

Bad mothers and poor role models: Maternal inadequacy and the problem of perfection

Women in the audience find themselves drawn to a number of comedic and dramatic representations of motherhood that span different channels and schedules, and although such depictions offer a range of escapist fantasies, potential role models and the opportunity for emulation, there are a number of maternal depictions that create a sense of pity, disgust and mistrust. It is important to think about the ways in which certain depictions of motherhood are reviled while others revered, and the ways in which these distinctions can be seen to pick up on broader debates concerning the socially acceptable ‘good’ mother or the culturally inappropriate ‘bad’ mother as they are evident in the broader social and entertainment landscape (Feasey 2012b).

I asked the question ‘Are there mothers on television that you feel negatively towards, what is it about these mothers that encourages ridicule or disapproval?’ With the additional help text asking ‘Do you feel negatively towards their appearance, family, maternal behaviour, friendships, relationships, domestic space or working efforts?’ It is interesting to note the diversity of responses here in terms of the details provided. I do not mean simply in terms of the length of the responses proposed, but rather, in terms of minutia of information given. While some participants provided generalised comments about those maternal representations that irked or irritated, others spoke about specific genres, texts, characters and narratives. That said, less than 1 per cent of responses left this question blank, and as such, it is clear that there are a myriad of maternal depictions that create negative reactions from the television audience, and enough of a reaction for participants to provide comment on. And although this may not surprise readers, given some of the representations that are evident on

the small screen, the genres most frequently cited may surprise theorists from within the fields of television and media studies, because much of what is suggested by audiences negotiates extant literature from those aforementioned areas of research.

Very few women chose to overlook this question, indicating an interest in or desire to communicate what they view as negative or problematic depictions of mothers on screen. And yet, before we look at the ways in which women in the audience judge, rank and qualify mothering practices and performances, it is worth noting that a small number of respondents refused to judge televisual mothers, even fictional creations, however strained their parental performances, due to the emotional, physical and psychological difficulties associated with motherhood and motherwork. We are told that:

... being a mother is tough, we shouldn't criticise.

I try to be non-judgemental, and have an open mind because being a mother is not easy and we all make mistakes.

Offhand I would say no. I sometimes think families are made to look silly for entertainment purposes. I suspect many differ from how depicted.

No, everyone has their own methods and I try not to judge too much on media representation, especially where the children are happy.

And these self-same women went on to challenge those mothers on television who themselves are seen to be judgemental towards other maternal figures. These women are aware that their own maternal thoughts and practices are imperfect, and although parents have different ideas about what is appropriate or acceptable parenting, there is the shared sense that even with the best of intentions we are prone to make mistakes, and that the best we can do is learn from them. They acknowledge that mothers 'are human and flawed, and are learning on the job' (Speier 2004) and that because 'mothering is a trial and error experience, we need to respect that at best it will be "imperfect"' (ibid.). Imperfect indeed, and for a small number of women in the audience, judgement is not only reserved but rescinded.

While a small number of mothers commented without judgement, the majority of respondents seemed to speak in agreement against the swathe of negative, problematic and strained maternal figures that they deemed to be saturating the small screen. Indeed, many of these women made the point that 'bad' mothers were so ubiquitous that they found it difficult to think beyond these negative representations. One woman assumed that she was simply unable to recall a positive, favourite or 'good' maternal figure because of her limited viewing practices, telling us that *'I am not sure I watch enough television to be able to answer your questions very well as I have struggled to think of good mums I have seen and I am sure there must be some!'* Others made it clear that irrespective of time spent in front of such texts, there were few positive images to be found:

Mothers on TV never seem far from judgement.

I don't really think there are any fictional mothers on television who I look up to.

Most mothers ... are either too mumsy or trying too hard to look like teenagers.

American sitcom mothers are harassed, frazzled and normally play minor roles.

I find most representations of mothers on television to be reductive or unrealistic.

I couldn't possibly list all the problematic ways mothers are portrayed on television.

Women ... lose their own sense of identity when they become a mother ... disappointing.

Mothers in TV shows are either portrayed as negligent or perfect ... both are problematic.

I generally feel like mothers on television either are stuck in a relationship, undermined, or left to clean up the messes.

When shows undermine women and make it funny, it pisses me off. It reinforces negative stereotypes and agendas.

Negative images of motherhood are everywhere on television, it somehow seems normal to watch women who are terrible caregivers.

Most mothers on television are portrayed negatively, they are not showing the reality of what it is to have to care for young children, if at all.

... serves to fuel maternal guilt with the stereotype that women will always choose a family over her career ... as you can't have both.

I have never thought about this before, but now that I do, I realise that most of the programmes that I watch tend to focus on women who are terrible mothers.

Women are usually portrayed as home makers or domineering characters even if they also have a job. Either that or they are tough, unkind, business women.

... patronising and make inappropriate assumptions about how our roles are split and how we relate to our husbands. Many are also ridiculous with their attention to stereotypical concerns.

They are often unrealistically glamourised (e.g. played by actresses not actually old enough to be the mother of their character's children) and restricted to stereotyped clichés of 'the working mother' or the 'stay at home mom'. If they get any storyline at all it's generally restricted to the old standard of the affair or almost affair.

While a small number of women refused to offer negative evaluations of mothers on television, most made the point that the medium of television was judgemental towards mothers in a way not seen with their paternal counterparts. More than one mother '*objected to the ways that mothers are judged for being mothers, in a way that seldom applies to being a father*'. The wider entertainment marketplace applauds men for their fathering efforts, even when they are ineffectual, as the parenting bar seems to be set so incredibly low, any failed attempt at emotional connection or misguided effort at communication is rewarded rather than rebuked (Feasey 2008a). Women, however, have the bar raised just a little higher, so much so in fact that we are reminded that they, and they alone '*remain the best primary caretakers of children, 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*' (Douglas and Michaels 2005).

Others made the point that they were unable to provide commentary because they refused to watch those programmes that contained what they assumed to be negative or problematic depictions of motherhood.

I was informed that some mothers in the audience '*try to avoid negative programmes*' while others tell me that '*honestly, if I don't like them, I don't watch the show enough to describe them*', and these comments are interesting because there is the suggestion in such responses that the reputation of a genre precedes the viewing experience. Moreover, several women made the point that they avoid a programme or character, but were intimately knowledgeable of the biography and narrative history of those maternal representations, and although I am in no way questioning their responses here, such comments are interesting in terms of what they tell us about the role of women's talk and extra textual media materials.

There is a general point of interest here about the role that news, reviews and other ancillary texts including community gossip play in our understanding of specific programmes. For those women who have chosen to avoid a specific representation of motherhood, they have either once watched and never returned to a programme, or rather, listened to other discussions about a text which then informs their decision to overlook specific titles. Indeed, many theorists have looked to explore the role and nature of promotion, publicity, reviews, interviews and other paratexts on our understanding of a media product (Austin 2002; Barker 2004; Gray 2010), and it is clearly possible to make decisions about specific programmes based on never actually watching a particular title.

Furthermore, one might consider the gendered nature of these ancillary materials and the ways in which they inform female communication practices. After all, extant research on scandal and women's talk tells us that women bond through gendered discourses such as soap opera, women's magazines and the celebrity gossip sector (Bird 1992; Hermes 1995; Johansson 2006). My point here is that women who are actively trying to avoid specific representations might not watch a programme that they themselves find problematic, but that does not mean that they are able to avoid finding out about storylines, narrative arcs or character developments through shared physical and online dialogue with other women, and mothers. While Mary Ellen Brown (1994) reminds us that genres such as soap opera offer a sense of female community beyond the television screen, even a cursory glance at maternal forums such as Mumsnet remind us of the role of television in the lives of these women, with dedicated 'Fun and

Games' sections for 'telly addicts' and the offer of watching a specific programme as part of the Mumsnet community to inform conversation with other maternal audiences (Mumsnet 2013b).

Avoiding bad mothers ... and the soap opera genre

Although some of these women do not elaborate on those characters, programmes or genres that they seek to avoid, others are very clear about what they choose to overlook in the schedules, and it is surprising given existing literature on the genre in question. Several women talk about soap opera generally and *EastEnders* (1985–) in particular as the text or set of texts that they refuse to watch based on its negative presentation of motherhood and motherwork. And this is more than a little surprising given the genre's status as women's programming. Theorists have long been discussing the ways in which the genres narrative forms and structures appeal to the woman in the audience, foregrounding the role of the matriarch and strong women, focusing on the personal, domestic space and role of women in the community, and highlighting the importance of women's voices within the genre and beyond (Brown 1994; Brunsdon 1997; Geraghty 1999; Brunsdon 2000). Soap opera emerged on American commercial radio in the 1930s and flourished when it transferred to the small screen in the 1950s, and since the outset, the genre has been and continues to be understood as a woman's genre, with women remaining the largest audience share for British prime-time programmes such as *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street* (1960–) and *Emmerdale* (1972–). Moreover, the ancillary market of official magazines such as *Inside Soap* and the broader news, reviews and interviews with the actors associated with the genre appear in a rage of media texts deliberately aimed at the female reader. In short, it is surprising to find such hostility directed towards a genre that has its roots in women's discourse.

Although the soap opera tends to stress that having a baby is 'the single most important thing in a woman's life', the course of the soap opera pregnancy, like that of friendship, marriage and indeed motherhood does not always run smoothly (Rogers 1992). Indeed, one of the general principles of the genre is its commitment to families who are less than perfect, who are strained or struggling in some way (Modleski 2007). The point here is that soap opera refuses to show a contented, happy or harmonious unit for too long; firstly, because domestic trials and private tribulations make up the dramatic action of the genre, and secondly, because creators of these shows assume that the presentation of a jovial, trouble-free family would irk the audience who themselves might be struggling with at least occasional familial disharmony.

While one respondent noted that '*mothers are just in the background holding everything together, worthless and nagging*' the majority of women commented that women had a larger, albeit still problematic role to play in the genre. After all, in order to maintain a sense of character development and dramatic interest, maternal figures must be seen to traverse familial trials and tribulations in order to maintain narrative interest and the required cliff-hangers from week to week and year to year. However, while many women pointed to the lack of maternal reality here, the truth is that although the difficulties of morning school runs, packing lunch-bags and remembering swimming kits is of some interest to the audiences of suburban sitcoms, it offers little in the way of drama, suspense or character development as necessitated by the contemporary soap opera. The genre is said to act as a 'social barometer' for the wider romantic, sexual, familial and domestic concerns of society (Salmon, cited in Hobson 2003) while reflecting the changes that 'have occurred in family life throughout the periods of their existence' (Hobson 2003). And yet, a short look at the profile of one long-standing character points to the relentless drama afforded a popular figure and the subsequent difficulty of maintaining a respectable, responsible or 'realistic' maternal role:

EastEnders: Carol Branning

Carol Branning was born in the East End of London to Jim and Reenie Branning on 3 October 1962. When Carol was thirteen she fell in love with David Wicks and slept

with him. Carol fell pregnant and her family tried to force her to have an abortion but she refused to have the abortion and disagreed. However, Carol's brother Derek Branning hated David and after learning about Carol's pregnancy, Derek beat David up severely and terrorised his family. This resulted in David and his family leaving Walford for Romford in 1976.

Carol is a feisty, loud and strong character, who is fiercely protective of her children. She arrived in 1993, as a worker in the launderette. She soon moves to Albert Square with her partner Alan, and her four children: Bianca, Robbie, Sonia and Billie. When it looks like Bianca is about to start a relationship with David, Carol has to reveal to David that Bianca is actually his daughter, who David thought Carol had aborted.

Carol and Alan get married after Carol's sister April is jilted at the altar. This is despite Carol's father Jim and brother Derek disapproving of the marriage, because Alan is black. However, Alan soon becomes jealous of Carol's friendship with David, and starts an affair, which provokes Carol into having an affair with David. These affairs are short lived, and Carol and Alan soon reunite.

After Billie witnesses an armed robbery, the Jackson family (without Bianca) are moved away from Walford on the Witness Protection Programme. During this time Carol separates from Alan, and starts a relationship with Dan Sullivan. When the Jacksons return to Walford, Bianca realises that she had a relationship with Dan when she was fifteen. She keeps this from Carol, but they soon begin an affair. When Carol finds out about the affair, she kicks Dan out, tells Ricky Butcher (Bianca's husband), and disowns Bianca. She then moves to Balham with Billie.

