terms.

Followers respond positively to these representations, and despite the highly sentimentalised and saccharine nature of descriptions reflect back a perceived authenticity of these statements. This frequently takes a variant of the structure 'I love your posts. You're so honest about being a mum and [child] is so cute!' Thus, the visuals themselves possess a perfected, aspirational quality, and the mothers humanise themselves with disclosures. The images serve to create a beautified reality. Put another way - the images themselves do not serve to act as depictions of a complicated lived experience of parenthood. Any break from the perfected, controlled lifestyle of parenthood is done via textual expression.

Empathy and rapport are established by voicing how grateful and "blessed" they are to have these lifestyles and resources - despite their flaws as a parent. This tempers the relentless presentation of an aestheticized life and thus the mothers do not appear aloof. This reconciles the paradox of the mother's posts both expressing "perfect" lives and simultaneously Instagram placing a status on the authentic.

In a sense this places the maternal posts which initially seem to be confiding and unburdening about struggles, in a different light. Whilst they are met with support from the body of followers - they may not actively constitute support seeking as it has traditionally been described in terms of negotiating the transition to parenthood or using social media. The post below (Figure 30) manages to typify not only what Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.32) would refer to as "seasonal conformism" by taking an appropriate photo to record a holiday, but combines it with an extensive expression of being grateful for what she has. Outlining her status professionally and personally (extensive), the endeavours are framed within the ultimate subjugation to her maternal role.



**Figure 30 - Seasonal sentiment**

As touched upon earlier in this chapter, the mothers present an idealised and perfected family utopia. Any discord is presented as a personal failing on the part of the mother. Getting frustrated or experiencing the maternal role as all consuming - but struggling with this in place of revelling in it - is positioned as being a “bad mummy”, as seen in the caption in Figure 31.

Experiencing tension in this identity and exploring its manifestation can only be carried out with due notation that is the mothers experience alone and not a reflection on wider family harmony and stability. #004 says on business trips: “my favourite bit of travelling for work is the quiet moments in-between. I miss my family but I appreciate the quiet and the selfishness of not having anyone need me”. The hubris of family life has been escaped via a legitimate means (work) as opposed to a less acceptable personal break (holiday) and therefore is not through a personal choice. Yet it is introduced in a self-deprecating manner. In everyday life, failings are posted as a near confessional tone:



**Figure 31 - 'Bad mummy' verbalisation**

This gratefulness extends to the portrayal of husbands. The mothers are documenting their status as married, indicating this information is something of value to convey. It also provides evidence of status, establishing their family structure as traditionally nuclear. However, husbands are mostly invisible, rarely featuring in the photographs. Whilst this may be accounted for their full-time work (several work away for prolonged periods in a range of roles: the military, producing televised sports, a photographer and unspecified roles with shorter business trips) this does not fully account for their visual absence.

Even when present for evenings and weekends, the men do not appear as a supporting featured cast in these periods when their presence would be expected. They feature in days outside of the home - the beach, a farm or a road trip. In a domestic setting however, they remain strikingly invisible. #015 posted an image of her husband vacuuming their living room in an act of evidencing his practical support following the birth of their second baby. This is the only image which features a man engaged in any domestic chore or practical aspects of childcare.



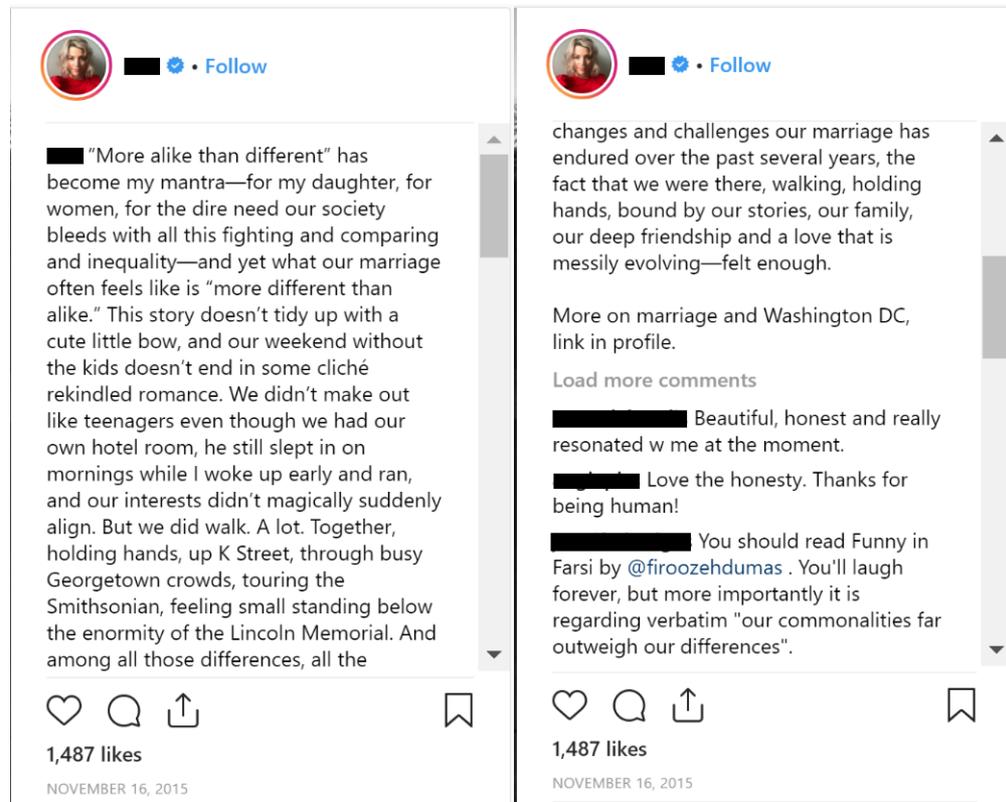
**Figure 32 - Token male domestic contribution**

Any mention of them doing so in written form is inextricably linked to their role in helping to support a mother if she was tired from caring for children, or the children were sick, for example. This contribution is required in order to present the mother as part of an idealised nuclear family unit. This is the idealised, stable and all supporting family structure. However, to provide too much coverage of fathers would work counter to presenting intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996). To be enacted as an all-consuming role and central to the mother's identities, they must retain the majority burden of 'doing' parenthood. The fathers are a supporting cast, to be applauded for their effort but remaining tokenistic.

The only image of her home environment posted by #013 features her husband giving their toddler a pony ride on his back in their apartment living room. Their absence in pictorial representation is contrasting to the caption texts where they are described as both virtuous in their own right and affirming how "lucky" the mothers are to have them in their lives. #020 groups her husband in with their three daughters saying of them collectively "Everything I do, I do for these four". #014 states in a post about her wedding anniversary that "you and the boys are my world". The family is presented as unilaterally harmonious, both across parent-parent relationships and parent-child relationships.

Verbalisation of this unity is often prompted by an anniversary or support provided through a taxing situation. This is marked by a post and accompanied by a descriptor which provides a positive picture of their partner. What is missing is any reflection of the opposite: negative representation is wholly absent. Arguments, bad patches, infidelity, and personal failings are absent despite the statistical likelihood they must be present in some form in real lives. The closest any commentary

comes to addressing that marriage is not inherently plain sailing, is #007. On marriage she posts:



**Figure 33 - #007 on marriage**

Even Figure 33, as a disclosure reads as a micro-narrative that is resolved. It communicates that this is not perfect, but it is authentic, and ultimately stable - and enduring. It does not serve to disclose marital disharmony or the prospect of marital breakdown – in fact it serves to do the opposite. It resonates as authentic with the audience, whilst resolving the issues neatly as not threatening to the family structure overall. One follower says in response that being married is “fucking hard work” and that they are now divorced because they could not sustain the efforts.

In expressing the closeness of the family unit, there is dearth of placing these families within wider communities or networks of support. The feeds are highly concentrated studies on looking inwards. Looking at the Instagram images there is little sense of wider horizons and belonging to larger, complex groups within society. There is passing mention of participation in Church social occasions by #020. Several mothers mention friends, and two of the mothers post pictures of family friends, one on a day at the beach and another with friends visiting their

house for New Year's Eve. Aside from this, there is mention of participation in cafe culture with other mothers of young children, but this is scant and not a common feature. The labour of the mother is central to the accounts, even when the accounts provide a mixed blend of identity expression (mother, professional, wife) there remains a sense of these accounts being very inward facing.

The representation of children as part of idealised families was particularly strong. This was evident both across the content posted about children by the mothers, but equally as strongly was reflected back by the followers. This led to a consistently amped up and saccharine quality to the exchanges about childhood as a concept, but was particularly focused on the children as individual beings. The representation was the strongest verbal theme encountered and one which permeated across all the accounts profiled, and all the supplementary blogs, biographies and interactional stances.

The written posts about children, can appear, to an outsider of the community as performative doting. For example, on a birthday picture of a small child, the caption alters the focus of attention not on the child but back on to the mother:



**Figure 34 - Maternal expression of gratefulness**

This linguistically adopts a dual voice, in speaking for the child in the image, then subsequently as herself. The positionality of the child making her a mother is peculiar, embodying the child with an agency they do not possess. Similar comments include “Lucky to have these girls. Lucky they have each other [heart emoji]”

The comments across the board, while idealising the children, are gendered. The male children, while preschool aged are referred to as gender neutral cute, gorgeous – but are made benign in being “sweet” or such “a lovely boy”. Older male children are not referred to in these terms and become “handsome” – although more rarely featured than younger children, those of older ages are much less frequently commented upon. These accounts were clustered around young children and families, primarily. Those which featured older children tended to have a large spread of ages across multiple children, so the younger ones were still in the ‘cute’ commentary phase.

The comments from followers are focused intensely on appearances, for example #003 posts images of her primary school aged son who has extremely curly hair. She focuses repeatedly on the curls and whether to get them cut. In becoming a persona, the characteristics of the individuals get magnified as they are repeatedly focused upon. For #005 it’s the status of the children as twins, which are featured together and #006 presents girls of different ages in entirely matching outfits regularly. This was annotated as “particularly visually unnerving” in field notes, due to a high portion of the 200 images containing multiple identical outfits on the children. Whilst internally charming, this is an example where as an outsider the effect is not necessarily perceived in the same vein.

## **6.5 Mundanity as Aesthetically Considered**

Intensive motherhood in this context can be conceived as visually recording competency and control, down to the daily minutiae. This has rendered even the mundane photogenic, as Instagram allows for the easy sharing of daily narratives. As identified in Chapter 5, Instagram results in an increased level of image sharing which depicts the granular detail of family life and parenthood. This deviates from the types of imagery which were typically included in analogue albums, which would not have been an efficient use of film as a consumable.

Figure 35 provides examples of the types of detail which may be posted to Instagram as daily, lived records. The images commonly include pets, food,

activities, things encountered, and artful depictions of everyday items such as shoes or crayons.

Some of these images, such as A and D capture artful pictures of toys or books. Even these are neat, orderly compositions of playful objects, with a careful aesthetic consideration. Again, these are not random, hasty snapshots. Those which include children themselves are calm scenes, such as napping (Image B), eating (Image H) or reading quietly on the sofa (J).

Image K typifies the commonly encountered portrait, that whilst situated in the domestic sphere is not 'homely' as a visual identity. The copper planter, muted tonal palette and framing by a dresser all elevate both the home setting and mundane daily events as tasteful and artistic.

Some of the mothers were overt in describing the importance and care of aesthetics and styling to their identity. Participant 001 describes her aesthetic as "modern vintage" and references vintage styling across her images. This again extends to the suggestion of affluence, with well-known brands such as Orla Kiely wallpaper and products (which represent a premium designer brand). Consumerism appears to be an integral part of the Instagram aesthetic, the same as leafing through a magazine, followers hone in on items they themselves would wish to own and do not hesitate to request where an item was purchased. This approach makes the scenes featured reminiscent of magazine editorial shoots across both fashion, interior design and woman's magazines. In fact, this is mirrored in the practice of photographing products as 'flat lays' where items are carefully arranged in artful forms and photographed from above.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

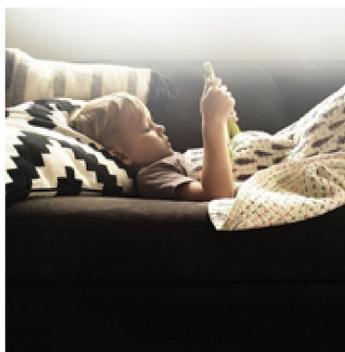


Image J



Image K

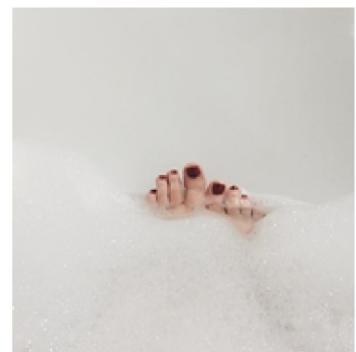


Image L

Figure 35 - Mundane imagery

Frequently featuring seasonal items, such as summer holiday items or Christmas gifts and cute / kitsch items such as stationary, these are essentially a form borrowed from print formats and adopted by the mothers as a styling exercise. Examples of the obviously posed and arranged nature of the images are shown in the top row of Figure 36.

Image B presents the contents of a baby changing bag, complete with snacks, nappy and cuddly toy. These are everyday items of low appeal or excitement as functional objects. However, here they formed into a new, more aesthetic representation of the mundane. Image A achieves a similar result, however it combines with the aspirational (and notions of 'me time') of beauty, with a high end face mask combined with plastic animal figurines, denoting the parental. This typifies the imagery in making all aspects of maternal identity appealing visually. Even within Image C, the mother has pristine painted nails included within the created scene of arranged ingredients.

The image set ups frequently require either another individual present to act as photographer, or the use of a camera tripod. This is often not addressed explicitly but alters images from a simple snapshot to an image which involves significantly more labour and consideration to enact. Instagram images feature common angles of presentation, one of which is an image taken from above, also shown in the final 3 images of Figure 36. Image E again becomes self-referencing with the staging of another image being captured. Image K is additionally notable for being an interesting example of an image, which is taken of printed images. These print out are of photographs which the account holder has shared on Instagram, making them into multi medium images.

Images D, G, and I highlight that whilst the scenes themselves may be informal, with children playing on a sofa, or on a parent's bed, that the act of capture of these scenes is less casual than the image contents. These types of capture are not confined to either the self (as in image L), or just children, (images D, F, H) but feature across all groupings.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 36 - Instagram aesthetics**

This is an image type missing in traditional family photography as a deliberate endeavour - it may be taken as an opportunistic shot due to scenery or

locality, but less so as an interior room shot. Followers do question how certain images were taken, or what camera equipment is used. In seeing behind the image, one account holder describes - in response to a question in the comments - the image is part of a styled shoot that changed the furniture layout of her home to be more photogenic and was not a representation of how it normally is. This forms a representation which is a staged reality. #013 outlines that whilst she uses her iPhone for all her Instagram images, she uses additional clip on lenses to achieve a wide-angle effect when required. The labour, whilst in a sense 'invisible' is not secretive. When asked, the mothers were open about how the images are captured, where and why.

In using the images elsewhere, #11 described printing her Instagram images and displaying them around her home because they are "pretty". She says of the volume produced that: "I have about 26 million photos... which is wonderful, but it completely overwhelms me thinking about having to categorize or organize in a way that we will be able to enjoy them later!" Kirk et al (2006) suggests that even digitally, the emotional labour of organising family photos still falls predominantly to women, which appears to be supported here - the Instagram feeds are a personal link to their role as a mother, but also as part of a family unit. This link between emotional labour, mothering and family remains intact.

This placement of motherhood as all-consuming and responsible for a significant portion of both emotional and practical labour, is what would be expected from Hays (1996). The women are placing motherhood as the most significant and important role they have. The care and attention given to producing an Instagram account of the lives of their children becomes another form of the labour of doing intensive motherhood

Most images are in colour, in the correct orientation and of a very literal composition. There is limited evidence of artistic endeavour or creative treatment of the images. This extends to filters, which as a core feature of Instagram are generally popular. When used they are subtle and used to enhance the image tone or brightness, rather than to create large contrasts. However, the images here appear to be carefully selected (it is of no more effort to take multiple variations of a scene than to take one, on a phone camera) or actively composed in order to be of good, shareable quality from the outset. Several of the mothers openly discuss editing their images using apps or software prior to uploading them to Instagram. Followers have no problem essentially going backstage and asking how or what techniques are used by an account they admire to produce the results they see.

The appeal of the family images here may lie in a far more basic nature. Bakhshi et al (2004) demonstrates that Instagram images which feature faces receive significantly higher levels of positive response than those which do not feature faces. In addition, those which were evaluated here as deviating most from professional levels of image capture and persona building (accessible writing, a coherent online identity, elements of visual sophistication borrowed from print and professional media production) were those with least audience engagement with their posts. Followers present a response to the aesthetic explicitly, often linking this to children being “cute” or “gorgeous” and commenting something is a “great shot”.

## **6.6 Expressing Selfhood**

The accounts often present a duality in role enactment. Both personal and family representations are made but additionally some also present a professional identity. This can act as a background focus which themes the account and aligns it with a particular interest or field. #

016 strongly identifies as a self-styled “boss lady” as a business owner and entrepreneur. As the owner of an upmarket independent boutique, there is both a strong branding at play for business and for herself, as the owner and professional representative. However, this is inextricably linked to her own identity - the business reflects her personal aesthetic and she sources the stock based on her visual preferences and taste. As a result, the account is richly infused with a particular visual quality based off whimsical, vintage aesthetics.

There are frequent florals, both in motif and in photos of blooms and flower displays (Images B, C, G and H). These are overtly pretty and delicate, and are combined with images of tea sets, vintage silverware and highly feminine dresses and skirts for the boutique. ( as seen in Images A, E, G and L)



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 37 - Individual account aesthetic**

The overall visual tone is one which avoids being overtly twee, due to the high end and genuinely vintage nature of the pieces on display. The account owner herself is presented as visually immaculate, with well applied, classic make up and manicure, in line with her role as professionally facing “boss lady” and business owner, as in Images F, I, K and D.

In contrast account #009 combines professional identity equally with personal one, but the results are exceptionally different. The account holder is a high-level fitness professional (not a self-styled ‘wellness blogger’).



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 38 - Contrasting account aesthetics**

Whilst #016 maintains a division between her professional and motherhood roles, sometimes explicitly outlining the effort to not work over the summer, #009 presents a different logistical resolution to work-life balance. #009 has a younger child - a baby - and he is firmly embedded in her professional practice.

Her daily postings include her workout sessions which integrate her baby, as seen in Figure 38, in Images A, H and I. These include images of using the pram as a prop for exercise, lifting the baby as a weight (Image E) and incorporating him into yoga and stretching positions (as seen in Images B, D and E ). Whilst other accounts perform motherhood in a way which is unlikely to gain attention in public, #009 is confident and unashamed of this. She references getting odd looks in the park from strangers as she uses the pushchair as apparatus and publicly works out with the baby in tow.

Both of these accounts highlight the extension beyond the ordinary in their depiction of the daily lived experience of parenthood. These aspirational lifestyles feature the routines of the everyday and mundanity, however this is part of well resourced, successful lifestyles of glamorous, attractive mothers.

There is broader commentary of the progress of family life and the uncertainty this brings. For example, the themes of children growing up so fast and not meeting their own standards of mothering and expressing self-flagellation for falling short are recurrent. There is much discussion surrounding the change from having one child to making the decision to have another. The worries expressed are less practical or logistical but were framed around worrying the first will receive less attention, that they cannot imagine loving another baby as intensely as the first, and whether the dynamic as a family would remain as fundamentally enjoyable and positive. Mothers in the comments are encouraging in doing so and recount having exactly the same worries. They universally state these worries were unfounded and interestingly, frame the successful transition in terms of the first-born child. They assert they receive pride and pleasure from watching their child become a sibling and enact the role of oldest child, for example #001 described pride in her son being "such a good brother".

This becomes a process of intensely bestowing virtue and praise upon the child to a degree which, to an outsider, appears to surpass the emotional and intellectual capacity of a toddler or young child. Thus, their response is *interpreted* by the parent and in fact embodies the child with a maturity which appears projected upon them externally from an adult perspective. In doing so, daily

tensions appear reconcilable as simply bad days situated within a larger family context which remains ultimately harmonious.

In growing up, starting school is milestone which is met with ambivalence by the mothers. One commenter affirmed #001s expression of being proud but missing the child being at home as finding the whole experience “bittersweet”. #017 posts the image below, with the associated caption combining both



**Figure 39 - Maternal commentary on growing up**

In fact, a salient point arising from this description is that of how closely intertwined the characteristics described within this chapter as discrete observation are, in co-occurring in posts. Expression of selfhood is a broad category useful in framing long and short-term narratives - however it is also a comment on audience interaction in offering their own experiences of motherhood and potentially a useful point for considering how the account holders frame their children as central to their identity.

### **6.6.1 Instagram As Part of Online Selfhood Across Platforms**

The mothers commonly link to blogs elsewhere online. This is frequently presented to followers in the format “check out the blog for more on this” (#005). In this sense Instagram was being used as a headline vehicle for a blog post hosted

elsewhere. Followers appeared to participate in this, with no comments observed which addressed this critically.

