“Yummy Mummies”: Angelina Jolie and Early 21st Century Representations of Mothering

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Abstract

The face of world-famous actress Angelina Jolie features boldly on the magazine cover of Vanity Fair (July 2008). Staring directly at you, this is the face of a woman who finds pregnancy ‘very sexy’. Represented in the media as a celebrity ‘yummy mummy’, Jolie is seen to be a caring, devoted, good mother. She is also viewed by many to be an attractive, beautiful, and sexy woman. The representations of motherhood in the media, such as ‘yummy mummy’ discourses which combine motherhood with looking good, work to romanticise and idealise mothers, while at the same time denigrating and humiliating them.

This paper is concerned with the flow of discourses about contemporary mothering that circulate in and out of media texts, as well as the lives of everyday women. In what I describe as the ‘Glamorisation of Motherhood’, a woman’s sense of self, her sense of maternal identity as a mother, can be shaped and influenced by yummy mummy media narratives. The representation of Angelina Jolie in the July (2008) issue of Vanity Fair can be seen as one representation of the discourse which informs and gives meaning to the stories we construct about what ‘yummy mummy’ motherhood means.

Keywords: Mothering, Motherhood, Representations, Discourse, Media

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Introduction: The Face of a Famous Mother

The face featured on the cover of *Vanity Fair* (July 2008) stares directly at you, catching your eye, intriguing your curiosity, inviting your gaze. Beneath high-arched, dark brown eyebrows, you are drawn into a pair of almond-shaped, darkly-lashed, symmetrical, and highly striking, green-blue eyes – the colour of which is so clear you can actually make out the silhouette figure of the photographer being reflected within them. Apart from a single, small, round beauty spot above the right eye, completely flawless, porcelain-like skin is enveloped by slightly curled, thick chocolate-brown hair that hangs loosely to just below the shoulders. The bottom edge of the magazine cuts straight across the lower part of this portrait’s bust. Dressed in a tan-coloured, v-shaped garment, two well-rounded, large, voluptuous breasts are supported in a revealing manner. Full, plump lips, painted in a seductive, deep, crimson red hold centre position of the page and a set of perfectly straight, bright, white teeth sparkle behind the slightly parted, bow-shaped pout.

This is the face of Angelina Jolie. This is the face of a mother to six children under the age of eight who is sharing the responsibility for their care with partner Brad Pitt: “I happen to be with somebody who finds pregnancy very sexy. So that makes me feel very sexy” reads the quote above her name which is printed in large, white, bold font. Having just given birth to a set of healthy twins at the time of this magazine’s publication, it has since been reported that Jolie and Pitt are already approaching the final stages in the adoption process of a seventh child (Tippetts 2008).

Jolie has become somewhat of an icon, or role-model, in today’s media-driven celebrity culture and represents for many, a woman who ‘has it all’: career, family, as well as romantic love interest. Frequently circulating through various forms of the media in 2008; Jolie’s image – the representations of her – can be seen to represent a number of powerful social meanings. In particular, the publicly narrated stories about her can be said to reinforce, or reproduce, dominant (and other) social norms, beliefs, discourses, ideologies, and values (Devereux 2007).
‘Sexy Motherhood’ is all the rage today with glamorous mums-to-be who shop, lunch, and socialise their way through pregnancy in fancy, high-heeled shoes and proudly displaying their baby bump as if it were the latest *Louis Vuitton* or *Gucci* handbag. Fuelled by Hollywood stars and celebrity mums, the ‘yummy mummy’ trend of early 21st Century motherhood features “too-posh-to-push” C-Sections, high-end fashionable maternity wear, and a rapid return to fitness, fashion, style, and career after giving birth (Woolley 2007). McRobbie (2006) suggests that “the svelte figure of the high-income yummy mummy who can squeeze into size six jeans a couple weeks after giving birth, with the help of a personal trainer, has become a favourite front-cover image in the celebrity weeklies”.