Carol comes uninvited to Ricky and Bianca's second wedding, to try and stop her son Billie from attending. Despite initially feuding, Carol and Bianca make up, and Carol moves to Walford. Billie and Carol fight regularly over Carol's controlling parenting, and Billie's gang connections. When Jack Branning gets accidentally shot by one of Billie's gang members, who wanted to shoot Billie, Billie blames himself, and joins the army.

Billie is allowed to come home on his birthday, and Carol organises a party for him and his friends. During the party, Billie drinks to much alcohol, and the next day he is found dead on the sofa. Carol is distraught, and blames her family, until her brother Max tells her Billie only joined the army to get away from her. She bans her family from attending Billie's funeral, so only her, Alan, and Alan's mother Blossom attend. In her grief, Carol tries to kiss Alan, but he rejects her as he has married again, and has a son. Carol plans to commit suicide by overdose, but is interrupted

by one of Billie's ex gang members, Connor Stanley. Connor and Carol comfort each other, and end up having sex. Carol however, disapproves of Connor's criminal background, and they break up and get back together many times. During one of the breaks, Connor starts dating Carol's step granddaughter, Whitney Dean. Connor sleeps with Whitney and Carol at the same time, until Bianca finds out and hits him with a metal pole, causing her to go to prison.

In 2011, Carol started a relationship with Eddie Moon, until she finds out he is seeing Vanessa Gold. In 2012, when David returns to Walford to visit his dying mother Pat, old feelings start to resurface. Carol's brother Derek however hates David because of an old rivalry, and him getting an underage Carol pregnant, so he forbids the reunion. During an argument with Carol, Derek slaps her, which frightens her. The feud between David and Derek eventually escalates to violence. David persuades Carol to leave Walford with him, but after seeing how much she is needed by her grandchildren, he decides to leave without her.

When Bianca is sent back to prison in Suffolk for theft and assault, Carol, along with her grandchildren move away from Walford in order to be closer to her. Carol and her family return to Walford a few months later. On Christmas Day 2012, Derek dies of a heart attack, which upsets and relieves the Branning family. On the day of Derek's funeral, Carol clashes with Max's secret wife Kirsty, telling her that Max doesn't want her in his life.

In late 2013, Carol begins a relationship with Masood Ahmed, but when they arrange a quiet night in at Carol's house, David returns with a whole lot of trouble. He has been having an affair with his boss's wife Naomi, and he has money which his boss, Don, wants. Don orders his henchmen to beat David up, which is severe. The next few weeks, Carol is torn between David and Masood, and doesn't know who she loves. She eventually opts for David, and leaves Masood to go on a meltdown.

In January 2014, Carol finds a lump on her breast and fears she may have breast cancer. She has the lump checked out and a few weeks later, Carol is diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. This devastates Carol, and only tells David, Bianca and Sonia. (Wikia 2014)

The genre has historically gone out of its way to present strained and struggling families in order to appeal to the woman in the audience, but there is the suggestion here that many mothers are turning away from such texts precisely because of these careworn and besieged family depictions:

The characterisation of mothers in soaps is often too extreme, they show little concern over their children's welfare.

Soap opera mothers in general because they are always making stupid decisions about how to behave without thinking about their children.

I feel there are few positive reflections and this saddens me. Mothers in soaps for example, are often shown as flawed or people with real problems.

The portrayal of women in soaps is appalling ... they seem to put themselves first with little thought to their young or grown up children.

I try to avoid negative programmes like EastEnders ... it paints mothers in a poor light because they are not always available for their children when they are needed.

Many of the mothers in soaps encourage disapproval, mainly because their parenting skills leave a lot to be desired ... I can't think of any who have stood the test of time.

On soap operas ... pregnancies are rarely shown as complication free and once the babies arrive you rarely see them or there is no discussion over who is looking after them, childcare arrangements etc.

It is sometimes difficult to watch Carol and Bianca in EastEnders, they obviously try their best to love their children and grandchildren but are hampered by the complexity of their relationships and trials of everyday life.

I find maternal characters on soap operas too unbelievable. They are pitched at the extremes. I would rather see reality television when it comes to mothers, you get to see more of the things that have to be dealt with day-to-day.

I do like to watch fictional maternal characters on television and think that they can be very positive images of motherhood but I do get frustrated as I think soaps ... can still portray quite a limited view of motherhood, or being a woman generally, taking on a very domestic role.

People in soap operas who have children at the drop of a bat, change relationships all of the time, and have lives that revolve around themselves without any acknowledgement of the requirements of being a parent. It presents a fake and worrying impression of what responsibility means.

I have argued elsewhere that soap opera is not simply a woman's genre, but should be understood as a maternal genre due to the commitment not only to women, but mothers, within the long running narratives (Feasey 2012a). Peter Buckman tells us that 'the problems of motherhood' (Buckman 1984) are crucial to soap opera, Christine Geraghty argues that the mother figure is the undisputed 'heroine' of the domestic text (Geraghty 1999) and Dorothy Hobson notes that 'child-rearing' is one of the genre's principal storylines (Hobson 2003). Soap opera does not merely represent motherhood, but rather, it represents the 'power of motherhood' (Hobson 2003) within the family unit and such maternal power is most evident in the ways in which the genre foregrounds 'the needs of children for their mothers' in the weekly narratives (*ibid.*). Tania Modleski's seminal work on the soap opera suggests that two of the most fundamental and oft-repeated narrative devices revolve around unwed mothers and the difficulties of balancing a career and motherhood (Modleski 2007). In short, maternal concerns about pregnancy, labour, caring for young children, guiding older children, providing for families, juggling work and domestic responsibilities and balancing social, sexual and motherwork routines are the mainstay of the genre, and yet the genre that received the most criticism for its maternal depictions was the soap opera, to the extent that several respondents commented that they were not interested in, and made a deliberate effort to avoid watching the fictional domestic drama.

I have previously suggested that soap operas present 'good enough' mothers rather than a more romanticised ideal of maternal care, because in many cases these women are seen to look after their children, but not at the expense of their social, sexual or financial desires (Feasey 2013). My point was that these mothers tend to the physical and emotional needs of their children, often under trying financial and familial circumstances, but they do not do so to the detriment of their independence or individual identity. Based on recent debates in feminist mothering, selfless mothering is understood to be problematic for mother and child in the long run, and a woman's desire to maintain a social and sexual life outside of their mothering role is said to be healthy even if it runs against contemporary notions of acceptable mothering in line with the ideology of the intensive role. Such maternal practices might be seen to be in keeping with feminist parenting

manuals as they 'challenge the excessive child-centeredness of contemporary parenting practices' (O'Reilly 2008) and encourage women 'to grow as individuals', not just as mothers (Tiemann 2006). However, although feminist mothering manuals encourage women to sustain a selfhood beyond motherhood, several respondents echo Liebes and Livingstone's work when they tell us that maternal characters in the soap opera are often 'fallible, unsympathetic, or too preoccupied with problems in their own lives to support' their children (Liebes and Livingstone 1992). There seems to be the suggestion that the mothers presented in the genre are not simply trying to negotiate their maternal role and other domestic duties, but that they are not taking sufficient responsibility or providing appropriate role models for their children.

The commentary here tells us that the genre has perhaps gone too far in its desire to debunk the 'good' mother myth, with mothers being read as inappropriate and unacceptable rather than what I previously framed as 'good enough'. Based on a wide range of responses, it is clear that the women of soap opera are read as poor mothers because they are too selfish rather than selfless, too quick to look to their own pleasures rather than making decisions based around their children's wants and needs. In short, the participants appear to be judging these maternal figures for challenging the ideology of intensive mothering and for negotiating a more romanticised ideal. For these women, parental responsibility demands maternal sacrifice for the good of the children, irrespective of social, sexual or financial choices. The difficulty of maintaining this delicate balance of mature identity and maternal responsibility can be summed up by the following viewers:

I don't like mothers who are portrayed as only housewives that are waiting on their husbands hand and foot. I don't like mothers who put their children last and only care about themselves, their boyfriends or their appearance.

I do not like to see a matriarch, a bossy women who thinks they know what is best for everyone, keep tabs on cash and read all letters, neither do I like to see women as the underdog, trodden on and abused. I find this too painful to watch.

I don't enjoy watching self-sacrificing mothers who do everything for the family but then I am uncomfortable watching mothers who put their needs before their children, young or old. Mothers should take on the burden of childcare but not become victims.

I have not amended the comments, nor ordered or re-ordered the wording in any way. What we see here then is the opposing notions of the 'good' mother as martyr and the more selfish woman who maintains her individual identity even after starting a family, and the desire for our screen mothers to propose a satisfying middle ground that mothers in society seem themselves to be struggling to find and maintain.

Moreover, in terms of the notion that few maternal figures have, to quote from one respondent '*stood the test of time*', one has to wonder if part of the problem here is the format of the genre itself. For programmes that span several decades and generations, there will be times when the story might need to look to characters who have left the regular cast list, with storylines having to work around the availability of current and available actors, so that an uncaring or inconsiderate mother might be less about the role or responsibilities of a given character, but more about the availability of a performer over a given period. That said, if these comments about unavailable mothers is less about work schedules and more about the representation of those women seen on screen then there is the suggestion that the genre has moved too far from its roots as a domestic drama. Perhaps this is unsurprising given soap opera's recent attempts to move away from traditional feminine narratives and matriarchal characterisations in order to appeal to a broader demographic (Buckingham 1987; Hobson 2003; Feasey 2008a). After all, in order to attract a wider audience, much feminine discourse has been replaced with relational aggression, so that women are seen to cheat, bully, lie and deceive those around them, in line with their male counterparts. And although this behaviour is not directed at children *per se*, there is the sense that such performances, although common on screen, are not palatable for many mothers in the audience as it points to a level of selfishness and individualism not in keeping with what are seen as more responsible, and thus more appropriate models of parenting.

Although some respondents '*can't stand EastEnders because the families are always screaming and shouting at each other*', such negative

representations are not confined to the soap opera genre. While many mothers suggested that television is littered with negative representations of motherhood, the majority of these women went on to talk about the reality television genre and a diverse range of programmes that feature ordinary people as the basis of their negative feelings and frustrations. We find that reality television, the docu-soap, the talk show and celebrity documentaries are dominated by examples of poor motherhood beyond a single character or programme. As with soap opera before it, there are assumptions made about reality television by those mothers who attest to never watch the genre, and several comments were made along the lines of 'I'm sure I would see lots of negative images if I watched reality television'. If indeed, many women clearly watch and enjoy such problem-parenting inspired texts from the reality genre, albeit a pleasure tinged with discomfort. Genres such as soap opera were accused of using pregnancy, babies and children as key narrative tropes that can be called upon or overlooked depending on the storyline and narrative arc, and as such, one of the pleasures of watching reality parenting television is quite simply the fact that the mother and children are together, attempting to interact and communicate, without convenient respite from that relationship.

Reality and recognition: From *Supernanny* to celebrity

Extant literature on the original, popular and long-running *Supernanny* (2004–12) and later *Jo Frost: Extreme Parental Guidance* (2010–) make it clear that the programme can be understood both as a supportive text for struggling parents and a site for maternal humiliation. And yet, although mothers in the audience are capable of diverse responses to programmes such as *Supernanny*, the overwhelming majority of those women who mentioned this programme or a more recent imitator made it clear that they derided the genre and dismissed those struggling mothers who played a part in such texts.

While most women in the audience spoke of feeling uncomfortable with a programme that offers parenting advice, a lone voice applauded those strained mothers who are shown on screen for their decision to provide a more appropriate and harmonious family:

One of the things I am really impressed with is when mothers (parents) are open to help/advice on programmes like Supernanny. They are obviously struggling and their parenting skills could do with some support, but it is really hard to open yourself up to the criticism, however constructive, on something as important and emotive as mothering. I don't watch it regularly but when I do see it I am impressed by these mother's good intentions, openness and ability to put their children first at this point in their life.

