



## Australian women's complex engagement with the yummy mummy discourse and the bodily ideals of good motherhood



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### ABSTRACT

The celebrity “yummy mummy” is a popular and dominant contemporary representation of motherhood. Feminist analyses of the yummy mummy have predominately focused on textual readings of the Western cultural ideal of the maternal. This paper contributes to this body of scholarship by focusing on empirical data gathered from 29 women living in regional Western Australia. Representations of the yummy mummy regulate how women experience their bodies and their identities as mothers, and how they perceive other women. Analysing these representations provides a platform for talking about maternal bodies and the current societal pressures upon them, with the mothering ideal associated with the yummy mummy being in deep conflict with other dominant ideas about what constitutes good mothering. I argue that while women do not have many alternative discourses to draw on, they can engage in resistance work against the powerful ideal of the yummy mummy, often at the same time as desiring it.

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### Introduction

This paper reports on findings of an empirical study investigating how women reconcile, negotiate and resist competing discourses of good motherhood. I explore these contemporary tensions in relation to the discourse of the ‘yummy mummy’, its popular representation and meanings for women’s experiences of mothering and plans for motherhood. I undertake my analysis within the context of broader Western<sup>2</sup> cultural meanings of femininity. These meanings are informed by neoliberal rationalities that interpret “fat” as a “personal inadequacy” or “lack of will” (Bordo, 1993, p. 192), which are increasingly applied to the postnatal body.

To highlight the significance of representation in influencing women’s feelings about, and relationships with their postnatal bodies, I draw on Foucauldian feminist approaches to power, discourse and subjectivity. In such a framework, power is conceptualised as ever-present, productive and relational (Foucault, 1990). Rather than a force that can be possessed, power is exercised, embodied and enacted, both

constituting and being constituted through the actions of individuals (Foucault, 2002; Foucault & Gordon, 1980; Sawicki, 1991). In such a way, an individual’s subjectivity is constructed through relations of power, and the discourses through which these power relations are organised work to ascribe subject positions and constitute subjectivity (Foucault, 2002; Skeggs, 1997a). Only within discourse can individuals find their social realities and subjectivities (Barthes, 1993; Foucault, 1971). Thus, the discourses in operation around individuals affect how the world is experienced (Letherby, 2002), including how the body/ies are experienced and projected within the social field (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). However, precisely because of the nature of power – its productivity, relationality, instability, enactment through action and the absence of any position exterior to it – resistance is always a possibility (Foucault, 2002; Ramazanoglu, 1993; Sawicki, 1991). Thus, relations of power can be modified by acting upon actions (Foucault, 2002).

I argue that dominant media representations instil and permeate neoliberal interpretations of fat, providing interpretations of what constitutes good mothering that influence how women feel about and relate to their postnatal bodies. The women in my study had differing perspectives on the ability of media representations of motherhood to affect women’s thinking about mothering. Some were critical of their engagement with the media and self-reflexive about its influence upon them. By exploring these women’s responses to, and engagement with media representations of the maternal body, this article considers the significance of such representations for women’s identities. My analysis found that women’s critical reflections of popular media, and

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<sup>2</sup> My concern in this paper with the ideal of the thin, toned, sexually attractive postnatal body is based within a Western context.

the sharing of these views represent important kernels of resistance against the contemporary ideal of the yummy mummy.

### Yummy mummies and neoliberal bodies

The yummy mummy is a highly classed, White, heteronormative cultural configuration of the maternal, tied to practices of consumption and self-grooming. In contemporary popular culture, the yummy mummy is “celebrated as a desirable identity; one that embodies female choice, autonomy, consumerism and aesthetic perfection” (Allen & Osgood, 2009, p. 6). It is a practice of distinction, modelled to women by Hollywood and the “cult of the celebrity” (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010). As a cultural ideal, it plays a critical role in the classification of “good” versus “bad” motherhood, “successful” versus “failed” femininities and “worthy” versus “unworthy” female citizenship (Allen & Osgood, 2009). Accordingly, “good” mothers care that their bodies look thin, toned and “sexy”, and are well-groomed and well-dressed (Littler, 2013; Nash, 2011). In order to achieve this, women need money to consume beauty products and adhere to beauty regimes. Hence, good women wait until they are established professionals before contemplating motherhood (Allen & Osgood, 2009). Early, unplanned pregnancy makes “yummy mummy” status, and an ability to positively contribute to the broader community, unattainable. In reality, yummy mummy status is unattainable for most women regardless of the timing or the planned-for nature of their pregnancies. However, celebrity culture creates, maintains and perpetuates this ideal as a desirable and attainable part of being a “good” mother. In this section, I review current literature on the yummy mummy. Following this, I draw on empirical research to extend textual analyses by exploring how women rework the dominant regulatory norms articulated in the yummy mummy discourse.

Feminist accounts of the yummy mummy predominately centre on the neoliberal context of her birth and her regulatory function in the lives of young women. Neoliberalism is a contested term which scholars from various disciplines have viewed and engaged with differently depending on their own orientations and predispositions (Gilbert, 2013). Here, drawing on a Foucauldian perspective, neoliberalism is interpreted as a particular form of governmentality (see Foucault, 2008) that operationalises indirect techniques of power (Lemke, 2002) to encourage entrepreneurial and competitive practices and individualistic understandings of selfhood (Gilbert, 2013). In this context, McRobbie (2015, pp. 16–17) identifies the “compulsion to compete for perfection” that neoliberal governmentality cultivates within young women today, including when it comes to bodily appearance, as a violent (self)regulation of femininity.