There is additionally also deliberate behaviour around this, which attempts to formalise it into a structure. One user has Tuesday as the day where she releases a regular recipe on her blog which she highlights to users on Instagram to go and look at. This involves posting a teaser on Instagram which announces she has a particular recipe or topic she is talking about “on the blog”. There is sadly no metric available to measure the success of this as a strategy. The continued use of the practice suggests it must have some net benefit or it wouldn’t be sustained. However, as much as an indication of the success of traffic direction it may simply be a reflection that the mothers command loyal followings which consume their content across multiple platforms.

This is entwined both in the previously highlighted value of both high-quality prose and being “hilarious”. The skill or USP (unique selling point) can be stretched into longer form posts. In fact, there appeared to be a correlation between the quality and effort put into a blog, and the popularity (which may equate to professionalism) of the account holder. If this is the case, this may go some way to explain the popularity of the demographic with advertisers and brand sponsors. If the mothers can demonstrate they not only have an active body of followers, but a following which demonstrates high levels of engagement with their content – this strengthens their position as “influencers” (De Veirman, 2017, p.799).

The monetisation of the blogging process is apparent. A significant portion of the blogs feature adverts or content which is marked as sponsored or ‘in association with’. Interestingly, the longer form of the blog format and more complex format led to a larger disparity between the quality of output between the accounts. The quality of prose, when unstructured and freeform appeared to lower the quality for some account holders. The Instagram image post format act as a prompt, structuring the caption that accompanies it. One blog had clearly broken CSS, rendering it obviously broken. Others appeared to subscribe to the format of having adverts placed down the side of the screen, with varying levels of visual clutter as a result. This had a significant impact on how professional the site layouts appeared. The ease of maintaining an Instagram account cannot be overlooked. It requires no technical skill, management or site upkeep. The layout is controlled by Instagram, leading to a clean and uniform arrangement of images.

This may account for the tensions described earlier when followers feel that an Instagram feed has become too overt in paid partnerships. It may be that this is

an evolving norm where advertising content is more typically hosted by the mothers on their blog platforms in long form writing, or direct advertising space. However, advertising on Instagram can take a differing form. As was the case with #003, the controversy was sparked by a collaboration with Google where a phone was provided to the mother to take and post images from. Thus, the content for the feed was produced by the product being advertised. Advertising here can be more flexible – and potentially less transparent – in using a product, or featuring a paid-for day out or listing products used, for example ingredients used to cook a meal. The level of interest from followers and keenness to source products they've seen on feeds leads to a potential for less transparent product placement or promotion. This was acutely obvious for popular products. Multiple individuals would request where an item was sourced, over the course of one comment thread. This would emerge as a question which was asked on every single photo which featured the item. In one case this was a distinctive grey sofa posted by one user, which illustrated that followers do not necessarily read the comments of others. This led to a high level of repetition regarding sourcing items.

Others have a similar, but more ad hoc release of recipes and competition give-aways hosted on blogs but promoted with Instagram posts. A few mothers specifically address that if followers also follow them on Snapchat that they have posted content there of an activity or day out. #017 frames this in terms of both humour and increased access to her life stating “follow me on Snapchat for behind the scenes glamour”. There is not only the labour involved in the production and activity of an Instagram account, but evidence that some mothers are doing so across multiple platforms and formats simultaneously. #015 uses her biographic link from Instagram to link to a different Instagram account where she acts as a franchisee distributing essential oils.

Events were clearly put on by companies and the mothers were invited to attend PR days, typically in London. These appear to be primarily focused upon gathering multiple parenting bloggers together to act as a focus group, as opposed to mixing traditional press staff with bloggers. These were documented and posted as a day out and disclosed as an activity which was not perceived as selling out or one which compromises either integrity or authenticity from followers. One account holder posted that Thompson had provided a holiday to Disneyland Florida, which she explicitly stated was not a family holiday that could have financed themselves as a family. This was however, the largest and most substantial sponsored event and was specifically targeted at a travel focused blog owner. This can be construed

as a targeted approach by companies to partner with those bloggers identified as having an audience reach to a demographic which is closely aligned with that of their overall company PR strategy. The mothers were linked with brands which included camera equipment (again aligned with the focus of the blogger's professional focus) Tefal and Bupa (for a childcare campaign supporting new mothers).

Some crossover was apparent, even within this small sample. There are instances of at least two users appearing in each other's comments, meaning one likely follows the other. This references #001 seeing the others birth video posted, in preparation for her own home water birth. The mothers appear to be embedded in a definite sub community on Instagram which is very focused upon their life stage with young families. This raises the question of whether the community composition will shift over time as other couples become parents, and those with existing children find they become older, perhaps altering their focus from this period of early years insularity.

There are also internal micro-trends, with a period, for example, where a particular T-shirt became popular and is apparent in numerous user's feeds. This may be indicative that the mothering accounts on Instagram form a sub-community within the site that is self-referencing. With participation in PR panels, blogger events and hosted days out, these may unintentionally act as conduits for the more disparately located mummy-bloggers to meet and network offline, as well online with each other.

## **6.7 Narrative Building Via Textual Expression**

The mothers generally displayed a strong level of education in their communications. Spelling, grammar and word choice, while not complex were to a high degree correct and accurate, displaying high literacy. In general, the posts contained a greater degree of background literacy and fluency (or simply care taken to compose the postings) than was sometimes displayed in comment threads in response. Particularly on high follower accounts featuring high volume threads, comments demonstrated some deviancy from that of the posters style, with some comments abandoning punctuation or cogent sentence structuring - thus having low readability. Interestingly what the audiences responded too specifically across multiple accounts was the high-quality prose and writing ability. Combined with the previously noted levels of professionalism in the image taking, these accounts often

appear above being a personal account, with production values above that expected of amateur content producers.

Followers tended to equate writing ability with the poster's personal qualities, attributing them as being "hilarious" for example. The followers were explicitly responsive to humour across the board and appeared to place a high value on it. This may be due to the posts they found amusing being perceived as more memorable and with a higher entertainment level to read. Humour also represents a complex social skill which can be used to mitigate negative expressions or difficult topics, or address controversial topics via satire.

Overall, in term of language, meaning was expressed in simple language. Prose was relatively uncomplicated and thus projected an air of accessibility and informality. Meaning was conveyed in a casual, chatty fashion with very little technical, obscure or formal language employed. The focus was on communication being understood and getting meaning across. They use language in flexible ways to convey their beliefs and describe their actions. This results in some creativity with sentiments such as #018s: "We're hippifying my grandma's green jello recipe. Spirulina is involved".

Posts become both descriptors of daily life and of larger reflective narratives on life and self. #20, for example posts about periods of weeks when her military husband is away as distinct blocks of time, with them having a distinct wistful quality about them.

The headings provide a useful structure to order the observations from the ethnography, however they are in a sense an artificial division between elements which overlap in practice. Content is often multipurpose, representing multiple aspects of how Instagram content reflects the account holders. This is a reflection of the complexity and extreme density of the connotations, attitudes and patterns which were observed in the mother's content. The headings represent the internal sense making of conducting the analysis of the fieldnotes into a cohesive set of reportable findings for publication.

Bad days or negative sentiment about parenting are bounded by the mothers. They are framed as the individual mother's fault, or failing - and are contained to her alone. Whilst partners are invoked in positive expression of ability or the state of the family as idealised - less than ideal sentiment is not jointly expressed as 'we'. It remains a uniquely maternal expression to caption an Instagram image and offer up parental responsibility for failing to meet the expected (self-imposed) standards.

In terms of children's ages there appeared to be a slight leniency for those parenting young babies and newborn infants. In this instance, again the aesthetics presented visually would not document actual disorder or the implied failure to cope. It would however be textually referenced, in comments such as:

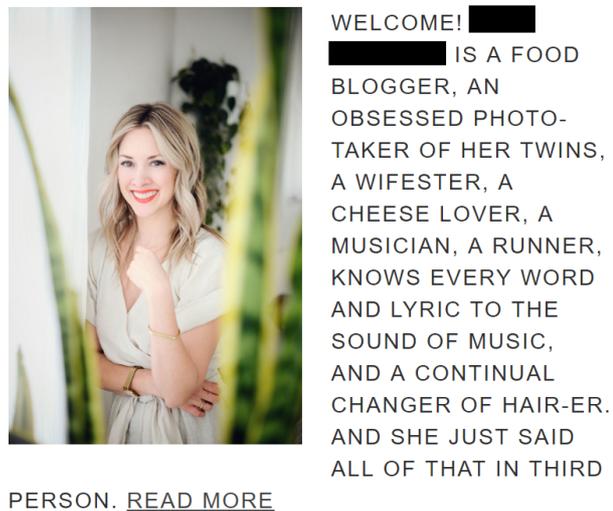


**Figure 40 - #015 on parenting a new baby with an older child**

A fascinating linguistic quirk was observed in comment threads during the ethnography regarding the use of children's names. In responding to parental content, commenters who also had children would frequently name their own children when the sentence or message construction did not require it in order to make sense. For example in place of responding with 'That's exactly what my daughter does too!' a follower, who is a stranger and unknown to the poster may instead phrase it as "That's exactly what my Sarah, (8 months) does too" The name is essentially extraneous information which is not required to convey the point, or strictly relevant (or of personal meaning to provide context to the original post maker) This occurred with relative frequency and within certain posts made the sentence construction somewhat stilted enough to draw attention to the fact the name was extra to the basic meaning. This may be an attempt to align the commenter with the original post, expressing they view themselves as similar to the poster and establish commonality. This forms a vehicle of expressing 'I think I'm like you' or membership of a motherhood club. This essentially reads as form of

attempting to establish rapport. However, with limited reciprocity in the mothers communications, it is not an effective strategy.

Occasionally the accounts play on text speak and common vernacular - while one mother (#005) makes significant and pointed reference to her age being 39 and being a grown up, she uses language in a way which reads as younger: “adorbs” and abbreviating pacifier to “paci”. This studied immaturity appears casual but may form part of a deliberate cultivation of a persona of playful relatability and accessibility. Her biography describes her as a “wifester” – not necessarily expected verbal everyday vernacular for a 39 year old professional (see Figure 41).



**Figure 41 - Biographic description by mother #005**

The account holder is an experienced blogger who states she has been blogging since 2010. In fact her followers regularly state she is “hilarious” and are very responsive to anecdotes which carefully present a light hearted, breezy account of life.

Whilst captions can be quite lengthy, or posted over multiple comments there is a brevity to the format. Blog posts are accepted as being suitable for more long form, article style posts. Captions will often direct followers towards blog posts on a certain topic from an Instagram caption. For example, #020 directs towards instructions towards making a DIY play tepee, #005 regularly directs readers from Instagram images of food towards the recipe posted on her blog, and #007 posts long Instagram captions which summarise a longer form blogpost. These end Instagram posts with a variation of “see my blogpost for more on this”.

Online text is commonly supplemented with emojis. The mothers themselves used a varying amount of emoji to supplement the text they write for posts. They are primarily used for illustrative purposes to compound the meaning of the text and not to contribute any new information or meaning. They tended to be added to the end of the final sentence as a form of visual summary.

Hashtag usage varied across users in the frequency and number typically applied to posts. It was however, not unusual for a post to contain both the text associated with the image (referred to here as the caption) and an additional number of hashtags within the first comment. The caption on Instagram has a character limit of 2200 characters in total and 30 hashtags (SproutSocial, 2017). Therefore, when the desired number of hashtags exceeded this, it was simply incorporated into a new follow-on post in its own right. Despite being an integral part of Instagram characteristics, they were not utilised particularly in expressive or self-referencing ways. They tended to appear as highly literal and closely aligned to the content of the images, for example #003 posts a number of photographs of flowers with #flower, #leaves or #succulents. Other users relevant but slightly more descriptive tags for their child related content such as #motherhoodthroughinstagram (#001), #childhoodunplugged (#018) or #candidchildhood (#014). These are typically very dependent on the tone or lifestyle displayed on the account overall and reflect the focus and prevalent attitudes toward parenting and family. They fit with the 'voice' of the account.

In a slightly contrary fashion, a number of these tags actively assert the value of a simple, natural childhood that has freedom and is in essence, free from modern technological influence. Mothers use the SNS platform Instagram to post about their value judgments on technology and childhood, and assert they are countering this and doing "good" mothering. The tags include those such as #letthembelittle, #conscious, #naturalparenting and #childhoodunplugged spanning multiple accounts profiled. These focus on the value of a simple, natural and wholesome lifestyle. This is again aligned with living an authentic life. Others used them to promote their blog focus or professional identities, such as #[username]cooks for a food blogger (#005), #fashionblogger (#013) or #fitnesswithbaby (#009).

Whilst the mothers on Instagram appear to belong to a fairly insular sub-community within wider Instagram, they remain susceptible to spam or inappropriate input. #004 has both an app and a hashtag which acts as a submission for themed photos. As a professional blogger this represents a core part

of her online branding and identity. At one point the submission hashtag was suspended due to becoming inundated with “inappropriate comments”. Essentially while not actually detailed as to the specifics, comments on this announcement implied the comments were spam of a pornographic or generally adult themed nature and the hashtag had been co-opted for this. However, overall the comment threads were remarkably free overall of spam, trolling or junk tweets for an open, public platform.

While external content in the form of traditional memes or visual humour was on the whole absent, there was a recurrent inclusion of the motivational quotation or self-styled philosophy - in itself a form of sense making and resolving inner conflicts. This was typically centred around identity: the importance of self-confidence, resilience and fostering a kind attitude towards self. Some accounts linked this to wider sense making in associating this with (quasi)spirituality and personal growth.

### **6.7.1 Audience Response**

Mothers here appeared in some cases to have followers they knew in real life and were friends with, however this was minimal. Interactions with followers were generally unknown persons limited in scope to Instagram and their blog readership (the direction of traffic between these two formats is reciprocal).

As discussed in the previous section, audiences were generally presented with high quality images and text reminiscent in some ways aesthetically of lifestyle marketing/branding. Meaning is presented in a rich mix of images, textual posts, implied meaning and personal disclosure. This builds into a picture which gives the audience, at least the perception, of having insight into both the life and personality of the account holder. This is where the longevity of Instagram sharing becomes important. Not only is the content rich but it builds continually to reinforce what is known about the poster, but also adding new and relevant information. The posts become part of larger narratives and commentary on life events, transitions and everyday ‘truths’.

This building of a knowledge base on an individual followed is continual and organic with some followers clearly following for extensive periods of time - numbers of years. On a post where the child is approximately 5 years old a commenter adds “I have been following you since I fell upon your story of [child’s name] birth and love watching her grow up, such a cute girl and wanted to thank

you for sharing!”. In fact, this work posits that this becomes a hugely important aspect of interpreting the audience responses as being generated from a position of artificial closeness.

There is something occasionally unsettling in watching strangers hawk over a family and make informed personal commentary which exceeds the boundaries normally in place for those who are functionally strangers. For example, a follower says of #003s children that “I always feel like [child’s name] looks so different from your other kids, but here she looks so similar to [siblings name]!”

This process is strikingly similar to the experience of meeting somebody new, proceeding to get to know them and becoming friends - information builds via talking and listening. This talking leads to the gradual revealing of personal traits, attitudes, likes, preferences and humour. It also provides a working knowledge of current living situations and a gradual sense of familiarity. This is a reciprocal, two-way process. It is however also continual as communication reveals insight into ongoing change and the ups and downs of life. Here this disclosure is one sided (whilst some followers may indeed become friends off the interactions made, this will not be true for the majority of followers who remain interested fans) on the side of the mother’s posts. The similarity to making friends clearly builds something which followers feel is an affinity and identification with the Instagrammers, even though it is one sided.

The normalcy and accessibility of the mothers appears to make it so that the followers do not perceive themselves as inhabiting a fan role. This may be due to their internal recognition that the conditions do not resemble traditional roles or statuses of celebrity and fan. The accessibility of the Instagram mother appears to produce a rapport on the part of the audience. Mothers typically demonstrate that they read their comment threads (at least initially, some gather extensive quantities consistently and to read them in their entirety would be time consuming), will respond to questions and thank followers for their comments. They do not commonly engage in protracted or detailed exchanges within the comments - the threads do not resemble community forum threads remotely in this sense. They are not understood or utilised as open discussion forums, but a direct line to respond to the poster.

As previously noted, for an internet platform with the capacity to interact on a direct level - there was a surprising lack of friction or tensions expressed. The body of followers tended to be highly engaged and positive. This occasionally seemed to have an acutely exaggerated quality to it, where enthusiasm crosses

into hyperbole. The levels of praise levelled at content which was not extraordinary in any regard led to an observation of the term “fan like behaviour” within the fieldnotes on encountering repeatedly heightened responses.

However, there were a few cases of emergent negativity. The most prominent is highly interesting, because of loci of the issue appears to be the audience expectation of ‘authenticity’ from Instagram mothers, as part of the social contract and parameters of exchange. A perception this has been breached is one which followers respond to with an overall feeling they have been misled or the account holder has mis-characterised herself in a deliberately misleading way. This appears linked to the concept of being aspirational requiring a degree of humility and gratefulness in order to not be the opposite and appear unrelatable and alienating.

Account #002 represented the largest degree of controversy and critique - still a minor percentage of the comments garnered - this was a highly popular account. This individual account had a degree of novelty, the mother having left a wealthy London suburb with her husband to embark of a year of travel around the world with their four children. This provided a literal departure from mundanity and the everyday. The family are highly photogenic, clearly wealthy and present the overall tone of a charmed life of easy privilege.

The images within Figure 42 typify those across the sample period. The subject matter reads visually as like an extended set of holiday images. However, these are artful shots, where the beaches are empty of other holiday makers or travellers (Images B and H). The accommodation, in Images J and L is luxurious and private, with no shared hotels pictured. C, E and I highlight the inward facing nature of the account, despite being outdoors and in public, the images do not capture an incidental passers-by or locals. Images B, I and J typify the kinds of images of scenery which occur repeatedly on the account, showing attractive travel images which would not be out of place in a travel brochure or magazine.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 42 - World travels**

#002 had an Instagram account and substantial Instagram following prior to this period of travel, but the sample period fell coincidentally early in the endeavour. Featured in the Financial Times on the monetary aspects (Financial Times, 2016) and writing her own article on the gap year in 2015 for The Telegraph newspaper (The Telegraph, 2015c) this was not a discreet undertaking. As such it generated much interest on Instagram and these the conditions are likely to have resulted in more casual and new followers of the account along with the long-term audience.

These conditions provided the ideal environment for discord to be voiced - the crux of which was that promoted content, sponsored by brands was not labelled as such.

This essentially monetised the content and shaped its form. It was observed that this was visible, apparent, and was contrary to how the account holder had previously stated she wanted to manage her account. Excerpts of this exchange are presented below to illustrate the ire elicited:

Commenter #1 – (directs comment at another user who queries if this was a paid for post): u reeally didn't get this was a really subtle paid advertisement? Lol

Commenter 2: if you do ads I'll have to unfollow

Commenter 3: Wahhh :( please no paid posts, [mothers name]! Your feed is so great, don't jeopardize your credibility! There have always been little product promos, but this is so blatent [crying face emoji] #disappointed #toofar

Commenter 4: So you lost your credibility :( :( :( :( :( (returns to post again): "remember: earlier you said you do not use your account to promote. So, you lied."

Later on in the feed the issue arises again in light of consumerism; comments include: "...ads ads ads....and honestly there isn't anything inherently wrong with that. But it's only disingenuous when the entire premise of the trip was to "live simply". Those who do provide critique are faced with other followers undermining their points by branding them as based on jealousy, spite or being mean. In response to this, one critical poster responded with:

Why is an intelligent critic judged to be "jealous"? If you are prepared to self promote to gain a following of 127k people of which at least 126k must be strangers; then you are fully aware of what you are wishing to achieve from a marketing perspective. The key promotional tools have appeared to always been the children and I am sure such a strategy was always part of the

plan...along with the complimentary clothes, hotels and apartments

There appears to be an undercurrent of holding the user to account for selling out or taking advantage of followers - the fact the collaboration was not labelled appears to strike followers that they are being taken for foolish and would not notice the content was advertorial.

The account holder addresses the commenters individually stating she has always "supported (and promoted)" brands, people and products she personally likes and respects and will continue to do so. Interestingly she points out that "this is my feed, not a public service" and that she is duly "entitled" to monetise content for income generation: "Please unfollow if you cannot allow me this". This is clearly intended to draw a line under the discussion and end it.

However, even those who had come out in support of her acknowledged the content appeared to transgress their understanding on the relation between them, the images and the account holder as a credible source. One thanks #003 for her involvement in the discussion but says the paid posts have left a "bad taste". Tellingly, another references previous statements by the author that she hadn't made any paid posts at that point and only supported small or independent brands and would always state this clearly. Those in defense of #003 invoke their perception that she is indeed "humble", implying that she isn't greedy and motivated to exploit her followers for gain.

This issue appears to highlight that the followers will hold content creators to stated policies and find any unannounced changes to be a form of personal transgression. The post in question here was in collaboration with Google - and when questioned was framed as "working with" the company, as opposed to 'for' the company. Transparency is expected by followers.

The alignment with being humble appears to support the implication one aspect of this controversy was financial and about the link to being grateful for being so well resourced. It becomes crass and unappealing to be perceived as self-absorbed or entitled. This conflation becomes apparent at several points in the feed: "Wow...very luxurious accommodation but definitely not travelling on a budget!" The insinuation here is that most average families would find this inaccessible for a holiday, let alone a prolonged period of travel.