In the main, the parental reality genre in general and *Supernanny* in particular were seen to be committed to negative images of women as mothers. And although one mother made the point that '*I particularly dislike TV shows portraying "naughty step" type discipline for children. I believe that children respond best to loving kindness from their parents*', the majority of respondents spoke negatively about the mothers, not because of their desire to learn disciplinary techniques, but because they were seen trying to parent without such techniques, which they saw as a sign of maternal inadequacy. A number of mothers spoke of their sadness at witnessing what they deemed to be regretful maternal performances:

Reality programmes like Supernanny, I can't believe that some mothers don't seem to take an interest in their children, they show no guidance. The children then don't know what is right and wrong, and then it becomes a vicious cycle.

I think it is really sad to see the ways that children treat their parents on Supernanny, and how the lack of maternal discipline makes these children think that hitting, hurting and name calling is acceptable in the home.

Supernanny tries to help parents who are struggling to raise their children, she (and we) watch them make parenting mistake after parenting mistake, sometimes it is really sad to see how they have slipped into such bad habits, usually with the best of intentions, and then fall back into these routines without much needed support structures.

The mums on Supernanny are unbelievable, they don't seem to realise what they are doing wrong even when it is really obvious to everyone else. It is upsetting to see the impact that

their poor parenting is having on the children. They talk about the children being naughty but these poor children are just reacting to the erratic decisions made by the mother.

Others, however, relished the opportunity to judge and rank what they referred to as ‘shameful’ parenting efforts:

... reassures me that my way is best!

... I like to criticise poor parenting skills.

I sometimes watch ‘nanny’ programmes, where some guru drops in to sort out a families problems. I do make ... judgements about these mums (families).

Some of the mums on programmes like Supernanny, mums who do not take pride in themselves, who shout at their children all the time and refuse to keep a tidy house.

I don’t like reality television as it tends to take the ‘extremes’ in society, which I can’t relate to, however, the people they select tend to make me feel better about myself!

I used to occasionally watch Supernanny and feel lucky that my child didn’t behave like theirs. Which I suppose gave me the feeling that I was more successful as a mother.

Unorganised parents, the ones who are constantly late or have children that begrudgingly go to school are often ridiculed and portrayed negatively as a lesser being in programmes like Supernanny.

... nice to see your kids aren’t THAT bad after all. I often feel insecure and/or annoyed about others ... preaching to me about how I should be bringing up my children, or presenting their way as an idealised way.

I like to watch programmes like Supernanny and Extreme Parental Guidance, less with an eye on wanting to borrow particular domestic or maternal techniques, more so with the hope that I am maintaining an acceptable domestic space and maternal routine for my family. It sounds terrible to admit but watching the extreme behaviours of the mothers and children in these programmes makes me feel more secure about my motherhood decisions.

I sometimes wonder how the mothers on something like Strictly Come Dancing are coping with looking after the children and the training sessions: I do not think that they are being a ‘good’ mum as they are not there for their kids, hence it makes me feel that

I am the 'better' mum. I think that is why I find things like Wife Swap and Supernanny interesting to see if I am doing a better/worse job ... I am interested in the 'real' mothers for comparison purposes if I am being honest.

Supernanny is the parental makeover show, with Jo Frost as the childcare expert offering practical advice and emotional support to parents and children alike. With decades of experience in the field of childcare, Frost seeks to help strained and struggling carers to improve both parental and child behaviours in the home through the use of routines, respect and discipline in a safe and nurturing environment. And although Frost is not a mother herself, there is a sense that her professional childcare role rather than a more emotionally attached maternal status helps those households that she spends time with, allowing her to see where the problems arise and how best, without a sense of maternal guilt or conscience, to propose assistance. Although not all cultural commentators, parental advisers or maternal figures agree with Frost's disciplinary techniques, it is worth noting that most 'of her recommendations are based on recognized authoritative positive parenting behaviours, that is, providing consistency, praise, routine and boundaries' (Ganeshasundaram and Henley 2009).

And although the Montessori movement has recently published a parenting handbook that advocates a far more liberal approach to childcare, encouraging children to take decisions for themselves, without punishment for misbehaving, both the strict regime of Jo Frost and the more liberal approach augmented by the Italian doctor who founded the Montessori movement in the early 1900s are popular with pre-schools within and beyond the UK. Many Ofstead Outstanding pre-schools follow Frost's routines and practices, while a growing number of successful early years providers who feel that such regimes interfere with a child's own natural 'desire to learn and socialise' commit to a more liberal approach (Henry 2012; Hughes 2012).

Although one may talk about parental styles and popular opinions in terms of advocating one of these childcare approaches both at home and in the choice of pre-school, what seems to be overlooked here is the notion of taste and cultural distinction as it is informed by class differences. If one looks at Frost's television career and her broader publication and

web-based franchise there is a sense that it is aimed at a working and lower middle class household, with *Supernanny* and *Extreme Parental Guidance* following the parental tribulations of mainly working-class families, while the Montessori movement and other recent attachment manuals are clearly aimed at and supported by more privileged upper middle class maternal figures. Attachment parenting requires the economic means to live on one income and time to commit fully to motherwork, and although this may not talk of middle class bias in itself, Bill Sears, the founding father of the contemporary attachment movement seems to point to this partiality when he states that mothers should not work outside of the home, and if financial constraints leave them questioning the importance of attachment parenting then they should borrow money from their parents to enable the wife to stay in the domestic arena (Lipkin 2012), an option not viable for most families outside of the privileged classes.

And although one might argue that co-sleeping is free, that slings costs less than prams and push-chairs and that extended breast-feeding past the recommended six months is actually saving money on early weaning and the cost of formula, economics reporter Helaine Olen looks at the incompatibilities of toddler breastfeeding with the demands of a career, noting that 'whatever one thinks of the pros and cons of attachment parenting ... it doesn't come cheap, especially since there aren't many (if any) employers out there waiting for an employee who turns up with multiple children in slings and otherwise clinging to her body' (Olen, cited in Lipkin 2012). Likewise, Orit Avishai informs us that 'although some mothers may have the financial means to quit their jobs and dedicate themselves to full-time parenting. For most women, this is not a viable choice, since the more time they spend away from work, the larger the negative impact on their potential lifetime earnings' (ibid.). In this same way, the American Sociological Association makes the point that 'breastfeeding for six months or longer is only free if a mother's time is worth absolutely nothing' (Lipkin 2012). To return to the Montessori movement in the early years sector, the notion that pupils engage in individual and small group work of their choice, with children receiving individual instruction for 3–4 hours a day speaks of a teacher to child ratio not common in either the early years or later school environment. To note that 'classes that spend over an hour a day in whole

group instruction are departing from the Montessori model' leaves little doubt as to the financial and physical implications of a teaching method beyond most educational establishments (Chattin-McNicholas 1992).

Criticisms of *Supernanny* range from domestic disorder, mothers taking little interest in their children, showing them no guidance, demanding little respect and tolerating abuse with erratic and futile attempts to discipline such behaviour. None of the respondents talk about badly behaved children *per se*, rather, there is a clear consensus that it is the parental behaviours or maternal practices in particular that are at fault, with a lack of discipline or insufficient time spent with children being held up as the problem here. And although several commentators talked about what they deemed to be sad or tragic parenting oversights, there was little sense that the mothers were struggling to maintain what are considered to be appropriate childcare practices due to other work, caring or domestic commitments, even though this is something that the fragile and failing mothers in the programme routinely pass comment on in order to justify what are highlighted as their poor maternal choices. Most women who appear in *Supernanny* are not aware of what Frost and the audience see as poor parenting practices, and indeed, much of their decision making comes from a place of devotion rather than deviancy. It is not uncommon for women to tell us that they are scared to commit to formal, organised, coherent and constant discipline out of fear that such discipline will mean that their children will no longer love them (*Supernanny*: S2:E1). Frost briefly acknowledges the fear being voiced here before making it clear that the opposite is true, because rather than show respect or appreciation for their mothers loving efforts, these children have little opinion of the maternal position in the family home.

A small number of respondents made reference to the agenda setting function of these programmes and the ways in which they are being deployed as part of a broader maternal backlash:

I suppose it's the ones I'm being set up to disapprove of, e.g. who don't provide much in the way of a disciplinary framework or who yell/swear at their kids, feed them junk etc.

I am shocked at how many shows are around that feature inept mothers – trying to change their behaviour. I'm not against it if it helps, but I wonder if mass culture is undermining women's instincts about their own competence (although I know this is nothing new).

With this in mind, one might question why it is that mothers watch and continue to watch in growing numbers programmes such as *Supernanny*, and according to those women who completed my questionnaire the answer is three-fold. For pregnant women yet to experience motherhood first hand, Frost offers a visual parenting manual, acting either as a point of practical information or as a way of starting domestic discussions before the arrival of a baby; for mothers who are themselves struggling with childcare practices, Frost acts as a firm but fair tutor, with a proven track record in helping families with their maternal routines and child-centred disciplines; and lastly, for those parents who have less first-hand insights into toddler tantrums and routine behavioural anxieties, the show offers reassurance concerning their day-to-day appropriate maternal techniques. The fact that social and economic commentators are discussing the recent rise in extended family, or multi-generational living for the sandwich generation (a generation of middle aged parents who have caring responsibilities for both young children and elderly parents), demonstrates how living apart from extended families has become the norm (Davidson 2013). At a time when the majority of mothers are living away from their wider family network, there is a sense that they have not been 'taught' by example how to raise and care for their children, in a way that had existed for previous generations, and some respondents saw this as regretful:

I have in the past felt sad about mothers who did not know how to cook appropriate meals for their children or to demonstrate responsibility and respect for the family, as portrayed in a variety of documentaries. I usually felt sorry for them rather than angry as it was more a question that they hadn't been taught rather than deliberately poor decisions.

No wonder these women are struggling, they don't seem to have ever been shown or guided as parents, I know we all have to make it up as we go along to some extent, but having supporting parents available makes the job a lot easier, not just because there is extra childcare help, but because of the practical advice from experienced mothers.

Another way to think about the Frost franchise is to acknowledge that it is not uncommon to find pleasure, escapism or entertainment in those texts that we deem to be problematic. Existing work on soap opera (Brown 1994), the gendered magazine sector (Feasey 2008b), romance literature (Radway 1984/1991) and the romantic comedy (Brunsdon 1997) have all garnered hypocritical responses by readers who deem a specific genre text retro-sexist or pre-feminist, irrespective of their continued enjoyment of the text in question, with many fully aware of the seeming contradiction or hypocrisy at stake in their responses. Indeed, this is a position often experienced by the film, television and media academic whose theoretical and layman positions are at odds, particularly in the realm of feminist media studies. For example, gender theorists may teach students about the influence of psychoanalytic film theory and the need to renounce Hollywood film in a session on visual pleasure, outline the importance of post-feminism and the liberation of the sexual subject in a debate over contemporary raunch culture (Levy 2006; Attwood 2014) or present debates relating to the social construction of childhood gender roles, even when such formal theories are at odds with their own lived experiences. Indeed, much of the pleasure of watching something deemed unacceptable is based precisely on, rather than in spite of, this sense of disapproval. Watching television that we ourselves see as problematic merely speaks of a televisual version of smoking, eating fast food, drinking more than government initiatives tell us is good for us and forgoing trips to the dentist. We are not unaware of the health implications of these actions, but it still does not always warrant that we abide by socially approved behaviours.

The working class interest and escapist pleasures of *Supernanny* appear almost subtle in comparison to a range of more recent parental-themed programmes, with shows such as *My Big Fat Gypsy Weddings/Holiday/Christening/Valentine* (2010–), *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012–14) and *Mom* (2013–) being said to have jumped on the current ‘white-trash’ televisual bandwagon:

I like to get perspective and sometimes a brief stint of reality TV reminds me how lucky I am to have a normal life.

I sometimes watch Here Comes Honey Boo Boo – simply because I can't quite believe the parenting and am morbidly fascinated!!

You couldn't make up the families in My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding. I don't know whether to laugh or cry at what these young girls are doing with their lives.

I find the clothes and bling lifestyle comic but the behaviour ... deeply troubling. I am repulsed yet drawn to watch these wedding stories unfold.

