

Big Brother Meets the “Alpha Mom”: Tensions in the Media Standardization of Motherhood

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On 26 January 2007, *Today* on NBC aired a segment as part of its series on “Today’s Woman” entitled “Cocktail Playdates for Moms.” The segment was ostensibly intended to provide a neutral report on what it identified as a growing trend: mothers who enjoyed a glass of wine or beer together while their children played. After a pointed introduction by *Today* host Meredith Vieira (in which she quipped that “whether you call it ‘tots and tonic,’ ‘cocktails and chaos,’ or ‘booze and babies’...it has got everyone *buzzing*”) the field correspondent spoke with several mothers who explained their rationale for drinking a glass of wine while parenting. But even as the mothers argued that enjoying one glass of wine was a constructive way to socialize and to claim an adult subject position, the segment framed this practice in a way that construed these women as irresponsible and selfish, suggesting that “good” mothers would never be tempted by alcohol. Both correspondent Janet Shamlian’s voiceover and the segment’s soundtrack provided commentary that transgressed the bounds of objectivity. “Call it the cocktail playdate,” Shamlian intoned: “the jungle gym, the sandbox...and a backyard bar.” The beats of hip-hop/club music resonated

in the segment's background, later switching to the upbeat Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross jazz tune "Gimme That Wine"; both songs implied that cocktail playdates are mere sips away from drunken revelry.

If these sorts of messages are being communicated by the *Today* show, currently the most-watched morning television program in the United States with a viewership of five to six million people (Kurtz), what does this suggest about the mass media's relationship to the cultural constructions of motherhood that it promotes? By what avenues does the media serve to normalize our conceptions of power and gender, particularly in parenting contexts? While it would be impossible to trace the direct effects that the media has on women's personal choices (especially because those choices are impacted by countless other contextual factors), the media's specific strategies to pressure women to conform to hegemonic ideals should be more carefully examined. In this paper, I address the media's perpetuation of the Alpha Mom subjectivity, a very specific and ultimately impossible standard to which mothers are encouraged to aspire. Informed both by ideals of "perfect" mothers from recent decades and rhetorical acts of resistance in the present, this subject position symbolizes the tension between the normalizing effects of the media on motherhood and femininity, and mothers' personal or vernacular experiences. Examining the ways in which the Alpha Mom is framed and negotiated in mediated contexts provides a rich understanding of the key issues in contemporary motherhood.

While the term *Alpha Mom* was coined in 2004 as a branding strategy for the mothers' television channel *Alpha Mom TV* on cable network Comcast On-Demand, it has since been used more broadly to describe the criteria for the "good" mother in contemporary society. A recent article in *USA Today* defines this new ideal as

[an] educated, tech-savvy, Type A [mom] with a common goal: mommy excellence. She is a multitasker. She is kidcentric. She is hands-on. She may or may not work outside the home, but at home, she views motherhood as a job that can be mastered with diligent research....and—key for marketers—she is, as the label implies, a

leader of the pack who influences how other moms spend (“Alpha Moms”).

While other researchers have not used the specific term to describe this ideal subject position, they have pinpointed the criteria that comprise it. Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers describe the contemporary “good” mother as follows:

Above all, she is selfless. Her children come before herself and any other need or person or commitment, no matter what. She loves her children unconditionally yet she is careful not to smother them with her love and her own needs...She is ever present in her children’s lives when they are young, and when they get older she is home every day to greet them as they return from school. If she works outside the home, she arranges her job around her children so she can be there for them as much as possible, certainly whenever they are sick or unhappy. (30)

Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels term the most recent trend in public representations of mothers the “new momism,” and define it as “the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids...and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (4).

To understand the sophisticated and nuanced standards by which mothers are judged and normalized in American culture, it is worthwhile to examine the constructions of motherhood from decades past that serve to inform these contemporary ideals. Some of the primary visions of the “ideal” mother in our public consciousness likely find their beginning in portrayals of the nuclear family of the 1950s. Betty Friedan famously provides example after example of fictionalized media representations of what she terms “happy housewife heroines” (33), June-Cleaveresque wives and mothers who cultivate their feminine beauty and exist solely for acts of subservience to their husbands and children, and who adhere to the belief

that "the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity...in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (43). The result, in Friedan's account, was the "problem that has no name," the great lack of purpose in the lives of American women in the 1950's that literally drove them insane. Even though the "ideal" mother was in fact very different from actual women in this time period, this ideology presented a model to which they felt they should aspire; not surprisingly, the "perfect mother" was a fiction then—and she remains a fiction now, even as she helps to inform contemporary motherhood.

