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ARTICLE

Good, Bad or Just Good Enough: Representations of Motherhood and the Maternal Role on the Small Screen

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This article seeks to introduce the contemporary maternal experience and the 'good' mother myth as it exists within the media landscape before considering the ways in which the situation comedy in general and the new American comedy, *Mom* (2013–) in particular have negotiated ideal images of home, hearth, family and motherhood.

Introduction

This article seeks to introduce the contemporary maternal experience and the 'good' mother myth as it exists within the American media landscape before considering the ways in which the situation comedy in general and *Mom*¹ (2013–) in particular have negotiated ideal maternal images, paying attention to the ways in which audiences respond to the depiction of such screen representations. An examination of Internet Movie Database user reviews will help researchers from the fields of media, motherhood and cultural studies to understand the ways in which audiences perceive appropriate maternal practices in a period dominated by the ideology of intensive mothering².

Mom is the new American comedy created by Chuck Lorre. The show is based on a intergenerational cycle of working class teen mothers struggling with single parenthood, AA meetings, unskilled work, a dearth of emotional support and a scarcity of financial assistance. It chronicles the work and family life of currently sober Christy Plunkett/Anna Faris who is trying to rebuild her life removed from her drug-dealing ex-husband, focusing on her relationship with her recovering drug and alcohol addicted mother, Bonnie/Allison Janney, her pregnant teenage daughter Violet/Sadie Calvano and younger son, Roscoe/Blake Garrett Rosenthal. The opening credits make the premise of the show clear as we see candid photos of Christy in various states of sobriety and undress including her professional pole dancing role

¹ *Mom* was one of the projects that became a priority for CBS and Warner Bros when it was pitched in late 2012, in part due to Chuck Lorre's new four-year deal with Warner the previous September (Andreeva 2012, 2013). This show gave Lorre the distinction of having four sitcoms airing on one network starting in the 2013–14 season. Lorre is also the creator and executive producer of earlier maternal sitcoms including *Grace Under Fire* (1993–98) and *Roseanne* (1988–97).

² The Internet Movie Database user reviews are taken primarily from the US with some reviews from the UK, Australia and Canada. While *Mom* currently airs in the US (CBS) and UK (ITV2), it is also available in Australia (Nine Network), Canada (City), Greece (Star Channel) and India (Comedy Central). That said, there is no clear link between the stance taken and the country of origin. Vocal commentators from each of those countries speak both in favour of and against the depiction of unruly women struggling with the maternal role in the popular sitcom. There are clear variations of maternal thought, familial comportment and economic status within these developed countries, and thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the reviews and readings presented here are not neatly classified or categorised according to location.

and a police booking photograph, before focusing on a recent family snap that would not look out of place on a traditional, middle-class family mantelpiece. And it is the development of maternal thought and the desire for family stability amongst the social, sexual and financial turbulence that are played out from week to week, with that smiling family snap acting as both the maternal dream and strained reality for our central maternal protagonist.

Popular television has long since been charged with the 'symbolic annihilation' of women (Tuchman 1978), and more recently, specific genres and formats have been critiqued for the new and diverse ways in which mothers are presumed dead, absent and missing from the small screen (Karlyn 2011, Feasey 2012b, Aström 2015, Feasey 2017). With this in mind, a contemporary sitcom that not only includes mothers, plural, but a popular show that has these maternal figures front and centre of the narrative demands critical attention. That said, it is not my argument that sitcoms such as *Mom* are direct or unmediated reflections of the lived society or a mirror to be held up to the maternal experience, but rather, they are considered and calculated constructions of motherhood that must be understood in concert with lived maternal experiences. Moreover, a consideration of the ways in which such texts can be read and received by contemporary audiences help us to make better sense of both the text itself and the broader social contexts that it problematises.

Therefore, rather than offer a textual analysis of the show as is routine in much film and media research (Valdivia 1998, Fairclough 2004, Maher 2004, Stephens 2004, Hall and Bishop 2009, Addison 2009, Podnieks 2012, Feasey 2012 and Jenkins 2014), I am seeking to examine audience readings relating to the sitcom in question. I will focus on a range of popular reviews in order to consider the ways in which such commentaries can be understood in relation to representations of motherhood in the genre, the wider social context and the ideology of appropriate mothering. Exploring the news, reviews, interviews and extra textual materials that surround a television text, or what Martin Barker refers to as 'ancillary materials' (Barker 2004) is proving popular within the fields of film, television and media studies as such research places the viewer at the forefront of analysis, over and above the voice of the 'exceptionally knowledgeable' reader as it exists in more traditional textual approaches to screen

criticism (Hermes 1995). Indeed, entire journals have developed on the back of this newfound approach to media research (Barker et al. 2014).

Motherhood studies exists as a growing discipline but this field is dominated by research on the lived experience of mothers in terms of feminist mothering (O'Reilly 2008), notions of peace and political activism (Ruddick 2007), experiences of pregnancy, labour and child rearing (Miller 2005) and case studies about the maternal experience (Thomson, Kehily et al. 2008). What this discipline tends to overlook is the ways in which representations of motherhood and motherwork are presented in the media environment. So too, film, media and cultural studies tend to overlook maternal representations in favour of unmasking, examining and deconstructing a myriad of alternative images of women in the media. Moreover, on those rare occasions when maternal representations are interrogated, it is in favour of 'expert readings' and at the expense of viewer responses. This research seeks to redress this oversight by giving a voice to the sitcom audience in the hope of furthering our understanding of the ways in which they judge appropriate and inappropriate maternal practices.