Angelina Jolie is just one of many ‘celebrity mums’ women’s magazines seem to thrive on along with stories about other famous mothers such as Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Alba, or Nicole Richie. It could be actresses such as Katie Holmes, Cate Blanchett, Halle Berry, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Sarah Jessica Parker; or singers such as Gwen Stefanie and Madonna. Maybe it is supermodel mums like Heidi Klum and Kate Moss or, even famous women such as Victoria Beckham or Donald Trump’s wife, Melania Knauss who are all reported as combining motherhood with looking good. ‘Mum’ seems to have be the hottest look of the season: baby bumps are super-trendy, and babies themselves make for great fashion accessories to add to the perceived persona (and capacity) of a female celebrity star.

Celebrity mums are scrutinised by the media industry (and in turn, by ‘us’, the audience) for how they look, physically, after giving birth and in becoming a mother. This seems to suggest that appearance has become associated with a woman’s maternal capabilities, and my concern here is the effects that this may have on a wider social audience of individual ‘everyday’ mothers (see for example a study done by Jessica L. Collett, 2005, entitled “What Kind of Mother Am I? Impression Management and the Social Construction of Motherhood”).

This paper, which emerges from a larger Honours research project, is concerned with the flow of discourses about contemporary mothering that circulate in and out of media texts, as well as the lives of everyday women. ‘Yummy Mummies’ have become a popular way to describe celebrity mothers, as well as a way for ‘normal’
women to define themselves. The yummy mummy concept promotes and packages a particular type of mothering style to women in capitalist-driven, consumer societies. In what I describe as the ‘Glamorisation of Motherhood’, a woman’s sense of self – her sense of maternal identity as a mother – is shaped and influenced by yummy mummy media narratives. Angelina Jolie texts, such as the article written by Rich Cohen for *Vanity Fair* (July 2008), is one representation which can be analysed for the way it informs and gives meaning to the stories we construct about what ‘yummy mummy’ motherhood means.

**Maternal Identity: Discourses, Meanings, Fantasies, and Consequences**

Tina Miller (2005: 6) suggests that becoming a mother changes lives in all sorts of ways: “it has a major significance for individual biographies, yet expectations will be shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which women live their lives”. Although contemporary western mothers are presented with an abundance of new opportunities and a wider range social roles than ever before, mothering discourses are influenced and informed by culture and society’s thinking about women’s mothering (Giddens 1992). This can be argued to limit (rather than liberate) women and socially acceptable choices concerning motherhood.

Divergence away from traditional (nuclear) family norms, advances in medical reproductive technologies, and changing attitudes to sexual behaviour and/or marriage over the past few decades have contributed to an increase in choices now available to women (Arendall 2000; Hadfield, Rudoe and Sanderson-Mann 2007). The widespread availability of contraception and abortion also provide opportunities for women to ‘choose’ motherhood: “when or whether to have a child, and in what context”, if at all, that is (Hadfield et al. 2007: 256). One cause of these sorts of societal changes is the influence of the second-wave feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s which have allowed women greater independence and new freedoms to self-reflexively define and alter their identities, including their desires (or lack thereof) to mother.

Mothering and motherhood are viewed by feminist constructionists as dynamic social interactions and relationships which are organised within the prevailing (patriarchal) gender belief systems (Glenn 1994). Some feminist writers have attempted to
challenge theories that tie women’s positions to essentialist biological imperatives by locating the origins of a seemingly universal pattern of mothering in social (rather than biological) sources (see for example, Chodorow 1978; DiQuinzio 1999; Glenn 1994; Rich 1976; Ruddick 1990). We can understand motherhood as being socially located and culturally produced in that mothering is differently patterned and experienced according to a woman’s personal context, situation, and position within her given community. Mothering is not a universal experience – it is a multi-faceted and dynamic process which can involve an array of complexities and tensions. Certain ideals and expectations about mothering – like the pervasive images of yummy mummies that are frequently seen in the media can have an immense affect on a woman’s her sense of self as a mother, her ‘maternal identity’ (Miller, 2005).