In an image of a pristine, tropical beach with a working donkey included (Figure 43), multiple followers objected “really not liking the sight of that poor poor donkey looking hot and tired” another suggested that “maybe she chose NOT to see it. Unfortunately that’s tourists for you :(”



**Figure 43 - Animal Exploitation as Controversial**

The link to privilege is drawn by a user who posts that:

I have loved this blog for so long. But this trip has really showed how utterly privileged your family are, this is a wonderful thing, if only you were more transparent, this ‘simple’ life you present is only attainable for those with mega wealth. I am glad to have discovered this and I hope you will consider more honesty in your writing as not to lead the many women who believe they themselves can achieve this.

This can be viewed as crossing the line from the aspirational, to revealing the fantasy is created and grounded in the reality of finance and privilege. This introduced the realities of money and profit into an idealised, romanticised view of the trip as a carefree, tropical endeavour which personifies relaxed, blissful family time. The followers appear to react strongly to the illusion of perfection being punctuated or abruptly disrupted.

This is in opposition to the permitted disclosures controlled by the mothers on difficulties or reflecting on parenthood or realities of social media, which do not disrupt the reality portrayed. A commenter makes a highly interesting argument in favour of both monetisation and sharing of a given lifestyle. Bloggers should “be

entitled to some kind of payment for spending so much time and effort and *for lacking privacy*” (researcher’s italics for emphasis).

A fascinating attempt is then made to quell the ongoing levels of critique with a different approach by #003. She appears to masterfully position the followers sense of ownership of the feed and leverage it. She denies the trip is a PR or media organised endeavour. Then she evokes the audience experience of her feed. Explicitly framing negativity levelled directly at her as sullyng the feed she frames this as ruining the experience of her feed for other followers. This repositions her as both caring about her readership and shifts the critique onto a different mode of deflection rather than justification for her advertising strategy. It would also be reasonable to assume there is a need to engage with a readership at large to quell ongoing tensions as this audience body is what it being monetised by collaborations with commercial entities. A stable, positive readership which accepts the account holder as aspirational and influential is required to demonstrate to brands than an individual has audience reach to be capitalised upon.

Follower interaction was clearly not solely limited to communication aimed at the account holder. Peer-to-peer interaction occurs within comment threads - however this is not a common practice. There is limited interaction between those commenting and thus the space is not conversational. What is observable is that the comments will be used to draw the account to the attention of a friend. This is a micro-interaction within the comments, which is visible to the account holder but is essentially about them and not to them. This takes the form of highlighting that an account is “hilarious” or that “this is the account I was telling you about”, for example.

However, there is evidence that followers represent a form of fandom in one sense and represent a loyal following. If there is a comment which is critical or hostile then there will be a collective action to berate the individual. Essentially the comment threads are self-policed. This may account for the lack of discord or discussion of counter points of view. The environment may be constructed as hostile to dissent and thus it is not voiced within comment threads. Interestingly when practices were observed as being endorsed, promoted or carried out in a few cases which the researcher felt to be genuinely of concern (sleep practices for babies which countered sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) prevention guidelines or avoidance of conventional medicine for infants in favour of unproven alternatives) there was little or no dissent voiced. If it was, it was countered with unspecified support that “many studies” (uncited) support the practice displayed.

This is attributable towards the intensification of homophily in line with the deviation from the norm. Accounts which were either extreme in lifestyle towards eco and sustainable aspects (which appeared to often co-occur in tandem with home-schooling of children) or those which focus on practices such as homeopathy, crystal healing, placental consumption and aromatherapy appeared to draw those who also espouse these views. Confirmation bias was visible in these cases, even when advocating breaking official guidance on product use for babies. This was framed in terms of trusting motherly instincts, as a powerful and somewhat mystical capacity which exceeds scientific research or professional guidance.

In this instance, whilst contextually different to being framed as a “taste maker” (De Veirman, 2017, p.798) in terms of consumerism there was an obvious cache given to accounts which strongly subscribed to a given lifestyle and evidenced its everyday enactment. These often position motherhood as being directly equated to femininity and womanhood. These reference social practices and iconography which borrow elements of Eastern culture combined with selective cultural appropriation across a range of cultures into a hybrid formation which forms the basis for a lifestyle ‘philosophy’ rooted in personal enlightenment and ‘earth mothering’.

The threads also act as participatory vehicles for engaging with followers. Some of the accounts tapped into the obvious enthusiasm of followers to act in reciprocal communications with them, posing questions and canvassing opinions. This ranged from trivial in asking followers what they ought to watch on Netflix next to returning to thank followers for their input on where to buy a particular style of dress available in a tall range (#001). When a post had been framed as the mother failing or being a “bad mummy”, they often returned to thank users for their support and express their gratitude.

Occasionally these posts were unprompted statements which offered reflections on Instagram as a community, an example #020 posts expressing gratitude for friends made via Instagram, their “wonderful” comments & interactions and “people taking time to share their lives with me.” #017 posts this as a seasonal expression

Just feeling like the luckiest and something that keeps me coming back to this Instagram community is seeing you all feeling like the luckiest yourselves!! Happy families, brightly shining faces, especially around this special time of year, they always make my day so much better ❤️ #thanksforsharing #brothers #motherhood

#myboys #love #mywild #communityovercompetition #wildandfree  
#thehappynow #childhoodunplugged

However, in contrast to this there was an acknowledgment that Instagram (and social media in general) are not complete, true representations of life. This was framed as a tension and balance that the account holder has to manage. As previously mentioned #011 explicitly made a post which detailed her ambivalence towards the urge to present a perfect life and the feeling that she was participating in that falsehood. However, she reconciled the tension via the creative practice of staging, taking and displaying pretty images as an enjoyable hobby in its own right.

These rare instances of acknowledgement of an awareness of the prevailing attitudes towards positive representations read as analogous to Chalfen (1987, p.78) and the notion of tokenistic images of 'no harm done'. Those images serve to acknowledge reality beyond the family album as a purveyor of positivity, without documenting any reality which is actually serious and disruptive to that theme. Discussion here appears aligned as a textual equivalent which addresses the false representation without fundamentally breaking that convention.

## **6.8 Key Themes**

The analysis of the data generated a number of findings outlined within this chapter. The observations, characteristics and emergent patterns of behaviour can be collectively considered to fall under a number of key themes. These analytic themes are not wholly discrete, with a significant degree of integration and overlap between them. This is partially due to the multifunctional nature of the content analysed. Posts commonly represented a number of aspects including familial identity expression and cohesion, intensive mothering and audience interactions, simultaneously. As such these themes form a method of sense making and organisation of the findings as opposed to discrete categorisation. The themes reported on are as follows:

- Aesthetics
- Constructing meaning in multimedia contexts
- Audience interaction
- Family cohesion
- SNS ecosystem
- Lifestyle

### 6.8.1 Aesthetics

The key theme is that of the importance of aesthetics. Not only do the images themselves represent careful, deliberate endeavour to capture visually pleasing images, but additionally they capture a wider importance of appearance.

Homes are free from the clutter and mess typically associated with childrearing. As such children are frequently pictured against pristine white rooms, which are tastefully decorated. Even play, when depicted is a small scale, ordered affair. As such, not only are the accounts presenting a beautified and glamorous visual account of parenthood, but there is an overall impression of aspiration. Whilst the narratives are at times of a daily, everyday nature they are also simultaneously 'otherly'. They are not quite ordinary, due to their high levels of production and attention devoted to aesthetics.

However, there is an additional quality that is implied by these images: control. These accounts present elevated aesthetics in which young children are serene, benign beings. What the orderly, beautiful images suggest is that children are non-disruptive. Their effect on adult, aesthetically considered lives is minimal. There are no concessions visually to the raising of children – the necessary equipment is tasteful, discreet and limited in visual presence. There is no chaos, noise, or lack of control wrought by the force of young children's exuberance. The mothers have retained their stylish identities, outfits, artfully considered homes and time to expend on documenting it.

The accounts demonstrate a number of features which are reminiscent of magazine and editorial styling, presenting a high level of aesthetic care and consideration. These beautified lives on show are highly insular in focus, facing inward in depicting the mothers and their children. This care and attention can be viewed as labour which has been absorbed into the work of intensive motherhood, placing Instagram as a platform to provide evidence and demonstrate publicly the efficacy of motherhood being enacted. This aspiration is however, limited in its diversity and overwhelmingly focused on white, socio-economically privileged mothers.

This visual care commonly extends beyond the image taking itself, with aesthetics an important feature in the lifestyle choices of the account holders. These lifestyles are both well resourced, and present family life as idealised and harmonious. This renders them with an aspirational quality to followers, presenting

a beautified and overall positive presentation of motherhood and lived experience. This not only serves to be visually appealing but serves to document that within the home, the currency is emotional. This highly sentimentalised attachment renders the ideology of intensive motherhood not only focused upon doing motherhood, but that is must also be “emotionally absorbing” (Hays, 1996, p.8).

There is a lack of images which are of low resolution, blurry or of low quality. There is an awareness of this level of quality and appealing aesthetic, as voiced by #20. This mother represented one of the most ordinary accounts sampled - it was unusual in not presenting images which appeared to contain deliberate, considered efforts to curate the ordinary or overtly style scenes specifically for photographing. The lifestyle on display is one of less overt affluence. On winning a Top 10 blogger award in a mothering category list of Top 100 Instagram accounts she stated: “I’m not sure why though, the others in the list have amazingly shiny Instagram feeds. Mines just normal...”

There is a general level of professionalism of display which implies not only a range of digital skills mastered, but of labour invested in the production of the account, despite the everyday nature of content. This may be attributable to the emergent conventions of Instagram content production; successful account and influencers typically demonstrate image staging which exceeds that of informal, amateur accounts.

### **6.8.2 Construction of Meaning in Multimedia Contexts**

Narratives are divided into larger overarching records of life events, and smaller narrative structures of a granular everyday nature. The larger narratives follow the women through their paths to pregnancy, motherhood and expanding their families. These not only depict current events but can include forward facing discussion of decision making to have more children or move to a different location as an eventual dream, for example.

Unplanned life events of a less positive nature, such as the death of a relative can punctuate the idealised depiction of family existence. When this occurred, it was met with a significant degree of support and sympathy (eliciting more comments as a thread than a standard topic post) from followers, and resulted in the “community” being thanked for their meaningful support. However, the larger narratives are constructed in an overall framing which depicts life events as

positive, welcome and fulfilling. This aligns with the depiction of family life as idealised, and positive.

Smaller, daily narratives contain the same messages of familial harmony. Here the focus is more concentrated on the daily minutiae of life. These posts are frequently constructed of iterations of the same composition, repeated across numerous days. These include outfits of the days for both mothers and children, and images of daily life. These posts present an aestheticised presentation of parenting as a lifestyle.

Time appears as a reference associated with the images - either as future objects of reminiscence, as a means of capturing the current and precious, or in the case of #019 as musings related to how time is the “best gift” she can provide for her baby. #018 on the pictures from her evening: “First we had a dance party, then we took some pictures because they'll help us remember, no matter how fast time might accelerate from here” The audience also responds to the images in terms of temporality. However, in contrast to the mothers this is linked to the longer-term narratives, invoking the ‘journey’ a mother has been on - this tends to be backward facing as it is the past which has established the familiarity a long-term follower has with an account holder. This is particularly true of mothers who have documented the experience of infertility and the process of undergoing IVF, publicly. Mother #005 refers to her “petri dish” experience in describing her twin’s IVF conception.

In communicating meaning, this analysis noted the repetition of linguistic statements which follow the implied logic that if the mothers are struggling or had a bad day that this is a personal failing to be taken as evidence that increased effort should be made. This also reflects Murphy (2007) in pointing out that this blameless model of childhood is highly rooted in the history of childhood, and can be conceived as Apollonian, in which children are inherently good and require nurturing. This responsibility is borne individually here by mothers and is clearly delineated from how the families are harmonious units, parenting well. This maternal guilt is itself a key feature of intensive motherhood. It is one which Hays (1996, p.97) attributes partially towards the tension of intensive motherhood being at odds with a rationalized marketplace in which paid work is both the norm and an economic necessity for most families.

One of the keys elements of intensive motherhood outlined by Hays (1996, p.64) is that within the domestic sphere, the currency is emotional. As opposed to the world of work, where the currency is transactional with labour in return for

economic gain, when mothering the underlying currency is that of love. However, when narratives of parenthood as shared on Instagram, this makes visible a portion of daily experience which was previously not depicted publicly. As such this process of 'evidencing' that intensive parenting is taking place becomes extended in scope. The narratives serve to provide documentation that motherhood is being carried out in a child centred, intensified fashion.

As well as a social media platform, the social function of the family snapshot is affirmed on Instagram. Documenting and expressing familial bonds as an image function is explicitly expressed by the mothers. They reference the intangibility of the digital format, the link between snapshots and sentimentality, and their role in reminiscence and memory. On the subject of the intangibility of digital images and scrapbooks #011 describes letters received (by inheritance from her grandmother) as objects of personal sentiment. She states a desire to create physical legacy objects for her own, reflecting on the intangibility of digital formats. Followers also invoke links between family, creating prompts for reminiscence, and sentimentality - clearly intended as a compliment one user commented on an account that "this is such a well photographed and documented childhood"

The images themselves tend to contain a limited number of people - mostly either the child or children, and the mother (account holder). Very occasionally another person features, usually her partner or another adult family member. Group shot are rarer, compositionally. The accounts are visually insular in nature, looking inward at the family unit. Even in those which feature a strong sense of geographic embedding within a location, this is presented as the family within this place (as opposed to community).

This is a process of sense making which the mothers are conducting in creating content. The posts convey (frequently strong, assertive) positions of an array of larger issues - marriage, religion, the role of family, parenthood in a social context, belonging, place and future selves. These often emerge from both the self in the form of thoughts to responses to events as they unfold, or reflective practice on past events. #007 presents a strong example of this, openly documenting her emotional response to the birth of a Downs Syndrome baby whom was undiagnosed prior to birth. This period of adjustment, crisis and sense making eventually became the material for a book documenting this period in her life. The memoir became a New York Times bestseller - additionally highlighting that even a complex SNS ecosystem exceeds the binary conception of the on and offline being separate spheres.

The feeds blur and mix lifestyle, a persona and offline identity work in being parents, professionals and people. Mothers have long struggled to reconcile their professional status with motherhood (Hays, 1996). Becoming a mother is still associated with stalled career prospects and lower pay, in the face of limited options to work flexibly or find appropriate part time work. Interestingly, some of the mothers appeared to have identified that they can leverage this shift to market their parental identity and lifestyle, either in terms of gaining a positive audience or in monetary gain. It is important to note in this distinction that the latter is not quantifiable as a larger gain. The identity work, positive feedback and affirmation of belonging which may come from a body of followers is socially significant. Working online from home, with children present appears to be a modern iteration of small scale female entrepreneurship. By profiting from sharing their daily, lived experience the account holders appear to forming a modern day cottage industry.

### **6.8.3 Audience Interaction**

Combined with the everyday nature of content and frequent posts, a sense of artificial closeness and familiarity comes into being for the audience. The mothers are accessible in way traditional celebrities are not. So much is known and available that some followers clearly feel they 'know' the mothers despite being strangers. This artificial closeness appears as an important feature of the comment threads, with some followers stating they have followed a particular mothers for extended periods of years.

However, the comment threads did not present a true space of communicative exchange. They are utilised, near universally as a line of communication to the account holder posting the thread. That is, followers them them to respond to the mother's posts with a comment, or to ask questions. The mothers acknowledge the comments, making it known that they read them and affirming their audience's responses. However, this is slightly tokenistic by virtue of the volume of comments received on a popular account with a high number of followers.

Followers present an exaggerated, hyperbolic response to the content posted by mothers they follow and engage with. Children are universally described as cute, gorgeous, beautiful and adorable. Images themselves are responded too positively as compositions, with a common comment being a simple variant on "I love this picture" or "This is so cute". This extends to the perception of the mothers

as individuals, with an amplified response to the account holders qualities or attributes. As such, humorous anecdotes are inevitably described as hilarious, and minor achievements lauded as evidence of creativity, talent and skill.

Comment threads commonly contain multiple followers requesting to know where a particular, popular item is available for purchase. These include children's clothing, furniture and home accessories. The mothers appear happy to provide this information and, in some cases, seek to suggest alternatives if the original item is no longer available. They appear comfortable with this emulation of their style or aesthetic, particularly when it refers to items of children's wear. In fact one mother (#001) specifically has a heading on her blog entitled "Shop my Instagram" featuring styled clothing shots shared on Instagram, with direct links to buy the items featured.

Whilst followers were affirming and supportive of the tenets of intensive motherhood being displayed, it was when mothers appeared to be exploiting their feed and monetising content in an overt or new way that followers demonstrated criticism and discontent. Instagram, with its heavy weight on authenticity and honesty in discussing motherhood is also a sphere heavily involved in advertising, paid collaborations and influencers. This tension can be viewed as epitomising the internal conflict of marketisation versus intensive motherhood described by mothers in a pre-internet era in Hays (1996) work. It is now however, played out in a mediated manner online.

However, in contrast, the followers act in a protective manner more generally, self-policing criticism within comment threads on images when there are instances of criticism levelled at the mothers, and shutting down dissent collectively.

In light of the noted perception within media reporting and wider society on the shallow, consumerist nature of Instagram (The Telegraph, 2014; The Guardian, 2016a) the complexity of the images and expression suggests a renewed need to evaluate Instagram beyond these framings, as sources of support and communities of interest for users.

#### **6.8.4 Family Cohesion**

The images broadly retain some key characteristics of analogue family photo albums. The accounts do not document visually – or describe in textual captions – negative experiences of family. Dissatisfaction, discord and negative events are

omitted. As outlined in Chapter 2, this is a key feature of family photography (Rose, 2012; Hirsch, 1981, Spence and Holland, 1991).

Here, there is evidence that images of ‘no harm done’, described by Chalfen (1987, p.78) as tokenistic references to reality being messy, are employed. However, these were only referenced minimally. They deviate from the traditional album format somewhat, in that the mishap is not featured in the image. Instead, the image depicts the events prior, or after the event, where all is well. The image caption is used to outline the event as anecdote.

The family here is represented as an idyllic state. The mothers are all members of nuclear family units. There is no record of, or allusion to tensions within the relationships. The mothers frame their roles as being “lucky” and “blessed” to have husbands so supportive and virtuous. The one exception (detailed in Section 6.4.3) provides a lone commentary on marriage being challenging. However, this in itself presents a reconciled presentation which ultimately stresses the commitment and positive state of being married despite the difficulties. As such, it is not shared as an ultimate threat or precursor to marital breakdown.

Hays (1996, p.97) describes intensive motherhood as “women’s work on behalf of the sacred child”. This maternal value system of taking of responsibility for parenting, psychologically, as much as practically, is evident on Instagram. The mothers depict children as angelic and lovely, which is reflected back in the follower’s comments. These comments centre on children being cute, adorable and thus serve to reinforce the common language of the comment threads in this demographic. These were observed to be highly saccharine in nature. However, in itself this is notable for striking a resemblance to Hay’s (1996, p.98) observation that

As you listen to the mothers, it may seem at times that they are simply speaking in clichés, trite truisms, and all too well worn out phrases. But clichés and truisms should not be underestimated or discounted – they often highlight recurring cultural themes.

Broadly these accounts portray motherhood as an identity and role which transcends other roles, with children as the focus of attention. This portrayal places them in idealised family units, and retains the elevation of children into a state of virtue.

### 6.8.5 SNS Ecosystems

Even within the context of producing content for a multimedia platform, and across blogs, Instagram and other apps or websites, it was noted within this chapter that the mothers were all successful account holders, measured by the metric of follower number. This is suggestive that they were all proficient in online platform use across sites other than Instagram. As part of a complex pattern of web and mobile app ecosystems, Instagram functions not only as a medium to view mothers image production and sharing behaviours, but also how they direct their readership between Instagram and their blogs (primarily).

It was highly visible that not only were depictions of family life idealised, but that the narratives are very inward facing. The content is very highly focused upon the singular family unit, where the husbands are mostly invisible and the majority of the content is mother / child centric. This places the mother as the persona and branding identity. This maternal branding appears to be cohesive across the multiple platforms the mothers use. As such, this centrality of identity as a mother is replicated in identity expression online at this life stage and is not unique to Instagram. The cohesive nature of the identity expression may be a key to the success of the account holders, as they present the audience with a well defined content type and personality as a known quantity.

Comments directed at followers do reference that Instagram is perceived, as a platform, to have a sense of community. Unlike other platforms though, communication with the audience is on the whole unidirectional. That is, followers use the comments as a direct line of response to the mothers (there is little interaction between followers in comment threads). The mothers can – and do – acknowledge this engagement, but the substantive bulk of activity is posting images and not engaging in discourse.

As such, this raises questions regarding how the feeling of community is formed, experienced and maintained. The mothers refer to community feeling, generally as a result of having gained the support or encouragement of their followers en masse. However, it is logical to assume that for followers – unless also successful enough to exploit this social capital – that their experience of community will be different as audience, rather than content producers.