Why would any mother who herself has experienced life as a gypsy wife and mother wish this for their daughters. Unless there is something that the programme doesn't show or that the women are not telling, it seems at best unhealthy and at worse cruel to encourage a 16 year old child to quash any professional ambitions to lead this life of domestic drudgery.

Glamping for a week is mildly entertaining, but committing your life to a small trailer with all of the social stigma that comes with that domestic environment is rather sad, especially given the financial resources that these families seem to have at their disposal. Tens of thousands on a wedding to then live in a trailer is genuinely confusing to someone outside of the romany lifestyle.

Audience responses picked up on the sometimes 'shocking' stories of young girls wearing sexualised attire, a lack of education or personal ambition and their status as property in the institution of marriage. A recent story on such nuptials informs us that:

Britain's youngest Gypsy bride has wed in a lavish ceremony costing £50,000. Danielle Maughan, who has appeared in the hit television show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, was one day past her 16th birthday when she married 21-year-old Brendan Joyce this weekend ... If [audiences] were expecting a traditional Big Fat Gypsy wedding, they were not left disappointed. The bride wore a six foot wide white dress, with dozens of layers of netting underneath the skirt ... Her heavily embellished corset was studded with crystals and glittery butterflies, and on her head, she wore an elaborate tiara. Her hair was vigorously tonged into brunette ringlets, and her skin was tanned to a deep brown. As befits tradition, there were multiple bridesmaids, who were dressed in voluminous purple creations reminiscent of a Disney princess. After the ceremony, the bridal party moved on to the nearby Open Hearth pub for a reception described as 'raucous'. For the party, the bride swapped her wedding dress for a bottom-skimming lace tutu and a crystal-studded, bow-trimmed corset that revealed her tanned midriff. (Arthurs 2012)

However, although Danielle reported that she was ‘excited and very, very happy’ to be marrying Brendan, she goes on to add that ‘when you get married, you think you are going to get away and be your own boss, but it is nothing like that ... You’re leaving your mother who owns you and she gives you to another person that owns you – your husband’ (ibid.):

As a married woman she now has a life of hard work ahead of her. As teenagers, Gypsy girls are often kept away from school and instead put to work at home, performing chores and housework. Married life is no different, and Danielle will be expected to look after every aspect of the home for herself and her new husband. (ibid.)

And yet the programme has long proved popular with audiences, so much so that hundreds of fans lined the streets surrounding Our Lady Of Walsingham Catholic church in Corby in the hope of catching a glimpse of the limousine, bride, bridesmaids and the extravagant attire, and to a lesser extent, the groom. And although many of these fans may be keen to see a young woman who they admire, or want their own daughters to aspire to, there may of course also be an element of what has come to be understood as ‘car-crash’, or in this sense, ‘white trash’ (Hayes 2013) viewing pleasure.

Several commentators made the point that they did not and could not understand the lifestyle on display in the Gypsy stories, so too, it was suggested that mothers who responded to my questionnaire were unable to make sense of the maternal thoughts and practices that were evident in the *Toddlers & Tiaras* (2009–) genre of programming, in terms of the pageants themselves, the mothers who strongly encourage their young daughters to take part, the professional instructors or the children themselves.

Tots, Tiaras and Blinging Up Baby

Toddlers & Tiaras offers a behind the scenes look at the often controversial world of children's beauty pageants, with the drama of the show relying on a range of tantrums from stage mothers, daughters and professional parties interested in the victory of young girls in these events:

Here Comes Honey Boo Boo – find some of the parenting skills shocking.

Any women who is competitive about her children ... gets her priorities wrong.

... those who project their own self worth through assessments of child's own looks. Toddlers & Tiaras!

I do not like the false show-off mothers in reality television who do not give a true picture of motherhood.

I find it difficult to watch those pushy pageant mothers who put themselves before their children.

I think mums on shows like Blinging up Baby (which I haven't really watched) would drive me mad. Forcing your children to live out your dreams or treating them like a toy pet seems wrong.

I get upset with all those overbearing stage mothers on television who are selfish and only thinking of themselves, not their child's interest and needs. I can find that incredibly frustrating.

It is bad enough to see these young girls presented in this way, but when a little girl does not win a trophy and her mother berates rather than comforts her, you know that the maternal role is falling short.

It is upsetting to see the lengths that these mothers go to to 'help' their daughters win what they see as important pageant titles, if only they put this much effort in to their education. It worries me what messages these girls are taking away from the experience with so much attention being paid to appearance, and what it will mean for them when they are older.

Toddlers & Tiaras is so sad, no amount of fake gloss can make this acceptable, it is one thing for grown women to make the decision to enter these contests, quite another for mothers to make that decision for young children. They are meant to be the responsible and respectable ones making decisions for the good of these girls, they must realise that the physical fakery and emotional turmoil is damaging for anyone, especially vulnerable and impressionable young girls.

Although most audiences, even those who have never made a point of watching such reality fare are accustomed to images of very young girls with fake hair, nails, teeth and tans, moving in the style of go-go dancers, it remains shocking for maternal audiences to see these girls dancing in cages, mirroring the sexualised performances more routinely associated with adult performers at specialised night-clubs, and dressed in the popular attire of working girls as popularised in the film *Pretty Woman* (1990). Indeed,

... with mothers dressing their daughters like surgically-enhanced country singers, fake breasts and all, or hookers with hearts of gold, how could viewers be anything *but* horrified? In all honesty, some of these little girls – the ones who don't aspire to be tax lawyers, at least – look like complete prosti-tots. (Zaretsky 2012, italics in original)

It is clear that mothers, the driving force behind young girls entering such pageants, take on a role in the makeovers and costumes demanded for each performance. The show itself, and viewer responses make it clear that these women are not acting selflessly at the behest of their children, but that in many cases, it is the mother who seeks the media attention and reaps the financial rewards from their daughter's role in these pageants. In short, these women are living vicariously through their daughter's successes, and are subsequently frustrated and disappointed by what they see as their failings. A recent political remix video makes the point here when it tells us that:

It's difficult being a pageant queen but being a mother of these up and coming contest winners can be even harder. *Moms & Tiaras* provides a different insight behind these prepubescent beauty queens: the mothers from the TLC show *Toddlers & Tiaras*. (Candler 2013)

The video goes on to edit together maternal commentary, and it very easily gives the impression that these mothers are the ones committed to and

invested in the pageants, and that the role models that these women provide for their young daughters is based on winning at any cost:

It is my life and if you don't like it, stay away from me ... We do pageants because they are fun and addictive ... It's the winning part that's so addictive ... We would travel up to 24 hours one way for a pageant ... It just becomes almost consuming ... You do drugs because you want to get high, you do pageants because you want to win ... Do I think that what I do is wrong, no ... Beauty is the most important category ... You can make the face beautiful, you use more make up ... I would rather take no crown home than a princess crown. (ibid.)

One might look to the pageant experience and hope that it provides a safe and nurturing space for young girls to build their confidence, make and maintain early friendships and to teach meaningful life lessons such as consideration, respect and the importance of taking part over winning before the onset of adolescence which is when, research shows us, girls start to lose confidence and question their appearance (AAUW 1994). However, this is clearly not how many of these pageant parents are performing here. Indeed, some respondents pointed out that such a focus on appearance for these young girls does not encourage a healthy attitude to surface beauty and body image, with the suggestion that this attention to the assumed physical ideal at such a young age might lead to anxieties over appearance when these girls reach their tween and teenage years.

There is little respect shown between pageant mothers or between mothers and daughters. Dance tutors and other pageant influences invest in the hierarchy of titles and make it clear who will succeed and who is set to fail. In short, little compassion is shown towards these girls and perhaps with this in mind, it is not surprising that these children are then shown physically and verbally abusing one another, with little or no parental interference or apology for such actions. After all, such actions merely echo those that are being displayed by the parents and guardians of the piece. For mothers in the television audience, the programme seems at best inappropriate and at worst a problematic presentation of maternal care.

Teen motherhood, privacy and wannabe culture

This notion of maternal self-interest continues in comments made about the broader parenting reality genre, in relation to programmes such as *16 & Pregnant* (2009–) and *Teen Mom* (2009–). *16 & Pregnant* is the documentary series that focuses on the controversial subject of teenage pregnancy in America, with each episode following a five-to-seven month period in the life of a teenager as she navigates the mental, physical and financial road to new motherhood, paying particular attention to themes such as marriage, adoption, religion, community and peer gossip, graduating high school and the world of work. *Teen Mom* is the follow-up documentary series that follows several of the ‘stars’ of *16 & Pregnant* as they face the challenges of new motherhood as a teenager. While the mothers on *Toddlers & Tiaras* were spoken about in overwhelmingly negative and hostile terms, those mothers presented on *Teen Mom* prompted more mixed reviews, ranging from compassion and empathy to pity, judgement and ridicule. In terms of the compassionate readings:

The saddest thing on Teen Mom is seeing the cycle of poverty played out, teen mothers having daughters who then themselves become teen mothers... without a formal education to fall back on. These young girls will struggle to better themselves and the cycle continues.

Sometimes I find it difficult to watch young mums on documentaries who are not giving their children the best that they can, they can seem selfish and uncaring. Then I have to remind myself that these mothers are really still children and that they need help to become better parents.

Unwanted teen pregnancy is a real problem in this country and America, the more we can get young girls to face the reality of having children when they themselves are mere children has to be a good thing, and for this, I think programmes like Teen Mom are actually contributing to society. I am not saying I like them, but they serve a useful purpose.

16 & Pregnant and Teen Mom really do show the painful reality of teenage pregnancy played out in full, you get to see the reality of living in poverty, boyfriends and fathers leave, these young girls leave schooling, grandmothers sacrificing their lives in order to step in ... and the cycle of poverty, struggle, abuse, depression and misery. You watch

hoping that they get the support that they need to help them break out of their sad situation for the sake of them and their children.

Others offered a more critical reception of the young women on screen:

Teen Mom ... some people shouldn't be allowed to have children!

It makes being a teenage mum look like a career option, and the more family drama the better for popularity and ratings.

It's the children I feel sorry for ... most of these young mothers show more interest in the cameras than they do in their children.

It is one thing to be a terrible parent, another to be seen on television, but quite another again to play up to this failing image for the cameras. I sometimes wonder how much of these shows are exaggerated for exhibitionist effect.

I wonder why these girls agree to go on the programme, is it because they feel that they are receiving much needed attention for their maternal group, because the payments through the show and wider channels will help them to support their children or simply because they want to be one of the new breed of celebrities by any means, I cannot understand why they would want to be presented in this way, or why their parents would encourage it. Don't they realise that their children will be able to watch all this one-day.

Much of what we see on these programmes could be read as problematic parenting whereby these adolescents struggle to realise and perform in line with the responsibilities of motherhood. As such, it is understandable that some audiences question the appropriateness of these girls as parents, and their desire to be filmed for the series. In some cases the teen mothers put their own social and sexual needs before their children's, stay within unsafe and abusive relationships, create friction between generations, demand long-term and routine family assistance and live in inappropriate conditions for a young family. The mothers in question speak of mental illness, violence, suicide attempts, felony charges, drug addiction, overdoses and rehab (TeenMomNews 2014a, 2014b). Some of which is understandable, given, in many respects the lack of clear and constant maternal, educational, career and wider social and domestic guidance offered to these young women. The fact that many of these girls are the most recent in a long line

of generational teen mothers, living near the poverty line, points to the difficulties of breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Many of these teen mothers are without financial, educational and/or social support, they are young women who have mostly had an unplanned pregnancy who were naïve to the reality of childbirth and parenting, leaving their previous school routine and friendship circles, now struggling in their newfound maternal role.

No wonder then that many respondents felt sadness or sympathy when watching the trials and tribulations of the teen mothers played out in minute detail on the small screen, watching these young girls navigate their way through new motherhood with the added pressures of school, social stigma, peer disapproval and errant partners makes it difficult not to feel compassion for these mothers. The responsibility of new, particularly first time motherhood can be overwhelming for women (Oakley 1979/1981), and that sense of parental responsibility might be compounded when the mother in question is still, herself, a child and often mothering without the father in routine residence. There is a sense that however much audiences feel sadness for the maternal figure, what many are expressing of course is a sense of injustice on behalf of the children of the piece. These newborns, toddlers and infants are seen to be the innocent parties here and audiences watching direct their thoughts, concerns, hopes and anxieties at this new generation growing up in the limelight.