Even though patterns of reproduction and practices associated with childbearing have changed in comparison to previous generations; childrearing however, is still strongly related to notions of femininity and the reinforcement (or reproduction) of women’s gendered identity roles (Chodorow 1978; McMahon 1995). Regardless of the recognition that nurturing and caring work is not inevitably or exclusively the domain of women, “womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience” (Arendall 2000: 1192; Forcey, 1994). DiQuinzio (1999) argues that women’s mothering continues to be seen as a crucial component of Western industrial capitalist societies: women should have kids; women should want kids, and kids should primarily be a mother’s duty, responsibility, or even social obligation. If you are a woman who does not feel these things, well, then there must be something wrong with you.

Although mothering is an ongoing learning process through interaction with the child, mothers are identified by how they behave rather than what they feel (Arendall 2000; Ruddick 1994). Discourses about motherhood determine how women should ‘do’ mothering and representations of these discourses can create strange discrepancies between the fantasy of ideal behaviour and the lived realities of social experience (Maushart 1997). Shaped with reference to dominant ideas about doing the right thing, socially constructed discourses and representations about motherhood require, in a sense, that mothers be seen to “act responsibly...to narrate experiences and
expectations [of pregnancy and motherhood] in culturally recognizable and acceptable ways” (Miller 2005: 86).

Ideas about the ‘right’ kind of parent are extremely pervasive in society and what constitutes good or bad mothering is fuelled and informed by representations and media discourses about being a ‘yummy mummy’. Such ideals exist in tension with mothers’ everyday lives and indicate that no matter how much a mother does for herself, and her children, it will simply never be enough. Mothering is often lonely, hard, isolating, and undervalued – it entails extensive emotional work and a myriad of desires, frustrations, tensions, and anxieties (Miller 2005; Paris and Dubus 2005). Contemporary motherhood in early 21st century postmodern contexts has become full of uncertainty and paradox – a process fraught with dilemmas at all stages – that both influences and is affected by socially defined, hyper-mediated conceptualisations of what mothering supposedly means (and looks like) for women.

Angelina Jolie: Yummy Mummies and the ‘Glamorisation of Motherhood’

Rich Cohen’s article, “A Woman in Full” (Vanity Fair, July 2008) is a thirteen page spread which contains seven large photographs of Jolie by Patrick Demarchelier. In one image Jolie stares pensively into the distance. In another, she lies back on a recliner in a sparkling metallic sequence gown that is hanging loosely off the corner of her shoulder. Her legs are apart with one resting on the chair and the other poised on the floor. In another photograph, Jolie is seen clutching at her breast in what appears to be an effort to hold her garment up. Her eyes are closed and her head, with loose hair covering part of her face, is tilted back to the side. Wearing bright red lipstick, her mouth is open, as if to signal her enjoying an intense, breath-taking moment of pleasure.

Over the page we see Jolie standing on the balcony of an exotic location in Malibu, California. With the ocean behind her and the sun on her face, she stands confidently; arms spread out and holding on to the sides of the glass balcony, one slender and long leg, in high-heeled shoes, is revealed all the way up to her hip. The rest of her body is draped in a brown summer dress. Tattoos on her arms, thickly curled hair, and a pair of sunglasses are the only accessories she wears. In each of these photographs, Jolie is
a number of months pregnant, and yet she exudes an allure of sexiness and femininity. If this is not convincing enough from the shots themselves, there is accompanying text to make sure you understand that Jolie truly does feel like a ‘woman in full’. On being pregnant, Jolie says: “I love it...It makes me feel like a woman. It makes me feel that all the things about my body are suddenly there for a reason” (Cohen 2008: 74).

