Affective Strategies For The Containment and Commodification of Motherhood

Or, Towards a Theory of Affective Expertise

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ABSTRACT

Affective Strategies For The Containment and Commodification of Motherhood

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This thesis proposes a theory of "affective expertise," for understanding the affective maneuvers and strategies employed by influencers, and momfluencers specifically, as they work to earn income through their online personas. The basis of this form of expertise is located in the contradictions that momfluencers (and other influencers) must negotiate as they seek to commodify their private lives through the production of content for sharing platforms. To be forthright in the commodification of family life would represent a breach of social norms. One of the fundamental challenges that momfluencers (and other influencers) face, this thesis argues, is to make the selling of their images appear like spontaneous acts of self-expression rather than considered strategies meant to generate income. Affective expertise is the set of skills that content creators develop and rely upon to thread the needle between commerce and "authenticity."

The subjects of this study belong to the broader creator economy, a precarious workforce that has emerged from the affordances of algorithmic sharing platforms including Instagram and TikTok. This study demonstrates how the working conditions experienced by creators operating under algorithmic managers are the backdrop for both the accumulation and deployment of affective expertise. The work of Deleuze, Hart and Negri, Duffy, and McRobbie lay the theoretical groundwork for the analysis of these labour conditions. Further, this study situates affective expertise within the broader context of biopolitical societies of control as defined by Foucault, Hardt and Negri, and Rabinow and Rose. Affective expertise can be understood as both an outcome of biopolitical subjectivity, and, ultimately, an attempt to recuperate agency within a matrix of constraints oriented around the reproduction of certain forms of life.

This study situates affective expertise as a form of lay expertise that functions outside any formal structures of credential or training. Although this expertise is deployed in the service of an audience, and can be measured in part by an audience's engagement with those who deploy it, I argue for its theorization as expertise rather than as entertainment or spectacle. Rather, affective expertise is an intricate negotiation between the competing and overlapping exigencies of biopolitical control, algorithmic managers, corporate or brand interests, and the imagined preferences of audiences.

ACKNOWLEGMENTS

iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is widely considered to be a collection of practices, values and affects that are resistant to commodification. Across cultures, the state of motherhood is understood to possess some kind of sacred depth that can't be traded or leveraged. And yet, over the last decade or so, motherhood has become a hot commodity on the algorithmic platforms of the social web. Representations of motherhood from the sublime to the mundane command major market share among audiences on social platforms, and brands are continuously on the hunt for new moms to align themselves with. There are untold millions of aspiring and professional momfluencers on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, working hard to commodify the very experience that has long seemed like the last sphere of life – the family – that is safe from the reach of the marketplace.

The work of being a momfluencer, as this study will demonstrate, is complex, sophisticated and by no means easy. Central to the complexity of this labour is the fundamental bind that producers of this kind of content find themselves caught in: They are selling representations of something about which the audience is highly sensitized: Family love. Audiences want this content, but they want it to feel "authentic" – not staged, not for sale, not in any way disingenuous. We expect fashion content to be choreographed, we expect artifice from actors and musicians that we idolize. We graciously forgive our athletes for their acts of shilling. But momfluencers are in the awkward position of turning something we fundamentally don't want to see sold into something we would want to buy.

How do momfluencers create content that threads this needle? In this study, I will argue that a distinct form of expertise is required to successfully do this work. Algorithmic precariousness combined with the stark realities of a culture steeped in neoliberal self-reliance

form the backdrop of this labour. Pulling off a convincing representation of family life through pictures, captions and short video clips, while never veering into territory that might be read as too sales-oriented, and always maintaining an endearing sheen of "relatability", requires a very specific set of skills and competencies. Among the millions of women currently attempting some kind of momfluencing activity on social media, only a small fraction ultimately succeed in earning an income.

What separates those who are able to convincingly sell us motherhood, and those many who simply aren't? There must be some kind of influencer "special sauce," some fairy dust that animates certain content creators and makes them extra-engaging. This study seeks to define exactly what that fairy dust consists of, and how it intersects with platform economies, discourses of expertise and domesticity, and theories of affect.

The aim of this study is to develop a working theory of a distinct form of expertise -- how it is acquired, perceived, articulated and instrumentalized -- among brand-sponsored "mompreneurs" in the online space that scholars have come to define as the mamasphere (Friedman 2009). More specifically, I am seeking to define a type of expertise unique to the influencer economy and its constraints and affordances, which I am calling "affective expertise." I will be locating affective expertise among momfluencers, but I argue that it is deployable in instances beyond this context, among any group who communicates on social platforms.

In this study, I will argue that affective expertise is a form of lay expertise that exists outside of a system of formalized credentialing. I propose that this form of expertise has emerged alongside Web 2.0, and represents a set of competencies linked specifically to acts of sharing information about oneself on digital platforms, developing an audience or "following" and establishing "credibility" among your audience. Affective expertise is necessarily enclosed

within a digital context of platform surveillance and algorithmic sorting, and bound by the metrics that measure forms of connection on sharing platforms. While these metrics (likes, shares, comments, and subscribers) are not, in my argument, necessarily part of the conferral of affective expertise, they can't be disentangled from the concept.

This thesis will seek to understand how affective expertise is expressed, instrumentalized, and what social functions it performs. In theorizing affective expertise, I will propose that it offers us a new way of thinking about affective labour in the context of the "creator economy" (Radionova and Trots 2021). I will also expand upon some of the existing conclusions in the research about momfluencers' agency and autonomy as they negotiate the biopolitical, algorithmic and economic binds that they find themselves ensnared within as content creators.

The subjects of this study are North American momfluencers, and their work of creating digital stories out of their family lives for audiences of strangers. Family life in contemporary North America can't be made sense of without acknowledging the social and economic conditions endemic in a neoliberal society; this is the "water" in which momfluencers swim, and in which their affective expertise is developed and deployed. This project will locate affective expertise as both a product of and a tool for survival in a neoliberal society. It could be said that the precarious labour conditions endured by content creators (Duffy et al 2022) mirrors that of American families getting by with very little social support from institutions or government social programs.

As Wilson and Yochim (2017) and Thornton (2011) argue, family autonomy rather than community interdependency is a defining feature of family life under these social conditions. This social ideal can be understood as a function of necessity; as public funding for social programs oriented toward family (daycare, after school programming, community centers,

professional enrichment) is continuously rolled back and these services are privatized, working-and middle-class families turn inward for survival. Job insecurity, financial fluctuations and rising housing costs create conditions of financial precariousness and social isolation as families adapt to seek employment (Lorey 2015).

These challenges can cause increased social isolation among parents, in particular mothers who stay home to care for young children in cases where daycare is financially out of reach (Watson 2020). Many of these mothers seek out affirmation, solidarity and support through continuous, brief, contact with the mamasphere (Wilson and Yochim 2017). This contact, I will argue, is a response to the dearth of "care" that they are afforded by their social environments. The mamasphere provides small doses of care and solidarity throughout the day. In a precaritized social context, the care afforded by the mamasphere can feel existentially significant (Baym 2015).

This is the context in which I seek to situate my theory of affective expertise. By speaking to mompreneurs whose businesses rely on online interactions, I will seek to understand the social importance of this kind of expertise. My content analysis of four mompreneurs' Instagram accounts has indicated to me that small gestures of politeness and consideration are enacted continuously between content producers and audience members, to the extent that this politeness forms a background noise or discursive tone to the entire mamasphere. I have observed that even mompreneurs with followings in the hundreds of thousands spend hours replying to every question posted in the comments sections of their posts. Relationships among women in the mamasphere are often organized around small daily affirmations, compliments, and giving thanks. The work that this represents in terms of hours and effort, I will argue, is

socially significant, and is best understood as a symptom of and response to the exigencies of life under neoliberalism.

Affective expertise sets the discursive tone among mompreneurs. Because mompreneurs and the mamasphere are influential role models for many North American mothers (Crowley 2015), I will argue that this form of expertise is emerging as a defining discursive modality among mothers -- it is coming to help define how a good mother ought to behave. I seek to argue that it is in part through the sharing of affective expertise that conditions of neoliberalism play out amid the challenges and opportunities of contemporary motherhood. Affective expertise is a response to some of the challenges that mothers face in a neoliberal society.

Underpinning all of these questions are the structural constraints and affordances of online platforms, in particular Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. In order to address the questions above, I rely on research on the political economy and affordances of platforms by Bucher and Helmond (2016), Gaver (1991), Abidin (2015), Andrejevik (2009), Baym (2015), and Duffy (2015). The questions of platform political economy attend to what conditions are necessary for mompreneurs' content, and the platforms on which it's published, to exist. By addressing these constraints and affordances, I will be able to more clearly analyze the media produced by mompreneurs, and the way in which audiences interact with it.

This project's primary theoretical engagements relate to Foucault's theories of care of the self and biopower; Binkley's elaborations on neoliberal governmentality; theories of affect related to gender and labour (Hart and Negri; McRobbie; Duffy; Wilson and Yochim) and theories of expertise by Wall (2001), Apple (1995), and Collins and Evans (2008). I situate my investigation more broadly within a social scientific "moment" animated by "the affective turn,"

articulated in writing by Berlant, Stewart, and Massumi that seeks to uncover the currents and conditions that give meaning and shape to people's everyday lives within neoliberal societies.

My interdisciplinary analysis is based upon the following methodologies: ethnographic study via participant observation, discourse analysis of social media feeds, and open-ended interviews. I conducted interviews at the virtual Mom 2.0 mompreneur convention that took place during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020, and at the in-person Mom 2.0 convention that took place in Los Angeles in April of 2022. I also interviewed momfluencers individually via Zoom. With the exception of twoindividuals (Cathy and Lauren), all of the women I interviewed appear under a pseudonym.

Throughout this thesis, I will make repeated reference to the "mamasphere," "mommybloggers," and "mompreneurship." These neologisms have been coined over the past decade to describe the distinct activities of mothers engaging through the affordances of digital media. The mamasphere is a blanket term referring to all online activity characterized by mothers engaging with motherhood as a topic, whether it's in the form of traditional media outlets, social media, or e-commerce.

Although there has been some resistance to the term "mommyblogger" among mothers who belong to this community of practice (Chen 2013), I will be making use of this term, as it conveniently encompasses a large and diverse online ecosystem, and includes many subcultures, some of which I will identify in the review of literature. "Mompreneurship" is a somewhat broader term, and I am using it to describe only a portion of that it denotes. Mompreneurs are mothers who start their own small businesses from home, typically while caring for their children full-time. Although any kind of business can be run by a mompreneur, the term came into use in the early 2000s, during the same period that many entrepreneurs were starting online

6

businesses. Mompreneurship, therefore, is associated with online businesses, both ecommerce-based, and increasingly based on the sponsorship model made popular by social media influencers over the past decade. For my purposes here, mompreneurs and mompreneurship refer exclusively to digital labourers and digital labour. In this sense, mommybloggers are often mompreneurs (when their blogging activities earn them money), and the terms are often used in this thesis interchangeably.

Motherhood and Expertise

The history of expertise on motherhood and domesticity has always been entwined with patriarchal structures of power and control. However, expertise on these issues has often been crafted and disseminated not by men, but by women. The "domestication" of women, write Ehrenreich and English (2008), has occurred with particular social consequence during moments in history when patriarchal power was destabilized by social change. In these moments of social instability, "experts" have been widely sought to ease the anxiety of an unknown future social order. These experts - both men and women - have offered scientific arguments for how women should manage themselves, their families and their homes. "Anxiety suffused these questions, and the experts were ready with answers that grew out of their own anxieties in the face of rapid, unpredictable social change" (Ehrenreich and English, 2008).

Inspired by Ehrenreich and English's theory that expert advice is often a response to prevailing social anxieties, I seek to investigate how mompreneurs gain and disseminate expertise in the contemporary online attention economy dominated by social media and ecommerce. How do mompreneurs work to be seen as experts? How is legitimacy conferred upon mompreneurs who ascend to expert status? What kind of expertise do they claim to have,

and how can this expertise be understood as a response to contemporary concerns about the roles that mothers and women play both in and outside the home?

Convention-like events catering to female-identified online entrepreneurs have proliferated in the past decade. Annual conferences including Create Cultivate, BlogHer, Mom 2.0, WEX (Women Empower Expo), and Altitude Summit -- among dozens of other, smaller conferences -- attract online content creators and the brands who wish to sponsor them. These events typically bill themselves as sites of "empowerment" for women entrepreneurs, and opportunities for women to find like-minded peers and mentors in a celebratory networking environment.

Typically, these conferences cost upwards of $500 to attend, and promise free gifts from brand partners for attendees. These conferences are promoted as social and recreational events in addition to professional gatherings. Given the geographically diffuse nature of online communities like the mamasphere, there is an underlying sense that these events are precious opportunities for communion for a group of like-minded people who might otherwise never get to meet. Altitude Summit's promotional materials claim to give attendees the opportunity to "meet your people." Create Cultivate is based on "building relationships." BlogHer claims as its mission, "Women inspiring women." The emphasis placed on the consolidation of social capital at these events makes them rich sites for investigating how mompreneurs see themselves and assess others in their field. Furthermore, these events attract mompreneurs of all levels, as well as members of their audience.

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the period of time I planned to attend these conferences, and they were held online instead of in-person. Despite the lost opportunity to conduct participant observation studies over the course of hours or days, the online format

nonetheless offered me the chance to watch mompreneurs socialize with each other in Zoom "breakout rooms" and attend panel discussions with live Q and A sessions.. As restrictions lifted, the Mom 2.0 conference announced a return to in-person programming for 2022, and I took the opportunity to meet with a number of attendees in-person. These events afforded me access to a diverse pool of interview subjects who are approaching the same topic -- mompreneurship in contemporary North America -- from different parts of the country, but to similar ends: In the hopes of monetizing the content they produce about motherhood.

The past decade has brought about radical transformation in the production and consumption of all North American media. Motherhood media is no different, and just as newspapers now compete with citizen journalists for coverage of breaking news, the opinions of "experts" on motherhood are now considered right alongside lay-people with no scientific or otherwise formal training, all of whom offer opinions and advice on best practices for raising children.

The form and content of this advice has itself evolved rapidly since the advent of Web 2.0. The experts of the mid-20th century child-rearing science, such as Doctor Benjamin Spock and Dr. John B. Watson, were figures whose credibility was derived in part from their ubiquity in North American homes. They were doctors, with formal credentials, whose expertise was based on a top-down definition of what constitutes knowledge and experience.

Today's mompreneurs compete for an evermore fragmented piece of the "attention economy" (Davenport and Beck 2001) and are often required to diversify their content to appeal to a broader cross-section of audience in order to remain competitive (Demo et al 2015). Mompreneurs give advice without formal certification. They base their claims on their own experience, and are granted legitimacy through processes that are exclusively social, discursive,

9

and informal. Expertise is a slippery concept across the contemporary media landscape, and in the mamasphere, concerned as it is with topics that are never far removed from fundamental issues of morality and social cohesion, this fungibility has social implications that deserve our attention.

The Affordances of the Mamasphere

The landscape of motherhood media at the time of this study's writing is distinguished by several structuring features, including but not limited to the following three: The presence of engagement metrics including "likes," shares, and comments (Cote and Pybus 2011); a growing discourse claiming that online entrepreneurship is a reliable means for women to seek empowerment, agency and financial rewards (DiPrince 2012); and an established trend among marketers to advertise through social media influencers as opposed to through more traditional advertising channels such as spots on TV or banner ads on websites (Toma 2016). I will be basing my analysis of the political economy of the mamasphere largely on these three structuring features, as they have featured prominently in existing scholarship, and provide a foundation on which to develop my theory.

The concept of affordances is meant to describe what technologies and social organizations allow people to do -- the possibilities for action that are latent within a given set of conditions (Gaver 1991). In the context of technology, it describes the way in which users interact with interfaces, and what this interaction allows for. Affordances are not normative; fire can provide warmth but also can burn us. Social media can provide opportunities to connect but has also been found to increase feelings of isolation among specific populations. Technology, therefore, can be understood to afford different kinds of sociality, and it's within this context that I am interested in studying mompreneurs.

10

However, within a social environment afforded by technological interfaces, social behavior is an important component in and of itself. As Gibson (2015) writes, "behavior affords behavior." The sociality of the mamasphere is made possible by its members' own behavior in and through the technological affordances that provide its infrastructure. Technological affordances are often divided into high-level, abstract affordances related to the social worlds and engagements made possible by technologies, and low-level concrete engagements that occur between users and platforms, usually in the forms of buttons (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Researchers of social media affordances refer to "imagined affordances" to describe the affective currents that run through online social interactions (Neff and Nagy, 2015).

Imagined affordances, Nagy and Neff claim, "emerge between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (5). For Nagy and Neff 'older' notions of affordances do not adequately account for affect or cognitive process on the part of technology users. Ascribing the possibilities of action of a social media platform in its design features isn't enough, they claim, because users' expectations of what the technology does or what the platform suggests it is for "shape how they approach them and what actions they think are suggested" (5).

This is a relevant concept when considering how platform affordances are brought to bear on the sociality of the mamasphere. In particular among mompreneurs, platforms are spaces that are freighted with meaning and possibility, both as potential opportunities for the appreciation and reaffirmation of family happiness (Wilson and Yochim, 2017) and as a space for precarious economic activity (Duffy, 2015). Social media engagement within the mamasphere takes place largely within the digital mundane: In brief "in between" periods over the course of a day. In this

11

way, audiences' consumption of momfluencers' content often happens in and through their daily routines, becoming part of their inner monologues and even their sense of self. It's been noted that consuming content by beauty influencers can have a negative impact on audiences' self esteem (Bauer 2020), and although more research is needed to fully understand the impact that momfluencer content has on its audience, several women interviewed in this study claimed to have fallen into a "comparison trap" with other moms whose content they followed online.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media became even more central to the social lives of many users, as lockdowns made in-person socializing impossible or at the very least risky. The role of mompreneurs as entertainers, confidantes, cheerleaders and ultimately social critics became more pronounced after March 2022. The content created by mompreneurs that I followed during this period evolved in both tone and content. I will elaborate on this evolution, and its relationship to the affordances of social media platforms, in a later chapter.

Mompreneurs and the Influencer Economy

Researchers have begun to address the question of trust and credibility between audiences and social media influencers, which includes some mompreneurs (Dahlquist and Preiksaite, 2018; DeBruijn 2016; Fischer 2018). Notably, Toma (2017) analyzes how Heather Armstrong, the first momfluencer to ever accept sponsorships (on her blog dooce.com, back in the early 2000s), navigated the transition from amateur to professional. Toma examines the narrative and aesthetic underpinnings employed by Armstrong as she begins introducing sponsored content to dooce.com, and argues that Armstrong's style of representing everyday life is essential to the maintenance of trust between herself as blog narrator and her large and engaged audience.

Armstrong was the first blogger to publicly announce that income from her blog was supporting her family. Having built her audience based on honest accounts of having been fired, her struggles with depression, her hospitalization due to post-partum depression, and later her divorce, Armstrong was in a challenging position when it came time to accept sponsorships. Toma's study, along with Hunter's work on audience reception of sponsorship on mommyblogs (2016), are among the few that have engaged with the implicit conflict between perceived "authenticity" and corporate sponsorship.

The topic of authenticity as it relates to audiences' relationships to online personalities has been taken up in the fields of sociology (Duffy, 2013, 2015) and media studies (Rieh et al, 2014). Reih et al. propose a theory of "audience aware credibility" as a practice among bloggers. Some readers have an innate distrust for all user-generated content, which puts the impetus on bloggers to create not only entertaining but credible content. Simultaneous with the emergence of blog sponsorship came the proliferation of platforms on which bloggers could connect with their audiences.

Each platform, write Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere (2018) has its own distinct audience, who represent a distinct value to content producers. Duffy et al consider these "imagined audiences" and "imagined affordances" to be highly influential in the creative decision-making of online creative producers, including mommybloggers. Each platform's imagined audiences have distinct expectations of "authenticity" performance by creative producers, meaning that the demonstration of authenticity must be re-calibrated and re-performed for each platform in order to maintain the credibility and integrity of one's online brand (Duffy et al, 2018).

13

Rationale for the Study: Towards a Theory of Affective Expertise

In tracing the historical basis for understandings of various "technologies of the self," Foucault identifies the theme of "knowing oneself," one central to the philosophy of antiquity, as a place or origin. In Plato's dialogue *Alcibiades 1*, we read of Socrates counseling his friend and lover Alcibiades, who is seeking to transform the erotic power of his youth to political power in older age. Alcibiades is ambitious, and Socrates reminds him to "take care of himself" – to apply himself to better understanding himself. "Concern for self always refers to an active political and erotic state. *Epimelesthai [*knowledge of self] expresses something much more serious than the simple fact of paying attention. It involves various things: taking pains with one's holdings and one's health. It is always a real activity and not just an attitude" (Foucault 1988 p. 26).

Knowledge of self, in this Platonic dialogue, is necessary for matters as private as caring for ailing family members, and as public as debating political opponents. Foucault notes that care of the self/knowledge of self (these two were variously considered interchangeably and distinctly through different stages of antiquity) was, during the Hellenic period, considered bound up with the then-predominant oral discursive tradition, but as written discourse came to prevail in later centuries, the idea that one should pursue the work of self-knowledge became a matter of engaging in an ongoing practice of writing (1988, p. 27).

Self-knowledge was more than a matter of learning and study. It "found ready support in the whole bundle of customary relations of kinship, friendship and obligation (1988, p. 53). Care of the self was something to teach and learn from your friends, it was one's responsibility to one's community to model sound self-awareness and to actively seek self-knowledge through reflection, meditation and reading. The obligation to cultivate self-knowledge and to dedicate to

14

the care of oneself animates the momfluencer space through neoliberal incitements to self-reliance, as I will mention in a later section.

Later, in early Christianity, knowledge of self was considered required to seek salvation; in order to be saved, Christians (and followers of other salvation-based religions, like Muslims) must be able to acknowledge and articulate their sins, desires and temptations, in order to be forgiven. In this case, self-knowledge is a technology of self that enables a person to negotiate their transition from earth to heaven after death. Penance in early Christianity was a prolonged stage in a sinner's life; it involved rituals and routines. Showing humility, accepting punishment and demonstrating shame then became public dramatic performances, required of anyone experiencing punishment (1988, p. 42).

Momfluencers and early Christians undergoing penance may not be bedfellows, but momflueners' audiences actively demand that they demonstrate the adequate humility and assiduously avoid shameful or norm-unsettling behaviour. Technologies of the self in the early Christian period coalesced around presenting a deserving soul to one's religious community. In the mamasphere, momfluencers must engineer transitions from ordinary woman to public figure through ongoing subtle adjustments tailored to the exigencies of their audience. They undergo a transformation based not on a set of holy texts but on an ever-changing algorithmic manager (Duffy and Meisner 2022) and the constant feedback of their audience. Affective expertise is what guides them through this transformation from private individual to public commodity.

This study expands on existing applications of Foucault's theories of technologies of self and biopower by mapping it to the world of momfluencers and their labour of creating discourses of social reproduction. Biopolitical agendas have been identified in studies of influencers in the wellness space and a biopolitics of physical fitness underpins current understandings of digital

15

discourses around vaccination (Katta 2012). This study engages with biopower as a pressure that exerts itself more broadly, more universally, than we find in studies related to the management of bodies on social media. To make use of a rhizomatic metaphor, momfluencers, this study argues, are fruiting bodies of biopolitical pressure. The digital media produced by momfluencers expresses a confluence of multiple overlapping biopolitical imperatives, including social reproduction through childbirth and child-rearing, care for one's mental health and physical fitness, and the maintenance of nuclear family cohesion (even in the case of divorce).

Affective expertise concerns the following dimensions of the work of momfluencing: The creation of rapport and accountability with followers; the negotiation of social norms that govern the mamasphere, whether by way of reinforcement or critical engagement; and the recuperation of affect into value. Data analysis in this thesis will identify cases where these dimensions were found in field research.

As covered in the literature review, the question of expertise in the context of the domestic has historically been troubled by power dynamics to do with gender and class. Women's informal expertise related to managing the home was subsumed under the authority of experts anointed by media and government. Likewise, I propose that affective expertise has not been given serious consideration. Given the ease of access to social publishing tools, the work of mommyblogging and later momfluencing is considered accessible to anyone who chooses to do it (Lopez 2009). Since the dawn of Web 2.0, social platform users have been urged to express themselves online (Friedman 2020). The accessibility of web tools, combined with the boom in mommyblogs in the early 2000s, encouraged millions of women to take to the internet with their stories of motherhood.

However, attracting and maintaining the interest of an audience, earning an income and producing entertaining content at a consistent rate requires numerous overlapping skills, some of which can be acquired through training programs in marketing or creating writing, but none of which can all be acquired through any given source. Success as a mommyblogger has always been elusive, and for this reason, a small industry of how-to-blog courses has flourished online, further reinforcing the myth that the expertise required to succeed as a momfluencer can be taught (Jezer-Morton 2019).

Momfluencing is hard; not everyone can do it. It is not a matter of instinct. Like running a household, momfluencing comes with a specific set of expertise that has not been formalized through training programs or other formal flows of information. The affective expertise I propose in this study is somewhat at odds with historical notions of expertise in the social sciences. There is no credentialing process for affective expertise, no formal set of standards. However, as I will argue, the concept of "expertise" can expand to accommodate this new definition, in particular given the changing understandings of labor being proposed by scholars in media studies (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy 2021).

Deleuze (2017) refers to "ultra-rapid forms of free-flowing control" that have emerged, continue to evolve and that create affordances and barriers that ultimately determine what's possible for contemporary subjects. When understanding and identifying affective expertise, we must consider the processes through which momfluencers exert agency and recuperate value from their affective labour (Hart and Negri 1999) within the flows of control that form the mamasphere. This kind of expertise functions within the professional context of momfluencing and is thus tied to establishing and growing one's earnings potential across multiple social media

platforms. Affective expertise necessarily encompasses multiple sites of self-presentation, each of which have distinct exigencies (Scolere and Duffy 2018).

Recuperation of value from affective labour is far from guaranteed within the mamapshere. Affective expertise is the "special sauce" that separates successful momfluencers from those whose engagement never takes off. It encompasses characteristics that are embodied, discursive, and ephemeral. The embodiment of affective expertise might be located in the way a momfluencer uses her relationship to her body as a way to build a sense of belonging within her community, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of aspirational distance between herself and her followers. As we will see in the content analysis, embodiment might be expressed in the way a mother moves her body in relation to the camera, so as to perform looseness, relaxedness, humour, affection, exhaustion or overwhelm – while always, simultaneously, managing to appear attractive to her audience. Embodiment and appealingness are always in conversation in the mamapshere, and affective expertise is a matter of mastering that conversation intuitively.

Returning to Deleuze, affective expertise must necessarily be understood within the cybernetic context of algorithmic platforms. Today's social platform algorithms are neatly contained within Norbert Wiener's definition of cybernetics from 1954: systems that steer action with the use of data that is gathered continuously. A cybernetic machine receives feedback from its environment over time, and adjusts the environment based on the feedback data. Its function is to maintain certain conditions in a given space using this data feedback loop.

Deleuze (2017) theorized "flows" through which social controls operate; per his theory, platform algorithms are understood as machines designed to steer people toward different outcomes based on the information they are served. This, Deleuze argued, was "cybernetic social control," the form of social control that followed disciplinary social control that was theorized by

Foucault. While societies of discipline functioned to control subjects' bodies, societies of control function to control subjects through access to or withholding of information. Deleuze argues that societies of control are designed to create the future via algorithms through the mining of data and the creation of data-informed channels through which you are granted or withheld access to different futures.

Navigating an algorithmic environment in which one is trying to grow a business based on one's own affect requires another form of affective expertise, which has evolved over the last few decades through influencer idiocultures. Maintaining visibility in this space is a matter of financial survival, yet there are no guarantees from platforms that any given action will result in visibility. Digital creators are thus precarious workers, managed by inscrutable algorithmic bosses (Duffy 2022).

Folklores around rewards and punishments in the algorithmic space are traded within these idiocultures and among an emergent community of algorithmic experts (Bishop 2020). Participating in this information sharing is essential to managing one's brand, modulating one's affect and fine-tuning the methods through which you extract value from your affect. Rendering oneself "algorithmically recognizable" (Bishop 2019) is imperative for influencers' success, and this requires an ever-shifting set of optimization practices, which are shared through informal networks for algorithmic experts. This form of expertise, like affective expertise, is informal and relies on the community or audience to confer legitimacy.

There is extensive scholarship on the mamasphere's social significance, as I will demonstrate in the following sections. Much of the content that makes up the mamasphere -- the social media posts by mompreneurs, the comments by readers, the panels presented at blogging conferences, the sponsored content created in partnership with consumer brands -- is based on

the transmission of informal expertise. Informal expertise forms the very foundation of the mamasphere. I seek to bridge a gap between studies of expertise and studies of the mamasphere with this thesis by articulating how the mamasphere has evolved its own modality: affective expertise.

This will require that I engage with existing scholarship in the social science of expertise, the theory of affect, and theories of affective labour. Theories of affective labour focus largely on the unequal distribution of this labour between men and women. Women have historically been responsible for affective labour more than men, and in almost all cases, affective labour has been unpaid. I intend to depart from this line of thinking, acknowledging that affective labour has traditionally been women's domain, but that the "feminization of labour" (McRobbie 2016) that has occurred as the creative economy has moved away from traditional labour configurations, has transformed working conditions for men as well.

I hope to prove through this study that affective expertise, although based on the performance and instrumentalization of affective labour, is not necessarily part of a process of exploitation. Consolidating and sharing affective expertise, I will argue, is a necessary strategy for succeeding within the mamasphere's economic dimension. I will seek to situate affective expertise within the context of the social construction of expertise in the twentieth century.

My working definition of affective expertise is comprised of three components, that I define as coherence, instrumentalization, and affirmation. Coherence refers to the ability to modulate and control one's affect, either online or "IRL," in support of a larger, plausible, mediated story that you are telling about yourself, your family, and your ambitions. Coherence in the context of affective expertise is the ability to tell a credible story through the affective assemblage of online posts, comments, responses to readers, and affiliations with sponsors.

Instrumentalization describes the process through which momfluencers recuperate the value of their affective labour through their posts; this will be covered in Chapter 4's discussion of conflict and frustration in audience engagement.

The final component of affective expertise is affirmation, which I will argue is its defining characteristic. Contrary to the "mommy wars" rhetoric that has been analyzed by media continuously over the past two decades, discourse across the mamasphere in 2019 is overwhelmingly affirming. In fact, affirmation, I will argue, is a critical social tool used across the mamasphere as an antidote to the rigors of neoliberal family life. Affirmation is more than niceness. It has to do with the maintenance of a constant flow of small encouragements, in the form of "likes," thank-yous, complimentary questions ("where did you get that cute bag?") and reminders that "you've got this" and "you're not alone." A skillful deployment of affirmation, along with coherence and authenticity, adds up to affective expertise.

In my field work, I will seek to develop a clear picture of what constitutes affective expertise: Its boundaries, rules, and defining characteristics. One might argue that what I'm seeking to describe isn't a form of expertise but merely an affect, the maintenance of a pose. However, as I will demonstrate in my field work, the ability to make use of this kind of affect is highly sought-after in an economic system that is increasingly knowledge- and service-based. This is a form of expertise that earns people money. It is a form of expertise that people spend a lot of money in order to acquire. It also represents a manifestation of a set of hegemonic neoliberal values -- self-government, reflexivity, and self-reliance.

Situating myself: From lay enthusiast to expert

This project represents the culmination of work that began as leisure. I began consuming mommyblogger content around 2006, four years before I had my first child – before I had even

begun thinking about motherhood as something I would ever do. It was the golden age of the mommyblogger, with characters like Ree Drummond of The Pionner Woman and Heather Armstrong of Dooce developing a new genre of life-writing before our very eyes. I became an avid consumer of mommyblogger content because I was fascinated with what was shared and what was kept private.   Around the same time that I had my first child, the genre of mommyblogging began to change, as corporate sponsorships became de rigueur. Then, Instagram became a new way to share content, which completely upended the genre from text-based to image-based. By this point I was consuming mommyblogger content as a mother and my questions about the sociality of the space became too persistent to ignore. (In 2013 I began a Master's in digital anthropology, inspired in large part by my questions about what happens when motherhood encounters digital culture.)

Ultimately, this thesis is grounded in over a decade of "lurking" in online spaces where mothers narrated their lives, first as amateur bloggers, and later as fully professionalized influencers. I have observed the evolution of this discursive space, and written about it extensively for news outlets and later in a Substack newsletter I wrote on the topic (Jezer-Morton 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022. Much of how I determined who to speak to, and what kinds of questions to ask, was based on the accrued knowledge of a decade spent paying attention online. Had I entered this space for the first time in order to research this thesis, I may well have chosen to speak to a different group of content creators; new voices are always emerging, and today's most influential momfluencers are sometimes those who are relatively new to the scene.

Deciding who to approach for interviews and whose content to analyze for the content analysis portion was, therefore, the product of some considerations that are hard to fully account for. Amber Fillerup Clark, whose I look at in the content analysis, has been creating content

about her life for over a decade, and she's become an adult while becoming a mother. Her narrative's evolution has been visible and in some ways even quantifiable, which made her a compelling subject.

Morrison (2019) describes the emergent genre of life-writing born out of social media. The proliferation of writing in this genre has likewise ushered in a new kind of reader – one who searches for context-clues across platforms and over time, and pays attention to subtle hints that might signal changes in a person's story and perspective over time. I was one such reader (I still am), patching together an understanding of ecosystems of momfluencers over time, like a detective making connections on a big whiteboard. The years I spent reading this content, noticing and then following connections between momfluencers, tracking one person's influence over others, remarking on the ways people comment on each other's posts, and the rules that govern these public-facing interactions, has accumulated into a humus of knowledge about this space that was essential to the what this thesis grew into.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

 From Mommybloggers to Mompreneurs: A Survey of Research on the Mamasphere

Before there were momfluencers, there were mommybloggers. Active during the early days of the social web, from approximately 2000-2005, the first wave of mommybloggers were among the pioneers of blogging, sharing intimate accounts of their daily lives on personal blogs – a huge constellation of sites that has come to be known as the mamasphere.

For reasons that themselves merit scholarly attention, the mamasphere has held particular interest among academic researchers since the advent of Web 2.0. Friedman (2009) writes that over the course of the past 15 years, mommyblogs have deconstructed the term "mother" and replaced it with a contested subject. Friedman has produced influential analysis of the mamasphere from a sociological and women's studies perspective, focusing on the shifting social norms that govern motherhood, and the way these norms are expressed online (2010, 2011, 2009). In the early days of mommy-blogging, which can be defined roughly between the years 2000-2010, the mamasphere was a discursive space defined by support, honesty, and emotional catharsis (Orton-Johnson, 2016).

As Song (2017, p. 45) writes, "What made mommy blogs so compelling was their ability to give voice to authentic and raw accounts of motherhood over and against more sanitized and sentimental scripts that prevailed in mainstream culture." The first wave of mommyblogs used candor and humour to redefine and problematize social expectations of how mothers should behave (DiPrince 2012). By confessing to ambivalence about family life and domestic responsibilities, and arguing that the "perfect mother" image that defined motherhood media in the 20th century was not only unrealistic but oppressive, early mommybloggers were picking up the struggle started by second-wave feminists including Adrienne Rich, Shulamith Firestone and

Susan Faludi, who had argued in the 1970s and 1980s that traditional maternal roles functioned to exert control over women and limit their agency.

Since the popularization of the mommyblogging form in the mid-2000s, the tone and form of many mommy-blogs has evolved. Webb et. al. (2011) describe mommy-blogging in the early 2000s as being stylistically journal-like, a chronicle of daily life and struggles. The journal style of blogging has gradually given way to an image-based "lifestyle" approach to blogging -- partly due to the popularization of the photo-sharing platform Instagram (Bosker 2017). Morrison (2011) writes that mommy-blogs have been profoundly influential on motherhood discourse because bloggers are often active readers and commenters on other blogs, and this creates a tight, interwoven network of perspectives and stories. It is not a top-down discourse, and it is an interactively changing one with inputs from both audience and producer.

Morrison (2009, 2011, 2014) has produced some of the most frequently cited scholarship on mommyblogging practices. She notes in her influential cyber-ethnography that mommy-bloggers engage in a very specific form of intimate sharing; there are certain degrees of embarrassment that are "off-limits." Morrison's close reading of several personal mommyblogs (2014) analyzed the conflict management techniques used by bloggers to avoid arguments within their highly engaged audience of commenters. These techniques, Morrison found, often hinge on omission of sensitive information. In other words, even during the early confessional period of mommyblogging, social norms had structuring impacts, and bloggers were often highly aware of their audiences while writing, reflecting through their narratives the anticipation and avoidance of controversial topics.

Morrison notes that the early days of mommyblogging were notable for the intimacy cultivated between bloggers and their audiences, and that this sometimes careful negotiation of

25

social norms often occurred directly alongside acts of intimate self-disclosure about topics that had previously been considered taboo, including sexuality, depression, and addiction (2014). Notably, the "intimate publics" of mommyblogs emerged from the early social web which has been described by Howard Rheingold and Sherry Turkle, among others, as notably anarchic and confrontational, an environment where "flame wars" and trolls run rampant.

Morrison (2014) argues that mommyblogs' social dynamics, as carefully maintained by bloggers themselves, tended to avoid the dynamics of confrontation and abuse that came to characterize anonymous message boards and comment threads. From the very earliest days of mommyblogging, bloggers took on the responsibility of both challenging existing social norms and cultivating intimacy and trust within their audiences. This is a significant point in relation to the development and expression of expertise that will be the primary analytical concern of this thesis.

