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Understanding 21st Century Motherhood: Irish Mothers' Perceptions of their Maternal Bodies in the Context of Celebrity Culture

Name: Nadja Winter

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Supervisor: Dr. Paul Ryan

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Abstract

Using semi-structured, face-to face interviews, this research seeks to explore how Irish mothers perceive and experience contemporary motherhood and further investigates the impact of media representations of celebrities' pregnant and postpartum bodies on Irish mothers. Focusing on dominant ideologies of motherhood and the role of the media and celebrity mothers in conveying a 'fit and slender' body ideal, the research argues that Irish mothers are not only subjected to dominant motherhood ideologies and contradictory neoliberal demands, but also to unrealistic expectations to 'bounce back'. The research also suggests that the importance of the 'perfect body' ideal seems to be declining. Moreover, the author claims that there is a difference in social and mainstream media regarding the representations of the ideal postpartum body, with social media acting as a platform for challenging dominant ideals whilst mainstream media still promote these ideals.

Introduction

In August 1991, a then 28-year-old and seven months pregnant Demi Moore featured on the cover of VanityFair. Titled ‘Demi’s Big Moment’, the photo showed a practically naked actress with her baby bump and is to this day considered to be one of America’s most influential magazine shoots. It was the first picture published by the mass media that sexualised pregnancy, and although it was deemed controversial at first, it changed America’s views and attitudes towards pregnancy (and surely the rest of the world’s, too). Pregnancy, and especially celebrity pregnancy, was no longer a private affair or something that should better be concealed and kept hidden, but was instead accentuated and highlighted. Since then, celebrity births, maternity shoots and baby bumps have become a common feature in popular media; pregnancy and motherhood have turned into an industry of their own (Collins [1991] 2018).

This development is closely associated with the rise of celebrity culture. Turner (2004) defines the concept of celebrities as an industry, a commodity, a discursive effect and a form of social relations. With the advances in technology and the rise of the social media, the range of influence of celebrity culture has no limits. The Internet plays a crucial role in spreading celebrity news and gossip, thereby potentially helping or harming existing celebrity careers, and social networks allow fans to be “friends“ with their favourite celebrity (Riley 2010). Nowadays, celebrities serve a social, cultural, economic and political function (Turner 2010) and they use their status and influence to engage in politics (Turner 2004) or to promote their own brand, especially via social media (Lagerwey 2017).

Motherhood has become a way for celebrity mothers to spread their self-brand and communicate a shift in their identity from “’extraordinary movie star’ to ‘ordinary’

woman'" (ibid:73). Celebrity children thereby serve a social and political function: they are not only a down-to-earth marker in their celebrity mother's attempt to create an relatable identity, but also represent an "idealised future nation" (ibid:19). Celebrities have become an important cultural force (Furendi 2010) and motherhood serves as a gateway for celebrity mothers to emphasise their authenticity and ordinariness; regardless of how these women achieved their fame, they are, first and foremost, mothers.

Contemporary mothers thus find themselves caught in the middle between dominant neoliberal ideologies about 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1996) and femininity, with the media promoting a thin and slender body ideal (Mayoh 2019; Chae 2014; Hopper and Aubrey 2016; Liechty et al. 2018). Thus, it becomes increasingly important to shift the focus from these idealised images of motherhood and pregnancy, which are represented by celebrity mothers, and to examine 'ordinary' mothers' personal perceptions of and feelings about these different ideologies they are confronted with on a daily basis.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore **how the exposure to representations of celebrities' maternal bodies in social and digital media influences the views, thoughts and attitudes of Irish mothers regarding their own pregnant and postpartum bodies** in order to get a better understanding of **21st century motherhood**.

Literature Review

So far, most of the research in this area has focused on motherhood and motherhood ideologies (for example Hays 1996; Douglas and Michaels 2004) and the representation of celebrities in the media as well as on the rise of celebrity motherhood (Lagerwey 2017; Douglas and Michaels 2004; Chae 2015), but not many studies have explored women's feelings about these issues and even fewer have examined the feelings of pregnant women or mothers about media representations of celebrities' pregnant and postpartum bodies. One of the few studies on the connection between motherhood, pregnant or postpartum bodies and the influence of social media has been conducted by Fox and Neiterman (2015), who explore women's perceptions of their postpartum bodies, and another by Hopper and Aubrey (2016), who study the impact of social media on non-pregnant women. The studies investigating the influence of media on women's pregnant or postpartum bodies have been carried out in the US (De Benedicts and Orgad 2017; Liechty et al. 2018; Mayoh 2019; Johnson 2014), Korea (Chae 2014) or Australia (Lupton 2017), using qualitative research methods like content analysis, focus groups or semi-structured interviews. Thus, there is a gap in the literature with regard to one-to-one in-depth interviews with Irish mothers about what they think of the representation of celebrity pregnancies and postpartum bodies in social media. Considering Ireland's unique history of containment culture (Smith 2007), I argue that the dominant motherhood ideology is immanent in the Irish understanding of motherhood and that the exposure to media representations of celebrity mothers pressures women into conforming to neoliberal ideologies of 'perfect' motherhood, femininity and beauty.

Historical and Social Constructions of Motherhood

Motherhood, as a social and cultural construct, changed over time and place. The Industrialisation period brought about the modern idea of ‘the good mother’, a full-time stay-at-home mother who is financially dependent on the husband and isolated in the private sphere. In the Victorian era, a new motherhood ideology emerged, according to which mothers were seen as morally ’pure’, ’chaste’ and ’pious’, but this only applied to white middle-class women. After the Second World War, the idea of the “happy homemaker” became dominant, which portrayed the ideal mother as white, married, educated and staying at home (O’Reilly 2004). In the 1960s and 1970s, mothers were encouraged to work outside of the home and the ideal of the ’super mum’ emerged, a perfect mother in the home who is also working full-time. In the 1980s, the media focused their attention on women who abandoned their professional careers in order to look after their children; ’the soccer mum’ became the new ideal of motherhood (Chae 2015).

The contemporary idealisation of motherhood commenced in the 1980s and intensified in the 1990s, with the media introducing the ‘celebrity mum profile’, which idealised white, sexy and heterosexual celebrity mothers who were ’having and doing it all’ (Palmer-Metha and Shuler 2017). Accompanied and reinforced by the ’celebrity mum profile’ was the rise of ’New Momism’.

Douglas and Michaels (2004:4f.), who coined the term ‘New Momism’, define it as

> a set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach.

“Honey-hued ideals of perfect motherhood“ (Douglas and Michaels 2004:2) differ from the reality of mothers’ everyday lives are communicated by the mass media. According to the authors, ’New Momism’ is centered on the needs and development of one’s children; it includes the ideology of ’intensive mothering’ (Hays 1996), which demands mothers to devote and sacrifice their full psychological, emotional, intellectual and physical self continuously and unconditionally to their children. It conveys the idea that ‘good mothering’ involves putting their children’s needs before themselves, obtaining expert skills and knowledge about the well-being of their offspring and the idea that no amount of money spent on their kids is too much. It presupposes that women are natural caregivers and perceive mothering as more important than paid work. Moreover, ’New Momism’ claims that a woman is not completely fulfilled unless she becomes a mother and motherhood is presented as the ultimate goal through which a woman can perfect her femininity and unleash her full potential (Douglas and Michaels 2004).

Parallel to the rise of New Momism, the idea of the ‘yummy mummy’ emerged, the motherhood ideal of neoliberalism. The ’yummy mummy’ is young, beautiful and sexy, even while she is pregnant, and works on her body through exercise and beauty practices. She is a “consuming and consumable neoliberal subject“ (Musial 2014:404) and represents the ’desired identity’ of contemporary mothers, symbolising autonomy, choice, aesthetic perfection and consumerism (ibid).

Feminist scholars (e.g. O’Reilly 2004) call for a distinction between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the feminist experience of mothering. Motherhood is a socially and culturally constructed patriarchal institution, in which maternity is considered to be natural to women due to their supposedly innate abilities to nurture

and love children. This belief is also the foundation of the modern ideological construction of ‘intensive mothering’ which oppresses mothers; firstly, by denying them their identity as individuals by assuming that every woman has the natural desire to become a mother, and, secondly, by refusing to give them authority and agency to determine their own experience of motherhood. Instead, contemporary motherhood demands mothers to raise their children in accordance with the expectations and values of the dominant culture, imposing a “powerless responsibility“ (O’Reilly 2004:7) on mothers.

History of ‘the Irish Mother’

The narrative of the Irish mother has developed in the context of the Victorian era and Ireland’s unique containment culture: a constituted national identity in which women were solely defined by their place in the domestic sphere and their role as wives and mothers, expected to maintain the image of sexual purity and chastity of Irish women (Smith 2007). Within this context of containment culture, the concept of the Irish mother emerged: Inglis (1987) argues that the Irish mother was “created as a moral power in and through the [Catholic] Church“ (Inglis 987:188) and became one of the main forces behind the modernisation of Irish society. Furthermore, Inglis states that the church maintained the control over women by exercising control over their bodies and sexual activity by making women feel ashamed of their bodies.
Hence, the concept of Irish motherhood was created and controlled by the Catholic Church and idealised the Victorian values of chastity, purity and piety within women.
Ralph (2016) notes a sense of ambivalence in contemporary Irish family life: even though there is general societal support for an increase in the fathers’ involvement in child-rearing, mothers are still considered the primary care giver for children. This is

due to the contradictory demands of what he calls ‘gendered moral rationalities’ and the labour market: while fathers draw on the ‘primary worker’ rationality (the best thing for fathers to do is to be a robust economic provider), mothers draw on moral ideas of the ‘good mother’, which combines the ideology of intensive mothering and the assumption of women being naturally better carers than men.

This shows that the dominant motherhood ideology as defined by Douglas and Michaels (2004) and Hays (1996) is prevalent in Irish society and thus provides the social context for my research project.

Giddens and Beck: Modernity and the Risk Society

Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck are arguably two of the most important modern-day sociological figures. Both of them developed a theory of modernity, which I will use as the theoretical framework for this thesis, focusing especially on Giddens’ notion of the reflexivity of modern societies and Beck’s ’risk society’.