Fictional representations are a powerful force in shaping what we think about specific groups, individuals, roles and responsibilities, and by looking at a range of user reviews we can start to make sense of the ways in which such depictions go towards forming our expectations of 'good' mothering. Again, this is not to suggest that fictional representations should be understood as a direct reflection of our maternal experience, nor to presume that audiences read television texts as familial realities, but rather, we need to understand the television text in order to help explain the ways in which contemporary audiences read and respond to the wider maternal experience. It is the deliberate construction of maternal identity in *Mom*, in concert with the lived social and familial context that leads audiences to comment on the show in question, not in terms of confusion or slippage between the fictional world and social reality, but in terms of understanding television's broader frame of reference. With this wider context in mind, it is useful to consider the changing maternal reality, as it can be seen to help construct audience readings of fictional maternal roles.

Maternal experience and maternal media

Numbers of lesbian mothers and women who become single mothers by choice are on the increase; and higher numbers of women with young children are working than in previous generations, in part because they are entering into motherhood later than their mothers and grandmothers³. The number of women becoming first time mothers in their 30s and 40s is rising, at the same time as the numbers of teenage mothers are in decline. Since the turn of the millennium 'the average age of women having their first child went up' in all American states (CDC cited in Sifferlin 2016). Many of these women will have found career success before choosing motherhood. These women might well be turning their professional role into maternal duty, with baby massage classes replacing pitching and presentations and later, sing and sign sessions replacing board meetings and working lunches. However, rather than applaud 'professional' motherwork, there is a sense that these women are part of a feminist backlash, with the ideology of intensive mothering helping to maintain a sense of maternal inadequacy and an inability to competently combine motherwork with paid labour outside of the home⁴.

As work, life and mothering practices have changed, so too has the notion of the 'good' mother. After all, even though there has been a longstanding and ubiquitous link between appropriate mothering and stay-at-home motherhood, whereby women are responsible for the domestic arena in the male-as-breadwinner

³ Recent figures tell us that one in five women in the US will not have children, and although this figure has risen in recent years, the fact remains that pregnancy, motherhood and childcare remain a lived experience for the majority of women. The average age of women giving birth has risen to the highest level on record in America, up from 24.9 years in 2000 to 26.3 years in 2014 (CDC 2016a). A factor in the rise in mean age at first birth is the decline in the proportion of first births to teenage mothers, down 42 per cent from 2000 to 2014 (ibid). That said, although the number of teenage mothers in the United States have declined, the US continues to have a higher teenage pregnancy rate than much of Western Europe (CDC 2016b), and as such, both educational support and family services have been set up to help overcome the problems of teen pregnancy for future generations (The Baytree 2014, Bi 2012).

⁴ This can be understood as part of a broader feminist backlash at the height of the post-feminist movement, when women are outnumbering men in Higher Education, making inroads towards greater pay, and paving the way towards professional success in once male dominated spheres (O'Reilly 2004).

nuclear unit, it was not until the late 1980s that the ideology of intensive mothering took centre stage as the maternal ideal (Maushart 1999; O'Reilly 2004). In line with ideology of intensive mothering, the 'good' mother is said to be entirely responsible for the social, psychological and cognitive well-being of her children. Moreover, if a mother has more than one child then not only is she responsible for the playtime, mealtimes, bedtimes, extra-curricular education, physical, cultural and creative activities for each child, but also responsible for instigating and monitoring the bonding that takes place between them (Munn 1994). The growing trend towards the ideology of intensive mothering constructs and champions a particular maternal image, which reduces a mother's identity to her maternal role.

Representations of motherhood exist in all forms of media texts that seek to engage, entertain, inform and educate the audience. And yet, although there is a myriad of ways in which women can and do mother, the mass media seems committed to presenting the strict, rigid and narrow ideology of intensive mothering in a range of newspapers, self-help books, parenting manuals, magazines, advertising campaigns and feature films (Michaels and Douglas 2005).

Dedicating your entire physical, emotional, economic and social selves to your children, is at best exhausting and at worst implausible. What is important according to this ideology is that the 'good' mother is not committed to her children because she feels that she should be or because she feels that it is her stay-at-home duty, but rather, she habitually puts her child first because she wants to. She finds it fulfilling rather than frustrating, satisfying rather than stifling, and has no negative feelings towards her family for putting her own social, sexual, economic or creative needs in second, third or fourth place (Maushart 1999, Green 2004, O'Reilly 2004, Borisoff 2005, Douglas and Michaels 2005, Warner 2007, Maushart 2007). The problem is of course that no mother can ever live up to an unattainable ideal. The working mother is deemed a failure by virtue of her hours in the labour market, and the number of mothers entering the workplace is currently on the increase, in part due to the continuing economic

crisis in the US⁵. Furthermore, it is not just working mothers who are deemed unacceptable in the pronatalist period (Borisoff 2005). Many stay-at-home mothers also struggle to live up to the 'good' mother myth because of the physical, financial and emotional resources that this form of mothering demands (Held 1983, Asher 2012).