Friedman (2013) and Lopez (2009) both chart the social impact that early confessional mommyblogging had on social norms governing motherhood, noting that early mommyblogs were nothing short of revolutionary in how quickly and dramatically they changed what was "sayable," and therefore what subjectivities were possible, among middle-class mothers in North America and Europe. Steiner and Bronstein (2017) found audiences of mommyblogs tended to use the comments section to critically engage with societal norms around parenting. Their study of the comments section of the *New York Times*' mommyblog "Motherlode" (rebranded as "Well Family" in 2017, and again as "New York Times Parents" in 2019) found that prominent in the blog's commentary was a keen awareness of media trends and political economy. Many commenters held media outlets in contempt for stoking outrage or controversy among parents around hot-button issues such as breastfeeding and anti-vaccination activists. The authors

26

conclude that the online discussion space provided by blogs like Motherlode help parents

negotiate the everyday politics of raising children, including risk-reward calculations that are

inherent in a highly competitive neoliberal society (2017, p. 73).

The "Mommy Wars"

One of the major discursive threads that has persisted in the background of motherhood

media over the past two decades has come to be known as "the mommy wars" (Douglas and

Michaels 2004), the ongoing ideological conflict between stay-at-home mothers and mothers

who work outside the home. According to the discourse of the mommy wars, mothers who put

their children in daycare while they work outside the home have reason to be ashamed

(Peskowitz 2005), while women who stay at home lack agency and willingly subject themselves

to conditions of isolation and submissiveness that should have ended in the 1960s (Peskowitz

2005).

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Labor (DeWolf, 2017) reported that over 70% of

American mothers with children under 18 participated in the labor force, but despite this

majority figure, debates around how mothers ought to reconcile their identities as professionals

and mothers are ongoing. (Crowley 2015). Media scholars consider the mommy wars to have

begun in media outlets in the 1970s, when women joined the workforce in large numbers. In her

survey of representations of family life in the media in Britain and the United States, Akass

(2015) writes that the word "togetherness" was coined by the editors of McCall's magazine in

the 1950s to describe a new aspiration for the middle class American housewife: A state of

family cohesion the maintenance of which was her sole responsibility. "Togetherness" as a

cornerstone for the happy family has since been enshrined in media discourse, and its contours

have continued to be defined by contemporary mommybloggers as they've taken up the conflicts of the mommy wars.

Zimmerman et. al (2008) note that the "media-driven culture of blame" (p. 204) that animates the mommy wars has had the effect of obscuring, in media discourse, social inequality issues relevant to all mothers, regardless of whether they work outside the home: access to affordable child care and postpartum health care, access to paid leave, and social support for young families. The authors argue that the mommy wars have rerouted feminist frustration inward rather than outward, which has the effect of blunting progress these for issues of feminist concern. Mothers have historically been blamed for causing psychological problems in their children, in particular during the rise in popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis during the mid-20th century (Zimmerman et al 2008, p. 208). This tendency to hold mothers responsible for their children's mental health, in addition to the "togetherness" of their families, raised the stakes of the mommy wars debates, in particular as they took place within the mamasphere's digital enclosure (Watson 2020).

The mommy wars can be understood as an outgrowth of a culture that has constructed motherhood into both an omnipotent social force and a site of obedience and submission. Steiner (2007) writes, in the introduction to her anthology of essays on the mommy wars, that the "catfight" between working mothers and stay at home mothers is a consequence of the powerful social pressures that mothers feel as the moral standard-bearers of North American family life, as well as the increasing economic competition and insecurity of the late 20th century.

Although most scholarly writing frames the "mommy wars" as a media construct, evidence suggests that mothers often find this rhetoric powerful, and internalize its messages. Swanson and Johnston (2004) conducted interviews with mothers about their own judgements

and perceptions of both mommy war rhetoric and other mothers, and found that "the majority of mothers perceived lack of cultural support for their mother role" (2004, p. 506).

The conflation of mother-work with identity rather than sets of behavior was found to be another exacerbating factor in creating a sense among mothers that they were being judged by other mothers for their choices (2004, p. 508). Motherhood, based on mommy-war rhetoric, is not a set of practices, but a totalizing identity -- a belief that aligns with the ideology of "intensive mothering" which numerous sources have found to be the prevailing contemporary ideology governing what constitutes "good" motherhood (Johnston and Swanson, 2006).

Mommy-blogs provided women with a "meso level" between macro constructions and representations of motherhood in mainstream media and their individual relationships and subjectivities. In addition to weighing in on the debates surrounding the "mommy wars," many early mommy-blogs engaged critically with discourses of "intensive mothering," a concept defined by Hays (1996) as child-centered, emotionally absorbing and labour-intensive. They provided readers and bloggers with opportunities to construct maternal subjectivities in conversation with cultural scripts about what constitutes "good mothering," and to negotiate periods of transition in their own lives.

The SAHM mamasphere and Regional Retreatism

Since the start of blogging, the mommy wars have been fodder for personal bloggers to continue the debate about working the merits of versus staying at home (Pettigrew et al, 2016). As sites of expertise, the mamasphere of stay at home mothers (SAHMs) and of working mothers are rhetorically and ideologically distinct, and should be considered as two separate spheres that, given certain platform affordances, are sometimes in conversation with one another. Today, the

mamasphere is composed of myriad subcultures, including sites geared toward mompreneurs, sites geared toward women who juggle career and family, and a large and robust subcultures of SAHMs and women who homeschool their children.

The Bloggernacle

No thorough review of the mamasphere would be complete without mention of the contribution made by Mormon women, as part of what has come to be known as "the bloggernacle" -- the Mormon blogosphere. Mormon mommyblogs have come to occupy a folkloric space within Mormon society (King 2011). Popular Mormon mommybloggers are celebrities within the LDS Church, and they have developed, over the past two decades, a vernacular style of narrating their domestic lives that has come to be recognizable to readers both in and outside of the religion.

Mormon women were active in early forums on the online mailing list UseNet, where they found an opportunity to share their experiences outside of the traditionally male-dominated and hierarchical spaces of the Mormon church (Feller, 2018). Mormon bloggers have cited the church's encouragement of its young members, women in particular, to scrapbook and archive their lives, as a natural precursor to the act of personal blogging (Gregory, 2017). Mormons are instructed to be a "record-keeping people" (King, 2011) and blogging has become, for Mormon women, a way of fulfilling this expectation from within their community.

After an initial hesitation on the part of the LDS Church to encourage internet use among its members -- church leaders commonly associated the early internet with pornography and a threat to sanctified marriage -- the LDS community avidly explored the affordances offered by online connectivity. Smith (2013) writes that Mormon women were early adopters to blogging platforms at the turn of the 21st century, and were encouraged by church elders to use new media

technology as a means of spreading LDS ideology: alternative way of conducting missionary work.

Several structural facets of Mormon motherhood animated the early popularity of the Bloggernacle among Mormon women. Observant female members of the LDS church are encouraged to either work part-time, or to become stay-at-home mothers. They are also encouraged to have larger than average families. Because of these values, Mormon motherhood holds thriftiness and the ability to "do-it-yourself" in high regard, and Mormon women began using personal blogs to share tips and stories about homemade crafts, decor ideas, and child-rearing tips (Smith 2013, Feller 2016).

As the "new domesticity" movement emerged in secular society (Matchar 2015) and in particular in the growing world of mommyblogs, Mormon mommyblogs, with their novel approaches to money-saving, household organization, and childcare, became the object of fascination (and fandom) outside of the LDS Church as well as inside. Secular readers began to notice the rigorous aesthetic perfection broadcast on Mormon mommyblogs. As Matchar (2011) wrote in a viral article about Mormon mommyblogs, which was published on the website Salon.com,

> [Mormon mommybloggers] have bangs like Zooey Deschanel and closets full of cool vintage dresses.
> Their houses look like Anthropologie catalogs. Their kids look like Baby Gap models. Their husbands look like young graphic designers, all cute lumberjack shirts and square-framed glasses. They spend their days doing fun craft projects (vintage-y owl throw pillow! Recycled button earrings! Hand-stamped linen napkins!). They spend their weekends throwing big, whimsical dinner parties for their friends, all of whom have equally adorable kids and husbands. (Matchar 2011)

Mormon mothers are traditionally expected to uphold fairly rigorous standards of traditional feminine and domestic maintenance, and this, perhaps above all other reasons,

31

accounts for the fascination that secular readers have for mommyblogs that belong to the Bloggernacle. King (2011) writes that just as many Mormon mommybloggers are blogging so as to fulfill the edict to be record-keepers, many of them consider their blogs to be virtual scrapbooks that they will one day share with their children. In this sense, they are using their blogs in categorically different ways than the confessional mommybloggers of the early oughts. Many Mormon mommybloggers are writing about their lives with their children as their imagined audience, rather than other mothers. This may account for part of why Mormon mommybloggers are sometimes characterized as "too Pollyanna-ish" (King 2011, p. 43) by secular readers.

"Regional retreatism" has been used to describe the trend in secular women's media toward more traditional domestic practices including cooking, crafting and parenting (Lagerwey 2016). This trend has challenged second-wave feminist media rhetoric that began, with the likes of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, to deconstruct domestic accounts of women's agency and question the importance or desirability of taking part in "traditional" domestic and feminine activities. Regional retreatism in the secular mamasphere overlaps with the Bloggernacle, food blogs, and the "natural parenting" movement that has gained prominence, also thanks to social media's affordances, over the past decade (Matchar 2015). Regional retreatism defined broadly celebrates motherhood, domesticity and the act of making things by hand. Although regional retreatism has queer and nonwhite practitioners who have gained prominence through online platforms, its most recognized and commercially successful practitioners tend to be white, cisgendered women -- in particular, mothers.

The SAHM mamasphere and entrepreneurship

Adjacent to the Bloggernacle are a large number of secular and Christian mommybloggers whose identities are heavily defined by their choice to be stay-at-home-mothers. However, unlike mothers in the Bloggernacle, many SAHMs include an entrepreneurial narrative to explain how and why they choose to stay at home, and this narrative plays an important role in the social geography of the mamasphere. The entrepreneurial dimension of stay-at-home motherhood emerged alongside the trend among brands to sponsor influencers (Gomez 2019).

Many stay-at-home moms active in the mamasphere have turned to multi-level marketing (MLM) companies to earn money, including LulaRoe apparel and Doterra essential oils (Jezer-Morton 2019). Others have established their own online businesses selling "printables" - files that visitors can download for a fee, that feature graphic organizers, calendars, and list templates designed to fulfill the needs and interests of stay-at-home moms. Limited scholarship currently exists on stay-at-home mothers and ecommerce (notably, Yochim and Wilson write in detail about a woman involved in selling weight-loss wraps through the GET LIFE company in their 2017 ethnographic study, *Mothering Through Precarity*). I will argue in this project that the expertise being cultivated and shared by SAHM mompreneurs plays an important role in mompreneur culture as a standard bearer of traditional maternal practice and values.

The ecommerce-based SAHM mamasphere differs notably from the Bloggernacle and the secular mamasphere in one important way: Many SAHM e-commerce-based mommybloggers started blogging not as a way to participate in a community or to have a creative outlet, but to make money. The idea of a blog as a money-maker is not unique to this online subculture. However, the SAHM e-commerce subculture is unique in that its content producers don't seek to

33

create narratives around their personalities, but rather around their expertise in blogging itself. While other mommyblogs exist as creative outlets, or as aspirational spaces where women seek to commodify affect and personal style, the world of SAHM e-commerce-driven mommyblogs are first and foremost about making money as bloggers, and the content related to motherhood is largely secondary.

Many of these bloggers sell ebook guides to blogging, or online publishing courses that can be downloaded for a fee, intended to help beginning mommybloggers grow their audience through search engine optimization (SEO), strategic linking, and strategic content design oriented toward popularity among users of Pinterest. The content related to motherhood is characteristically traditional and practical, consisting largely of recipes, parenting advice and crafting tutorials. But this content appears in many cases to be an afterthought, a requirement for the maintenance of an engaging and credible blog, but not the blog's raison d'etre (Jezer-Morton 2019).

This corner of the mamasphere is unique in the resemblance some of its earning structures have to MLMs. Through a practice known as "affiliate linking," less experienced bloggers with smaller audiences will sell the products (ebooks, online courses, or printables) produced by more experienced bloggers, and earn a small commission from each sale. This creates the "pyramid" earning structure, wherein top earners continuously recruit beginners to sell their products, attracting them with promises of future success. SAHM mommybloggers within this subculture often start out with very little experience writing or producing online media, and are encouraged to invest up-front in training products sold to them by more experienced bloggers. Having learned the "tools of the trade" from video tutorials and the like, these beginner bloggers can then sell the guides that they themselves used to other beginning

bloggers. In a sense, this blogging ecosystem is somewhat closed, in that it consists largely of beginner bloggers selling blogging "tools" to other beginner bloggers (Jezer-Morton 2019).

The motherhood-related content produced for these blogs represents an interesting manifestation of the reinforcement of norms and conventions. Because these blogs are not intended to create any controversy, or provide any catharsis, or indeed stoke feelings of aspiration in their audiences, they broadcast a kind of baseline agreed-upon set of styles, practices and values in North American middle-class, Christian motherhood.

But perhaps the most interesting dimension of the MLM-mommyblog niche is its relationship to economic precarity. Like all MLMs, mommyblogging-for-profit exploits the hope and at times desperation of an often vulnerable and isolated population. Many mothers who embark on mommyblogging for profit see it as the only option they have to support their families, given the high cost of childcare, and the attendant need to stay home and care for young children. Further along in this literature review I will elaborate on the neoliberal social logic on which the appeal of MLM mommyblogging entirely depends. Without a social safety net, stay-at-home mothers in situations of financial precariousness are left alone to figure out a plan of action, and a pervasive neoliberal discourse of self-reliance feeds into the appeal of the financial gamble of paying for "blogging tools."

Labour and the Mamasphere

How can mompreneurship be understood as a form of labour? What kind of energy does this labour require, and what, if any, are its material products? To answer these questions, we can turn to the work of numerous scholars who have used the theories of affective and immaterial labour to better understand the sphere of "women's work" post-industrial digital economies.

35

Affective labour describes the form of post-industrial labour that has come to largely replace manufacturing work in developed nations. Affective labour is concerned with managing the emotional experiences of others, whether through the service industry, administration, care professions, quality or safety assurance, education, or other forms of labour that don't result in material production but require the maintenance of certain degrees of social decorum within a group.

Defining affect and affective labour

Affective labour draws upon the theory of affect, which is articulated by numerous contemporary scholars including Lauren Berlant, Brian Massumi, and Sarah Ahmed. Affect is varyingly defined as pressure that individuals feel when making decisions, but that is not entirely integrated with emotions or belief systems. Affect can also be understood as an assemblage of ''intuitions, gut feelings, ideas'' that influences and gives force to our emotions -- a "historically and culturally distinctive topography of investments, attentions, and felt obligations" (Massumi, 2015). Affect is distinguished from emotion in that it resists narrativization; it informs how we feel, but we often are not aware of affect, and therefore we rarely describe its impact (Rice, 2008). Affective assemblages are useful concepts for describing the influences, pressures and forces that motivate and energize mothers to approach mothering in particular ways. I will reflect further on affective assemblages further on in this literature review.

According to Hardt and Negri (2001), one of the most significant ways that capitalism has transformed post-Fordist economies is the turn toward affective rather than industrial labour. This transformation has required that workers develop emotional rather than technical skills to manage the demands of their jobs. It's worth noting that affective labour differs from Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labour (1979) in that it concerns the management of the

emotional states of others, whereas emotional labour concerns the management of one's own emotional state.

Feminist scholars have engaged extensively with the theory of affective labour, as it gives name to a sphere of activity that has traditionally been considered "women's work" (McRobbie 2011, Van Cleaf 2018, Taylor 2016, Duffy 2015). It has also emerged as a relevant theory for understanding the labour dimension of social media use, both as recreation and as profession. Likewise, a growing body of work understands the digital labour of the amateur creative producers that constitute much of the digital landscape as a form of affective labour that is performed with particular enthusiasm by young women (McRobbie 2017, Duffy 2018).

Mompreneurship requires the maintenance of an online persona calibrated to the expectations and aspirations of an audience whose attention is a valuable commodity (DiPrince, 2012). Successful mompreneurship also requires constant interaction with one's audience and peers through the comments section of various platforms, and through participation in events and giveaways (Abidin, 2015). Moreover, successful mompreneurs must navigate the often-polarized landscape of contemporary motherhood-as-practice, where opinions on best practices are strongly held and often divergent (Steiner and Bronstein, 2017). Attending to these concerns forms the basis for the practice of mompreneurship, which makes this enterprise a particularly rich inflection point for drawing on the theory of affective labour for insight.

Before engaging with some of the most recent writing on affective labour and digital production by women, I will first demonstrate some of the ways that affective labour has been used to understand digital culture and work since the early days of Web 2.0. Lazzarato (1996) was one of the first to define immaterial labour as a post-Fordist phenomenon. He used this term to describe "activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions,

37

tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion." All social media participation

falls under this definition. In 2007, Cote and Prybus wrote about how Myspace, one of the first

popular social networks, introduced its young users to the experience of entrepreneurial

socialization. The new affective capacities required of Myspace's users included maintaining a

grasp on ever-changing ways of communicating on the platform, and expanding one's social

network and hence one's social capital. (These capacities are, of course, as much in demand as

ever over a decade hence.) The authors refer to Foucault's concept of a "surplus of power"

generated by these early social networks -- a surplus of social information with the power to

change the direction of peoples' thoughts and behaviours -- to explain the immediate social

importance of web 2.0, and its tremendous value to corporate entities such as News Corp, who

bought Myspace in 2005 for $580 million dollars.

Negri and Hardt (1999) describe the way in which affect has come to dominate post-

Fordist political economies as an "economy of desire" (p. 88). Affect, they argue, is impossible

to measure, and is abundant beyond measure. It defies classical understandings of how

capitalism brings labour power under its control. Affect is both means of production and the

product itself. It is in this context that self-branding practices take place. Four years after their

paper on MySpace, Cote and Prybus applied the same theoretical scrutiny to Facebook, and

found that as social networking had become more or less ubiquitous, the immaterial and affective

labour of its user base had, as Negri and Hardt predicted, continued to expand, defying any

attempt to contain or quantify its potential in terms of finite value.

Affective labour and immaterial labour are both concepts explored extensively by Negri

and Hardt among many others. Affective labour is the task of producing, by one's own

behaviour, emotional outcomes in and for others. Immaterial labour is an overlapping but distinct

concept, which describes labour whose product is not a material object but instead knowledge, information, and cultural content. To use mompreneurship as an illustrative example, one might stay that mompreneurs are affective labourers producing immaterial labour-value.

In attempting to explain the appeal of participating in this immaterial labour force in the context of Web 2.0, Cote and Prybus cite Judith Butler's writing on performativity, specifically the individual's desire to "count as a subject" and thus be eligible for social recognition (Butler 2009). The user-generated newsfeed, whether on Instagram, TikTok or any other platform, is a site for the reproduction or troubling of gender and social norms. Users are not only responsible for their own output; they must also monitor the output of other members of their network, which is replete with social information that is essential for their own continued participation and belonging within their networked world. All of these rules apply to mompreneurs to an equal if not greater degree, given how much of mompreneurship is devoted to the reinforcement of social norms related to femininity and family life (Wilson and Yochim 2017).

Mompreneurship as Precarious Labour

Beginning in the 1970s, Marxist-feminist scholars argued that women's affective labour -- the care-work that goes into running a household and feeding and nurturing a family -- is both essential to the function of capitalism, and completely invisible within its valuation of labour (Fortunati 1995). The emergence of capitalism as a socio-economic system separated reproduction from the concept of labor value. Precapitalist society was concerned with reproducing the individual within their social environment, but capitalism is concerned with producing value through individual labor.

39

Individuals thus become the means to an end (value production), rather than the end themselves. Their only innate value is contained within their ability to be productive. In this transition, Fortunati argues, women's reproduction and domestic labour ceases to be considered value-producing labour, but rather "social labour." If individuals' value is not innate but tied to their ability to produce, then the ability to produce and care for individuals is likewise not innately valuable. Because human reproduction isn't the literal production of value, it is devalued under capitalism.

Fortunati argues that capitalism has a dual character organized around that which is adds value, and that which does not. Based on this duality, production has value, and reproduction does not. This duality is obviously analogous to a corresponding sexual duality under capitalism. Although the individual has no innate value in a capitalist system, they are free to sell their labour power in whatever way they please.

> On the other hand, such "freeing" has implied, for the female worker, the ownership of her capacity to reproduce, which goes hand in hand with that of production. She has been, however, typically obliged to sell the former first, and only afterwards the latter. There is thus a very clear difference between the fate of male and of female workers under capitalism. While for the former the ownership of his labor power brings with it a literal "liberation" from reproduction work, for the woman, ownership of her labor power as capacity for reproduction does not "free" her from production work. (1995, 14).

Based on Fortunati's formulation, the work of digital self-branding and mompreneurship could be defined as the production of labour-power and the participation in the traditionally male side of the capitalist duality. However, the raw material used by mompreneurs to produce this value is the very stuff of domesticity -- the non-valued labor of cleaning, feeding, and nurturing. Mompreneurship as an undertaking seeks to celebrate and make visible the work of mothers, but in practical terms, it fails to do so. In fact, if anything, mompreneurship may be an example of

40

women participating in complicity with the erasure of the work of reproduction, while on the surface seeking to valorize that work.

Mompreneurship seeks to create marketable, monetizable products from the work of nurturing. It seeks to instrumentalize care work in the service of selling a personal brand. In this sense, mompreneurship appears to potentially represent a radical reclamation of labour-value for women. However, as scholars have noted (Duffy et al 2022), the labour conditions under which mompreneurs operate are structurally precarious, and the product of their labour is immaterial and unevenly compensated -- if it's compensated at all. Rather than being a reclamation, mompreneurship is more accurately described as a reformulation of a longstanding condition: women being unevenly or unequally compensated for their work, much of which is invisible or immaterial.

A consensus has emerged over the last several decades that work has become more precarious in the postindustrial world. Precarious in this sense means discontinuous, inconsistent, sometimes constant and sometimes highly irregular (Federici, 2011). When labour is precarious, there is no predictable flow to the means and duration that laborers can expect from their work. According to the Autonomist Marxists such as Negri, Virno and Hardt, the precariousness of work is not necessarily a bad thing. It suggests a gradual reduction of work for individuals, as they're replaced by machines. Likewise, the mompreneur industry seeks to cast a positive spin on precarious work, describing it in terms grounded in freedom, independence, and passion. Working from home on projects generated by oneself rather than by a manager is considered by many mompreneurs to be a form of "living the dream." But precarious work has negative affective consequences and presents challenges never before overcome by workers. These challenges tend to be downplayed or ignored in mompreneurs' public performances of identity.

41

Federici (2011) is critical of the prevailing theory of precarious and immaterial labour put forward by Hardt and Negri (2001), claiming that their theory fails to properly account for gender. Federici (and others) argue that women have always been precarious labourers, and that precarious labour does not offer an opportunity for workers to enjoy a new self-directed entrepreneurial commons. Furthermore, Federici states that capitalism's gains in one domain are always losses in another; there is no cost-free capitalism. Wherever a new class of self-employed knowledge workers are enjoying increased mobility thanks to affordable personal technology, another group of under- or unpaid workers are mining for lithium battery components under dangerous conditions (Federici 2011). To argue that post-industrial capitalism is operating based on a rationale of progress is to assess the working conditions of only a very small segment of the working population.

For all creative producers regardless of gender, earning money in the immaterial labour economy of web 2.0 has required the adoption of a set of practices that are associated with traditionally "feminine" values. As more people have turned to Web 2.0 platforms to support their creative pursuits, there has been a "feminization of work" (McRobbie 2011). The affective labour of "connecting" with audiences on social media requires the use of social skills that until recently were largely the purview of women. These include being "relatable", "authentic," and mixing self-disclosure and honesty with self-promotion so as to maintain a sense of equality with one's audience.

Even the smallest acts of digital sociality have affective implications that, over time, generate webs of social relations that require maintenance. "Liking" a post on Facebook, for example, was developed as a way to communicate that you enjoyed a piece of content, without requiring you to write a comment. This small act, however, has a cumulative effect. Hochschild's

(1983) theory of "gift exchanges" within emotional labour sheds light on the role "likes" play on social media. A "like" can be translated into affective or material gain; research indicates that people tend to feel pleasure and augmented self-worth when their social media posts get more likes; likewise a lack of engagement via "likes" can lead people to feel frustration or self-doubt (Arcy, 2016). The gift exchange of "liking" has affective consequences, and represents a "management and distribution of emotions" (Arcy 2016) that, platform developers hope, will lead to more return users, seeking to re-experience the pleasure of this exchange.

This exchange happens between individuals, and also between individuals and brands. In the latter case, this carefully orchestrated affective work is meant to create bonds with potential clients or patrons, and it is the very definition of precarious labour in that it requires constant attending to by social media managers, and yields unpredictable financial returns. Many mompreneurs manage their personal social media accounts as businesses, and this invites a complete collapse between personal and professional feelings of validation, and ascribes a totalizing importance to the number of likes a post gets. Not only is one's personal life being affirmed through the gift exchange of likes, one's professional success relies on it. As we will see in the literature on meritocracy in social media, it is important, while engaging in this sustained affective work, to continuously self-promote while sometimes appearing to be spontaneously "sharing" rather than engaging in a calculating play for financial remuneration (Baym 2015).

But free labour, or precarious labour, does not necessarily mean exploited labour. When mompreneurs and other creative professionals engage in unevenly remunerative affective labour by attending to their online audiences with calibrated engagement, we can't necessarily characterize their relationship with the platforms on which they post to be exploitative. Cultural

43

capital accumulated through platform engagement, argues Jarret (2014) is a form of value in itself. The "free labour" of domesticity that women have historically undertaken in order to reproduce social cohesion, in the form of childbirth and rearing, cleaning, cooking, and nurturing, has until relatively recently been ignored by political economists (Fortunati 1995). Digital social interaction is the latest iteration of "free" labour organized around the creation and maintenance of affective states, but scholars like Andrejevic (2009) and Malaby (2006) have argued that this free labour is not unrelated to the accrual of value for its labourer.

Social capital within digital worlds exists alongside and sometimes in exchange for capital in the real world. The lines between these types of capital are irrevocably blurred, which can lead to exploitation (in the case of some of the SAHM e-commerce mommybloggers mentioned previously, for example). In other words, in a context where labour-value is fluidly defined, it's possible to chase the promise of financial reward where none realistically exists. However, this is not to say that nonfinancial assets such as social capital or "audience reach" (to use an industry term that is often ill-defined and imbued with promise) don't possess potential value in and of themselves.

The Affective, Immaterial, and Precarious Labour of Mompreneurship

As mommyblogs have transitioned from confessionnal to entrepreneurial, the labour required of mommybloggers has changed. Whereas previously, bloggers engaged in maintaining the trust and loyalty of their readers by balancing candor, self-deprecation, and tolerance of opposing views (Duffy 2015), contemporary mompreneurs are maintaining cross-platform brand identities, often creating unpaid content designed to attract potential sponsors, and leveraging their labour as care-givers for the construction and maintenance of a coherent, attractive,

44

monetizable brand. Duffy has coined the term "aspirational labour" to describe the work done by aspiring social media influencers. This theory of labour has useful applications to the case of mompreneurs. It will also prove useful in my data analysis, as I attempt to create a working theory of affective expertise among social media mompreneurs.

Today, mompreneurialism in late capitalist economies is tightly bound up with precariousness and precarity. Lorey (2015) distinguishes between precariousness, precarity, and precarization. Precariousness is the human or nonhuman condition of vulnerability within a context where survival resources are scarce. Precarity, meanwhile, is a product of structural hierarchies that prioritize the safety of some groups over others; it is a form of social injustice. Precarization is the process by which social insecurity becomes a condition through which populations are governed. According to Lorey, precarization is the form of biopolitical control that maintains instability. "Contrary to the old rule of a domination that demands obedience in exchange for protection, neoliberal governing proceeds primarily through social insecurity, through regulating the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability" (2015 2).

In "The Romance of Work: Gender and Aspirational Labour" (2015), Duffy defines aspirational labour as a form of gendered work centered around entrepreneurial creative production, which is often characterized by those performing it as "doing what I love." This "doing what I love" narrative is central to the mompreneur conferences I analyze in the field work portion of this dissertation. Duffy (2015) outlines three important aspects of aspirational labour: "narratives of authenticity and realness," "the instrumentality of affective relationships," and "entrepreneurial brand devotion." These aspects, Duffy argues, both reinforce traditional

gender norms while also satisfying the post-feminist ethos of personal choice, and the expression of those choices through participation in a consumer marketplace.

The Affective Labour of "Authenticity"

The instrumentality of affective relationships refers to the use of narratives of intimacy and nurturing (between the blogger and her family, or her audience, or her friends) in order to construct a consumer identity and set the stage for a particular "style" or consumer ethos to be expressed. Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017) further situate this instrumentality as part of what they call the "digital double bind" experienced by female online entrepreneurs. This double bind holds women accountable to traditionally feminine modes of sociality: modesty, decorum, and sociality. Maintenance of these modes takes work, yet while doing this work women are encouraged to profess to feeling liberated by the ability to be "real" and "honest" with their readers. Traditionally feminine social behaviour is re-expressed as post-feminist empowerment -- "I choose my choice," to quote the infamously defiant line uttered by the character of Charlotte on the HBO show *Sex and the City.*

Narratives of authenticity and realness refer to bloggers' efforts to remain "relatable" while simultaneously participating in an "aspirational" narrative related to style, consumption, or family life. Since the emergence of user-generated content enabled by Web 2.0, the use of "real people" in advertising and entertainment has been a dominant theme. Reality television has allowed viewers to feel that they, too, could appear on television. Audiences are now invited to assess entertainers as peers rather than "stars" (Duffy, 2013). Meanwhile, advertisements have begun featuring "real" people as part of a movement toward more "authentic" messaging. This move toward "authenticity" has proven particularly complex in the context of women's media,

46

where aspiration toward certain standards of beauty and social belonging have always been defining narratives. How to be both "authentic" and "aspirational"? This is a question that has emerged for women engaged in the influencer economy, including fashion and motherhood bloggers (Duffy 2015).

Duffy (2015) has identified tropes in women's media that have emerged recently as part of a move toward more "authentic" content, including the trend of "expressive individualism" among content producers. This trope describes a discourse wherein women seek to get to know their "inner selves" and engage on discursive journeys of "self discovery." Part of this process requires content producers to acknowledge their own flaws and failings -- a nod toward the maintenance of "relatability" -- and then to attempt to address these flaws, or come to terms with them, by a process of improved self-awareness or acceptance (Duffy 2015). This trope plays a huge role in contemporary mompreneurship discourse, as we will see in the data analysis.

People who cultivate large audiences on social media platforms have reported that audiences have an innate distrust of user-generated content (Rieh et al, 2014). This perceived distrust compels social media influencers to work hard to maintain a credible narrative, and this, in the case of many mompreneurs, requires maintaining a sense of shared experience with the audience. Content must not only be entertaining, but also credible, and essential to credibility among mompreneurs is "relatability" (Rieh et al 2014).

Mompreneurs both professional and amateur seek to appear "ordinary" while maintaining the sheen of professionalism in their posts about daily life. This "balancing act" between performing legitimacy and expertise while never failing to be "relatable" is notable in that this form of expertise can't create a distinction between experts and their audience (Maakinen, 2018). Mommy bloggers often distinguish themselves from "lifestyle bloggers" who promote a "glossy"

47

idealized version of their daily lives. However, there is a remarkable creep toward glossiness throughout the mamasphere, as bloggers seek to appear professional so as to attract more lucratives sponsorships.

But perhaps audiences' definition of what is "relatable" is creeping toward glossiness, too. Perhaps what readers aspire to, and therefore what they consider "aspirational," is changing. These questions are addressed in my data analysis. As income inequality grows in neoliberal economies such as the United States and parts of Canada, the quality of life on display in the feeds of popular mompreneurs like Naomi Davis of @lovetaza and Katie Crenshaw (@katiecrenshaw) are further and further from reach -- yet these mompreneurs have growing influence and reach, not shrinking.

McRobbie (2016) writes about how the emphasis on aspirational and passionate work among young women in particular in the postindustrial creative economy has a "de-classifying" impact on young workers (90). It has the effect of separating them from class and racial identities. Women are thereby encouraged to think of themselves as a population of ambitious or upwardly mobile people, and to seek solidarity among other women with similar ambitions, rather than among women from similar class or racial backgrounds.

The Emergence of a Social Media Meritocracy

What makes mompreurship as a form of labour characteristically "aspirational"? In many cases mompreneurial activities begin without promise of compensation. The affordances of Web 2.0 have allowed creative amateurs to launch brands based on their passion projects (or, in the case of mompreneurs, on their lives-as-passion-projects), and the success stories broadcast by those who "make it" provide inspiration for many others who many never see the same success.

48

It's the hope that one day they'll be "discovered" by a brand or fellow influencer that animates those engaged in aspirational labour. The affordances of "virality" are powerfully enticing and the factors that enable something to "go viral" are often considered in near-mythical terms -- a mystery of networked society's workings, a miraculous and unexpected happening. Like practitioners of pagan rituals for fertility or love, online entrepreneurs can create favorable conditions for virality to occur, but they can't ultimately guarantee the outcome. However, the immediate and tangible impact of the viral success of a single piece of content -- like a single powerful rainstorm for an agrarian society -- is so significant that individuals invest substantial time and material resources to try to enact viral success.

In some cases, a mere mention by a highly visible influencer like Gwyneth Paltrow and Goop.com or Oprah Winfrey can catapult a small, undiscovered aspirational labourer to overnight success. It is this promise that keeps many aspirational labourers carefully tending to their online identities. Duffy argues that despite only a very few cases of aspirational labour paying off, the discourse surrounding "doing what you love" -- for money or just for love -- has "romanticized work, labour and passion at a historical moment when actual work and its affordances are evermore precarious and unromantic (2015 14).

Duffy and Pooley (2019) conducted an analysis of celebrity coverage in *People* and *Time* magazines, alongside an analysis of the Instagram posts of a select group of celebrities covered in those publications. They found that the narrative of hard work and bootstrapping oneself to success was recurring throughout both the coverage of celebrity, and the celebrity's own accounts of their origins and rise to success. Hard work, according to the narrative offered by these sources, is redemptive. These sources made frequent reference to celebrities' experiences with personal adversity, but rarely made reference to structural challenges they faced (2019 12).

49

Meanwhile, celebrities (and social media influencers, imitating their more successful and well-known counterparts) have become "idols of self-promotion" (Duffy and Pooley 2). A celebrity's ability to promote multiple projects across multiple platforms is attributed to a strong work-ethic (11). Whereas celebrities' success was once judged by the extravagance of their consumption habits, today it is assessed by the constancy of their hustle. This reflects the neoliberal social and economic direction that post-industrial society is heading in; each individual is expected to steer one's own ship to success, and hard work and self-discipline are highly regarded ways of doing so.

In a neoliberal society, celebrities are thus looked up to not just for their talent, but for their "work ethic." In the world of mompreneurship, successful microcelebrity mompreneurs like Heather Armstrong of Dooce, Ree Drummond of The Pioneer Woman and Joanna Godard of Cup of Jo are admired for their "hustle" as much as for the quality of the content they produce, as I will demonstrate in my data analysis. In the world of mommyblogging-for-profit, "success stories" are women who have overcome personal odds to ultimately run successful blogging businesses (Jezer-Morton, 2019). These success stories become valuable currency, used to encourage other mothers to embark on their own entrepreneurial ventures, and to consolidate mompreneurial expertise.

Self-Branding Practices: Social Media Influencers and Mompreneurs

As "savvy subjects" broadcast and consume highly curated and in many cases idealized narratives of self (Khamis et al, 2017), the production and maintenance of the personal brand has become central to women's media, both in traditional terms (authors and public figures maintain active personal brands that cultivate a sense of knowability and 'authenticity' on social

platforms) and among consumers. The practice of "self-branding" provides an important context for reading women's domesticity media in its current iteration. Mommy blogs, craft sites, "hauler videos", and fashion blogs are all governed by the logic of individualism, creative autonomy and self-branding (Duffy and Hund 2015).

Self-branding can be problematic, not least because a successful brand is consistent over time, and humans do not necessarily possess consistent affects, opinions and behaviours over long periods (Khamis et al, 2017). Self-branding can also be understood as a strategy by which individuals retain and assert personal agency and control within a general context of uncertainty and flux." (Khamis 200). Several successful figures in contemporary domesticity media are self-made, having maintained a consistent and popular personal brand over a decade or more. These include Ree Drummond (The Pioneer Woman), Joanna Goddard (Cup of Jo), and Kate Taylor (Cookie and Kate), all of whom are self-trained and rose to success after starting personal blogs as a hobby (Rodney, Cappielitz et al, 2017). The self-made success of these well-known figures in domesticity media reinforces audience belief that success is "attainable" within the sphere of user-generated domesticity content.

If this is the context in which domesticity media is being produced and consumed in 2018, it is safe to say that the days of mommy-blogging as "radical act" are behind us (Webb et al, 2011; Lopez, 2009). Morrison (2011) wrote about the emergence of mommy-blogging in the early 21st century as part of a long tradition of women's writing intended for emotional release. Of these early bloggers Morrison wrote, "Personal mommy bloggers organize their writings around the intimate details of their private lives, expressing the greatest comfort in writing about the most personal topics... It is the very personal and intimate nature of the writing on personal mommy blogs that may help to cement their operation as an intimate public" (41). Confessional

and intimate media about domestic life has been overshadowed by a fetishization of the maternal (Littler 2017), both in terms of affect and aesthetic.