The spread seems to be saying that pregnancy and motherhood shouldn’t slow you down from continuing to do everything, or ‘having it all’ and making it look easy – just take a look at Angelina Jolie! Thriving family, romantic love interest, successful acting career, as well as humanitarian work; pregnancy is no longer about morning sickness, swollen ankles, mood swings, and bloating – women should look and feel absolutely fabulous right up to, and even during labour. In ‘sexing up’ the image of what it is like to be pregnant, celebrity mums make motherhood glamorous and trouble-free. This could be argued as being a means for a woman to feel good about taking control of her body, but it also places unduly pressure on women to feel that they should always look fantastic. If Angie finds it sexy, then why don’t you?

Douglas and Michaels (2004) trace the popularisation (and idealisation of) celebrity mums as emerging initially in the late 1970s with the founding of magazines such as People, Us, and InStyle. Although the ‘yummy mummy’ image may have been marked by an intense scrutiny of stars’ post-baby weight loss with magazine covers featuring popular titles such as “Bodies after baby” (People Magazine 2008) and “Body after baby – the winners and losers” (Star Magazine 2008), Jermyn (2008) suggests that the yummy mummy ‘mothering demograph’ has become visible among many aspirational “ordinary” women – not just famous celebrities. As popular culture absorbs, creates and promotes celebrity, O’Donohoe (2006: 3) argues that images of celebrity yummy mummies are looked up to as role models by “young mothers steeped in visual culture and seeking to escape the old ‘frump’ stereotype of motherhood”. Obtaining a ‘yummy mummy’ title signifies a woman who appears to be successfully juggling motherhood, career, and sexuality, as well as looking stylish and trendy all the time.

Whether it is television or the newspapers, magazines or Internet websites, the media is saturated with images and representations of what mothering looks like, or at least,
what it *should* look like in early 21st century Western social contexts. And right now, it is about looking fantastic: pregnant women opt for tight fitting clothes that show off their baby bumps and new-found (natural) cleavage. No more oversized frocks and baggy slacks (no matter how comfortable they are) for new mothers. No visible eye bags, dishevelled hair, or baby dribble and puke stains. *Most importantly*, absolutely all signs of post-partum pregnancy flab need to disappear almost instantaneously with the birth, completely vanishing from the body, the mind, and all sight before mum even considers leaving the house with her baby.

Representations of celebrity ‘yummy mummies’ can create pressures for contemporary women who may feel inadequate in comparison, or find it difficult to measure up to such ideals (Devine 2008). ‘Ordinary’ women know that famous yummy mummies are Hollywood fantasies; that in reality, celebrity mums actually have a team of drivers, cooks, trainers, maids, masseuses, skin-care experts, hairstylists, personal assistants and a fleet of nannies that help to create and maintain their fantastic yummy mummy appearances (Burroughs 2008). The yummy mummy ideal is also predicated on considerable economic privilege, as well as being inherently middle-classed, and a typically white-faced concept (Jermyn 2008). In addition to this, McRobbie (2006) argues that the premise of having glamorous mothers frequently gracing the covers of women’s magazines, internet websites, and celebrity television shows is that it has become “an ideal opportunity to extend the grip of consumer culture by suggesting that successful maternity now requires that a mother and baby afford high maintenance pampering techniques as well as a designer wardrobe.”

Even though being a glamorous mum may be out of reach for most women, Woolley (2007) describes how products, services, and expert advice to back up the yummy mummy lifestyle are booming in today’s market. There are Yummy Mummy websites, Yummy Mummy Life Network Television programs, Yummy Mummy clubs, spas, shops, gyms, and a multitude of yummy mummy clothing department stores. Magazines, self-help guides, parenting manuals, and even books such as Liz Fraser’s (2007), *Yummy Mummy’s Ultimate Family Survival Guide*, and Betty Londergan’s (2006), *I’m Too Sexy for My Volvo: A Mom’s Guide to Staying Fabulous*, advocate that ‘yummy mummy’ lifestyles have become an essential part of motherhood today:
“Much as you adore your kid,” writes Londergan (2006), “it’s just as important to BE adorable” (Front Cover Insert, my emphasis). Campbell (2004) argues that women yearn to be yummy mummies because being one suggests being a woman who is taking back control of her body and her life postpartum. These days however, it seems as though a woman’s ‘yummy mummy status’ is determined by how little she lets motherhood interfere with her pre-baby lifestyle, in addition to how much she is willing to spend (financially or in terms of time and energy) on attaining and maintaining such an image.