The 'good' mother dominates the media marketplace, with few alternatives to this maternal depiction. As such, the ideology of intensive mothering appears as a powerful, persuasive and indeed, potent image of motherhood that audiences feel compelled to try to emulate, or to judge themselves by (Feasey 2016). Representations of motherhood in the entertainment arena are not presented as motherhood manuals and creative directors would not deem their escapist fare to be held up as a mirror to the lived experience of motherhood. Yet women in the media audience look to these depictions and routinely question their own pregnancies, birthing experiences and maternal practices (Maushart 1999, Wolf 2002, Tally 2008, Feasey 2016).

That said, I have recently argued that popular television, as a traditionally feminised and domestic medium, can be seen to debunk the ideology of intensive mothering and go some way towards challenging the dominance of the 'good' mother, as a number of factual and fictional genres address the improbability of this maternal role. A range of soap operas, dramas and reality texts appear committed to the notion of 'good enough' mothers, mothers who love their children, cherish their families but struggle with the financial, emotional, social or logistical reality of childcare (Feasey 2012a, Feasey 2013). These women are not upholding the image of acceptable motherhood and they are either unable or unwilling to conform to the ideology of intensive mothering. That said, there is a sense that those women who debunk the 'good' mother myth are the same women who are in dialogue with this ideal. The

⁵ A recent study for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tells us that higher numbers of mothers than ever before are entering the workplace. Seventy per cent of mothers with children under the age of 18 now participate in the labor force, with over 75 percent employed full-time. Indeed, recent statistics suggest that mothers are the primary or sole bread-winner in 40 per cent of US households with dependent children (Fernandez Campbell 2015, DeWolf 2017).

televisual 'good enough' mothers hold themselves up to the idealised standards of the intensive mother, so that rather than demonstrate comfort with or confidence in their own maternal practices, they tend to hold themselves up to a socially approved maternal mirror, making them, and the audience question their maternal efforts. In this way, television as a medium both confronts and confounds the 'good' mother myth as it continues to present acceptable maternal norms and approved familiar mores for the woman in the audience. As a case in point, the situation comedy often simultaneously reaffirms and subverts the longstanding 'good' mother in favour of one that is just 'good enough', and it is to this comedic genre that I now turn (Feasey 2012a).

From good to good enough: mediations of motherhood in the situation comedy

The television sitcom has a longstanding link with women in the audience in general and the maternal viewer in particular, and a cursory glance at the genre's history is testament to that fact. Early American sitcoms were committed to the white, middle-class suburban family, with father at work and mother at home, with each parent speaking of their satisfaction and success in their separate spheres. This 'Hi Honey I'm Home' format came to dominate the television schedules on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the 1950s and 1960s, even when society was itself moving away from this traditional unit (Morreale, 2002a, 2002b). The romanticised view of family life was so persuasive that generations later, we continue to compare our lived maternal experiences with those of the idealised stay-at-home mothers that dominated the small screen in the post-war period. Although the family sitcom has undergone many stylistic changes since that time, the genre remains popular on contemporary American networks, and, irrespective of whether the sitcom is dedicated to a nuclear, divorced, remarried or single parent family, with a few notable exceptions⁶, mothers dominate these narratives.

Much work exists on the sitcom genre in general (Dalton and Linder 2005, Mills 2009, Austerlitz 2014), the role of women in what has been termed the feminist

⁶ Namely *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–8), *My Two Dads* (1987–1990) and *Two and a Half Men* (2003–15).

sitcom (Rabinovitz 1995, Spangler 2003, Kypker 2012), and the role of motherhood in such shows (Feasey 2012a). Programmes such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–63), *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–66), *Bewitched* (1964–72), *The Brady Bunch* (1969–74), *Kate and Allie* (1984–89), *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), *The Simpsons* (1989–), and *Outnumbered* (2007–14) have received critical attention, due in part to the changing maternal thoughts and practices being depicted. The trajectory of the situation comedy from the 1960s to the 2000s has been from happy homemaker to harried housewife, from conservative images of stay-at-home motherhood to chaotic depictions of working mothers. Irrespective of class, race, age and location, the family sitcom has been in dialogue with the changing familial landscape, acknowledging the role of mothers at work, and the ways in which this family structure impacts on the domestic sphere. The genre makes it clear that there is a gradual debunking of the 'good' mother in favour of those that are 'good enough' due to their social, sexual, economic, class, age or family structures.

Lucy Ricardo/Lucille Ball from the long-running *I Love Lucy* (1951–57) might be seen as the first televisual mother to challenge the happy housewife image as she dared to suggest that she was not entirely satisfied with her role as wife and mother, seeking an active role in the entertainment business to which her on (and off-screen) husband belonged. Although Lucy was routinely reminded of her role in the domestic sphere and was often chastised both physically and verbally for daring to transcend her maternal duties and homemaking commitments, her desire to move beyond the domestic realm was, for the time, ground-breaking. Lucy was a 'good enough' mother because although she maintained her stay-at-home status and presented a nuclear family unit, she routinely spoke of a desire for more than the domestic realm.