The "yummy mummy" began as an overdetermined cultural caricature in England but has infiltrated domesticity media thanks to lifestyle and domesticity media figures like Nigella Lawson, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Chrissy Teigen (Lagerwey 2017). The "yummy mummy" appears to have risen from the ashes of the "mommy wars," a debate that appears to have stalled as conditions for working mothers have been slow to evolve and the many women stay at home with their children not out of choice but because childcare for young children is prohibitively expensive (Vavrus, 2007). The "yummy mummy" discourse primarily concerns women's appearance, physical fitness and personal style (Littler 2017). In many ways, it is part of a generalized return to the traditionally gendered midcentury domesticity discourse.

Meet The Affective Experts

There have always been entrepreneurial mothers, but the portmanteau "mompreneur" is the product of the internet, and in contemporary society it is a "hotly contested identity" (Ekinsymth 2014). The term was first used publicly as the title of the website mompreneursonline.com, a website launched in 2001 by Ellen Parlapiano and Patricia Cobe as a resource for mothers starting their own businesses (Nel, Martiz et al, 2010). Over the nearly two decades since, the term has come to signify more than simply "entrepreneurial mother." In some cases, it implies resistance to the traditional constraints of motherhood. In others, it implies a commitment to "hustling" and self-determination that contains strong neoliberal overtones. It is virtually never a neutral descriptor; it implies a degree of odds-beating and ambition that, in a neoliberal society, is typically considered worthy of praise and affirmation.

52

A common characterization of the mompreneur is that of the altruist; she is not simply looking for opportunities to earn income from home, but rather to improve her family's situation and to make the world a better place. Mothers' "unconditional love for their children" combined with their "expertise borne of experience" (Nel et al 6) are notions bound up in this identity as well. As mompreneurs, mothers can leverage idealized, often patriarchal notions of selfless devotion in order to market their expertise. Mothers, folklore has it, are natural innovators, given how much intimate knowledge they have about the needs of children and households. Many successful mompreneurs have crafted their identities around this intimate expertise in developing products (Bower, 2005).

The obstacle of balancing work and family is fundamental to the mompreneur identity. This differs from the notion of the traditional family business, however, in the sense that mompreneurship is typically done, at the outset at least, in the home, rather than at a store or office. The idea that the mompreneur faces the obstacle of working from home while raising children is often used to reinforce the image of the mompreneur as determined to succeed against all odds (Nel et. al. 2010). It can be argued that mompreneurs make use of gender roles as enablers rather than constraints in the traditionally male-dominated environment of entrepreneurship, in particular in cultures like Japan's, which is traditionally highly gender segregated, with the expectation that women stay home and raise children (Leung 2011).

In the case of Japan, mompreneurship has been a means for women to pursue careers "on their own terms," often based out of their homes, and apart from the structural constraints defining traditional business culture. However, "on their own terms" in this case implies an important caveat: All successful mompreneurs in one Japanese study used their traditional roles as "mother" prominently in their business. In other words: Mompreneurship can offer mothers

important opportunities to earn money while raising families, but often contains within it identity constraints that harken back to traditional gender role expectations. Interestingly, some American mompreneurs have positioned themselves as "proud housewives," implying that they are standing in opposition to a prevailing cultural narrative about housewives being worthy of pity (Rahoi-Gilchrest 2012).

In a neoliberal society, hardworking mompreneurs are often represented as gender ideals. Indeed, the most successful mompreneurs are heterosexual white women who conform, in both appearance and affect, to traditional standards of "feminine" attractiveness and behavior. They are self-made, self-regulating, and vigorously competitive in whatever market they are serving. (The content analysis section of this study includes several vivid examples of this form of self-presentation.) As business-women, they represent independence and self-determination as opposed to collective effort and shared labour -- the latter being important dimensions to the second-wave feminist philosophy of feminist social theorists including Shulamith Firestone, Betty Friedan, and bell hooks. Some mompreneurs characterize themselves ideologically as "the new feminists" (Ekinsmyth 2014), but what implications for feminism does the mompreneur-as-ideal contain?

On one hand, when appraised on a global level, female entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship among mothers in particular, is considered a key facet of improving gender inequality. Conversely, when mompreneurship is considered in a specifically Western, post-industrial context, it must be considered within the context of the existing feminist movement and its goals, in particular as relates to white supremacy and neoliberalism.

Motherhood and business are co-constituted by mompreneurs. The work of the mompreneur is determined by the spacio-temporal routines of family life. In this sense,

mompreneurs are influential actors in the discourse surrounding mothers' labour politics, both in the home as caregivers to their families, and as business women earning income. Although mompreneurship makes the home and household the strategic allies to work and business, rather than its adversaries (Ekinsmyth 2014), at what cost does this realignment of domesticity and work come? Or, conversely, how can mompreneurs as a labour class disrupt the "hegemonic dualism" that opposes the construct of "mother" with the construct of "good worker"?

McRobbie (2016) sees the concept of "work-life balance" as a compromise that ultimately surrenders feminist aspirations of gender equality in the workplace and domestic spheres -- "reneging and foregoing" any of the aspirations toward ambitions that would take a woman out of the home. In other words, "work life balance" as a concept is a post-feminist's concession to traditional patriarchal social structures of male ambition and female domestic subservience. McRobbie further sees media stepping in to provide "solutions" for the postfeminist crisis of "work-life balance," thereby framing it as a legitimate source of professional concern.

When women are worrying about work-life balance, they have not fully ceded control of their ambitions -- they are still working toward them, albeit at a curtailed pace. This is the reassurance that McRobbie sees being given to women through the media's interest in the problem of "work/life balance." This is articulated in and through mompreneurial practice, which resists any suggestion that women should be encouraged to work outside the home, away from their families. The feminism of mompreneurialism stops short of envisioning mothers with fulfilling professional lives and partners who shoulder the majority of household labour.

EXPERTISE AND THE MAMASPHERE

It's necessary to begin this foray into defining expertise in the context of motherhood media by situating the discussion within existing theories of expertise. The nature of expertise, how it is conveyed, and how publics confer it with legitimacy are all fundamental concerns in the study of the evolution of expertise in child-rearing, and women's relationship to that expertise. This tension between expertise and experience is what Collins and Evans consider "the pressing intellectual problem of our age" (236). The question of how, or whether, momfluencers can be said to possess expertise is inherent to the project of theorizing affective expertise. Momfluencing is a form of entertainment, and their "success" at keeping their audiences "entertained" (or engaged, as digital platforms would have it) is measured in their metrics (Petre, Duffy and Hund 2019).

Collins and Evans (2002) propose a "normative theory of expertise" based on the premise that scientific expertise, rather than an objective notion of truth, is the basis for scientific knowledge. As such, expertise must be treated as something stable -- something "more than the judgement of history, or the outcome of the play of differing attributions" (237). This normative theory would belong to a third wave of social studies of science, and would be based on the problems both solved and created by the preceding two "waves." The authors define the three waves of social studies of science in the following terms: The first wave, characterized by its embrace of positivism, crested in the 1950s and 60s, and during this time science was considered both esoteric and authoritative. Participation and input from non-certified individuals was not given consideration; this was the golden age of "top-down" scientific expertise. If you were an "expert," you were to be trusted by your public. This claim is supported by the evidence mentioned in the previous pages, about mothers' widespread embrace of expert advice on all

matters relating to domesticity and child-rearing, from the turn of the century until the countercultural movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.

The second wave is defined by the move toward a social constructivist view of science, or the view of science as a social activity rather than a pure conveyance of "truth." The second wave opened scientific discourse to "extra-scientific factors," including considerations of ethics, philosophy, history, and identity. Science, in short, became recognized as a social process as much as a process of empirical measurement. "Non-experts" were invited to participate alongside "experts" in cases where "informal" experience could be considered in addition to evidence gathered by scientists with formal certification and training. The second wave, the authors argue, remains in effect in the sciences. Its tenets are not being disproven by the third wave. However, the second wave opened the door for anyone to provide "expertise," which introduces difficult questions about how expertise should be defined. If anyone can weigh in based on their experience, what firm empirical ground is left to stand on in defining the contours of what is real and true?

The third wave of the social studies of science seeks to take into full consideration the extent to which "non-experts" make essential contributions to scientific knowledge, and to track the process by which this occurs. Collins and Evans seek to establish a working definition of who should, and who should not, be contributing to the development of scientific consensus. "The object is to develop a discourse of expertise which will help to put citizens' expertise in proper perspective alongside scientists' expertise," they write (248). They make use of a metaphor of concentric circles. Expertise is negotiated by the interactions between the groups within these circles. The core circle is composed of the scientific experts within a given field, those who participate in making the science itself. This group is continuously challenging its

members with debates and questions that are only of relevance to other members of the specific field. For this reason, this core group is accustomed to and comfortable with the idea that their scientific claims are unstable and under continuous review. They are less likely than those from outside their immediate field to make concrete statements of truth about their field, because they are aware of minute debates within their area of expertise that call small truth claims into question.

The wider circle that extends beyond the core group are those who engage with the core group but don't belong to it - say, scientists in other fields. These outsiders learn about the work of the core group through conversation, media, and other "digested" sources, which typically means that this outside group assumes a degree of certainty about the work of the core group. Because they are not continuously exposed to disputes within the field, they assume that the claims they hear about in the media or from their colleagues are the result of consensus, which core members know from experience is not the case. "The consumers, as opposed to the producers, of scientific knowledge have no use for small uncertainties," write Collins and Evans (246).

Part of the reason for this, they explain, is that often decisions are made by the outer group based on binary choice. Either we will put chlorine in the city's water supply, or we won't. Either we will enforce a recall on all cribs of a certain kind, or we won't. In cases such as these, whose bases rely on the opinions of experts, debate on the merits or costs of a given choice must be shut down once a decision is made.

Collins and Evans argue that the further information gets from its core set (the scientists who made a particular discovery, and their certified colleagues within their immediate field), the more the information is presumed to have been established by consensus. When science enters

popular culture, the "apex of certainty becomes public property," they write (247). The next generation of scientists are taught from textbooks written by writers from outside the core circle who have glossed over or collapsed all the debates surrounding the establishment of scientific concensus, thereby erasing all but the certainty in the claims. For this reason, it can be dangerous when science is broadcast to the public before the core group has established fundamental consensus. What is broadcast is assumed true, and this enters into the public consciousness, and eventually becomes part of the "mythology" of science -- part of the pantheon of truth.

Rip (2003) offers a counter-proposal to Collins and Evans', with the very definition of what constitutes a "core group" called into question. Rip critiques Collins and Evans for taking the importance of maintaining closed core groups of scientific experts for granted. What social and political processes enable these core groups to carry on unquestioned? Who is permitted access to these core groups, and why? Rip cites an example of Maori expertise being introduced to natural history research taking place in New Zealand. Government funding initiatives were created to integrate Maori systems of knowledge into scientific research conducted in New Zealand, thereby opening up core research communities previously considered closed.

Rip's critique emerges from the context of the decolonization of the natural sciences, a process by which indigenous and other paths of knowledge are gaining entry into the core groups of experts in the natural sciences. He suggests that the study of expertise should make room for the study of "tribal norms," or processes by which groups hold certain epistemologically norms to be more important than others. An example he cites is the importance of building one's reputation among core experts among Western scientists. Failing to identify the tribal norms that give rise to the pathways of knowledge that come to be accepted as expertise is a failure to give expertise its full sociological due.

59

Turner (2001) defines five types of expertise: Type 1 is the expertise of the hard sciences that have gained universal authority across society through the "black boxing" (to use Latour's concept) of its discoveries. Expertise in physics, chemistry or mathematics would fall into this category. Type 2 expertise exists within a particular sect, and is only considered legitimate among the sect's adherents; astrology and certain kinds of psychiatry fall into this category. Type 3 overlaps with type 2; this type creates its own legitimacy by recruiting members or followers. (Religion and certain kinds of healing modalities fall into this type.) Types 4 and 5 rely on specialized groups, such as government departments or agencies, who seek out and reify expertise on specific topics and use this expertise to forward their own, often unrelated, goals.

Were momfluencers' expertise to fall under any of these categories, it would be type 4 – essentially, gaining legitimacy and credibility through the influence of a group of fans. The way that momfluencers gain followers could be understood as analogous to the way a new church might grow: Word of mouth, inspired by like-minded content, or a "fellow-feeling." "I think you'll like her vibe," is a common way that women recommend momfluencers to each other; I imagine that a similar dynamic might take place when recommending a new pastor or place of worship.

Collins and Evans' theory of normative expertise is interested primarily in Type 1 of Turner's typology. In thinking about Type 1, they propose two of their own types: *Contributory expertise*, for those with enough expertise and training to contribute to the field; and *participatory expertise*, referring to those who don't have the qualifications to contribute, but can participate in informed conversation and debate with those who do contribute. In order for any interaction of cooperation to occur between groups of experts -- whether between two separate groups with contributory expertise in different fields, or between a group of contributors and a

group of participants -- the authors state that particular forms of interactive skills are necessary. Often, contributory expertise does not go along with participatory expertise. In other words, having a contributory degree of expertise does not necessarily mean that one also has the ability to interact meaningfully with people outside one's field.

The ability to translate one's contributory expertise for audiences outside one's immediate field is, according to Collins and Evans, a form of expertise in and of itself. Social intelligence related to the ability to discern what outsiders would find meaningful about one's work is essential for this translation, which indicates that the flow of expertise can run both in and out of the core, contributory circle. Citing a case where scientists and sheep farmers were both invested in understanding the impact of radioactive fallout from Chernobyl's impact on a particular grazing terrain, the authors conclude that the sheep farmers (experts in the field of raising sheep in this particular landscape) and scientists (experts on the environmental impacts of radioactive material) could have taught each other a great deal, were they able to a) communicate meaningfully about each others' respective priorities, and b) willingly admit that experts outside of their immediate circle of expertise had knowledge that could be valuable if properly translated. The authors argue that organizations that can translate pockets of "lay expertise" to be used by experts are valuable in contemporary society, and should be more widely called upon by scientists with contributory expertise.

In making the case for lay expertise being a valuable addition to certified expertise, Collins and Evans draw upon a well-known example of a group of activists from San Francisco's queer community, and their endeavour to raise the alarm about AIDS virus to the medical and scientific community. Epstein (1995) writes about the remarkably diverse group of actors, from the scientific and medical communities, pharmaceutical companies, activist and alternative press,

and community organizations, that came together and interacted over the course of a decade in the development of HIV/AIDS treatment protocols. In this exceptional case, expertise crossed porous social boundaries between certified and participatory expertise.

Epstein argues that by employing several different approaches to building credibility, AIDS activist groups were conferred legitimacy by experts and ultimately were able to "speak in the language of medical science," addressing audiences both within and outside of communities of scientific experts. The AIDS activists in question were specifically "treatment activists," concerned with widening and improving access to clinical trials of AIDS treatments to larger and more diverse populations of people with AIDS. Epstein notes that this activist movement emerged out of a widespread concern, in particular in urban gay communities, that the medical establishment was dragging its feet on addressing the AIDS epidemic.

Treatment activists educated themselves on the relevant technical dimensions of immunology, epidemiology and virology, and began communicating with researchers and drug manufacturers, sharing data gathered from their communities and presenting concerns and wishes on behalf of their activist groups. Epstein notes that part of these treatment activists' acquired credibility rested on the notion that they acted on behalf of a growing population of suffering individuals who were being mobilized around a highly politicized medical and social crisis. In other words, the stakes for the medical community were high. Should treatment activists be ignored and effective treatments fail to materialize, the scientific community were aware that the social consequences could be dire (Epstein 1995).

The author notes that biomedicine is generally more open to the participation of lay experts, given the legitimacy of clinical trials as a form of reaching conclusions. Other sciences are less open to autodidacts in their midst. However, he notes that activist groups have formed

around particular diseases, and individuals suffering from these diseases have constructed group identities through which to communicate to the outside world. These disease-centered advocacy groups (breast cancer and Lyme disease are among those cited by Epstein) have been increasingly influential, if not at the level of biomedicine itself, at the level of advocacy, research fundraising, and public awareness. If anything, this trend has accelerated since this article's publication, and now includes disorders such as autism. If anything, the power and influence of these patient advocacy groups have created larger entries into participatory credibility.

In premodern societies, expertise on the raising of children was information shared privately between (almost always female) family members and neighbours. There were no "experts," only people with experience: mothers, grandmothers, and lay healers (Ehrenreich and English, 2008). Parenting as a practice did not exist as an idea until the Industrial Revolution; in premodern times children were considered small adults and were expected to do most of the same work adults did. If children required any specialized care it was to do with early childhood illness, and this information was shared in the privacy of home. Religious authority was the only source of expertise that came from outside one's immediate community.

Formal training in medicine became more widespread during the Enlightenment in Europe. During the same period, governments began intervening into family life with recommendations about the feeding of infants; Foucault defined this practice as the exercise of biopower over family life, and argues that through as series of subtle coercions exercised at the level of the domestic sphere, governments began to increasingly exert biopower over their populations so as to generate healthy, socially conditioned subjects. This is how much of what is now understood as "child rearing expertise" in western context came to be disseminated.

In the Foucauldian sense, expertise in child rearing is a disciplinary technology intended to shape how parents understand themselves, and distinguish between right and wrong (Murphy, 2003). Expertise is comprised of a series of "normalizing judgements" (Foucault, 1991) which either qualify or disqualify individuals from "belonging" to a society of rules and values. In this way, individual behaviour is defined and constrained through "a set of standards and values associated with normality which are set into play by a network of ostensibly beneficent and scientific forms of knowledge" (McNay, 1994: 94). When discourses emerge from powerful consensus-based institutions, such as medicine or law, they tend to be more readily accepted (Murphy, 2003).

During the Enlightenment, public health became a site of social control. There emerged "medical police" to enforce rules of public health and sanitation - a way to control unruly bodies and practices that fell outside of what government officials considered to be the best practices. Soon thereafter, with the emergence of the capitalist marketplace, medical care began evolving into a commodity -- something to be understood as a series of quantifiable services rendered to a consumer.

The social implications of the commodification of medicine is too large a topic to venture into in this thesis, but it's relevant to the topic of expertise and motherhood in one important sense: While the care that doctors give patients was readily commodified in the early decades of industrial capitalism, the care that mothers give children resisted such commodification. As Ehrenreich and English (22) write, "The laws of the market come to appear as the laws of human nature." Until the last several decades, motherhood and the care given to children within the home was a notable exception to this rule. Momfluencing has ushered in an era where family life

is being visibly commodified for public consumption; the impact that this will have on families remains to be seen.

A Historical Overview of Expertise on Motherhood in the United States

The expertise disseminated by mompreneurs could be framed historically as a return of expertise to the home after two centuries of expertise being deliberately removed *from* the home, first by the professionalization of medicine in the 18th and 19th century, and second by the emergence of "domestic science" in the Victorian era (Ehrenreich and English, 2008). Conversely, mompreneur expertise can be understood as a continuation of the historical precedent wherein expertise is a response to the conditions of the capitalist free market. Through this process, the laws of the market gradually come to be understood as the laws of human nature, and dictate how we are encouraged by experts to behave so as to thrive.

This precedent has brought about the commodification of medicine, care, romance, and parenting, and one could argue that mompreneurs are simply the latest iteration of the process of the commodification of motherhood. The commodification of the self is what lies at the center of Foucault's theory of governmentality and the multitudinous contemporary scholarship on neoliberal governmentality and private life. I will seek to understand what role the commodification of the self and neoliberal governmentality play in the construction of mompreneurial expertise in the data analysis section of this thesis.

Expertise among women was almost completely confined to the home until the industrial revolution, when women first joined the workforce in large numbers, and for the first time in history, the tasks of cooking, caring for the sick, producing household goods, and raising children had to be outsourced, respectively, to restaurants and canteens, male "regular" doctors (as opposed to lay healers, most of whom were historically women), factories, and nannies.

65

By the late 19th century, "science" was widely seen as the valuable antidote to rising commercialism in the still young field of medicine. In the wake of the rising commodification of care for the sick, doctors became notorious for making wild claims about the effectiveness of procedures and products that often did more harm than good. Science, with evidence and rationality on its side, was seen as a respite from bias and dangerous practices that characterized the first century of professionalized medicine in Europe and the North American colonies.

Science was deployed in the service of improved health care, and it also defined expert advice on how women should raise children and keep a home. Thus the rise of "scientific motherhood" beginning in the late 19th century -- the idea that women require advice from medical experts to properly care for their infants and children (Apple 1995). The turn of the 20th century brought about the rise of "experts" in the scientific sense -- scientists of the body, mind and social environment who prescribed practices that purported to be based on scientific rather than moral dictums. However, the marriage between ideology and science is strong. Although the turn of the century marked the first time that science was hailed as an antidote to moral ideology in healthcare and homemaking, morality maintained its hold on advice that women and men were given on how to care for themselves and others (Ehrenreich and English, 2008).

The end of the nineteenth century brought about the age of expertise on child-rearing and domestic management as we know it today. As the "germ theory of disease" came to dictate the direction of scientific medicine, it also set the tone for the way that women -- now freed from their pre-industrial domestic production of all clothing, textiles, and food products -- would organize their household tasks. The discovery of microbial life in the late nineteenth century led to a new science of cleanliness in the home, which women were encouraged to attend to with professional intensity. Women's work in the home had been transferred into the open

marketplace, but the "domestic void" was quickly filled by an emergent area of expertise: domestic science. Domestic science as a field was founded in the late 19th century by Ellen Swallow Richards, and was embraced by then-nascent middle-class "mothers' groups" around the United States as a way that women could professionalize their work in the home. (Ehrenreich and English, 2008).

"Domestic science" brought together Taylorism's focus on efficiency, the germ theory of disease's focus on cleanliness and sanitation, and the United States' prewar manifest destiny ideology of inevitable, God-given progress. In the context of domestic science, this progress was embodied by the promise of the next generation of children, raised in rigorously orderly homes, prepared by their mothers for whatever technological innovations lay ahead. In order for domestic science to be considered a profession, there had to be experts to teach women the fundamentals of this new field, and thus the early 20th century brought about a flourishing of experts on the art of anti-microbial cleaning, rationalized child-rearing and feeding, and efficient household.

"Science transformed housekeeping into an endless adventure, a quest for new knowledge," write Ehrenreich and English (2008). Housewives -- a new term, suggesting a proper vocation, as opposed to simply "wives" -- were encouraged to continuously re-assess their ability to manage their homes in the light of the continuously evolving field of domestic science. Experts (usually men) addressed conventions, wrote pamphlets and visited homes. Labour-saving devices proliferated on the new industrial-age consumer marketplace, including washing machines, chemical cleaners, vacuums, and ovens. Industrially produced detergents, food products and household items replaced products that, up until less than a century before were typically made at home either by oneself or, in the case of wealthy women, by a servant.

67

(Domestic workers had flocked to industrial factory jobs, leaving wealthy women with houses to keep themselves, and new domestic science methods to master.)

If the house was to be turned into a laboratory for housewives to work in, what about its messiest, most professionally unreliable inhabitants, the children? The turn of the 20th century also coincided with what many social reformers referred to as the dawn of "the Century of the Child," which was the title of an influential tract by Swedish social reformer Ellen Key in 1909, which articulated the social transition that accompanied industrial progress. The "century of the child" was embraced as a cause by Progressive era social reformers, and this spirit is what led to the widespread establishment of playgrounds, public schools and recreational programs, juvenile courts, and child labour regulations.

Along with this public recognition of childhood during the early days of the "century of the child" came a new emphasis on the importance of correct child-rearing based on "scientific" evidence. Child-rearing became a site of biopolitical importance at a national level. The pace of social change since the industrial revolution had scholars and social reformers concerned with raising future generations to be "prepared" for new technologies, new measures of efficiency, and new standards of hygiene and education (Graebner 1980; Weiss 1977; Ehrenreich and English 2008).

So along with a professionalization of domesticity came the professionalization of child-rearing. Four primary sources of expertise illustrate major social transitions that were reflected in parenting advice during the first half of the 20th century in the United States: L. Emmett Holt's *The Care and Feeding of Infants* (1897); *Infant Care* (1914), published by the U.S. federal government's Department of Children and written by Mary Mills West; the pioneering "behaviorist" John B. Watson's *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* (1928); and Dr.

68

Benjamin Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (first published in 1946, but reprinted dozens of times thereafter).

"Maternal instinct" was vilified by many early 20th century social reformers (and later, by the founders of the field of psychology) as smothering, emasculating, and retrograde. Rather than follow one's instincts or the advice of older family members, "modern" mothers were encouraged to apply the principles of industrial rationalization to the raising of their children, so as to prepare them for a future of productive labour. Expertise during this period was conferred on domestic scientists and medical doctors. Formal "training" was seen as necessary for success in any endeavour, from washing dishes to changing diapers. For all of human history leading up to this point, older mothers were looked to for advice on child-rearing. Suddenly, child-rearing was something best explained by experts, most of whom were men (Apple 1995).

Holt's *The Care and Feeding of Infants* (1897), became the first "parenting book" sold widely in the United States. It was followed soon after by a widely circulated pamphlet published by the federal Children's Bureau in 1914, *Infant Care*. *Infant Care* was first distributed for free, and was conceived of as a way to reach both middle class urban mothers and rural women isolated in America's rural hinterland (Weiss 1977). Both of these early guides were characterized by the rationalization and scheduling of childcare, and one could argue that both guides exist within a broader cultural program of American nation-building in that they both encourage self-reliance over collective effort, and both emphasize the productivity of the individual over concerns related to nurturing and children's affective states. However, the two books differ in the way they address mothers.

Holt's book is wary of mothers' hazardous tendency to deploy "mother love" (a concern that Watson maintains in his book published 30 years later) and counsels mothers that keeping

their indulgent impulses in check (impulses like "petting" and "comforting" children, or singing to them) will allow their children to grow up to be disciplined, serious and hard-working adults. West's book offers similar kinds of practical advice: Schedule infants' sleep and feeding; do not heed every cry; leave children alone for the most part so that they develop self-reliance. But unlike Holt, whose advice is based on the idea that mothers are apt to destroy their children by their very presence, West's advice is based on a pragmatic assessment of the average turn-of-the-century mother's daily responsibilities.

West's *Infant Care* is based on the underlying belief that infants must work alongside their mothers in healthy and harmonious households. Mothers should schedule their children's feeding and sleep, and ignore their cries during certain times of day, not because they themselves pose hazards to child development, but because running a household means prioritizing tasks. *Infant Care* gave advice with a mother's affective state in mind, and encouraged her to feel confident in employing a triage mentality to her household when necessary. Infant Care acknowledges outright that caring for children can be exhausting and counsels mothers not to lose sight of their own needs while caring for their families. In this way, *Infant Care* differs notably from other parenting guides. It's worth noting that Infant Care was the only widely circulated parenting guide written by a woman.

Watson's behaviorist parenting advice built up on the premise of Holt's -- that mothers stood in the way of proper human development, and should avert their gaze and influence so that good habits might be formed in infancy through scheduling and repetition. Although behaviorism was widely discredited by midcentury, Watson's child-rearing advice proved remarkably resilient and it wasn't until Benjamin Spock ushered in the age of "permissive

parenting" with his best-selling guide that behaviorism fell out of fashion in North American middle class households (Weiss 1977).

Dr. Spock and the Emergence of the Anxious Parent

Spock's *Common Sense Guide* represents a change in how experts addressed parents (for by midcentury, fathers were also reading child-rearing books, though still in smaller numbers than mothers). While the earlier experts admonished parents and set ironclad limits to how they should behave, Spock's tone was congenial and reassuring. Much has been written about the social consequences of Spock's hugely influential book, which was one of the biggest best-sellers of the 20th century, having sold over 50 million copies between its initial publication in 1946 and 1998. It was revised and re-released numerous times, itself becoming a living document reflecting changing social norms.

The historical moment at which Spock's book was released contrasted dramatically with the early-industrial optimism that informed Holt, West, and Watson's parenting guides. While the latter experts saw rationalization and discipline as emancipatory, Spock felt that human society had become too aggressive and competitive, and that humans were losing touch with their "natural" social instincts. (Graebner, 1980). Rapid industrialization, combined with the shock and trauma of two world wars and an economic depression, had numerous social theorists concluding that society had become "aggressive" and that child-rearing philosophies of the previous generation had contributed to a society with an "authoritarian" bent. Spock and his peers concluded that a return to certain "primitive" forms of social organization, in particular within families, could help heal Western society's collective traumas (Graebner 1980).

71

It's relevant to apply a Foucauldian reading of Spock's philosophy of "permissive" parenting, in which parents raise their children as respected members of a group, with opinions worthy of being listened to. Foucauldians would argue that all of this discourse was in the service of emergent democratic forms of social control. Children raised in households following the Spock method would be given a chance to participate as members of the collective (or, to extrapolate, the democratic civil society), but also expected to submit to the rules governing the collective. Essentially, their equal participation as family members and later as voting-aged citizens would be their reward for submitting to the rules of the collective (Grabner 1980).

Spock's work is informed by the scholarship of a group of his peers in the fields of child development studies and social psychology that included Margaret Mead, Jean Piaget and Susan Isaacs. Their work inspired him to take a somewhat nostalgic view of "pre-modern" societies' approaches to raising children according to "natural rhythms." Spock originally wrote during a time at which most women did not work outside the home, but this would change. However, his nostalgia for "pre-modern" child-rearing techniques like co-sleeping and breastfeeding on demand persisted among parenting experts despite women joining the workforce in droves during the second half of the 20th century.

This set the stage for conditions that inform much of the discourse of contemporary mompreneurship: How are women supposed to be "nurturers" in the "natural" sense, while still be active and healthy participants in a demanding late-capitalist workforce? Spock didn't know, in 1946, that the majority of mothers would be working full-time by 2000. Perhaps if he had been able to predict this change, he would not have made recommendations that require that mothers wake up throughout the night to care for their infants.

It's hard to overstate the influence of Dr. Spock's book and expertise, and this can be explained in part by the historical moment at which it was released. The phenomenon of mass media consumption was beginning to take shape in the postwar years as more Americans bought televisions. Synergistic messaging became possible across broadcast platforms of newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. Soon Americans thought of Dr. Spock's book as synonymous with the act of raising children (Ehrenreich and English, 2008). Because of this unprecedented influence, the "permissive" parenting style recommended by Spock has been blamed for such a wide range of subsequent social developments as the counterculture, helicopter parenting, "overparenting," and increased instances of maternal depression (Caulfield, 1999).

Although Spock's child care advice differs notably from the previous three sources of expertise mentioned here, he did share the fundamental belief that a mother's attention or lack thereof has the power to hurt a child. Previous experts argued that mothers should great a rigid discipline so as to build good habits in children. Spock, however, advised that mothers should let their children take the lead and be their gentle, encouraging guide. Children with intuitive, relaxed mothers would have the opportunity to blossom to their full potential -- whereas the children of either overbearing or neglectful mothers risked growing up either repressed or struggling with abandonment issues (Weiss 1977).

There may not be a causal relationship between Spock's advice and the American counterculture or rising rates of maternal depression, but I would argue that it's fair to link the expertise of Spock with an increased emphasis on maternal affective labour in North American parenting. Weiss puts it thus:

> An emotional workday is superimposed on the mother's physical workday, in part devoted to monitoring her own behavior so as to provide the proper environment for her offspring's " 'self-realization' through 'self-discovery' and 'self- motivated behavior.'... Child rearing manuals might be renamed mother rearing tracts. Behind every rule

concerning desirable child behavior a message to mothers was couched, advising them on how to act and recommending the right, proper, and moral way to conduct their own lives.

The open-ended advice to "just relax" and "let your baby be your guide" was no doubt intended to release mothers from the rigid schedules of baby care that they were encouraged to maintain at the start of the 20th century. Despite Spock's well-documented good intentions (Caufield, 1999), he may have opened a Pandora's box of maternal guilt and anxiety. The implications of this development continue to inform expertise sought by mothers today. Spock's book invites women to indulge their maternal affection and trust their instincts, but by emphasizing the positive dimensions of childcare, he overlooks the harder parts of motherhood, which are no less common than the rosy parts: loneliness, frustration, boredom, exhaustion. This omission might have been inconsequential if his books hadn't become so ubiquitous. A reviewer criticized Dr. Spock thus: "By not identifying common problems of resentment and loneliness, while being so conscientious about identifying others, the books may contribute to the anxiety of women who read them. (Bane, 1973)."

"The care of a baby is readily reduced to a system," *Infant Care* read in 1914, "unless he is sick. Such a system is not only one of the greatest factors in keeping the baby well and in training him in a way which will be of value to him all through life, but it also reduces the work of the mother to the minimum and provides for her certain assured periods of rest and recreation" (Weiss 1977). Perhaps Spock took for granted the fact that 20th century mothers took time for their own rest and recreation, because he does not mention it in the *Common Sense Guide.* After all, the midcentury housewife had dishwashers and laundry machines, canned food and a car to get her to the grocery store. Surely she would have time for her own leisure. It's somewhat ironic that mothers' private recreation time is mentioned in *Infant Care,* which was written at a time

74

when mothers were responsible for far more onerous domestic chores than they were in Spock's time.

Spock's style of advice is based on the presumption that parents (mothers in particular) are willing and able to perform virtually limitless amounts of affective labour, in the service of helping their children realize their full potential. In this sense, Spock's book was among those to usher in an age during which the neoliberal government of the self became the defining modality in which self-help and advice books were written in the West. This age is ongoing today, and I argue that contemporary mompreneurs are engaging with the same values of what's good for kids and parents that was first proposed by Spock in the *Common Sense Guide*. In my data analysis, I will identify how this manifests in social media postings and interactions between mothers at mompreneur conventions.

By the postwar era, the notion that child-rearing should follow a pattern determined in large part by experts had been fully embraced by American mothers (Weiss 1977) and expert prodding was no longer needed; mothers socialized each other to perform motherhood in certain socially-sanctioned ways, or else risk harsh judgment (Zimmerman et al 2008; Steiner 2007). The philosophy of child-rearing had become commodified, and this process was complete by the 1950s. What was, in pre-industrial society, a private endeavour undertaken within the confines of a family, became a public discourse around best practices and products. Motherhood, according to experts, was not a social role or a series of tasks undertaken by the family collective. It was a solitary task undertaken within the isolation of the home, often alone with children, in the absence of other adults.

This isolation of the mother has been part of the rise to the mother as consumer. Mothers' choices evolved into a series of consumer choices during the mid 20th century, and today's

mompreneurs operate in a context in which one's identity as a mother is largely conflated with one's identity as a consumer. In my data analysis, I will test a theory that consumer choices make up an important part of mothers' performed identity. Dr. Benjamin Spock did not create the mother-as-consumer, but he did encourage mothers to maintain an open-ended approach to their involvement with their children. This open-endedness created ideal conditions for the evolution of the mother's role as consumer.

Since the turn of the 21st century, two popular trends in child development theory have emerged, one in response to another. In the 1990s, neuroscientific data was leveraged by toy marketers (notably the Disney Corporation's *Baby Einstein* series of books, videos and recordings) to indicate that parents could enhance their children's intelligence by stimulating their senses with exposure to certain visuals and sounds during the first three years of their lives (Thorton, 2011). The "first three years" movement was based on neuroscientific research about infant brain plasticity, which was made possible by noninvasive brain imaging technology that emerged in the late 20th century.

This technology produced compelling evidence indicating that infants' brains respond to particular types of visual and auditory stimulation. The result of this data, combined with the way it was aggressively marketed by toy companies, led to an emphasis on cognition rather than emotion how parents were encouraged to interact with their infants. Parents were encouraged to surround their children with "stimulating" educational toys, which was a boon for the toy industry. "The Mozart effect" of raising gifted children through exposure to educational toys was heralded by toy marketers throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but was conclusively debunked in the early 2000s (McKelvie and Low, 2002).

What followed was the "back-to-basics" parenting movement, which represents a return to Spockian principles of parental attentiveness. The "back to basics" movement remains a prevailing child-rearing trend among many middle and upper-middle class families in the United States and Canada. Although this movement retains the belief in the importance of brain development in infants, it emerged as a rejection of the commercial dimension that came to define the cognitive movement that preceded it.

Starting in the late 1990s, a wave of books were published that encouraged parents to resist consumerism in their child-rearing practices and use "old-fashioned" methods of stimulating play with their infants (Thornton, 2011). These include titles such as *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture*; *Buy, Buy Baby: How Consumer Culture Manipulates Parents and Harms Young Minds*; *Einstein Never Used Flashcards: How Our Children Really Learn and Why They Need to Play More and Memorize Less*; *Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children from the Culture of HyperParenting*; *Parenting, Inc.: How the Billion-Dollar Baby Business Has Changed the Way We Raise Our Children*, and *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain.*

The "back to basics" movement ideology espoused in these books advocated for an emphasis on emotional rather than cognitive development in children, and encouraged parents to attend to this development by fostering attentive, spontaneous modes of interacting with their infants. This movement holds that emotional intelligence, developed through attachment with one's parent, is considered more important for a child's healthy development than cognitive development, which is said to follow naturally. The back to basics movement came to conflate a "training" approach to early childhood development with the pressures of consumer culture. Buying stimulating toys and games backed by scientific claims came to be associated with a

disembodied, emotionally remote, "unnatural" kind of parenting -- which the back-to-basics movement was determined to discredit.

Neoliberal Anxiety As Parental Affect

Thornton (2011) argues that, although the back-to-basics movement is based on the ethos that consumer capitalism is bad for family life and child development, its ideological underpinnings work to reinforce fundamental precepts of neoliberal governmentality. This shift, Thornton writes, is enabled by "late capitalism's privileging of freedom as a supreme governing value." Citing Nikolas Rose's theoretical work in his book *Powers of Freedom* (1999), Thornton argues that the dream of freedom -- from consumerism, in this case -- is embedded into how neoliberal subjects continuously re-energize ourselves. To choose to be free from an existing way of behaving is to take up an entrepreneurial approach to living, through our aspirations and anxieties.