There is evidence of common use of blogs as linked too from Instagram biographic text and direct links from image captions. In tandem, there are a few

individual mentions of Snapchat and YouTube. However, explicit links from either Instagram biography text or image captions to other social media platforms was not a frequent practice. For those with blogs, these may act as a hub which lists all social media accounts associated with that mother. Instagram acts as a satellite site, which directs traffic back to this central hub.

Whilst the mothers clearly display a high level of digital literacy, Instagram itself provides a structure which provides a fixed layout and relatively low need to write lengthy prose. This structure places the images within an appealing, uniform layout. This clean layout places the photographs in a display setting which contains a significant portion of white space and is optimised for display across mobile app and desktop display. Thus, whilst the images are of a high quality, it cannot be overlooked that Instagram is designed to facilitate and support their presentation to an audience with no technical skill or input required. When faced with creative (and potentially technical) control and a longer form text capacity, there is a variance in the mother's content quality on blogs in comparison to Instagram. Presentation was generally of a lower quality overall.

The insularity of the accounts in their focus, and relative isolation from other SNS platforms can again be interpreted as a representation of Hays (1996, p.64) conceptions of how intensive motherhood situates itself against a backdrop of the external forces outside of the domestic sphere. This theorisation states "In child rearing, love is the foundation." If children personify goodness, by virtue of being innocent and inherently trusting and pure, this is oppositional to the adult world of capitalist society. The characteristics of acting in self-interest, in competitive processes for material gain are placed as the polar opposites of childrearing. As such, mothering ought to be insulated from these forces. This insularity depicted within the Instagram accounts appears to codify what Hay's describes as maintaining the goodness of children as "a marker of the child's distance from the "corrupt" modern world". This may additionally account for the preoccupation with 'natural' parenting and a reticence for children to be overly immersed in technology, with numerous hashtags regarding childhood being free, natural or wild.

#### **6.8.6 Lifestyle**

Lifestyle is in some respects a self-styled projection that is deliberately cultivated for presentation to an SNS audience. From the aspirational qualities

projected from organised, beautiful and well-resourced homes, to the choice to include only positive aspects of parenting. However, some of this is linked more intrinsically to personal identity and values, for example in the case of #007 in her desire to foster a disabled positive environment for her daughter, #018s remote, self-sufficient lifestyle or #017s strong expression of female entrepreneurship and business ownership.

The sheer level of mundanity and granular detail acts to individualise each account. They cannot help but appear distinct when you know what each kitchen looks like, the locality, and each mother herself. In a sense 'lifestyle' is where the aesthetics and implied cultural contexts of discrete images become read as longer-term narratives. Collectively the body of information, both explicit and implicit from an Instagram feed builds to form a sense of the account holder and their own understanding of their identity.

The lifestyle elements here are strongly expressed and continually reinforced. They are also in many ways contradictory. The mothers express a child centric identity and lifestyle. "Everything I do, I do for these four" (#019) with high levels of sentiment posted surrounding idealised motherhood, the idealised child and the perfect family. If a professional identity is expressed in tandem, it is self-contained and discrete (and linguistically subjugated when discussed along with being a mother as something done for the children). The crossover occurs when negotiating maternal guilt (and taking blame for this as a parental flaw or "bad mummying"), or expressing a sentiment on how positive it is to have such a well-rounded and fulfilled life.

Visually these lifestyles do not align to those an 'ordinary' parent may identify with. Pictorially the children, whilst being the centre of the persona and lifestyle are side-lined in practical ways. There is scant evidence in the photos of the impact they have upon beautiful, pristine homes. There were no images of the practical, daily detritus of childcare – no stair gates, fire guards, safety fixtures or fittings. These are inevitably, in the real world, ugly and intrusive pieces of equipment which value function over form.

Aside from the safety equipment around the home, most family homes would include the unavoidable presence of brightly coloured plastic in the form of toys and games. These elements do not intrude upon the Instagram accounts, there are no changing mats, push along toys, toy boxes, puzzles or changing bags visible on any floors. Interestingly, even for young children featured heavily and

repeatedly, there is no repeated presence of a chosen cuddly toy or comforter which in real world scenarios can become a ubiquitous attachment to a young child, particularly when sleeping. To an extent these omissions are only visible to those whom have lived experience of parenting young children – a childless viewer may not even note the absence of these elements or their departure from the real world households encountered with young children.

That is to say that it is the text that centralises motherhood, making statements about the emotional and cultural geography of parenthood. The images serve to picture the experience as a beautified, organised and modern lifestyle which has continued undisrupted by parenthood. The work of mothering is emotional labour in this context, carried out within carefully curated homes free from clutter, highlighting Hays (1996, p.64) assertion about the currency of motherhood being described in terms of love and nurturing.

The most aesthetically considered lives here are not secretive about sharing the brands and sources of their possessions, signalling their purchasing power and means. Money does not need to be addressed because it is not a daily level of concern in an aspirational lifestyle. The consumerist thread which runs through the accounts renders disposable income as a given. Resources which are not monetary are included under the umbrella of being blessed and lucky. When provided with an all-expenses paid holiday to Florida, as a travel blogger, money did get a rare explicit reference. This was framed as being so grateful for the “opportunity” provided in actualising a dream. The cost is obscured in the language of aspiration, wonder and opportunity, as opposed to being a free holiday paid for as PR for a middle market travel company brand.

In fact this pervasive positioning of lifestyles as golden, is closely aligned to the framing used in representing children. The well-resourced child is angelic and well behaved. Thus, they do not disrupt the aesthetically beautiful homes and lives they inhabit, which remain adult and serene. They are also deserving of being provided with beautiful things, to belong in carefully curated lifestyles.

Once again, the images themselves raise parallels with print magazines and editorial. Some of the photographs would not be unusable as magazine covers promoting certain lifestyle types. The first of these are those which bear a resemblance to interior design magazines. The children themselves do not jar with the background aesthetic, presenting a uniform appearance of modernity.

Alternate, but equally as strongly expressed is the self-styled ‘alternative’ lifestyle. This was encountered in varying forms. The first was the eco conscious,

self-sufficient lifestyle. All of these act as broad containers which shape and frame all the content shared, from environment, aesthetic, purchasing choices to parenting philosophy. The eco concerned lifestyles present their parenting as closely connected to the natural, linking the importance of technology free childhoods and the importance of nature and simple living. There is no implied tension to presenting a simple lifestyle, in touch with nature, and presenting this to an audience on Instagram, via internet connected devices and sharing the children's protected status from technology on a public account to a substantial number of followers. These accounts did appear to have an air of practicality about them, living in remote settings and engaging in craft, cooking and producing their own supplied in a lifestyle closely aligned to their personal value systems.

A different facet of this is a more eclectic, faux spiritual accounts which not only endorse a range of scientifically unsound practices, but promote them. This included the broad umbrella of 'earth mothering' which encompasses an extensive range of practices that the account holders held an affinity towards. This included some common themes of attachment parenting, yoga and natural birthing. The more fringe elements include a stated desire to not engage with conventional medicine, placental consumption, co-sleeping, umbilical cord artworks, homeopathy and personal belief systems. These visually conformed to a range of stereotypical tropes, displaying tie dye fabrics, dreamcatchers, Buddha motifs and handmade crafts. The stronger the lifestyle (frequently denoting the strength and degree of its departure from the norm) the more strongly followers appeared to display homophily. The lifestyles displayed appeared to draw followers who themselves subscribed and identified with the practices, to the comment threads. This was particularly true of those home educating their children.

Others, such as #001 style their online persona and lifestyle in more mainstream and typically popular Instagram friendly forms. Stating on her profile that she curates her life as "modern vintage", the whole package of clothing, appearance, home and image types form a cohesive whole. This aesthetic lifestyle indicates not only the resources and dedication to doing so, but in marketing terms is quite sophisticated in being so integrated and aligned. Staying on brand and ensuring that the brand is communicated in the same way across all channels and content is one which concerns commercial ventures, particularly in negotiating online presences.

What these lifestyles do provide is a means for followers to identify forms of aspiration which are relevant to them. The most active and engaged bodies of

followers were observed on accounts which presented the most conventional forms of beauty, both personally and in their wider visual choices. However, to those lifestyles which were alternative, followers appeared to value and identify with the figures, providing them a model of aspiration.

The lifestyles being presented are demographically constrained, being limited to white, heterosexual, middle class and educated women. Interestingly the lifestyles they present not only reflect back this lack of diversity, but additionally represent an idealised family structure. These model nuclear family units, with married parents who generally undertake gendered roles. The husbands presented here go to work outside of the home, with the mothers acting as primary caretaker for the children. When women on Instagram do maintain professional identities, this comes across as something they prize highly but verbally subjugate as something done for their children, as opposed to personal fulfilment or economic necessity.

## **6.9 Summary**

This study of successful mothering accounts on Instagram indicates that in this context, there are two primary deviations from analogue family album practices.

The first significant deviation remains the increased levels of mundanity afforded by digital photography. Despite the high levels of aesthetic care and image production skill on display, these are still applied to the capture and description of daily lived experience (as was observed in Phase 1 of study). These mundane narratives sit within larger overarching narratives which chart the events of the mothers and their families as life courses.

The second key deviation is that the images as photographs have become aesthetic artefacts. As public displays in a visual medium associated with presenting stylised depictions of daily life (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016), the compositions have become beautified. The images are glossy, considered captures. This renders the image taking practices as more deliberate than the image taking practices of analogue equivalents. Particularly for images of children, these depictions have moved away from the original conception of the analogue family snapshot as casual, spontaneous and informal.

These deviations can be considered as uniquely linked to the intensification of motherhood described by Hays (1996). The societal pressures to perform

mothering as an active state of 'doing' can be interpreted as contributing to the representation of maternal experience presented on Instagram. Maternal identity is framed as fundamentally central to the mothers being, with alternate roles subjugated in their prominence or importance. Children and husbands are relentlessly described in idealised terms, with the family state one which the mothers are blessed, grateful or lucky to have.

The overt sentimentalisation of the family state not only retains the qualities of selective representation in family photography as a trope, but extends it. In an Instagram context, the concept of maternal tension becomes acutely associated with 'bad mummying'. As such, any dissatisfaction or struggle with maternal identity or experience, however trivial, is presented as a personal failing. This reconciles the presentation of parenting presented as a glamorous lifestyle, with angelic children in an idyllic family unit as an authentic depiction of reality, with the mothers failing to meet their part in responding appropriately to this blessed and fortunate lifestyle.

## 7. (Phase 3) Parental Display and the Extended Self

### 7.1 Overview

Building on findings from Phases 1 and 2 of study, this chapter explores the Instagram feed as a representation of parental selfhood. This is conducted through the lens of possessions and identity work as part of consumerist culture. This addresses the final research question, which poses:

- How can the images and discourse produced by mothers be interpreted as evidence of extended selfhood (Belk, 1988) via parental identity expression?

A persistent cultural perception of Instagram is that it propagates self-obsession, typifying the accusation levelled at social media of presenting superficial representations of life. Whilst extant published studies have explored Instagram influencers (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016) and begun to explore parenting in this context (for example Locatelli, 2017; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017; Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017), these do not fully explore posted images as complete social artefacts.

This doctoral work proposes an integrated approach to analysing the staging of images that addresses the role of possessions and the homes on display in domestic photography on Instagram. In analogue compositions, the focus of family photography was principally people focused. In this context there is some compositional deviation in content and non-person elements within the images. Background features within the images become subject of discussion, and less extraneous than in previous formats.

With the previous phase of work highlighting that successful mothering accounts display a high degree of aesthetic consideration in both their homes, styling and attire, these elements in the photographs clearly have a significant role in communicating meaning. As outlined in Section 3.6, the extended self provides a well described theoretical framework in which to evaluate image production for Instagram. This chapter provides a re-examination of the account data presented in Chapter 6, from a differing theoretical perspective.

## **7.2 Images of the Extended Self**

Analogue family photography had inherent constraints as a medium which relied upon consumable film. Aside from the noted tropes of documentation of seasonal conformism in capturing summer holidays and Christmas, for example, family photography was at its core a record of its members (Bourdieu, 1965/1990). As such it presented the family through a chronological recording of pregnancy, new babies and expanding families with subsequent children. These members (and extended, wider family) are then documented growing up. The surroundings and objects are scene setting to where the people captured within were at the time, or were doing. They provide a visual context to the portraits, as opposed to being the point of the images. King (1984, p.19) describes this as a record of “the family doing well in the world”. Within this data, there are clear deviations from this core focus. These can broadly be categorised as: non-people focused compositions, prominence of objects and identity work through integration of items into an assembled selfhood.

### **7.2.1 Objects as Aesthetic Communication**

The mothers post both images which are of high quality, but also borrow aspects of editorial and printed magazine layouts. These images are posted for their aesthetic appeal, as opposed to highlighting the practical attributes of an item. Items such as stationery or household items which are cute or decorative are commonly formed into the focus of the composition. These are photographs of the objects as decontextualized from their wider surroundings, or purpose. This foregrounds the efforts to curate the items into appealing arrangements and attractive images.

These images themselves can be viewed as part of a larger practice of aestheticising the mundane (as outlined in the previous phase of work). However, as individual compositions focused around objects they can be reinterpreted as providing insight into identity expression. The labour invested in curation of objects clearly exceeds that noted in analogue photography. This curation of the self is both public and object focused. Forming and arranging objects into styled collectives represents invested labour, and creates a new collective meaning for the arrangement.

The images in Figure 44 demonstrate the varying results of this staging process. Images A, B and D typify the process as creative and intentional. All three images have additional elements added; flowers in Image A, decorative crepe paper circles in B and additional garnish in D. Not integral to the object capture, these are introduced purely to increase the aesthetic quality of the final result.

Images C and F display examples of the everyday made aspirational. Both are ostensibly ordinary in the content, with the first containing a cup and saucer of tea next to a folded t-shirt. However, this is carefully and artfully themed with the slogan on the t-shirt reading “My cup of tea” folded to display this. Placed next to the tea, this visual theming forms a still life effect against an decorative spotted background. Whilst example F features the serving of food, this is stylistically elevated into a magazine style presentation. The tonal matching of the striped cloth and black and white banding of the plates creates the impression of an image which has been set up and photographed for maximum visual impact. This care is mirrored in Image E where the arrangement has been laid out with the intention of capturing a full frame image. The multiple holiday themed objects are carefully laid out in an orderly arrangement of so called ‘holiday essentials’.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F

**Figure 44 - Editorial style flat lays and compositions**

Belk (1988, p.140, 144) outlines this in terms of post-acquisition bonding. This is broadly outlined as the investment of energy, or positive feeling derived from the response of others. Within this context this can be construed as the engagement (likes, comments and follower count) the mothers receive for the images posted.

The second element of 'invested energy' is notable for its applicability to the production of Instagram images by the mothers. Styled arrangements here encapsulate not only acquisition and ownership of objects (with the associated status implied by demonstrating the resources to have purchasing power) – but active possession.

Other styled shoots accompany a giveaway linked to specific brand or product. In fact, the comparison to magazine editorial and shoot styling is fundamentally not inaccurate to the historical roots of magazine production. The term magazine itself is derived from the Arabic makzin, which denoted a storehouse or repository, and came to be understood as a publication comprised of different content collated into one (Oxford Dictionary, 2018). The Instagram feeds here may reimagine this into a repository of selfhood. This combines content with dual purposes, from paid advertorials to intentionally promotional content, to images designed to promote the mothers as a brand, and content which represents personal photographic practice.

## **7.2.2 Temporality and Narrative**

González (1995, p.133) presents an alternate theorisation of the same principle of objects as supporting of selfhood. Describing the capacity of things to have personal influence as “mental prosthesis” it is asserted that by extension items form an autotopography collectively:

In the creation of an autotopography – which does not include all personal property but only those objects seen to signify an “individual” identity – the material world is called upon to present a physical map of memory, history, and belief. The autobiographical object thus becomes a prosthetic device: an addition, race, and a replacement for the intangible aspects of desire, identification, and social relations (p.134)

However, in line with González (1995) and the conceptual autotopography of items, other displays are frequently strongly associated with a temporal aspect.

Whilst both Belk (1988) and Gonzalez (1995, p.134) highlight the indexical nature of linking objects to memory and reminiscence, here this is more closely aligned to record making in real time, as ongoing. As result of this alignment to lived experience, this often linked imagery to seasonality in the mothers image production. Within the data, compositions frequently feature items or scenes which are unambiguous in their association with a given season. For example, autumn has images of pumpkins and leaves in autumnal shades, where as winter has images of snow and Christmas, and summer to flowers and beaches (see Figure 45).

The image based communication of Instagram appears to magnify what Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.32) observed as seasonal conformism in analogue image taking. This primarily referred to the predictable inclusion of main seasonal events such as summer holidays and Christmas. This remains as relevant in this context as in analogue albums. However, it is magnified as a theming tool for image taking.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E

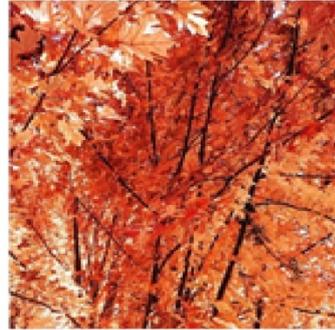


Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 45 - Seasonally themed images**

Items are often seasonal, and described in terms of acquisition in line with new fashion seasons, or annual events such as summer holidays. This denotes both the status of having resources to allocate to purchase new items, but also that the mothers are invested in cyclic trends in fashion, for example.

Fashion images in particular focus on transitions between seasons and “wardrobes” of clothing for given seasons. This seasonality provides framing to thematically style images and provide the opportunity for particular backdrops such as weather, clothing and product availability to be integrated into staging.

Whilst Belk (1988) does not outline how possessions which are integrated into the extended self may cycle through practical use, these accounts highlight that

certain objects have continued high status or personal value, but their logistical purpose is bounded. The capital associated with a high-status item, for example designer sunglasses, appears to remain when it is placed in a suspended state, packed in storage and then regain relevancy when the items are unpacked at the beginning of summer and reintroduced as an appropriate item.

### **7.2.3 Active Possession**

Belk (1988, p.145) additionally highlights that identity is a composite of multiple brands and distributed across a range of items. However, the practice of deliberate, creative labour to form items into display, and capture, exceeds these descriptions. In this original description ownership is somewhat passive.

In addition, ownership is framed by the status value of the objects in Belk's 1988 outline and as such is conceived as an external worth, which is assigned externally and bought into. This active arrangement (as in Figure 44) adds meaning and cultural value, assigning a worth to the items which exceeds their individual associations. This differs from collecting objects, which are typically thematic (and not generally purposeful).

Here, items of the extended, aesthetic self are treated in an active state of possession where they are organised, captured and displayed. This active demonstration of the extended self transforms items into a whole self-concept that exceeds their collective value as relatively low status items - as compared to Belk's high-status examples of cars, expensive investment items of furniture or fine artworks. These items, whilst potentially premium brands, are not necessarily inherently high-status objects in their own right, but often more mundane and functional ones.

### **7.2.4 Possessional Gaze**

Faircloth and Murray (2014, p.3) highlights that motherhood is in increasingly moralised and political sphere, leading to a high degree of critical commentary on the 'right' ways to parent. Whilst the pressure to appear a good mother is sociologically real, the family snapshot is a multi-layered artefact. There are visual tropes within the data which demonstrate a particular style of portraiture which is emergent.

As part of the previously noted highly sentimentalised and stylised aesthetics across the accounts, the images of children are careful representations which reflect this. Belk (1988, p.141) cites that the integration of young children into an extended selfhood as more viable than for adults due to their lack of agency or independence.

Young children are carefully photographed to exploit their cultural capital in eliciting responses which frame them as cute and appearing as part of modern families. The public display of these images by the mothers on Instagram results in a self-referencing awareness of the potential capital of the images. This awareness is seen below in Figure 46. In the caption, via humour, the value of the image as cute and worthy of capture is highlighted as oppositional to the parental need to retain and affirm boundaries to young children. As Hays asserts, the common language and clichés by which parenting is referenced by can provide an insightful lens as to the everyday values and common experiences which permeate parenthood (Hays, 1996, p.98).



**Figure 46 - Example of image captioning**

This can be interpreted, in this theoretical lens as a form of parental identity work. In taking the images, the mothers express a possessional gaze. This gaze represents a maternal pride in asserting 'you, are part of my identity and make me

who I am'. This relational dynamic is observed in Chapter 6 as being established and expressed explicitly within the caption texts of images, however it appears here as mirrored in the images themselves. This relation was frequently stated by the mothers in their image captions, as part of sentiments which projected virtues onto the children and affirmed their gratefulness for their family life.