One might suggest that the overweight, caustic, working class Roseanne Connor/Roseanne Barr, from the sitcom of the same name (1988–97) is a 'bad' mother due to her distance from middle class privileges and intensive mothering practices. However, this mother of four is a loving and supporting parent who tries to make time for her children, as much as her periods of unskilled employment (fast-food employee, a telemarketer, a bartender, and a shampoo woman/hair sweeper at

a beauty salon, waitress) will allow. And it is precisely her maternal devotion against working commitments and sarcastic comments that have endeared her, and continue to endear her to television audiences. While *Film.com* named her one of the top classic television mothers of all time (Wilson 2009), *ivillage* named her one of the small screen mothers that audiences most love (Garfinkel 2012). In short, Roseanne's 'good enough' mothering techniques speak to television audiences, either in spite of, or precisely because she challenged the ideology of intensive mothering and negotiated a 'good' mother myth that demanded an image of middle-class, stay-at-home, selfless, serene and satisfied motherhood.

Roseanne cherishes her children but she admits that she finds them at various times hard work and tedious, and as such goes some way to negotiating a romanticised image of motherhood. Following on from Roseanne, audiences were introduced to the character of Grace Kelly/Brett Butler in *Grace Under Fire* (1993–98), a sitcom centred around the exploits of a divorced mother and recovering alcoholic who has left an abusive marriage, as she juggles bringing up her three children with working in an oil-refinery. Like Roseanne before (and after) her, Grace is a strong opinionated mother who looks out for her children under difficult circumstances. The key differences are that the show moves away from the nuclear family unit and positions the struggling single mother as a recovering alcoholic, all of which place her even further down the hierarchy of hegemonic motherhood. Although the character of Grace has not been honoured with the same popular accolades as Roseanne in terms of her contribution to small screen motherhood, individual reviews refer to the character as a 'perfect role model' and a figure to 'admire' because she is read as a brilliant, incisive, witty yet fallible maternal figure (Nemesis 2001).

Roseanne negotiated the 'good' mother myth; Grace challenged it; and more recently the character of Christy Plunkett, a newly sober single mother balancing waitressing with raising her two children shattered it in *Mom*. This show goes further than its sitcom predecessors in debunking the 'good' mother myth because not only is Christy a working class single mother with children from different relationships, but she was born to a teenage mother, herself became a teenage mother and now has a pregnant 17 year-old daughter living under her roof. It is this intergenerational

cycle of teen pregnancy, poverty and addiction that creates controversy and conflict for popular commentators. *Mom* is in dialogue with the broader social and familial experience, and viewers tend to pick up on the lived reality of teen pregnancy and addiction in their commentaries on the show⁷. This is not to suggest that audiences are confused or naïve about the construction or circulation of fictional narratives. Rather, they understand these themes, plots and characters in concert with the broader social and maternal environment that deems teen pregnancy problematic and addiction a growing social concern.

Mom

Like Lucy, Roseanne and Grace, Christy is not presented as a 'good' mother and one might suggest that she is not even positioned as a 'good enough' mother due to the range of social, sexual, financial, familial and physical challenges that she faces on a day to day basis. Indeed, the very premise of the show is that Christy has been let down by friends and family, and it is her job to try and find a way through the tough reality of work, family life, dating and addiction. The programme has not only found an audience on both sides of the Atlantic, but is popular enough with that audience to be renewed for further seasons. Part of the appeal we are told is that we get to laugh with the characters, rather than at them. In its first season, the programme already makes numerous jokes about Christy and her mother's alcoholism and financial difficulties. Although these are serious themes and therefore not perhaps the fare of much sitcom humour, the fact that 'the characters make light of their own situation' is said to make it 'easier for the audience to go along with the joke' (Porter 2013). *Mom* follows its female-centred sitcom predecessors as they all, in complex and compelling ways, puncture the romanticised maternal ideal in favour of the unruly mother. What these carnivalesque women have in common is a desire for social, sexual and financial agency in a patriarchal society that deems funny, strong, smart, caustic, overweight, working class and single women at best unpalatable, and

⁷ There are some physical risks associated with becoming a younger mother (Chen et al. 2007), but the longer-term risks are associated with socioeconomic rather than biological factors. These pregnancies are often linked with social issues such as poverty and lower educational levels, which lead to poorer life outcomes in children, which can be seen to follow through generations (Swann et al. 2003).

at worst, poor maternal figures. We are able to laugh with these women because they are presented as active, albeit struggling protagonists. We watch them develop throughout their maternal and familial journey's, rather than witness them passively submit to the status quo. Lucy, Roseanne, Grace and Christy challenge social conventions as they fail to live up to maternal ideals, and the contrast between 'good' and 'good enough' mothering is made even more explicit in a pronatalist period dominated by the ideology of intensive mothering.

Rather than seek to predict viewer commentaries of *Mom*, I want to turn to existing user reviews. After all, it is crucial that we understand how audiences are reading media texts rather than second-guessing how they could, should or would have come to understand them. Existing work accounts for a discussion of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006, Couldry *et al.* 2009), netnography and social media audience research (Deller 2011) whereby reviews and commentaries can be utilized as a form of contemporary audience studies. With this in mind, I want to unmask those recurring themes and debates that exist in user reviews in order to present an authentic audience reading that may otherwise be repacked, repurposed or silenced in more traditional interview or focus group forums.