The back-to-basics movement orients itself as a form of personal freedom to the extent that it encourages parents to "resist" consumer culture's manipulation of science. It also presents a postfeminist opportunity for mothers who wish to make their own choices "independently" from consumer trends, and seek their own self-actualization as nurturers away from corporate messaging. As such, the "back to basics" movement has evolved into what some psychologists call the "gourmet baby" movement (Zigler and Lang, 1986), referring to the rigorously chosen and maintained aesthetic and affective environments that contemporary parents strive to create for their babies. How can this be construed as a reinforcement of neoliberal governmentality?

Freedom from the incitements of consumer culture does not mean freedom from normative constraints related to one's emotions and behavior. The back-to-basics movement is

based on the "problem" of bonding between parents (particularly mothers) and their babies. This movement reifies bonding as a natural process between parents and children, but does not presume that this process will unfold effortlessly. In order to enable healthy bonding with their infants can take place, this movement holds that mothers must set the appropriate affective stage through the proper government of their affect. Parents of gourmet babies are responsible for creating the appropriate affective assemblage -- to return to this concept articulated by theorists of affect -- that provides, via a kind of affective immersion, the healthiest and most nurturing affective waters for infants to swim in.

Creating and nurturing the right affective assemblage then becomes a project of self-government. According to the back-to-basics ideology, it is not enough to buy a baby toys and ensure that they are entertained and stimulated. The entertainment must occur at the appropriate emotional register, and be overseen by parents rather than extra-familial caregivers, in order for adequate bonding to occur (Thornton 2011). This incitement to "active" as opposed to passive parenting has become a hallmark of the contemporary "intensive parenting" or "overparenting" movement (Bernstein and Triger, 2010).

The back-to-basics and gourmet baby movements overlap almost completely with the intensive parenting movement, although the intensive parenting movement could be said to encompass parenting philosophies that go beyond the aforementioned. (For example, Amy Chua's best-selling *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, published in 2011, falls under the intensive parenting umbrella, but adheres to more traditional cognitive and training-based approaches to raising children rather than the more affective and emotion-oriented approaches of the back-to-basics movement.) Intensive parenting, whether it takes the form of carefully calibrated, continuous emotional communication between parent and child, or strict adherence to schedules

79

and educational programs, is a social adaptation to the pressures and opportunities of neoliberal society.

Neoliberal parents, like all neoliberal subjects, are encouraged to make "empowered choices" (Wilkins, 2014). The ability to make choices in a society that is undergoing gradual economic privatization and marketization is dependent on a subject's own resources -- their time, energy, attention, skills, and ability to mobilize all of these in a given direction. In other words, empowered choice-making in a neoliberal society relies on individuals' affect (Wilkins 2014), and their willingness or ability to do the affective labour required to access resources that are available on the open marketplace.

Parents who take an intensive approach to raising their children, whether their style is more in line with the back to basics movement or the "tiger parent" movement, are characterized by the frequency and urgency with which they intervene in their children's lives, starting from infancy and lasting through their child's university years. This intervention, whatever form it takes, is animated by parents' affective response to the choices available to them. By steering their child in the "right" direction, parents are helping their children take their place in the crowded marketplace of neoliberal society.

Contemporary parenting advice is often couched in the military metaphor of armament: we must "arm" ourselves with the best possible information in order to best raise our children in a competitive economic and social environment. Accessing information and then reacting appropriately is a high-stakes endeavour for parents under neoliberalism. Writes Wilkins (2014),

> To choose "responsibly", for example, is to engage in practices of long-term preparation and planning together with the exercise of certain skills, knowledge and orientations, all of which presuppose a network of equally shared and equally available dialogical competencies and socially appropriated behaviours. "Choice", therefore, is less an act of spontaneity than it is a behavioural adjustment to culturally acceptable values and politically mandated norms (276).

If neoliberalism requires that parents exercise rigorous self-government at the level of affect in order to position themselves as worthy recipients of the rewards of "choice," then expertise of an affective sort is a valuable and sought-after commodity. What is expertise, when it is not coming directly from the mouths of experts? Who is providing this kind of affective expertise in contemporary parenting media? How is this expertise broadcast, what shape does it take? To attend to these questions, I will proceed by considering the evolution of debates around what constitutes expertise itself, and how it has been problematized over the past several decades within the social sciences.

Mothers As Experts, Mothers as Inept: The Construction of Expertise

Mothers' reliance on experts has, since the early 20th century, been a negotiation between dueling constructs: medical and scientific "expertise," and mothers as innate, instinctive lay "experts." Beginning in the early 20th century, the expertise of science and the expertise of instinct have often been invoked side-by-side by advertisers trying to appeal to mothers. Apple (1995) notes that by the early 20th century, advertisers for products targeting mothers had already turned "doctors recommend!" into a cliche. Mothers' instinctive ability to nurture would naturally lead them to trust scientific experts in making choices about what to buy for their families - or so advertisers hoped.

Apple (1995) writes, "The development of scientific motherhood did not represent a sharp break with past practices, but rather a gradual realignment of power relationships within the domestic setting" (178). For all of human history up until the 20th century, women were fully responsible for and in charge of their children. This responsibility implied expertise even if expertise itself wasn't a formalized concept. Mothers were experts by default; they held the

81

monopoly on the marketplace of child-rearing, with the exception of the influence and power of religious leaders. Scientific motherhood shifted a mother's responsibility toward dutifully following the recommendations of outside experts. A "good mother" was good at following directions rather than good at following her own instincts.

By the twentieth century the social construction of "good motherhood" implied that mothers are essential figures for children, and their presence and attention is valuable beyond measure. (Previous constructions of motherhood emphasized a mother's sound moral influence and ability to nurture, but attention as such was not.) However, this construct also maintains that mothers need help to perform motherhood properly and are therefore dependent on the input of experts, which undermines a crucial dimension of maternal authority and even, in some readings, intelligence. Scientific motherhood came to reproduce patriarchal structures of power, wherein women were reliant on men to define how responsible mothers ought to behave. (Apple 1995).

According to Apple (2006), it was not until the second half of the 20th century that women began to push back against the reign of "experts" in child rearing, through the establishment of advocacy groups such as La Leche League (founded in 1956) and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which published the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1970. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* offered a guide to women's health and sexuality "by and for women," and encouraged women to take an active role in defining their sexual desires and identities. The book was produced at the height of the women's movement, and sought to demystify and destigmatize women's sexuality and reproductive health.

This survey of historical developments in mothers' relation to expert advice through the 20th century makes clear that there is always tension between expertise, experience, and scientific evidence.

Expertise and the Mamasphere: Vaccination Debates

Expertise gained and deployed by advocacy groups makes up an influential niche of the mamasphere. Mothers' advocacy has a storied history, from the Madres del Plaza de Mayo who protested the extrajudicial disappearances of their children during the Argentinian dirty wars, to Mothers Against Drunk Driving who have campaigned effectively for stronger enforcement of drunk driving laws. Expertise gathered autodidactically has often formed the foundation for these mothers' groups and this remains true today. It is partly through social media influence that the contemporary wave of activist mothers are able to leverage their experiential expertise to bring about political and social change.

However, social media influence can also muddy the boundaries between participatory expertise -- the type of expertise earned by the AIDS treatment activists in Epstein's paper, or mothers of MADD who learned about the risks of driving while intoxicated and campaigned for tighter drunk driving legislation-- and expertise that is fraudulently acquired, or that is not recognized by any contributory experts. Fraudulent expertise that is taken as truth -- "fake news" and the like -- creates social instability. The mamasphere and mompreneurs in particular have been implicated in numerous fake-expertise controversies, most notably claims that vaccination increases children's risk of developing autism.

The literature on the anti-vaccination movement, and its implications for the social science of medicine and science, is too extensive to delve deeply into for the purposes of this project. However, insofar as the anti-vaxxer movement bridges two important themes of this thesis -- online motherhood, and the construction of expertise online -- I would be remiss in not trying to articulate this thematic meeting point. Ana Katta (2012) writes that the affordances of

Web 2.0 have allowed a new postmodern paradigm of healthcare to emerge, wherein patients are increasingly empowered to question the legitimacy and expertise of scientists and doctors. Whereas previously these groups were socially marginalized due to the shakiness of their claims in the eyes of scientific communities, today they are able to command larger audiences and attract more attention due to social media.

Many anti-vaccination groups frame themselves as neutral "watchdog groups" that report on findings from studies on the effects of vaccination. This pose seeks to create the illusion of scientific credibility by imitating the kind of agency -- often funded by governments, such as the Food and Drug Administration, or the National Institutes of Health in the United States -- that works to prevent malpractice and hazardous health outcomes for the general public. As such, these anti-vaccination groups are deliberately assuming particular visual and rhetorical markers that are typically used by agencies with contributory expertise, without having either contributory or participatory expertise themselves (Katta 2012).

When Knowledge Creates Anxiety

The question of expertise and family life has been taken up over the past two decades by researchers focusing on the growing trend of "intensive parenting" in post-industrial economies. "Parenting" as a verb, it has been widely noted, has only been in use since the 1970s (Douglas and Michaels, 2004), and its definition has come to encompass parental anxiety -- a necessary part of raising children in contemporary post-industrial society.

How does this anxiety relate to the question of expertise? As parents become more informed about the conditions of the world, both locally (competition for schools and jobs, and for survival resources once their kids are grown) and globally (the health impact of processed

84

food and sugar, the global obesity epidemic, growing rates of treatment for adolescent and adult depression -- the list is endless) the task of raising their children with this knowledge (call it expertise) in mind becomes more and more daunting.

What a child comes to embody, in these conditions, is the conscientiousness and care with which parents apply this knowledge to their parenting. Childhood, based on this worldview, is "a series of defeats" (Faircloth and Murray 1118) that a "good" parent must make on behalf of their children: Defeating the threat of obesity through good diet and exercise, the threat of unemployability through diligent education; the threat of substance abuse by making sure children are exposed to a healthy peer group; the threat of social isolation by ensuring that children have engaging hobbies and interests. On top of these, some parents feel that commercialism and consumer culture must be defeated on behalf of their children's future selves, and so they add an emphasis on approved, noncommercial games, apparel and food to their already long list of threats they are working against. Covering all of these existing concerns like a sagging tarp in a deluge is parents' growing awareness of climate change, and how it might impact their children. This threat doesn't have a clear set of counter-attacks that have been collectively agreed upon yet, so for many parents it causes free-floating, helpless anxiety. It is the awareness of all of these threats, and the commitment to defeating them through diligent parenting, that defines the culture of "intensive parenting."

These anxieties relate to the notion of kinship, that concept fundamental to anthropology of family life, in that these parents know that their genes determine much of a child's future, and those outcomes can't be controlled. Kinship is highly deterministic. However, collective awareness of the impact of "nurture" versus nature compels parents to try and engineer whatever desireable outcomes they possibly can muster from that numinous flexible zone governed by

85

"nurture," and this is where they hope their intensive parenting will pay off. It is for these reasons that parenting has become as much a moral undertaking as a pragmatic one (Faircloth and Murray 2015).

Despite Doepke and Zilibotti's argument (2017) that parents transmit their values and concerns to their children not out of a moral obligation, but for purely economic reasons related to giving their children the best possible chance at succeeding in their native economic environment, Faircloth and Murray suggest that the very knowledge possessed by the parents is enough to engage them in the practice of intensive parenting. "How can I, in good conscience, behave any differently, knowing what I know?"

Foucault would characterize this affective state as a symptom of the neoliberal subject. Murphy (2003) writes that responsible moral actors in contemporary society are expected to be an informed consumer, to critically appraise the choices available to her, rather than to blindly follow the recommendations of others. "Those who are not reflexive, informed consumers are deemed irresponsible or in need of education," (2003 457). Once again we brush up against the issue of expertise in the mamasphere, where a large volume of social media posts concern product recommendations, "tips" and "hacks" for solving everyday household challenges. Influential mothers compete to have the most effective "hacks," and there is no scientific basis for any of the claims made. Rather, it's the quality of their affective expertise -- the affect with which they make their claims -- that can determine how their claims are received.

Foucault refers to the "biologico-moral responsibility" that women have to care for their children in societies that exert biopower via the medicalization of family life, and maintain that power via the "panoptic gaze" of a society in which surveillance is normalized (Foucault, 1980). Of course, Foucault used the panopticon metaphor before social media existed, and today the

technologies that keep mothers under surveillance are often deployed by mothers themselves, in the form of social media posts about their own choices and experiences that are tailored to generate particular responses among their followers.

In my field work I seek to understand how mothers construct their own expertise through their use of social media technology, and how the processes by which they are assessed and vetted by their audiences reinforces this new form of "affective expertise." Affective expertise may be a relatively recent social phenomenon, but it is based in large part on these observations made decades ago by Foucault: that biopower is exerted through the medicalization of family life, and that mothers are primarily responsible for upholding a set of norms and standards of behaviour that conform with these rules. Foucault refers to a "medical police" (1991), and this phenomenon is ongoing, but it has evolved to encompass more enforcers in more places.

The conduct of contemporary mothers in post-industrial societies is largely governed by the laws of neoliberalism (Thornton 2011; Duffy 2017; Wilson and Yochim 2017; Giles 2014). By this argument, affective expertise is basically expertise in successfully managing the exigencies of neoliberal selfhood, and then broadcasting that success in a compelling and convincing way, largely through the modulation of one's affect on social media.

Biopower and the Mamasphere

The mamasphere can be read as a massive site of biopolitical negotiation. The sites of social intervention where biopower has been brought to bear have evolved since Foucault first theorized it, as noted by Rabinow and Rose (2006). Biopower today, write the authors,

can be understood as a group of discourses and

modes of subjectification, through which individuals are brought to work on themselves, under certain forms of authority, in relation truth discourses, by means of practices of the self, in the

87

name of their own life or health, that of their family or some other collectivity, or indeed in the name of the life or health of the population as a whole (p. 197).

Rabinow and Rose write that in the late 20th century, reproduction becomes "a problem space, in which an array of connections appear between the individual and the collective, the technological and the political, the legal and the ethical" (p. 198). This "biopolitical space par excellence" is where we find discourses around what constitutes fit versus unfit motherhood, "healthy" families, large families versus only children, maternal mental health as matter of public concern. As in-vitro fertilization procedures have become commonplace in some parts of the world, while campaigns to limit population growth have taken hold in others, we see a growing discourse around what sorts of families are deserving of admiration and celebration, versus what kinds of families are considered unsafe, unhealthy, and doomed from a climate-crisis perspective.

Biopolitical interventions by the state during earlier historical eras were likely to have been motivated by racism, eugenics and fear of genetic "contamination" by disease and disability. Today's biopower operates according to the logic of capitalism and liberalism, not eugenics, write Rose and Rabinow. Momfluencers do not belong to a conspiracy in the service of any kind of racial or social purification. Instead, momfluencers are the foot soldiers of mindsets of liberal self-reliance. They have taken the marching orders for their biopolitical project from the brands and brand managers of global corporations like Dove and Pampers, and that project's goal is to map mindsets of liberal self-reliance and perpetual growth onto family life.

Momfluencers and their audience can be understood as "biosocial collectivities" (Hardt and Negri, 2001). As I will demonstrate in the chapters presenting the data, the space of contemporary discourse in which momfluencing is produced and consumed can be understood as an entirely biopolitical space, wherein "the whole social body is comprised by power's machine

88

and developed in its virtuality" (p. 24). Hardt and Negri characterize biopolitical socialities as fully animated by flows of power, and indeed, when I earlier characterized momfluencers as fruiting bodies of biopolitical pressure, I was affirming their point of view. However, as I will argue through presentation of data, momfluencers' relationship to biopower is not so simple, not so unidirectional. Hardt and Negri claim that contemporary biopower is "a control that extends through the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population" (p. 24), and while I don't contest that, I will argue that momfluencing does stake claim to agentic territory beyond the biopolitical boundaries that contain their social worlds.

Even as momfluencers sometimes act as sock-puppets for regimes of neoliberal self-reliance and patriarchal social norms – success in this sphere does afford opportunities to push back and redraw certain rules of engagement, like how to talk about sex, or whether to show pictures of kids' faces. As I demonstrate in the data, momfluencers are often highly aware of the ways they can and can't subvert norms and challenge their followers to think in new ways. Frequently in mainstream media coverage, momfluencers are characterized as either victims of patriarchal entrapment or complicit in structures of control and oppression (Petersen 2021, Coslett 2022). In this thesis, I propose a different reading: That biopower sets the terms and conditions for momfluencers' speech, but that the development of affective expertise enables momfluencers to recuperate agency and push back against some of the very structures that they work within.

Mompreneurs as Neoliberal Subjects

Mompreneurialism emerged as a possible alternative set of opportunities and affordances for stay-at-home mothers who might otherwise be shut out of professional identities. But lately,

it is more closely associated with economic precarity and the necessity to make ends meet in an economy where long-term, well-paid employment is hard to secure for many Americans. Although mompreneurs continue to employ hopeful narratives about self-reliance and resourcefulness, the realities underpinning this economic activity has more to do with survival and necessity than with optimism and ambition (Wilson and Yochim, 2017).

Mompreneurs participate in an affective economy, wherein their affect is the commodity and their aspirational labour is the structure through which this commodity is produced and traded. In their 2017 ethnography, "Mothering Through Precarity: Women's Work and Digital Media," Julie Wilson and Emily Yochim argue that there exists a "mamapreneurial sensibility" among women who earn income at home through digital mompreneurial activity. This sensibility is shaped by the precarity of neoliberal society and animated by the demands of neoliberal subjecthood. Mompreneurs in this contemporary context are highly self-regulating, highly reflexive "happiness machines" that perform the role, in and through their digital discourses, of holding their families together. Although mompreneurs may be selling any number of services or products, the overarching enterprise that every mompreneur is working on is the enterprise of her family (71).

Given the increasing privatization of social worlds under neoliberalism, mompreneurs are engaged in a performative process of the privatization of happiness - their families', and increasingly, as discourses around "self care" become more common (Ward 2015), the privatization of their own happiness. Meanwhile, as state and provincial budgets cut funding that supports families, mompreneurs are increasingly responsible for maintaining family stability, whether through the care and education of children who might otherwise attend daycare or after-

school programs, or through the earning activities that keep the rent paid, as male partners are more frequently subject to layoffs and irregular work.

"Mamapreneurialism emerges as a vital sensibility for navigating, and surviving, the mounting demands and structural impossibilities of mothering through precarity," write Wilson and Yochim (72). Mompreneurialism incites many women to rationalize their domestic activities, and this rationalization often ends up being the product being sold, either through advice (in the case of mommybloggers who blog about domesticity), or products and services based on "life hacks," or tricks and methods to making family life more orderly, efficient, and "fun." Bound up with this rationalization is the need to work to maintain and ultimately appreciate the value of the primary mompreneurial asset: family life. The affordances of social media and the digital enclosure allow for virtually limitless opportunities to appreciate a family's value.

Gjinishi (2018) writes about the practice by which mommybloggers and online mompreneurs "harness" everyday routines and affect for the purposes of commodification. Even among amateurs, that is to say those who aspire to sponsorship or other forms of financial remuneration, this harnessing takes place in an aspirational orientation. What emerges from this commodification of everyday consumer choices is the idea that the consumer marketplace (rather than, say, a religious or community institution) is the "prime locus of legitimation in society" (9). The mundane makes up both the stuff of mompreneurship and the context in which mompreneurship is consumed (as I detail in the following section).

Mundane experiences like cuddling on the couch, helping a child with their homework, initiating a child's bedtime routine, or walking the family dog are all mined for potential, whether via sponsorship, or through an aspirational pose orienting one's life as "sponsor-

worthy." From the right angle, everyday life is rife with opportunities for optimization with the help of products and services. Cuddling on the couch is best enjoyed with a plush blanket. Helping a child with their homework is easier with the right home lighting system. Walking the dog is easier with comfortable yet stylish shoes. Above all, a mompreneur's goal is to make everyday life look recognizably mundane, yet optimized for style, comfort and productivity (Gjinishi 2018).

Economizing Happiness

In and through the digital mundane of the mamasphere, the spirit of mompreneurship is contagious, and is felt and expressed by mothers who aren't necessarily entrepeneneurial. In other words, you don't have to be a mompreneur to internalize a mompreneurial value system vis-a-vis your family and yourself. Much of the affective nuggets circulated within the mamasphere are based on the fundamental value of optimization of self and family, and of the economization of happiness. Mompreneurs style themselves as coaches and trackers, and recommend experts and charts for self-improvement. The dimensions of self and family that are ripe for improvement are multitudinous. Worksheets can help mothers plan healthy meals. Daily affirmations help mothers "practice gratitude." Tips for entertaining children help mothers create "happy memories" and keep children active and healthy. Tips for recipes help mothers preside over "happy mealtimes" and encourage their children to be healthy eaters.

This attention to optimization borrows practices of the quantified self movement and applies them to mothers' management of their own moods and habits. Here we can see the outlines of the mamasphere as the latest dominant discourse in parenting advice. Unlike scientific motherhood, the mompreneurial mamasphere does not reify the opinions of clinical

"experts" or explicitly encourage mothers to ignore their "maternal instincts." Like Dr. Spock's "passive parenting" movement of the mid 20th century, the mompreneurial mamasphere invites mothers to spend an open-ended amount of time paying attention to the needs of their children.

Also in the same vein as Spock, the mamasphere invites mothers to govern themselves and their own moods alongside those of their children. Their own moods are considered to have enormous impact on their children, and on their families' happiness. If Spock reminded women to be self-aware while parenting, the mamasphere is full of tricks and tips for improving and shaping that self-awareness within the social context of a quantified self.

Happiness itself can be quantified in the mamasphere, by sharing photos -- "making memories." Time is quantified in the mompreneurial household in terms of the number of hours that children spend in front of screens, number of hours they spend outdoors, and number of hours they spend doing organized extra-curricular activities. Moreover, children's diets are of enormous interest and concern to the mompreneurial mother, who holds the meals she prepares to a clearly defined standard of healthfulness and variety. Mothers of infants quantify their breastfeeding practices, sharing goals for how long they plan to breastfeed "exclusively," and publicly tracking how much milk they produce with a breast pump.

Finally, a mompreneurial mom's own body and mind are subject to quantification and management, both through the management of weight and appearance, and the tracking of opportunities for "self-care" -- the ultimate commitment to self-appreciation in the neoliberal worldview. A mompreneurial mindset requires that mothers maintain optimum mental functioning for themselves so as to be able to care for their children, and this means taking time for themselves in a variety of tracked and narrated ways. The mundane material of family life is thus instrumentalized toward the appreciation of one's family and oneself as a mother.

93

The labour of family appreciation represents a huge affective workload for mothers. It can place mothers in a double bind, in which rules must be made and enforced, and yet sometimes strategically broken in order to give children a sense of fun, possibility and "wonder." Spontaneity and flexibility are crucial components of successful mothering in the mompreneurial context, and yet mompreneurs are also passionate about running efficient, productive households. The emphasis on spontaneous play and flexible affect are legacies of the "back to basics" movement in child-rearing.

Mompreneurialism, whether practiced as a business enterprise or through a set of affects, can be understood as a strategy for coping with the challenges and pressures of neoliberalism. In a context where employment, social services, education, and health care all exist in precarious states, and where a single financial "emergency" can be crippling (Youn 2019), a mother's love and commitment to her family can appear to her as the only guaranteed resource that is available. It is a resource that can be measured, cultivated, and in many cases, monetized. "As digital media multiply opportunities for appreciation, mothers become exceedingly flexible abilities-machines for their families, working all the time to elevate their family scenes above the risks and threats of the precarious ordinary," write Wilson and Yochim (100).

Berlant (2007) defines an object of desire as a "cluster of promises" that we hope someone or something will make to us. This cluster of promises can emerge from "a person, a thing, an institution, a smell, a bunch of cells -- whatever" (33). Berlant conceptualizes objects of desire in this way so as to describe the "incoherent, enigmatic" dimension to the way we feel about what we want. Our desire does not always take the form of "dreams" or "hopes" -- nor does it always have an obvious source or location. Likewise, optimism is more nuanced an affective state than simply having a positive outlook. Optimism implies, according to Berlant, an

affective leaning toward the object of our desire, this cluster of promises, wherever it may emanate from.

Mompeneurs, whether they are doing business or simply animated by mompreneurial spirit, are all oriented to some degree around a common object of desire, a common cluster of promises: domestic happiness. The specifics of what constitutes happiness varies by individual, but another circumstance shared by many mompreneurs is that this "cluster of promises" is perennially elusive. It is hard to achieve -- maybe impossible. Berlant's definition of optimism is mobilized in her theory of "cruel optimism" as an affective state that is coming to define life in neoliberal society. Cruel optimism refers to attachment to an object of desire whose realization is more or less impossible, or, conversely, that it is "too possible, and toxic." Put another way: cruel optimism is longing for promises that, unbeknownst to us, are completely out of our reach, or that are within reach but are characteristically different from what we are hoping for. The object of cruel optimism is "enabling and also disabling," (35).

Cruel optimism also describes the maintenance of an attachment to something with an either impossible or harmful outcome. This attachment becomes, for those maintaining it, the basis for making sense of their lived experiences. In this way, they are unwilling to let go of the attachment, because without it, their lives will cease to make sense. The loss of the conditions of reproduction of the optimism are experienced as "breathtakingly bad," writes Berlant. Losing optimism toward these impossible objects of attraction can be experienced as loss of all hope, for anything.

The context of Berlant's theory of cruel optimism is her interest in the social rhetorics that give shape to political depression; how people make sense of and respond rhetorically to "life-building modalities that can no longer be said to be doing their work"(35). This context

95

makes cruel optimism a relevant theory for making sense of the construction of affective

expertise by mompreneurs. Mompreneurs have emerged in response to and alongside the

challenges and opportunities of neoliberalism, which is the context in which many of our current

life-building modalities are doing, or failing to do, their work for us.

In and through all of their mompreneurial work, and despite whatever challenges they

may face, mompreneurs are working to conjure a "good life." To cease to dream of this good

life, or to believe in its existence, runs contrary to every value held by mompreneurs. While

mompreneurs might remind themselves that they are "good enough," that affirmation can only

be made within the context of a continuous, totalizing striving for "better." Stewart describes

"ordinary affects" as "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give every

day life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences"

(2). Ordinary affect are manifest in habits, ways of relating, strategies and their failures or

successes, and stories people tell themselves. They are amplified through interactions, but also in

private.

Ordinary affect gives shape to how mompreneurs approach the task of posting stories

about their lives to social media. Likewise, it helps determine (although is by no means

deterministic) how their audiences react to their posts. Berlant writes, "The labour of

reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it," (36), and

most of the affective nuggets being broadcast by mompreneurs, whether they are selling

something or not, are concerned with the labour of reproducing life in the contemporary world.

There is no doubt that much of this work is exhausting and bewildering, as Wilson and Yochim's

ethnography demonstrates.

96

Digital Entanglements

Rose (1999) writes that neoliberal societies rely on "government through community."
The mamasphere is a network of communities that functions as a form of government over the
privatized, autonomous family units of its audience and contributors. "In the institution of
community, a sector is brought into existence whose vectors and forces can be mobilized,
enrolled, deployed in novel programmes and techniques which encourage and harness active
practices of self-management and identity construction, of personal ethics and collective
allegiances" (176). By Rose's definition, the mamasphere is a "moral field" defined by the
fundamental value of family autonomy. Yochim and Wilson write that across the mamasphere,
there exists a consistent normative orientation toward "stabilizing and enhancing the autonomous
private sphere of family and the increasingly hard work mothers must do to hold it together"
(144).

   As Bosker (2017) writes, mommy-bloggers who most successfully monetize their brands
and maintain active audiences are increasingly producing glossy, professional images of
themselves and their families. Many former bloggers hire photographers and stylists to stage
their homes for photos once their advertising and sponsorships generate enough revenue to do so.

As social media users generate followings and communities over years of use, there has
emerged a market for "self-evaluation" services that allow users to monitor their social "reach"
on sites including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These sites, including Klout, TweetScore,
and Kred, represent scores and "targets" that create what Gerlitz and Lury (2014) refer to as
"climates of futurity" (175). These services render social media engagement as a numerical score
that serves both as a means for user self-evaluation and a way to quantify and project future use.
Klout scores translate into material rewards including free trips and merchandise. By

97

instrumentalizing one's social media engagement around generating a high score, users make judicious choices about what to share and engagement in order to maximize their scoring potential. This in turn serves to increase social engagement with already-popular media postings, creating a kind of closed system of consumption and promotion within the social web.

Convergence Culture

Contemporary media consumption can be understood to occur within a context that Jenkins calls "convergence culture" (2006). In a convergence culture, individuals are engaging with media across multiple platforms that for practical purposes are undifferentiated and porous -- and producing their own media while they consume. Media from one source can be altered and adjusted for a different broadcast technology or demographic niche. Convergence refers to activity within each individual's subjectivity, through their social relations, consumption habits, and creation of a personal hierarchy of stories, myths, boundaries and references related to the media environment. In this context, domesticity discourse is constantly being repurposed, reproduced and recirculated across multiple digital platforms by media producers both authoritative and unknown (Jenkins 2006).

However, Bird (2011) emphasizes that even in a media environment where fans and consumers are encouraged to act as producers (or "produsers," as fan-producers are called) the distribution of power and influence remains relatively consolidated among the traditional media "influencers." What fan-produced media attracts wide attention, and why? Writes Bird (507),

> I fear that an overemphasis on online audience creativity not only underplays the role of the media industries in specifically controlling produsers but also may lead to neglect of the larger question of media influence on audiences. This influence is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship, but a much more subtle issue. Media producers have the power to inscribe privileged representations of the world that place constraints on actual audience practices, and may actually shape those practices.

For example, when bloggers and publications hold audience contests -- a popular feature of domesticity media -- it is the audience entries that most successfully mimic the blogger or website's existing style that are often rewarded. Major consumer brands targeting women such as Sephora and Madewell incorporate consumers' Instagram posts of their products on their websites, but single out and promote those that bear the most resemblance to the company's branding (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). In other words, while convergence culture invites every user to broadcast their own answer to media discourses, it is usually the produsers who most successfully reproduce dominant modes and narratives that are rewarded with the audience attention that is the currency of this economy.

Archer (2019) makes note of the practice among mompreneurs of using images of their children -- especially infants -- in order to create more intimacy with their audience, and develop a more "relatable" personal brand. As this practice has become a fundamental part of the self-marketing of mompreneurs, many everyday mothers (who themselves are prosumers of motherhood media, although of the amateur rather than professional variety) imitate this convention, and create brands around their children in their online posts. It is not uncommon for mothers to create hashtags to describe their children or family, and use these hashtags over the course of years to create a sense of continuity across time -- a widespread practice among brands and mompreneurs.

In this sense, the dynamic between audience produsers (or prosumers) and brands helps to reinforce neoliberal norms that pervade this "government through community." That which garners attention and affords potential financial opportunities is closely linked with the design and discursive tropes favored by brands. Therefore, it can be argued that brands that target

mothers contribute to the way in which mothers communicate with each other and engage with digital platforms.

Beyond Convergence and Enclosure

The domestic mundane makes up the backdrop for the storytelling that comprises mompreneurship, and the consumption of mompreneurialism takes shape in and through the "digital mundane," the everyday habits and practices of mothers engaging with digital media in the "silences and gaps" of their routines. As Wilson and Yochim note, "the mundane itself is always already digital." Within the digital mundane exist a limitless sea of informational and entertaining tidbits about "good living" that "make hard lives feel livable and sometimes even happy, while also mirroring and multiplying the threats of advanced neoliberalism" (16). These tidbits are "affective nuggets" -- Facebook posts, shared photos, recipes, memes, Pinterest boards about home decoration, funny videos -- and in this milieu, the mompreneur seeks to blend in but also stand out as an exemplar of effective self-regulation. The digital mundane of the mompreneur is the "affective machinery of everyday life" (17), where opinions, sensibilities and practices are reinforced, challenged and worked on over time.

The practices of many participants in the mamasphere mirror the online habits of most North Americans, that is to say, they go beyond that which is described by Jenkins' theory of convergence culture. Daily life, argue Wilson and Yochim, is fully steeped in digital culture. Mothers interact throughout the day with the mamasphere through a multiplicity of devices and platforms, in public and in private. If a convergence culture is defined by different media products being continuously remade and rebroadcast across many platforms, the culture of digital consumption in contemporary North America implicates the user in that convergence, as

both a product and a consumer. The mamasphere is constituted of mothers' lives, and in turn helps to constitute them.

Andrejevic's theory of the "digital enclosure" (2007) makes sense of the economic conditions under which this convergence culture is currently monetized. The digital enclosure describes the privatized ownership of data flowing between users and the corporate owners of platforms like Google, Apple and Facebook. At the time that Andrejevic first formulated his theory, he predicted a future where user data would be instrumentalized by corporations to serve location-specific ads to their mobile devices. In this future, individuals' location could be tracked with accuracy at all times. Of course, this future is the present, and most users have given over their data, with or without consent, to the private owners who control the terms of the enclosure in which we live our digital lives.

Andrejevic uses the metaphor of land enclosure in pre-industrial England to explain some of the implications of life within a digital enclosure. By enclosing land through the enforcement of private property rulings, landowners could effectively control the degree to which workers (in this case peasants) could access the means of production, and therefore control the products that they produced. The same is true for data within the digital enclosure: As long as user data is generated within spaces enclosed by corporate ownership, that data's value belongs to the platforms, not the users, and thus can be manipulated and instrumentalized beyond the user's control.

Any theory related to the products of mompreneurialism must acknowledge the logic of a digital enclosure. Although most of the work that mompreneurs do occurs while taking the digital enclosure for granted, its constraints and affordances necessarily set the terms of what's possible. Privacy concerns in particular remain an ongoing source of debate among

101

mommybloggers, especially those who took part in the confessional culture of the early years of the mamasphere, often sharing intimate details about and photographs of their children as infants. Some of these children, now teenagers, are asking for control over their image online, and requesting that their mothers take down content related to them, or stop posting images of them altogether (Tate, 2019).

The issue of children's privacy is still evolving in the mamasphere, as the first wave of infants whose images appeared in mommyblogs in the mid-aughts are becoming teenagers with their own opinions about how their images should be used. Many mommybloggers conceive of blogging as a performative space (Hunter 2016), and think of their children's photos as a necessary part of that performance. Others use pseudonyms for their children to protect their identities, or only post photos wherein their children's faces are hidden. These approaches are likewise being co-opted by everyday mothers in their social media posts.

None of this engages with or changes the conditions in which this data is used by corporate entities, of course. In a sense, these debates around children's privacy fail to address the fundamental ethical conundrum, which has to do with who owns data, and how it is used. For the time being, many mompreneurs are happy to make do with the affordances that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest allow. However, as mompreneurs invest increasing resources into photography and media production, and become evermore assured in their affective expertise and the opportunities that it affords, it's worth wondering how long they will be willing to give their content away to platforms for free.

Chapter 3

Content Analysis: Katie Crenshaw, Amber Fillerup Clark, and Brooke Reybould

This content analysis looks at the Instagram content produced by three momfluencers, Amber Fillerup Clark, Katie Crenshaw, and Brooke Reybould. The analysis covers a period of 18 months, from early 2020 through mid-2021. It is based entirely on the contents of the three womens' Instagram feeds, including the main grid, Instagram Stories, Reels, and publicly visible comments. The choice of these three momfluencers as subjects for analysis was made because they each represent a distinct iteration of white womanhood in the mamasphere, while also sharing overlapping characteristics.

I wanted to focus exclusively on the content of momfluencers who earn a steady income through their content. When determining which accounts to analyze here, I decided to focus on momfluencers with followings of over 150,000, because at that point, income is more consistent with regards to brand partnerships. I also decided to stick with relatively "mainstream" momfluencers; the space contains myriad niches, from homeschoolers to "quiverfull" Evangelical Christian families of many children to back-to-the-land homesteader families.

Rather than focus on momfluencers whose brands were based on their specific lifestyle, I wanted to look at those whose backdrop was not a featured part of their brand, I wanted their towns to be presented as an "Everytown USA" – a place that could be anywhere, rather than a unique location featured prominently in the content, such as might be the case for a homesteader or someone living in New York City. I also wanted to analyze the content of momfluencers who post pictures of rooms throughout their homes. Although this sounds as though it wouldn't narrow down the field very much, in fact it does; many momfluencers deliberately leave most of

103

their homes' interiors outside of the frame, in particular their bedrooms, or the bedrooms of their kids. The momfluencers that I analyzed here post pictures of themselves in their kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms and home gyms – providing an intimate look at how their values and interests are reflected in the interiors they choose to share.

The relative diversity that the three women included in this analysis represent indicates just how rigorously white heterosexual womanhood is maintained as the raceless norm across the mamasphere. Although nonwhite momfluencers run successful businesses, the hegemony of whiteness necessitates open contestation if it is to be reckoned with, and momfluencers of colour who undertake that work find themselves by default outside of the mainstream. For that reason, white momfluencers require their own study if we are to attempt an accounting for the ways that power moves through their representations of white motherhood and reinforces hegemonic white supremacy within this online space.

Finally, I chose women to identify who I had been observing first casually, and then with more serious intent, for at least three years. As Morrison (2019) writes, accrual of knowledge in social media spaces is a form of informal expertise that is only recently considered even remotely legitimate, and in my case, my field work began long before this study began. When I decided to focus on these three women, I already knew roughly where they fit in within the social and economic ecosystem of the mamasphere: What kind of momfluencers they admire and aspire to, and where they started out. I had a sense of the public side of their professional trajectory, and it was based on the sum of that knowledge that I had acquired over untold hours of scrolling that informed my choices here.