In this sense, the extended self is a component of the transition to parenthood and one which may be commonly overlooked. The images, which have been accused of being exploitative within articles in the media (for example, Guardian, 2018b; The Independent, 2017a) can be viewed as a visual representation of the extended self, highlighting that maternal identity is distributed and possessional. It is within the context of Instagram and the aesthetic sensibility which comes with it, that the extended self becomes beautified and hip. This is demonstrated in the types of imagery of children, as shown below in Figure 47.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D

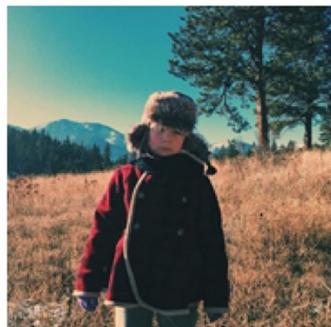


Image E



Image F

**Figure 47 - Instagram portraits of children**

The ubiquitous wall-as-background portrait (Images, A, B and C) and child with nature (Images D, E, and F) pictures can be considered beyond the scope of superficiality commonly attributed to them. Whilst they deviate visually from the analogue family album in being glossier and more self-consciously appealing as

compositions – as artefacts of identity transition and affirmation they may remain closer to the original form than an initial assessment may suggest. Titus (1976, p.526) highlights that for parents “Observing the child is also an important role behaviour because it is the key to learning when to respond to the child’s needs”. In tandem, this is linked (ibid p.525) to the suggestion that family photography as a practice can be considered a self-reflexive means to assess identity performance:

It seems reasonable that the actors themselves observe their own performance when they pose for and also look at the photos. In addition, anyone to whom they choose to show the photos will see the performance. So one can speculate that the family members as actors will strive to leave impressions in a fixed fashion, such as “I am a nurturant mother”

As such, the images in Figure 47 can be interpreted as demonstrating that the mothers are focused upon their children. Having graduated from fully dependent infants, the mothering here is demonstrated as still attentive and efficacious. The children are happy (Image B), in appropriate weather attire (Images A and E) and subject to an attentive oversight which documents their actions (D and F). Titus highlights that documentation of the routine reinforces parental identity through capturing the repetitious as normal activity for the role.

### **7.3 Hierarchies of Integration**

Belk (1988) provides a well described theory of the elements which regulate the degree to which individual categories of possessions are integrated into the self. These have a hierarchical structure, with items not equal in their degree of inclusion into a collective formation of identity. Broadly he suggests that inanimate objects are more successful as subjects of integration over people and pets. This is due to the central importance of control. As a highly individualistic process, and one of significant psychological importance in forming a sense of self, maintaining control over the assemblage is imperative. As a result, the free will of others presents a challenge to this process as they not only seek to form their own selfhoods but act with autonomy in ways which can result in conflict.

Belk has a number of other works which he integrates into his overall conception of the extended self. He suggests that both McClelland (1951) and Prelinger (1959) provide key input into his conceptualisation of the extended self. These suggest that hierarchies on integration would include literal self in the form of

body and mental capacity to act autonomously are of primary importance (even within the self, differing body parts are culturally denoted as having more perceived affinity to the self than others). Outside of the self, possessions and then select others would form the main basis of spheres of influence.

Whilst Belk (1988) was published prior to digital photography becoming mainstream, and significantly before the advent of Instagram, it also draws on works which pre-date its own publication by a number of years. Whilst the diverse range of sources provide a well-developed argument, as previously addressed in this chapter, Belk's 2013 position on the internet as a place of communication is posed as less well developed. Dealing with specific points, it fails to critically engage with interrogation of the basic premise of whether the hierarchies suggested hold true in online contexts. In light of this absence, a sample of images in the dataset were analysed to provide an indicative measure of whether the hierarchy of integration suggested by Belk (1988) is visible in snapshot images on Instagram.

A sub sample of 600 images, spanning three accounts were analysed to devise a codebook of image types based on content. Each image was coded once, with an image containing the mother coded as 'self' even if a child is included, as per Belk's assessment that bodily self is rated above all external others. The mean of each category across the three accounts is included in the table below. This is not intended to be a definitive exploration of the hierarchy, but an indicative measure of whether Belk's hierarchies are discernible in this representational format. Images which are domestically situated (either of the interior or exterior) are categorised as home. Those which are more abstract, outside of the home, outdoor scenes or decontextualised (for example a large flowering bush, which may be in the home garden, or a park but this is not discernible) are coded as wider environment. 'Objects and artworks' encompasses still life style images of objects or decorative artworks, such as vases of flowers, pictures of artworks on walls or items which are neither food or fashion items.

The findings here represent a small sample, designed to provide an initial exploration of whether Belk's hierarchy of integration is discernible in this context, and if visible, to what extent it conforms to the expected criteria described. The largest deviance from the extended self-hierarchy suggested is the reversal of the self as primarily the expression of identity. This may be indicative that the extended

self is expressed in an overall manner, but is secondary to the representational conventions and tropes of photographic practice.

<b>IMAGE TYPE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
<b>CHILD / CHILDREN (NO ADULTS)</b>	82.3
<b>SELF</b>	54.7
<b>HOME ENVIRONMENT (HOME INTERIORS AND EXTERIOR GARDENS)</b>	17.3
<b>FOOD</b>	14
<b>WIDER ENVIRONMENT (OUTSIDE HOME, LANDSCAPES, NON-DOMESTIC)</b>	9.3
<b>FASHION</b>	8
<b>OBJECTS (INDIVIDUAL ITEMS, COLLECTIONS OR FLAT LAYS OF OBJECTS)</b>	3
<b>ARTWORKS (ON WALLS, PICTURES OF ART WHERE FOCUS OF THE SHOT)</b>	3
<b>CONCEPT / SENTIMENT (SLOGANS, MOTIVATIONAL QUOTE)</b>	2
<b>PET</b>	1
<b>SPOUSE</b>	1
<b>OTHER ADULTS</b>	0

**Table 2 - Frequency of image types encountered**

The strength of understanding outlined in literature in Chapter 2, and the findings in Chapter 5 which suggest that Instagram has not fundamentally disrupted inherited social knowledge as the norms and content of the family snapshot. These may combine to render practice here as primarily regulated by these visual conventions. The characteristics of image taking may render the need to consider the hierarchy of objects as co-present with bodily selves. This places the extended format of Instagram useful for providing textual description to the images and discourse around the meanings.

However, what this does provide is a supporting theory to conceptualising selfies. The impetus to turn the camera on the image taker is apparent from the inception of photography and does not represent a new practice either digitally, or online (Frosh, 2015). What the extended self provides is a conceptualisation of the bodily self as highly important in maintaining a sense of identity, as equally as a psychological self. This physicality, captured on film provides a supportive documentation of the physical self. As a result, photography of the self is a form of identity marking and identity expression. Particularly in the maternal selfie, an image of selfhood captures both the social transition into, and inhabiting of, a parental identity (Titus, 1976, p.526).

As pictorial artefacts, family images represent multi-layered representational forms in which the sociological complexity of parenting is captured. It is also indicative that images are primarily focused upon the capture of people, as opposed to objects featured alone. Despite the prominence of children, the extremely low incidence of images of spouses featured alone – one instance alone was encountered – does broadly conform to the Belkian assertion that children can readily be integrated into an extended self, but that autonomous adults are less easily brought into an extended selfhood.

Whilst the children are reliant upon parental input, other adults are both similarly attempting to form and negotiate their own selfhood and have both independence and agency. As noted in Chapter 6, the accounts are both lacking in other extended networks of adult relatives or friends, and are very insular. In addition, within the Instagram environment the desire to make images appealing to followers is present. Bakhshi et al (2014) highlight that images which feature faces receive more engagement than those which do not, in both likes and comments. This renders the absence of any other adults (who again as adults, are competing for their own identity assertion) but high frequency of both the mothers and their

children an effective strategy in both documenting the self but producing content which produced positive audience engagement.

In terms of objects, Belk (1988) places these as pivotal in forming and maintaining a sense of self. These collected possessions are subject to not only their status as highlighted within the extended self, but to prevailing fashions, practicality, aesthetic appeal and affordability. Whilst food has both an everyday role in life, its prominence here is one which is linked to Instagram posting norms, as opposed to a stated prominence derived from hierarchies of the extended self. Marwick (2015) notes that popular accounts profiled posted a high number of photographs of food, with it a highly popular image type on Instagram.

Within the examples shown in Figure 48, Images A, B, F, H and I in particular depict either tea or coffee, arranged artfully. This is used to denote a number of differing connotations, as cosy (yet minimalistically stylish) domesticity, or as 'me time'. Alternatively, as in images A and I, there are emergent compositional types which denote relaxation as aesthetically considered. These both style a cup, with a book, taken from above. Both feature predominantly white backgrounds, styled with differing textures introduced in the form of a knitted blanket, ceramic plate or plaited fibre coaster.

Images G and I both feature pie, while Images D and E feature cake and ice cream. These images frequently feature sweet foods, linking it with treats, self-care and domesticity. This linking of food and drink with domesticity - and thus sentimentality, is literally spelled out in Image B, where the coffee cup is artfully placed on a chalkboard background which spells out "Love" against a hand drawn floral motif.

Its significance for the platform is reflected in media coverage, with the Huffington Post UK (2018) posting a monthly round up entitled "The Top 10 Most Popular Foods On Instagram", articles offering detail on the most popular brunch foods taken by popular Instagram accounts (Metro, 2015) and numerous articles providing guidance on taking Instagram images of food (Elle, 2017). Instagram food photography influences the popularity of venues, with articles providing lists of the "most instagrammable" restaurants (London Evening Standard, 2018). As with the debate surrounding the pervasive nature of Instagram sharing in other areas, it is reported that certain restaurants have banned amateur food photography for Instagram posts as a response to its disruption of the dining experience (The Telegraph, 2017).



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 48 - Typical Instagram food photography compositions**

Overall, there was a focus on items being around people, worn by them, or featured as part of background scenes. That is, they form props and supporting imagery as part of previously identified aesthetically considered lifestyles. The Instagram accounts are insular, providing a look into the life of the mothers. As such, there was a lack of high status items (or indeed even mundane ones), posted independently. If done so, this was styled or deliberately themed as a fashion post, for example, as opposed to incidental capture. The objects of the extended self here are very much proximal to the mothers (and their children). In this context, this is not entirely unsurprising. Mothers report that their children's appearance and dress are highly important as they are a reflection not only of familial identity (Andersen et al, 2007; Hughes et al, 2015) but that they are used to signify parental

efficacy and competence (Freedman Lustig, 2004). The items in use here are demonstrating the efficacy and competence of parenthood, in ways which exceed their simple purpose. They are pictured as used within stylish settings. In fact, this high degree of integration of the parental life into identity is presented as easy and without tension. In this way, there is a certain close alignment of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) and Belk (1988) in infants becoming central to maternal gaze and identity.

#### **7.4 “This is my feed, not a public service”: Parental Image Production**

In the previous theoretical lens used on this data Hays (1996, p.64) places intensive motherhood as oppositional to functioning within a marketised society, where adults act in their own self-interest in the workplace. The domestic currency becomes love in the interests of child-rearing, as a selfless process. However, when carried out online Leppert makes a relevant point, using the Kardashians as a contemporary example (2015, p.217). As individuals for whom motherhood is a high-profile affair and whose success is based largely on social media exposure that

Whereas postfeminist entrepreneurial culture tells young women they don't need to build connections with other women, the overwhelming popularity of the Kardashians' investment in sisterhood suggests that young women do value and desire bonds with each other, even though those bonds may be in the name of a brand.

This highlights the intersection between the social, the commercial and the individual that exist online. Belk (1988, p.152) makes the point that social bonding and group identity is equally as focused around consumer culture and group identification with possessions.

Instagram is frequently posed as having either a community feeling, or as a highly commercialised sphere of the self as brand (Abidin, 2016). However, from the perspective of Belk, the two are correlated in ways which have a high level of anthropological value. Marwick (2015, p.139) frames this in terms of Instagram as a convergence of digital documentation, the proliferation of celebrity and micro-celebrity culture, and conspicuous consumption. Leppert (2015, p.218) goes on to suggest that this model of sisterhood is “entrepreneurial and productive – an antidote to the potentially alienating culture of neoliberalism that demands

enterprising individualism.” However, it may also describe the community building efforts and perception of belonging which mothers describe on Instagram.

Content creation may be posed as individual efforts to monetise content and build a brand of self, from external perspectives. However, these high level production values may be perceived by mothers as taking place within collective communities of mothers on Instagram. The positive feedback from followers and links with other successful Instagram mothers may results in a perception it is less hostile and competitive than in traditional workplaces (particularly since the model of influencer marketing often runs campaigns and collaborations with multiple bloggers for the same product simultaneously, rather than competition existing for one role).

Comparatively, despite the unrelated nature of the theoretical perspectives, this aspect of Hays (1996) ideology also has a degree of commonality with the extended self. Both are formed on theorising how individual identity is formed and navigated within wider societal economic models. Belk (1988, p.152) highlights that the invested connotations with items, figures or concepts is applicable to group identities and denotes collective belonging. The similarity between the accounts – which are aesthetically homogenous to a significant degree – not only represents emergent norms of production but may denote collective understandings on parental consumption patterns. This collective social understanding may constitute a shared understanding of the lived experience of parenthood and serve to foster both identification with the mothers and a sense of a sub-community on Instagram.

Belk (1988) does not address the intersection between personal and professional extended selfhoods explicitly, however media profiles of Instagram content production (see The Telegraph, 2018; Guardian, 2015), and studies focusing on Instagram influencers (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016) highlight the significant investment in time and labour required to produce high quality images. This labour of production on Instagram by mothers, is frequently labelled as part of influencer culture and as a result, is not described as entrepreneurship or a sphere of work in which women can utilise social capital from maternal experience in contrasting ways to other forms of employment.

### 7.4.1 The Instagram Feed as a Collective Object

The feeds in themselves represent conceptual artefacts as a whole entity. As a result, they can be conceived as having their own spheres of ownership and integration into an identity. This appears to be a reciprocal understanding by both the mothers and the audience.

#003 highlights this, for her involvement in negotiating tension with followers (see Section 6.8.1 for more detailed context on the source of the conflict and audience framing of perceived inauthentic behaviour). In defending her position on including paid for content from advertisers, she stated “this is my feed, not a public service”. She expands on this, asserting she is “entitled” to earn money from her Instagram and will continue to do so. In acting as a producer of the account, it is made plain by #003 that she views her account as ‘hers’ to monetise and suggests that people unfollow her if “you cannot allow me this”. The feed, as conceptual entity is part of #003s extended self in its own right. A critical response to the feed is taken personally precisely because the feed acts as a representational possession. Thus, an attack on the feed, is a personal attack on identity.

In fact, the surprisingly low levels of disruption, trolling or critique may suggest that the socio-technical affordances of Instagram in particular are interesting in this regard. As observed in Chapter 6, the followers police the comment threads and are intolerant to dissent or criticism of the mothers. In this sense, trolling can be positioned as a form of digital graffiti within a community space. By self-policing, the followers act as form of neighbourhood watch to protect their sphere from perceived anti-social behaviour.

Anthropologically, Belk (1988, p.144) highlights that there is a common acceptance surrounding attitudes towards labour. As a producer or creator of a product or work, culturally there remains an acceptance that individuals are then entitled and reasonable to expect to both own and/or receive reward for their labour. These attitudes are discernible on Instagram from the comment threads. They appear to broadly chime with Belk’s assessment. #001 posted regarding her being awarded the accolade of “Instagram queen” by a baby magazine publication. Her followers present variations of expressing that it is “well deserved” or “totally deserved”. This is clearly viewed as a legitimate recognition of her feed and appropriate given their own perception of #001. Interestingly one commenter explicitly outlines this position, asserting that “You reap what you sow”. This attitude appears to hold true for both gaining recognition, and for monetary gain. A

commenter on #002s feed asserts that bloggers are entitled to payments from their efforts, and the advertising which is labelled as such does not meet with resistance commonly. Monetisation itself is not inherently contentious in this context, what influences its reception is how it is approached and introduced to followers.

The invisible labour behind the creation of a popular Instagram account generally lies in the high-quality production of content and content that is considered a good fit for the platform. This also, to an extent, is a continual and prolonged effort as posting is a frequent activity. This becomes interesting when this concept of production is considered in terms of the online “attention economy”. In this culture of attention, it is asserted that for marketers have an emphasis on building “long term loyalty, trust, and credibility” (Fairchild, 2007, p.358). This is, in itself, a peculiar statement as creative content has always been produced for a mass audience, and for profit, and as a result aimed for popular appeal. However, in this context it is reminiscent of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s (1981) description of the relationship between the producer of content and the item. The term “psychic energy” is used as analogous to ‘attention’ given to something. The greater the investment in producing or making something, the higher the degree of psychic energy which becomes linked with the object. As a result, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton are essentially describing that the more labour that is invested in an endeavour, the higher degree of integration into the extended self. Therefore, Instagram becomes a platform highly linked to psychic energy (attention) both as producer, and as part of an online ecosystem driven by seeking audience engagement.

## **7.5 The Domestic Sphere**

The Instagram accounts of the mothers are focused on the domestic sphere, with Section 7.4 of this chapter demonstrating that, after images with people, scenes of the home are the most frequently posted image type.

As previously noted in Chapter 6, the homes on display are ordered and photogenic, with a high degree of care taken in the aesthetics and styling of the home presentation. Whilst this can be attributable to selling a lifestyle via Instagram (Marwick, 2015), Belk proposes a more nuanced and anthropological perspective to the home. Broadly on the value of owning objects, Belk (1988, p.139) asserts that

A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognising that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard possessions as part of ourselves.

This is not a superficial relationship, with Belk positioning the extended self as key to defining who we are, both individually and as part of collectives. As highlighted by Rose (2003) the home is commonly both the focus of family photography, but also where it is primarily curated both in albums and on display (Durrant et al, 2009; Janning and Scalise, 2015). The Instagram accounts here are focused on the home, with the domestic setting well documented and shared in the images. This process of presentation is outlined in Section 6.3.1, and illustrated in Figures 18, 19 and 20 within.

As previously noted, the interior scenes on display are pristine, modern and uncluttered. The account images cover a range of domestic scenes, rooms and locations. While this builds a picture of their priorities, equally it builds a profile of their consumer habits. This is particularly acute, given the discussions regarding where items were purchased and queries from followers about where to locate items which appeal to them to purchase for themselves. There is an open and prominent display – and discussion - of consumerism and purchasing power.

On this point, Belk (1984) and Solomon and Assael (1988) have previously outlined that identity via possessions becomes a composite of various brands, purchasing behaviours and consumption. Faced with an array of choice, as well-resourced individuals, the accounts demonstrate a range of choices made based on value judgements, appearance and personal preferences. That is;

rather than a single product or brand representing all of one's self-concept, only a complete ensemble of consumption objects may be able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self (Belk, 1988, p.140)

The Instagram accounts provide enough detail over time to build a mental image of the purchasing behaviours and power of an account holder, gaining a broad sense of this assemblage of extended self by possessions. The mothers here describe these choices in ways which assert sole ownership over them, outlining them in terms of individual action as opposed to joint ones with their husbands. This is not atypical, with literature suggesting mothers frequently make child related consumer

decisions and describe their husbands as not giving sufficient care to appearance of children (Hughes et al, 2015, Andersen et al, 2007).

The concept of acquisition of items and associated ownership in the home being of significant importance is not a new observation. Ames (1980) highlights that for key items, particularly large or expensive ones, that they become temporally bound to a family history. Not only does it mark the beginning of a “new chapter” in the lives of the family (1984, p.31) but that its presence begins to symbolise the passage of time as it becomes incorporated into memories and becomes a way of ordering memories. Aside from this link to time, the new beginning which a significant domestic object brings is aligned to status. Ames conceptualises this as a reinvigoration of the self, as “becoming more” in the family’s own eyes, but also through the knowledge that others would recognise the status value of an object and adjust their estimation of the owners upwards in light of their new ownership. This highlights that traditionally gendered objects such as cars, have the potential to act as significant prompts for increased confidence, self-esteem and an awareness of the perception of others changing when a high status, luxury item is used, over a functional and lower status model. Belk (1988, p.152) suggests that

a family is most apt to use distinct family possessions to define a family self for its members. The key consumption object in this case is the home – both the dwelling and its furnishings.

In expressing family identity, Belk suggests that the home environment is the focus of consumption, acting as a form of collective identity making. The homes on display in the Instagram images not only demonstrated access to resources to purchase home accessories and furniture – but styled them in a fashionable way, with white walls and minimal clutter frequently pictured. There was an array of currently fashionable accessories including house plants (cacti or succulents, large monstera and indoor fig plants are all currently fashionable in interior design - shown below in Figure 49).



Image A



Image B

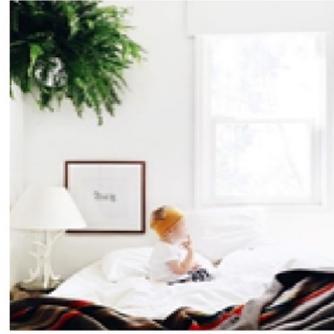


Image C



Image D

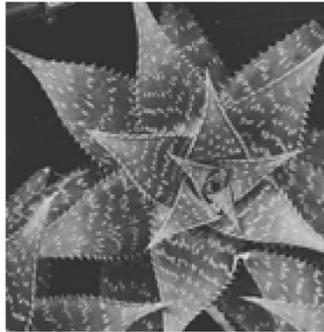


Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I



Image J



Image K



Image L

**Figure 49 - Plants as interior decor**

The acts of styling, combining and organising the objects exceeds simply purchasing them, hence the term the 'aesthetically considered life' being used

within this work to describe the lifestyles on display. Belk (1988 p.152) addresses this, asserting that

Two points are important here. The first is that the house is the symbolic body for the family. Just as clothing alters the individuals body, furnishings and decorations alters the family's body. The second important point is that the expressive imagery of the house that is definitional of the family is only fully acquired during consumption. At the point of acquisition, only a portion of the ultimate meaning of these objects is present.