The overwhelming majority of reviews seen here refer to the cycle of teenage pregnancy that exists in *Mom*, and the interweaving narrative concerning drugs and alcohol use, poverty, abuse and rehabilitation. And although these commentators agree that the comedy is both dark and provocative, there is a division in how they respond to the inclusion of such subject matter within the situation comedy. It is not my intention to foreground which audiences have best understood or most accurately engaged with the genre in question, nor is it my intention to point out where the programme has accurately, or otherwise, depicted specific characters, scenes, lifestyles or working practices. Rather, I am interested in making sense of the ways in which audiences respond to the show in light of broader social and maternal themes, themes which exist beyond the entertainment arena. In this way, I hope to shed light and offer critical insight into the ways in which audiences rank and classify appropriate, acceptable and failing motherhood in relation to the wider sexual, social and maternal context.

Some audiences spoke negatively and at length on the topic of intergenerational teen pregnancy, poverty and addiction, suggesting that such experiences were not suited to a mainstream comedy production. The concern was not because the situations in question were unrealistic or sensationalised, but rather, tasteless in their authenticity. In short, it was the too brutal reality of these themes that was of concern here:

The storyline is disgusting and rather depressing! The main character was bought up by a dysfunctional alcoholic mother and is a recovering alcoholic herself with a pregnant teenage daughter! (bellab1972, 2014).

Topics were simply too serious to be funny. Multi-generational sluts, teen pregnancies, adultery, drug and alcohol use, drug sales (at least they threw in AA), absent and deadbeat dads. Hey I can watch the news for this plot (lec-tex, 2013).

This show is horrid, awful and disgusting. It is not about a dysfunctional family (which can be funny), it is about junk, garbage people, their miserable lives and lowbrow toilet humor. I was horrified to know that there are people that think it is funny to be an alcoholic, a pregnant teenager, a promiscuous mother/grandmother (trans_mauro 2014).

This show is trying to sell comedy on situations that aren't comedic. This is a show about at least 2 generations of alcoholic, drug addicted, promiscuous mothers with zero parenting skills and the breeding of a third generation to turn out the same way (angelbaby3838 2013).

There are clearly grey areas about what family dynamics and domestic dysfunction are considered appropriate situation comedy fare. If dysfunctional families 'can be funny', why then is *Mom* considered to be 'horrid' and 'awful'. These different maternal generations are all attractive according to the long standing and ubiquitous 'beauty myth' (Wolf 1991/2015) and they all adhere to what has been termed the 'thin ideal' (Redmond 2003), moreover, they live in a comfortable family home that

seems spacious and inviting (before the family are evicted due to gambling debts), and as such it is neither the surface appearance nor domestic environment that creates a sense of 'misery', 'depression' or 'disgust' for viewers.

The sitcom has routinely presented characters as desiring and desirable, and one might suggest that *Mom* is no different here. That said, audiences refer to these women as promiscuous, as if holding mothers up to different social and sexual standards than their childfree counterparts. Not just different to their childfree counterparts, but different again to their appropriate maternal sisters. After all, the 'good' mother dedicates her entire physical, emotional, economic and social self to her children, and finds satisfaction and fulfillment in this full time domestic role. The fact that Bonnie and Christy have sartorial, social and sexual desires might position them as 'good enough' mothers if their desires had a positive impact on the family environment, but because their desires and barely contained addictions routinely threaten to break the family apart, audiences read them as failing rather than merely flawed caregivers.

The programme is clearly dealing with sensitive subject matter, but the language used to comment on teen pregnancy is loaded, emotive and divisive. Terms such as 'slut' are used to 'put women down, to shame girls, to victim-blame in cases of sexual assault and harassment, and to ridicule and oppress female sexuality in general'⁸ (Steinkellner 2015). One can refer to codes and conventions of teen pregnancy and single motherhood in the sitcom without using such sexual judgment. Moreover, sexual judgement is interlinked with maternal discrimination as these women are critiqued for their choice of unsuitable fathers and lack of parenting skills. What is causing disquiet here is the sense that these women are 'breeding' a new generation of poor, alcoholic teen mothers. It is the cycle of poverty and teen pregnancy in concert with pleasurable sexual activity and addiction that is the root of much audience

⁸ The term 'slut' has recently been reclaimed by way of 'organized events like SlutWalk – as a way of taking back the term and turning the tables on those who've tried to use terminology as a form of oppression and scapegoating. Still, reclaiming a word doesn't always redefine it, and in the Internet era, the word "slut" has been co-opted—on a whole new level—by anonymous harassers' (Steinkellner 2015, See also Tanenbaum 2000, 2015).

anxiety and viewing hostility. Seeing these teen mothers speak as active subjects rather than passive objects is what makes them unruly women, to be dismissed as 'garbage' rather than 'good' mothers to be applauded.

A narrative centred on three generations of teen mothers is tinged with social, financial and educational hardships, and the addition of alcohol addiction to the family dynamic can be seen to add further tension and trauma to the piece. Although they might appear 'depressing', to refer to these ubiquitous and long-standing dramatic tropes as 'disgusting' foregrounds hostility, intolerance and discrimination. The fact that we could routinely 'watch the news' for such stories suggests that it is not the themes that are problematic *per se*, but rather the repackaging of them for a mainstream sitcom audience, who are more routinely served up work-place frissions, the trials of new relationships and the harried maternal figure in the traditional nuclear family. In other media texts and formats, topics such as addiction, poverty and the cycle of teen pregnancy might be deemed gritty, harrowing or realistic, but here it is deemed 'low brow'. *Mom* is not unique in addressing these themes, nor is the show the first to find humour in dark subject matter, but by exploiting inter-generational teen pregnancy, it is acknowledging a growing social and sexual anxiety that exists apart from the fictional narrative. What is truly groundbreaking here however is that it is being made and marketed as family entertainment, and it is this repackaging of the gritty subject matter that lends itself to the critique of debased taste formations and cultural distinctions.