As the Women's Liberation movement came to the forefront in the 1960s and its immediate results eased into the 70s and 80s, more women entered the workforce with the result that the media's face of motherhood in these decades changed significantly—a result of women's backlash, perhaps, to the "perfect mother" (Douglas and Michaels 42). The ideal of this era was embodied by the Supermom subjectivity, a full-time working woman who could still attend to her children's every need (Kantrowitz 46-47), somehow able to find enough time to assume two full-time jobs. This stereotype eventually fell out of favor as well; Barbara Kantrowitz, in a 1986 *Newsweek* article, notes that "the myth of Supermom is fading fast—doomed by anger, guilt and exhaustion" and describes new trends in mothers' work such as flex-time, home businesses, and leaving work for several years to return after children are older (47).

It may be in the return swing of this pendulum that the Soccer Mom, the most familiar ancestor of the contemporary "ideal" mother, was born (Douglas and Michaels 206). Research suggests that a combination of Supermom burnout, increased media focus on potential threats to children from both inside and outside the home, and political emphasis on reviving family values (Coontz 95) resulted in a trend of affluent, suburban mothers choosing to work only part-time or less. Women were confronted with a media onslaught of stories about razor blades in Halloween candy; children molested, abducted, or killed by caregivers; and all sorts of manifestations of bad mothers, such as crack mothers, murdering mothers, and so on (Douglas and Michaels 85, 141), all of which exercised a profound pathetic

appeal to mothers' sense of fear and guilt about not spending more time at home. Douglas and Michaels note that ideal mothers in 1980s media were "exemplified by...the educated, authoritative, highly organized woman who read every childcare book published... and juggled work and family" (151). A mother who often worked full-time could not likely conform to these rigorous standards, and so many mothers felt pressure to choose between their children and their jobs—and past constructions of motherhood made it perfectly clear that they belonged at home.

I have traced the genealogy of publicly constructed and memorialized mothers through the past several decades because they have greatly informed representations of the "ideal" mother in the present-day. Today's Alpha Mom may be newly technologically adept, but she also is a composite of the past fifty years' worth of unrealistic standards—and thus just as much a fiction as her predecessors. The fact that the Alpha Mom is still considered most "at home" in a domestic sphere in which she strives for perfection reflects ideals of the 1950s and 1960s; the fact that she is expected to multitask—entertaining and educating children, maintaining domestic splendor, texting on her Blackberry, and possibly working outside the home—evokes the Supermom of the 1970s and 1980s; her fastidious attention to and sacrifice for her children, to the eradication of her own independence and individuality, maintains expectations of the 1990s Soccer Mom. It is as if society chose the most difficult, most demanding aspects of each past cultural model and channeled them into a new identity for contemporary mothers—and one just as impossible to achieve.

But even as American popular culture has constructed a purely fictional archetype of the "ideal mother," the pressures women feel to conform to this standard are neither imaginary nor inconsequential. The ideals catalogued above have been communicated and imposed largely through the mass media, ranging from women's magazines in the mid twentieth century (Friedan 44) to television and the Internet today. The prevalence of the media in our everyday lives—and our dependence upon it—suggests that it has incredible influence upon our actions, our opinions, and ourselves; ultimately, we cannot escape exposure to ideologies so widely communicated. I contend that messages of motherhood conveyed by purport-

edly reputable news organizations have the potential to construct a convincing, compelling standard to which readers and viewers may feel pressure to aspire. This standard also appears inherent in the goals of media texts that focus on motherhood. These texts seem to take a persuasive, normalizing stance rather than neutrally informing the public of certain issues or trends. The *USA Today* story on Alpha Moms ends with two provoking questions: "Are you an Alpha Mom or are you related to one? What makes you or her an Alpha Mom" ("Alpha Moms")? These questions seem to suggest that the reader should consider her own subjectivity and her own parenting style and compare it to that of the Alpha Mom. The existence or criteria for other "types" of mothers, however, are not discussed. The article suggests that if a woman is not an Alpha Mom, she might fall under the lesser categories of, perhaps, a Beta or Omega Mom, and to assume those subject positions would be undesirable. David Gauntlett argues that television, the Internet, and other media "provide numerous kinds of 'guidance' . . . in the myriad suggestions of living which they imply. We lap up this material because the social construction of identity today is the *knowing* social construction of identity. Your life is your project—there is no escape. The media provides some of the tools which can be used in this work" (249). Applying Gauntlett's lens here indicates that texts such as this *Alpha Mom* article possess a subtle, manipulative power to privilege certain standards of living, behaving, and even becoming—and that the media does not hesitate to normalize motherhood via this power.