In line with this, Belk additionally notes that 'family' covers a diverse range of group identities, lifestyle identities and classes. The extended family self reflects the "core self" in just the same manner as it does on an individual basis. It would therefore be reasonable to expect the images of the home shared by the mothers on Instagram to actively portray not only items which are high value monetarily – but ones which also reflect their good taste. This labour serves to provide a visual manifestation of the beliefs and desires the mothers have about their family, which can be physically viewed. This labour acts as a vessel for representing collective identity. As noted, the lives on display are aesthetically considered with obvious investment and value placed upon the home as modern, stylish and ordered.

In this regard, the term "taste maker" (De Veirman et al, 2017, p.798) as used in association with Instagram influencers is telling. Taste itself is bound both to both social class and status. Belk (1988, p.146) asserts that "People seek, express, confirm and ascertain a sense of being through what they have" but stresses that these acquisitions, particularly those externally read by others such as appearance, home, clothes and cars are deliberate, active and intentional choices made in forming our extended self. In linking taste to class, the language of the 'nouveau riche' binds taste to upbringing and the difficulty of upwards social mobility, aligning taste not as individual but a collective social canon of belonging and exclusion.

In regards to child rearing, this is not culturally insignificant to modern parenting. A 2012 Guardian article highlighting the contemporary complexities of relationships which cross a class divide, had an individual talking about his lower-class girlfriend stating as evidence of the difference, reporting that: "My girlfriend likes to dress our daughter in Disney-branded outfits, comfort her with a dummy and feed her sweets as snacks". The description of Disney branded clothing as

essentially common and tacky, denoting a lack of taste is key. Andersen et al (2007, p.94) state that

the consumption of mothers is also a very appropriate way of understanding how consumers may create extended concepts of self through their consumption, and in this case even through the consumption on the behalf of their children.

In terms of taste, Andersen et al (2007) go on to outline that for mothers in particular, that not only are infants read by others as barometers of successful parenting, (and must therefore be well turned out and thoughtfully dressed) but that there is an extensive cache of knowledge surrounding branding in terms of cost and luxury branding, taste, the social conventions of mixing and displaying these brands as status symbols. "According to the mothers in the study, children's clothing (and other goods around the child), plays an important role for the mother's ascribed status in society." (Andersen et al, 2007, p.95). In fact, Belk asserts that vicarious consumption for family is as legitimate for creating an extended self as acting individually and is not diluted when acting in a proxy fashion.

The linguistic trope observed which appeared to mitigate against decreased popularity of wealth, status and security via being "grateful", "blessed" or "so lucky" is notable here. The mothers on Instagram repeatedly acknowledge their position by making their persona appear humble and asserting they have both self-awareness and are down to earth. This avoids the obviously perfected reality on show becoming alienating to followers. Andersen et al (2007, p.95) observe and ascribe this as "conspicuous motherhood" in which a balancing act is met between wishing to demonstrate a family (and parenting) is going well and successfully, versus the risk of appearing "flashy" or deliberately conspicuous in choosing expensive options. Whilst this discussion is linked to children's outfits and clothing, it does appear to chime with the mothers approaches to their extended self as a whole on Instagram (Andersen et al, 2007, p.97):

She mentions the patterns and colours first and adds the brand, and then in the end, as a casual afterthought she adds "...or whatever it is called." This addition is a marker of the mother's insecurity, as she knows that she is not supposed to care that much; not supposed to know the brands by heart. It is however our strong impression, that this mother definitely knows, which brands she puts on her son. But by presenting the outfit like this, the mother does not flash that she dresses her child in high profile brands, which it actually is. In this way, consciously or not, she

manages to present herself as a person who does not put too much thought into brands. She tries to make her conspicuous consumption look 'not too conspicuous'!

What is interesting about the domestic sphere in this context is the notion of what is public and what is private in terms of homes shown on Instagram. Belk (1988, p.153) conceptualises the domestic sphere as representing "true selves" due to the private and secluded nature of our homes and personal spaces. There is no performative element to our homes due to control of access and our uses of them as informal spaces. (This spatial delineation appears in various forms in scholarship, for example this is framed as the private 'backstage' in Goffman's (1971) dramaturgical conception of interaction). The interior, he contrasts to the public façade of the home, where it becomes important to sustain and affirm status and conformity by mowing the lawn regularly and washing the car. These normative activities are on show and are performative displays of competence and good citizenship. Thus not a true display of the self but done for external viewers as part of a social contract of belonging.

Perhaps due to the types of pictures the mothers take, and possibly due to some lingering desire to retain privacy by not explicitly identifying their abode, there are few pictures of the actual houses of the Instagram mothers taken externally. Whilst several accounts literally featured every room in their house, and views of the garden – the external is mostly invisible.

#011 presents an example of this. The image vignette below (Figure 50) includes a selection of images posted which represent her home. This visual record only builds a detailed view of her home environment, aesthetic taste and the importance of the visual. The captions add an extra dimension, carefully explaining how spaces join together in her home and which elements her favourites are. This includes changes as they are made, future plans and what items are on a wishlist to be purchased or sourced. The images combine to provide a detailed view of room layouts which enable the various views encountered to be mentally built into their belonging in a whole home arrangement. There is a strong identification with home styling and a strong, repetitive line of questioning regarding where items were purchased, from followers.



Image A



Image B



Image C



Image D



Image E



Image F



Image G



Image H



Image I

**Figure 50 - Interior shots from #011s Instagram feed**

Questions can focus around a certain item, such as the sofa pictured in Image D. There are over 50 comments specifically related to where the sofa was purchased from, often posed by multiple users in the same comments thread under images which contain the sofa in view. #002 answers this repeatedly in her engagement with her followers. These are reproduced verbatim, with the pattern of additional and excessive punctuation interesting in themselves for forming their own element of hyperbole.

Love this sofa

@marylauren can you tell me where you got the sofa?

Where is your sofa from?! Love it????

Sweet photo. Where is this sofa from? I dig the color and mod feel.

I love the prints too but I'm actually loving that sofa haha I'm desperate to find the right one for my new place and the colour and style would be amazing!

@marylauren where did u get your couch! So pretty! And pretty family;)

I love this. where is your couch from?!

I've been admiring your couch. Where did you get it?

Other comments align #002s purchasing or curation of items with skill, or as a reflection of her abilities, or virtue. Whilst this is often reported on as a shallow and vapid reflection of Instagram as superficial, it provides the ideal platform for people to reflect on others extended selves. This voices not only the concept of status items as described by Belk, but a wider reflection on the composite collections of brands, items and effort put into an ensemble distributed self. This is expressed positively, in comments such as

Can you be my stylist? I'll just call you when I have some spending money and you buy all the pretty things?  
????????????????????

I love your style! This room is daaarling????

I want to be a mum like you when I have one ?????????????? You don't just "do the job" but you make it a lifestyle you enjoy

The accounts have literally turned Belk's conception inside out. To the online audience, the public display of competence is not a mowed lawn, or status car parked on the driveway. The private 'true self' space is now on display – minus clutter, mess or signs of lived life with children. The detritus of childcare, laundry drying or toys are noticeably absent from the images in the feeds. This relaxed, private space where there is no external gaze has become visible, and therefore modified to be acceptable to put on show. In doing so, this can be posed as having further intensified the labour of motherhood, extending the scope of what is visible and therefore subject to potential scrutiny and judgment.

## 7.6 The Extended Self as Experiential

Today with these and other digital technologies the possibilities for self-extension have never been so extensive. There is nothing deterministic about the effects of technological change, and current digital technologies are merely the latest in a human technological history that began in Paleolithic times. (Belk, 2013, p.477)

Belk (1988) focuses primarily on outlining the ways in which individuals form their extended selves. These discussions address the concepts of status, and how objects can be reacted to by others. This is framed within provoking a reaction when a prized status object is admired, for example. A number of other ideas are touched upon; the ability of possessions to have group significance, the emotional capacity of objects in sentimentality, religion, and memory making are all identified as relevant. Whilst the attachment to an object is explained in terms of integration into the self, there is not a sense of the extended self as experiential. The extended self, as a highly significant element of selfhood, must permeate both daily life and social interactions in ways which are mundane and common.

In living with an extended self, Belk (1988, pp.141-144) does address that loss, damage or vandalism of possessions can have a real psychological detriment to individuals. This visceral response to items which have a high degree of integration is taken personally, and can result in a process of loss, guilt, insecurity or anger. Items with a high degree of integration are clearly equated with a particularly acute response to damage, as the response is literally, personal. This reflection and questioning represents a form on sense making in which the self is realigned around the loss and ultimately updated through acceptance. Whilst not termed such by Belk, the position outlined in the extended self can be conceived as a form of object grief. This process is ultimately one based up nostalgia and sentimentality, as much as the material.

As previously discussed, an Instagram feed itself can be positioned as becoming a possession which is integrated in support of the self in identity making. However, these large events do not fully provide a theoretical consideration of daily, lived experience of negotiating possessions and balancing their importance within contemporary life. This cannot be a static state, but a dynamic one integrating repair, redundancy, obsolescence and changes in favour. The extended self must represent a continually fluctuating and evolving process of negotiation due to

ongoing consumerism and evolving relationships with our possessions. It is noted that altered dynamics which are made through choice and life progression are not problematic as they are made with full control. Discarding possessions or choosing to replace them is equated to identity work, highlighting that the extended self is fundamentally centred around individual control (Belk, 1988, p.143). From the hierarchy of objects types integrated, to rearranging these objects, the process is framed upon exerting control and remaining the arbiter of our extended self. Tuan (1980) asserts this is due to the fragility of the sense of self, which requires possessions to bolster and affirm. The self is in fact reliant upon actualising and codifying in order to be maintained and secure.

However, the nuances of change which must occur over time, to move between life stages is not explored in detail. The micro tensions which must occur in negotiating challenges to control are lacking in Belk's (1988) work. It would be reasonable to hypothesise that those granular challenges to an extended self would be those which challenge the state of ultimate control. This includes those which occur as necessary but are pressured by external timeframes, processes and individuals. Additionally, those which occur to objects which we have a high degree of integration and investment would be the most affecting and potentially problematic, in this theoretical perspective.

### **7.6.1 Infants as Objects of an Extended Parental Selfhood**

Belk asserts that young children have higher levels of integration into a parental self, due to their high levels of dependence upon their adult caregiver. As a result, their integration into the adult extended is significantly higher than for other people, including older teenage children with a higher degree of autonomy. This independence is socially associated with transitioning into becoming a young adult capable of living and acting alone, without parental supervision. Thus, it is seen as necessary and beneficial. Aside from the provision that consumer behaviour is equally as valid when done in a family proxy state, Belk omits to discuss the most interesting implications of this parental state.

The mothers on Instagram not only present their young children in highly idealised states of virtue where they are sweet and kind, but link this with their expressions of gratefulness. The textual descriptors in image captions combine both the virtuous child, the fortunate life and the experience of motherhood as idyllic

(as summarised in Section 6.10). One of the repeated tropes in this was the mothers navigating change and transition. This topic appeared in varying forms, and was highly engaged with by followers who reflected back the commonality of maternal experience, adding their own parallel anecdotes and discussing their emotional geographies. The discussions took the form of extending families, typically from having one baby into having a second child, or children moving into attendance at nursery or starting school. The nuances of these conversations were firmly embedded in the maternal feelings regarding change and them “growing up so fast”. This included sentiments about missing their company when they would be at school, that small children gaining independence was “bittersweet” and that children would resent expanding a family and feel emotionally side-lined by a new baby. This was encountered across multiple accounts, with variations on the theme and the responses across, #001, #011, #013 and #015.

My little boy is the exact same age as your little one, and I felt this exact way when I was thinking of adding another to our family. Well, I decided that it would happen when it was supposed to happen and that there is nothing but blessings and joy adding another baby to a family.

Exactly how I felt. Just being real, There will be an aspect of sadness. But once that new little one settles in it is magic ?

#011 sought to crowd source solutions to address her own ambivalence towards the change of her child growing, implying there was a sadness to seeing change documented within her snapshots of her infant son. Followers provided a range of responses highlighting the commonality of experience:

I love to see your images & [child's name] growing up ?????

I've got some suggestions for you to check out for memory keeping. Project Life by @beckyhigginsllc...her saying is "cultivate a good life & record it" such a simple solution to keeping on track with photos & journaling. If you have iPhone then download the app & you can do it all in the palm of your hand

Precious boy! Sometimes I just want to pause time. They grow too fast! ???????

Awww bittersweet

This was framed in terms of maternal worry on behalf of the child and a difficulty in accepting change even when it was positive, natural or intentional. Belk (1988)

does not describe how individuals emotionally negotiate alterations to the extended self, or might articulate or seek support. However, the maternal focus on internal realignment of the self in the face of children “growing up so fast” is clearly reminiscent of the tensions which would arise from integrating infants into an extended self as entirely dependent infants and then facing adjustment when infants become toddlers or families expand. The status quo of the extended self is being challenged - that is not only is a parental identity being modified, but the assembled range of extended possessions is being realigned in light of this. This may explain the focus on memory building and sentimental objects associated with motherhood such as baby books, memory boxes and keeping baby clothing as a memorial and preservation to that past time and self. The extended self is conceived here as part of parental identity, as part of how an individual identity is formed through possessions. It does not replace, or compete with other theories of parental self. It does however provide a possible explanation to the multi-layered complexity which accompanies identity work for mothers.

The other aspect which is raised is how people may conceive and therefore express their extended self with others. The elements of status, knowledge of brands and appropriate behaviours are ones which individuals are consciously aware of. However, negotiating challenges to control and micro tensions which arise from managing an extended self which fluctuates may be less consciously conceived. However, discourse around common maternal experience and possessions as a physical manifestation of parenthood may be a useful tool to explore this area.

The integration of consumerism and the extended self permeates into group identities beyond the familial. Belk (1988, p.152) asserts that the integration of possessions can be collective, with group meaning. Marwick (2015, p.138) suggests that participants express the perception that people visit Instagram with a mindset that is more positive than other platforms and are less savagely critical of content they encountered. For mothers, Instagram has been cited as having a more community based atmosphere than Facebook (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015, p.1308). For the extended self, community belonging is situated around shared possession and relation towards an object, interest, place or experience. The mothers operate within a sphere based on sharing content which is heavily centred around parental discourse. As a result, the images can be interrogated for evidence for repetitive imagery which indicates a shared language of belonging. In reality this

visuality remains centred around children and steeped in maternal identification. The images below (Figure 51) represent different accounts with no duplication. They display both the internal fashions visible in this community, but a strong message of the central positioning of maternal identity.



**Figure 51 - maternal identity display via consumerism**

Belk (1988, p.143) asserts that “home and neighbourhood have been hypothesised to contribute to sense of self to the degree that a person feels control over them.” Acting as an asynchronous platform where content can be posted, (for example #latergram where an image was taken prior to being posted), images edited or captured multiple times and posts deleted if desired, the role of producer is flexible. However, the issue of control is one which is inherently less overt in controlling others responses to publicly made posts. It was observed that followers strictly police comment threads, both to negative and dissenting voices. When one of the mothers did address critique in the comments, followers provided supportive statements and backed up the perceived good character of the account holder. Thus, whilst the mothers themselves do not have a complete degree of control over how they are perceived, the ‘community’ itself may be an online space which does feel controlled in the sense there is an element of protection from the herd in the

face of threats. This safety in numbers approach gained from having a highly engaged and significant body of followers may result in the perception of safety and thus bring Instagram into the sphere of the extended self. The shared iconography of motherhood here becomes important in establishing a visual group identity, which allows for shared investment and belonging.

## **7.7 Summary**

This chapter has explored the extended self as an alternative theoretical exploration of Instagram images from Phase 2 of study. This examination affords a deeper level of critical-reflection and analysis of the study findings of this doctoral project.

A small-scale analysis indicates that, whilst some key element of Belk's (1988) theory of the extended self are visible, there are some key deviations. The primary indicator which contradicts that outline by Belk, is within the hierarchy of integration proposed. Belk (1988, p.141) places the self in physical form as the foundation of a stable sense of individual identity. However, in terms of the Instagram accounts presenting the mothers selfhood, images of children (without adults present) are more frequent than those which feature the mothers (the self). This may be attributed to the mothers acting as photographer, it may also be indicative of the degree to which the infants and young children are integrated into the mother's selfhood. These images can thus be conceived as demonstrating the self by proxy. As such they can be interpreted as continuing to highlight the intensively insular nature of the early years of motherhood as a period of identity transition and daily lived experience.

Whilst Belk (1988) provides no exploration of how the role of possessions would be represented or manifest in photographic practice and resultant images, it would be logical to assume that images of the self would be produced. As discussed in this chapter, this has implications for discussion of maternal selfies and how they can be theorised. However, the tropes of family photography as inherited social knowledge, with a strong set of conventions and social understanding appear to regulate image taking in this context. Images of children are more frequent than images of, or including the mothers. Despite this, there are some trends within the images which do share characteristics described by Belk (1988). These include the lack of other adults present within the feeds, the attitudes

on display towards ownership of the feeds, and a theme of discourse surrounding household objects.

Instagram has a perception of promoting and perpetuating a culture of “conspicuous consumption” (Marwick, 2015, p.139). Associated with low cultural value in being superficial, the production values and labour invested in producing parental imagery is considerable. Linked to both aspiration and consumerism, the accounts conform to the values described by Belk in items representing status and links to sentimentality and reminiscence. However, items within this context are rarely pictured independently of people. The Instagram accounts can be positioned as showcasing the personal resources required to acquire and own items, but these are displayed and discussed within a whole life context. This analytic perspective provides initial insight on the intersection on Instagram between mediated expression of identity, monetisation and marketisation of the self and parenting within a visible, public space.

Whilst there are indicators which suggest that further work is warranted in exploring the extended self within a visual context, the analytic discussion of this chapter is primarily based on the original 1988 framework by Belk. Discussion in Chapter 3 and within this chapter provide a critical interrogation of Belk’s 2013 update to the theoretical positioning of the extended self. Primarily this is centred upon theorisation of the internet as ‘other’ and divorced from offline activity, as this perspective is philosophically preoccupied with dematerialisation of physical items and personhood online. Even through the analytic lens of the extended self, the developing thesis proposes Instagram as a mediator for communication through which the social artefacts of family snapshots are shared. The complex, multi-layered representation which occurs when parental identity, influencer and family photographic practice are co-present, highlights the need for continued examination of Instagram beyond its vernacular perception as having superficial representation and low cultural value.

## **8. Discussion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

Through 3 phases of work, this thesis has examined the family snapshot in an Instagram context. Strongly regulated by tropes and social conventions, analogue family photography was a distinctive and complex format, as described in Chapter 2. The potential influence of this previous analogue practice on online sharing was poorly described in literature at the commencement of this work. As a result, this work took a comparative approach to the family snapshot, examining if it retains characteristics of the family photography genre, or if there is deviation when shared on Instagram.

The first phase of study explored family snapshot practices, comparing these to literature on traditional family photography to establish if there was significant departure in the genre when snapshots are captured digitally and shared on Instagram. The second phase of study contextualised these individual images, conducting an ethnography of narratives to interrogate how everyday sharing depicts the lived experience of motherhood on Instagram accounts. The final phase of study built upon these findings, presenting a theoretical reexamination of the ethnographic data, interrogating if maternal image production can be viewed as representations of extended selfhood, and thus represent identity work.

Collectively these studies examine not only deviation from analogue family photographic practices but how the adoption of photography as an everyday, vernacular activity for mothers can be used to examine their lived experience, identity expression and public depictions of contemporary parenthood.

### **8.2 Retention of Analogue Tropes**

As a consideration of the family snapshot in light of its previous analogue format, the findings from this work suggested that there is a high degree of evidence that its tropes and characteristics have been retained in several key regards.

Phase 1 of work comparatively assessed family snapshots on Instagram against the characteristics of analogue family snapshots. The findings provide a

number of observations in this area: collectively these demonstrate that positive representations still dominate. Chalfen (1989, p.78) provides an analogue description of the phenomenon of 'no harm done' in which token images of injury or mishap are included as a grounding in reality of family life. However, these privilege the message that no serious harm or upset occurred, or else the images would be excluded from family albums.

Images also traditionally focused upon positive, upbeat representations of family life. These highlight familial harmony, fun events and a high degree of positive imagery. This remains the case in this data, with no instances of actual harm or upset in either discrete images in Chapter 5 (or the accounts profiled in Chapter 6). With the extension of capacity beyond the limitations of film as a consumable, it does not appear that this freedom in image capture overrides the understood social conventions of what is omitted in family image taking practices.

Family photography is described as not truly documentarian. It presented a selective and biased representation (Hirsch, 1981; Spence and Holland, 1991) of family life. Here, there remains no evidence of family breakdown and formation into new blended structures. The failure of the step-parenting hashtag sampling to return a full sample quota for analysis, is notable. Particularly when combined with the lack of general negative representations of family or children, these findings begin to collectively form a strong indication as to the strength of influence analogue photographic practice has upon Instagram image capture.

Images which are included are focused on happy occasions, and key events such as holidays and outings. These depictions of togetherness highlight the underlying messages of the snapshot as a social artefact in embodying familial harmony, integration and togetherness. Within the findings of this work there is evidence of the ongoing use of imagery as socially functional in creating and affirming familial bonds. Bourdieu (1965/1990, p.21) asserted both that the mother who had her children photographed could only be met with approval, and that sharing snapshots by post introduced infants to geographically distant relatives. This is precisely a function described as being met by social media by parents (Kumar and Shoenebeck, 2015; Morris, 2014; Bartholomew et al, 2012). Within Chapter 5 there is evidence of newborn photography with family members, which captures and records the introduction of the new family member into the extended family group. Here, the mediating agent is the digital delivery platform of Instagram, as opposed to the postal service in distributing these images.