The problem identified in these reviews is not that these teen mothers are lacking parenting skills but that they are demonstrating resourcefulness and resilience in the face of what is a tough and challenging maternal role. The fact that these mothers remain in the family home and show love for their children, whilst speaking openly about their frustrations as sole emotional and financial providers can be seen as just one more example of a female-centred sitcom in the *Roseanne* tradition. Like *Roseanne* before her, Christy is unapologetic about her maternal thoughts, makes little attempt to present herself in line with the ideology of intensive mothering and seldom holds herself up to unattainable maternal ideals.

Other reviews picked up on the inappropriateness of intergenerational teen mothering for a comedy show because of what was seen as a tasteless mocking of the socio-economic groups that dominate the show. Although the situation comedy has a long history of presenting unconventional and more recently, dysfunctional middle and working class families, *Mom* is said to push the boundaries of the genre by actively exploiting the white working class. One review accuses the show of 'jumping on some trendy, white trash bandwagon' (Kimba1178 2013) perhaps on the back of programmes such as *Shameless* (UK 2004–) (US 2011–), *My Big Fat Gypsy Weddings/Holiday/Christening/Valentine* (2010–), *Ladette to Lady* (2005–2008) and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012–17). Indeed, these white working class depictions have so saturated our television landscape that extant literature is asking itself *When Did White Trash Become the New Normal* (Hays 2013). Although popular reviews foreground hostility towards *Mom*'s representation of the struggling family, they go further than to simply point to their dislike for a specific social group. Some go as far as dismissing the programme for what they see as its support of, even encouragement towards the intergenerational cycle of teen pregnancy. Commentators write that:

TV clearly influences our country and our kids . . . How much worse could this be for our daughters to watch? Heartwarming? Three generations of disrespect, careless, self abuse, with no direction for their lives. Oh yeah, that's comedy (Kimba1178 2013).

Really? You really had a sappy, totally unrealistic stupid show glorifying teenage pregnancy, with the mom and grandmother happily supporting this moronic situation? Don't you understand how much damage you did, and that now some stupid, immature teenage girls who already are playing with this fantasy with their equally stupid boyfriends just got another green light to delude themselves into believing 'Aww, how cute I'll be pregnant and my boyfriend will be all happy and supportive, as will my mom, and we'll just trip on down the road of life and live happily ever after'. . . What a terrible disservice you did to teenage girls! (Johnston 2013).

In traditional sitcoms the 'good' mother is a supporting presence, and these women are encouraged to put their child's physical and emotional needs before their own. With this in mind, Christy might be deemed an appropriate maternal figure due to the fact that she offers practical advice and emotional support to her pregnant daughter, irrespective of her own frustrations, needs or desires. However, although maternal support is to be commended from serene mothers instructing their children from within middle class nuclear family units, a teen mother offering comfort to her pregnant teenage daughter is deemed a negligent form of 'abuse' rather than a well-meaning form of support in these reviews. Such commentary makes distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate, 'good enough' and poor maternal practices, but these distinctions are at best intangible and at worst stigmatizing, exploiting stereotypes that present teen mothers as unmotivated, irresponsible, and incompetent parents (SmithBattle 2013).

It is interesting that the commentators seem to place the problem of unplanned teenage pregnancy on 'immature' girls and 'stupid' boys rather than on a lack of meaningful sex education or failed contraception. The situation may be understood as life-changing or traumatic, emotionally or financially difficult, but 'moronic' seems an odd term in this regard. Unplanned teenage pregnancy will always be a cause of surprise and shock for the individuals in question, but the fact that Violet and her boyfriend have shared the news with their parents and are trying to work out the best possible future for themselves and the baby might be better understood as difficult or challenging rather than 'moronic'. Indeed, these reviewers construct and circulate several assumptions about the vulnerability, impressionability and passivity of a teen generation both on and beyond the small screen.

Moreover, there is no word in the user comments about the scenes and sequences that see Christy's daughter put her child up for adoption. The programme asks us to feel her loss and pain but accept both her selfless and selfish reasoning. This was an extended narrative arc that went some way towards highlighting the options available for those young women who find themselves pregnant. Careless, maybe. Heartwarming, no. Cute, hardly. The narrative shows a young couple making a difficult decision that would, they believe, be best for their future and the future

of their baby. They were shown to take the decision seriously, and to consider the consequences at length, albeit in conventional sitcom spaces with light relief and a predictable laugh track.

There is a very real sense that audiences, commentators and reviewers acknowledge a dialogue between television and the wider social context, suggesting that popular shows such as *Mom* have a responsibility to their audience. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the situation comedy has a long history of challenging social and sexual stereotypes, and of introducing controversial or taboo subject matter in 'conventional spaces' in a way that is palatable to audiences (Battles and Hilton Morrow 2002). From this estimation, it is not the subject matter *per se* that is tasteless and thoughtless, but rather the tame representation of that subject matter and social group. In short, the programme is being condemned for ostensibly supporting teenage pregnancy because it is not challenging enough.