The term ’modernity’, in the simplest terms, refers to modern societies and the ‘industrialised world’; however, Giddens (1991) states that modernity is multidimensional and much more complex. He talks about three dynamisms of modernity: the separation of time and space, the disembodying of social institutions and the reflexivity of modern society. He defines the latter as follows:

> The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character (Giddens, cited in Elliot 2014:115).

In modern societies, everything is open to reflection; we constantly reflect on and examine and modify our actions in response to ever-incoming information. As a result, we also reflect on ourselves, our lives and our identities; the self is, in

Giddens' words, a "reflexive project", meaning that we constantly examine and adapt of our everyday routines and lifestyle choices in the light of incoming information and in the knowledge of various alternatives and options that exist, in order to maintain a narrative of the self; the story or stories through which our self-identity is understood both by ourselves and by others.

This reflexivity results in a sense of uncertainty, which is reinforced by means of another characteristic of modernity: the risk society. According to Giddens (1991:3), modernity is characterised by a "risk culture". Here, Giddens does not refer to society' willingness to take risks, but rather states that modernity, and thus globalisation and industrialisation, introduced new risks unprecedented in human history. A 'risk society', according to Beck ([1986] 1992), refers to the mode in which society organises itself in response to such risks. Like Giddens, Beck regards modernity as reflexive, and like Beck, Giddens characterises modern society as a 'risk society'.

For Giddens (1991:3), a risk society is increasingly concerned with the future, in the sense that "[u]nder conditions of modernity, the future is continually drawn into the present by means of the reflexive organisation of knowledge environments".

The Rise of Social Media and Foucault's Concept of 'Biopower'

According to Giddens (1991), the development of high modernity, which is the current stage of development of modern institutions, is inseparable from electronic innovations and the development of mass print media. Several previous studies on the experience of contemporary motherhood have focused on the development of social media.

Social media has functioned as a platform a) for celebrities to promote their own brand or product (Lagerwey 2017), b) for mothers to exchange experiences, information and knowledge about parenting and pregnancy (Liechty et al 2018; Lupton 2017; Chae 2015), c) to discuss and promote alternatives to the dominant motherhood ideology (Guignard 2015; Palmer-Mehta and Shuler 2017) and d) for social networking and increasing one's social capital (Johnson 2014). Moreover, certain apps help mothers to log and monitor not only their children's development (Johnson 2014; Lupton 2017; Hopper and Aubrey 2016; Mayoh 2019) but also their own bodies; fitness products and training programmes targeted at women reinforce and promote individual beliefs in the need to gain control over their bodies by means of self-surveillance and self-control. This draws on Foucault's concept of 'biopower' , which refers to

> the ways in which power manifests itself in the form of daily practices and routines through which individuals engage in self-surveillance, self-regulation and self-discipline and thereby subjugate themselves (Pylypa 1998:21).

'Biopower' operates in our own bodies as we control and shape them through self-surveillance and disciplinary practices (Pylypa 1998). In this respect, ideals of beauty, physical fitness and femininity create "docile bodies" (Pylypa 1998:21) as women are engaging in practices to live up to these standards.

The Rise of the 'Celebrity Mom Profile'

In the 1980s, the media's obsession with motherhood has given rise to the 'celebrity mom profile'. The media presents images of celebrity mothers who found a balance between work and family life, reinforcing and romanticising the features of 'New Momism' and 'intensive mothering'. Celebrity mothers are represented as 'having and doing it all' and the media communicates unrealistic ideals to 'ordinary' women

(Douglas and Michaels 2004). Celebrities' fit pregnant bodies and their commitment to engage in 'body work' to maintain a slender and slim postpartum bikini body are praised and glorified (O'Brian Hallstein 2011), whereas a failure to attain this ideal is associated with laziness and failure (Hopper and Aubrey 2016). Hence, celebrity mothers are fundamental to the dominant motherhood ideology, conveying popular culture's idealised images of motherhood (Lagerwey 2017). In 21st century popular culture, ordinariness and authenticity are the most valued forms of stardom and motherhood and assist celebrities to create a not only an relatable identity, but also a personal lifestyle brand, which is further reinforced through their children. Lagerwey (2017) argues that these ideals, like historical constructs of motherhood, are not only addressed at and representing affluent white women, but are also oppressive. Celebrity mums act as 'role models' for employed mothers, as they are depicted as being successful both in motherhood and their professional career (Chae 2015) while at the same time maintaining the ideal body (Chae 2014; Musial 2014).

Methodological Approach

Choosing the Research Method

My research intends to investigate women's experience of contemporary motherhood and their perceptions of their body during and after pregnancy, given the exposure to the 'celebrity mom profile'. My main objectives were to examine how Irish mothers handle and negotiate dominant motherhood ideologies as well as to explore the impact of messages and depictions about the idealised maternal body in the media. To do this, I found it important to explore mothers' lived experience of motherhood and their opinions, feelings, thoughts and perceptions regarding 'celebrity mom profiles' and narratives about the 'perfect' maternal body. Adopting an exploratory research design, which "seeks to find out how people get along in a setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions and what issues concerns them" (Chambliss and Schutt 2013:8), this research attempts to answer two questions: **how do Irish mothers experience 21st century motherhood** and **how do the representations of celebrities' maternal bodies in the media impact mothers' perceptions and feelings about their own pregnant and postpartum bodies?** The latter focuses especially on the exposure to and use of social media.

My research takes an interpretivist/constructivist approach, which considers reality to be socially constructed and multidimensional, meaning that social reality is defined by individual experiences (Mackenzie and Knipe 2006). For this reason, I felt that the most appropriate and suitable means to use for my research were qualitative methods. Qualitative research attempts to "document the world from the point of view of the people studied" (Hammersley cited in Silverman 2001:8). It usually

involves “exploratory research questions, inductive reasoning, an orientation towards social context, and a focus on human subjectivity and the meanings participants attach to events and to their lives“ (Chambliss and Schutt 2016:200) and therefore suits my research question and paradigm. In my research, I conducted face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten mothers aged 22-40.

I refrained from using quantitative methods as I was interested in what mothers thought about representations of celebrities’ maternal bodies on social media and how they felt about motherhood and their own body. Even though conducting surveys or using other quantitative research methods has the advantage of making the data collected more generalisable, I believe that it would have been inadequate for my research questions as it would have not given me a deeper insight into the participant’s feelings, experiences, perceptions and thoughts about the topic. Moreover, I felt that in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate qualitative research method as they allow the researcher to investigate things that cannot be detected through other methods like observation or focus groups (de la Croix et al. 2018; Wellington and Szczerbinski 2007). Kruger et al. (2019) found that individual interviews provide a more supportive and comfortable environment for women than focus groups when discussing sensitive issues such as the body image. In their study, women in individual interviews disclosed more personal feelings and thoughts about their body picture and evaluated interpersonal environment of their sessions more positively. Hence, such interviews constitute a more effective means of obtaining rich information for my research.

The Sample

At first, I attempted to recruit women not older than 35 years who were currently pregnant or had at least one child under the age of 3. These women had to be actively involved in social media and should have gone through bodily changes associated with pregnancy fairly recently. However, as the age of women at the birth of the first child in Ireland has increased over the past decades (CSO 2016), I chose to widen my selection criteria to women aged 18-40 who had at least one child under the age of 5. The children had to be young because I wanted the women to be in or to have recently made the transition into motherhood and experienced the physical changes accompanying it. This enabled me to obtain the most valid and accurate data possible. Moreover, women with multiple children may have different experiences of their pregnancies. I used snowball-sampling, in which respondents are identified who then refer the researcher on to other respondents.

Interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Number of children	Age of youngest child
Lisa*	39	Female	3	3 years
Christina*	27	Female	2	2.5 years
Ciara*	33	Female	1	14 months
Alannah*	36	Female	1	10 months
Clare*	33	Female	3	14 months
Meabh*	38	Female	2	2 years
Niamh*	36	Female	2	3 months
Saoirse*	22	Female	1	5 months
Kate*	34	Female	2	6 months
Aoibheann*	40	Female	5	4 years

* — name changed for confidentiality

Conducting the Research

As I did not know any young mothers myself, I started my sample with three women who I got in contact with through two of my housemates. However, snowballing was not as effective as expected: I did not get many replies from the women that I was referred to, so I decided to put an announcement on Facebook on a local citizen notice board page, outlining my research topic and the research process, the selection criteria and the duration of the interviews. This proved successful and within a couple of days I was contacted by various mothers who wanted to participate in my research. I also wrote emails to several creches in my area but either received no response at all or was declined.

Most of the interviewees were from my area and most interviews took place in two local coffee shops. This allowed the mothers to bring their children and created a familiar and comfortable interview environment. Three interviews were conducted via FaceTime or through a phone call: two due to the reason that the interviewees lived outside of my area and one as a result of the outbreak of COVID19 which prevented me from doing an in-person interview with the respondent. All questions I asked were open-ended. Wherever needed, I asked different follow-up questions dependent on the interviewees response.

Ethical Considerations

Since my study involved sensitive issues such as body image, a number of ethical concerns had to be addressed. Firstly, all of the participants were informed about the nature of the research — once when I first contacted them and a second time on the day of the interview — and about their anonymity and confidentiality. I stressed that no interviewee was obliged to answer the questions, especially those they felt

uncomfortable answering. All questions have been approved by my supervisor beforehand. The interviewees were made aware that the interviews were recorded, to which all participants consented. Consent forms were given to and signed by the interviewees I met in the coffee shops; in the case of the interviews conducted through FaceTime and over the phone, I informed the participants about the content of the research and tape recorded their consent to participate. All interviews were recorded on my personal mobile phone, which was secured through a personal pin code, and were permanently deleted after they had been transcribed. The interviews conducted via FaceTime and on the phone were recorded on my personal laptop, which was also secured through a password and were equally deleted after transcription. In both cases, I used pseudonyms to name the individual interview files.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed and printed out. I then developed codes and concepts to identify similarities and minority reports. These concepts were then colour-coded in terms of themes I had previously identified in the literature. At first sight, I was overwhelmed by the data and it was difficult to detect any regular pattern in the individual, very personal reports, but eventually I identified three major recurrent themes: the social and cultural construction of contemporary motherhood, the issue about the perfect maternal body, and lastly the impact of social media.