Thus, in terms of subject matter and the emotional messages conveyed by the albums, there is also a strong thematic resemblance to printed album images. These images are focused on people, and particularly serve to represent family relationships as idyllic and harmonious. No discord is pictured or visible. The social function of the snapshot remains visible overall in communicating that family life is untroubled, and fulfilling.

Where there is deviation observed, this can be attributed to the specific affordances of Instagram and camera phone photography. This takes two main forms: new content and image composition types, and an increase in mundanity within the images.

The first of these is the extended format types. This encompasses the snapshots that represent the 'good parent selfie'. Whilst images of the self are not inherently new, they have become increasingly common and ubiquitous with the introduction of smartphone photography (Tiidenberg, 2018). Within this data these were described as 'good parenting selfies', which evidence togetherness and parental engagement, visually.

In contrast to this, is the presence of non-photographic content, which is shared rather than produced by the account holder. This includes slogans, artworks and visual humour. These appear to serve to acknowledge the chaotic nature and tensions of the demands of parenthood indirectly, via humour.

The second key deviation is that while tropes are retained, there is an overall shift towards a capture of more mundane images. Both the capacity to take virtually unlimited images and the practice of daily sharing are highlighted in Chapter 5 as resulting in an increased capture of the everyday. This capture of the minutiae of parenthood deviates from the analogue album. However, it does so in a manner which further magnifies the characteristics of the analogue family snapshot which were most critically assessed by scholars such as Batchen (1995) and Langford (2001). However, in doing so it provides a new insight into the visuality of the parental everyday experience.

### **8.2.1 Implications for Understanding Instagram Family Photographic Practice**

These findings present a contribution towards the understanding of Instagram family photographic practice. They demonstrate that despite the shift towards camera phone capture, with the freedom to capture essentially unlimited

snapshots at no cost, and with creative freedom, that this practical capability has not revolutionised the family photography genre online.

This is supportive of the position of this work that photographic practice is in itself, inherited social knowledge. There is evidence that these understandings on what is included, how it is portrayed and what is omitted in family photography, endure within the data here. Given the strength of sentiment expressed in literature and the consensus in literature regarding analogue family albums, this is perhaps unsurprising. The retention of key tropes and composition types suggests that Instagram practices can be positioned as a continuation and evolution of the format. The key points of deviation, are those afforded by the shift to digital capture and the Instagram platform itself. These are: the increase in mundane imagery, and the introduction of extended content types.

Whilst this work does support the findings of Van House (2011) and Murray (2008) that the camera phone has altered photography into a capture of the now, as opposed to that of key or notable moments, this granularity is present along with traditional family snapshot compositions.

Collectively these findings are of importance in future consideration of parental activity on Instagram. They are indicative that the influence of analogue photographic practices has a lasting and significant influence in this context. This must be taken account when interrogating visual representations of parenthood, and the depiction of family life present on the platform. This includes insight into what kind of imagery would be typically excluded from sharing, and is thus invisible in data collected from the main parenting hashtags.

### **8.3 Aesthetics in Narrative Building**

The second phase of study focused on a smaller sample of mothers, to explore the use of family images in narrative building on Instagram. Building upon the previous phase of work, this aimed to contextualise images having established that discrete snapshots demonstrated a strong resemblance to analogue formats.

The key finding is the importance of aesthetics in this context. Whilst there is an increase in the mundanity and granularity of the family snapshots as compositions, their overall aesthetic quality has altered within an Instagram context. The images presented by the mothers demonstrate a high level of production skills. These far exceed the analogue family snapshot, which were casual, informal

captures of family life. As individual compositions they are considered, deliberate captures. On Instagram, even images of the mundane are photographed for sharing on mothering popular accounts, with aesthetic care. These are presented as editorial style compositions, with a quality of aspiration to them. This deviates from the casual, spontaneous quality traditionally associated with snapshots. For images where content is of a less mundane nature, there is equally evidence of a high degree of consideration in the presentation and aesthetic qualities of the pictures.

The increase in mundane images noted, forms the narratives created into two separate types. The first of these charts large life events of the mothers, such as getting pregnant, expanding families beyond a first child, moving house, and children starting school. These mark the traditional life transitions common to both analogue family albums, and are recorded visually as milestones.

These larger narratives typically follow a standard path for the formation of nuclear family units. The mothers profiled in Phases 2 and 3 of this work are heterosexual, married couples. As such, there is idealisation of traditional family structures and gender roles presented in the 'motherhood as a glossy lifestyle' presentation of self. The accounts follow their 'journeys' to motherhood, subsequent babies and family life, along with other key events.

In particular those who have shared their experience of infertility and challenges to have a family, have these stories reflected back and referenced by followers.

However, the affordances of Instagram also allow for daily, everyday narratives. These mark the ordinary courses of days and weeks, which are not inherently notable. As part of the elevated aesthetic quality of the accounts, these everyday activities and images of food, toys or daily routine are presented in an appealing, glossy fashion. As such, these granular accounts of the daily lived experience of motherhood are still appealing and aestheticised representations of life with small children.

This combination of larger, and daily narrative expression, over a long period of time builds an artificial closeness on behalf of the followers who feel a familiarity and investment in the mothers. For the mothers it represents a loyal audience who provide a source of continual support to be drawn on, and positive feedback on a daily basis. As such, the overall feed narratives present on Instagram accounts are

complex and multilayered in their construction, both in imagery and in the textual captions to the images.

In terms of audience response to these dual narratives, there is evidence of long-term readership by followers. As such, some commenters have followed the accounts of mothers for periods of years, demonstrating an investment in the long-term narratives. Literature suggests that Instagram has the perception of being a more of a community experience than Facebook (Marwick, 2015; Kumar and Shoenebeck, 2015) but does not elaborate on why this perception exists. The strength of engagement, praise and positive feedback observed here may account for this perception. Followers present an exaggerated and hyperbolic response to the mothers, labelling them as hilarious, amazing and good parents, which they reflect directly back at the mothers in commentary on images. The comment threads are used as a line of communication back to the mothers, and do not feature as spaces where cross communication occurs between followers. As such the feeds represent a form of publishing to audiences, who consume content and comment on it.

The narratives depict parenting as a glamorous lifestyle. The highly aestheticised images of daily life build to present parenting as controlled, serene and beautified. The narratives are intensely inward focusing, featuring the mother and her child(ren) primarily. The scenes are prominently at home, or on outings. As such, the domestic sphere here has been turned inside out. The formerly private is made visible (and renders the home exterior as formerly the visible aspect, invisible). In this sense, the aesthetics and lifestyles on display form the basis of appearing aspirational, whilst remaining slightly removed in a way which is reminiscent of traditional celebrity figures.

Whilst the mothers provide access, this does not necessarily equate to them being accessible. Interactions are typically limited, with their identity portrayed through their posted content as representational forms. The lack of substantive interaction by the mothers however, is slightly challenging to Marwick and Boyd's (2011) observation on SNSs moving the parasocial relationship into one where communication can make the relationships potentially real and social. Whilst the mothers seek to acknowledge the Instagram community and their followers, they are not using their narratives to actively build new personal relationships with unknown followers.

### 8.3.1 Implications for Interpretation of Maternal Narratives on Instagram

The imagery within Chapter 6 collectively appears to suggest that depictions of family, in the long-term, prioritise positive representation of motherhood and children. The narratives frame maternal identity as central, with other roles subjugated collectively into sentiments such as “everything I do, I do for these two”. These positive depictions represent a retention of the tropes of analogue photography in presenting a biased, happy version of family life. As a key characteristic of analogue family photography this is noteworthy in both interpretation of image production, but also in interpreting family life as it is depicted in photographs online.

Additionally, with this work framing Instagram as a continuation and evolution of the family photography genre, this positive depiction is significant. The format was shaped by early Kodak marketing, which positioned the family snapshot as oppositional to studio portraiture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Coe and Gaten, 1977, p.47). This sentimentalised capture of seasonal occasions and family milestones became the normative, socially understood use of the snapshot in family album contexts. As a result, this trope laden medium later become the subject of critical appraisal for its boring, repetitive imagery and lack of creativity (Langford, 2001; Batchen, 2008). Here, it is suggestive that these initial marketing messages, which came to shape the analogue format, have a continuation in the digitised format of the modern family snapshot.

The additional scope of Instagram posts over family albums lies in the capacity to add extensive textual captioning. This provides an extended written format to outline the sentimentality associated with the images. This appears to have intensified the presentation of family life as idealised. Children are relentlessly described in saccharine terms. The innocent, angelic and well-behaved descriptions of children are notable in themselves, but also have some implications for analysis of familial presentation on Instagram.

These implications are two-fold. The first of these, is visible in the mother’s cursory descriptions of managing and resolving tensions in maternal experience and identity. The mothers frame these as admissions. These frame the tension as a personal failing. They assert they feel guilt for failing to appropriately respond to their idealised children and harmonious family structures, expressing any negative feeling as a reflection on them personally. This is suggestive of a high level of self-imposed pressure to mother in the right ways, both practically and in terms of emotional responses to their lived experience.

This raises questions about the nature of support received on the platform. Whilst the mothers receive significant levels of support in response to these posts, if the normative presentation of lived experience is idealised, then is social media use fragmentary? Does support seeking in more ongoing, open ways take place on alternate platforms with a differing culture (and are these more parenting specific platforms)?

The second key point arising from these findings, is that not only are non-nuclear family units invisible, but that the highly idealised and beautified accounts of family life does not leave room for social deviation from this normative representation. Not only in terms of alternate family structure overall, but also for traditional family configurations whose lived experience is complicated or messy. Those with behavioural challenges, learning disabilities or medical issues, for example, may struggle to reconcile participation in a community which privileges angelic, well behaved and docile depictions of childhood.

The mothers profiled drew high levels of support, positive feedback and encouragement from the Instagram community. Further work is needed to ascertain if those rendered invisible here draw similar support in smaller sub-communities, or if future work can explore how they can potentially leverage this form of community support on Instagram.

#### **8.4 Extended Selfhood in Instagram Imagery**

The final phase of study aimed to address the role of image production and possessions within the family snapshot images. This conducted a re-analysis of the ethnographic accounts, drawing upon the theoretical perspective of Russell Belk (1988).

Belk (1988) is very clear that the low levels of autonomy that young children have render them as particularly operant in forming an extended self. In light of this, this work reports this as potentially a contributory factor in the taking and sharing of images of children on Instagram. These snapshot images can be interpreted as indicative of integration into parentally extended selfhoods.

The sharing of idyllic, positive representations of motherhood has been posed within media reporting as “showing off” and self-promotion via images of well resourced, privileged lifestyles (The Independent, 2015, 2017). This typifies an ingrained cultural value judgement on social media in general. Parental scrutiny and judgement is not new or specific to the online sphere. Faircloth and Murray (2014,

p.3) highlight that mothers are subject to scrutiny across the whole spectrum of everyday parenting activities, and children's appearance in particular is treated by mothers as a measure to others of their efficacy as parents (Andersen et al, 2007). That is to say, appearances matter socially. As a pictorial platform, Instagram may exacerbate and intensify this pressure to communicate parental efficacy visually.

With this context in mind, and having established that family snapshots on Instagram retain their characteristics of presenting the positive aspects of family life and omitting the negative, as per family albums – it appears logical these would shape Instagram image perception as seeking “digital accolades” (Goodwin, 2018, p.1). The extended self provides a contrasting lens to interpret these pictures. The images can be posed as exceeding criticisms of showing off by mothers and alternatively can be interpreted as representative of the parental identity being expressed. This legitimises the activity, as not only normalised as a daily practice but one with significant potential in negotiating the transition to parenthood and sustaining a sense of parental identity.

This collective identification of belonging in a community or demographic via shared use or adoption of objects, may be the visual currency which forms the sense of community experienced by the mothers on Instagram. This may account for the strong theming of the parental as the key content posted by the mothers.

This additionally highlights that not only would the formation of a parental self be a vital part of the noted transition to parenthood but that this process is ongoing in terms of parental identity in this context. This work also presents an extension to this, posing that the extended self is highly experiential. Belk (1988) outlines the psychological effects of damage to objects of the self, including loss, theft and damage but little description on how the daily minutiae of challenges and negotiation of micro-tensions would be experienced. The discourse surrounding consumption, purchasing and dressing children in particular outfits can be posed as a daily form of maintenance in the child as a proxy part of the extended self. This reframes the discourse from one which appears as superficial, into one which both affirms and supports belonging in a parental community, but also has individual value in identity expression.

This also provides a link to why this is a discourse and repetitive theme within the comment threads. The ethnographic analysis has observed that followers often contribute in a particularly stilted way which brings into their own children's names and ages in. Here this can be accounted for by Belk's own statement that adults are

challenging in terms of an extended self because they are all essentially engaged primarily in forming their own extended selfhood, and this can act as oppositional and conflicting. Here the comments from followers can be seen as asserting they have their own parentally extended selfhood which they bring to the discussion as common ground. This commonality is a key feature of understanding why the comment threads are so distinctive.

The previous analysis provides a basis for intensive motherhood as requiring mothers to devote a significant amount of resources to childrearing, and that children are posed as innocent, virtuous beings. This did not fully account for the high levels of commentary devoted to possessions, purchasing items and consumer behaviour. Belk (1988) highlights that the extended-self theory works in collective forms. Thus, groups may identify a belonging to and participating in, a community which has shared icons or themes. In this instance the accounts act as insular representations of family life centred around children. In tandem commentary from followers also focused on parenting and family life. This thematically structures the accounts as spaces in which the collective language is that of maternal experience. This includes the identification with consumer trends, which include not only children's products directly, but the whole lifestyles on display.

The discourse here can be viewed as denoting a collective mechanism to participate in and display an affiliation with the subcommunity on Instagram. This also extends to the reaction of followers who aggressively police the threads, challenging critical voices or trolls in defence of the mothers, acting as a form of neighbourhood watch. This may account for the perception that Instagram has a more community feel than other social media sites (Kumar and Schoenebeck, 2015; Marwick, 2015). The observed investment in both following and producing the accounts over long time periods raised questions over the nature of engagement in this context.

From a Belkian perspective, this can be accounted for by positioning the feed as collective entities in themselves. In this view, there is a link between the observed high production values in the images and frequent, long term posting behaviours. These represent an investment in the labour of production. This, according to Belk (1988) can be cited as bringing both a sense of ownership through the personal attention given to an object, and dually as something for which reward in both monetary and attention is considered reasonable. If Instagram accounts are integrated into an extended self – it would be reasonable to assume

any criticism would be taken as a personal one, as the feed has become integrated into an extended self.

For possessions to be desirable and have status they must conform to the prevailing popular aesthetics of the time. As Chae (2018) asserts, appearance is the key driver in generating a positive response and engagement by followers on Instagram. By asserting that possessions not only influence how others perceive us, but actually work to support and maintain a sense of self, Belk (1988) casts a light on why consumerism might be present in photographic images online.

As in other techno-social perspectives in this work, this is treated as a continuation of previous formats. In essence, what Ford and Steinorth (1988) and King (1984) describes in analogue snapshots as the family doing well in the world can be viewed as partially material. The extended self provides not only an explanation as to why, and how, possessions may be included in domestic photography, but suggests that this influence may have carried over into the online sphere in images. This is broadly supportive of Appadurai's (1986, p.6) description of possessions as a "thoroughly social" thing.

What the interaction made possible by Instagram allows for, is communication surrounding materiality and its associated links to aspiration, class and status. As a result, the analysis here is placing Instagram as part of a wider cultural aesthetic in terms of contemporary trends in interiors, fashion and children's products. Aesthetics here, can be interpreted as a form of public identity expression and ongoing maintenance of a sense of self.

These findings stress possessions as anthropologically, socially and culturally valuable and part of complex meaning within society – including depicted visually on social media. This provides a conceptual link between the observed importance given to aesthetics and the degree of labour invested in how things appear – termed the aesthetically considered life in Chapter 5 – and their importance in ways which exceed reductionist conceptions of consumer culture. From this perspective, there are commonalities apparent with Belk's theoretical position paper of 1988 and the data set here. These are number of key elements highlighted as particularly relevant. These include an explanation of the elements identified as forming aesthetically considered lifestyles, consideration of the labour invested in producing an account, and collective identity via discourse and consumer habits.

#### **8.4.1 Significance of The Extended Self in Visual Analysis**

The findings from Phase 3 of this work present an alternate perspective on parental image production for Instagram. They are suggestive that the images may be considered as evidence of an extended selfhood. This places their production, and participation on Instagram as potentially highly beneficial identity work. With the transition to parenthood cited as a time of particular challenge, Instagram activity may socially function in much the same way as Titus (1976) suggested analogue photography aided the transition for earlier parents.

This provides a theoretical positioning of this vernacular activity which contrasts to widely reported common perceptions of the platform as superficial. It additionally contributes a perspective which is currently under explored in literature, which at present typically focuses on other aspects of Instagram use, such as selfies or influencers. Taken as normalised, productive sphere of identity expression, this work is suggestive that Instagram has a wide range of potential benefits for parents.

Additionally, as an increasingly normative aspect of parenting, there are a range of ways in which Instagram use may be of benefit to professionals working with parents, such as health visitors. It presents a potential digital third space in which to interact with, monitor and disseminate NHS information and promote specialist early years services.

In terms of visibility, the continued focus on the accounts as intensely insular and child centred represents a key retention of family photography. With the magnification of mundane and inane photographs, the accounts can be viewed as granular curation of the parental selfhood. This in itself provides a contribution to literature which assesses the family snapshot, providing both an interpretative lens on Instagram photographic practices, but also a sympathetic assessment of analogue family photography, which was typically subject to fierce criticism.

#### **8.5 Contemporary Parenthood On Instagram**

The findings here assert that there is significant retention of tropes in Instagram family snapshots. The phases of work collectively present analysis which presents the key characteristics of the genre as visible and ongoing. However, the public, visual nature of sharing and high levels of idealisation also suggest there remains a high degree of cultural pressure on mothers to parent in the right ways.

### 8.5.1 Intensive Motherhood

Whilst scholars have since built upon and re-examined Hays (1996) work on intensive motherhood, (Ennis et al, 2014; O'Reilly, 2010; Thompson et al, 2011) their findings collectively do not present evidence that motherhood has been culturally de-escalated into a less frenetic, all-consuming identity. The findings here support this assessment of the social pressure to mother in an all-consuming manner.

However, they provide a unique avenue of this expression in which public sharing on Instagram extends this labour and refocuses it on certain key aspects. There is a reframing on not only the need to parent actively, but this labour to be presented beautifully. Thus, aesthetics and image production have become a vehicle to express maternal efficacy, via making the private domestic sphere publicly on show.

Secondly, Chapter 6 highlights the intense emotional framing of the mother's emotional geographies surrounding mothering. There is a relentless framing of the family as perfect, and children as angelic. However, this appears to intensify the internalisation of any struggle as being a personal failure on the mother's parts.

The transition to motherhood in particular is frequently cited as a time of uncertainty and adjustment (Ennis et al, 2014). Titus (1976) drew the link to photographic practice, suggesting it acts as an assertion of parental identity via role play and thus as a mechanism used to ease the psychological transition. This may partially account for Chalfen's (1987, p.81) description of the first years of a child's life representing a period of snapshot significance. Within this data, there is certainly a focus on the early years. However, the accounts exceed this one-year intensity, extending it into a longer period. As such, these accounts often cover mothering multiple children simultaneously.

As outlined above, the mothers present limited, positive representations of their family lives. In terms of the family album as a non-documentarian record, this is itself not surprising as representation has been traditionally based on exclusion of the negative aspects of life photographically (Hirsch, 1981; Rose; 2012). However, this can be interpreted as the mothers demonstrating intensive motherhood and acting as their own PR.

Instagram is typified by the co-presence of conspicuous consumption, 'instafame' and self-branding described by Marwick (2015, p.139) but is reframed

here as less concerned with monetisation and the luxury economy. One of the key elements of Hay's (1996) description of intensive motherhood – and one which is frequently less explored than the elements of labour – is that of motherhood being emotionally consuming. Hays (1996, p.64) highlights that within the ideology of intensive motherhood the domestic currency is posed as being that of love and emotional nurturing. Hays cited love as the literal currency of motherhood within the domestic sphere. The Instagram discourse in the data reflects this, and is highlighted as emotionally loaded in regard to parenting and children. In this light, the findings from Phase 2 of work can be interpreted as the mothers using the accounts as a form of evidential narrative in which they can display their adherence to mothering intensively, both emotionally and in terms of financial investment and applied labour.

Collectively the images, as previously described in this chapter, appear to broadly conform to the characteristics of family snapshots in terms of composition and subject. However, they exceed the analogue snapshot in some ways, adapting to the Instagram platform. The primary foundation of intensive motherhood is that it is centred around maternal labour (Hays, 1996). This labour is considered necessary for good mothering and distributing labour either formally or informally is associated with maternal guilt (Guendouzi, 2006). The shift from the private album, to public sharing reframes the images as demonstrating the maternal gaze is focused upon the child. The Instagram audience can literally see what the mothers are seeing as they focus their attention of the child and documenting their daily life. The 'maternal selfie' noted in Chapters 5 and 6, extends this framing to encompass the mother doing motherhood, as opposed to an invisible role behind the camera in recording her children. The accounts here provide visual evidencing in daily narrative and documentation that children are the focus even in the most mundane situations.