It was imperative that one Mormon mother be included in the analysis, as Mormon momfluencers exert the influence of a magnetic pole on the entire digital space of motherhood. Much has been written about how Mormon momfluencers started out in the early blogosphere, but more study is needed to better understand exactly how Mormon women have come to dominate the high-income spaces within the mamapshere in the 21st century. Indeed, Amber Fillerup Clark, the one Mormon mother included in this data analysis, has 2.4 million Instagram followers, which is orders of magnitude more than either Katie Crenshaw or Brooke Reybould.

I chose Clark for inclusion in part because of her success; she has reached a level of income-generating to which most other momfluencers aspire, and has parlayed her social media following into a successful brand of hair care products -- another dream for many momfluencers who are aware that their career has a built-in expiration date when their children reach adolescence. Clark represents what momfluencers sense could be possible and seek to achieve. Given her relative security within a labour environment defined by precariousness and constant change, it is illuminating to see how Clark negotiates the changing exigencies of the platforms on which she relies.

Katie Crenshaw lives in suburban Atlanta and unlike Clark or Reybould, is divorced from the father of her children. She identifies as bisexual and has made queer identity an increasingly important part of her content. While Clark and Reybould represent versions of white motherhood that cleave to traditional standards of bodily discipline and heteronormativity, Crenshaw brings to this analysis the newer popular discourses of body positivity and gender inclusivity. She also discusses mental health with notable candidness, in keeping with shifting norms around stigma and shame associated with anxiety and depression. In particular during the COVID-19 pandemic,

the issue of mental health was taken up by momfluencers, and Crenshaw has become consistent in integrating this topic into her posts.

Reybould represents the stalwart traditional white mother and wife in our subject triad. While Amber Clark has become the main breadwinner in her family (her husband David works for her brand as a photographer), Reybould is a stay-at-home mom in Washington D.C., where her husband Ryan is an attorney working for a Republican U.S. Senator. Reybould performs the part of the successful SAHM (stay-at-home mom) with rigor and discipline, and unlike Clark, who does not make any mention of labour in any part of her content, emphasizes the effortfulness with which she runs her home. Many of the forms of labour that Clark elides appear in stark relief in Reybould's posts, and yet the two women bear a strong superficial resemblance: Both are blonde, thin, and heavily made up.

Most momfluencers primarily represent themselves and their families at leisure in their content. As social media sharing has become a common daily practice among everyday families, family leisure has become a "performantive space" (Shannon 2019). In this way, everyday families and momfluencers can be understood to be engaging in an overlapping practice of sharing visual representations of themselves as a form of identity-performance.

Household Labour

The period of analysis falls within the first two waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Children were being schooled remotely and the home became the only space where many North Americans' lives unfolded. Within a month of what's widely considered the beginning of North America's "lockdown" (March 15, 2020), media coverage was reporting on a growing crisis

106

among caregivers, in particular mothers, trying to work remotely while caring for their homebound children. It is in this context that my data analysis begins.

Many momfluencers manage to erase care work even while creating content that hinges on their roles as caregivers. Across all of the content under analysis here, there are only six photos out of thousands where people from outside the mothers' immediate families appear. Clark features zero of such photos; no friends, neighbours or relatives appear at all. In Crenshaw's case, she posts four pictures with friends out of the 389 main grid photos included in the study period. Reybould includes one picture with her mother-in-law, and one with a friend who is pregnant at the same time as she is.

One might assume that the COVID-19 pandemic is the reason for the isolation of these three families, but reviewing content from six months before the pandemic, it's clear that no one outside the nuclear family is intended to be a part of these narratives. No neighbours, relatives or friends make any regular appearances. On the rare occasion that friends are invited into pictures, they are groomed to match the momfluencers, so as not to create any visual dissonance between real life and fantasy.

Amber Clark conceals her housework completely. The care of her children appears to occur on a seamless continuum with her care for herself. She posts photos of her children more often than she posts photos of herself solo, but she never details the work involved in caring for them, she simply puts them on display, usually looking happy, clean, and well cared-for. To say that "she makes it look easy" is an understatement. Looking at her feed makes one forget that raising children is work at all.

107

Amber Clark's Instagram content adheres to a set of standards followed by most Mormon momfluencers, the most important of which is that household work is rendered completely invisible. (Two other notably successful Mormon momfluencers who adhere to this standard are Naomi Davis of @lovetaza and Rachel Parcell of @pinkpeonies. Although this aesthetic was once more common across the mamapshere, audiences have come to expect more "imperfect" content from momfluencers, and momfluencers have adjusted their content accordingly. For more on perfectionism among momfluencers, see Gibson 2019.) Mormon momfluencers are widely considered some of the first women to make successful careers in this field, and the affective expertise that they cultivated early on, based on eliding the reality of household labour while sharing images of their cheerful, tidy home interiors, has been very influential on the visual language of this online world.

When Amber appears in her kitchen, she is baking cookies with her children, or slicing citrus for them to squeeze into juice. Her house, both interior and exterior, provides an immaculate backdrop. The only forms of labour that we see Amber performing are done by choice: She posts regular selfies from her home gym, detailing her workouts and featuring links to her exercise apparel and gym equipment. On occasion, she will appear sweaty and grinning post-workout, beaming out a message of triumph and positivity.

A few weeks before the pandemic lockdown began, Clark announced the launch of her own line of hair care products, Dae. Following the launch, she began to pepper her posts with stylized images (that seamlessly match the colour theme and desert-living aesthetic of her existing brand) of bottles of shampoo and body oil. She began occasionally posting short "behind the scenes" images of herself working on style photos or inspecting packaging.

However, the representations of labour to which she granted her audience access were themselves highly stylized extensions of her home life, rather than departures from it. More than a year after the launch of Dae, she posted a photo of her home office, a minimal space with a huge Mac monitor graced by a flickering scented candle. "Cozy office vibes," read the caption, suggesting that even while working at her desk, Clark's life is enveloped in comfort and ease. Workplace stress has no presence in her content.

Remarkably, Clark has only mentioned the pandemic twice in over a year of content posted to her main grid. (Instagram Stories, which disappear after 24 hours, may have included more mentions. Although I have gathered anecdotal data from Stories throughout the study period, it wasn't possible to account for their huge and ephemeral volume, so they are not included in this analysis.)

This maintenance of a complete fantasy world within her feed is central to her brand, and housework has no place in her fantasy. Occasionally, audience members demand to know what goes on behind the scenes, and Clark reveals discrete details about her household management. In September 2021, Clark did an "ask me anything" session in her Instagram stories (a practice that has become common among momfluencers, as Instagram's algorithm begun prioritizing "engagement" rather than simply likes and follows, and AMAs create engagement by asking the audience to submit questions and then return to see if theirs was answered). A reader asked, "How do you keep your house so clean?" doubtless a question on the minds of tens of thousands of followers for nearly a decade.

Clark replied that she had a housekeeper visit the house three times a week. A week later, in another Instagram Story, Clark filmed a video of herself returning home from an errand to find

the cleaners' van in front of the house. She took a photo of the van and tagged the company as a bit of promotion, and expressed cheerful gratitude that her house was being cleaned. Clark's audience was no doubt not expecting this tiny glimpse at what goes on behind the scenes; it's a virtually unprecedented disclosure.

Meanwhile in Georgia, Katie Crenshaw speaks for the struggling mothers while maintaining a consistent visual identity of neutral tones and chic ensembles. Crenshaw's affective expertise is located in the way she's able to balance "real talk" with visual consistency and humour. Crenshaw addressed quarantine within a week of the lockdown and if the pandemic wasn't a natural fit for Clark's domestic fantasyworld, it provided a perfect narrative context for Crenshaw's approach to creating "vulnerable" content about body image and mental health.

Household labour is an implied reality in the world Katie Crenshaw is portraying, although we don't her doing the work itself. She is a single mother of three and refers to herself variously as a "creative" and a "content creator." She posts about her content-creation busy seasons, feeling "behind" on life, feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities, and, most frequently, the importance of being kind to oneself. The latter topic has emerged as a cornerstone in the idioculture of the mamasphere during the pandemic; momfluencers took on counselor roles as it became clear that lockdowns were lasting weeks into months and their audiences were looking for advice and support during a period of unprecedented isolation and collective vulnerability.

Crenshaw stops short of displaying the visual messiness of household labour. Her interiors are no less spotless than Clark's. Instead, she makes regular use of text on images to convey her message of imperfect family life even while the backdrop images remain perfect. Unlike Clark or Reybould, Crenshaw is naturally funny, and writes humorous self-deprecating

110

tweets that she posts to Instagram. Her humour situates her within the category of "relatable" momfluencers, the ones you'd like to be friends with. Clark and her house are inscrutable, but it's through her wisecracks about laundry, kids' messes and her lack of motivation to tackle household chores that Crenshaw demonstrates her affective expertise.

A recent AMA in Crenshaw's stories asked, "What's the weirdest thing in your kids' room?" Celebrating "weirdness" within an otherwise conventional domestic space is Crenshaw's stock in trade. By sharing the "messiness" of family life as an expression of individual personality, Crenshaw invites her audience to assess their own domestic space accordingly: with an eye toward the quirkiness of the everyday. This, as Chivers and Yochim write in "Mothering Through Precarity" (2017) is a way of reinforcing "individualized solidarities," or creating bonds of recognition within a context of precarious 21st century living.

Crenshaw hosts the highest volume of sponsored posts of the three women in this study, and many of the brands that she partners with are linked to household labour: Seventh Generation cleaning products, Kroger grocery stores, and Big Lots stores. By alluding to household labour as a shared annoyance but keeping the messes safely out of frame, Crenshaw maintains a safe yet entertaining brand for her sponsors. Just like beer ads on television never feature people ingesting beer on camera, Instagram posts about cleaning products never feature messes in need of cleaning up.

Reybould's approach to disclosing household labour on her feed mixes elements from both Clark and Crenshaw. Reybould is a mother of four boys (Crenshaw and Clark each have three children, boys and girls) and being a rough-and-tumble "boy mom" is important to her brand. Her sons are all under 6 and they are ever-present in her content as a kind of

111

undifferentiated mass of blond, barely-contained energy. While Clark floats above the surface of the earth in a haze of terracotta and whitened teeth, her children floating alongside her like color-matched familiars, and Crenshaw greets us with a steaming mug of coffee emblazoned with the message "You are enough," Reybould styles herself as a type-A perfectionist whose house runs on a set of tested-and-true "systems."

Household labour provides Reybould the opportunity to disclose to her audience that she's "a little bit type-A" and that she holds herself to high standards, the implication being that she knows how deep into a trough a housewife can fall in the midst of chaos. (She has shared that she suffered from postpartum depression after the birth of her first son, and that her carefully planned routines have saved her from getting depressed following her subsequent three pregnancies.)

All three women express their neoliberal and biopolitical entanglements in different ways. Reybould conveys more vividly her exertions of discipline over her household, while Crenshaw and Clark let the audience make their own assumptions about how everything is kept tidy. Reybould's household routine is repeated so frequently that I know its beats by heart: She wakes up before the kids and fits in a 30-minute workout. After everyone is up, she makes the beds. Having a made bed, Reybould reminds her audience regularly, sets one up for a successful day. On her way out the door every morning she throws in a load of laundry; by doing a bit of laundry every day, it never accumulates to a point where it feels overwhelming.

She maintains a tight naptime schedule for her sons, and keeps a drawer full of "healthy" packaged snack food full at all times. Sometimes Reybould uses a meal kit service for dinners, and often has one as a sponsor. The Reybould house is an ideal of neoliberal American

productivity and purpose: Weekends are full of sports and activities around which Reybould takes up the challenge of keeping everyone clean, fed and rested with tireless aplomb. Weekdays are for workouts, dropoffs and errands. Reybould often posts photos of herself working on her laptop from her local Starbucks, with her baby sleeping in a carseat at her side. Stay-at-home mothers are not disqualified from participating in hustle culture, as Reybould energetically reminds us. Her days are packed, and she makes following along a whirlwind.

Of the three women, Reybould's husband Ryan is the most visible spouse. (Crenshaw occasionally posts photos with her two ex husbands, on Father's Day or Christmas, which demonstrates to her audiences that she's committed to a "non-traditional" definition of family; meanwhile Clark's husband David, who takes most of her photos, occasionally appears in vacation selfies.) Ryan is an attorney, but he still makes time for his sons, according to Reybould. He will appear playing with them, or working out in their home gym. The maintenance and protection of the nuclear family is the subject of Reybould's brand's story, so it's little surprise that the rhythms of the home make up such a large part of her content.

The theme of household labour does not give these three momfluencers many opportunities to push back against the structures they inhabit. Keeping a tidy house is a moral imperative for them, and although there are ways that they are able to transgress, as we will see, a messy house is not one of them. This is curious, because everyone in the audience knows that every house is messy sometimes. But the visual medium in which momfluencers work overrides that shared experience. A mess simply does not appeal to the scrolling eye, nor to the brand partners.

The female body

113

Disciplining the female body is an established theme across all three women's accounts. The mothering body is the site of a particular kind of scrutiny in the mamasphere; mothers who "get their bodies back" soon after giving birth are both admired for their discipline and criticized for the way they reinforce the already-impossible standards of eternal youth on the aging and transforming bodies of mothers (Mayoh 2019). Each of the women considered here leverage discourses about the female body in different ways that reinforce their own forms of affective expertise.

Clark's body as an object of desire and discipline is nearly as important to her brand as the images of her children. There are more photos of Clark by herself than photos of her with her children on her feed. Thanks to the pool in her backyard, she is often shown bikini-clad, sometimes alongside her daughter Rosie wearing a child's bathing suit in a matching print. Clark partners with bathing suit brands regularly; as a bikini model, her body is a commodity that she maintains with rigor.

In keeping with shifting contemporary norms around body positivity on Instagram (Cohen et al 2020), Clark never writes about dieting or about feeling "fat." She makes the maintenance of her thinness after having three children seem just as natural and effortless as the way she is raising her kids. She does share the details of her workouts, which she does five or six days a week in her home gym. She claims to work out because of the mental health benefits and posts regular pictures of herself grinning after a workout.

Clark's bikini pictures are defiant of the Church of Latter Day Saints' rules about modesty, and she has been asked to defend herself for them by more traditional members of her audience. In a subtle discursive manoeuver, Clark began recently posting about some of her

beliefs that go against church doctrines, including those having to do with sexuality. She has

described herself as a "curious person" who has sought to chart her own independent path

through Mormonism, and she has situated her immodest pictures as part of her commitment to

being a free thinker. In this way, Clark is able to "justify" her "immodesty" as a form of

authentic self-expression, which pushes gently back against two groups of critics: those who

fault her for being immodest, and those who fault her for participating in practices of self-

maintenance and presentation that are unrealistic and even unsafe for many women.

A devoted subgroup of Clark's huge audience is made up of much younger women, many

of them seeming to still be in college, who refer to Clark in comments as "mom." They ask for

advice frequently about lack of confidence, shyness, feeling ugly. Clark relishes the opportunity

to reassure these younger women in captions she posts to her Instagram stories. She describes

herself as having been on a journey of self-acceptance that has grown with each pregnancy – her

body's changes have helped her understand that change is inevitable and perfection is

impossible.

This is pretty rich-sounding coming from someone who looks like a model, but Clark is

relentless in her message that self-acceptance is essential to a happy life. As I've observed

Clark's message over the years, it has matured. She addresses her need to take refuge away from

her phone's screen, to wrap herself in blankets and hide from the world. These remarks are, I

feel, coded critiques of the platform on which she earns her money. They are tacit

acknowledgments that there is something deeply unhealthy at the heart of women's battles with

their appearances, and that she has learned to take a softer approach to her self-appraisal.

Katie Crenshaw's body, and that of her daughter Charlie, provide the basis for an important segment of her content too, but toward a different end than Clark's. Crenshaw's brand centers on discourses of body positivity – she has published two books for children, "His Body Can" and "Her Body Can." Charlie was born with a large vascular birthmark on her face, and Crenshaw's first brush with viral fame came in 2016 thanks to a blog post she wrote on katiecrenshaw.com answering back to strangers who made comments about her daughter's face. The irony that a critical boost of audience growth occurred based on the success of a statement about the lack of attention that her daughter's birth mark deserves is of the particular kind of irony that has become commonplace on social media.

She informs the audience that at "a size 14," her body is considered unruly and too big to be attractive by conventional beauty standards, and just as Clark does, Crenshaw pushes back against these social biases by revealing her body to her audience as an act of defiance, brand performance, and as a statement of freedom of expression. Crenshaw posts pictures of herself in her bathing suits and underwear. She captions posts wherein she is not fully dressed with incitements toward self-acceptance. She admits to having struggled for decades with disordered eating and shares this information with her audience to fight against stigma and reinforce her brand as a place of "radical self-acceptance."

Crenshaw posts photos of herself undressed to normalize representations of uncovered bodies outside the "straight sizes" range of 0-12. These pictures are posted as a political act and the careful production of these images is one of the ways that Crenshaw makes use of affective expertise. These pictures are often posted in black-and-white rather than in colour, and they show Crenshaw in a thoughtful pose. These images of Crenshaw's body are staged to reinforce ideas

of calm, strength, and control, and to problematize the perceived assumptions that big bodies are shameful, unruly and represent failure.

This content represents a direct contestation of hegemonic biopolitical control of women's bodies. The so-called body positivity movement has grown significantly in the last decade, largely thanks to social media, and women on its margins like Crenshaw are instrumental in bringing activist discourses around destigmatization to broader mainstream audiences.

Reybould posts pictures of herself in a swimsuit, and, like Crenshaw, uses her body as a site of political commentary. Comparing the two women's approach to body positivity reveals some of the limitations in that which can be said in the mamasphere. Unlike Crenshaw, Reybould's body conforms to norms of thinness. Her affective performance of rigorously maintained, effortful neoliberal motherhood extends to her body; she risks being controversial by stating that she has "15 pounds to lose" two months following the birth of her fourth son. Reybould's body is above all a site of discipline, and while Clark and Crenshaw eschew diet talk, Reybould unapologetically goes there. She shares details of her near-daily workouts, as well as what she eats on an average day. She reminds readers that she doesn't consume much alcohol (neither does Clark).

This is controversial in a mamasphere that is increasingly adherent to discourse of body positivity, but by choosing to talk about dieting Reybould is defining her own kind of affective expertise. Many moms remain very interested in dieting and losing "baby weight," and Reybould speaks for these moms, who tend to feel scolded for these practices by the body-positivity moms.

Meanwhile, Reybould also uses images of her swimsuit-clad body as a way to "clap back" at the very norms that she, in other posts, appears to uphold. On July 20, 2020, she appears

117

in a swimsuit holding a letterboard that reads "This mom bod has never felt more worthy of a swimsuit." Indeed, it's hard for someone unversed in the ongoing discourse about mothers and bodies in the mamasphere to understand why she wouldn't feel worthy; she appears exceptionally fit. In another post, she holds a letterboard with the words, "They told me I would love my body less the more kids I had. I have found the exact opposite to be true."

Despite her catholic approach to engaging with discourses around bodily acceptance, Reybould's content follows a rigid set of visual standards. She almost always appears in photos with her children, and only rarely appears alone or with her husband. She uses letterboards in almost every post to create humorous or poignant captions. In her Stories (which are only anecdotally studied in this analysis), she never shares content about her life apart from as a mother; she is either with her children or her husband virtually always.

Through her postings, Reybould maintains a rigorous commitment to productivity, routine and discipline, and this encompasses the way she represents her body and habits. She maintains that she exercises to maintain a steady mood rather than to lose weight (likely a nod to the body positivity movement, adherents to which are among her audience and who speak up in favour of size inclusivity).

During the period of analysis, Reybould got pregnant and gave birth to her fourth son. As soon as she announced her pregnancy to her audience (at the widely agreed-upon "safe time" of 12 weeks after conception), Reybould begins appearing in her photos cradling her abdomen with her left arm, even while often holding up a letterboard or a child in her right arm. This gesture functions in multiple ways: First, it's an easily read visual signifier for "pregnancy" to an idle person scrolling through her feed. It's also a way that women tend to distinguish their body's

size as having to do with pregnancy rather than weight gain. By emphasizing her stomach, she avoids any misreading of a photograph by someone who might be new to her account. This gesture signals to her overall concern with bodily discipline and maintaining an orderly, conventionally attractive appearance.

Mental health

The topic of mental health emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic as another way that momfluencers could express themselves and appeal to their audiences through affective expertise. The destigmatization of mental health issues on social media over the last decade (Betton et al, 2015) has been slower to take hold within the mamasphere, where until recently momfluencers would have risked their reputations and accumulated authority by broaching the topic. But the pandemic and its attendant stresses on the nuclear family ushered in a new set of norms around discussing mental health in the mamasphere.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Amber Clark's fantasy world does not leave much room for discussions of mental health. She mentions the pandemic only twice on her main grid throughout the entire period between March 2020 and October 2021, and these mentions are breezy, suggesting that she's enduring boredom while cooped up at home, but not suffering. Indeed, it would be possible to scroll through Amber Clark's feed and remain completely unaware that a pandemic is occurring in the background. We don't see her or her children in masks until October 2021, when she takes a trip to New York City with her daughter Rosie.

However, Clark's affective expertise requires her to remain relatable as a woman cautiously seeking self-knowledge, even within a fairly rigid environment of gender and social

119

roles. Neoliberal governmentality requires continual labour toward self-improvement, and Clark fulfills this requirement through reading and church attendance in addition to her physical workouts. In one post, she recommends the book *The Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself* by Michael Alan Singer. Although this isn't quite a mental health text, it does suggest that Clark seeks spiritual counsel.

Although it falls outside the timeframe of this study, it's worth mentioning that Clark did describe her experience with what she refers to as "pregnancy blues" when she was pregnant with her third child, Frankie. In 2018, she posted about it on Instagram and linked to an entry on her blog where she goes into more detail. Using her trademark informal and upbeat style, she apologizes for not knowing more about the condition and for risking seeming "negative on here." But she goes on to write in a lengthy caption to a picture of her face, "multiple articles I read said that 20% of pregnant women experience this which I thought was so interesting because that is a lot of people! So hopefully this will make someone who is feeling the same things feel a little better?"

I identify Clark's affective expertise here in the way that she self-deprecates and denies having any clinical expertise, and then shares in fairly vivid detail her own experience. Not wanting to seem to speak over other people' experiences (something that the mamasphere audience is very sensitive to), but to do justice her own story in the hopes of connecting with other people who have been through the same thing is a very common narrative frame for sharing personal experiences in the mamasphere.

Clark never seeks to talk down to her audience, and so at the end of this post, when she offers a list of "tips" for treating the pregnancy blues, she first thanks her followers who have

given her advice, and reiterates that what works for her might not work for everyone else. In Clark's case, affective expertise is sometimes a matter of denying that she has any clinical or other more formal expertise – of reaffirming her position as a peer, an ordinary woman.

Crenshaw once again situates herself at the opposite end of the momfluencer spectrum as Clark, in that she makes mental health awareness a central focus in her posts. Within her assiduously maintained aesthetic of neutral tones in her wardrobe and stylish minimalist home décor as her backdrop, Crenshaw addresses psychiatry, suicidal ideation (within the relatively "safe" narrative framework of marking National Suicide Prevention Day), therapy, medication, and sexual assault awareness. Through Crenshaw's posts we can chart the stretching out of norms around mental health talk, while simultaneously observing how these new boundaries remain tightly bound by biopolitical exigencies. Suicide enshrined in a national day of awareness is contained in a narrative of social responsibility rather than an unknowable chasm of grief, for example. Mental health as a problem to solve through treatment and awareness, rather than a reality that shapes and contorts many families' daily lives, represents both the possibilities and limitations of how momfluencers are able to talk about mental health today.

Regular visitors to Crenshaw's page are not shocked to see close-up photographs of her tearful face (February 3, 2021), or overhead photos of her open palm holding her daily intake of pharmaceutical medications. Crenshaw's mental health content is such an important part of her content mix that it's interesting to see how she modulates her tone in these posts so as to appeal to readers looking for this kind of content without "turning off" the part of the audience that isn't interested in mental health issues as a topic.

121

Over the last 18 months, Crenshaw has come out as queer, finalized her divorce from her second husband, endured a "major depressive episode" that required "intensive treatment" [(Reel](#), Nov. 2, 2021) and begun outpatient treatment for depression and anxiety. Typically, she shares about these experiences with frankness and humour. She is careful to leaven content about suffering with humor and self-deprecation. The balance of clinical disclosure (she speaks about her anxiety disorder, post-partum depression, and ADHD with the openness of one speaking to a trusted family doctor) and humour (memes about shopping at Target, yelling at kids, and outfits-of-the-day shots) is precise and effective; Crenshaw gives the impression through her posts of being thoroughly in control of her narrative while allowing herself room to veer into territory much more vulnerable than most momfluencers typically enter.

The balance of topics – serious, clinical, humorous, intimate – against a backdrop of domestic order and competence demonstrates Crenshaw's considerable affective expertise.

Unlike Clark, Crenshaw's affective expertise incorporates some clinical expertise. She is an advocate for mental health awareness and therefore has educated herself about her own diagnoses to the extent that she often posts with authority about signs of depression and anxiety. In the spirit of dispelling stigma, Crenshaw never apologizes for her posts about mental health (whereas Clark apologizes for even suggesting that pregnancy blues is something that some women experience).

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many momfluencers began confiding to their followers about how hard a time they were having. Audiences responded well to those posts because they were deeply resonant during a period of collective trauma, and Instagram's algorithm likely took notice as well. Throughout 2020, posts from mothers about mental health

122

became more common, and it was tempting as an observer to posit that mental health, as a "trending topic", had come to be understood as an engagement-driver for momfluencers.

In other words, momfluencers were encouraged by each others' success in posting raw accounts of their own struggles, so began to do so with more regularity. This is how content creates its own kind of topic-churn in Instagram's algorithm; likeness rather than diversity is always a safe bet, until the audience grows fatigued and the algorithm notices the engagement numbers drop.

So, a critical perspective might suggest that some of the mental health content posted in the mamasphere as the pandemic wore into its second year might have been posted in the spirit of opportunism as much as honesty and "authenticity." I would argue that Crenshaw can't be accused of this kind of opportunistic posting, because her commitment to mental health as a topic far supercedes the limits of the pandemic's impact on mothers.

Reybould once again falls in between the two poles marked by Clark and Crenshaw. Reybould's world is less of a fantasy than Clark's but is subject to more rigorous norm-policing than Crenshaw's. The aforementioned ubiquity of letterboards affords Reybould a way of maintaining a measure of distance between herself and her audience that neither Clark nor Crenshaw seek to create. The letterboards serve as a visual contrivance, breaking up any illusion that what we're seeing is Reybould's "unfiltered life." By posing with a letterboard, she is doing away with any sense that the photos she's posting are candid (Clark's selfies can seem intimate and candid in a way that Reybould's letterboard posts never do) and also afford a discursive space where she can make commentary (via the board's text) without having to "own" it to the extent that Crenshaw does.

123

Nowhere is Reybould's submission to biopolitical control and adherence to narratives of neoliberal self-reliance more apparent than the content she produces touching on mental health issues. She makes occasional use of the myth of the "supermom" (Douglas 2005) to make her point. On April 4, 2020, when lockdowns were in full effect across much of the West, she posed with a letterboard reading: "One of the most underestimated things is a woman who has rebuilt herself through motherhood." In the caption below the photo, Reybould elaborates about how she, like everyone else, is struggling with stress and isolation during the pandemic, but these reminders help her to carry on.

Later in the pandemic, she posted the following letterboard: "Dear Mama, Self care is about giving your kids the best of you rather than what is left of you." This message implies a self-sacrificing attitude to motherhood, which reinforces existing ideas about the virtues of intensive mothering that are persistent in the mamapshere (Shirani et al, 2012). A few months later, she reframes the same message in another letterboard: "Dear Mama, Taking time for yourself does not make you selfish. It makes you a good mom."

For Reybould, speaking about mental health struggles for mothers is a matter of reifying the idea that mothers have "superpowers" but are ultimately only human. Her affective expertise is located in her awareness that nodding to the too-muchness of contemporary motherhood is necessary for the reliability of her brand, but she is unwilling to wade further into the murky depths of the topic, where norms, taboos and cultural biases might still lurk. She keeps it light.

But more than anything else, she keeps it self-reliant. In the fall of 2020, one of her letterboards read:

"Them: It takes a village.

Me: Does anyone have directions to the nearest village? Sounds amazing."

This joke sends up the cliché that "it takes a village to raise a child," and skewers the warm-hearted (liberal) ideal of collective care-giving. Must be nice, it seems to say, while breezing past this ideal toward a reality of nuclear family self-determination.

Conclusion: Affective Expertise in the Idioculture of Momfluencers

Clark, Crenshaw and Reybould have instrumentalized their domestic environments, bodies and families toward the end of maintaining the interest of potential brand partners through steady audience engagement. As this data analysis has sought to demonstrate, creating and maintaining an appealing representation of family is a multi-valent, iterative and largely intuitive process. The "best practices" in this idioculture are developed through informal processes, including observing others' posts and metrics. A certain uniformity of content style has emerged as momfluencers labour to ensure the success of their posts.

The three momfluencers analyzed in this chapter all adhere to the fundamental rule book of successful momfluencing. The unbounded rigors of gendered creative labour set the terms for their work. They each maintain consistency within their own style of posting, so that an overall branded appearance emerges over time. Through their affective expertise, they have iteratively developed a brand personality, which they modulate to be at times vulnerable, "relatable," and connected to the concerns of their audience.

This analysis demonstrates some of the range of engagements that momfluencers have with biopolitical societies of control, which Hardt and Negri characterize by "an intensification and generalization of the normalizing apparatuses of disciplinarity that internally animate our common and daily practices" (2003 p. 23). While Reybould's content in many ways exemplifies

the momfluencer-as-object-lesson for patriarchal, biopolitical hegemony, even her content

dealing with body image engages with ongoing movements within digital spaces to expand the

definition of a healthy and beautiful body. But perhaps more importantly, Reybould's content

provides a "control" against which other momfluencers' content might be read.

Clark and Crenshaw both work within the boundaries of the biopolitically correct to

carve out space for agency and possibility beyond it. Indeed, their relationships with their

audiences depend on the deftness with which they dance inside and outside of the lines of "good

motherhood" to simultaneously demonstrate their skill as parents, the control and care they're

able to exert over their bodies, and the relatable ways that they fall short of ideals on both counts.

It's affective expertise that enables them to push back against hegemonic structures of control

while demonstrating their mastery over the skills these structures require of them.

Affective expertise is located in the choices that these women make about how to best

represent their home lives while appealing to their brand partners and their audience. Unlike

traditional brands, which are developed by teams of marketers and tested by focus groups prior

to being put on the marketplace, momfluencers figure out how best to market themselves in real-

time, in front of their audiences. They correct for what they perceive to be missteps, adjust their

degree of vulnerability, humour, polished or unpolished appearance, and the extent to which they

include their families in their content.

This expertise is also located in the modulation of these momfluencers' affects with the

intention of satisfying their audiences' appetite for "authenticity." Even while demonstrating

frustration, personal weakness or imperfections, the successful momfluencer must nonetheless

maintain a rigorous adherence to social norms of good parenting (Friedman 2018) and it's

126

through affective expertise that these momfluencers develop the skills to walk this, and many other, discursive and representational tight-ropes.

This chapter's argument supports existing theorizations of biopower and neoliberal governmentality in the myriad examples by which the three momfluencers in question lean heavily on rhetorics of self-reliance, control (via household cleanliness, mental health wellness, physical fitness, and marital fidelity, just for starters). By proposing affective expertise as a means by which momfluencers trouble the waters of biopolitical control by introducing subtly subversive threads to their narratives, I am expanding on the work of Chivers and Yochim (2017) and Watson (2019), whose research on the strategies of mothers as precarious or unpaid laborers outline the need for and the emergent acts of quotidian forms of solidarity and resistance within societies of control.

Meanwhile, this argument differs from existing literature in its focus on momfluencers as both subjects of and resistors to biopolitical control. Extensive literature currently investigates the subject of momfluencer as labourer, through lenses of neoliberal governmentality and platform creator. However, the link between momfluencing and biopower has not been explicitly made in the literature up to this point. Digital culture and biopower converge in research on the quanitifed self and wearables (Lupton 2017 and Sanders 2017). Social media as a site of suveillance, social control and biopolitical influence has been written about extensively (notably Colombo 2013), but again, momfluencers don't receive extensive analysis as subjects and broadcasters of this discourse.

This chapter sought to identify sites where affect expertise was used to either reinforce or hint at a place beyond the limits of the sayable among momfluencers. The labour outlined in this

chapter is understood to have been strategic and deliberate. But not all the work done by momfluencers has its intended effect. Conflicts, disappointments and misunderstandings abound on social media and even the most manicured momfluencer content is no different. The following chapter discusses how affective expertise is brought to bear when the work of momfluencing has unintended consequences.

Chapter 4: Affective Expertise and Recuperating Frustration As Labour Value

This chapter identifies how momfluencers' affective expertise functions to manage criticism from audiences, and recuperate value through negative feedback. This negative feedback is typically conveyed in comments on influencers' posts, although there are robust social spaces on Reddit and elsewhere dedicated to the gleeful flaying of influencers' posts and the close analysis of their content (Hunter 2016, Duffy et al 2022). This chapter's data will demonstrate the process by which influencers work to maintain credibility among their audiences come what may.

This process requires that they engage in an ongoing process of self-management with the intent of satisfying expectations of "authenticity" and to avoid critiques of offering "fake" representations of self, family, or consumer behavior. (For more on the rhetoric of "authentic" selfhood among media representations of women, see Duffy 2013.) I argue that affective expertise guides them through this process, and provides them with strategies and scripts to use as they seek to recuperate affective value in and through these conflicts. This chapter will demonstrate five womens' accounts that emerged as similar while coding the open-ended interviews I have conducted for this project.

Central to my theory of affective expertise is the recuperation of affect value through content production. Hart and Negri posit that postindustrial capitalism creates conditions where every aspect of life is absorbed within capitalist production (1999). Following the globalization of manufacturing toward the end of the 20th century, service emerged as the dominant labour product of postcapitalist societies, and workers' affect became a commodity. Furthermore, with the transition to neoliberal economic policy in the west during the 1980s, labour power was

decisively separated from physical spaces of work and made diffuse and impossible to locate. Neoliberal subjects are responsible for being fit and ever-ready to work; no part of their day is decisively outside the realm of value production, and therefore they are perpetually preparing to work, even at rest.

As workers, momfluencers exemplify this unlocalized, immersive labour environment through their ongoing entanglement with algorithmic precarity (Duffy 2020). This chapter will look at how even personal frustration or private difficulty is coopted by the social media marketplace. With the right expertise, these otherwise private experiences of conflict, critique or ambivalence can be rearticulated in the service of a momfluencer's brand.

This chapter's discussion will demonstrate how momfluencers manage criticism by instrumentalizing frustration and conflict by transforming it into engaging content. Affective expertise in this case is located in the successful reconfiguration of stress, frustration and even abuse into affective scripts meant to reinforce a rapport with followers and re-articulate a brand identity.

The mamasphere is bound by structures of surveillance and discipline, enacted through social platforms' algorithmic functioning, corporate sponsors' commodification of maternal affect and anxiety, and audience response. The expectation that mothers uphold moral standards has been widespread in media since the early 20th century (Orton-Johnson 2017) as we saw in chapter 1. The emotional management expected of momfluencers works to limit the forms of speech considered permissible within the highly policed moral landscape of the mamasphere (Mattheis 2020). This is, as I discussed in chapter 2, an affective circuit through which biopower flows and is expressed in the highly governed self-presentation of momfluencers. Affective expertise is in part a matter of rendering a self in the midst of these constraints while salvaging a

130

sense of honest self-disclosure – which, as one mother included in this study said, "is almost impossible without pissing someone off."

Relevant to a discussion of affective expertise and audience relationships is the underlying structure of social media revenue earning. The fee that influencers command for sponsorships is tied to the number of followers they have, which determines in part the most important set of metrics in 2022: audience engagement. According to Chelsea Clark, the co-founder of a Toronto-based influencer marketing firm called Momfluence, engagement is a composite score that measures the amount of comments, likes, and shares that posts receive. Depending on a platforms' changing and largely opaque strategic plan, different audience actions are given different weight in determining an engagement score.

The exigency of maintaining engagement is essential to the field of action in which momfluencers operate. Although the nature and content of the engagement - whether it's praise or criticism - is not measured by social platforms in determining the score, momfluencers are often wary of courting controversy for the sake of heightened engagement, as it will undermine the trust they have established with their audiences, and potentially lead to a loss of followers (Sawey and Duffy, 2021). Their sponsorship fees are linked directly to their ability to engage their audiences in a reciprocal relationship, a digital call-and-response.

This makes moments of discord or disagreement within their audience base particularly fraught for momfluencers; their incomes depend on their diffusing conflict and maintaining a consistently enjoyable environment for their audience. This chapter's discussion is based on data collected during open-ended interviews with nine momfluencers between the spring of 2020 and the spring of 2022.

131

I made contact with these momfluencers by emailing them directly, and also while attending the virtual Mom 2.0 conference, held in April 2021 and attended by content creators and brand representatives from across North America. In the latter case, I introduced myself to potential informants in the "virtual lounge" area of the conference, which was used during interstitial periods of the day for networking. After chatting in the lounge we would agree on a time to have a longer interview one-on-one over phone or video chat.