One rhetorical device that encourages women to construct their identities in accordance with social norms is the "bad mother" trope. The "bad mother" is a stigmatized and demonized character that ultimately fails her children and society at large. Ranging from the most criticized, such as mothers in nontraditional families, poor teen mothers, or drug addicted pregnant women (Chase and Rogers 31, 35, 41), to mothers who work and thus neglect their children, to mothers who stay at home and thus smother their children (Tincknell 27), this trope appears consistently in mass media. The "bad mother" operates rhetorically by presenting an undesirable option for motherhood—and implying that if the audience member would like to avoid this pitfall, she would do well to abide by the me-

dia's standards. But this common trope is actually part of a larger fallacy of false dilemma; offering an undesirable choice and an "ideal" choice for good motherhood argues falsely that there is only one way—the standardized way, the "institution"—to parent well. Thus a woman who drinks wine at a playdate is cast as a bad mother, while the Alpha Mom that "does it all" is cast as ideal. Douglas and Michaels describe the rhetorical significance of such media arguments as constructing a "maternal panopticon" (171). Mothers are consistently held to fickle, impossible standards, and the consequences for failing are severe—ranging from cultural disapproval and hostility to criminalization. In standardizing motherhood, the media has crafted good mothers and bad—and suggested that "bad" mothers should be scrutinized, rehabilitated, legislated against, and ultimately reviled. The existent research in this field suggests that the media exerts tremendous power in normalizing what mothers feel they should do and who they should be. Ultimately, the "good" mother seems like a feasible ideal to which women aspire because the media leaves them with no other options but failure.

But even as the media exerts such power, it is also worthwhile to question if and how media texts resonate on a bottom-up level, with what Paul Nesbitt-Larking terms the "expectations of the everyday" (85). Much of the media's rhetorical success is contingent upon contextual factors such as preexisting audience ideologies and cultural norms; effective media arguments draw upon and may even originate from these shared ideologies, "thus reproducing dominant ideas and ideals" (99). The *Today* show segment with which I began this paper may help to reinforce certain standards of behaving—but it is quite possible that the rhetorical effect of this segment lies in its manipulation of (and appeal to) cultural values that the audience may find compelling. *Today* may have been preying on certain contextual factors, such as fears of mothers like Britney Spears, who allegedly abuse alcohol and provide substandard care for their children, or such as cultural hegemonies that dictate that mothers should not imbibe alcohol while parenting. The suggestion that cultural ideals inform the media while the media serve to replicate those same cultural ideals may be relevant to the various incarnations of ideal motherhood in the past half-century—and

the Alpha Mom subjectivity as the media offers it today. This subject position is a composite of decades worth of cultural constructions of what "good" means. The media, serving as the primary vehicle for relaying these constructions, may have helped to construct the Alpha Mom based on this synthesis of cultural values that have informed what qualities mothers should possess, such as selflessness, Type-A personalities, child-centric attention, drive for success, and so on. The communication and normalization of all of these values at once results in standards that are impossible to meet.

While the recognition of oppressive and inaccurate ideals of motherhood is well documented in academic discourse, the symbolic subversion and negotiation of these standards are a potentially rich area for further rhetorical study. In their text, Douglas and Michaels champion the difficult work of what they term *rebellious mothering*, which deliberately challenges the Alpha Mom ideals by affirming that good parenting, individualism, and nontraditional views of motherhood are not mutually exclusive (13). The Internet serves as a particularly apt venue for the expression of these subversive ideas and ideals. Rhetors are able to create and contribute to arguments that have the potential to reach a wide audience, but are mostly spared the bureaucratic difficulties associated with publishing in print or television media. Thus the "rebellious mothering" work that has been accomplished on the Internet has largely assumed a personal, politically bottom-up format. These acts of resistance are more specifically undertaken in the blogosphere, particularly in the work of blogging mothers, or "mommybloggers." Using such strategies as irreverent and often profane language, sarcasm and humor, and identity construction, these women attempt to readily acknowledge and negotiate the trials and tribulations of parenting—a potentially important rhetorical aim, given the hegemonic discourse touting the Alpha Mom. While these women challenge some of the Alpha Mom's criteria for existence, they also negotiate their own identities in relation to this new standard; several popular bloggers in this genre, such as Armstrong, write regular columns for *Alpha Mom TV*. Providing an ideal setting for women who are attempting to negotiate the different subjectivities they assume—whether those of woman, writer, mother, social