While the aforementioned reviewers dismissed the show for its depressing storylines and dysfunctional families, others welcomed the show precisely because of its comedic framing of teen pregnancy against a backdrop of addiction and socio-economic hardship. One reviewer made the point that 'it's not just a comedy, it bears so much grief and pain as well as many great funny stories' (shaoyicheng 2014). Many reviews echo this point :

I get very angry when people call this trashy. These people are normal! They are not living in a trailer selling meth! The show also does not glorify teen pregnancy. If you watch the show the mother knows she made mistakes raising her daughter. . . She did not like the fact her daughter was pregnant but she knows there is nothing she can do about it! The teen made a mistake. Her mother still loves her and that was an AWESOME MESSAGE. This is after all not the 1950's (Stanton67 2014).

I love shows that tell it like it is. Shows that don't sugarcoat awful situations . . . This show pushes the envelope in family dysfunction. It's two steps further

into the abyss than *The Simpsons* or *Married With Children*. As much as people don't want to admit, we do turn out like our parents. Unfortunately this is a family of alcoholic, drug addicted, sluts. Violet is keeping the family tradition alive by getting pregnant while still in high school. Christy who is trying to survive and stay sober has strained relationships with both Violet and her own mother. Christy is a punching bag for both. . . While not mean spirited, she's told Violet that having her ruined her life. It's hard to fathom, but hilarious to hear. This is a show that's not for the delicate or faint of heart. It's raw on every level (davidsmith666999 2013).

I do not really understand how people do not appreciate this show. They are completely missing out on the plot. It talks about real life problems with some humour. It does not advocate any kind of lifestyle but just how people deal with those problems. There are not a lot of shows that talk about those topics and it is done really well. People shouldn't be judging a show because they don't like the subject matter of teenage pregnancy, or alcoholism. It's great to see these topics discussed in an open way. A funny one. But at the same time these topics are taken seriously (Chloe-baconlover 2013).

I honestly think the people leaving negative reviews about this show really just don't understand the direction of the show. While this show demonstrates taboo topics such as teen pregnancy, it is by no means demonstrating it in a way that says 'Hey girls, you should totally have a baby when you're a teenager because it will make your life all roses and good times for all of eternity!' This show is about a single mom who has admittedly made one bad decision after the next, and is now trying to piece it together in her mid 30's while dealing with a teenager, a younger child and his dead beat drug addict father, while battling her own struggles of alcohol and the never-ending life of living paycheck to paycheck (dangitsbethany 2013).

Those reviewers who looked to praise *Mom* for tackling sensitive subject matter without the syrupy coating of other comedic fare are commenting on the carefully crafted scripts, the tone of the show, the multi-dimensional characterizations and skillful performances of the actors. It is also worth noting however that their reviews were peppered with negative judgements, not about the show, but about those audiences who were openly hostile to the themes being addressed in the sitcom. While some reviewers cast aspersions about the taste formations and cultural distinctions of individual sitcom narratives, others cast aspersions about the taste formations and cultural distinctions of individual commentators. Hearing that other reviewers are 'completely missing out on the plot' because they 'don't understand the direction of the show' could be framed as patronising as it betrays a sense of elitism or superiority. However, my point is simply that the show is divisive, in most part because of its depiction of intergenerational teen pregnancy. An unplanned teen pregnancy in an otherwise 'good' family is often presented as a problem for the individual in the news and entertainment media, whereas a cycle of teen motherhood is presented as a problem for society. As such, *Mom* is presenting individual narratives that themselves exploit widespread social anxieties, which in turn remind us about the hierarchy of hegemonic motherhood within and beyond the small screen.

Mom is referred to as 'normal' and 'real life' due in part to its depiction of difficult subject matter; and in terms of wealth demographics in the US. The working class experience is the majority of households based on earnings, savings, disposable income and property ownership. Indeed, living 'paycheck to paycheck' is a routine experience in the post-recession era as demonstrated by the increased demand for short-term, quick decision, payday loans (Consumer Affairs 2014). And although I would not go as far as to suggest that alcoholism, drug addiction or teen pregnancy is in any way the experience of the majority; if one considers relationship counseling and divorce rates then it becomes clear that family and relationship difficulties are common place within and beyond the socio-economically disadvantaged unit. Moreover, with respect to the comments related to 'bad decision' making it is worth noting that the children of alcoholics are four times more likely to develop

an alcohol abuse problem than those without. We are told that 'genetics, learned behavior, trauma and stress all do their part to perpetuate the cycle of alcoholism from generation to generation' (NAC 2016). And if one considers that alcoholism can lead to financial turmoil, domestic violence, child abuse, abandonment and even the development of other substance abuse issues' (ibid) then Christy's mistakes and bad decision making can be understood in relation to her formative years and family dynamics, and in this way audiences appear to be reading the narrative against a broader lived experience.

I am not making any claims as to the reality, accuracy or verisimilitude of *Mom*. However the ways in which this programme picks up on these themes for comedic entertainment is fascinating when understood within the broader social and sexual landscape, a landscape evidently understood by the reviewers. The programme is clearly exploiting a number of familial themes that at present create concern and anxiety for educators, the medical profession and legislators, and it is enlightening to examine the ways in which audiences navigate their way through the popular comedy text in light of these anxieties.