In the cases of Sandra, Carmen, Anne and Lauren, I had made contact independently of any event. In my everyday internet travels (scrolling, clicking through on comments that caught my eye, basically swimming in the community-waters of the momfluencers that I was focusing most heavily on, which ultimately coalesced into the women featured in the content analysis), I always make a note of momfluencers who seem to have especially "sticky" content – content that people engage with and seem to relate to, but not because of trollish behavior where a content creator deliberately provokes the audience for attention.

These momfluencers caught my eye for different reasons – each of their brands is quite distinct; they are not likely to be aware of each other. But what made me notice each of them was they communicated with voices that were distinct to them, and their audiences appeared responsive, and established. They each appeared to be working with affective expertise in their own distinct context. In each case, we spoke on the phone.

I met Cathy because she commented on an interview I had done about my research, which had appeared on the newsletter of the writer Anne Helen Petersen. Cathy identified herself as a "mommyblogger" in her comment and I decided to see if she'd talk to me about her work. She was eager to speak to me, having appreciated the kind of analysis I was working on. Having spent nearly a decade in the mamasphere, Cathy told me that she felt attention to the space was

worthwhile and long overdue. (Of course, there has been lots of scholarly attention paid to the mamasphere in the last decade, but not much sympathetic analysis in the media, which I think is what she was responding to in my interview.)

Unlike the women discussed in the content analysis, the momfluencers interviewed in this chapter occupy smaller niches. I wasn't necessarily looking for only white women here, so as to reflect the hegemonic whiteness of the space as I did in the content analysis; I wanted to speak with momfluencers who had established credibility within a slightly broader perspective. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one hour. Although there is always a risk while conducting interviews for qualitative analysis of gathering data that is shaped in part by the impression that informants wish to make, I attempted to mitigate that impact by asking informants to reflect on specific content they produced as a way of inciting conversation.

I made use of the social media scrollback method (Robards and Lincoln 2020), which invites participants to scroll back and reflect on content they have posted in the past. This method is often used in ethnographic research with online communities, as it allows participants to describe their online activity while affording a new form of rapport to be built with the researcher. Discussing specific content rather than reflecting generally on online activity grounds the conversation and can produce useful data (Robards and Lincoln 2020). I employed grounded theory to code and identify patterns in the data (Straus and Corbin 1997). I coded interview transcriptions, as well as observation notes that I took while doing in-person field work. With the exception of Cathy and Lauren, all names attached to direct quotes below are pseudonyms.

Black Lives Matter and whiteness in conflict: The case of Sandra

133

In the interviews I have conducted, I have yet to encounter a mom who claims to be unconcerned with negative feedback from her audience. However, several moms described criticism of her content being a form of audience sorting – a process whereby those who don't "get" the content unfollow, and those who appreciate are reaffirmed as belonging to her "people."

The Black Lives Matter protest movement that emerged following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis became a social media flashpoint during the spring of 2020. To an extent that had not been seen before, brands and influencers were under pressure to make statements of solidarity with the protest movement, and to denounce racism in all its forms (Yang et al, 2021).

Sandra, a white mother of three with a following of over 100,000, feels that her content's success in part depends on her engaging with current events. But the BLM movement put her in an awkward position to have to potentially speak about topics she felt underinformed about – like race. She found herself caught in a bind between the threat of platform "invisibility" (Petre et al 2019), as discussed in the review of literature, and a sense of what would be "right" for her to say. The opaque reward systems behind platform algorithms are a source of particular stress for momfluencers around major news events. (The Trump election of 2016 is a moment that many momfluencers mentioned as a flashpoint where their engagement either rose or fell, depending on their willingness to participate in the breaking-news discourse and taking sides in the political battle that ensued.)

"Whenever there's a big news event happening, you're going to maybe perform less well if you're not talking about what everyone else is talking about," she told me, referring to her content's metric performance. Consider her choice of words in "perform less well": It's

important to remember that in this idioculture, there is very little certainty about how platforms reward or punish content. What certainty does exist is usually established through informal sharing of information among momfluencers, via Direct Message or text message, according to Sandra.

In the interest of "staying relevant," Sandra felt compelled to make a "statement" about Black Lives Matter, but she was also worried about "alienating my audience if I talk too much about things that are outside of motherhood."

Sandra ultimately posted a photo of herself holding a letterboard with a message that she felt reflected her views without being overly "polarizing," as she put it. "It pushed me out of my comfort zone, and then I got backlash from the other side. I was very upset about it. I think I lost a couple pounds that week. I'm a people pleaser, and it was really hard. I realized that you can't please everyone. If people unfollow me, or think I'm X or Y, that's fine. I'm learning."

The "backlash" Sandra refers to came in the form of negative comments and a loss of "a few thousand" followers. She ultimately turned the comments off on the post because she felt overwhelmed by them. Negative comments expressed dissatisfaction at the way she engaged with the issue of race; rather than condemn all racism, Sandra's sentiment was to the effect that people should not seek to identify their differences but instead "choose togetherness." In the zero-sum discourse that was prevalent on social media in relation to BLM, some commenters argued that to fail to denounce racism was to be a racist, and Sandra's statement fell short of a denunciation.

Throughout our conversation, Sandra habitually used the word "X" in place of the word "racist" or "racism." "If you stay silent, you're X," she said, explaining how she experienced the pressure to make a statement. "I'm not just going to flippantly do what other people are doing

just so that people know that I'm not X. As an influencer, you have to think through these matters," she said. Sandra's avoidance of the word "racist" felt instinctive to me, and I suspect that she was aware that by uttering the word, she feared she might be associating herself with it.

Sandra is a white woman accustomed to operating within a social space where moral assessments are made based on parenting and consumer choices. It is within the boundaries of that space that she has cultivated her affective expertise. The norms and standards that govern Sandra's online space are typically being upheld by Sandra herself; she is a churchgoing stay-at-home mom who presents a capable, energetic and committed version of motherhood to her audience.

The experience of being swept into a debate about race, and subsequently receiving criticism for her statement, was bewildering to her. After turning off comments on her BLM post (which used only coded language of "togetherness rather than division" to signal the broader debate she was engaging with, rather than using any other hashtags or the BLM label) she took "a week off" from Instagram, not posting any new content. "That was a first for me," said Sandra, about her break.

Sandra reflects on the experience:

I don't want to be one of these people who sets forth into an issue, and then 50 percent of the audience is… alienated. If you're prepared for that, will you then have more of a loyal base, to be able to talk more openly about anything you believe? I don't think at this point I'm ready to do that, because I love and respect my followers with different viewpoints. The people who came at me, I was happy to see them go.

Sandra felt that discussing race openly would amount to disregard for her "followers with different viewpoints." By this she means, euphemistically, audience members who do not wish to see racism or race discussed in a space normally defined by hegenomic whiteness. Limiting the topics she addresses in her content is a matter of respecting her followers rather than "alienating"

136

them. The experience of receiving criticism for her failure to discuss the issue of racism in America head-on was a shock to Sandra's system, one that she says she will avoid in the future. Of the followers she lost, Sandra frames the loss as a consolidation of the more valuable, like-minded followers who form her core community. After experiencing social discord within her group, she was able to reframe the process as a reestablishment of an in-group and out-group (Tajfel 1974).

This reframing is one that recurs in other interviews in this chapter. Tajfel theorized that the strength of identity within a group exists in relation to the degree to which it identifies a social "other", the out-group. A more vividly defined out-group tends to relate positively to a cohesive in-group identity. Affective expertise recognizes this dynamic and instrumentalizes it as form of brand-identity consolidation: Here, we are all friends. We are of like mind, unlike those "other" folks. Out-groups, in the context of the mamasphere, are unstable constructions. Given that these groupings are virtual, and users may identify simultaneously with momfluencers who might claim to have competing claims at "in-groupness," it's hard to define to what extent these audience groups exist in any meaningful way. However, for the purposes of defining one's brand, in-group/out-group rhetoric is not uncommon among momfluencers, as I will demonstrate in this and later chapters.

More broadly speaking, in-group/out-group rhetoric is a dimension of affective expertise that concerns the conceptualization of one's follower base as both an economic resource and a well of support. Much like a political figure, Sandra must measure how much of herself she can disclose, and how much she should conceal in order to remain an appealing mirror or foil for the desires and aspirations of her followers. Affective expertise lies in part in the calibration of disclosure and concealment. Crucially, Sandra does not think that by shedding followers and

consolidating her "true fans," she can then begin sharing more intimate content – or insulting those followers who jumped ship. Decorum is an important part of her brand, and so after taking a weeklong break from posting content, she simply picked back up as if nothing had happened. "I think I did OK with that," she concludes, assessing how she handled what she considered to be an ordeal both for her brand and for herself personally.

"I'm the black sheep of the mom bloggers in this town": Carmen's experience

I met Carmen through a group called Virtual Mom Collective that links mompreneurs for skill-sharing workshops, virtual happy hours and general community support. Carmen lives in a large Southern city with a large Latinx population, of which she is a part. She bills herself as an entrepreneur, blogger, "mindset coach" and "mentor." With under 20,000 followers, Carmen earns less through her brand partnerships with major brands like Ford, Wal Mart and Herradura tequila than other moms I spoke to. However, her longstanding relationship with these large corporate accounts is a point of pride for her. She is a single mother of two teenagers, who appear sporadically in her content, but for the most part she appears alone, often with motivational captions and graphic t-shirts printed with inspirational messages like "Babes Inspire Babes" and "Autentica."

Carmen feels that her success as a content creator is rooted in her commitment to being honest with her followers. She began sharing motherhood content before Instagram, on a personal blog, and has navigated the transition from text-based to image-based content. As an "older" momfluencer (relative to other informants, who tended to be in their early to mid 30s, Carmen is in her 40s and her children are older), she began creating content during the blogging era of "real talk," and her approach remains in many ways unchanged from those earlier days of

online sharing. "I've built my entire brand based on being a truth teller," she told me. She began her blog when she was pregnant with her first child and was going through a depression. "When I first started writing, it was to be real, and to be raw, and to attract that kind of reader that would support me. It worked -- a lot of moms were like, omg, I can't believe you're saying this."

Nine years after she started her blog, she and her husband broke up. Carmen draws a link between the end of her marriage, and the persona she was broadcasting online at the time. "I realized I wasn't being as real and authentic as I could be. I was still being very limited by society as a whole - by my family - by my Mexican traditional roots - and by my ex husband. He wasn't very comfortable with a lot of what I shared. He was like, you're sharing everything, you're not leaving anything for us."

Carmen did not post about her divorce on social media, where she had developed a following. "People had no clue I was going through a divorce," she said. "People think they know you - they think they really knew what was happening with me. They know as much as I want them to know." This remark clarifies the rigor with which most momfluencers are able to control their narratives through careful image production and captioning. Recall in the data analysis in chapter 2, that when momfluencers wish to reveal vulnerability, as Katie Crenshaw often does, it is almost always carefully calibrated so as to trouble norms without fully breaching them. This is the careful dance within and outside the bounds of the sayable, instrumentalizing biopolitical imagery and incitements as opportunities to affirm or push back against social expectations.

After her divorce, Carmen committed to "letting my guard down, letting myself be vulnerable" to her audience. She seems to feel strongly that she can be both very "unfiltered" as

she puts it, but also maintain a tight control over what people do and don't know about her life.

Upholding this contradiction, to Carmen, appears to be a way to guard a sense of agency.

"There were different stages in my process where I'm trying to figure myself out, and be myself, and know what is Carmen, and isn't Carmen. I've lost a lot of my filters. I've posted a LOT. In my post-divorce, I was posting all those nights when I'd go out and drink, and some people were like, maybe you shouldn't? And I was like, why the hell not? I'm healing, I've been grieving, I can be a good mom, and I can be out with my friends."

Pushing back against some of the gendered behavioural norms of what constitutes a

"good mother" came to be an important way that Carmen demonstrated affective expertise.

"Having a perfect life might not be so great for business," Carmen remarked. By observing the

trends among other online moms in her city, Carmen identified a niche for herself.

"A lot of local people, they filter themselves a lot. People look at me outrageously - I am the outcast here. I am the black sheep among this city's bloggers. I don't get the invitations that the pretty curated people get. But the major brands still work with me, regardless of what I'm posting. They know I'm being truthful and honest, and my audience knows. I post pics with my belly hanging out, with stretch marks - they know I tell the truth."

Carmen defines herself in opposition to who she perceives as "the pretty curated people."

By proposing an in/out group dynamic, she invites her followers to join her in her journey of

becoming herself as a form of "empowerment," as she puts it. Carmen has created a narrative

frame for her approach to "raw" sharing wherein she invites others to a space safe from the

perceived judgment of other women online. Carmen's negotiation of self-branding adheres to the

findings of Scolere, Pruchniewska and Duffy (2018) about how content creators develop brands

based on the perceived affordances of specific platforms and audience groups.

The way Carmen positions her self/brand in opposition to hypothetical critics on

Facebook and Instagram appeared as a pattern among nearly half of the women I spoke to, and is

a recurrence of the in-group/out-group rhetorical dynamic I described in the case of Sandra. I

have observed that many momfluencers instrumentalize criticism from other women - real or

140

imagined - as a narrative brace against which to build their online persona. By outlining ways they experience judgment from other mothers, momfluencers like Carmen are able to generate sympathy and interest among audience members who might have felt similarly judged or criticized.

This does raise a provocative question: Does norm-policing in the mamasphere, which is widely understood to be rooted in patriarchal ideas about what "good mothering" looks like (Friedman 2020), and which can likewise be understood as another expression of biopolitical control exerted through the "biopolitical collectivity" of online moms, provide a useful foil for mothers who wish to be identified as "authentic"? Or, put another way, do some momfluencers instrumentalize limiting, harmful patriarchal beliefs in order to consolidate their brand identity? This question is a worthwhile starting point for future research on the relationship between the mamasphere and patriarchal discourses in North American media.

Building a size-inclusive community: Lauren's story

A case where a momfluencer experienced criticism and judgement as both an asset in terms of consolidating her community, but also a threat to its cohesion, is the case of Lauren, a mother who started a blog about what she refers to as her plus-sized pregnancy. Lauren began blogging about being a plus-sized pregnant woman a decade ago, and quickly realized that there were many women seeking size-inclusive information about pregnancy. "No one on social media was talking about having a healthy pregnancy as a plus-sized person," said Lauren.

At the time, plus-sized women were routinely shamed by healthcare providers for their bodies while receiving prenatal care. Biopolitical regimes of control had long held women in the grips of largely male experts on childbirth, as we saw in the review of literature. It was rare for

141

plus-sized women to speak openly about their reproductive health and bodies in ways that were affirming to anyone outside the patriarchal norm of small-bodied femmes. There was very little information for plus-sized women about their reproductive health that went beyond incitements to lose weight.

Clearly, Lauren was stepping into a biopolitical warzone by seeking to discuss plus-sized pregnancy in a positive, nonjudgmental way. She learned this through a steady stream of messages from readers sharing their frustration about their own experiences seeking advice from medical professionals. Her readers shared testimonials of receiving degrading and dismissive medical treatment because of their size, and of feeling shame about their bodies while pregnant and parenting young children. Lauren was embarking on signal-boosting a discourse that flew in the face of hegemonic ideas of "good motherhood." It was an ambitious and demanding project.

Lauren's community differs somewhat from the other momfluencers' spaces that I learned about in that she inadvertently created a highly politicized environment that quickly superceded the boundaries of her lived experience. "I realized it wasn't only about me. It was filling a void and it couldn't really be about me," she said. "When I started a blog, it was very personal. It wasn't for business. I thought it was just going to be my story. But later… my community blew up," she told me.

Lauren was laid off from her job, which was when she began accepting sponsorships for content. She became certified as a childbirth educator so as to better inform her community. "I was in their shoes and then I became an expert in my field, so I was always very cognizant of the feelings that they were having and what they wanted to learn about." Essentially Lauren went from being a diarist to being a community advocate over the course of two years. She felt a

strong sense of personal responsibility toward her audience because of what she perceived as

their vulnerability – but her income also relied on their loyalty.

In order to raise the profile of her blog and grow her community, Lauren started a

Facebook group linked to it, which quickly grew to almost 14,000 members. "I could have sold

out years ago to weight loss companies and made so much money, but that wouldn't have been

true to my community or myself," she said. Lauren felt that in order to serve the interests of her

audience, she had to fight against a dominant media culture that shames plus-size women into

trying to lose weight. That meant refusing sponsorships that advocated for weight loss, and

putting up with a constant barrage of abusive comments from people outside the community.

"There's a whole underground culture that basically gets off on shaming people of size," Lauren
explained. "Because I exist in a larger body and because I built a community, [people say] I'm
pushing obesity. It's so frustrating. A lot of what I've done is protect the group, protect the
space. I've been through it."

For Lauren, fighting back against the judgment of outsiders wasn't as easy as shoring up

a loyal following, as it has been for Carmen. After a few years of growing her blog's audience by

linking it to her Facebook page, Lauren decided to shut the Facebook page down. The platform

had become a site of abuse and invective, thanks to the platform affordances of Facebook at that

time.

"It became this toxic mommyshaming place where it was impacting my mental health. I
had 6 admins and a whole list of rules, and it was draining my life. I couldn't even go on a date
with my husband without my phone distracting me. It was such the opposite of what I had
worked towards for so long. I shut it down in 2018 knowing that it was right when FB was
focusing in on groups and it was a huge opportunity for my business, but it wasn't worth it for
me. It's always a small but loud group, shaming one another. If something wasn't said that they
liked, they'd go to peoples' profiles and nitpick. So often what we see on FB is these keyboard
warriors, thinking they can say or do anything. It's near impossible to create a safe space online.
A Facebook group with under 2000 members, that's the sweet spot. It's utopian. But once you
grow beyond that it's so hard to manage."

143

While Carmen experienced criticism as a means of galvanizing a loyal audience and consolidating a sense of belonging among her following, Lauren experienced criticism to an extent that became an existential threat to her community. No amount of affective expertise seemed enough to divert or reframe the activity of the trolls; Lauren's audience, unlike Carmen's, was not interested in framing their existence even somewhat around the disapproval of others. They just wanted to be treated with respect.

Lauren feels she has learned some lessons from her experience running a large Facebook group based on her blog. In addition to her commitment to never working with weight-loss brands, she has become aware that there are certain discussion points that are "not worth the trouble."

Vaccines, circumcision and abortion are among the topics she will not address publicly, and when her readers do, she often has their posts flagged for removal. "It will just become a toxic debate," she says. In response to the "toxicity" on Facebook, she has moved over to Instagram in the last few years. One of the affordances of Instagram that she appreciates is that it invites much less community chit-chat than Facebook. She continues to take sponsorships for her Instagram content, which tends to be about self-care and health and which is made up primarily of her selfies.

"I'll never do a big public group again," she said. "Instagram was bought by FB and so we all kind of just wait," she said, reflecting a widely held suspicion (which has not borne out as of early 2022) that Facebook will make changes to Instagram to make it more like Facebook. In a space like Lauren's PlusMommy community, the social relations require her to apply affective expertise rooted in protection and gatekeeping. While other spaces in the mamasphere might be

characterized and enjoyed by their members for a "say-anything" culture, it's what isn't said that makes the PlusMommy community feel safe and enjoyable.

Reading through the content Lauren has created over the years, one gets the sense that what PlusMommy seeks to do is to write into existence a social space where a woman's size is not relevant to the assessment of her worth or desirability. Were Lauren to dwell too much on the negativity and biases that she experiences, she would compromise her audience's enjoyment of her content. Without eliding the reality of living in a fatphobic society, Lauren maintains a space where fatphobia is the subject of discussion, but not one to be engaged with emotionally. "My readers deserve to be treated with respect," she repeated to me.

Lauren's affective expertise can be located in the way she attends to the concerns of her audience by shutting out trolls while not giving the trolls' existence primacy in the creation of her community's narrative. Plus-sized women don't deserve respect *despite* the abuse they receive from anonymous strangers; Lauren is sure to downplay the abuse in creating her content, so that her identity, and those of her followers, don't become too entwined in what others think of them. This is an important distinction to make with the way that Carmen chooses to incorporate negative opinions of others in her content-creation.

Bridging community accountability online and IRL: The Prairie Wife

Foucault writes that "the association of prohibition with strong incitations to speak is a constant feature of our culture (17). Every momfluencer must negotiate the balance between appearing "unfiltered," relatable, and honest, with the persistent norms around acceptable sexuality, affect and family relations. Cathy, who writes a blog and associated Instagram account based on her life in rural Wyoming, must navigate the balance between prohibition, due to the

145

conservative community in which she lives, with a strong incitation to speak that is afforded and indeed rewarded by Instagram's platform and algorithm.

Like many momfluencers, Cathy started creating content after leaving the workforce and becoming a stay-at-home mom. Until the second of her five kids was born, she taught first grade, but a move to rural Wyoming with her family caused her to leave the workforce. As she put it, "I stayed home, and for nine years my husband was gone five days a week, and I popped a baby out every year."

Cathy found rural life isolating - "sometimes I'd go three days without talking to another adult…The checkout lady Rita at the grocery store started giving out my number" – so she started a blog about her life at a friend's suggestion. "I created a mission statement right at the beginning," she told me: "It is :Women, wives and mothers live a life of grit and grace." She explains that all the content she has produced since must in some way be traceable to her mission statement. I argue that this has made creating and sustaining affective expertise easier for her.

"There have been so many posts I had to delete, because it was about my ego, or something I was pissed off about. From the very beginning, I decided to authentically be who I was, and with the mission statement it made it easier for me to navigate my brand."

Cathy's content is closely identified with Wyoming's natural landscape and rural lifestyle. She only accepts brand partnerships with woman-owned Wyoming businesses, which lends a distinct style to her sponsored posts. They are more amateur and homemade-looking than ads created by other momfluencers because she does not tend to adhere to the same visual guidelines that most influencer marketing companies recommend as "best practices."[1] Because

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[1] According to Chelsea Clark of Momfluence.com, a large influencer marketing firm in Toronto, many brands prefer influencers to maintain a neutral palate in their clothing and home decor so that the sponsored products have more visual impact. This can be seen in content across the mamapshere, where neutral colours have become ubiquitous both among momfluencers and their more trend-aware followers.

she is not beholden to teams of influencer marketers, she creates the ad content herself, which means it's more informal and unexpected.

Rural living has presented Cathy with the challenge of balancing her online community with the norms of her real-world one. This, rather than conflict coming from anonymous strangers, has been a challenge in modulating her content. When I asked her about the aforementioned posts she had to delete, she shared this story:

One thing I did, and I still don't think I was totally in the wrong… I was in Vegas, I took a pic of a woman passed out at 8 a.m. at the craps table, and I did a "caption this". [This is a prompt inviting the audience to add a caption.] You couldn't see her face, no defining tattoos. The majority of my readers thought it was hilarious. One mother in my town who I don't know picked it up, and then my character was attacked. I wrote a post like, you have got to be kidding me -- but I never posted it, it wouldn't have been helpful.

When I asked Cathy to reflect on what it would have cost her to post the response, she said she didn't want to appear too concerned with others' opinions, or to appear interested in creating rivalries with other women in her community. She had already established a reputation for being "brave" in what she would post - she had a preventive mastectomy several years ago, and posted pictures of the process. That had caused a stir in her community but not among her online followers. "I'm a Catholic and I've taught Sunday school for 10 years," she said. "But a parishioner went to our priest and said I shouldn't be near children. I had actually already talked to my priest before posting the pictures. So of course the priest told her to shove it. It was so hurtful."

The norms governing her community life and her online life have always been somewhat askew, but Cathy makes an effort to accommodate both types of audiences. Her affective expertise lies in her ability to identify what's both appealing to her audience outside Wyoming while also considering how her Wyoming community would react. Anticipating the reaction of a

147

diverse population is challenging, but it's necessary given that Cathy's content is rooted in a

specific location but broadcast internationally.

Reflecting on the choices she has made while building her audience, Cathy told me, "I'm

just trying to be authentic to my brand. I have a six-pack now and nice fake boobs.

I could be doing bikini pics and have a crap-ton more followers but I'm not gonna do it. Kids in

matching clothes get great engagement! I would make freaking bank if I dressed them in

matching clothes, with the mountains in the background? But that's not us! I don't need 10k

followers that don't really care."

Cathy's children are older among the kids of momfluencers I've spoken to, reflecting the

near-decade that she has been in the business of creating content. At this point, she must also

consider her kids' privacy when creating content – something that mothers of infants don't

typically worry about once they've decided to produce content about their private lives.

"I always ask my kids for permission to post pics of them. My 15 year old son doesn't love pics.
You won't see too many pics of him. There is some stuff that is gold - GOLD! But my kids will
say no, you can't put that stuff up! The brand can't come before them…My kids don't care about
far-away ones. But then you have my 13 year old daughter who freaking loves it, and that's
something really important for me - to see her seeing pics of me with no makeup. And I never
talk to them about how much "likes" something gets - I don't want them thinking that way."

Having teenagers requires an additional layer of affective expertise, concerned with

balancing trust and safety of one's children while also producing content about them. Cathy

needs to include her personal life in her business, but doesn't want her children to think of the

images wrought from their life in terms of metrics. She wants to shield them from the reality of

their lives being packaged into a commodity that is then assessed for financial viability based on

user engagement.

148

An unwanted intervention at the park: Anne's story

Anne did not have plans to become a mom when she started creating content on social media; she was interested in fashion and hoped that her "outfit of the day" posts would generate interest in fashion media. She described being "laughed out of the room" when she tried to parlay her growing following into a career in fashion marketing, but she kept posting to her blog anyway, because she was gaining a following and enjoying the process. When she unexpectedly got pregnant, she kept documenting her life, and began including motherhood stories on her blog. When we spoke, she had reached a point of modest success; she earns a living through brand partnerships, but considers herself a "small" influencer.

Political debate was never off-limits for Anne. She considers it her "duty" to write about the things she cares about, and during the Trump presidency, she did not shy away from making political statements on her blog and increasingly on Instagram, where her followers had moved to. Although online hecklers caused her some frustration – she referred to it as "abuse" – she never considered cutting out the political content. "Basically, if you're following me, you know what to expect and you're here for a reason," she said. "When people have a problem with my opinions, I know they're new here."

Anne's most difficult experience as a momfluencer took place offline. A few months ago, a babysitter was at a local park with her toddler. Anne and her family live in a small town in the American northeast, and she is by no means a well-known local personage, according to her own assessment. According to Anne's babysitter, a woman approached Anne's toddler and began speaking to them by name, chatting with them with familiarity. The babysitter approached and greeted the woman, who introduced herself as an old college roommate of Anne's who was

passing through town. "We met for drinks last week," the woman said. The babysitter was unconvinced, and took Anne's toddler home.

It turned out that the woman in the park was a stranger, a follower of Anne's who had recognized her child from photos she'd seen on Anne's Instagram page. The experience caused Anne a great deal of anguish. She decided to scrub her blog and Instagram of any photos of her child, and stop posting pictures of them.

"I was not expecting something like that to ever happen," she told me. " I'm actually so happy it happened. It was the wake up call I needed. I want [her daughter's] identity to be hers. I was creating an image of her that I was controlling."

After removing all of the pictures of her child, Anne wrote a post explaining her choice to her followers. "Some people were really sad, but they understood where I was coming from," she said.

By creating a piece of content explaining why she would be exerting new control over online representations of her child, Anne was appropriating the frustration and pain that she experienced following the encounter between the stranger and her child, into engaging, thought-provoking content for her followers. True to form, Anne's statement was measured, thoughtful, and interesting to read. Anne seemingly instinctively saw an opportunity to educate and inform her followers as she has come to be known to do, and she seized the opportunity, despite feeling an overall sense of ambivalence about her public persona.

Anne's instincts – or her affective expertise – led her to make use of the upsetting park encounter in the service of her brand. As Hardt and Negri argue, the postcapitalist workplace is nowhere and everywhere, and for momfluencers, the work of nurturing their brand never stops, even when that brand itself engenders an invasion of privacy.

150

When I asked Anne what the hardest part of her work as a momfluencer was now that time had passed and the privacy issue had faded into the back of her mind (the incident occurred in 2021), she answered, "work life balance." This seems like an apt note to end this chapter on, given that it has covered the process by which momfluencers try to translate difficulties or frustrations that they experience while producing labour value, into new labor products.

Neoliberal labour operates with the precondition that in addition to performing always-on labour, subjects are responsible for caring for themselves so as to maintain their readiness to work. Instagram's algorithmic exigencies create the feeling of constant pressure for content creators whose incomes depend on it, and offer a vivid illustration of the working conditions that are theorized by Hartd, Negri, and others.

Elaborating on her work-life balance comment, Anne said:

A year ago, I wrote this long blog post about how Instagram wasn't a feel-good place anymore. With the election, and the thing that happened with my daughter, and the fact that the only way to be successful is to be on [the platform] ALL THE TIME. I'm hoping to be off [Instagram] by the end of this year. I'm making a plan to move onto other platforms, maybe to Youtube, because there's more opportunity for passive income there, and also, the content is more discoverable. Youtube is a search engine. Instagram, within a few days, something I post is gone forever, no one is ever going to see it again.

Anne perceives that in order to have a successful business on Instagram, she must be active on the platform without taking breaks. In an attempt to create more of a sense of work-life balance, she decided to limit her time on the app, and she almost immediately saw a negative impact on her engagement metrics: "Instagram punished me. My engagement suffered, no one was seeing my content when I did post."

The idioculture of the mamasphere is full of theories about "punishment" from social platforms, in the form of "shadow bans" or other demotions from visibility. Influencers perceive

151

this punishment through the visibility metrics to which they attend, and on which their incomes

are tied. Sudden drops in visibility metrics (accounts reached, impressions, as well as likes and

comments) often confuse and frustrate creators, who perceive the fluctuations in the performance

of their content as a form of discipline enacted by the platform. The folklore of social platforms'

algorithms operates as a way of explaining algorithmic activity that the platforms keep

deliberately obscure (Cotter 2021). In fact, the iterative process by which algorithms are built

over time, based on user activity (Burrell 2016) makes it difficult to draw conclusions from their

functionality at any given time.

The opacity of platforms like Instagram functions to keep creators paying very close

attention to their metrics in an attempt to glean insights into how content is sorted and served to

users. This attendance to metrics itself is a form of labour, as it's impossible to predict outcomes

of plan for contingencies without knowing how or when an algorithm might change next. This

constant attention to the platform engenders another reason Anne wishes to leave it: She feels

that she is setting a poor example for her young child: "I want to model good behaviour for my

daughter. I don't want her to have a phone, and I don't want to be be on my phone all the time."

Looking to the next generation and TikTok: A final thought on conflict and content

This study is limited to momfluencers whose work appears primarily on Instagram. But

given how rapidly social media landscapes shift, it bears acknowledging that within a few years,

Instagram's popularity is likely to be eclipsed by TikTok's, and more momfluencers will shift

their activity over to that platform. Indeed, this shift is already underway (Stokel-Walker, 2020).

TikTok has developed content-creation tools that engage directly with the process

discussed in this chapter, by which creators instrumentalize conflict or frustration in order to

152

create new content or reaffirm bonds of belonging and exclusion among their followers. Using the "reply with video" feature on Tik Tok, creators can create graphics out of comments from their followers, which they can then display on a green screen behind them, allowing them to speak directly to the comment in a short video. This clever device is a popular way that creators can "clap back" at their commenters while also entertaining their followers and, by creating more content, generating more engagement.

The reply with video tool formalizes the informal and iterative process described in this chapter; needless to say, social platforms are expert at gamifying users' communicative habits. Tik Tok has emerged as another site where creators must manage their use of the app so as to recuperate a sense of control or mastery of it. The one mom I have interviewed who maintains an active presence on Tik Tok described the feeling of using the app as being "a wheel inside my head that never stops turning." For her, the question of work-life balance was hard to answer; when I asked her if that was a challenge she initially said no, but then qualified her answer by saying that she was unable to quantify the amount of time she spends working, since it bleeds imperceptibly with her social and family time.

Conclusion: Negotiating obstacles toward recuperating affective labour value

Developing affective expertise means learning to exploit the affordances of social platforms towards the end of recuperating maximum labour value for one's personal brand. This argument builds on existing literature related to personal brand development (Scolere et al 2018), affective labour (Hart and Negri, McRobbie, and Duffy), and platform affordances (Duffy, Neff). It's totalizing labour environment for momfluencers: They are the labour product and the labourer, and the site of their work is unbounded and complete; it encompasses their entire lives.

153

Negative experiences must be endured and reframed through this same process, and that is what I found in common among the women interviewed in this chapter.

This data analysis further builds on the content analysis from the previous chapter by demonstrating how momfluencers react to encountering the limits of the sayable within their online space. The interview with Lauren, Carmen and Cathy demonstrate how some momfluencers seek to reclaim agency from biopolitical hegenomic notions of feminine conduct, appearance and decorum by pushing back – strategically, and with care – against the constraints that bind their speech. In the case of Sandra, we learn how she brings affective expertise to bear in moments when audiences splinter and ideological poles reveal themselves among an audience group. In Anne's case, we see the lengths to which precarious neoliberal labour conditions determine how momfluencers can do their jobs.

This chapter's analysis expands the existing literature on momfluencers by taking up the topic of how discord and frustration within their audience groups can be instrumentalized to further consolidate a group identity around a brand – a process that, as I argue in this chapter, is negotiated with the help of affective expertise. Audience criticism of momfluencers has been well documented, but the way momfluencers make use of this criticism toward their own professional ends has not been considered at length in current research.

Chapter 5

Discourses of Commerce and Affect: Whose Expertise?

The sharing of momfluencer best-practices has been packaged and commodified as the mamasphere has grown into a multi-million-dollar industry. This is somewhat counterintuitive when taken alongside this thesis' theory of affective expertise, which, I am arguing, is acquired informally, and can't be taught. The kind of intuition and "soft skills" required of affective experts, not to mention flexibility and savvy opportunism (as demonstrated in the previous chapter's discussion on instrumentalizing conflict for the sake of one's brand identity) are not easily taught, and don't belong to any social media strategy toolkit. Nonetheless, a cottage industry of "how be a mommyblogger" has existed since the early days of mommyblogs, giving aspiring momfluencers tips on how to build traffic and earn passive income. This industry is comprised of books, online courses and web tutorials, coaches, retreats and large networking events.

One of the largest and most high-profile event in this industry, meant as a networking opportunity between content creators and brands, but also as a place for moms to share best practices and compare notes, is the annual Mom 2.0 Conference. According to the event's marketing materials, "Mom 2.0 was conceived in 2008 to facilitate a much-needed, focused conversation between moms and marketers in the growing online marketing and social media space."

In the years since, it has evolved into a three-day destination event, something like an annual industry convention, usually hosted in an appealing location at an upscale hotel. With

ticket prices upwards of $700 USD, it prices out many aspiring momfluencers but is also considered an important professional milestone or opportunity by others. I attended the 2022 Mom 2.0 conference which took place at the Intercontinental Downtown Hotel in Los Angeles, where I joined over 600 momfluencers both aspiring and established from all over North American and beyond along with a smorgasbord of brands seeking to entice moms to become "partners" or "ambassadors."

This chapter looks at some of the discursive contradictions I observed while attending the Mom 2.0 summit and interviewing attendees. This site offered me a unique perspective on expertise and momfluencers; it's a place where momfluencers converge to acquire and share expertise. It's also one of the only in-person opportunities for momfluencers to gather in a group and perform expertise collectively.

In her research on gender and the post-Fordist creative economy, McRobbie (2016) has written about how in the absence of organized labour or trade associations, creative workers must rely on informal networking opportunities that exist online and in-person in an always-on space unbounded by location or temporality. Without a fixed workplace for a workplace culture or politics to emerge in, self-employed creative producers seek out any opportunity to leverage their influence and experience through relationships; this often relies, as McRobbie notes, on "intense self-promotional strategies" (20).

Mom 2.0 provides momfluencers with a rare physical site in which to network. In several instances, content creators who are closely associated online, who share each others' work and communicate continuously, were meeting in-person for the first time at Mom 2.0. But the informal structure of the summit – guests have no responsibilities but to attend, and there is no

unified, goal-oriented agenda or decision-making process that takes place at the event – means that the status quo of workers' precariousness is maintained.

The atmosphere is one of barely contained frenzy. Attendees are rushing to extract as much value from their time as they can; there is a lot of animated networking and rushing from panel to panel. There is no obvious hierarchy, although some VIP guests are recognized by everyone and thus possess status. Social groups sort themselves out over the course of the event, and by the end cliques are recognizable.

Journalists have reported on Mom 2.0 in the past, usually critically (Lenz 2019). As a researcher in attendees' midst, I was greeted with friendliness but not immediately with trust. Momfluencers have in many cases learned to keep their guards up, wary of being satirized, critiqued or dismissed by outsiders. As I explained the purpose of my research, most women I spoke to were willing to discuss their work with me. In two instances, other women overheard our interview and joined the conversation, eager to share their perspectives. "Nobody ever asks about our behind the scenes," one woman remarked. However, several declined to be interviewed.

I spent the three days of the conference attending panel discussions in various hotel ballrooms, and then rushing to try to interview attendees during the catered meals and coffee breaks that took place in the same spaces. Among the attendees were also many mom-entrepreneurs seeking to launch new products with the help of this population of entrepreneurial marketers. I met a woman who was working on launching a product called the Vommat: a special mat that you can put down when your children have the stomach flu, to absorb their vomit. When I asked to see a picture of the product she informed me that it was "still in development."

157

Another pitch I heard over coffee was from two women working on an app that tracks "invisible labour," called TendTask. Couples are meant to download the app together and then compare trackers at the end of a week. It would include "integrated relationship coaching." One of the two founders informed me that finding investment capital had been difficult. At a pitch meeting, one would-be investor said, "I hope my wife never learns about this app."