For some, *Teen Mom* offers an authentic insight into a generation of mothers that are glamorised elsewhere in the media marketplace. The American soap opera routinely glamorises single and teen motherhood and gives the young female audience a misleading picture of this maternal position that takes little account of the reality of teen pregnancy or adolescent motherhood in the contemporary period in terms of poverty, crime, life-long learning disabilities and behavioural problems. Mary Strom Larson's research, based on questionnaire responses from junior and senior high students, tells us that those who watch daytime soap operas are ill-informed about the reality of teen and single parenthood, basing their opinions about this parenting status on what are overwhelmingly positive experiences for this family unit in the domestic drama (Larson 1996). Indeed, it was suggested in her textual coding that the soap opera went some way towards idealising teen and single motherhood as these fictional female characters

were routinely seen in professional careers, wearing designer clothing, maintaining enviable social and sexual lives without any obvious restrictions or limitations on their personal, professional or financial freedoms. And this depiction of a serene, spontaneous and successful teen mother was seen to influence young women's perceptions of the reality of this role.

Much of the commentary on *Teen Mom* however points to the role of deprivation, a general lack of privilege and poverty as the root cause of what is deemed '*failing family behaviour*' as it is seen on the programme, and some maternal audiences refer to representations of such harsh realities as a useful lesson for young girls in the contemporary environment. Indeed, it is difficult to judge these teenagers against the ideology of intensive mothering or the 'good' mother myth when many of their stories of hardship and hope are so far removed from that, itself romanticised, ideal. That said, although extant research and the commentators here speak of the financial difficulties associated with teen pregnancy and young motherhood, it is worth mentioning that the 'stars' of these television productions are paid for inviting us in to share their turbulent domestic routines.

The eponymous teenage mothers are paid between \$60,000 to \$65,000 per season, therefore the problem here is not necessarily a problem of poverty *per se*, but more a concern about financial management. Those who commented on the show within and outside of my questionnaire point to the ways in which the adolescents are spending vast sums on ephemeral, trivial and inconsequential items, and questioning provision for the children seen the show:

These girls have sacrificed their children's privacy for financial gain, I only hope that they make sure that they are rewarded when the time comes, and that it hasn't all been spent on fake nails, hair and tans.

You can see that some of these girls are going to spend every penny rather than save for their children's future ... what a shame that no one really seems to be advising them. This might be their best and only chance at financial security, but they are not treating it as such.

For young mothers who talk of giving their children a better start in life than they had, some of the girls on the programme seem to spend an awful lot of money on themselves.

I know that you can't see savings as such, but you really have to wonder if they have left anything to help their children when they grow up.

A percentage of the monies from both the parents and grandparents, should be put into a trust fund for the child. This trust fund to be used for advanced education, medical, dental and other NECESSARY items. I feel that the young people should be given financial counseling BEFORE they are given their monies. If a reality star is on substance abuse or shopping abuse etc. then [...] MTV, should pay for counselling because MTV make more money from someone who has an 'illness' [...] Amber ... using her money to buy false nails, false eyelashes, makeup, drugs etc. was such a waste. MTV have a responsibility to these young people because most of these young people come from families that are incapable of giving their children the financial advice that they need [...] MTV has made a mint from these kids, so therefore MTV should be including as part of extra payments, professional financial guidance counselling BEFORE these kids receive their monies. (Aguirre 2010)

There are a number of points introduced here, including a debate over a child's right to privacy. While many respondents pointed to notions of child deprivation and insecurity for many of the newborns introduced on the programme, a smaller number of them wrote about their concern for the privacy of the children seen in *Teen Mom* and the wider reality genre. The young mothers on the show are able to give consent to their appearances on screen and are then able to, within the conditions of their contract, enter, leave and re-enter the show as discussed and agreed in advance with a production team. The children, however, are in no position to consent. Indeed, the United Nations Report by the UK's Children's Commissioners has recommended that the government regulate the appearance of children in reality and the wider television sphere in order to ensure that their right to privacy is not violated (Beckford 2008). Research goes on to tell us that as the reality genre continues to increase from year to year, so too does the number of children that we see on screen, and that using children as cast members leads to a clear and permanent loss of dignity and privacy for those involved. What is more, we discover that, particularly in America, 'the current legal regime is inadequate to protect these children, whose parents have betrayed their best interests for fame and fortune' (Royal 2010; Nobile 2013).

What is of concern for some audiences here is not simply the loss of privacy for the child whose early years are played out in front of the camera, but the fact that there is then no financial recompense for their loss of privacy. The California Child Actor's Bill (also known as the Coogan Act or Coogan Bill) protects child actors by limiting the amount of hours children can work, requiring teachers be present on 'set', and demanding that employers set aside 15 per cent of a child's pay and place it in a blocked trust account, however this law does not cover those children who are seen within the reality television genre. In short, the parents have sole access to their *Teen Mom* salary, and unless they chose to do so, the children being seen from week to week will not be financially rewarded for their time on camera (Gornstein 2010). With this in mind we discover that:

These kids are not classified as performers, denying them the protection of Coogan laws. In fact, the children are not even classified as workers, also denying them the protection of child labor laws. Kid reality stars fall through the cracks of the protections crafted by early 20th-century reformers, who likely never imagined that someone would consent to potty-training their children on camera. (Levey 2010)

In order to protect privacy and secure financial futures we are told that 'legislators and lawyers need to step in to ... protect the best interests of children' within and beyond the reality television genre (ibid.). Indeed, American states are all encouraged to pass Coogan laws for child performers, broadening the definition so as to include children on shows such as *Supernanny*, *Toddlers & Tiaras*, *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* and *Teen Mom*, to name just some examples mentioned by maternal audiences. Early reality television was focused on adults, and it is only more recently that we have seen children firstly on the margins and then more recently again, at the centre of such programming, and there is a clear sense that in legal, cultural and creative circles, existing laws are not doing enough to protect either the dignity, privacy or financial integrity of the children in these shows. Bearing in mind that the actions of these children are not only being seen on television, but will be available through internet channels for decades to come, when these children are well into their adult years, means that this must be taken seriously by policy makers and producers alike.

Some respondents made the point that the young mothers in these programmes are seeking fame, renown and notoriety, with the suggestion that they are using their status within the *Teen Mom* series to elevate their public position, placing them within the sphere of celebrity culture for an interested and invested female audience. And there does seem to be some evidence to support this suggestion; after all, many of these teen mothers go on to have entertainment careers outside of the show that made them famous, maintaining a celebrity lifestyle in the manner of what Chris Rojek refers to as an 'attributed' celebrity. An 'attributed' performer is, we are told, someone whose fame rests heavily on their ability to capture and maintain media interest, with a public profile committed to sharing each and every moment of their personal and private life with the tabloid and celebrity gossip sector (Rojek 2001; Turner 2006). From sex-tapes and nude photos to confessional biographies and beauty blogs, many of the 'stars' of the series find a way to maintain a level of public attention beyond their time on the programme in question. Irrespective of whether these young mothers sought fame and therefore approached the producers or whether their time on the programme opened up a desire for celebrity, these young women epitomise the contemporary culture of wannabe celebrity. WAGs, socialites, kiss and tell escorts, glamour girls and reality television performers have created a new breed of approachable, available and accessible personality.

The tabloid and celebrity gossip sector tend to focus on the changeability of celebrity and the narrative of female transformation. Regardless of whether the sector is applauding an actress for her weight gain, condemning a presenter for her weight loss, mocking a socialite for a new hairstyle, praising an Olympic medallist for her sartorial makeover or commenting on a new romance, pregnancy or plastic surgery procedure of a reality television contestant, what each of these stories has in common is change, changeability and the modification of a female figure. Claudia Croft talks about 'the celebrity trajectory theory', which refers to the notion that 'a life in motion is ... more interesting than one that appears stagnant. It doesn't ... matter whether their trajectory is upwards to career success ... or downwards to addiction and tragedy. As long as they keep their lives moving, we keep watching ... and the more it looks like a trashy soap opera, the better' (Croft 2006). Croft makes it clear that Madonna set the pace for celebrity

changeability and transformation in the late 1980s with her regular hair, clothing and image makeovers. However, we are told that changing a wig every few months is no longer dramatic enough to garner audience interest, and that the public now demand that a young 'star' change her outfit several times a day and her sexual partners with similar frequency (ibid.).

Croft suggests that the most popular and successful 'stars' of the modern day are in flux, in short, offering up a point of discussion and instigating women's talk for the celebrity gossip reader (ibid.). Indeed, the ways in which the changing celebrity can be seen to act as 'gossip-fodder' is crucial here. After all, extant literature on the celebrity gossip reader makes it clear that the latest entertainment news is understood as, and deliberately coveted because, it stimulates informal talk between women and creates a sense of group cohesion. It is as if an understanding of celebrity 'trivia' serves as a connection between females, with readers being united by an appreciation of, or at least through a discourse surrounding a particular gendered text (Hermes 1995; Feasey 2008b).

Even a cursory glance at *Teen Mom* and the surrounding media discourses relating to the 'stars' of the show demonstrate that changeability is key to coverage in the media; after all, within one brief news update on the teen mothers we find talk of arrests, sex tapes, diet successes and slimmer figures, plastic surgery, maternal feuds, drug, addiction and rehab confessionals (TeenMomNews 2014a, 2014b). Although I do not want to appear flippant about such issues, it is clear that, irrespective of whether that change is serious or superficial, positive or destructive, to be condemned or applauded, change is key to media interest within and beyond the maternal teen text. The fact that these young women can change their hair colour, relationships, body weight and sartorial style on a monthly, weekly or even daily basis is the key point here. It is not seen to be interesting to report on a reality star who is consistently too thin, too well groomed or in a stable relationship, but rather, the growing tabloid sector is keen to foreground those dramatic and somewhat less significant changes. If we consider that divorce rates, unemployment and the cost of living are rising, then it might come as little surprise to find readers interested in the downward spiral of once commercially successful figures. Indeed, reporting on the failed relationships, career decline, financial losses and questionable maternal

techniques and practices of recognisable young women might be seen as one more way in which the young tabloid reader identifies with the female celebrity. Alternatively, the depiction of recent romances or the triumph over medical or financial adversity might offer hope to those women who look to these figures to make sense of their own lived reality (Johansson 2006). Either way, it appears to be the changeability of female celebrity rather than the stagnant life of the famous figure that appeals.

Named and shamed: Price, Katona and Hopkins

While some respondents were highlighting their distaste and mistrust of the teen mothers for their interest in the celebrity lifestyle, many others were foregrounding two mothers well known for their popular and long-running reality television commitments. Kerry Katona and Katie (also known previously as Jordan) Price were spoken about in the majority of negative comments directed at mothers on the small screen, and commented on, at length, in many cases. For some respondents these two figures were interchangeable in terms of their maternal credentials and what they considered to be their inappropriate mothering roles.

While Katona found fame as a member of an all girls group Atomic Kitten, Katie Price came to notoriety as a glamour model for *The Sun*. Both women have had multiple marriages and very public divorces, numerous children from different partners and a life played out in a series of very intimate reality television shows. These women have each forged a career in the entertainment sphere, through a steady stream of reality shows, celebrity columns and confessional biographies. Like a number of other 'attributed' celebrities their careers are 'an ongoing process of managing, repudiating, and creating the scandals that afford [them] media attention' (Bell 2008). Indeed, one cannot overestimate the importance of these reality television performances on their subsequent star images and celebrity status, with the charges of crudeness, exhibitionism, and humiliation being thrown at

both the shows and the stars in question (Feasey 2012a). Although Price is an incredibly successful media personality, with an estimated net worth of £40 million due to a range of equestrian ranges, fashion, beauty and clothing lines, book deals and television contracts; Katona has faced multiple drug, alcohol and smoking scandals, been declared bankrupt at the High Court, lost her endorsement deals, magazine columns and television shows before facing a recent repossession order.