In their analysis of British make-over television shows, Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) elucidate how neoliberal discourses support the notion of individual accountability while ignoring the subject positions of gender, class and race. They argue that the feminine subject achieves success through consumption. For Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008), the yummy mummy embodies a new bourgeois fantasy about successful femininity. It is wrapped up in notions of “having it all” and achieving gender equality. Women are regulated by this embodiment, encouraging for McRobbie (2013), contemporary revivals of middle-class hegemony.

The yummy mummy ideal regulates young women’s lives, their imaginings and plans for the future, and how they conceptualise their choices and/or circumstances. Under neoliberal discourses, such regulation occurs through the internalisation of cultural narratives. Young middle-class women are positioned as ideal neoliberal subjects within these neoliberal discourses, imbued with choice, independence and the self-discipline to “succeed” in the market place. In this context, motherhood is problematic (Allen & Osgood, 2009). Yummy mummies model good and “responsible” motherhood to young middle-class, successful career women (Allen & Osgood, 2009, p. 7) who postpone motherhood until they have accumulated economic capital and can fully

participate in consumer culture as self-actualised mothers. Through the neoliberal configuration of the yummy mummy, working class femininity is viewed as an undesirable identity, and young motherhood a mark of failure for the modern woman. Like “top girls” (McRobbie, 2009), yummy mummies are self-regulating neoliberal subjects (Allen & Taylor, 2012). They are juxtaposed with young, single, welfare-dependent mothers, who, unlike the yummy mummy, are not responsible, quality, clean and respectable mothers (Allen & Taylor, 2012).

The yummy mummy ideal informs definitions of good femininity based upon systems of representation and structures of hegemonic regulation. It fosters a new set of expectations, which I describe as the “loading on” of expectations (Malatzky, 2013), by sexualising the maternal body (Littler, 2013). However, ‘sexiness’ is narrowly defined. What is constructed as “fat” is reviled when these expectations suggest women must acquire an ideal body type that is thin and toned (Bordo, 1993). Nothing must “wiggle” (Bordo, 1993, p. 191). This ideal body form is seen to articulate the “correct attitude” (Bordo, 1993, p. 195). It embodies the neoliberal tenets of control and discipline required by self-controlled and self-disciplined citizens (Foucault, 1991). This is sometimes framed within the need for women to maintain heterosexual relationships (Skeggs, 1997b), and control their own lives. “Fat” is viewed as a personal failure, revealing a lack of self-discipline or self-control (Bordo, 1993; Lupton, 2013); as a source of anxiety and disgust (Tyler, 2013). Further, public approaches to weight loss continue to shift responsibility away from social structures and onto the individual (Lupton, 2014). This is a trademark deceit in neoliberal governance, operating to encourage the processes of internalisation to produce the ideal citizen (Foucault, 1991). In this sense, the ideal of the yummy mummy can be read as a neoliberal device, operating to distract attention away from important social matters for families and states.

Littler (2013) argues that the yummy mummy represents a fetishisation of the maternal. Conceptually, this representation conceals the complex difficulties women face in attempting to combine paid work with mothering, as well as a systemic failure by the state and other social institutions to engage substantially with these complexities. Part of this fetishisation works through infantilising the maternal; the “yummy mummy” is a “half-sexualised, half-childlike address” (Littler, 2013, p. 233). McRobbie (2013) argues that feminist discourse is increasingly co-opted into a “corporate” re-make of conservative politics to further neoliberalism’s reach. Gossip is intertwined with important matters, distracting attention away from genuinely significant issues for families and contemporary societies (McRobbie, 2013). For example, debates about postnatal weight loss can distract from important discussions about the work women do for families and how it is divided and supported.

Representations of celebrity yummy mummies model an idealised maternal body. The media employs an “inspecting gaze” (Foucault, 1995) in its representations of female celebrity bodies, which are heralded as the epitomes of femininity and motherhood. Heightened interest in the bodies of pregnant and mothering celebrities means maternity no longer escapes the disciplinary practices of current body projects (Nash, 2011). Rather, the bodies of female celebrities are surveyed, scrutinised and judged (Gill, 2009) and the maintenance of a “(not too) thin” (Kokoli & Winter, 2015, p. 165) body has become part of the emotional work required from female celebrities in particular (see Nunn & Biressi, 2010). The resulting radical “transformation” of postnatal celebrity mothers constructs an ideal around “getting your body back” after pregnancy and childbirth. This is represented as attainable to all women, when in reality, such transformations require considerable finances, time and effort. Hence, while the yummy mummy body is not the “norm” in broader society, the “preoccupation” with this type of body (Bordo, 1993, p. 186) is commonplace.

For Skeggs (1997b), bodies are spaces for displaying cultural capital and demonstrating “improvement”. Skeggs’ (1997a) analysis is useful here to consider the ways that particularly middle-class women aspire to achieve postnatal bodily transformations, to position themselves as

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