I decided not to pre-schedule any interviews, but instead to show up cold and determine based on what I observed who I would seek out for interviews. Although this was a somewhat intuitive process, it allowed me to respond to the context of the event rather than impose any predetermined awareness on my part about who would be there and what I might be able to learn. But this approach also put a lot of pressure on me to identify potential informants, and act fast.

Luckily, the event is meant to be a networking opportunity, so most people were happy to be approached by a stranger and eager to share their ideas. Of the 32 women I chatted with, 14 were engaged in content-creation of some kind. The rest were entrepreneurs of different kinds, seeking ways to expand the reaches of their brands. Among the 14 content-creators I spoke to, I focused on those who demonstrated some interest in reflecting on the nature of their work itself. I chose not to include the data from women who were still figuring out how to find a following, which accounts for a good number of Mom 2.0 attendees. With one exception (Sally, who I included because I found her case to be illustrative of the challenges of finding your voice/developing your expertise), the women included in this study spoke with confidence and experience about their work, and have the followings to show for it.

My intention was to learn about affective expertise from those who have come to possess it, which necessarily means to me people who have followings of over 50,000 (this is a

somewhat arbitrary line in the sand that I've established, but I've also determined that

algorithmic visibility is easier to ensure once you've surpassed this threshold. Conversation

snowballed organically, given the networking focus of the event. One woman offered to

introduce me to a friend, who was attending with another friend. By talking to women about each

other, I was also able to ascertain who was especially admired by peers, and whose work was

considered "must see."

I interviewed Rebecca because Linda and Michelle insisted I do so; "she's about to blow

up," they told me. I had never heard of Rebecca, but our interview introduced me to a growing

niche in the momfluencer world of women who talk about childhood trauma and how it impacts

their parenting. Had it not been for Linda and Michelle, I doubt I would have known to look for

Rebecca; having met her, an entire new subgenre revealed itself to me.

Attendees at Mom 2.0 were predominantly white, and mostly dressed in a standard

feminine-casual style exemplified by blouses, pedicures and blow-dried hair. Most women wore

makeup. The framing of the event, as it appeared on branded backdrops and signage, was

vaguely defiant, in the way that much contemporary capitalist-feminism is. On the screens at the

front of every conference room, the title slide bore the words, "What You're Doing Matters."

This kind of discourse sometimes makes me wonder the extent to which the imagined

interlocutor saying "what you're doing doesn't matter," to whom this kind of statement is

intended as a rebuttal, is necessary for this community's meaning-making to occur.

But it also suggested that the Mom 2.0 conference is a site of important discursive work

in the process to repatriate expertise away from the traditional child-rearing experts – almost all

of whom have historically been men, as I demonstrated in the review of literature – and back to

mothers. Wrestling expertise away from the brands that speak on behalf of "busy moms," and

back to the busy moms themselves, is part of what momfluencers do with their affective expertise. Somewhat ironically, if a momfluencer is to successfully shill for a brand, she must leverage her own expertise, rather than gesture toward the expertise of the brand, if she's going to build trust among her audience. (I will elaborate more on this further in this chapter.)

There are multivalent discourses at work at events like Mom 2.0, all meant to reinforce momfluencers' expertise and agency within a political economy whose rules are determined largely by corporate brands and platform algorithms. On one hand, biopolitical and patriarchal norms remain in place, as I will demonstrate in the section of this chapter on the House of Wise gummy brand. On the other hand, momfluencers' influence over their audiences is a valuable commodity, one that they can leverage to raise awareness about issues that matter to them and hold brands accountable (this is an area about which more research is needed, but about which I heard repeated claims during the Mom 2.0 panels).

Potentialities of influence and leverage notwithstanding, another recurring theme among speakers was the assertion that women had made major sacrifices to attend, and validating those sacrifices as worthwhile and important. It seemed significant to the spirit of the event that attendees were there under a certain amount of duress and were in need of validation. Again, the emphasis of this duress, whether real or imagined, was recurring throughout the programming, and seemed significant to the community's sense of itself.

While introducing the keynote speakers, Anna Malaika Tubbs and Valarie Kaur (both of whom, it is worth noting, are women of colour and activists for social justice causes, and neither of whom are momfluencers), one of the co-founders of Mom 2.0, Laura Mayes, thanked the audience for coming. "Home is cozy. Thank you for leaving your comfort zone to be with us. I know it was probably hard for some of you, but I know it's worth it."

160

Tubbs' and Kaur's talks were not about momflunencing but rather about motherhood as a site of radical potential, for love, acceptance, community-building and healing. Mothers can heal the divisions and traumas of the world, according to both speeches. Tubbs recounted how mothers had provided the inspiration and guidance for some of the great leaders of the civil rights movement. Kaur shared her vision for radical acceptance, for which mothers could play an important role. Attendees were visibly moved by both keynotes; some women wiped tears from their eyes as Kaur recounted a story about forgiveness. Absent from the keynotes were any mention of material culture, entrepreneurship, beauty ideals, or even, to a large extent, gender. They could have been keynotes addressed to a nonprofit community organization. To me, the programmers' choice of Tubbs and Kaur as keynote speakers represented a deliberate political choice, to encourage more conversations about social change within the Mom 2.0 space, and perhaps to remind attendees of their power to affect that change through their work.

At the last panel I attended at the summit, all about "the state of motherhood and media," one of the presenters, Nathalie Bowman, opened the panel with the question, "how many of you had to leave notes back home, and do meal prep, before you left?" (The unspoken implication of this question is that the women in question were working with incompetent spouses who needed directions and ongoing help to manage the basic running of the household in the absence of the mother.)

The response was many raised hands and knowing looks. "How many of you are still worried about how things are going back home, even though you left notes and cooked?" Still more hands. This was meant to be humorous (I think), and the audience responded well to it, but this emphasis on the sacrifices that mothers make in order to leave their homes was an interesting

contradiction to the simultaneous affirmations and incitements that were fundamental to the event's branding.

What I found striking is the extent to which the trap of patriarchy and the vicegrip of biopower were taken for granted during the events I attended at Mom 2.0. Panelists enthusiastically encouraged moms to value their work and ask for more help around the house, but these calls to action presumed a high degree of domestic inequality to begin with – indeed, they would be meaningless without that presumption. Individual momfluencers like Crenshaw claim to be moving past a lot of the normative constraints of patriarchal hegemony, and yet in the group setting of Mom 2.0, those constraints seemed animating – part of what gives the group meaning. As I will demonstrate in the following sections of this chapter, the keynote speakers' messages were an aberration at Mom 2.0. The real meat of the event was about the instrumentalization of affect in the service of sales, made possibly by rigorous neoliberal self-management.

Let's return to the event's slogan, "What you're doing matters," and its imagined interlocutor arguing the opposite, that what momfluencers are doing *doesn't* matter. This slogan contains within it the whole of the contradiction between mom-as-expert and mom-as-patriarchal-subordinate. When momfluencers recuperate expertise from corporate brands trading on outdated ideas about what womanhood and motherhood should look like, they are undoing at least a century of male dominance of expert discourse around motherhood. As I wrote in the review of literature, Doctors Spock and Watson were the standard bearers of best-practices for moms for half a century. They were the last word on what "good mothers" should be doing. Perhaps the imagined interlocutor implied in "what you're doing matters" is all of 20th century parenting expertise, arrayed against the informal expertise of mothers.

House of Wise: Sales as self-care

But the expertise of momfluencers represents an evolution with the times, when compared to the expertise of stay-at-home moms. Momfluencers are negotiating neoliberal ideals, alongside biopolitical and algorithmic imperatives. It's no longer a question of "mother knows best." Mother is a boss, a powerhouse, a manager. I found the momfluencer-ideal eloquently articulated in the branding materials for House of Wise, a brand of CBD gummies that was featured as a major brand partner for Mom 2.0.

House of Wise's booth was set up in the large atrium where attendees could network and drink free coffee, alongisde a dozen brands who had partnered with the Mom 2.0. The brands were there to promote themselves to the moms; they were up-and-coming brands looking for "ambassadors" or brand partners. House of Wise had the most elaborate booth, and the company's founder, Amanda Goetz, circulated like a celebrity at the event; her platinum hair was styled in a severe bob and she wore chic, form-fitting clothing.

Goetz's "founder" story was repeated several times throughout the event during the interstitial programming between panels. According to her brand's lore, she founded the company in the midst of the pandemic in the wake of a divorce, when she was overcome with the stress of suddenly becoming a single mom of three kids. Wary of self-medicating with wine, Goetz looked into CBD products for stress relief, but was unsatisfied by the unregulated market where she did not feel she could trust the contents of any brands.

House of Wise's branding is cannily neoliberal; it calls itself a cannabis product for "high-functioning multi-hyphenate women." No stoners allowed. Its tidy gummy cubes are

branded into four categories: SWEAT (CBD for before you work out), STRESS (CBD to help de-stress), SLEEP (CBD for sleeping), and SEX (CBD for the libido). Although like every other brand of CBD sold in the States, House of Wise does not need to comply with any regulations around what its gummies do or do not actually contain, the brand is based on the idea that mothers need reliable, safe products to help optimize their lives.

I spoke with Lauren Nolan, the company's director of marketing, who was behind the booth. "Women prioritize other people too often," Nolan told me. "House of Wise is about supporting caregivers' ability to prioritize themselves." This message echoed that which I'd been hearing throughout the event: That women's leisure, or self-care, exists within a matrix of self-sacrifice and responsibility. Attending a conference is contextualized by the domestic sacrifices required to make the trip; relaxation is contextualized by how rare it is for many women. I was noticing the emergence of a rhetorical and normative pattern defining the boundaries of mothers' happiness, celebration, and freedom.

Summit attendees gathered around the House of Wise booth and sampled gummies. (I sampled them too; they tasted strongly of cannabis but I didn't experience any noticeable effect.) Nolan informed me that "anyone" can be a "Wise Woman", which is what the brand's partners are called. In order to get access to an affiliate link program (details of which I would learn about which I would learn about shortly), women must apply, and their social media presence vetted.

House of Wise is a "direct to consumer" brand, meaning it markets only on social media, and can't be found in stores or on other brands' websites. "But we really think of it as 'direct to community,' said Nolan. "When you're a Wise Woman, you have access to a safe-haven for connection. We have a private Slack channel for our Wise Women where we share information, and share in community."

164

House of Wise proposes a vision of sales-as-self-care. Wise Women are characterized as belonging to an exclusive community of caregiving and support. The work of creating content and selling a product is subsumed under the affective project of nurturing others and oneself. In this way, House of Wise's marketing materials and sales pitch struck me as an analog for the affective maneuvers of momfluencers more generally. The "capitalization of affect" has been identified as a post-capitalist phenomenon that animates the influencer space as well as aspects of the service economy (Kolehmainen and Makinen 2021). House of Wise's marketing material fetishizes the sociality and neoliberal hustle of momfluencers' affect. "Women are influential on every level," Nolan said. "Word of mouth is very powerful. Our Wise Women are part of a movement to revolutionize self-care."

Affiliate marketing: Embedding sales into the daily domestic

It's within this context that the conferences panels were taking place, and a panel that was particularly eye-opening with regards to commerce's role in the affective modes of momfluencers was on "affiliate link programs." The panel was hosted by Jessica N. Turner, a influencer with approximately 75,000 followers who claimed, as part of her presentation, to have earned a six-figure income in the previous year mostly through the practice of affiliate linking.

Affiliate linking is a common practice among influencers of all stripes. Affiliate links are links to products recommended by an influencer. The links contain a line of code that tracks any purchases made at the destination site, and the influencer who shared the link (the "affiliate") receives a small percentage of sales, or a small flat fee per click-through, depending on the agreement.

Commission structures vary widely by brand, but typically they are pennies on the dollar. Affiliate linking is distinct from other kinds of sponsored content. When an influencer enters into

165

a brand-partnership agreement, typically they receive a lump sum fee to produce an agreed-upon amount of content in partnership with the brand. Affiliate links are typically not part of partnership agreements. Rather than pay an influencer a fixed sum, a brand will give an influencer access to an affiliate link code with a certain commission structure, and it will be up to the influencer to use the link in their content, and potentially earn as much commission with that link, as they can.

Brand partnerships require that an influencer have an existing audience with active engagement and a track record of consistent content of a certain quality. Affiliate links, by contrast, have a much lower barrier to entry; they are made available to anyone, even aspiring influencers with virtually no track record of content creation or audience engagement. In this way, they are quintessentially entrepreneurial; they offer earning potential to virtually anyone, but no guarantees. As Jessica Turner said in the opening to her presentation, "There is no ceiling to the revenue potential." However, unlike brand partnerships, it is entirely up to the content creator to generate conversions and earn money. The brand spends nothing and gets free advertising.

Turner went into detail about different payout structures for affiliate links; there are performance-based incentives for influencers whose accounts have higher conversions (usually giveaway bonuses for merchandise like iPads, phones, and gift cards), and there are cash bonuses for influencers who post affiliate links during certain times of year. (According to Turner, brands like to push affiliate links during certain quarters during which they might otherwise be making fewer sales, and they reward influencers for posting during these times.)

As Turner got into the granularity of her best practices, I began to better understand the relationship between this particular revenue structure and affective expertise. "I think of ways to

166

incorporate my linked products with my posts in ways that make sense," said Turner. "Let's say I have a floral dress from Zulily that I'm selling. It looks good outside, so I'll wear it on an outing, on a sunny day, with the family. I'll take photos throughout the day and then I'll have a batch of shots I can use to sell the dress later."

The audience might see Turner's posts about a trip to the zoo and notice an affiliate link but think very little of its inclusion. Their main point of focus would likely be the content about Turner's family trip to the zoo – their smiling faces, the kids' cuteness, the setting. But from Turner's perspective – businessperson whose income relied almost entirely on affiliate income in 2020 (according to her presentation) – the zoo pictures were in the service of the dress. The content must appear "authentic", "organic" – simply the record of a day spent with family. But its purpose is to convert sales of the dress Turner is wearing.

This is a very tidy representation of the purpose of affective expertise: To neutralize the act of commodification, to make it blend seamlessly into representations of the rhythms of family life. This form of sales is unique in that its success relies on its appearing to not be a form of sales at all; when successful, Turner informed the audience, affiliate links appear incidental, just favours being dropped into the content by influencers simply fulfilling the audience's inevitable request for information about a given item in a picture.

But even this request can be engineered, according to Turner's presentation. "Train your audience to expect to find out what the products in your posts are, by responding to every single DM you get asking where you got something in a post," she advised the audience.

Training one's audience

167

After spending enough time in the mamasphere, I began to notice that momfluencers are often assiduous about replying to every single visible comment (and, I surmise based on Turner's remark, many direct messages) and anodyne question. In virtually every post made by a mom with over, say, 50k followers, the comments will be a cascade of questions about every item visible in the camera's frame. "Where is your rug from?" "Where did you get that lamp?" "Brand of shoe?" The abiding interest of a certain segment of the audience in the consumer choices of these women is evident.

But even more remarkable than the consistency with which these questions come in, is the consistency with which they are answered. Replying to every question, many of which are redundant but must be answered individually so that each person is notified when they receive an answer, must add hours of work to each day. I always wondered, idly, why momfluencers bothered. Turner's presentation gave me a convincing answer.

The process of "training" one's audience to expect information by reliably attending to their questions looks on the surface like friendliness and consideration, which are both important personality traits for a momfluencer. Solicitiousness to the concerns of fellow moms is a cornerstone of momfluencer affective scripting. But in this case, the endearing quality of attentiveness is a felicitous byproduct of the main purpose, which is to convert sales. By engaging in this ongoing form of behavioural nudging, momfluencers achieve two goals at once: performing reliability and friendliness, and building a strong relationship with an audience, which is the most coveted commodity in the profession of influencing.

Attending Turner's affiliate linking presentation helped clarify my thinking about a central tension in the work of momfluencing. The goal of this work is to appear to be creating content for fun and to create community, and the success of the work itself relies on the

convincing execution of this kind of fun community-building. Meanwhile, the practical objective (as opposed to the superficial objective) is to earn an income and convert sales. It is imperative in this milieu to obscure the motivation to earn money, because this motivation is in direct conflict with the labour and affect of motherhood itself. Motherhood is understood to exist apart from commerce, in a sacred zone (Hays 1996). Yet momfluecing is done to earn money.

Therefore, the posts of successful momfluencers can be imagined as the visible tip of an iceberg. The audiences see a post about, say, a family trip to the zoo, or a picture of the interior of a kitchen with a family snacking around the kitchen island. The strategy behind the post may have been planned around a particular affiliate linking opportunity with an especially high commission, or perhaps the promotion of a particular item – say, a dress, or a set of plastic storage containers – that a brand was incentivizing linking out to, with additional bonuses for hitting sales targets.

Turner went into detail during her presentation about how she decided to switch from selling Amazon products, which offered her a low affiliate commission but a very wide variety of products to sell, to Zulily, a lesser-known retailer with a smaller selection that was offering much higher affiliate commissions. To the audience she was speaking to at Mom 2.0, she framed the switch candidly, as a strategic move toward an opportunity to earn more. But to her followers on Instagram, she had to make the case for Zulily as a consumer; she had to sell her loyalty to the brand, and convince her followers that she had willingly switched over.

The final portion of Turner's affiliate linking presentation was about how to track the conversion rates of the products you link out to, in order to determine "what's worth your time." This will depend, according to Turner, on who your audience is, and what they are clicking on

and buying. Each audience is distinct; she repeatedly reminded the conference attendees that "what works for me may not work for you."

As part of her slide presentation, Turner shared the spreadsheets where she tracks each item she links out to – "flower dress," "closet organizers," "skincare products" – and records each products' performance in terms of click-throughs, conversions, and finally, payouts. By tracking this data she is able to determine what her reliable money-makers are, and focus on linking out to those kinds of products.

Turner reiterated what she considered to be a best-practice of using affiliate links: Only link out to products that you would use even if you were not earning a commission. This, she emphasized, is essential for maintaining your audience's trust; they must believe that you would do the work for free, or, put another way, that you simply happen to be earning money on what is basically a public service, "moms helping moms." But the earnings-tracking practices tell a somewhat different story; obviously, products that are more reliable commission-earners are a better "use of your time."

The final slide of Turner's presentation was a call to action for the audience to buy her online course on affiliate linking for $99.00 – a sale price that she assured us would be going up in 30 days, so we should act fast. "This is just the very beginning - my course contains so much more info about affiliate linking," she said. Indeed, her claim at the start that there's no limit to what you can earn as an affiliate linker had the ring of multilevel marketing at the time, and closing on the note of recruitment and the sale of "insider" knowledge justified that association.

"What do brands want?"

The following day at Mom 2.0 I attended another panel on content monetization, called "What do Brands Want?" It was hosted by two brand marketers and two influencer managers and it was well attended. Foremost, according to the panelists, brands are seeking out influencers with "consistency of voice." This helps branded content "blend in better with non-branded content." What is consistency of voice? The marketers defined it as an absence of "volatility", and a predictability in terms of image style, type of topics addressed, and overall mood.

"Your audience should come to expect a certain type of content from you, and you should be able to deliver that over a long period of time," one of the marketers informed the audience.

Consistency of voice affords sponsored content a more seamless fit amid non-sponsored content, thereby maintaining the illusion that sponsored products are an organic, uncontrived extension of a momfluence's everyday life. Advertising can hide among the everyday, if the everyday itself has the steady and predictable quality of branded content. If a family's life is too chaotic, too unpredictable, the structure of a sponsored product might be jarring and less convincing as part of that family's routine.

It's interesting to imagine the scenario in reverse. What if brands, seeking to better disguise themselves within the patterns and affective shades of a mother's representation of her life, sought to allow for unpredictability or unexpected shades of meaning to be brought into the advertising that moms created? What if mothers' own styles of content-creation informed sponsored content? Instead, motherhood itself is recreated in the mold of advertising.

Lucrative advertising is the goal for many momfluencers, but the conflict at the heart of affective expertise is located in the many requirements or preferences that brands have about how moms present their daily lives as a backdrop for sponsorship. Audiences want "authenticity" and "relatability," while brands want consistency and a lack of "volatility", which leaves

momfluencers in the awkward position of having to fulfill two sets of contradictory expectations in order to earn an income.

One of the influencer managers on the panel defined "volatility" as an unwillingness to stay away from certain "off limits" topics – in particular, calling out other brands. Social media is a popular platform for voicing complaints about customer service or poor quality (Gallaugher and Ransbotham 2010), so it would not be unexpected for someone with a large following to tag a brand that had disappointed them. However, for momfluencers seeking sponsorship deals, this kind of content is considered volatile, and can be off-putting for brand partners.

Volatility can also be a matter of personality: One of the panelists clarified that it's not just a matter of "trash-talking brands" that can deter brands from partnering. Women who seem like "loose cannons," according to the marketer, are less appealing for brands. "Listen – if volatility is your brand, that is your brand," they continued. "But for most people, that is hard to pull off." Who decides what constitutes "pulling something off"? The implication is that it's brands who decide whether or not a woman's "loose cannon" personality is "successful" or "compelling" rather than off-putting.

What this panel was iterating, best-practice by best-practice, were the behavioural guard rails of momfluencing. These are the unwritten rules of being a successful income-earning momfluencer today. What constitutes a "loose cannon" is highly subjective, but in the mamasphere, it is defined by brands motivated by profit.

A member of the audience posed the following question: "How do I handle brands that are so focused on key messaging that there's no room for my voice?"
One of the marketers on the panel replied, "you want brands to buy your voice, not change it."

But the question suggested a pervasive anxiety among momfluencers about the degree to which they are expected to adjust their tone to suit sponsors' preferences. The line that divides "too focused on key messaging" and "appropriately focused on key messaging" is invisible and highly subjective. It falls to individual momfluencers to determine how comfortable they feel adapting their content to what they imagine potential sponsors would find appealing.

Perhaps even more unsettling about the influence that advertisers' discourse has on mothers' accounts of their home lives is the extent to which aspiring momfluencers are projecting images of their lives that they are speculating would attract advertisers. One might call this speculative maternalism: an attempt at luring in brand partners by creating a compelling, consistent and appealing representation of home life. As Jessica Turner said in the opening remarks of her affiliate marketing presentation, there is no ceiling to the earning potential. Given that promise, there is reason to assume that aspiring momfluencers are labouring to conjure a vision of motherhood that might fulfill it.

The presentation on influencer marketing ended with a final insight from the marketers. "Brands want longer contracts with content creators, usually starting at around six months contract duration," one of the influencer managers informed the audience. "This gives brands a longer connection to your story, and a more organic presence in your family's life." "Brands are embedding more deeply," another speaker interjected. This remark landed ominously for me, but the speaker meant it to be informative – content creators should expect more of a long-term relationship.

But what does that really entail? Entering into a six-month contract with, for example, a paper towel brand, requires that a momfluencer come up with repeated ways to integrate the product into her family's life in pictures. This puts the creative pressure on her to generate

"authentic" opportunities to demonstrate her loyalty to the product – the demand for authenticity coming from both the brand side and her audience side, who want to believe that she's creating content for pleasure, not for work.

McRobbie writes about the idea of "passionate work" being a form of gender re-traditionalization in the precarious creative economy (2016). Post-feminist media production makes use of normative femininity, which takes place within designated zones of activity, to animate female aspiration and entrepreneurship. The challenge of incorporating a particular brand in one's domestic story over the course of months can thereby be seen as a test of one's enthusiasm for the work itself, an opportunity to attempt to "innovate" on one's one affective scripts so as to create a credible account of brand loyalty.

"It was phenomenal for my business, to be so authentic."

The final panel I attended at Mom 2.0 was on "the state of motherhood and media." It was hosted Jo Piazza, an author and creator of a podcast called Under the Influence, about the mamasphere; Blessing Adesiyan, a Nigerian-American entrepreneur and founder of Mother Honestly, which is described as "a platform that is reimagining how women build better careers and happier homes"; Nathalie Bowman, a marketing executive and small business owner; and Amy Schoenthal, a marketing executive.

The panel's topics ranged widely and it felt at times unfocused, as though the panelists had not been briefed on what they were expected to discuss, and each of them arrived with their own agenda. Piazza introduced the group and said to the audience, "Every single woman in this room is a storyteller, and it's the storytellers that will write the next chapter of history."

On this empowering opening note, Bowman began talking about inequality in domestic settings, and how momfluencers have the power to change these norms. "Progress isn't going to happen unless it happens at home," said Bowman. "What kind of intimate daily actions can happen at home?"

Adeyisan visibly bristled at the idea that individual women should take on inequality by taking responsibility for it in their households. She interrupted: "Childcare is the most important issue facing families in the United States today. This is not a problem that can be solved in the home. This is a structural problem. You can't self-care your way out of childcare." The audience applauded and she went on, "I moved my family back to Nigeria – from Houston, to Lagos – because we have childcare there. I can't build a tech and media company without childcare. We have to put America in the hot seat and ask why it is so hard to solve childcare."

Amy Schoenthal steered the conversation back toward content-creation "and the revolutionary potential of "storytelling." Women should feel empowered to be their "authentic selves," she said, and to share their real-life stories.

"Accounts with over 250,000 followers on Instagram all start to look the same," she said. "Don't copy what others are doing… I showed up as my full self and I was rewarded with a community. My honesty resulted in crazy conversions [nb: sales through affiliate links] for me. It was phenomenal for my business, to be so authentic."

Bowman added, "Women often feel they're unprepared for professional challenges. But the audiences love when you show up and don't have your shit together."

At this point in the panel I began feeling a sense of unease growing among the panelists, as though there were several totally divergent conversations happening that could be seen to undermine each other. Bowman's assertion that a lack of preparedness could be instrumentalized

175

for the sake of authenticity felt at odds with the idea that women's stories had the potential to change the world. There seemed to be an overarching message among all the panelists that women's labour in creating content was an under-valued resource. But there was no consensus on how exactly that resource should be valued.

Should women's work be valued more, and structural changes like subsidized child care might represent that value in the world? Or perhaps, as Bowman suggested, women's "authentic" experiences of being overextended and underprepared could contribute to a shift in expectations for what constitutes success and power within the mamasphere. All I could conclude from the panel was that there was a vague sense among the panelists that women's work, whether creating content, or caring for children, or working outside the home, is undervalued, and should be taken more seriously. But how this might happen remained elusive.

Piazza, the panel moderator, wrapped up the hour with an anecdote. In 1975, women in Iceland staged a general strike – "which they strategically didn't call a strike, but a day off," Piazza said. Their intention was to highlight the value of their work in Icelandic society, and apparently around 90% of the nation's women took part in the action.

The women's day off changed Iceland, Piazza said. It highlighted women's essential labour as caregivers. On that day, children ran wild through offices and fathers struggled to work while caregiving. The shouts of children could be heard from on the evening news, as male broadcasters had to take their kids in to work with them. Or so the lore has it.

"So, what if we did a women's day off from the internet?" suggested Piazza. Someone in the audience suggested six hours instead of a whole day, "because the algorithm will mess with us if we're gone too long."

What demands would be made in such an action? Perhaps fair pay for momfluencers from brands? It was hard to tell. Bowman and Schoenthal claimed during the panel that women content creators are paid less than men, and that by being more transparent about rates for sponsorships, women could help each other demand higher pay. "When the system's broken, you have to build your own system," Bowman said at one point.

The "six-hours off" idea seemed to excite the audience even without a clear set of demands or even a defined purpose. The very idea of taking some kind of action seemed to satisfy a need among the audience.

Adeysian provided the last word, crystalizing at least one possible set of demands. "You need to build a strong team at home if you want to make an impact with your work," she said. "Your husband knows this – you are HIS team. You need to make him YOUR team now. You need to take your organizational and managerial skills and apply them to your own home. It's called 'asset effectiveness', and your husband needs to get it right so you can succeed." A woman sitting next to me wrote TEAM in her notebook in big letters and circled it many times.

I spoke to Adesiyan over the phone a few weeks after this panel, and she expressed disappointment about how it proceeded. "I was there to talk about real issues, I don't know why we were talking about being authentic in your content. How are you supposed to be authentic when you can't handle the basic affairs of your life, when you can't find childcare, your spouse isn't supporting you? For me, the panel was a joke."

Conclusion: Momfluencers and the reclamation of expertise

The Mom 2.0 Summit affords momfluencers, and aspiring participants in the commercial enterprises that target mothers, a place to act out the affective scripts that animate this space. The

177

result is a highly charged and sometimes volatile series of encounters. Neoliberal precariousness animates contemporary motherhood in North America. It likewise creates the conditions from which momfluencing emerges: entrepreneurial opportunity and self-reliance combined with virtually no labour regulations that protect content creators. Most of North America is a "wild west" for families trying to get by, and so is the mamasphere.

The panels outlined in the chapter were vivid scenes of negotiation between momfluencers, audiences and brands. I heard frank explanations for how to juggle the obvious contradictions that exist when women are working to commodify their personal lives. Whether the topic was affiliate marketing or cultivating "authenticity," the challenge of cultivating affective expertise was a silent thread that ran through every panel I attended. Although there is no vocabulary for this expertise, I left these panels with growing certainty that this form of expertise is fundamental to the work of momfluencing.

I was also struck by the potential brimming from some of the encounters. The keynote speakers' incitements to mothers to see themselves as agents of social change, and Blessing Adeysian's statements about the need for post-nuclear-family collective caregiving, made me wonder how much longer a neoliberal patriarchal basis for representing motherhood will be the norm. Will momfluencers begin using their influence not just on their audience's spending habits but on the ways their sponsors represent motherhood in advertising? Could these changes shift the way "good motherhood" is conceptualized in North America? Time will tell, but there appears to be a willfull push in that direction, at least among the organizers of Mom 2.0. North American feminism is far from a monolith and perhaps Mom 2.0 is a place of encounter between multiple contemporary feminisms. As such, it provides a rich site of analysis, and suggests a future where expertise is contested between mothers and traditional expert voices.

178

Mom 2.0 is a place where non-experts travel in the hopes of gaining expertise. It's a rare space in the world of momfluencing where women meet face-to-face to discuss their work and share information. However, as I've argued in previous chapters, affective expertise can't be transmitted explicitly; it has no name. There is never a panel that takes up the topic of "how to modulate your affect for maximum engagement and financial gain." Affective expertise is the skill that everyone seems to be talking around. Seeming "authentic," being "consistent," per Turner's presentation on affiliate linking, is affective expertise by another name.

This chapter supports existing literature on gendered affective labour and the precarious labour market of content creators. My findings about the behind-the-scenes best practices in affiliate linking expand on existing understandings of influencer labor conditions. Affiliate linking is practiced widely across the world of influencers, and more research would further elucidate how affiliate linking practices have shaped online discourses themselves. I suspect that affiliate linking can have structuring impact on influencer speech, and more research is needed to better understand the practice's role in discursive practices among influencers.

This chapter builds upon some of the questions asked in Matteis' (2020) thesis on maternal solidarities. However, my observation that some of the discourse at Mom 2.0 might signal a reclamation of expertise away from agents of scientific motherhood represents a departure from existing research on motherhood and expertise. There has been up until now very limited attention paid to momfluencers as agents for social change, and virtually no literature on momfluencers as experts. If the rhetoric of empowerment continues to gain traction in this space, I forsee a need to look at what outcomes may become possible. Global brands enact and reinforce biopolitical agendas, and momfluencers are in direct contact with these brands as they

create content based on their daily lives. What will happen if and when momfluencers embrace roles as agents for social change? What will change, and what norms will remain unmoved?

Chapter 6

Negotiating the Instrumentalization of Experience and Affect

In the previous chapter I set the scene of the Mom 2.0 conference, where marketing professionals and brands interact with aspiring momfluencers and all participants share a common goal of earning money from an audience of mothers. Participants are engaged in an ongoing, iterative process of narrative and affective orientation and re-orientation toward their ultimate goal of "resonating" with their audiences. They are "creating community", "connecting people," "empowering mothers," "sharing their stories." These phrases recurred throughout presentations and conversations I had during Mom 2.0.

In this chapter, I introduce four momfluencers (three with established followings on Instagram, and one aspiring to build a larger following and start a business) that were attending the conference. These individuals provide a different view of momfluencers than we saw in the content analysis chapter. Unlike Amber Fillerup Clark, Brooke Reybould and Katie Crenshaw, the women featured in this chapter are not working to build brands based on their appearance and personal style. While the content analysis chapter focused on momfluencers concerned mainly with creating "aspirational" content (always tempered with relatability, so as to maintain a sense

of intimacy and trust with their audiences), the women whose stories make up this chapter are operating further into the "relatability" end of the spectrum.

While Reybould, Fillerup Clark and Crenshaw instrumentalize their daily lives so as to demonstrate appealing and entertaining ways of negotiating daily domesticity, the moms I met at Mom 2.0 consider themselves of service to their audience for emotional, even therapeutic reasons. All four of the women included in this chapter explicitly stated that their goal was to help moms "feel less alone."

Their perspectives provide insight into the significant demographic of momfluencers who create content that has more to do with pop psychology than fashion and consumer choices (although the latter is never far from view, and norms related to consumer behaviour animate this space). How do these momfluencers develop affective expertise and how does this form of expertise play into their experience of their work?

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the labour of these four momfluencers takes place within a triad of competing concerns. They all spoke about how corporate sponsors or brands have certain expectations for what kind of content they should be making. Meanwhile, the momfluencers have developed nuanced understandings of their respective audiences and what they perceive to be the audiences' expectations of them. This understanding is based on a close, long-term observation of the way their audiences engage with their content. As is common for every momfluencer I have spoken to, these women keep an informal running tally of the best- and worst- performing categories of content they produce. This data seems to live in their heads as naturally as their children's favourite foods.

The third node on the triad is the subjectivity of the momfluencer herself. Each creator has their own vulnerabilities, preferences and boundaries that they must navigate while

producing content. How much self-disclosure is she comfortable with? Exactly how should she instrumentalize her personal information for maximum efficiency in terms of audience engagement, brand credibility, and appeal to potential corporate sponsors?

It is in negotiating this triad of the self, the audience, and corporate sponsors that I identify affective expertise among the four momfluencers that appear in this chapter. In each of their cases, it has become clear to them that both brands and audiences expect a certain amount of vulnerability and self-disclosure. Their professional challenge is in how to instrumentalize their acts of self-disclosure toward their desired professional ends. Affective expertise is located in how they embark on that instrumentalization.

I met Linda* and Michelle* in the buffet line for breakfast the first morning of the conference. Fortuitiously, Linda already subscribed to my newsletter about my research, and she was eager to discuss her experience with me. Michelle and she were "internet friends" – they both ran accounts with followings over 500k on Instagram and for years they had supported each other's work by sharing each other's posts and communicating via direct message on Instagram. The Mom 2.0 summit was the first time they'd ever met in person, but they seemed like old friends, finishing each others' sentences and sharing inside jokes.
I spoke to them together, so their interviews overlap in places.

Linda and Michelle in conversation: Negotiating how much to share

Linda lives in suburban New York City and runs an account that she describes as "a meme account." Michelle lives in the midwest and posts more personal, reflective content about having her first child as a teen mother, growing up and gaining confidence, becoming estranged from her mother, and other daily struggles that she contextualizes with a light touch. Michelle

also records a podcast under the same name as her Instagram account, touching on the same topics. "We're very much the funny moms, the relatable moms, the moms who talk about real motherhood stuff. Not the curated thing with the outfits of the day and perfect pics of the kids," Linda explained.

To open our conversation, I asked the two women what they considered success in their work.

Michelle: Well, money, sponsorships.
Linda: I never feel like I've succeeded.
Michelle: Well, you've succeeded in that you've grown a platform, you're reaching people. You are making a difference in people's lives.
Linda: Yes, but I could always be doing more. I could be helping MORE people. I could be making MORE money.
Michelle: You're helping people feel empowerment, connection. You have close to a million followers.
Linda: I just feel like I could be helping MORE people.
Michelle: I just feel like my piece that's missing is monetization.
Linda: It always is.
Michelle: Or being more impactful. Not like, the amount of people? But better impact for the group of people who are there.
KJM: Is that just through getting higher engagement?
Michelle: I don't think it's the size of the account that makes what you're doing great. There are huge accounts that are just sharing nothing.

Linda's page started out as "an anonymous meme page." She shared other peoples' posts that she found funny or resonant, and never shared anything about herself – her face appeared nowhere on her page. "I felt comfortable in that," she said. A few years into running the account, she introduced herself to her audience. "It was after I'd spoken to an agent who was like, you'll never book sponsorships being anonymous. So if you're going to do this, and do this properly, you're going to have to like be a personality. So I peeled back the curtain, and I was able to get a book deal, and get speaking engagements. But I still struggle with that. It's more comfortable to put out a meme than to bare your soul and be vulnerable."

I asked Linda if she felt ongoing pressure to disclose more of her personality, and she said there "absolutely" is pressure. "Even after doing this for many years, I'm still guarded in what I show and what I do. So, that probably hinders the sponsorships and that kind of stuff. But ultimately isn't it also about what's serving you, too? You're not going to put yourself out there just so you make money, you know? You have to worry about your own mental health, with putting yourself out there."

Michelle agreed that charting the course of self-disclosure is one of the challenges of the job. "It has to be authentic. If you're more private, and then you suddenly do something really public because the internet wants you to be doing something, it's not good. You have to show up as your true self, and you're telling your story, and your story helps somebody out there. But it's also hard, showing up as your true self. Because maybe somebody doesn't like your story."