This includes subsuming labour typically undertaken by professionals, in extreme cases, such as home schooling and efforts towards self-sufficiency. The child centric nature of the discourse among followers, who frequently contribute by framing their own identities as parents themselves, acts to amplify the messages that parenthood is by its nature, all consuming. This is further compounded by the absence of other adults – husbands are framed as exceptionally supportive and ideal partners – but are invisible bodies, rarely present in the narratives visually. This carefully maintains the visuality as focused on the maternal co-presence with

children and their central position within the mother's identities. Indeed, when other identities are (less commonly) expressed, they are kept entirely separate with professional roles delineated entirely and positioned as part of a message that all labour, in all forms is undertaken because 'everything I do, I do for my family'.

There is an observed visual dichotomy in the accounts being child centric, but that visually, childhood appears to have little effect or disturbance on the stylish homes and lives documented. Whilst it could be hypothesised that a child-centric ethos would capture a wide range of toys and educational resources supplied to promote child growth and intellect, this is not the case. Psychologically, the children are all invasive: physically their disruptive influence is controlled and minimal.

Intensive motherhood whilst ostensibly about child-rearing is firmly focused on the maternal mindset and expectations of this identity to subsume other facets of identity. The public performance of motherhood requires a capture of competence and good mothering. In sharing publicly, and potentially monetising the content, the additional need to be perfect and aspirational visually comes into force. This can be posed as extending the labour of intensive motherhood further, by making the private home environment more publicly visible. As such, there is an added form of labour in crafting aesthetically considered lives and home environments.

The thread of consumerism, whilst closely allied to aspirational lives and idealised expressions of family life, can also be interpreted as a facet of Hays (1996). Mothers report an explicit awareness of being judged via their children's appearance (Andersen et al, 2007; Hughes et al, 2015; Freedman Lustig, 2004). What this work stresses, is that intensive motherhood posits that parenting ought to be resource intensive, as well as labour intensive. Children are literal centres of investment. As a result, it would be expected that the images would include visual documentation of children being well resourced – which is both highly visible and highly implied from the obviously well-resourced lifestyles on display. The mothers do balance this, mitigating the potential for it to become perceived as entitled or alienating to followers by framing this within discourse as being lucky, blessed and grateful for what they have.

The analysis in Chapter 7 highlights the complexity of images within this context. As multi-layered social artefacts, they warrant consideration from multiple perspectives. Whilst the public sharing of images is frequently touted as being "vain" (Abidin, 2016, p.1) in common discourse, they can be considered here as representations of extended selfhood (Belk, 1988). This not only foregrounds the

importance of young children and infants into parental identity, but describes the importance of appearances in maintaining a social face of responsibility. This in traditional forms was communicated by externally visible means such as having a mowed lawn, or a status car. This left the domestic sphere as private and unseen.

As a result, this work can be considered to provide an alternate analysis to those more commonly made of Instagram. This draws upon the traditional tropes of analogue family photography, highlighting where there is deviation and similarity. This deviation is considered in light of the complexity of both visual artefacts and the social pressures of contemporary motherhood. As such, Instagram is not positioned as 'other' from the offline world, but simply a mediated communicative sphere for identity expression surrounding maternal identity.

## **8.6 Limitations**

Whilst not explicitly a limitation of this work as it stands, it is important to highlight that the findings produced here are not conducted in a field which remains static. As a result, they demonstrate an insight into Instagram parental activity between 2014 – 2018. Demographic shift between platforms and changing popularity, for example the noted youth exodus from Facebook, as reported in the media (The Independent, 2018) and its 2018 highly publicised and controversial practices in advertising content, privacy and data sharing linked with Cambridge Analytica (Guardian, 2018c) highlight that the landscape of social media provision is in flux and highly debated. Instagram continues to report growth, and as it develops user norms and trends will develop further. Social media remains in its relative infancy; this work presents a portrait of behaviours that will not remain exactly as captured here in the long term. What this work does imply is that even in future works, the study of online parental image sharing is liable to continue to demonstrate influences from the tropes of family photography, due to the strength of replication apparent here.

One of the interesting aspects of this work is that it was conducted with data collected from the Instagram API at a time when access was less tightly controlled. After the data for the study detailed in Chapter 3 was completed, Instagram altered its position, significantly tightening access to data using the API. The code deployed to collect this data, would no longer be deployable in the manner it was in early 2015. The introduction of the need to submit code for interrogating the API as an app to Instagram for approval become standard, followed by an announcement in

planned parity with Facebook API access models. A full redaction of access to the Instagram for researchers during Easter 2018, occurred without prior warning as part of this update. The alterations to data collection methods and inherent reliance on Facebook (as Instagram's parent company) presents an ongoing uncertainty as to the reliable (and independent/nonpartisan) access to data for future research purposes. This potentially stymies the replicability of this research, or the ability of further follow-on work to be conducted in the same manner methodologically.

The lack of non-nuclear and blended families within the dataset represented a lower demographic diversity than was intended. This was an unexpected result, with the work of Chapter 5 designed to incorporate a diverse range of hashtags in data collection. This raises the spectre of whether future avenues of work within this area could seek to identify if other, niche hashtags are used. Or if, indeed, families do not draw attention to the fact they are non-nuclear units and choose to 'pass' within non-specific family hashtags.

However, what this does present in itself is a fascinating indication of how Western society still places aspirational value upon representations of stable, harmonious family units. This was replicated and reflected back within the ethnography described in Phase 2 of work where all the mothers indicated publicly they were married to their spouses. There is a homogeneity of characteristics within this analysis, whom are nearly entirely heterosexual, white, middle class women. This is an extremely valuable demographic profile in terms of analysing popular mothering accounts on Instagram. It does however limit the findings firmly to within the category profiled, and further work is needed to expand understanding on those alternate family types invisible in this analysis, and their Instagram patterns of use.

In the same light, this work employs interpretative sense making for the ethnographic research process. As such, not only does the data collected only represent a Western sample, but is interpreted through a Western cultural lens (the thesis author's). The history of photography is commonly reported from a limited cultural perspective. For this reason, an interrogation of alternate cultural perspectives would present an interesting contrast to this work. (For example Stephen Sheehi's (2016) *Arab Imago: a social history of portrait photography, 1860-1910* on the snapshot in the Arab world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century presents an ideal starting place for this.)

This work reports on the use of content which is not created by the account holder and typically non-photographic. Detailed analysis of these messages

surrounding parenthood and popular culture was beyond the scope of this work. However, they provide an interesting contrast to images and warrant further study. They are particularly fascinating for their distribution within the data. Whilst collecting discrete images by parental hashtag returned a number of different content types (screenshots and written slogans, for example) these were not a significant feature of mode of communication employed by the mothers profiled in the ethnography, who mostly shared self-produced content. Identified as potentially enabling the expression of parental tension via proxy content, this is an avenue identified for further research in this area.

The initial exploratory work on Belk's theory of the extended self employs a limited sample to explore the hierarchy of integration, due to time constraints. This was intended to be an indicative measure, and it is hoped that the overall exploration would serve as provocation for further work to extend and interrogate the findings. However, as a method it demonstrates the viability of using visual analysis, to be combined with a theoretical position paper to generate new insight. This combination is in itself indicative of the need to approach visual materials flexibly and develop approaches to method which can incorporate visual and textual analysis,

Whilst the findings in this work address family snapshot in an Instagram context, as previously outlined this cannot be ascribed or attributed towards Instagram as a platform specifically. This is due to the impossibility of asserting causation between camera phone photography and Instagram. The two are intrinsically bound as tool and platform, and as a result attributing behaviours to Instagram affordances is problematic in terms of image analysis. As such, work here describe photographic practice to encompass the image production process of taking and posting images.

## **8.7 Critical Reflection**

The latter chapters arise from the completion of ethnographic study. Conducted digitally, there are two points which collide. Ethnographic practice is reliant on the process of sense making, formed from the researcher's own interpretative perspective (Hine, 2015; Weston, 2018). Rose (2012, p.17) highlights that visual analysis is subject to the same interpretative biases as other materials.

In light of working within the field of mothering, which is frequently stressed in this work as subject to judgment across daily practice, and from wider moral perspectives on the 'right' way to mother (Faircloth and Murray, 2014; Ellis et al, 2014; Budds et al, 2017), my own perspective is worthy of critical appraisal. Working from a social constructivist perspective, this work is influenced by my feminist influenced viewpoint on maternal experience and more widely on academia. My own identity as a mother is undoubtedly influential on my reading on Hays (1996) and how I interpret data on its manifestation.

This work presents an academic perspective which is grounded within literature and the data analysis conducted. Whilst this work began with the intention to employ a data driven perspective, it is inevitable that laypeople share anecdotes and their own experienced of social media with you when they discover your identity as a researcher. This is particularly true of strangers in waiting rooms or public transport. From this, I rapidly observed that people commonly assume a defensive position to pre-emptively divorce themselves from criticism of their practices. Aware of common areas of critique, in particular regarding Facebook, use is framed in terms of 'only' using it to share with family who are disparate geographically, to connect with a certain key family member who is far away or to retain contact with friends in different environments (work friends, while on maternity leave for example). This position is very casually assumed as a natural response when faced with describing their own practices. It does however imply a strong social vernacular in what is considered the 'right' way to use social media.

Whilst people did not frequently address Instagram often, focusing typically on Facebook – this defensive position was encountered within the course of conducting research. The findings of the ethnography were intended to be formed into talking points, and put to mothers who have successful mothering accounts. This was intended to assess their reflections and thus gain added perspective on my own sense making. However, whilst recruitment for participants is always a challenge in conducting research – this demographic is extremely reluctant to participate and in some cases hostile to findings contained within the paper published at the ACM CHI conference. In retrospect, this is in itself an interesting occurrence which generates questions regarding a reluctance to subject a practice to scrutiny. This is not an attitude which is noted in literature which was generated surrounding discussion of printed family photo albums (Rose, 2012; Boerdam and Martinius, 1980). Participants enjoyed the discussion of sentimentality and were

open and honest about the biases they replicated. This is shared because upon critical reflection, it affirms the original stance that I took towards conducting this work. Whilst methods which relied primarily on parental self-reporting are clearly of use, their overrepresentation shaped the decision to actively pursue a contrasting data driven model of study design. I felt that parenting is, as Ellis et al (2014) observe, a highly politicised and judged sphere.

In tandem, every day, vernacular discussions around social media reveal it to be a potentially contentious social canvas. These two issues combined to form a desire to avoid replication of potential biases in self-awareness, selective sharing or pre-emptive attempts to address issues parents are aware are of concern, such as privacy. The reluctance of account holders to participate in neutrally framed and simple reflection on their images on Instagram, came full circle and affirmed that this approach was a suitable one for this particular enquiry.

There remains a contemporary tension between qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Whilst this work explicitly employed a data driven approach, and visual materials which are poorly suited for quantitative methods, this did not insulate against encounters which highlighted the delegitimization of qualitative approaches. This was broadly discussed among many ECR peers as remaining a common - and disappointing - occurrence in submitting interdisciplinary work in particular.

Conducting this work has altered my perception of what Hay's (1996) work is primarily about. Having spent time with this work, and revisited it upon multiple occasions and via the work of other scholars, I have to come to view intensive motherhood as a book equally about economics as it is parenthood. Hay's contribution is frequently cited as a conceptualisation about the sociology of motherhood and the pressure to do mothering as a verb. However, it is underappreciated and explored as a commentary on modern economics. Whilst it is explicitly outlined in the work, it is easy to overlook as the key framing, and context which generates the ideology. It positions it as a response to both the culture of work and of a need to be economically active. Whilst a relatively old work, this is probably the key as to why it remains as contemporaneous in its descriptions as it does. In its own way, this work whilst not explicitly about economics is equally as underpinned by it.

Much of the literature which critiques family photography can be critically argued to lie in a gendered response to the ever present cultural devaluing of

mothering and women's work as uninteresting. Kodak and other advertisers deliberately set out to exploit the historically limited scope of women professionally, encouraging them to photograph their children and the domestic sphere as what they had access to at the time, and to capture the positive memories. As a result, family photography became understood as a repository of the socially acceptable face of familial harmony. It is economics of product promotion and market exploitation which can be viewed as shaping the medium. The resultant social form of image taking is as much a response to these markets as Hay's description of intensive mothering is to economic labour markets.

## **8.8 Summary**

In summary, this work has illustrated the ways in which the established cultural norms are preserved in modern forms of family photography. Family snapshots are illustrative of a desire to evidence good parenting and to appear a respectable, cohesive family unit pictorially. Parents consciously exclude negative imagery of children and family life, sending a clear photographic message to their audience that all is well and, critically, also lay down a record that offers some reassurance that things are just as they should be.

This retains the visual tropes apparent within traditional albums of images functioning as an artificially positive representation of family life. This inheritance of photographic norms results in the composition and social function of family snapshots retaining their core characteristics overall. That is, the critiques in literature of the repetitive and inoffensive compositions remains applicable. This retention of the visual cliché provides an explanation for the lack of creative expression found within the images.

The public sharing of images may bring about an awareness of audience perception and increase the pressure to be seen to be practicing "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996) This may account for the record of the mundane which is recorded and displayed as a demonstration of maternal competence. This positioning of the family snapshot as a means of identity reassurance is, as yet, relatively unexplored. The ethnographic work conducted here demonstrates the pressure to present a perfected version of reality is real in public facing, popular accounts. Despite this, and the high degree of commonality of sentiment expressed, feeds have a distinctive 'voice' and character. This maintains a sense of individuality and personality, which may account for the perception of a community

on Instagram. Comprised of similar, but unique accounts, this community allows for social contact, interaction, self-expression with a flexibility which physical world locations do not allow. This may increase the accessibility for those who have pre-existing barriers, or develop them in the post-natal period, for example postnatal depression or anxiety.

The transition to motherhood in particular is described as one which can be socially isolating. This is combined with a shift in identity which exacerbates the potential for feelings of disconnectedness and the experience of the lack of a face to face peer support network. The potential for finding community, connectedness and shared experience on Instagram is both real – and potentially highly impactful on the lived experience of mothers. Whilst, as Abidin (2016) identifies, there is a common perception of Instagram activity as essentially ‘messaging about’. This view of Instagram as separate from the ‘real world’ and that maternal expression in this format is not socially valid and valuable, underestimates its capacity.

## 9. Conclusion

### 9.1 Overview

This thesis set out to interrogate parental Instagram sharing from a comparative perspective. Analogue family photography was a distinctive genre, with snapshots well described in literature as having strong tropes and conventions in representation. These provided a set of characteristics by which to assess family imagery posted on Instagram. This allowed for Instagram to be considered as an evolution of the genre, as opposed to a discrete sphere divorced from previous photographic conventions.

### 9.2 Findings

This work posed 3 research questions, across phases of work with increased focus and shifts in focus.

- In Phase 1 the first research question intended to establish if the family snapshot had been radically altered in an Instagram context, or if it retained visible characteristics associated with analogue family photography. This contributed both a perspective and methodological approach which was absent from literature at the time it was undertaken. The findings suggest that in a public, social network context that the photographic practice retains conventions which underpin the representation of the family. Representation is still primarily positive, and depicts the family in an idealised state, with the omission of negative imagery.
- These findings fed into the increased focus in Phase 2 of work which posed the question: how do mothers use imagery to construct narratives of parenthood on their Instagram accounts and how do these narratives depict daily maternal lived experience. Focused on a smaller sample of mothers using an ethnographic approach, findings are indicative that Instagram provides a platform for the sharing of daily narratives, in granular detail. These are shared along with larger life events, providing a high level of insight into the mother's lives. These are presented in as part of aesthetically considered lives, with a high level of production and effort expended on image production and capture. Here not only is the depiction

of family still idealised and harmonious, but textual commentary accentuates this. As such, parenting is presented as beautified narratives which depict motherhood as a glossy, aspirational lifestyle.

- In Phase 3 the final research question asked: how can the images and discourse produced by mothers be interpreted as evidence of extended selfhood (Belk, 1988) via parental identity expression?

This theoretical perspective re-examined the ethnographic data from the previous phase of work. This reported findings which suggest that the images can be interpreted as representing both the use of material possessions to depict an extended selfhood, but also that the portraits of young children can be viewed as depicting integration into a parental selfhood. Thus, the production of images, and use of Instagram can be viewed as maternal identity work and self-expression.

What is apparent across the work conducted, is that whilst Instagram images retain characteristics traditionally associated with family snapshots, there is an increase in mundane imagery overall. Despite the creative freedom of camera phone photography, family snapshots retain the characteristic focus on the ordinary for which they have traditionally received highly critical responses.

Instagram appears to accentuate capture of the mundane. These photographs capture a granular account of daily life in the form of food, pets and daily routines. Whilst Chapter 5 notes their presence within parenting hashtags, contextualised within the study of popular mothering accounts in Chapter 6 this mundanity is contextualised as both part of long-term narrative building and providing followers with an insight into mother's lifestyles. This insight is aesthetically aspirational via the production of high-quality images and photo staging.

Instagram has a cultural perception as both being superficial but also in promoting consumerism. Its links to selfie practices in particular render it as commonly associated with narcissism and a facile focus on the self (Senft and Baym, 2007). However, this work presents alternate findings which suggest that the affordances of Instagram allow for mothers to conduct identity work, and participate in a normative daily practice of image sharing. This visual representation of the family represents both social understanding of the 'right' ways to parent (Faircloth and Murray, 2014) and intensive parenthood (Hays, 1996). This allows for the

imagery to be interpreted as depicting rich and detailed accounts of contemporary motherhood, its pressures and navigating the transition to parenthood and family life.

### **9.3 Further Research**

This work opens a number of avenues of further research which were beyond the scope of this thesis. The study of family snapshots in Phase 1 of work identified a lack of blended families included within the data. This is suggestive that stepfamilies use alternate hashtags specific to their family structures, or do not draw attention to their family structure in hashtagging practices. The data overall presented an over-representation of traditional nuclear family units, and as such single parent families were also not identifiable. Further research is needed to account for the use of Instagram by families who are invisible or excluded within this work. Of particular relevance is those who may face physical barriers to participation, such as those with disabilities whom may derive benefits from online participation in communities of interest on Instagram.

As identified in Chapters 5 the data included a range of external content, such as motivational slogans or parenting humour which are non-photographic. This external content is rarely produced by the user and is uploaded to parental hashtags along with photographic content produced by the account holder. Further work is needed to examine the role this humour based imagery has in expressing tensions in a way which family photography does not.

Further work in this area is reliant on conducting work without API access to Instagram data. This presents an ongoing challenge to researchers to develop alternate data collections methods. Whilst alternate collection tools, outside of formal API access, exist for scraping data, these present challenges ethically on circumventing Instagram's formal processes for researcher access. These technical issues of data accessibility render differing methods which foreground engagement with participants and communities of interest as of significant importance moving forward.

### **9.4 Policy Recommendations**

The findings from this work can be considered to provide a number of key points on the potential for Instagram as a platform in common, daily use by mothers. This

vernacular use, combined with the flexible and asynchronous affordances of Instagram has a number of implications for future integration into policy for supporting mothers in particular:

- Instagram, far from 'messaging about' online (Abidin, 2016) represents a serious space which mothers inhabit and post on in a daily, ongoing fashion. This activity is one which must be taken into account as a normalised activity by early years professionals, such as health visitors and midwives. This places it as sphere which has potential for assessing and monitoring the needs of individuals.
- The characteristics of Instagram render it as a potentially cost-effective method of interaction with a case load, particularly those groups with low engagement or barriers to use in traditional communication mediums.
- That Instagram presents a sphere with unexplored potential for dissemination of credible information and advice (and countering poor, or incorrect information circulating online), as an alternate channel. This allows for information to be delivered to communities of mothers on Instagram which are already using, and have a high level of engagement with the platform.

There are a number of key areas of potential for Instagram to be utilised as a platform. The logistical, practical and ethical issues warrant exploration as to the viability of Instagram use in this way. As a normalised, everyday aspect of parenthood, online activity on social media must be both understood and taken into account by professionals working in this area and in policy formation.

## **9.5 A Final Call to Interdisciplinary Understanding**

Instagram continues to report high levels of growth. During the course of this thesis, work focused on this area has begun to emerge and provide initial explorations of parenthood on Instagram. However, this field remains underdeveloped, with a number of areas identified in which further study is required. As outlined above, the accounts profiled here have limited demographic characteristics and work is needed to explore the diverse range of family arrangements and forms which exist outside of those described here.

In conducting research into the body of published literature on analogue family photography and family albums, there is evidence of an abundance of high-quality scholarship with well-developed descriptions of photographic practice. These perspectives, across a number of disciplines have been integral to situating the conducted work here. They have contributed a significant grounding in vernacular photographic practice which was absent from work addressing parental activity on Instagram. In doing so, this work has highlighted the complexity of the family snapshot in this context. As a result, the key recommendation from this work is that future work in this area maintains an interdisciplinary overview which integrates both perspectives on Instagram affordances with those of photographic practice, sociology, and visual culture.

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