However, irrespective of financial success or official endorsement and sponsorship deals, both women have played a large part in the British tabloid sector for over a decade, with their personal lives being exposed and interrogated in intimate detail by a willing public. These women are both skilled celebrities in that they understand their role as ‘attributed’ performers and play their transformative roles perfectly, with romantic, sartorial and physical changeability being their *modus operandi*. And although the column inches and viewing schedules dedicated to the physical, emotional, medical, mental and sartorial trials and tribulations of these recognisable women make it clear that audiences are interested in their life and love stories, there is clear judgement in relation to their maternal roles:

I am interested in celebrity but I don't like intrusive videos of the children – I think it is wrong.

Kerry Katona, what is worse, that she doesn't spend enough time with her children, or that she does.

Kerry Katona, she should not have custody of those four children. Drugs, drama, bankruptcy, you shouldn't let your children watch all of this play out in public.

Kerry Katona, she stands for everything that is wrong about celebrity, no talent, no skill ... using those poor children as media money makers when all her other options are running out.

Kerry Katona, I feel sorry for her children, I bet they have never had such a thing as a play date, how could they, between feuding with partners, financial disasters and forced house moves, alcohol and drug addictions, time in rehab ... I often hope that they have doting staff looking after them because there is little mother love here.

Kerry Katona and Katie Price ... so many children from so many fathers, it's difficult to keep up. I hope that these women adore big families, but I can't help wonder if it is all just part of a media interest story when their popularity starts to fade.

Katie Price, Kerry Katona and other celebrity car crashes are not setting good examples for other people's children so how can they for their own? They may be very good to their children but the images that they project are damaging to women in general by saying it's ok to behave like that.

I feel slightly guilty saying this but I do judge many of the reality television mothers who include their children in the filming of these shows. Kerry Katona and Katie Price for example. Not only do I question their parenting techniques but the very fact that they are exposing their children at such a young age to the full gaze of the television cameras and crew seems at best intrusive and at worst problematic in terms of the children's understandings of home, family, privacy and safety. It might be stretching the point but it looks exploitative.

Katie Price, jumping from one man to another and fighting in front of her kids, shameful.

Katie Price, because of the different, broken relationships that she is putting her children through.

Katie Price, I'm sure she is a good mother when she's at home and with the help of her eight nannies. But I hate her crudeness and aggression. And that she's only in the paper/magazines when she's berating her exes. Is that all she does??? I just don't get it?? And doesn't she realise her children will read everything nasty she says one day.

Katona and Price are both seen through their long and varied reality television formats spending time with and time away from their families, with the children being a key part of these productions. Although these programmes are filmed for our entertainment and highly edited, there is a sense that these women are showing us and sharing, quite literally, their maternal thoughts and practices, for good or ill.

I have previously argued that media celebrities such as Price, Katona and Alicia Douvall are appealing maternal figures for the woman in the audience precisely because they present a more selfish, sexual and social image of motherhood that debunks both the ideology of intensive mothering and the romanticised 'good' mother myth that is said to dominate the wider media agenda. I suggested that it is precisely the inappropriate

and unacceptable depiction of these women as mothers, but also as lovers, friends, business women and daughters that made them palatable, and indeed, pleasurable to a viewing public, because they presented a version of mothering without martyrdom. Both Price and Katona have been awarded mother of the year honours, are applauded amongst the general populace for their patronage of children's charities, proved popular with the voting audience on the reality show *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here* (2002–) and continue to be popular with magazine editors as demonstrated by their continued and repeated inclusion in the gossip and women's sector. However, as noted by Croft, changeability and transformation is key, irrespective of the direction of travel, and for every maternal commendation and media contract, there is an assault charge or accusation of neglect, an appearance on the worst mother list or a question about maternal custody (Feasey 2012a). One might suggest that the media and monetary fortunes of both women can be tracked through their maternal status, and with both women being new mothers at the time of writing, they are in a position to reclaim the affections of those mothers interested in the celebrity and gossip sector.

However, even though one can give examples of the ways in which these women *might* prove popular with television viewers, maternal audiences made very few positive comments about these women or their mothering capabilities. It is difficult to view Katona as 'mother of the year' due to her drug-addicted and self-confessed maternal neglect; however, it is hard not to empathise with a young woman who has spent years watching her own mother's fight against drug addiction and mental health problems. Katona is open about her childhood spent between foster homes, her addictions and bi-polar struggles, and she is adamant that she will try to 'break the fucking cycle here of my upbringing' (*TNC* S2:E3). Katona did not have an 'appropriate' maternal role model, but she is trying to become one for her own children. And although one might challenge the appropriateness of a bipolar mother presenting her own life and the life of her growing children on national television, the use of her children in demanding celebrity photo shoots, the crudeness of language expressed and the open hostility between herself and the fathers of her children, there is an uncomfortable honesty being expressed here which is not viewed elsewhere in mainstream

programming or the wider media agenda. And although Price has not suffered such financial hardships either in her formative years or as a celebrity figure, she has talked openly about her parents' divorce, child abuse, rape, miscarriage, fertility concerns and the struggles she faces as a mother of a blind son diagnosed with sepo-optic dysplasia, Prader-Willi syndrome, ADHD, oppositional defiance disorder, and autism.

Many mothers face difficulty, hardship and feel themselves and their children removed from the privileged life of the comfortable classes; and others across all class, taste and financial classifications face injustice, disability and non-traditional family units, and yet maternal audiences made it clear that they judged these women for what they deem to be their selfish practices and resultant maternal failings. The intimacy of address and the brutal honesty on offer clearly appeals to a viewing audience, but an audience who judge and ridicule rather than one who feels empathy for the women in question.

Both women are judged, like the eponymous teen mothers before them for not merely allowing their children on screen, but for actually encouraging their engagement with the public sphere in terms of contracts and endorsements. As an extension of their status as 'attributed' celebrities within and beyond the realm of reality television, these children were said to be missing out on what were seen to be more traditional and expected activities befitting their age group, activities unlikely in a household filled with camera crews and the wider paparazzi collective. The fact that these women do work and spend time away from home and from families in order to fulfil their media contracts makes it clear that they are not practicing intensive mothering, but it is the changing relationships and feuding between partners that many respondents found to be most troubling here. These women were seen to enter relationships, engagements and marriage contracts on a whim, with divorces being unsurprising and expected. The concern is less for the mental or emotional wellbeing of the women involved in these changing relationships, but for the children who find themselves introduced to, invested in and then removed from friendships with a number of boyfriends, fiancés and husbands, with the brash and aggressive feuding that often ensues. With mothers away from the family home, a number of men involved and then absent from the domestic scene,

this is what is of concern to the women in the audience. What is interesting here is that while several women felt empathy and sadness for the struggling teen mothers in the aforementioned show, these self-same women spoke of their hostility towards Price and Katona. One might question if it is the age of the mothers on screen, the longevity of their celebrity profiles or their distance from British audiences that led to such diverse comments for what are, in many respects, similar maternal figures.

The teen mothers, although struggling and occasionally selfish and in need of emotional and practical support are available to their children, whereas Price and Katona speak of their maternal devotion while often working away from the family home, and maybe this is one of the key differences here. The teen mothers are doing their best under challenging circumstances and can still navigate their way towards appropriate parenting, whereas Price and Katona are experienced mothers who continue to position themselves against traditional maternal roles and responsibilities. Moreover, the young women on *Teen Mom* can appear interchangeable, and new faces are introduced from season to season, whereas Price and Katona are individual personalities, intimately known to and by the British public. When respondents talk about the teen mothers they tend to speak about these women as a group rather than individuals – their frustrations and failures were seldom aimed at a specific maternal figure, whereas Katona and Price have made a career out of being recognisable individual personalities.

One does have to question whether there is a class dimension to the commentaries here, not in terms of the respondents, but rather in terms of those maternal figures that they find themselves judging negatively. After all, the world of film stardom and celebrity culture is peppered with women who have many children by different fathers, repeatedly married and divorced with little outrage or comment from either the tabloids, broadsheets or wider maternal blogs. Kate Winslet, Christine Brinkley, Erykah Badu each have three children by three different fathers; the difference here perhaps is that these are professional women with less stake in the celebrity gossip sector who are not flaunting their maternal status or revealing the day-to-day minutia of their relationships with the female audience for profit. Moreover, the notion of child privacy and media contracts for children seems to draw selective criticism, after all, Victoria Beckham has allowed

her children to, at different times, take part in her reality television shows, and take on their own endorsement deals, while Jada Pinkett Smith and Angelina Jolie both encourage their children to play a part in the entertainment industry with little in the way of public hostility or outrage. With this in mind, I would suggest that it is not the privacy debate, the number of fathers, or the negotiation of intensive mothering practices at issue *per se*, but the combination of such factors that position Price and Katona as such problematic figures in the contemporary celebrity landscape.

In relation to my question about mothers on television who audiences might feel negatively towards, many focused on the figures of Price and Katona, with some mention of '*Octomum ... that frightfully selfish creature who gave birth to 8 children even though she was already a mother to 6*', otherwise known as Nadya Suleman and the panellists on the lunchtime talk show, *Loose Women* (1999–) such as Coleen Nolan, Kaye Adams and Jane Moore who '*all seem to have loads of plastic surgery although they present themselves as very down to earth*'. However, only one other name appeared with any frequency, and this woman is another uniquely British phenomenon. Katie Hopkins. Hopkins is a mother of three who first came to the attention of the television watching audience as a contestant on the reality show, *The Apprentice* (2005–). Although Hopkins was in the final of the third series of the show, she withdrew from her place, stating that she would not be able to accept the job for fear of uprooting her daughters from their home to a new London base. And although this is surprising in itself after 11 weeks of competing for the prize on offer, a job with Sir Alan Sugar and a £100,000 starting salary, it was not her departure that created media interest in this figure. Since leaving the show Hopkins has become like the teen mothers, Katona and Price before her, an 'attributed' celebrity, with time spent in the *I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here* jungle, on the *This Morning* (1988–) sofa, not to mention the broader newspaper and magazine columns. Hopkins presents herself as a businesswoman and a journalist, known for her quick wit and acerbic commentary. She delivers strong opinions on women, work and family life and her notoriety stems from her outspoken, often controversial public statements concerning the royal family, other celebrities, maternity leave, women in business, obesity and motherhood.

Hopkins suggests that it is possible to make class and taste judgements based on the Christian names of a child, and rather than apologise for this elitist outburst, she goes on to tell us that it is not only acceptable, but sensible to do so in order to alleviate unwanted playdates. Her thoughts on children's names on *This Morning* went viral, attracting 10 million hits globally in just four days:

Chantelle, Charmaine, Chardonnay and Tyler ... there's a whole set of things that go with children like that, who are quite a disruptive influence in school and that's why I don't like those kind of children ... I tend to think that children who have intelligent names tend to have fairly intelligent parents and they make much better playdates for my children ... We are really time short in this world and we need shortcuts to make decisions. It's very effective. (Hopkins, cited in Cable and Kirkova 2013)

Based on the media furore following this announcement, Hopkins went on to publish *The Class Book of Baby Names* (2013), in part, as a response to requests for her to #ratemyname, and in part, to maintain her celebrity trajectory:

CHARDONNAY: Non-uniform day. Tyler, Chardonnay, Princess and Angel can't see what's so different from a normal day.

CHARMAINE: Any school lost property box. Always filled with uniforms labeled for Charmaine and Chardonnay. But misspelled.

RILEY: I can hear the collective sigh as another baby is born with only the state to call 'daddy'. Many of us choose to add the pre-fix 'Blimey Old' to the news of this joyous birth.

ROBYN: Teacher: 'Robyn, where have you been?' Answer is in the question miss'

TIFFANY: The conversation with a Tiffany and her mum goes something like this: 'Mum, the form says I need another next of kin.' 'Oh for Christ sakes Tiffany, just put I dunno.'

TANYA: Teacher: 'Tanya, have you got your voluntary contribution for the school trip?' 'No, mum said Sky Sports Subs were due.'

TYRONNE: Not too many steps to tyranny is it? One small step for man. One giant leap for thug kind.

TYLER: 10am Tyler eating his breakfast Mars Bar. Opens day 4 on his mums giro advent calendar. Only 10 to go. I had a dream in the night that Tyler got his GCSE results. The piece of paper was really really small.

WAYNE: Meet Wayne. He is on Free School Meals. He also has an iPhone, iPad and latest Wii. A wonder of modern parenting.