There are, however, some limitations of my study, the most significant one being the restricted sample size: for an accurate representation of Irish mothers' experiences in general, the study would have to be expanded and also include women from more minority backgrounds. All the mothers I interviewed were white and middle-class

women; inclusion of women of colour, from lower-class and ethnic minority backgrounds would diversify the sample and lead to greater accuracy and understanding of the issues addressed.

Discussion of Findings

The following discussion is split into three themes which are further divided into sub-sections: Firstly, the social and cultural construction of motherhood, which draws on dominant motherhood ideologies and is supported by Giddens' (1991) concept of the reflexive self and Beck's ([1986] 1992) notion of a risk society; secondly, the question of the perfect maternal body, which examines women's feelings about their pregnant and postpartum bodies before exploring their opinion on messages in the media to 'bounce back'. Lastly, I will examine the influence of social media on the mothers and, within this context, their opinions on celebrity mum profiles. The main argument of this research is that that social media and celebrities reinforce neoliberal ideologies about motherhood and body work, putting a great strain on Irish mothers' daily lives and potentially lowering their self-esteem considerably.

The Social and Cultural Construction of Contemporary Motherhood

Notions of a risk society and intensive mothering

Even though the experiences of the mothers I interviewed did not reflect every aspect of Hays (1996) intensive mothering ideology, I found various manifestations of it when I asked mothers about how they would describe 'good mothering'. Most mothers talked about keeping their children healthy and happy, raising them with good manners and respect and meeting their children's developmental milestones. Kate seems to have internalised the intensive mothering ideology to some extend, stating that a good mother should "provid[e] the best you can when you can, emotionally, financially, in every way".

This is in line with the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother which is at the heart of intensive mothering, and while the notion of intensive mothering is clearly present in

Kate's interpretation of 'good mothering', the understanding of putting the child's needs before one's own was a current theme in all of my interviews.

Some mothers were also talking about the importance of keeping their children safe, which indicates their underlying concerns about living in a risk society as described by Beck and Giddens. Ulrich Beck argues that modernity is characterised by risks and hazards produced by an industrial society and defines a risk society as "a *systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself*" (Beck [1986] 1992:21; italics in the original). Anthony Giddens (Giddens and Pierson 1998:209) similarly describes a risk society as "a society increasingly preoccupied with the future and (also with safety), which generates the notion of risk". Aoibheann, described motherhood in the 21st century as "scary" and felt like she always had to make sure that her children are in sight when playing outdoors. Similarly, Lisa compared her mother's experience of motherhood to her own saying that "it was safer [when I was growing up]; now you've got to secure everything, protect the children from nearly everything".

Both Aoibheann and Lisa perceive the society they live in as full of risks, hence feeling the urge to make it safer for their children, reflecting concerns of a risk society as described by Giddens and Beck.

<u>The dual demands of neoliberalism</u>

The interviewees also felt the dual demands of neoliberalism: being a caring mother at home while at the same time pursuing a successful career. Meabh perceived an increasing financial pressure, which made it necessary for her to go back to work as soon as possible after giving birth:

> I went back to work when [name of first child] was 10 months, I took my full unpaid and paid maternity leave, and with [name of second child] I went back

> after 6 months. […] [going back to work] was an essential; so yeah, it was tough going back, you put him in a creche when he was 6 months, you know, so, you would feel guilt about that, cause, they're just so small when they're 6 month, but you have to do it […] there's a lot of financial pressures on parents nowadays and you kinda, you have to work.

Here, the double pressure on women to return to work while also being good mothers causes feelings of guilt. Giddens (1991:4) also talks about guilt in the context of the reflexive self; he defines guilt as "anxiety produced by the fear of transgression: where the thoughts or activities of the individual do not match up to expectations of a normative sort." In this context, guilt is the result of a recurring anxiety produced by an inner conflict: on the one hand, mothers feel the need to meet neoliberal demands to be successful career women, and on the other hand, they are also aware of the normative expectations of society that they should primarily be a caring mother. These findings suggest that the discourse of New Momism is deeply rooted in society, causing feelings of guilt when mothers are confronted with the demands of returning to the labour market.

Like Meabh, Kate struggled with juggling both work and family life, also expressing feelings of guilt:

> [Name of first child] was 11 months old when I went back to work […] I did my Public Health Nursing [degree] and worked full time as well, so that was difficult […] juggling all three, so I was juggling college work, I was juggling full time work and I was juggling being a mammy you know, and I just feel […] that, as a mammy, you have more guilt going back to work than the daddies do. The daddies seem to be able to park it and say 'well that's it, I'm in work now', whereas the mammy's always thinking 'is everything ok at home' […] you're juggling everything.

Kate's way of thinking corresponds to what David Ralph (2016) calls the 'gendered moral rationality' of being primarily a mother while fathers are, despite the increasing expectation to be involved in family life, primarily viewed as workers and economic providers, and therefore do not have to feel guilty about leaving the children in care

and going to work. Drawing again on Giddens' definition of guilt, this further implies that gendered moral rationalities are powerful forces in the process of creating and maintaining a narrative of the self.

The significance of work

Despite feeling guilty, most of the mothers that I interviewed still experienced going back to work or college as mentally healthy and necessary.

Both Niamh and Alannah struggled with giving up work and staying at home full-time. For them, work seemed to be a focus outside of the home, a place of self-realisation, as expressed by Alannah's feelings of estrangement from herself during the first weeks of being a mother:

> When I went back to work for a few months after my maternity leave, […] I felt really good, like I felt like myself again. 'Cause, the first few weeks of being a mum, I remember telling my husband that I don't feel like myself anymore … sometimes I said 'I don't like the person that I've become'.

Hence, for Alannah, work is not just a place outside of the home, a way to escape isolation but also an opportunity for her to define herself and to be defined not solely as a mother but as a person. With regard to O'Reilly's understanding of motherhood as a patriarchal institution, and taking into account Giddens' concept of the self as a reflexive project, I argue that Alannah used to identify herself through her work. Now as a stay-at-home mother, she feels alienated from herself and her identity. According to Giddens (1991:52), self-identity "is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual." He argues that a person's identity exists in one's "capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (Giddens 1991:54; italics in the original). Thus, Alannah finds herself disconnected from her self-identity and unable to 'keep her narrative going', which

ultimately points to the importance of the work place — at least partly — as a means of self-actualisation. Moreover, the opportunity for a mother to be able to go back to work or stay at home is limited by her financial capital and/or on her social support network; with her family living in the Philippines, Alannah lacks the familial support other mothers may have.

The benefit of going back to work or college on mothers' mental health becomes even more apparent when I asked Saoirse about what being able to go back to university meant for her:

> Going back to college was […] physically tough […] but mentally it was the best thing for me because I was getting back into a routine. […] Whereas if I had stayed at home, which would've been nice to be able to stay at home to be honest, because, I would've been able to have time […] with my baby. So, if I'd had stayed at home, I wouldn't have been seeing people, I wouldn't have been out of the house as much, I wouldn't have been getting conversations with people […]. Definitely, it made a huge difference to me that I was getting out of the house and, I didn't have, thank god, I didn't have any trouble with postnatal depression.

Thus on the one hand, returning to work seems to be a necessity imposed by neoliberal and labour market demands but on the other hand, it also represents a 'mental remedy' for mothers, a way to escape the isolation of the house and a means of creating one's self-identity.

Mothers as a market place

Another feature of contemporary motherhood is the diversity of products and services directed at mothers. This was also a common element throughout my interviews: Mothers were using various gadgets and tools designed to facilitate motherhood and pregnancy, for example apps allowing them to monitor a child's development. The women were talking about the overwhelming amount of information available to them and the majority of mothers were using the internet,

specifically Google and related websites, when looking for specific information on pregnancy or motherhood.

The mothers I interviewed were aware of the use of social media by celebrities as a platform to promote and sell certain products, yet they were using them as a tool or source of advice for specific situations. For example, Niamh resorted to influencers' Instagram accounts for workouts during and after her pregnancy, but instead of feeling pressured by their advice, she regarded it as a "tool" and helpful for deciding "what to do when you run out of ideas". Similarly, Ciara followed celebrity influencers after her pregnancy to explore motherhood tools and practices. When I asked her whether she would buy any products promoted by celebrities, Aoibheann admitted: "motherhood-wise no but if they use a certain perfume I go 'oh I might try that' and then I buy it", which illustrates the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements.

Social and cultural expectations

Even though mothers were able to access a variety of information, they felt pressured to "do things by the book" (Alannah). The mothers I interviewed felt compelled to raise their child in a way that fulfilled certain social expectations, consequently putting pressure on themselves to live up to these expectations and comparing their own parenting style to others. Kate, for example, said:

> It's about every decision that you make about your child […] [name of second child] is six months now, do you go baby led weaning, do you go slow feeding, you know, […] do you bring your child swimming from the time that they are 12 weeks old [or] do you not. You know, it's everything, every decision you're making about your child there is somebody else who is doing something different, and you wonder 'should I be doing this or should I be doing that'.

Kate's statement displays the sense of 'powerless responsibility' O'Reilly (2004) talks about: She is expected to raise her child in keeping with dominant social

expectations (i.e. ’baby led weaning’), but is at the same time exposed to alternative information as she sees other mothers’ child-rearing practices.

Similarly, Alannah talked about “rules“ that are not only on a social but also on a cultural level:

> I feel like there is more pressure now to succeed, more pressure now to do things by the book like ‘no screen time’ or you’re supposed to sleep-train […] People are more conscious of developmental milestones: why isn’t she crawling yet, why isn’t she walking yet, is she supposed to be able to crawl at 9 months […] It’s different in the Philippines, very few people sleep train, my sister has three kids and she says all three of them sleep in the bed with them, but here there is pressure or expectation that [children] should be in their own room or crib by [the age of] six months.

Giddens (1991) argues that one dynamism of modernity is the reflexivity of modern society and the constant influx of information. Both Kate and Alannah seem to be reflecting on their actions as mothers against the backdrop of ever-incoming information and feel pressured by societal norms and expectations to ‘do‘ motherhood a certain way (for example by sleep-training their babies). These expectations, however, differ culturally. In spite of experiencing social pressure, the majority of mothers emphasised the individuality of each child, and asserted that there is no ’manual‘ for mothering and that different parenting styles suit different families.