Women are presented with, marketed to, and even “deluded” (to use Douglas and Michael’s description, 2004: 7) by an increasing amount of maternal advice, lessons, and programming which can powerfully shape how women feel about their relationships with their children, as well as how women, either as mothers or not, may feel about themselves. Representations of celebrity yummy mummy Angelina Jolie illustrate only one aspect of the ever-growing volume of motherhood discourses which are available to contemporary women. The issue here is that the media not only advises mothers - it flatters them, warns them, conflates them, and above all, sells to them, constructions and reinforcements of what constitutes good mothering, what good mothering should look like, and the ways in which women can achieve socially recognisable good mother roles (Gorman and Fritzsche 2002).

The representations of motherhood in the media, such as yummy mummy discourses, work to romanticise and idealise mothers, while at the same time denigrating and humiliating them. Hadfield, Rudoe and Sanderson-Mann (2007) claim that the images of yummy mummies in the media contribute to a stigma of failed femininity for those mothers (and potential mothers) who can’t live up to celebrity standards. Celebrity mums who race to get back into shape as soon as possible after giving birth exemplify how motherhood, in an intensified consumer culture, has become a competitive process (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Furthermore, mothering in magazines and on television has become commodified: “with female bodies on display, women have the power to own the gaze yet also embrace and celebrate the pregnant experience in commodity form” (Tropp 2006: 866). Glamorised representations of motherhood in the media suggest that attractive physical appearance is associated with being a good mother and thus, creates particular aesthetic ideals for the lives of everyday women.
who now, apart from feeling the need to always appear to be in control, also have to look great while doing it.

**Conclusion**

Represented in the media as an extremely caring mother who puts her children first, Jolie is widely regarded as an ideal type of mother. She is represented, for the most part, as a good mother. She can be seen as an ultimate yummy mummy who has it all – family, career, and intimacy (along with lots of money of course). Jolie is also one of the most famous celebrities of 2008, and the early 21st century for that matter. She’s won the biggest awards, been among the highest-paid actresses ever, and has become an object of desire for women around the world; women who, as Cohen (2008: 140) describes, recognise her as an “archetype”. This representation, not her personally, but the celebrity image of Jolie tells women how to mother, and which is the right way to do it. Media texts of yummy mummies such as Jolie present women with images and fantasies of what good mothering is, as well as what it should look like, feel, and involve.

Dyer (1986) suggests that society is fascinated with celebrities because they enact ways of making sense of the experiences of being a person in a particular kind of social context. He suggests that “[s]tars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed”, and that we love them because we imagine how lovely that glamorous life would be (cited in Turner 2004: 104). Celebrity mothers, although marked by contradictions, tensions, and ambiguities, have become a site of consumption for many women who might draw their understandings of what good mothering looks like, in part, from these particular focus points.

The media promotes certain kinds of lifestyles as being more desirable than others and the concept of ‘yummy mummies’, for example, is a type of mothering that I argue, has become an idealised standard by which contemporary women (or anyone else) might judge a woman’s capacity to mother. The allure of Jolie – her fame, her beauty, and her experiences of ‘sexy motherhood’ – is a form of attractiveness that is packaged and sold to us in ways that are made to seem extremely desirable. Although
reason might disagree, and consciousness tells us that these sorts of images are unrealistic; the unconscious continues to produce a fantasy, an internalised image, about what constitutes good (attractive) mothering (McRobbie 1996).

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Reference List