Michelle's Instagram content is more rooted in her own identity and life experiences. She posts selfies with captions regularly, so unlike for Linda, her brand *is* her persona. "I'm all in your feelings. I'm a feelings page. I don't shy away from the highs or the lows of motherhood. I feel like there's a lot of either one or the other. You usually get one of the other - either this glorified, curated view of motherhood, and everything's great great great, or it's 'my kids are little shits, and I hate it." I'm not on either one. I talk about the push and pulls of motherhood. The real nitty gritty stuff. 'I'm exhausted and I didn't show up the way I wanted to today.' I just normalize all of those emotions. I connect, empower and support moms. That's in my bio."

Linda and Michelle's experiences have taught them each about the value of self-disclosure on the mamasphere, and over the past five years they have figure out how to instrumentalize their own affect in the service of sponsorships. But the social worlds of their

184

immediate communities come with different sets of rules than the worlds they've cultivated on Instagram. Despite Mom 2.0's incitement that "what you do matters," Linda and Michelle's worlds don't necessarily share that view – or at least, that's the impression they get. If momfluencers are in a process of reclaiming expertise from traditional medical and contemporary corporate experts, you wouldn't know it from Linda and Michelle's experiences.

"I didn't tell people in my town what I do, until very recently," said Linda.

"I still don't," said Michelle. "People assume I'm a stay-at-home mom." It struck me as odd that both women were secretive about their work as momfluencers. What was the basis for their shame or secrecy? "There's a lot of dismissiveness," said Linda. "But then also, I just feel weird if people are like, 'oh, so you're famous?' I just want it to feel normal."

"My girls' preschool figured it out, I don't know how," said Michelle. "And all my neighbours have figured it out. I do a neighbourhood book club, and one day I walked in, and somebody had told everyone. And they were like, why didn't you tell us? And I was like, oh, it's just not a big deal! And now while I'm talking about personal stuff in my stories, I'm like, I know all these people are watching this now. It feels weird."

"Oh, my god," said Linda, "I am way more comfortable talking to total strangers about having a miscarriage than talking to people that I'm close to. I'm the president of the Parent Teachers Organization in my son's school district. And the principal told the superintendent about what I do. Sometimes it feels awkward - I write memes for a living. But none of my neighbours know. I wouldn't like that."

Of all the women I spoke to at Mom 2.0, Linda and Michelle had the largest Instagram followings, and yet they were the only people who spoke about feeling shame about their work

as momfluencers. For them, the affect necessary to maintain an engaged audience – which necessarily has to be "authentic" – exists in conflict with the affective scripts that they use in their daily lives. Reconciling the online and real-world self, for Linda and Michelle, is awkward.

"My mom hates my podcast," said Michelle. On the podcast and on her Instagram page, Michelle shares her experience having been a teen mother dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. "When I was pregnant with my first kid, very young, my mother told me to get an abortion, and when I didn't, she stopped talking to me for months. I didn't talk about any of that on the podcast, but when she listened to it, she was like, 'I don't like thinking back to that time.' And I was like, I'm sure you don't! But now that I've started talking about it on my account, it's impacted other relationships."

In recent years, Michelle and her mother have become estranged, and she's begun talking about family estrangement in her content as well. By her account, sharing her stories have both hurt some of her close relationships and helped her to heal from the harm that some of these relationships caused her. She did not characterize her self-disclosure as having been harmful to her, but it obviously was a choice that she made and committed to, despite some significant social costs. For Michelle, this is all part of being honest with herself and her audience, something that ultimately she feels she's rewarded for, with strong engagement.

Michelle and Linda both appear to want more ease in their working lives, which echoes Lisa's experience in Chapter 4. Michelle claims to "hate" Instagram reels, which they're being encouraged to create, both by brands' partnership deals and by Instagram's algorithm, which rewards reels with more exposure than static images. But in both women's cases, the tenor of their content relies on stress and struggle for its narrative basis. They are creating content about pain, frustration and domestic inequality – often for laughs, and in the form of memes. Their aim

is to provide affirmation and support for their audiences, but fulfilling this aim requires that there be a sense of struggle to begin with. It occurred to me while chatting with Michelle and Linda about their content that, while it is without a doubt helpful and affirming for their audiences, it might be part of a discourse that actively disincentivizes ease while agitating for more ease.

SALLY: Creating a real-world community with the help of commerce

Sally is on the younger side compared to other moms I spoke to at Mom 2.0, at just over 30. She wore on-trend clothing and seemed perhaps more fashion-focused than women like Linda and Michelle, who, while very well groomed, laughed when I suggested they were "lifestyle influencers." "We are SO not that," Linda corrected me, implying with her tone that being a lifestyle influencer was not a category that she wished to be associated with.

Sally had been at the previous, all-virtual Mom 2.0 summit I attended during the pandemic lockdown, and although we tried to connect for an interview, I wasn't able to connect with her. I was interested to see a familiar face attending the in-person event. I asked Sally to describe what kind of content she creates.

"In the past year or so I've been focusing more as a business rather than a hobby. I'm currently in the shift of focusing more on creating community for moms and their goals and dreams outside of motherhood. So I do a lot of self confidence posts, dreams and goals and encouraging other moms to pursue those dreams. While also giving the real and rawness of motherhood in my stories. And I focus a little bit on casual style for moms. The biggest thing that I'm taking from this conference is to focus on building that community around me, in my area. Hosting events, playdates, and having that balance of "girls night out" and also being a mom and playdates - kind of combining the two."

I was struck by how many simultaneous things Sally is trying to do with her content - to encourage self-confidence in others, demonstrate affective"rawness" while also maintaining a

consistent sense of aesthetic mastery through style posts. If I were a marketing consultant I would have advised her to choose a niche and stick to it.

I asked Sally what she meant by creating a community for moms "and their goals and dreams outside of motherhood." I wondered what that meant for her. She explained by sharing her personal experience – a move that suggests an established norm of interpersonal relations in this space, wherein individuals instrumentalize their own story for the purpose of establishing credibility within the space.

"I was pregnant with my daughter, and then I was a surrogate. During that time I struggled a lot with PPD and anxiety and I didn't know how to get out of it. I was talking to a friend from church, and she was trying to give me some advice about how to swim above the current. And she said, you just have to start telling people, and it will help you start better understanding how you feel. Just saying it out loud can let it not control you, I guess? So I just started telling people – my friends, and my husband. And then I started sharing it on Instagram, and the more people I told, the more I felt myself coming out of it. So now, this past year…I want to help other moms that are struggling."

Sally went on to describe her ultimate goal: to host regular meetups for moms, in-person, that would be sponsored by a brand partner. "When I was in the thick of depression I felt like I didn't have any connections. I felt like I wasn't able to make friends easily even though I would consider myself a very sociable outgoing person… If I can have a space that other moms don't feel like they're alone, then I want to try to help that."

I found it interesting that Sally was seeking to involve a brand partner. Obviously she is hoping to create an income stream out of the meetups. It did remind me of the shrinking of public space (Pitas et al 2020) through movements toward privatization in municipalities. Using a public space for a meetup did not appeal to her, it would not enhance the appeal of her events. Her target audience is interested in visually appealing decorations – "cuteness" – which an underfunded public park would not be likely to provide. Sponsorship seems to me like more than

188

just a way for Sally to earn an income – it is an imperative to appeal to the taste regimes of the local moms that Sally hopes to attract.

Sally's first in-person event was in the works: a get-together called "Drinks and Glow" that would take place in partnership with a friend who runs a self-tanning business. It would take place at the self-tanning salon, an opportunity to mingle with other moms, as she put it. Babies and children would be welcome, and there would be "cocktails and mocktails." If guests want a spray tan, they would have to pay for it, but the gathering itself would be free.

Having an event within a spray tanning salon necessarily structures Sally's event within a normative framework of traditional feminine rituals of grooming and maintenance of self. But by her reckoning, a spray tan salon is a safe, neutral space for potentially lonely moms in her area to gather in. A bar wouldn't be as kid-friendly and a restaurant would require too much cost outlay to reserve the space. A spray-tan salon, to Sally, offered a reasonable compromise. Given the milieu where Sally lives – upper-middle-class suburban Southern California – a spray tan salon was as close to a universally welcoming environment with air conditioning as she was able to find.

Sally's rationale about having the event inside a business that was offering a service for a fee is that the partnership enables her to host the event. She doesn't want the cost to exclude moms who might want to participate but can't afford it. "That's where I'm trying to figure out a balance. I want people to come and I don't want money to hold them back. When it grows, I have to somehow make that happen. Maybe it will be a membership fee to join, but then you can come to any events," she said.

I sensed that Sally was somewhat conflicted about the extent to which she was willing to self-disclose in her content. Despite mentioning the "rawness" of motherhood, I found her

189

content on Instagram to be exclusively aspirational and inspiration-focused. I asked her how she felt she performed "realness" and she clarified that the "real" posts are kept in her Instagram stories, while the Instagram "grid" is for more polished imagery. Instagram stories disappear after 24 hours while the grid images remain unless they are deleted.

"In my stories, I'm in my pyjamas with no makeup. My daughter will be screaming in the background. In the main grid I'm sharing more confidence and community-related stuff. I think that might be a good balance, keeping the rawer stuff there but in a place where it disappears."

The process by which momfluencers determine how and what to share in order to instrumentalize affect in the service of relatability is highly subjective and to generalize about it would require a much larger data set than I gathered for this study. But from my data it is clear that every momfluencer goes through a process by which she decides what degree of so-called vulnerability she is willing to demonstrate, and to what end. In this way, affect (which includes what Sally referred to as "rawness" and other moms I spoke to referred to variously as "realness", "honesty" and "messiness" is commodified through the deployment of momfluencers' affective expertise.

Ultimately, Sally's goal is to create affordances for forming social connections for new moms in her area. Helping her peers overcome loneliness and isolation is her motivation, alongside earning an income. It's interesting to think of the simplicity and ease with which mommy-baby groups can be organized in the context of publicly funded spaces like libraries and community centres, but perhaps given the ongoing privatization of public spaces in the United States, these spaces are less accessible in Sally's community.

Although I suspect a slightly different dynamic is at work. Growing income inequality in the United States has, perhaps, meant that free public spaces for gathering have become

190

associated with poverty in the minds of self-consciously upwardly mobile people such as Sally. Put another way: libraries and community centers are for the poor. To indicate financial stability, Sally is required to spend money (or, ideally, find a sponsor) to put on an event that will be perceived as "cute" to her peers; this is also an imperative if she wants to generate appealing visuals to share on Instagram and grow her following.

Neoliberal fiscal policies in the United States have led to reduced budgets for public spaces over the past four decades (Brown 2019). Momfluencers hosting sponsored events inside tanning salons and chic cafes is a symptom of this growing gap between public and private spaces. It could be postulated that the problem of underfunded public spaces might be exacerbated by momfluencers' imperative to host events in "cute" environments for the sake of their branding and visual content. This practice could potentially influence new parents away from using and supporting public spaces, relying instead on private events in environments with exaggerated attention to visual detail. More research would be valuable on this subject in the coming years.

REBECCA: "I'm overflowing the platform."

Linda and Michelle introduced me to Rebecca because they thought I would find her story interesting. The three of them have been friends on Instagram for several years and consider themselves part of a niche that identifies itself as "relatable" and "funny." Of the three friends, Rebecca is the least experienced with momfluencing (she started during the pandemic), and at 275k followers on Instagram and 625k on TikTok, she is nowhere near where Linda is. However, her content gets the most engagement of the group (according to their estimates) and she is considered by the threesome to be something of an "up-and-coming" sensation.

191

Rebecca's content is primarily Reels; short videos with sound and captioning that feature her speaking directly to the camera. Her face appears in every single one of her videos, and she appears less carefully groomed than most momfluencers; minimal makeup, sometimes messy hair.

Rebecca began monetizing her content about a year ago. Now, she earns more money than her husband, a police officer. She estimated that she's earning around $10,000 per month now. She feels that her content is resonating with her audience to an unusually powerful extent, which explains her rapid growth and success. And her content is based on self-disclosure and vulnerability, even more so, I observed, than the other women included in this chapter.

I asked Rebecca to describe the overall message of her content. "Moms - I feel like - carry shame and guilt over the struggles they have… Women internalize it, and then it affects their mental health and the whole experience of how much they enjoy motherhood. My message is to lift the lid off the shame that people are feeling, share what people are going through, not only let people know they're not alone but talk about the context around why we feel so much guilt and why we feel shame."

Rebecca's content is more overtly feminist in its message than most of the her online friends'.

"Women are gaslit to believe that there's something wrong with them that they should fix," she said. "So my message is to give ourselves grace. Talk about it, be the village for one another that so many people are lacking. Vulnerability and storytelling will get rid of shame. And we can change the narrative of what motherhood is. All moms are going through the same shit. This whole narrative of I'm not good enough, or I'm not perfect. People feel alone because they don't share. Let's story-tell. We'll realize we're not crazy."

Having grown up in poverty, and sometimes experiencing homelessness as a child, Rebecca feels that her perspective – and her willingness to talk openly about it – sets her apart. "I don't feel like an expert – I'm not -- but at the same time, all of those things have given me a unique perspective."

Her expertise lies not only in her experience growing up in poverty and feeling shame as an adult, but in her ability to judge exactly how to share this information so that it's engaging, inviting, and relatable to her followers – without alienating them or crossing some invisible line into a degree of self-disclosure that makes some people uncomfortable. (This observation was made earlier, by Linda and Michelle, when talking about Rebecca. They remarked that her ability to make everyone feel welcome on her page, while also talking about very specific experiences that not everyone might relate to, was part of what set her apart.)

Rebecca told me that she was thrilled by the positive response to her message but that she felt limited in her ability to maximize the opportunity she saw before her. "I need a team," she said. She works 7 days a week, often until midnight. She takes time off in the evening to eat dinner with her family, but then is usually back at work after the kids are asleep.

"I am totally overwhelmed," she said. "I have no work-life balance. I need a video editor, someone to help me write pitches, someone to help me schedule my work…I am so confident in my message but I have no idea how to get my message into the world. I think I have something really special that a lot of people aren't talking about .How do I get a team? How do I do what Brene Brown does? Glennon Doyle? Where does she find the people?"

Brene Brown (2006, 2012) and Glennon Doyle (2013, 2020) are figures of massive influence and importance within the world of white, self-help-inflected momfluencing. Brown is

a social psychologist and researcher on shame, and Doyle is a former mommyblogger-turned-author, public speaker and podcaster who in some ways represents the heights to which everyday moms can reach with their careful acts of self-disclosure and cultivation of affective expertise. As a researcher, Brown is not in the business of self-disclosure herself, but she is one of the high priestesses of the belief system that vulnerability is deliverance. Her research is accessible and have had an influence on momfluencer discourse over the past decade, introducing concepts like shame and vulnerability into the everyday lexicon of the space.

Doyle has made her mark and her massive success on self-disclosure; she started out her career in the early days of mommyblogging, writing a blog about Christian family life called Momastery. Gradually she began to experience changes of heart, and she documented her divorce from her husband, recovery from addiction, and ultimately came out as gay all in posts she authored on her website. She is now married to US Olympic soccer star Abby Wambach and the two host a popular podcast together, which is dedicated largely to their sharing details from their everyday lives. Essentially, Doyle and Wambach have made a small media empire out of self-disclosure, and for ambitious content-creators like Rebecca, they are an inspiration.

Self-disclosure as commercial practice

All four of the women interviewed in this chapter report having experienced relief and personal growth through the act of sharing their stories online. (Linda, the "meme creator", is somewhat of an outlier, in that of the four she is the least willing to share information about her personal life. However, she claims to have built a supportive community that has helped her feel a sense of belonging in the world, even without sharing details of her own struggles.)

194

"I've never had this confidence before," Rebecca told me. " I have so much to say and I can't even fit it in a Reel. I can't fit it on this platform anymore. I'm overflowing the platform. People are like, how do you come up with content? That's not my problem – my problem is time."

For Rebecca, telling the story of her difficult childhood and struggles into adulthood has transformed her life for the better. Affective expertise seemed to come naturally to her; she had an early knack for telling her story in a way that the audience both trusted and enjoyed. It would be inaccurate to say that the commercial practice of self-disclosure is a matter of fitting oneself into an appealing mold for the audience; the women interviewed in this chapter all believe in "finding your niche" and speaking directly to them. For some, finding a niche is easier than others. Rebecca has found hers; Sally is still looking.

Conclusion: What can an economy of self-disclosure do for women?

Popular discourses of self-improvement and self-help, steeped as they are in the neoliberal valorization of self-reliance and optimization (Binkley 2011) are a source of comfort and reassurance as much as a source of inspiration for content creators like Michelle, Sally and Rebecca. Brene Brown and Glennon Doyle have both created market-tested examples of how to talk about suffering, frailty, fear, and ambivalence in ways that resonate with their peer group. These momfluencers look to this discourse for guidelines on how to share and what to keep private. For women like Rebecca, Doyle and Brown provide roadmaps for the cultivation of affective expertise.

I wonder how this particular kind of momfluencing – the kind rooted in self-disclosure, and reliant on a particular kind of affective expertise that requires that creators sometimes turn their

struggles and even trauma into entertaining content – will be part of the reclamation of expertise that I propose in the previous chapter. The content created by the women interviewed in this chapter is highly individual, in that it takes one woman's experience and maps it onto a larger population. This kind of content would seem like a natural fit for pushing back against existing systems of biopolitical constraint or domestic inequality.

However, none of the women I spoke to seemed intent on taking on larger forms of oppression. Mostly they were concerned with their survival as content creators, negotiating demanding platform algorithms. When I consider their main concern, which is maintaining their engagement among followers, I do wonder how much they would be able to risk for the sake of, say, pushing back against structural barriers that constrain American mothers. Momfluencers work at a highly contested point of collision between commerce and privacy. Their skills evolve according to the specific affordances and constraints of that contested point. If pushback within that space of contestation isn't entertaining – if audiences don't engage with that kind of content – what's the incentive to create that kind of content in the first place?

This observation aligns with existing research by Duffy et al on the precariousness of platform workers, and the extent to which speech and solidarity are constrained in a working environment that is utterly inscrutable and impossible to predict. However, my emphasis on the particular kind of expertise that accompanies the labour of self-disclosure builds on that research and poses a set of new questions: How do the specific skills honed by momfluencers in and through that precariousness both promise and foreclose upon potential forms of resistance? Or, put another way, how does precariousness shape the kind of pushback, the kind of speech, that is possible? How are the forms of resistance-speech that we might observe in this space in fact products of this unique, precarious environment?

Chapter 7
Defining affective expertise

As I outlined in the introduction, affective labour is the work of producing, by one's own behaviour, emotional outcomes in and for others. In this thesis, I have proposed a definition of expertise that expands upon the idea of affective labour to encompass the effortful affective contortions performed by influencers through their digital feeds. This expertise is enacted with an audience's preferences in mind, as well as the imagined or perceived preferences of platform algorithms. Although it intersects with entertainment and spectacle, its social function, and the strategic processes that underpin its deployment, make it distinct.

Affective expertise is a collection of instincts, postures, gestures and utterances that take place exclusively within the bounds of the creator economy. This is a way of being that has emerged entirely concurrently with, and in the service of, the forms of precarious labour that today make up this massive and growing economic and cultural sector. The enactment of affective expertise is mediated entirely through digital media; I don't believe that it has a meaningful "IRL" dimension. This belief is based on conversations detailed in my analysis of

197

data, wherein momfluencers reflected on their online personas and demonstrated extreme self-awareness in terms of how they presented themselves. The decisions made during the process of developing an online persona are where affective expertise is brought to bear. These choices are highly individual yet contingent upon myriad external considerations, many of which I detailed in my data analysis.

Returning to Hart and Negri, it's essential that we situate affective expertise as a set of practices by which momfluencers exert agency and recuperate value from the affective labour they engage in through the production of digital content. Affective labour is what animates their content – a set of attempts to generate a certain outcome: in this case, growing an engaged follower base. Affective expertise is the means by which their goals are met, the moves, both deliberate and at the level of instinct, that translate their efforts into success. It is what distinguishes influencers with highly engaged, passionate followings from would-be influencers (and these are legion – easily in the millions of users) whose efforts never quite bear fruit.

The flows of control (to borrow Deleuze's theory) that bind the mamasphere form the topography of obstacles and affordances by which affective expertise is acquired and deployed. These flows of control include but are not limited to algorithmic regimes, imagined affordances between audience and creator, advertising revenue structures, influencer management companies and ever-changing micro-trends that sweep across social apps like weather systems. Influencers must navigate how they will act within each of these flows of control, and they must do so on the basis of very little reliable information or formal guidance.

As numerous interview subjects remarked, there is continuous pressure from social apps to create content using whatever new features the apps are trying to promote at a given time. However, creating content using unfamiliar tools is a gamble – one's followers might not

respond well, or the tools might simply not fit naturally with the kind of content one creates. Navigating the pressures to create certain kinds of content requires affective expertise as well – knowing what tools will best complement one's message, and what might not resonate with the audience, while balancing what the change might cost in terms of algorithmic visibility (Bishop 2020).

Becoming a "type"

In Chapter 6, during the conversations I had at Mom 2.0 with established and aspiring momfluencers, each described processes by which they identified as a certain "type" of momfluencer. "I'm a feelings page," said Michelle. Linda is gradually "pulling back the curtain" from being an anonymous memes page, in part due to advice and pressure from the publishing industry. The two of them emphasized that "we are SO not that," when I suggested they were lifestyle influencers. Sally described her niche as "self confidence posts, dreams and goals and encouraging other moms to pursue those dreams." As she attempted to describe her "type" I sensed that she was somewhat uncomfortable, and later she admitted that she was still figuring out where exactly she felt she fit within the momfluencer ecosystem.

Establishing an affiliation within the existing field of action is perhaps the first step in acquiring affective expertise. This involves locating one's place within the existing ecosystem of voices to which you hope to belong. One's niche, once established, is another constraint that determines in part what an influencer can and can't disclose.

Influencers are in constant conversation with one another; they learn from each other's experience and share resources. Success as an influencer is probably nigh on impossible today without belonging to such a virtual community of practice. In order to join such a community

199

one must first correctly judge where one would best fit in – creating a type for oneself and determining what gestures and utterances will best express one's belonging.

As Toma (2016) described in her close analysis of Heather Armstrong's pioneering mommyblog, Dooce.com, the construction of an online persona is a complex process that comes under extreme scrutiny when one's trying to leverage it into a paying job. As laid out in Chapter 5, brands have strict notions about how motherhood should be represented, and this is central to the construction of an influencer's personal brand. Armstrong's creation of an "outsider" persona was steeped in American fantasies of the "maverick" truth-teller, the independent thinker, and the rabble-rouser (Toma 2016). Likewise Brooke Reybould, Amber Fillerup Clark and Katie Crenshaw each carefully calibrate their online speech to reinforce the personae they have created, while also managing to appear uncoached, sincere and trustworthy. This highwire act is perhaps the central challenge of maintaining affective expertise.

Weighing authenticity, relatability and audience aspirations

Once a momfluencer has determined what her "type" will be, she must proceed to fulfill that niche's conventions while striking the right tone through her choice of images, videos and captions, to appeal to her audience. This is distinct from storytelling; it takes place below the surface of narrative. It's another subtle set of maneuvers meant to generate a positive response, another dimension of affective expertise.

The audience for momfluencers – a huge and diverse population that remains relatively understudied, in my opinion – is subject to numerous intersecting forces of neoliberal economic precariousness (as outlined, for example, in Chivers and Yochim 2017 and Watson 2019). Hanging on economically in an age of workplace precariousness, eroding social spending, privatization of care infrastructure and hyper-responsibilization of family care is like juggling

chainsaws. It would seem, based on the growing size of the audience for momfluencer content, that the tougher things get for American families, the more appetite there is for the orderly, attractive and upbeat content produced by momfluencers like Amber Fillerup Clark and Brooke Reybould, as described in Chapter 3's content analysis.

It's this dynamic that calls to mind Berlant's theory of cruel optimism (2011). It's within the constraints of the rhetoric of cruel optimism that momfluencers construct their narratives. They must remain sensitive to the vulnerabilities that plague everyday mothers while also catering to their dearest-held aspirations – even if these aspirations seem completely out of sync with material realities. In fact, it could be argued that some momfluencers, like Fillerup Clark and Reybould, are disseminators of cruel optimism, or cruel optimism agents. They enable their audiences to escape into fantasy so as to cope with their daily challenges, broadcasting visions of a self-reliant and orderly daily life that is emblematic of neoliberal domestic "success." These representations of family-as-corporation (exemplified in particular by Reybould and Fillerup-Clark) model their representations of family life on positive psychology: Positive thinking yields happiness (Binkley 2011). Over time, this program of neoliberal governmentality through positive thinking has a cumulative impact of erasing affective states that might exist outside a program of perpetual self-improvement (Jezer-Morton 2022).

Affective expertise in this context is the understanding of how to appear both "real" – subject to the same laws of scarcity that govern the rest of us – while also offering an aspirational vision of domestic order and happiness. Even wealthy, high-gloss momfluencers like Amber Fillerup Clark must include subtle nods to the "real world" and its concerns: Her audience won't be engaged with her unless she indicates that she's a "real person." But the precision with which she gestures to realness is where her expertise lies: She will show only certain kinds of

household mess, (usually a cheerfully messy crafts table, with signs of children's creativity), and only certain kinds of ambivalence, as outlined in Chapter 3.

Neoliberalism, and the cruel optimism that flows from its inequalities, are part of the spirit that animates the creator economy. Affective expertise can be understood as yet another way of negotiating these conditions, and seeking out openings through which opportunity might be conjured out of a jumble of affordances and constraints. Here, the commodification of the uncommodifiable is laid most obviously bare. In precarious times, a mother's love and commitment to her family can appear to her as the only guaranteed resource that is available. Affective expertise is a matter of demonstrating fitness for this colossal responsibility, while affirming to an audience that they, too, have the inner resources to be this fit, through an ongoing enactment of show-don't-tell empowerment.

Disclosure, concealment, and "real talk"

While most of the aspirational content produced by momfluencers takes the form of still images and video, the "real talk" often comes through in captions and other forms of text. Acts of self-disclosure in the context of a polished personal brand are important opportunities for building trust and connection with audiences. However, not all acts of self-disclosure will work this way, and an intersecting matrix of social norms govern that which can and can't be admitted in this space.

As I outlined in the review of literature, "self-awareness" while parenting became a moral imperative in the mid-20th century, alongside the popularity of Dr. Benjamin Spock's writing. This imperative remains in place across the mamasphere, where it is largely taken for granted that mothers are responsible for maintaining a steady and cheerful demeanor for the sake

of their children. Self-management in the same of appearing above all competent and in-control is a thread that runs through every aspect of affective expertise. There is no form of speech or image in the mamasphere that is exempt from scrutiny for the evidence of competence on the part of the mother.

Understanding how and when to disclose personal details and vulnerabilities is another dimension of affective expertise. Appearing to let followers into your "real life" is essential for maintaining engagement, but it also makes creators vulnerable to criticism, ridicule or even abuse. The women interviewed in Chapter 4 demonstrate some of the many considerations and possible pitfalls that come from sharing personal beliefs or stories.

Michelle and Linda, the moms I met at Mom 2.0 who described how they make their pages "safe spaces" for vulnerability and feelings, have strict rules about what they do and don't share about themselves. The act of being vulnerable is itself governed by strict rules of engagement online; take your disclosure a step too far and you might earn the indelible label of "hot mess" – a brutally undermining experience for mothers, whose images, even when they're demonstrating vulnerability, must project competence and control.

Rebecca, whose childhood was marked by trauma and poverty, is experiencing success with the Reels she creates giving moms encouragement. She has shared a lot about her past, and marvels at the extent to which her audience has responded to her disclosure. In our conversation, she expressed disbelief at the rate her following has grown. Rebecca is in possession of a lot of instinctive affective expertise. She has developed a consistent visual style, where she appears in her house, wearing a consistent muted colour palette, with her hair in a signature messy topknot. She has a sweet, open face and speaks directly to the camera as though to an old friend. She seems safe, cared for and competent, so when she shares difficult stories from her own past, one

never feels that she is "oversharing" or acting from a place of "attention-seeking" – both of which are criticisms often leveled at aspiring momfluencers who are seeking to leverage a following through self-disclosure. Rebecca knows exactly how to behave on-camera so that her audience isn't worried about her, and trusts every word she says. Affective expertise has enabled her to walk the thin line – again with the tightrope metaphor – between honesty and oversharing.

Expertise or entertainment? Why not both?

As outlined in the review of literature, there is always tension between expertise, experience, and scientific evidence in the realms of domesticity and child-rearing. Affective expertise is by definition informal. Although courses exist meant to teach people how to "grow your brand on social media," possessing affective expertise is, for most people, a matter of instinct. Although it can be taught, there is no guarantee that someone seeking to learn it will be successful; it's like teaching "emotional intelligence." Best practices may add up to the thing itself, but don't always.

As a form of lay expertise, affective expertise defies historical norms around who gets to be expert and why. For example, lay expertise in the domestic arts or the care of children has historically been understood to increase as one ages; older women were sought after for medicinal help and during childbirth for millennia, the idea being that experience equals expertise. This logic is meaningless in the mamapshere, where momfluencers age out of the space by their mid-30s, and new faces are perpetually vying for market share and attention. Being a relative "noob" is not a hindrance to consolidating affective expertise in the mamasphere; indeed, mothers of newborns enjoy predictable spikes in engagement metrics, according to the folklore of the mamasphere.

204

Several questions remain unanswered by my attempt to define affective expertise: If experience doesn't equate to expertise in this context, how can this form of expertise be measured? Let's say we decide to use "popularity," measured by engagement metrics used by algorithmic sharing platforms, as a way of determining whether someone possesses affective expertise. Does that make affective expertise little more than an ability to entertain? How is this expertise, and not just entertainment?

Adding to the slipperiness of the issue of expertise in the context of the mamasphere is the prevalence of misinformation and conspiracy theory within this space (Petersen 2020). There are hundreds of cases of momfluencers gaining large and devoted followings through the spreading of scientifically disproven information related to vaccination, illness and health, and myriad other issues. Momfluencers active in the QAnon movement spread misinformation related to public figures during the 2020 American presidential election (Petersen 2020). Would amassing followers and adherents based on discourse that is proven to be untrue nonetheless fall into the category of affective expertise?

I'll address the latter question first: I would argue that it is well within the definitional framework that I have laid out to confer affective expertise to purveyors of misinformation. In fact, it is the canny accumulation of this expertise through rhetorical maneuvers over time that enables misinformation to be spread so widely, in many cases by audience members that might not perceive ulterior political agendas that might underlie certain messages. I don't see any basis for linking "veracity of claims" with affective expertise – so much of what people believe on social media has no basis in fact, including claims made by momfluencers about the benefits of whatever product they're selling. It is affective expertise that smuggles lies and half-truths into the sunlight of legitimacy; understanding affective expertise might actually help us better

understand the processes by which misinformation gains traction in algorithmic ecosystems. It's the answer to, "why do people believe this stuff"?

Is affective expertise simply an ability to entertain? Belonging to an audience within an algorithmic space is distinct from being a "spectator" in the passive sense. Affective expertise is gained through an ongoing negotiation with the audience, and the audience has the capacity to withdraw their trust in someone, by leaving comments or simply unfollowing. The feedback from the social media audience is immediate, allowing influencers to calibrate their affect on an ongoing, nuanced basis. In this sense, affective expertise is a negotiation between the creator and their audience.

Recent historical events, including the Trump presidency and the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated the power of misinformation to sway public opinion and sway policy. Indeed, misinformation is widely considered a social issue that requires urgent action at the level of policy and education (Farkas and Schou 2019). A better understanding of how trust and affinity is built up in relationships between influencers and audiences – a better understanding of the social function of affective expertise – might play a part in developing media literacy strategies in young people and adults alike.

CONCLUSION

I have proposed my theory of affective expertise to many people over the course of writing this thesis, most of them aspiring momfluencers. The most reliable way I've been able to get my idea across has been to say that affective expertise is the "secret sauce" that makes an influencer good at their job. Without exception, momfluencers have known what I'm getting at, without having the vocabulary themselves to describe it. "Oh yeah," they'll say, before launching into their own thoughtful and nuanced perspective on how affective expertise works. "It's more than just being a pretty face," one woman at Mom 2.0 offered. "And it's more than being a really good mom. You need personality. But not just that either."

This applies to all content creators, from Twitch to TikTok. Affective expertise is embodied, discursive and ephemeral – and it is found anywhere content is being produced by a precarious workforce, for consumption on an algorithmic platform. It's charisma's encounter with digital culture – the ability to calibrate one's affect based on a host of variables, all of which

207

change continuously and require constant monitoring. The opacity of algorithmic design makes affective expertise essential for success on social platforms; without reliable information on how algorithms choose, creators develop strategies for engaging their audiences based on their intuitions and within the constraints of their environments. Indeed, it's impossible to define a theory of affective expertise without considering the precarious labor conditions of independent content creators.

Crucially, this is a form of expertise that exists within a field of amateurs – and there is very little formally that distinguishes these experts from the amateurs that surround them. There is no badge, no credential, no verification process. But given the ubiquity of influencers in lay peoples' lives, it's useful to develop a way of understanding what makes some influencers successful. Moreover, most people who consume social media content develop their own opinions about the influencers whose content they consume. As an audience, we are highly sophisticated and attuned to what we enjoy and what we don't respond to in influencers' content. It's time we had a framework for identifying the affective effort that goes into influencers' work, and understanding what affect has to do with why some influencers might be more successful than others. This theory of affective expertise seeks to initiate a step in that direction.

I have spent three years writing this thesis, and in that time, scholarship on the creator economy has exploded. What I considered understudied areas at the outset of this study, including influencers' tactics and tools for survival under algorithmic management, are now the subject of fascinating research by the likes of Bishop (2021), Glatt (2022) and Arriagada (2021), among many others. Likewise, the conditions among my research informants changed. When I began this study in 2019, most momfluencers were focusing their efforts on Instagram. Today, in the late summer of 2022, Instagram has pushed influencers to create more videos for their Reels

feature, intended to compete with TikTok. I interviewed a handful of momfluencers in October of 2021 about the switch to Reels, and the emergent consensus was that video was a lot more work, Instagram was a hostile environment to work in, and TikTok was an app for teens.

Less than a year later, I observe these same momfluencers having adapted to Reels and having created TikTok accounts. The labour of the content creator is contingent entirely on the whims of the platforms, and one of the lasting impressions I have of the momfluencers I have spoken to for this research has been their resilience and adaptability. Surely this must be a quality of affective expertise, too.

Throughout this thesis I have catalogued instances where momfluencers have been subject to patriarchal norms surrounding mothers' speech, appearance, behaviour and perceived "fitness." Likewise, biopolitical pressures related to mental health, child care, and the maintenance of a nuclear family unit, continue to set the terms for what can and can't be said and done among momfluencers. As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, momfluencing could be an active site of mobilization for social change, and some influential voices within the space are sending messages of encouragement through their programming at events like Mom 2.0. However, as we saw in Chapter 6, there are few incentives for momfluencers to take major political risks in their online speech. Mostly, they continue to focus on the individual at the expense of the collective. This has had the effect, of the past decade, of stymying any possibility for major political mobilization among momfluencers.

It's easy to dismiss momfluencers as foot soldiers for the patriarchy. It's easy to say that their work has the effect of reinforcing punishing and outmoded beliefs about maternal instinct, female beauty, conspicuous consumption, and biopolitical regimes of health and wellness. Indeed, much of my content analysis, and some of the data collected in interviews, has supported

this. However, that's not the conclusion I have reached after three years of paying close attention to momfluencers.

I argue that the accumulation of affective expertise enables momfluencers to carve out space for speech that might go against some of those hegenomic structures that determine so much of what goes on in this space. It doesn't necessarily happen often, and it doesn't necessarily happen loudly (although in some cases, this kind of defiant speech becomes central to a brand, as is the case increasingly with Katie Crenshaw and others), but momfluencers are pushing back against over a century of male and institutional expertise that has dictated what mothers should and should not do. Speaking openly about maternal mental health has become as mainstream as Starbucks coffee in the momfluencer space; this change has occurred over the course of this research project, due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic. Body positivity, gender inclusivity, fights for racial equality – all of these causes are not alien to this space, despite some momfluencers struggling to engage with these discourses in ways that feel natural to them.

I would not go so far as to call the mamasphere the space of liberation it once was. In the early days of mommyblogging (as we learned in the review of literature), maternal speech was raw and open – there was a lot of potential contained within the mamasphere in the years before corporate sponsorship moved in. You might say that this potential went unrealized, but I disagree. The mamasphere is a dynamic space, where motherhood remains contested, and the nature of that contestation is changing. Momfluencers' affective expertise is enabling them to engage their audiences around conversations that would have been unheard-of five years ago. What will they be engaging with five years from now? To assume that it will be nothing but seasonal decorations and school-lunches is sexist hypocrisy.

Abortion access is being restricted across the United States, and I wondered, when Roe was first rolled back several months ago, where the momfluencers were in the debate. For a huge social issue that centers mothers, where was the outrage? In the intervening months, I have noticed momfluencers broaching the topic of abortion for the first time. Last week, Amber Fillerup Clark linked out to a TikTok made by an Arizona lawyer, explaining the state's new abortion ban. I could feel Amber's caution in sharing this – she made no editorial besides "this really helped me understand what's going on" -- but I have reason to believe that Amber is beginning to consider addressing the topic to her followers. Her affective expertise is being brought to bear, which means she is considering sponsors, business opportunities and the social costs. She's trying to figure out how to do it while remaining true to her brand. But I'll be watching closely, and I think she's working on something.

The field of social media studies moves fast. I have no doubt that the areas that I identify as future areas of inquiry will have been covered by researchers within months, if they aren't already. I hope that by proposing a theory of affective expertise, expanding upon existing theories of affective labour and grounded in theories of precarious labour, that I can contribute to a scholarship that might serve to ennoble the work of content creators.

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223

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