Moreover, the women were confronted with unrealistic ideals of family life conveyed and reinforced by the media, especially social media, which put additional pressure on them. Talking about these ideals, the interviewees said:

> The kids are supposed to be happy, you’re supposed to be happy, the house is supposed to be pristine, you’re supposed to be home-baking, all those things on social media that make motherhood and family life look so perfect, but it’s not, not really. […] It puts so much pressure on women who are already under so much pressure (Meabh, 38).

> At the start you have every ideal, you think you're going to read to your baby 24 hours a day, you think you're going to go to the park, you're going to do all sorts of arts and crafts even from the time they may be three months old, but that's not reality either (Kate, 34).

Not meeting those expectations then frustrates mothers:

> You beat yourself up, it was actually, only after having my second baby that I realised how much I bet myself up the first time around […] I would've based my expectations towards the way [name of first child] would be as well like developmentally, you'd be thinking 'oh god, he's not doing this', 'this baby is doing that', whereas on your second [child] you're a bit more relaxed and not comparing as much, I think. Your lived perception [of family life] is better than your perceived perception the second time around (Kate, 34).

Hence, the media is an important factor in promoting social and cultural ideas of motherhood which are highly idealised and romanticised. Mothers experience the challenging aspects of motherhood and are frustrated and pressured by these depictions of perfection — not solely when it comes to family life but also with regard to the body.

The Perfect Maternal Body?

<u>The pregnant body: the bump and weight gain</u>

When I asked mothers about their feelings about their pregnant body, the responses were mixed and can be grouped as follows:

1. Positive feelings — the bump:

Most mothers I interviewed enjoyed their pregnant body, especially with regard to 'the bump'. Ciara, having had troubles with her body image her whole life, said:

> Because I was always quite overweight, I didn't notice any change until kind of around the late 20 weeks, […] but then, I loved actually having the pregnancy belly. I was like 'ah, I can wear stuff that shows my belly now because everyone knows that I'm pregnant so it's grand', whereas most of

> the time I'd wear my clothes to try and hide my stomach, so I was like, I loved that.

Both Niamh and Alannah were working out during their pregnancies (Alannah, for example, did so by doing pilates, yoga and dancing; Niamh had a personal training plan that was adapted every trimester). Clare stated that she "loved to watch it grow" and Meabh particularly "enjoyed having the bump and feeling the baby kick". The latter two both engaged in pregnancy-related, meditational courses ("reflexology" and "hypnobirthing"), asserting positive affirmations about their bodies.

2. Awareness of bodily changes — weight gain and body image:

Several women I interviewed were hyperconscious of their pregnant body, especially in regard to weight gain. In this respect, Lisa expressed negative feelings: "you don't feel pretty, everything is out of proportion, nothing makes you feel pretty". Saoirse kept her pregnancy hidden as long as possible and was concerned about her body image:

> The worst thing I feared was that I would get stretch marks, but obviously I know that that's the norm in pregnancy, but it turned out, because my bump didn't get big until the last few weeks, that I didn't actually get stretch marks. I was just kind of worried about body image to be honest, you know, because, you see girls and they get really large bumps obviously and I was just really worried because I was afraid of such weight gain and things like that even though when you're growing a human inside you that's normal […] Body image was my main concern while I was pregnant because I was upset knowing that my body would never be the same again.

Even though she was working out in the gym, Niamh was similarly preoccupied with her body image:

> You're kinda conscious of how much weight you put on, like, I put on 20 kilos with [second child] and 17 kilos with my daughter and I was 60 to start with so, you know, that's one third of what I was before […] You're conscious of how you look, I was double the size, my face was double […] you're working

> out in the gym and you know you're pregnant and whatever but I still felt massive.

3. Neutral attitude towards body changes:

A third group of women did not mind their body changes. Christina said she did not have any problems with her pregnant body as it did not change much due to her naturally slim figure. Even though finding out that she was pregnant was overwhelming for Kate, she was okay with the way her body changed due to her pre-existing knowledge in midwifery:

> I found it really overwhelming at the start, but then I was ok with it; I suppose because I worked as a midwife so I've seen women's bodies changing and that was quite normal for me whereas other people, I suppose, their perceptions are a little bit different because they don't see the reality of it.

<u>The postpartum body: a blessing or a vessel for food?</u>

Most women I interviewed were not happy with their postpartum body. However, some mothers expressed amazement about the body's ability to bear a human being and described it as a "blessing":

> I caught myself looking in the mirror a little bit and acknowledging that my body has carried three babies […] I feel honoured that I was able to have the babies, I definitely know that I wouldn't feel this way if I did't have a stillborn baby, that I would suffer a little bit more with my self-image […] Because of the horror of having [name of stillborn baby], I definitely look at it in a different light […] Falling pregnant naturally is like a blessing (Clare, 33 years).

Similarly, Ciara's body image changed after she realised what her body had achieved:

> I was always very hard on my body for being overweight, I was always being quite critical and I was hard on myself but after I had [name of child] I was like: "my body is after doing this, this is amazing", you know, how can I be hard on myself as much when I can do that? You know, when I can get through this and recover from a C-section and there's not a bother on me,

> you know. I actually haven't had any negative thoughts toward my body since I've had her.

Meabh, felt that she did not care about her body image during the first few weeks after having the baby: "especially in the first 3 months, I think, three to six months, you're in such a bubble with your baby, you don't really care what you look like yourself."

But the majority of mothers I interviewed were struggling with their postpartum body. Saoirse described how her feelings changed: even though she felt lucky that she was "able to carry a baby boy", she was unhappy with her "excess skin" after birth: "when you're pregnant, the bump was filled, but then when you had your baby it's just empty, saggy fat on your stomach […] It's not really nice looking in the mirror." Others described their postpartum bodies as "flabby" (Niamh), and referred to it as an over-hanging "pouch" (Ciara) or "a deflated balloon" (Alannah). Alannah, who described motherhood as a "shitstorm" that no one can prepare for, felt alienated from her body: "I felt like I was just a vessel for the food [breastfeeding]".

Thus, the feelings about their pregnant and postpartum bodies were mixed: most mothers were happy with their pregnant bodies and especially enjoyed watching the bump grow. They felt empowered and were fascinated by the capacity of the maternal body and experienced motherhood as a "blessing".
Some interviewees were over-conscious of their body image, especially during the postpartum period, worrying about their weight gain and overall body image. A few mothers, who were not concerned about gaining weight, did not mind the changes.

Niamh and Alannah were both working out during their pregnancies, exercising control over their bodies (Pylypa 1998) and engaging in body work in order to comply to the ideal of the 'yummy mummy' (O'Brien Holstein 2011; Musial 2014). Alannah was also experiencing a loss of identity and feelings of estrangement from the self and disconnection to the body, which confirms Giddens' (1991) claim that the self is embodied: feeling that her body was just a "vessel for food", she felt disconnected from her body and her identity.

These findings are in keeping with the literature (for example Fox and Neiterman 2015; Johnson 2018; Musial 2014) and feminist critiques of the body (O'Reilly 2004; Bordo 2003).

"Bouncing back"

Most of the mothers I interviewed were struggling to lose the weight they had gained during pregnancy after their last child was born. Several factors emerged during the interviews that facilitated mothers to "bounce back" naturally: gestational diabetes, breastfeeding and keeping busy.

Two of the mothers I interviewed had gestational diabetes and were on strict diets while they were pregnant which resulted in them having a slim figure post-pregnancy:

"After I had [name of second child], because I had gestational diabetes, I was on a very strict diet, so I was very slim. After having him, I snapped back, I was size 8" (Meabh, 38).

Moreover, a few mothers owed their success in 'bouncing back' quickly to breastfeeding. Kate said: "I think breastfeeding was my saviour after my first baby, I was lighter, I was really happy with my body after I had my second [child] and I put it

all down to breastfeeding.“ However, most mothers lost their pregnancy weight due to keeping busy and “running after kids“ (Aoibheann). As Christina puts it: “running after two small kids is pretty much fitness.“ Some mothers also talked about how being busy prevented them from eating regularly, further contributing to weight loss.

> I probably would have a mid-morning snack and then I’d have a cup of coffee and then by the time I look at the clock again I’m preparing dinner so like the only meal I feel I’m sitting down and enjoying is my dinner with us as a family. Besides from that you’re kind of picking when you’re preparing for the children. So it’s definitely missed meals since the babies came along (Clare, 33).

However, most mothers struggled to ’bounce back’ after their last child. But physical exercise, which is often advertised by the media as a means of ‘bouncing back’ actively (Hopper and Aubrey 2016; Musial 2014; Chae 2014; Liechty et al 2018) and as a way of exercising control over the body (Pylypa 1998), was no option for most mothers due to the lack of time and motivation.

Adding to her previous statement, Kate continued:

> It was easier to get out and about with one baby than it is with two so I would’ve been walking an awful lot on my maternity leave, I would’ve been doing, you know, things like aqua aerobics. I found it is easier to get one baby minded than it is to get two babies minded to do things for yourself.

Most mothers were emphasising the struggle to get out of the house and to find time to do things for themselves. Because she had no time to get out of the house, Niamh tried to work out at home:

> Because I don’t have time to go to the gym I try to work out at home […]. When I was pregnant I used to follow a lot of pregnant women for exercise and then you kinda go with them after the pregnancy for exercises […]. I get a lot of tips on what to do in the gym or at home from their videos […]. I don’t look at it like ‘oh my god she looks better than I do‘, I look at it like ’let’s use these things for myself’.

Besides time, another factor that determines whether or not a mother can work out is their perceived level of exhaustion.

> I hate [my postpartum body], I can't get rid of the last three kilos of fat […] everybody says 'give yourself time for it to grow back', but like, it's been 10 months […] I haven't been working out, I've been lazy because it's just so exhausting like looking after a baby is so tiring and then I have to work out? (Alannah, 36)

Alannah's statement implies that she suffers from the societal expectations to engage in exercise and body work to return to her pre-pregnancy body, which are, however, not compatible with her daily experience of motherhood due to a lack of time and motivation.

When I asked them about their opinions on 'yummy mummies' and the necessity to 'get the body back', most mothers saw 'bouncing back' as an individual choice and were amazed by those who were able to find the time and effort to do so ("fair play" (Alannah)). Niamh regarded those mothers as an "encouragement" who show that 'bouncing back' is doable, however she said she would not "get depressed over it".