STANLEY: Stanley? No, sorry. I can't help but think knife crime. (Hopkins 2013)

Her barbed commentary shifted focus from children to mothers when she informed the interested (and otherwise) public that:

The difference between most mothers and me is that I didn't sit around drinking coffee at baby group for 12 months after the birth of my baby. No, in three weeks I was back in my suit, back at my desk earning profit for my business and I don't see why other women shouldn't do the same ... To be honest it's beyond me why any working woman would want to take more than a couple of weeks off. Perish the thought of becoming a bloated, brainless version of your former self whose only topic of conversation is which organic vegetable combo you've pureed that week in your sad Tupperware tub. (Hopkins, cited in Duff 2011)

And a recent scathing attack on what she refers to as her most despised maternal stereotypes lead to further outrage for the social commentator:

The 'Parent Teachers Association' mum: avoid the Parent Teachers Association mum at all costs. Having given up a job she loved for her kids, PTA mum has found her calling as head of the Parent Teachers Association ... Smug doesn't even come close.

The 'home-school' mum: she has chosen to remove her precious kids from all human contact and spend her every waking moment in their company ... Home school kids tend to end up terrified and wide eyed; beaten up for calling 'Miss' - 'Mummy' and hiding in the toilets from Brandon trying to cut off their absurdly long hair.

The 'dad' mum: imagining sex with dad-mum makes you gag in your mouth. Someone needs to tell him to grow a pair and man the hell up.

The 'eco' mum: eco-mum cycles to school with unwashed children clinging to the framework of her bike, helmet stuck to her egg white washed hair. Feel pity for the kids.

The 'fat' mum: fat mum does drop off and pick up without ever actually leaving the car and belches out her fat kids in a cloud of cigarette smoke and crisp packets. Stare opened mouthed at her sheer size wearing only lycra and a sneer. (Hopkins, cited in Anais Rach 2014)

A small number of respondents stated that they did not judge mothers on television, but a larger number said that they tried not to make judgements about other mothers in their day-to-day lives, with one notable exception, that being the outspoken Hopkins. Many mothers pointed to this woman as an example of rudeness, negativity, classism and '*desperate celebrity*', and in some sense these responses were more damning than those aimed at their reality television counterparts, due in part to her impeccable education, privileged financial position and multiple career options. Whereas the teen mothers, Price and Katona demand media attention for income, Hopkins was said to be thriving in the world of business and commerce before the transition to celebrity. Comments on the televisual performer told us that:

Katie Hopkins portrays us as judgemental woman.

The only one that really springs to mind is Katie Hopkins.

I don't feel any negativity towards any of the mothers on television, apart from Katie Hopkins.

Katie Hopkins for sure – I feel for her kids as they'll be ridiculed themselves when they're older.

Women like Katie Hopkins who are very opinionated and use their children as weapons with no thought to how their children feel.

Katie Hopkins is a disgrace. She should not be allowed airtime. I feel so sorry for her children as she is everything a mother shouldn't be.

Katie Hopkins is a terrible example of mothers on television. Mothers are role models and everything that they do should be setting an example to their children.

Katie Hopkins, I really can't tell if she believes what she is saying about mothers, children and social mobility or if she is playing the pantomime villain for celebrity status ... and I don't know which is more troubling.

Katie because her beliefs on parenting; motherhood and life in general are so polar opposite to mine. I feel negatively about her life in general, she spews a lot of hate. Especially towards mothers and she judges children on names!

Katie Hopkins, she seems to despise everyone and everything, I for one wish that she would keep her hate-filled and hurtful comments to herself, it's one thing to think them and discuss them with friends and family but quite another to announce them to a mass public.

Katie Hopkins (the one that is always giving her opinion of children such as their names, social status or on attachment parenting etc.) Her kids look miserable and she is a judgemental, ill-informed person that obviously enjoys being hated by the nation for her ridiculous opinions (one way to stay famous I guess).

I feel negativity towards Katie Hopkins who sometimes appears as a social commentator representing 'mothers' on various TV programmes. She is extremely outspoken, likes the sound of her own voice and does not appear to take on board the other side of the argument. She is frequently rude to others who are debating a certain issue and I believe is not a fair representation of mothers.

The argument between Katie Hopkins and Holly Willoughby on This Morning was eye opening; I can't believe that a supposedly smart and educated woman would find it appropriate to make such scathing and snobbish comments in front of the cameras. She (and others) may find what she says acceptable, but she must understand the impact that her words are going to have on ordinary people ... and maybe that is the point!

Katie Hopkins is a forthright and opinionated mother of three who appears unapologetic about her own mothering practices or her outspoken views concerning mothers, their working lives, maternity choices and childcare activities. And although some look to her media performances as those of a pantomime villain exaggerating their cruelty for entertainment purposes, there are others who appear genuinely insulted by the comments made. Indeed, one angry and frustrated mother went to the effort of writing 'an open letter to Katie Hopkins' in order to confess all of the ways in which she would disappoint the television personality, before making it clear

that she and other women should not apologise for their maternal efforts, however removed they are from what Hopkins sees as the ideal:

Dear Katie,

May I call you Katie? Maybe I should stick to Ms. Hopkins, because you've made it clear – you don't like me. In fact, apparently, you hate me. A lot. I don't really get why you would feel such hate towards me, it's such a strong, negative word and I wonder why you feel the need to use that word against someone you don't know ... maybe you have issues. Anyway, I digress. This isn't about you, it's about me. Or, more particularly, what you don't like about me. And I almost feel I should apologise, because it seems, in that department, I'm very, very talented. I said almost. For I not only chair the PTA of a school, but I also home school. Isn't that clever? I manage to run around school berating parents to do such exhausting tasks like saving used stamps and collecting vouchers from their supermarket, and just being extremely SMUG ... all the while ensuring my other child has minimal contact with the outside world ... I KNOW!!!! How immense is that???? I am so hardcore. It's possible that you never thought that one person could embody so many things you dislike all at one time but I am sure, if I put my mind to it, there are plenty of other things you don't like about me too. Let's have a little think? My 4YO has an IPAD. My 5YO has two. And yet neither of them is mute. It's actually quite amazing. You are wondering how I do it, aren't you? Because, according to you, I'm supposed to fit into one of your tiny little boxes, aren't I? Well, I don't. I'm almost sorry about that. I said almost. Because I'm not sorry.

I am overjoyed with my two very different, very individual children ... And I am overjoyed to parent them both in the way they need, however different they are. I could say that you are very lucky to have had 3 children who are all utterly identical, but it's far more likely that they aren't all that similar, they are simply terrified of stepping outside of the tiny box you've defined as perfect. But they will, Katie ... You just wait, oh ... they will. I know what you are thinking now. You've got to me, and that was your aim wasn't it? But you are wrong. This isn't about you. This is to every single mum and dad who got up this morning determined to do the best for their child. Even when breakfast was supposed to be banana muesli but ended up being chocolate pancake. Even when the school run degenerated into a series of rants about lost ties and shoes and unbrushed teeth. Even when homeschool started with a game of minecraft. Because life isn't about living in a box ... regarding the whole dad-mum thing ... It's actually quite wrong, when you are dropping your child to school, to be thinking about sex with the dads of fellow pupils... Just saying...

Karen. (Bower 2014)

Katie Hopkins has found media attention and continues to maintain a celebrity profile due to her views on family and class in Britain, and although she has been petitioned to leave certain high-profile entertainment positions, she continues to maintain a media presence through avenues such as Yahoo Lifestyle! with blog titles including: 'There's nothing strong about wimping out of childbirth' and 'full-time mum is NOT a job title – it's a biological status' (Hopkins 2014a, 2014b). Hopkins has made a career on the back of her 'mother wars' rhetoric, whereby she incites hostility between what she sees as the respectable middle class professional full-time working mother and the stay at home contingent, and it is this level of maternal hierarchy, mother ranking and domestic judgement that is deemed distasteful and disrespectful to the woman in the audience.

Although audiences judged Katie Price and Kerry Katona on their celebrity efforts and maternal practices, these same audiences saved their real anger and irritation for Hopkins, and such commentary seems to echo in the wider media agenda. After all, while the exploits of Price and Katona are documented, mocked and ridiculed by a myriad of media texts, it is Hopkins who is referred to as the 'national public hate figure' (Ellen 2007; Aitkenhead 2014) of the three, and I believe that this is due in part to her inability to play to acceptable or traditional maternal roles. Although these women are all 'attributed' celebrities with media contracts, non-traditional work patterns, children from different fathers and multiple marriages who incite celebrity feuds, the difference between them is that the former 'stars' speak of motherhood as their priority, while the latter makes no such claims. Indeed, those respondents who criticise Price and Katona for their perceived domestic failings make the point that they feel a higher level of hostility towards Hopkins because '*as a mothers who works 24/7 and never see her children ... what's the point in having them?*', a question not asked of any other mother on the small screen. Moreover, when we see more general comments telling us that mothers in the audience respond negatively to those women in the media spotlight who give what they see as scant attention to their children, one might assume that they are again talking about figures such as Hopkins, as the personality speaks candidly about her professional priorities over and above her motherwork commitments:

I feel negative towards mothers who don't pay enough attention to their children.

... the ones that work full time, look super glamorous and you don't really see their children.

I sometimes wonder whether television personalities who work long hours at the expense of family time have their priorities right.

Although it would be difficult to suggest that Price or Katona are 'good' mothers in terms of their commitment to the ideology of appropriate intensive parenting, when these women speak on their reality shows and the wider media sphere, they talk at length about their children, and the important place that they have in their lives. Moreover, the narrator commentary on these programmes remind us, routinely, to the point of extreme repetition, that these women are mothers first and foremost, that their most memorable days are those with the children and how they like nothing more than spending time with them. Irrespective of the images seen or promotions available, these women speak about their desire for motherhood and their passion for that role, and in the case of Katona, make repeated public apologies concerning her maternal failings. In this way, these celebrity mothers manage to maintain their public profiles while simultaneously foregrounding their maternal responsibilities.

Hopkins, however, makes no such claims. She is very clear that seeing a mother work is as important, if not more important, than spending time with her children. Hopkins recently suggested that a child's birthday does not have to be a special day and that it was being overdramatic to suggest that a child's birthday was important to mothers as it reminded them of the day that they gave birth. She states that she holds one combined party every other year for her three children because it is more efficient than the alternatives, and informs us that if she is away on business, her children can choose to open their presents in the week or wait until she gets home at the weekend to open them with her. In short, she is reminding audiences that she often works on her children's birthdays and that when any celebrations do happen, they happen at a time that is convenient for her. When asked 'aren't you being emotionally defunct?' Hopkins replies that 'hard-working mums recognise birthdays have to wait' (Hooper 2013). The archetypal 'good' mother would put her children's birthday before

any other commitments, the 'good enough' mother might have to miss spending time with their children on their birthday through work, sickness or other caring commitments, but would make it clear that they would prefer to be with their children, going to the effort of reminding the children and themselves of the importance of this event, Hopkins however makes no such concession. And I believe it is her lack of maternal guilt, remorse or repentance that audiences find difficult to watch or accept. She is a strong woman who provides for her children, there are no questions about alcoholism, addiction, rehab or financial failings and she does not parade her children in the entertainment arena for media contracts, and yet she is judged more harshly than any other mother mentioned in the responses. Not only has Hopkins 'debunked' the 'good' mother myth, but she is that rare woman who makes it clear that she is not trying to live up to that romanticised ideal, and it is her maternal non-conformity that promotes fear, frustration, irritation and anger from women in the audience. It has been suggested that the 'ideology of natural-intensive mothering ... has become the official and only meaning of motherhood, marginalizing and rendering illegitimate alternative practices of mothering. In so doing, this normative discourse of mothering polices *all* women's mothering and results in the pathologizing of those women who do not or can not practice intensive mothering' (O'Reilly 2004, italics in original), with Hopkins as a case in point.

One might suggest that Hopkins has encouraged audiences to discuss the role and responsibility of motherhood and prompted a debate concerning the unrealisable ideal of the serene and selfless mother, and as such we might suggest that, even if we dislike her views or despair at her class commentary, her outbursts are meaningful, if not necessarily well meaning. The fact that she provokes maternal debate could be useful in a bid to quash the 'good' mother myth that appears to dominate the wider media agenda. As a full-time working mother with children from two fathers, she is unapologetic about how removed her domestic life is from the ideology of intensive mothering and the traditional nuclear unit, and her stance, although not well-liked, may at least present an alternative way of mothering.