adult, wife, etc.—blogs may enable women to resist and/or negotiate the pressures exerted by media constructions of motherhood.

I will provide a brief case study here to illustrate one of the ways in which “mommybloggers” (and mothers in general) may respond to impossible ideals. Following the *Today Show* segment on “cocktail playdates,” host Meredith Vieira interviewed Dr. Janet Taylor, a clinical psychologist, and Melissa Summers, author of the parenting blog *Suburban Bliss*. Having previously posted about this topic on *Suburban Bliss*, in the interview Summers reiterates her claims that mothers are adults and should not be obligated to drink juice boxes like children. She explains that at most these women are having one to two drinks in a controlled environment, and that this activity might actually benefit their children by showing them how adults handle alcohol responsibly. In her original post on the topic, Summers suggested that other mothers who disapprove of this aspect of her lifestyle are likely not people she would claim for friends or allies: “[I]f a beer freaks you out then you’re probably not going to like the fact that I am depressed and am on and off medication. You’re also not going to like the fact that sometimes? I don’t like my kids and I think they’re being whiney brats and I want to put them to bed at 3pm or sell them on Ebay” (“The hair”).

Summers was ultimately disappointed with the *Today Show* segment; she felt that Vieira was biased and had disregarded her points. A few days after the interview, she expressed her disappointment that Vieira had pointedly asked her if she would allow a babysitter to drink while watching her children, using her blog as a space to share how she would have really liked to respond:

Meredith is it possible that you’ve never had a drink in front of your kids because your kids are with an actual babysitter? Who you pay? To watch your children for a set amount of time? Meredith, is it possible that mothering is not a job for me. That it’s a role I have and one I take seriously. I also play the role of a wife and an actual person who enjoys socializing with her friends like anyone else who enjoys drinking as a social activity. Sometimes I play these roles AT

THE SAME TIME.... Next week on *The Today Show*.... Matt Lauer asks, "Gee Whiz, Why Do Mothers Feel Like They Have To Be Perfect All The Time" ("I can't")?

The rhetorical stance Summers takes in the debate over alcohol and child-rearing supports her representation of an identity that challenges traditional ideologies of motherhood. By reserving the right to enjoy a glass of wine while supervising her children for the reason that she is an adult and not a child specifically contradicts what Douglas and Michaels claim as the central tenet of the "new momism": that mothers adopt the subject positions of their children. Because motherhood is not a "job" but a subjectivity, Summers suggests that it must be integrated, along with others, into her identity. To become a true Alpha Mom, however, would leave no space for these other subjectivities to develop. In our exploration of "ideal" representations, it is also important to note Summers's point as to the idea that mothers feel they have to be perfect. In this barbed remark, she implies that mothers feel the pressure of perfection because these are the expectations impressed by the media specifically and society in general. This assertion reveals Summers's consciousness of the Alpha Mom criteria imposed upon her and her attempt to contest them by engaging in activities that promote her status as an independent adult. For many readers, Summers will provide a representation of a successful mother who does not adhere to Alpha Mom standards—and will validate them as they explore the options available to become truly good mothers.

I argue ultimately that motherhood is a key site for feminist action, precisely because it resonates so fully with our cultural values and expectations and is a mediated construct where sexism remains prevalent. Natalie Fixmer and Julia T. Wood note that third-wave feminists "aim to weave structural changes wrought by the second wave into material, concrete life and all of its 'tiny, everyday' moments" (243). This bottom-up, embodied political resistance as it occurs in the "local" arena of the blogosphere may potentially provide rich material for rhetorical study; women searching for their own brand of motherhood amid the Alpha Mom phenomenon have much to resist—but also much to discover.

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