Moreover, most mothers were stressing that there is a line between exercising to keep fit and an excessive obsession with the 'perfect' body:

> I don't think that there's anything wrong with going to the gym when you're pregnant […] I think it's good to keep fit, you know, but I would think that there is an obsession with the thin, perfect body after having a baby and that's not the reality, your body needs to recover and you need time to recover, and I think you shouldn't really be going back to the gym too quickly because your pelvic floor muscles and everything are quite vulnerable. So, I don't know, I would feel whatever you want to do as a mother […] whatever suits your lifestyle or the way you want to be […] [Bouncing back] wasn't a priority, but if it's a priority for somebody else and it keeps them happy then [do] whatever suits them (Meabh, 38).

Meabh's statement points to the contradictory messages mothers are exposed to: on the one hand, the media communicate narratives of 'bouncing back' and 'yummy

mummies' with slim and sexy bodies as soon as possible after giving birth. On the other hand, mothers are also aware of the medical facts of pregnancy and that the body needs "time to recover". This suggests that contemporary mothers are subjected to both cultural and medical discourses about the body; this finding is in keeping with the literature (Mayoh 2019; Musial 2014).

For some mothers then, losing weight and getting their body in shape was not a priority. For Clare, after having a stillborn baby, assuring the health and safety of her other two children was her primary concern. Christina regarded the effort to exercise in order to lose weight as an individual choice but thought that it was "better go to sleep if you can [rather] than do[ing] fitness", alluding to the sleep deprivation commonly experienced by mothers.

The Impact of Social Media

<u>The "fairytales" told by social media</u>

Despite the fact that all of the women perceived celebrity lifestyle as unrealistic, they still felt pressured by it, some to a greater extent than others. Celebrity lives as depicted on social media were described as "glamorous" (Lisa) "pristine" (Clare), as a "picture perfect life" (Meabh), only displaying "happy moments" (Christina) and as different from the mothers' lived experiences. Saoirse highlighted the pressure she felt:

> I try not to look at celebrity lives and influencer lifestyle because it's very glamorous and when your life isn't very glamorous it's kind of a bit depressing to me watching their lives every day […] social media can be fairytales.

Even though celebrity lifestyles are perceived as a distortion of the reality of motherhood, keeping up with their lives on social media in general also constituted a form of digital leisure. Ciara found that scrolling through the latest posts on social media was “time for yourself“, Aoibheann liked to “flick through“ Facebook and Instagram and even though Kate would not post much on social media herself, she enjoyed “the nosing“.

So apparently, there are two sides to the contemporary mothers’ use of social media, as suggested by previous studies (Lupton 2017; Liechty et al 2018; Mayoh 2019): on the one hand, social media acts as a form of digital leisure but on the other hand, it is also influential in promoting specific ideals.

In the course of the interviews, two major themes re-emerged: the decline of the ‘perfect body’ ideal and the pressure to socialise and take time for self-care.

The celebrity mum

Since Demi Moore appeared on the cover of the Vogue in the 80s, the media has been obsessed with celebrities’ pregnant and postpartum bodies. For the women I interviewed, the depiction of celebrity pregnancy and the postpartum body in the media contradicts their lived experience. Well aware of the way celebrities are used for product endorsements, Aoibheann compared her pregnancy with those depicted in the media:

> They all look amazing when they’re pregnant, I suppose they do be getting their hair done all the time, they all probably want to sell stuff or [they] go to the gym or are on diets, I used to go out in my tracksuit […] [celebrities] buy all the best clothes and they always look great, I never looked amazing when I was pregnant.

Kate felt that celebrities were using their pregnancies to present motherhood as a stage in life that every women should go through by glamorising it as a ’wonderful’

experience. Drawing on her midwifery knowledge, she knows that these representations of motherhood and pregnancy usually do not correspond to reality:

> It's nearly like a fashion accessory sometimes, it's like the next thing you should do, like the next step [in life], but in reality pregnancy is not that great for some people, it's not a wonderful journey it's actually quite a difficult journey but they don't talk about that, they talk about all the good things I suppose […] They never show the stretch marks, they never show the slaggy boobs, they never show how the body actually changed.

Kate's statement furthermore demonstrates how 'New Momism' is manifested the 'celebrity mom profile': implicating that no woman is complete and fulfilled until she becomes a mother, Kate has the impression that celebrities present motherhood as "the next thing you should do" by 'wearing' pregnancy like a "fashion accessory". Generally, mothers were talking about the differences that can sometimes be observed in the ways in which celebrity lives are represented in the media, which demonstrates the key role and effect of the media in communicating motherhood ideologies:

> When a [celebrity] mother does something that isn't [considered to be] a 'motherly thing' to do, for example when a mother is seen out drinking with her friends, it's in the papers in a negative [way], they're taking it from her, you know, that 'oh she should be at home minding her kids instead of being out with her friends' and things like that. I think that, as a celebrity you do get dashed a lot, especially if you're a mother (Saoirse, 22).

Saoirse's perception of the media illustrates how the media controls discourses on motherhood in the 21st century: ideologies like Douglas and Michaels' *New Momism* and idealised images of the ever-perfect-looking celebrity mum are promoted while behaviours that do not conform to these ideals are condemned.

The decline of the ‘perfect body’ ideal

Nevertheless, I found that some mothers, especially the younger ones, saw a change happening in social media, a shift from unattainable ideals to more realistic representations.

> I think nowadays, people are beginning to be very honest [about the body] whereas before I think we may have been slightly fooled by their photographs which have been altered and things like that […] I think social media is becoming a lot more honest and women are becoming a lot more confident to share the type of photos you wouldn’t expect people to share the type of photos that aren’t as glamorous, photos that are quite personal (Saoirse, 22).

> I think in the past few years, they started to represent real bodies after pregnancies. It was a huge hit when Megan Markle posted pictures with Archie and it was so visible that she still had a tummy after labour, whereas others really try to hide it with their clothes and photoshop. It was like that for so many years, they came out of the labour ward looking perfect, now it’s finally starting [to show] that it’s not so perfect for everybody […] As well on Facebook you can see now the [body] projects where it shows pictures of [women] with stretch marks or with C-section scars and things like that […] (Christina, 27).

This is in accordance with previous findings on social media and the depictions of maternal bodies: Liechty et al. (2018) pointed to the complex dimensions of social media: even though it communicates unrealistic ideals that are unreachable for women, it can at the same time have a positive influence, providing that the portrayals of the pregnant and postpartum bodies were realistic. The women in their study also equally experienced the contradiction between the social media’s depictions of unrealistic and fake images on the one hand, and of realistic and relatable experiences on the other hand.

Christina went on to say that celebrities are being more and more honest on social media about the struggle to lose their pregnancy weight. She welcomed this

development, stating that it lowered the pressure on women to have a perfect postpartum body:

> You don't need to expect to [look like] a Victoria Secret Angel one day after your labour, it's just unrealistic and I think it's good for new mums to see what actual life is like and to understand that it's not so easy and that it takes time to heal the scars.

Hence, a lot of mothers I interviewed perceived a decline of the influence of messages about the assumed need to 'bounce back quickly'. Instead, they prefer realistic depictions and think positively of celebrities who spread these authentic images.

A different kind of pressure

While the frequent claims on social media about the alleged need of having a 'perfect' maternal body seem to be (slowly) decreasing, Ciara found that there is a different type of pressure on social media:

> What I do think is more [powerful], I suppose, the influential like new mothers are the ones that … not even like getting their postpartum body back but it's more so about, you know, they have their hair done, they have their make-up done, they're dressed amazing whereas we're sitting at home on the sofa in a tracksuit with the house falling down around you and when you see [those mothers], I think that can be quite damaging.

In other words, she found that the pressure on mothers to lose weight quickly after birth was decreasing, but at the same time she felt increasingly under pressure from mothers who constantly share images about engaging in self-care and socialising outside of the family:

> Where it can be a bad influence on new mothers is where you see those women who manage to be out and about looking well, not even to do with losing weight or having a good body but when they manage to get themselves dressed and have their hair done and have their make-up done […] when you're sitting at home having a bad day and you see that, it can be tough to see everybody else having their stuff together but you don't (Ciara, 33).

Similarly, Clare argued: “us mammies in the 21st century we, put a lot of pressure on ourselves, we want to get out and about, we want to meet friends for coffee dates“. Thus, it seems as if images of the ‘perfect’ maternal body and narratives promoting a quick return to pre-pregnancy weight are losing their influence. Instead, mothers feel more pressured by depictions of other mothers who find time for “getting the hair and make-up done“ and going out for “coffee dates“ (which, in the interviewees’ eyes, is proof of those women’s overall balanced lifestyle).

Furthermore, I argue that returning to work or college are also perceived as features of a balanced lifestyle by means of which mothers create a ‘narrative of the self’ as individuals and not solely as mothers. For example, Lisa told me she did not “feel pretty“ because of the physical changes she experienced while being pregnant, she got her hair and eye brows done in her last pregnancy as a way to feel prettier. Kate though that neoliberal beauty standards and put “huge pressure“ on women, but that beauty practices were at the same time

> a woman’s way to feel more normal and their way to look after themselves. Sometimes you’re so busy looking after everybody else that this is the only thing you do for yourself and it’s not necessarily for anyone else.

This goes hand in hand with Alannah’s feeling of estrangement from herself being a stay-at-home mother and her feelings of normality when she returned to work. Thus, I argue that beauty practices, just like going back to professional work, is seen by the mothers as a way to take care of themselves, both mentally and physically.

<u>The need to ‘detox’</u>

However, although the normative discourse on the maternal body may be decreasing, it has still not disappeared completely. In the form of beauty standards

promoted by the media, it still prevails and puts pressure especially on young women. This is best captured in Saoirse's statement about how she 'detoxes' from social media, in order to escape a pressure she experiences as overwhelming and toxic:

> Every few months I actually delete my social media but it never lasts really long, I deactivate my accounts and the most I've lasted was nine days, just to kind of detox because I think it's really important. We're constantly looking at other girls who are way prettier or maybe way thinner or way curvier than you […] and we become a little obsessed I think. So with me, yea definitely, I'm always looking at women on social media to be honest. I'm comparing myself you know, I find myself saying 'oh I wish I was them' or 'I wish I had their hair, I wish I had their body, I wish I had their skin colour', just things like that and that's why I think personally that I need the detox because, I'm never gonna look like them […] It's just nice to be able to get the break […] it's a bit much, it's a bit overwhelming seeing [all these 'perfect' women].