Due to the timing of the participant commentaries, one might have expected Nigella Lawson to figure in a discussion about imperfect or problematic motherhood due to the very public fall from grace for the ‘domestic goddess’ (Goldman 2014). And yet although Katie Hopkins and others in the news and blogosphere commented on the unmasking of the perfect domestic figure on the back of the recent and very public fraud trial, these revelations were not mentioned by a single participant. Rather, for those who spoke about the journalist/broadcaster/television personality/gourmet and food writer, they continued to berate her, not for her domestic turbulence but for her continued ‘goddess’ presentation. Katie Hopkins refers to Lawson as a ‘self-confessed drug-taker, spendthrift, and a self-obsessed flirt determined to show other women they were imperfect’ (Flint 2013). And it is this final part, the image of the impossibly serene and utterly capable domestic figure that women in the audience found problematic:

Nigella Lawson has always made me feel a bit cross ... the image that she portrayed for her family life as a ‘domestic goddess’ was, I feel, pernicious, actively promoting an ideal most women would struggle mightily to even approach. Contemporary women are working earlier and longer hours than previous generations. They want to be good mothers and achieve in their work and be happy and fulfilled as individuals. This is a struggle for every woman. Any representation that does not represent the complexity of motherhood, the joys and this struggle with concepts of self as worker/woman makes me very cross.

Non-fiction and maternal perfection

These feelings of frustrated inferiority were not limited to the figure of Nigella; rather, Nigella stands as just one example of a maternal, televisual perfection that mothers in the audience feel incapable of emulating. Therefore, while Hopkins received overwhelming hostility for her non-traditional maternal role, other women were berated for presenting a romanticised maternal image, an image that makes mothers feel inadequate by comparison.

Negatively towards ... stereotyped mothers with a too perfect life.

Those that act like everything is perfect – I think I blame them for the false expectations of parenthood!!

I get particularly sick of the super-organised working mom because it only makes the rest of us feel inferior.

I don't like 'perfect' mother portraits – I like motherhood shown to be messy and full of mistakes but with a sense of humour.

I get annoyed at those mums who are portrayed as being 'perfect' ... because that is a mum that doesn't exist, and we shouldn't be made to feel exists.

I often feel insecure and/or annoyed about others ... preaching to me about how I should be bringing up my children, or presenting their way as an idealised way.

Subconsciously I probably glance at 'celeb' mothers in magazines or on TV – to see how glam, thin, well slept they are – despite having babies ... then wish I hadn't!

I feel that in celebrity and other non-fictional programmes mothers (such as Kirstie Allsopp) are presenting a fantasy lifestyle that makes 'everyday' mothers feel guilty.

No, I don't like to judge other women – except the ones who use the experience of motherhood to make other women feel inadequate. Those women I feel negatively towards.

Intensive uber-mum bit actually annoys me, those perfect women who make everything look effortless, these women can only make it look easy because they have help that the rest of us don't have.

Those perfect Cath Kidston-esque mums who manage to work and perform all of the necessary domestic and childcare duties with ease, no fuss, no compromise, not real. That is not the reality of motherhood, well certainly not in my house.

I can't think of any specific examples but I feel negatively towards people who appear to be able to look pristine, have pristine homes and a career and children as I feel that their children must be suffering in some way as a result (although this is irrational!).

Those perfect mothers irritate me, the ones that look amazing, have well behaved children, hold down meaningful work and still manage to make it to the bake sale on a Friday

afternoon ... farcical. Even when they are meant to be endearing or funny, they irritate ... there is nothing funny about comparing yourself to these women.

Celebrity mothers who talk about how they have wonderful bodies and great relationships with their kids when I think that we all would say that with the money for a personal trainer and several nannies ... I don't find that it upsets me in how I run my life but I hate that it puts pressure on all women to think that this is how you need to be.

Any celebrity that has their figure back straight away! I am always suspicious of them, as I feel it is unrealistic for the majority of the female population who have babies to try to emulate them. They are often held up as an example of what we strive for and actually concentrating on getting yourself back to yourself after a baby is the most important thing.

Generally so called 'celebrity mums' as they pretend that they have done it all and have the perfect life. Lost all their baby weight in a week etc. when you know they probably have a lot of help with childcare and domestic help etc. unfortunately this then becomes the norm and mums who don't have the luxury of all the help and make up artists etc. feel under pressure to be that perfect celebrity mum.

Mothers who work in TV e.g. presenters, who return to work quickly after having a baby and then appear very glamorous. i.e. well turned out, slim, etc. I realise this is unfair of me, but I find it hard not to be judgemental about this. Returning to work early is the bigger concern but I don't think it is helpful for the average mum and especially those who are struggling or have postnatal depression to see other women apparently managing it all and also looking radiant.

I always find the representation of the white middle class mother at the school gates a comic, almost negative, stereotype as they are almost always with a southern accent i.e. Londoner who has a child called Poppy or Daisy, dressed in Joules clothing and almost always immaculately presented as are the children, in clean ironed uniform. The mothers themselves are always part of the PTA and organise bake sales and fundraisers. In my experience most parents are only too pleased if they have managed to make the school gates before the start of registration or that they have a child who isn't kicking and screaming that they have to go to school in the first place.

These women are not explicitly referencing the ideology of intensive motherhood or idealised maternal practices, but nonetheless it is clear that they are in tune with extant literature from the field of media motherhood studies as they talk about perfect, unattainable images of femininity, physicality and domesticity that they fail to live up to, and which in turn, leaves

them feeling inadequate. The feelings that these women express have been considered in recent years and the image of maternal perfection that they speak of has at different points, in different volumes been referred to as the 'good' mother (Feasey 2012a), the 'mask of motherhood' (Maushart 1999) and the 'mommy myth' (Douglas and Michaels 2005), all of which are said to be performing in line with the ideology of intensive mothering. We are told that the serene and selfless mother acts as 'the "legitimate" standard to which mothers are compared ... she becomes an ideal to believe in, and one that people both expect and internalize' (Green 2004). Shari Thurer echoes this point when she states that 'media images of happy, fulfilled mothers, and the onslaught of advice from experts, have only added to mothers' feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety. Mothers today cling to an ideal that can never be reached but somehow cannot be discarded' (Thurer 2007). The theorist continues by commenting that even though the current standards for good mothering are formidable, self-denying and elusive, they continue to influence our domestic arrangements and what we think of as appropriate motherwork practices (*ibid.*). The women who responded to my questionnaire noted that they found what on the surface might appear to be motivational role models to be anything but. Those women on television who manage to successfully balance careers and domestic practicalities with ease, maintaining an attractive and serene manner to the audience are seen as, variously, smug, inauthentic and unconvincing.

What is interesting here is that the perfect mother is, in all but two cases, never named, a programme never pointed to nor a genre highlighted. Rather, the perfect mother seems to speak for a myriad of different women across a multitude of platforms, channels, genres, texts and characterisations. The perfect mother can be understood as a blanket term for those women who make pregnancy and motherhood look effortless and satisfying against a backdrop of maternal reality that is struggling in the contemporary climate. Susan Maushart makes this point when she tells us that the 'gap between image and reality, between what we show and what we feel, has resulted in a peculiar cultural schizophrenia about motherhood' (Maushart 1999, 2007). The comments make it clear that these perfect maternal figures are not only irritating in and of themselves, but that they are in some sense damaging our maternal self-esteem. The point here is that although

we know we are not perfect mothers and shouldn't compare ourselves to those composed creatures, we cannot help but do so, with feelings of guilt and shame to follow. Judith Warner echoes this point when she informs us that 'the ideal of motherhood we carry in our heads is so compelling that even though we can't fulfil it and know that we probably shouldn't even try, we berate ourselves for falling short of succeeding' (Warner 2007).

In much the same way as women are said to struggle to live up to the unrealistic 'beauty myth' (Wolf 1991; Redmond 2003) that saturates the contemporary media environment and men are seen striving for a version of hegemonic masculinity that is always out of reach (Connell 1995), the mask of perfect motherhood offers a flawless yet unrealisable ideal for contemporary mothers. Indeed, even those women in a position of family or financial privilege struggle to maintain this romanticised image, with the rest of us falling far shorter of this impossible ideal.

The fact that those women who responded to my questionnaire made it clear that they are unable to emulate this maternal ideal does not seem to lessen the power of this model; rather, it means that many expecting, new and existing mothers continue to watch this romanticised image while finding their own practices wanting. In the same way that the fashion industry continues to create incomparably slender models and the beauty industry continues to airbrush women to the point of physical perfection; the entertainment area continues to present us with perfect maternal role models. All three are enjoyed by ordinary women, and rallied against by this self-same group. This is not about pointing out contradictions or hypocrisy but rather, to point to the complex and sometimes frustrating relationships that we have with the fashion, beauty and entertainment arena.

Moreover, it is clear to see that in each instance where a commentator has noted what they find to be an unattainable image of maternal perfection, they go on to point out its disconnect from their own, or what they see as a more 'ordinary' and 'everyday' maternal thought, experience or practice. Many women here position themselves in opposition to and as different from, the perfect maternal role; that said, it is not uncommon to find pleasure in a more perfect or alternative figure. Harlequin readers seek pleasure in romance narratives removed from their own domestic situation (Radway 1984/1991), Hollywood audiences find escapism in

the shopping film that charts a make-over unlike any they will experience (Brunsdon 1997), and that same audience 'worship' glamorous female film stars who are unlike them in every conceivable way (Stacey 1994). Pleasure can be found in gendered experiences that offer audiences entertainment and escapism. We can find ourselves watching at a distance or being drawn in to identify on some level with these idealised mothers, so that, for the time that we spend in their company we can enjoy pointing out our differences with cynical amusement or find pleasure in being transported into a more serene maternal world for the short duration of the show or scene in question. The problem for some mothers then of course is when we turn off and close the book, the perfect image remains and we cannot help but judge ourselves by their standards, which then further perpetuates the 'good' mother myth.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at the ways in which women in the audience and the wider social networking sphere have spoken negatively about soap opera, reality television and the impossibly perfect maternal image. Respondents made the point that they judged and derided those maternal figures who put their social and sexual desires before their children's emotional needs within scripted and reality programming, even as they acknowledged and in many cases felt compassion, for the struggles that some of these mothers face in order to bring up their children. And yet while many women found these strained mothers problematic maternal characters, so too, many women found the romanticised ideal mother a fascinating yet frustrating figure to watch. After all, while viewing poor mothers in extremely turbulent domestic situations gives us a sense of comfort because 'the behaviors of the children are so exaggerated that most viewers have the ability to distance themselves somewhat from the show, as they watch in fascination and horror as the family implodes in front of

their very eyes' (Tally 2008), watching ideal figures can also encourage us to question our own maternal practices.

It is worth noting of course that the limited maternal depictions highlighted here are not restricted to representations of motherhood on small screen programming. A recent study by advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi noted that women in the audience are angered and frustrated by what they deem to be unrealistic, patronising and negative depictions of motherhood in contemporary advertising. In line with my own findings, the research noted that the 'perfect' mother and the 'stressed out mum who cannot cope' were the most problematic stereotypes in these short media texts. The study 'found major faults by advertisers including the fact that women who have children do not want to be categorised simply as mothers as if nothing else mattered' perhaps explaining why only 19 per cent of women believed that there were examples of mums in advertising that they could relate to (Chahal 2014). Indeed, *Marketing Week* editor Ruth Mortimer went as far as to suggest that advertisers should ban the word 'mum' from all advertising because 'there is no identikit person' (Mortimer 2014). Perhaps rather than ban the word mum, we should embrace the word mothers, plural, in order to depict the wide and varied range of maternal images, thoughts and practices that exist today. And if advertising agencies are uninterested in creating figures of maternal diversity as part of a social action agenda, then perhaps the fact that the estimated spending power of mothers is said to be worth £1.9 billion might go some way towards encouraging them to look beyond what are termed 'grating' and tired stereotypes (Mortimer 2014).