Mom takes its comedy in to rather dark territory, with jokes about adultery, sexual harassment, absent and inappropriate fathers and adoption practices. And yet, it is the intergenerational cycle of teen pregnancy, poverty and addiction that is routinely commented on in the user reviews. Indeed, whether audiences applaud or abhor such depictions, it is clear that these themes, or rather, the ways in which the mothers in the show struggle to overcome them, forms the cornerstone of the comedy here. But while some read this as responding to a new trash aesthetic that exploits and glorifies intergenerational teen motherhood and the cycle of alcohol abuse, others read this as a zeitgeist phenomenon, perfectly in keeping with and responding to the broader social and sexual environment.

Mom presents audiences with three generations of teen mothers, and as such, the programme offers up complex, competing and contradictory maternal thoughts and practices, with each woman's maternal endeavours going some way to helping us understand the norms and mores of appropriate motherhood as it shifts and ebbs

from generation to generation. It depicts struggling and strained maternal figures who themselves mother and have been mothered, and it is the tensions between the generations that is at odds with much nuclear family sitcom fare. *Mom* represents the anxieties of intergenerational teen motherhood, alcoholism and poverty, but refuses to let dysfunction mean disgust. Combining employment, single motherhood, sexual desires and addiction is hard, and the programme does not shy away from that fact, but what the programme does so well (and why it is taboo for some and trailblazing for others), is present the daily work of mothering as a choice, one that is more difficult for some women than others, but a chore nonetheless. We are living in a pronatalist period dependent on the ideology of intensive mothering, and as such, *Mom* lifts the lid on the final familial taboo by reminding us that the long-term act of mothering is a choice. Women can at any time hand in their notice, leave the family home and walk away from their children in line with the growing numbers of mothers who leave their babies, toddlers, infants and adolescents each year (Jackson 1994, Hart 2008). Christy doesn't leave. She makes mistakes, often and repeatedly, but she doesn't leave. She is an active protagonist who strives to improve her maternal practices, not in line with the ideology of intensive mothering, but rather, for the betterment of her family. With this in mind it is for audiences to decide whether this unruly woman and carnivalesque mother stops short of being a poor maternal figure in the hierarchy of hegemonic mothering.

The situation comedy has a long history of depicting strong, capable mothers struggling at work and in the home, but what is clear is that generation after generation, these mothers become further removed from the ideology of intensive mothering that informs the 'good' mother archetype. While Lucy, Roseanne and Grace might be redeemed as 'good enough' maternal figures, some user reviews make it clear that *Mom's* mums actually struggle to reach even this less elevated maternal mantle due to their teen pregnancies, although this might be understood by others as the appeal of the characters in question. After all, mothers in the audience might seek comfort in such struggling maternal figures when we ourselves are failing to live up to the 'good' mother myth in the wider social context. When women of the 1950s suffered

from what Betty Friedan referred to as the 'problem with no name', a phrase coined in order to explain and explore the reason why housewives were feeling stifled rather than satisfied in their domestic roles, watching the character of Lucy trying to find a role in the entertainment world before returning to the family realm gave audiences a 'good enough' maternal depiction to route for. Likewise, when more and more women started entering the world of part-time work and the notion of the latch-key kid was introduced into common parlance, *Roseanne* offered a challenging depiction of 'good enough' mothering as the central protagonist vocalised her dissatisfaction with the maternal role whilst also working to provide for her children. Today, at a time when more mothers with young children are entering the world of work, in full-time employment and using the services of nurseries, child-minders, breakfast and after school clubs, Christy is seen struggling just to maintain the 'good enough' role. My point here is simply that the further removed women in the audience become from the maternal ideal, the further away our televisual counter-parts have to step beyond this archetype so that we might continue to find these mothers a somewhat relatable yet safely removed maternal depiction.

Conclusion

I have outlined existing social and maternal statistics as they pertain to the notion of contemporary motherhood before considering the notion of the 'good' mother within and beyond the media marketplace, focusing on the representation of motherhood in the popular and longstanding situation comedy genre. *Mom* follows in the family sitcom tradition by finding wit in family dysfunction and humour in domestic tribulations. *Mom* is a classic situation comedy in the sense that it smuggles in societal concerns under the guise of humour, offering searing cultural comment through the safe genre conventions of a well-meaning but strained family unit. And although a range of reality, dramedy and teen productions can be seen to dwell on the inter-generational cycle of teen pregnancy, *Mom* does so with stock sitcom characters and a predictable laugh-track which can allow for more biting comment than the audience might otherwise choose to embrace in alternative genre formats. We are told that contemporary mothers are struggling as never before to uphold unrealistic stand-

ards of acceptable mothering, which might help to explain the popular appeal of a sitcom mother who struggles with more than a work-life balance against a backdrop of financial hardship. Christy's addiction and teen pregnancy, her mother's addiction and teen pregnancy, her daughter's teen pregnancy, the affair with her married boss, financial and creative frustrations with waitressing work, lack of emotional and financial support from ex-spouses makes our own maternal struggles look bearable and positions our motherwork efforts as 'good enough'. Media texts in general and domestic, women-centred television texts in particular can open up a dialogue relating to broader social and maternal concerns. With this in mind, I have not looked to demonstrate how realistic, accurate, false or misleading the sitcom appears to the viewer, but rather, to draw attention to the ways in which programmes such as *Mom* are being read and received on the back of wider debates about appropriate maternal practices and acceptable family dynamics in a pronatalist period dominated by the ideology of intensive mothering.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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