When I asked her if she would consider deactivating her accounts permanently, she declined, stating that she would not want to lose the social connectivity that comes with social media.

This illustrates the importance of social media: firstly, it provides a social platform where mothers can engage with other mothers, share their experiences and opinions. Secondly, it can be a kind of digital leisure and thirdly, it is immensely influential in negotiating beauty standards.

I argue that this preoccupation with one's appearance can be related to Giddens's notion about the self as a reflexive project. Giddens (1991:100) writes: "Appearance becomes a central element of the reflexive project of the self". Drawing on Goffman's concept of 'normal appearances', he adds: "Normal appearances are the (closely monitored) bodily mannerisms by means of which the individual actively reproduces the protective cocoon in situations of 'normalcy'". Engaging in beauty practices and body work then is not only a 'third shift' for women and mothers (O'Brien Holstein

2011), but also a way of taking care of themselves and of returning to feelings of ’normalcy‘.

The ‘Irish mammy’ blogger

Moreover, the mothers I interviewed distinguished between Hollywood celebrities and social media influencers.

A lot of them followed Irish celebrities and bloggers, like Vogue Williams, Kathryn Thomas or Siobhan O’Connor, for instance. Only one of the participants followed Hollywood celebrities like the Kardashians. Most of the women felt more connected to ‘Irish Mammy’ bloggers, as these were mothers with children around the same age as their own.

Referring to influencers like Vogue Williams or Siobhan O’Connor, Kate said:

> You see those people have children around the age of mine so that’s how I got following them as well […] some of the things [that they post in relation to motherhood] are helpful, some of their tips and tricks but it’s [about] finding the balance of taking what’s good for you and your baby and applying it to you rather than just say ‘well look, that’s the ways it’s supposed to be‘ […] A lot of these people are being sponsored by people and there is a lot of things that they would promote that are very expensive.

Some mothers, like Kate, were consulting the profiles of such influencers to get motherhood advice while other mothers followed them for different reasons. Saoirse mentioned that she followed Sophie Hinchcliffe when she was pregnant, an Instagram influencer who gained attention by giving cleaning advice, because “it was nice to see that she was going through some of the things that I would soon be going through“.

Hence, the mothers I interviewed were more inclined to follow those celebrities that they considered to be more like themselves (Irish and/or other mothers) rather than those who generally do not disclose much of their private lives.

Ciara explained why:

> There's a lot of Irish influencers that I would follow, and a lot of them would be mothers as well, the same stage as me like you kinda tend to gravitate towards what you know […] They're the ones with their profile out there […] the influencers, you're seeing on a daily basis on your phone so you tend to know more about them, you tend to be more invested in their lives than people that you see on a film you wouldn't know much about.

All mothers were cautious about celebrities' and influencers' product endorsements and felt more drawn to influencers or bloggers who were making their personal lives public and with whom they could identify as a mother and/or as being Irish. Hollywood celebrities, on the other hand, seemed to be regarded as more distant, because of their low public profile. This is in keeping with literature, Liechty et al (2018:857), for instance, state that social media is often perceived as "coming from 'real people'", which supports Lagerwey's (2017) claim that celebrities use social media to communicate an authentic and relatable identity. This corresponds to my interviewees' preference for Irish Mammy Bloggers due to their transparency and the fact that they shared similar experiences with them.

Inconsistencies in media representations

While there seems to be a shift towards a more realistic body image on social media, mainstream media still advocate the dominant discourse, as can be seen in the refusal of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science to show an advertisement for postpartum products at the 2020 Oscars. The TV spot narrated the authentic experience of a young mother struggling with her postpartum life, but was not shown at the Oscars because it was deemed "too graphic" (Seligson 2020).

When I came across the advertisement, I asked some of interviewees how they felt about it; most of them were indignant.

> I thought it was insulting not to play that ad, after having the baby that girl was me, that is exactly what a woman goes through after having a baby, it could not have been anymore realistic (Saoirse, 22).

While Niamh also confirmed the authenticity of that representation, she felt that the context in which the advertisement was supposed to be shown was not appropriate:

> Why would you show it to someone who is [not a parent] and traumatise them […] I know it is the reality but, would I want to be shown that? – No I wouldn't. In a hospital, one hundred per cent, when you go for scans or you're waiting […] that's the place for stuff like that.

Even though I could understand Niamh's view that certain messages may more appropriate in environments where they are particularly relevant, I was surprised. Advertisements for hygiene products are already being shown on a daily basis on television, and postpartum products should not be regarded as "traumatising" in the first place when they represent the lived experience of many women. The Oscar case clearly demonstrates that there is a gap between mainstream media and social media concerning the realistic portrayal of motherhood and the postpartum phase.

Conclusion

My research explored Irish mothers' feelings about and perceptions of motherhood ideologies and celebrities' maternal body image. The rise of social media and the obsession with celebrity culture are major features of modernity, which is why it is important to examine the relation between the exposure to 'yummy mummy' ideals that are communicated by the media and reinforced by celebrity mothers, and the lived experience of motherhood.

As expected, the contemporary motherhood ideology of 'intensive mothering' is entrenched in Irish society. Mothers felt overwhelmed by the influx of information on motherhood, pregnancy and alternatives ways of child-rearing and felt under pressure to meet social and cultural expectations. Confronted with the neoliberal idea that they should be a mother and a career women at the same time, some women felt guilty about returning to the labour market. I argued that this way of thinking is based on gendered moral rationalities as proposed by Ralph (2016), which are dominant in the construction of Irish motherhood.

Mothers perceived a return to work/college as mentally beneficial and I argued that work, self-care and socialisation, act as a way for mothers to maintain their narrative of the self, not solely as mothers but as individuals. Furthermore, motherhood is commercialised and commodified as the marketing industry takes advantage of the mothers' fear of living in a risk society, making them feel like they need to invest in various consumer products in order to guarantee their children's well-being.

Moreover, the research showed that the media are influential in shaping contemporary ideals of family life, beauty and motherhood and set unreachable standards on mothers to achieve a slender and slim postpartum body in a short

period of time by exercising self-control and self-surveillance. Meeting these expectations was regarded as unrealistic and incompatible with the busy everyday life during of the average mother.

Celebrity mothers were perceived as reinforcing these ideals by using social media to share their supposedly ‘perfect‘ motherhood with the public. All interviewees considered the depictions of motherhood in the media to be unrealistic and not in line with their lived experiences. Celebrities with a high public profile were seen as authentic and served as a trusted source of information on motherhood or fitness during and after pregnancy, even though respondents were well aware of possible product endorsements. The research showed that mothers were more preferred following celebrities with whom they could identity because they were also mothers and/or Irish. Since these celebrities disclosed many aspects of their private lives to the public, the mothers regarded them as more authentic and realistic.

The research showed that social media serves as a form of digital leisure, a platform for exchanging and connecting with people, and as an influential channel through which motherhood and beauty ideals spread. The research further demonstrated that dominant beauty ideals are still prevalent, creating a sense of competition and pressure. Especially young mothers who are usually more active on social media are more exposed to these beauty images; hence Saoirse’s need to ‘detox‘. However, the study also revealed a difference in the representation of dominant ideals in different forms of media: on social media, the advocacy of a quick return to pre-pregnancy weight seems to be slowly disappearing – instead, the interviewees felt an increased pressure from mothers who displayed their supposedly balanced lifestyle on social media. While social media has become a means of challenging

unrealistic representations of pregnant and postpartum bodies, mainstream media still supports dominant ideologies. In order to examine this in more detail, further studies would need to examine whether the representations of maternal bodies in social media correlate or contrast with those communicated by the mainstream media. This issue could be addressed by using content analysis, for instance. By means of method triangulation (the use of two methods or more), such a study could be expanded to a diversified sample base and combined with a thematic analysis of social and mainstream media images about the maternal body.

My findings are in keeping with previous literature on the subject and show that dominant motherhood and beauty ideologies are deeply entrenched in Irish society, creating a situation in which mothers are subjected to social and cultural expectations about motherhood and child-rearing and feel overwhelmed by information overload and the abundance of alternative options in parenting matters. Mothers constantly reflect on their actions and decisions against the backdrop of ever-incoming information and normative expectations. Whereas social media representations of motherhood are starting to incorporate more realistic images based on authentic experiences, the mainstream media are still far away from realistic representations of motherhood and postpartum experiences. Considering what happened at the 2020 Oscars, it seems unlikely that this is going to change in the near future.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Consent Form

Special Topics Consent Form 2019-2020

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my assignment for my Special Topics module in the department of Sociology at Maynooth University, NUIM. My research is designed to explore

how the representations of celebrity pregnancies and postpartum bodies in the media influence the feelings and thoughts of Irish mothers about their own maternal body within the context of a wider understanding of motherhood as well as to explore their opinion on celebrity mothers and messages around motherhood, pregnancy and the body which are communicated through contemporary media.

This one-to-one interviews will take up ca. 40-60 min of your time and with your permission I would like to tape record the conversation. A copy of the interview tape will be made available to you afterwards if you wish to hear it.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. I will store the tapes/notes of our conversation safely i.e. promptly removed from mobile devices and kept in a secure manner. Your identity will be kept confidential and I will use a code number/ pseudonym to identify your interview data. Neither your name nor private information will appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at

Email: **********

Mobile: **********

“I have read the description above and consent to participate.”

Signed_____

Date _____

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact my supervisor Dr. Paul Ryan at: ********** or **********. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little bit about you and your children.
2. Tell me about your experience of becoming a mother
3. What is important to you in terms of being a mother/ mothering?
    A. What, in your opinion, constitutes ‘good mothering’, if there is something like that?
4. What is it like being a mother in the 21st century?
    A. How do you feel about it?
    B. What was motherhood like for your mother?
5. What did you do when you sought information about motherhood or pregnancy?
6. Tell me about your experience of pregnancy with your last child.
7. How did you feel about your body during pregnancy?
    A. How did/do you feel about your postpartum body?
8. ***only when multiple children:*** Did your feelings about your pregnant or postpartum body change between your pregnancies?
9. Tell me about pregnancy and fitness.
10. How did you manage your body during pregnancy?
    A. How do you manage it now?
11. What are your thoughts on mothers trying to get a slim and fit body as soon as possible after pregnancy?
    A. How did you manage your body after the birth of your child(ren)?
12. What is your opinion “sexy moms”/ “yummy mummies“/ celebrity moms?
13. Tell me about your activity on social media .
    A. What celebrities do you follow?
    B. Did you look up any pregnancy-advice sites/books/blogs/ celebrities/videos during your pregnancy?
14. What roles do celebrities play in your life?
    A. Did they play a role during your pregnancy?
15. How, in your view, are celebrity mothers depicted in the media?
    A. Is that representation any difference to your own experience?
    B. What do you think about media representations of celebrity pregnancies and their post-partum bodies?
    C. How do you feel about this?

16. What do you think about celebrities posting pictures of their children or talking about motherhood?

17. What would you tell young mothers that worry about motherhood/ their body during pregnancy/ post-partum period?

Appendix 3: Announcement for Sample Selection

Looking for mothers to participate in my research

Hello everyone,

my name is Nadja Winter, I am in my Final Year at Maynooth University and am currently looking for participants for my Final Year Research Project. My research will be on mothers, celebrities and the body, so if you are a mother and have currently a child aged 0-5, and if you would like chat about your pregnancy and motherhood, I would love to meet up with you for a coffee (which will be on me of course) and interview you! I promise that everything will be totally confidential, supervised by a member of staff of the Sociology Department of the college and won't take up more that 40-60 minutes of your time.

If you have any questions or if your interested please feel free to dm me.

Appendix 4: Interview Transcripts

INTERVIEW 1 - LISA*

Interviewer: What is it like being a mother in the 21st century?

Lisa: I think it's completely different to when I grew up, so I'm nearly 40 years of age, my mum was a mother in the 80s, so I think the whole upbringing is completely different because back in the days , ehm, definitely, I was born in East Germany, so it was safer where I grew up than it is now. I would never ever let my children walk to school or let them go out on the road by themselves whereas we were able to go out on our own and you could leave the house door open, now you have to secure everything and you just have to protect the children from nearly everything.

Interviewer: Okay, how do you feel about that?

Lisa: It's scary! It's scary because you have to worry all the time, you have to like look after them and - it's just scary but you try your best, you try to bring them into safe places like in the park where you know there's no cars but you still have to keep an eye on them because you don't know who's running around there and who maybe try to, like, snatch your children away. So you have to keep an eye on them.

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INTERVIEW 2 — CHRISTINA*

Interviewer: You were saying you follow celebrities that are pregnant at the moment, how are they depicted in the media in your view?

Christina: It depends on the celebrity, there are the ones who are always, like, they have good media and then there are some who don't have such good media, like I think it was Beyonce with the twins, half of it was good and half of it wasn't so good because of her husband. I think he cheated on her? So yeah, it like made her look bad in the press, but like we don't know what's really going on and I'm really trying my best to understand that what media say is not always what's the truth. And, like, a lot of it is paid as well, especially as well like for the British monarchy, like Kate and William and Megan and Harry like, there was like, for Megan, her dad and sister paid media for information so, how can you trust that if you know that it's paid information?

Interviewer: So, is your experience different to the representations?

Christina: Definitely, yeah.

Interviewer: What would you say is different?

Christina: Like on Instagram they show only like the happy moments, there is none of those everyday struggles with the kids. Like, how you struggle to but him or her to bed for two hours, sitting beside the bed or doing whatever they need; they don't

post those things and it's just like happy pictures. You really need to let yourself go and not expect to be such a perfect mother, because like, nobody of us is perfect. So you need to understand that you cannot be perfect daughter or wife or sister, you cannot be a perfect mother either. And everybody raises their kids differently, like I had an experience where other people were trying to teach me and like, she had a daughter herself, but she didn't raise her and I was offended that she said to me how I need to raise my kids when I know she didn't raise her own. It's like, let me be the mother to my kids and you can mother your daughter. Like she was telling me that I dress my kids not properly, that I need to feed them differently and I'm like 'leave me alone', like I do what I think is best for my family (laughs) You know, like especially as well, I'm a young mother and I look younger than I am and everybody thinks that I'm stupid. As well in the creche, for a year I was fighting with the manager of the creche, that, like, I'm not as stupid as she thinks I am, it's just that like everybody looks down on you and like I do understand what I'm talking about, you know, it's not like I'm a 14-year-old who just fell into being pregnant, I knew what I was doing.

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INTERVIEW 3 — CIARA*

Interviewer: What do you think about media representations about celebrity pregnancies, as you were talking about earlier, about their pregnant or postpartum bodies?

Ciara: Again, I think that culture is slightly changing because I don't think people are willing to consume it anymore, I think a lot of women have gone like… like, if you saw like a magazine with a headline like you know, "oh, such and such manages to bounce back in six weeks" kind of thing, I think people are more aware now that's a wrong message. I don't think it's being consumed as much, I don't think people are buying those types of magazines, I don't think they're going in for that type of click bait if it's online. I think people are realising that it's just trashy. You know, thankfully I think culture has changed that way, just my own personal opinion, like I wouldn't consume it, I don't think anyone I know would, ehm… What I do think is more … I suppose the influential like ehm, new mothers are the ones that — not even like getting their postpartum body back, it's more so about, you know, they have their hair done, they have their make-up done, they're dressed nicely whereas you're sitting at home on the sofa in a tracksuit with the house falling down around you, and when you see that, I think that can be quite damaging. Rather than the postpartum body or oh look we're on a beach, you know a few months after giving birth or Oh look she still has a belly after giving birth. I think if you saw a publication writing something out like "oh look she's going around with a belly hanging out" like and everyone would go "so what, she just had a baby" like I think culture has changed that way and people are more sceptical of that. But I think where it influences, I suppose, where, you know, where it can be a bad influence on new mothers is where you see those women who manage to be out and about looking well, not even to do with losing weight or having a good body but manage to get themselves dressed and have their hair done and have their make-up done. And, you know, like that when you're sitting at home when you're having a bad day with the baby you know, and yo haven't managed to get outside the house, I think that can be damaging.

Interviewer: How do you feel about this?

Ciara: I think… again, there's an argument like for and against it, not really an argument but more so I can see, like if I have, if I'm having a good day say, and I feel like I've managed to get myself up and put some make-up on and well dressed and she's fed and sorted and I'm like, this is brilliant, oh my god this never happens, and I'm guilty of taking a photo of the two of us and putting it on Instagram and being like 'Oh out for the day, here's my coffee date' you know, (to child) you're gonna bite mammy now are you oh your teeth drive me mad. You teeth drive me mad! (to me) Ehm, yeah so I think, so like I can understand when there are women who do that and they like put pictures of themselves up but when they're people like with a high profile, they probably put more effort into doing it and I think that's kinda sad on their part, that they're not allowed to be at home on the sofa, so yeah I can understand you know, women wanting to show ' oh look i'm having a good day' but then you do look at the ones that like have… like I mean the Kardashians would be a prime example, like they have how many nannies behind the scenes and hair and make-up artists and all that, I think it's actually quite sad like I look at those kids and they look like a fashion accessory, they don't look like children, but they you don't want to judge, that's their life, that's their reality, ehm, I would imaging that the kids are very well looked after in the background, the only time you see their children is when their attached to their hip in the matching outfit you know. It's sad when you see stuff like that, ehm, but, and again like that when you're sitting at home having a bad day and you see that like, you know, it can be tough to see everybody else having their stuff together but you don't, you know.

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INTERVIEW 4 — ALANNAH*

Interviewer: What is important to you in terms of being a mother?

Alannah: Sleep? Sleep is a very huge factor like people don't like — I guess people just don't say it, or mothers just don't say it but really sleep is a huge factor cause like you can't take care of a baby if you're not taking care of yourself. And it's so easy to forget yourself, sometimes I eat really shit food, and then she eats like fresh, whatever, vegetables purees and I'm like Oh I only ate pizza and hummus today. Ehm, yeah taking care of yourself and going out as much as you can. Cause it's very isolating maybe especially for me cause I don't have family here, so I have to make an effort to leave the house and we also just moved here in June last year so I have to make friends and it's very hard to make friends as an adult. I mean you're in college now (laughs) after college it was like super hard for me to make friends, like the effort it takes to make new friends when you're an adult is huge. And remembering who you are, like I know that's kind of vague but, ehm, when I went back to work after a few months after my maternity leave, it was really really — I felt really good, like I felt like myself again cause the first few weeks of being a mum I remember telling my husband that I don't feel like myself anymore. Sometimes I said "I don't like the person that I have become".

Interviewer: Wow, okay… ehm, there is a lot of literature on motherhood and everything like that, like is there something like "good mothering" in your opinion?

Alannah: Good mothering … is there something like that? I suppose as long as you don't abandon your child… What do you mean with good mothering, like disciplining children?

Interviewer: Yeah, like in the US there's a lot of literature saying that mothers must dedicate everything to their children, do you think that's dominant in Ireland?

Alannah: No, I disagree with that, if it's like — suddenly you lose yourself, you give birth and then everything has to be about your child, like I'm a person too, just because I gave birth doesn't mean that like that's it, that's the end of my life, everything has to be for my child (laughs) That's depressing, sometimes I think that, especially in the first few weeks when she was much younger, I felt that way, I felt like 'that's it, I'm just a vessel for food'.

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INTERVIEW 5 — CLARE*

Interviewer: How do you feel about your body now, like post-pregnancy?

Clare: Post-pregnancy, ehm, we're just actually back from centre parks and maybe it was because, so we were in the pool and I was in the spa on Sunday, my first break since I've had the babies nearly, but ehm, I think, ehm, I dunno whether it's because I knew I was meeting you today, kind of caught myself looking in the mirror a little bit and ehm, acknowledging that this, my body has carried three babies and that I have been really lucky to carry three babies. Ehm, there's … I don't feel there's been a huge amount of change, the most amount (to baby which gave her a toy) oh thank you, the most amount of change or the area of big change has definitely been my breasts. Because of the feeding, I technically haven't been in an underwired bra in the last three years, because they suggest that from like 16 weeks pregnant you wear a non-underwired bra, so, I I pretty much haven't been in an underwired bra since, so the minute I'm finished feeding Paul*, I'm going into Arnotts to invest in the most comfortable underwired bra I can find, so yeah, that's definitely the area that I've noticed the most deterioration in (laughs)

Interviewer: Did your feelings about your body change during your pregnancy or between your children?

Clare: Yeah I suppose through my first pregnancy, before I realised that Bella* was poorly and that she wouldn't, she wouldn't make it, I've kind of felt oh my god, like, I'm stretching, I'm getting stretch marks what am I going to do, but since having Bella* and being lucky enough to have these two, I definitely look at — I definitely feel honoured that I was able to have the babies but i definitely know that my feelings, I wouldn't feel this way if I didn't have a stillborn baby, that I probably would

suffer a little bit more with my self-image, if I didn't have Bella* if that makes sense. Does that make sense to you?

Interviewer: Yes absolutely, can you elaborate on it a little bit more?

Clare: Yeah, I don't know, maybe the change would have felt more … more of a self-identity, ehm, but I think because of the upset and the horror of having Bella* that I definitely look at it in a different light now, that, because … I only had a discussion with my two friends and one was saying like falling pregnant naturally is like a blessing. And then, ehm, you know, and there's only such a short window in every month to get pregnant, that my body doesn't actually make, it doesn't matter to me about my body anymore you know, if that makes sense. Like, most days I don't even brush my hair, I probably put a face cream on there twice a day or like twice a week sorry, ehm, yeah so body image isn't … but then again it's because I haven't maintained the pregnancy weight, I've lost that so would I feel different if I still had all the pregnancy weight on? Yeah, I probably would.

Interviewer: Did you lose it naturally or did you do any fitness or workouts?

Clare: No I haven't, I solely that it's running after a toddler and feeding a very hungry young man, ehm … yeah I so definitely they do say that you lose it through feeding, but then you've got the other side of that that, ehm, I met a friend quite recently and I hadn't seen her and she goes "Oh god Clare* you've lost so much weight" and I was like well I haven't been trying. Ehm, it's just from the feeding and the busyness ehm, I probably would have a mid-morning snack and then I'd have a cup of coffee and then by the time I look at the clock again I'm preparing dinner so like the only meal I feel I'm sitting down and enjoying is my dinner with us as a family. Besides from that you're kind of picking when you're preparing for the children. So it's definitely missed meals since the babies came along.

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INTERVIEW 6 — NIAMH

Interviewer: How did you feel about your body during pregnancy?

Niamh: Oh I took advantage of it and started eating like a pig (laughs) Ehm, I mean like you're kind of conscious of how much weight you put on but I put on a lot, like I put on 20 kilos on him, and 17 kilos on my daughter. And I was 60 to start with so that's one third of what I was before, ehm, yeah you're kinda conscious of how you look or whatever, I was like I was double the size, my face was double, so I didn't enjoy that, kinda, hard weight that you kinda get too big and it's like, you know, you're working out in the gym and I know you're pregnant or whatever but I still felt massive. I'm very conscious of that. But then again it didn't stop me from eating so it didn't bother me that much, but you are conscious of that.

Interviewer: Did you work out during your pregnancy?

Niamh: Yeah. So I started on the first one on 27 weeks and I started earlier with him because I didn't have time minding the toddler cause like, you know, no child minder or whatever, ehm. But like I kept running with both of them as much as possible and then because I have a toddler and him we used to go on a lot of walks, so I did try to keep active as much as possible.

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INTERVIEW 7 — MEABH*

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience of becoming a mother.

Meabh: Ehm, amazing! When you have your first child you just look at the world so differently and you think Wow, this is what life is all about. Now, it can be really tough. I found my first baby easy, I found motherhood very easy with my first baby. When I had my second baby it all became very very busy, and it's a little bit tougher with baby number two, but — like you have days when you're tired but then there are moments that are just amazing, ehm, and motherhood is amazing. I would recommend it to anybody. Yeah, so, yeah (laughs).

Interviewer: Why is it tough sometimes?

Meabh: Well, it's hard to juggle work and childcare and childcare is so expensive now and there is so little places, like here in ********** in a particular it's problem. Ehm, so yeah, it's just hard to juggle time, really, you kind of find that you don't have much time for stuff outside the family life, you know. So it's just all kinda, Monday to Friday is getting the basics done and getting the kids fed and clean and homework done and the basics, and then, ehm, yeah it's just, it's busy juggling everything with work.

Interviewer: Have you been working full time with both of your children?

Meabh: Yes, yes, so I went back to work when Ben* was ten months, I took my full unpaid and paid maternity leave, and with James* I went back after six months, so that was a good bit shorter. And I went back because we were moving house and we had to save money, so it was an essential, and ehm… yeah, so it was tough going back, you put him in a creche when he was six months, you know, and you would feel guilt about that because they're just so small when they are six months but you have to do it, you know, that's the way it is. There is a lot of financial pressures on parents nowadays and you kinda have to, you have to work.

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INTERVIEW 8 — SAOIRSE*

Interviewer: Tell me about your activity on social media.

Saoirse: Ehm, so I would be a daily user, probably more definitely an over-user of social media to be honest, ehm every few month I actually do delete my social media but it never really lasts very long. I deactivate my accounts and the most I've lasted was nine days, just to kind of detox because I think it's really important, ehm, we're constantly, well as a female anyway, we're constantly looking at, you know, other girls and who are way prettier or maybe way thinner or way curvier than you and it's not really nice but yet we find ourselves looking at it constantly and we become a little obsessed I think. So, with me, yeah definitely, I'm always looking at, ehm, women on social media to be honest like, and comparing myself you know. I find myself saying "oh I wish I was them, I wish I had their hair, I wish I had their body I wish I had their skin colour", just things like that and that's why I think personally that I need the detox because I'm never gonna look like them, so ehm, unless I want to paint my skin a darker brown to be tanned or something (laughs) ehm, yeah so it's just nice to be able to get the break so that's why I deactivate my accounts because — it's a bit much, it's a bit overwhelming seeing, ehm, I think on social media, we, everyone posts the highlights of their life, so people believe that. And it's, it's just, it's nice to be able to highlight the good points in your life but then people forget that person also has bad stuff going on in the background. So we just presume 'oh they have a perfect life' and there's no such thing as a perfect life so, it's just, ehm, sometimes social media can be like fairytales, a bit unrealistic, so yeah it's nice to have the break from social media.

Interviewer: Would you ever consider to getting off it completely?

Saoirse: Ehm, I don't think I would consider it, to be honest, to completely get off it because ehm, we're so connected to people in different counties, different countries, different continents and where we have family they're all — it's a huge way of keeping in contact, ehm, easily. You know, we can just send a video of, say, the baby to your relative who's not living within proximity so I do find it great for things like that , definitely, so ehm — but then, to be honest, we have never uploaded any photos of our child on any social media platforms, like, that's another thing, I don't want my child on social media. I think it's a dangerous place for children, so ehm, but just in private messages yeah, we — sorry, one second (checks baby phone), okay, so, ehm, yeah I don't think I would come of it long term.

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INTERVIEW 9 — KATE*

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience of becoming a mother.

Kate: Ehm, my experience of becoming a mother … ehm, oh gosh, ehm, like in what way?

Interviewer: Like what was it like for you having your first child?

Kate: Ehm, having your first is a bit overwhelming because you have all these ideals in your head I suppose you have from social media I think and from ehm — even

sometimes looking at other people, I think people try to portray the best side of everything and, ehm, nobody really talks about other things that go on behind closed doors, so I think it's a little bit overwhelming the first time. The second time was a lot easier because you know you're going to go through all those different steps and you know, you know the reality of it I suppose. So, yeah, the second time definitely a lot easier than the first but, ehm, and that's because your perception may be … your lived perception is bette that your perceived perception if you know what I mean.

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about those ideals that you had at the start.

Kate: Oh gosh, I think at the very start you have every ideal, you think you're going to read to your baby 24 hours a day, you think you're going to go to the park, you're going to do all sorts of arts and crafts even from the time they may be three months old (laughs) but it's not, that's not reality of it all either. You do your best, and absolutely you do your best but not everyday is your best day either, you know, and you have to realise that actually, you're having a human being as well and their day doesn't go as good as everyday either, you know.

Interviewer: Do you remember how that felt when those ideals that you had were different to your experience?

Kate: Oh, sure you beat yourself up, it's actually only that I've had my second baby I realised how much I bet myself up the first time around. Ehm, so, even up until I had Sophie* I would've been beaten myself up, even going back to work you feel guilty about absolutely everything, every decision you make you're kind of comparing and contrasting to everybody else and then I think on my second I chilled a lot more that way. I realised well this is my family and this is our unit and we have to do things that suit us, more than I would have on my first. I definitely would have based my expectations towards the way Niall* would be as well like developmentally you'd be thinking Oh god, he's not doing this, and this baby is doing that, god is he okay or whatever (child cooing) sorry now, Sophie* is joining in on the interview (laughs).

Interviewer: You're fine don't worry (laughs).

Kate: When you have your second I think maybe you have, you're a bit more relaxed and you're not comparing as much I think.

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INTERVIEW 10 — AOIBHEANN

Interviewer: How are celebrities shown in the media?

Aoibheann: How are they shown? Oh god like everything is perfect all the time, and then they say 'oh Instagram isn't real' but they never show the real part of themselves I think either. Everything is the good side of them and then when people say 'oh you can't be that good' and then they say 'no I do have bad days' but they never show them bad days or, you know, their down days. It's only good days on

Instagram; I like, you know, what makes you feel good I suppose but then it's not real either.

Interviewer: So how is your experience different?

Aiobheann: It's madness from start to finish, like, you know, from the morning time they get up, it's mad trying to get them to school whereas other people, on Instagram, them kind of mams, seems like they get up and everything's ready, kids love school and they come home from school and it seems to be magical but it's not, that's not real. It's like mad from the morning till they go to bed. You know, it's homework, three/four of them do homework, then they have to get dinners, then you have to get them to bed; It is mad, it's tiring. But in a good way (laughs).