Through Mother’s Eyes: 
Multiple Mothers in American Mothering Magazines

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Historically speaking, the notion of the mother-consumer arose in tandem with the unfolding of modern consumer society and, in particular, with the emergence of childhood as a site for commercial exploitation during the early decades of the 20th century in the U.S. As a social construct, the mother-consumer fuses together long-standing and widely-held cultural beliefs regarding feminine foibles and emotionality with equally ideological constructions of maternal love, self-sacrifice, and self-effacement. When coupled with a newly-forming commercial infrastructure of stores, retail spaces, advertising and promotions, the consuming mother has emerged as a cultural figure that straddles two oft-thought disparate spheres, combining intimacy and care for others, on the one hand, with commerce and market activity on the other. It is this tension—between intimate life and markets, between commerce and care—that has formed and continues to inform understandings about contemporary motherhoods as well as the practices of contemporary mothers. Children and notions of childhood reside at the crux of this moral tension as they represent both that which is to be cared for and nurtured, as well as the focus and site for the contemplation of pecuniary value.

Marketeers—that is, advertisers, retailers and marketers—understood the relationship between mothers, children, and consumption several generations before academic researchers began in earnest to attend to the dynamics and dimensions of consumer society. Women, they recognized, were positioned to serve as something of a gateway to household consumption and thus constituted a desirable market. Roland Marchand identified the "little woman G. P. A. (General Purchasing Agent)" in 1920s U.S. consumer advertising as a commercial caricature that framed women's/mothers' role as one which traverses domestic and business spheres. Cook describes how those in the newly arising children's clothing industry during this same period explicitly and purposively defined, targeted and engaged mothers as the central and "natural" vehicle for gaining a share of the family pocketbook. Mothers, merchants realized, were valuable customers not only because of the purchases made in the new juvenile clothing sections, but also for the added business that they would bring to the entire department store in which these sections were situated. Merchants and trade publications of the time construed their mother-consumer (white, decidedly middle-class and urban) as one who put the consideration of
her child above all else and thus would spend well beyond necessity to obtain the best for her children.  

Contemporary constructions of motherhoods, particularly in the context of wealthy, media-saturated societies of the Global North, continue to reference the moral tensions implicit in the coupling of commerce and care, of children and markets. Advertisers and marketers understand well that mothers reside almost inescapably within an ideology of "intensive mothering," whereby a woman who shows anything less than complete devotion to her children may be construed—by herself as well as by others—as something of a failure on her part. The near-ubiquitous fear of being an incomplete, inadequate, or "bad" mother undoubtedly presents marketers and advertisers with opportunities to offer not simply goods and services to assist women in being the kinds of mothers they envision, but also to make available the semantic-visual materials from which such visions are assembled. Thus, publicity images made for the maternal market offer some reassurance that the products promoted assist in accomplishing a "good" motherhood. It is not, however, so much images of mothers themselves that provide the best or most reliable clues of good parenting to an audience of mothers. Rather, the most compelling evidence of being a good mother to a mother, I argue, is that of a pleased, satisfied, cared for, or otherwise happy child. 

In the following discussion, I make the case for the necessary inclusion of children and childhood in the study and analysis of commercial representations of mothers and motherhood. Drawing on advertisements taken from U.S. mothering magazines in recent years, I examine how multiple forms of visual address attempt to engage different versions of the consuming mother, placing emphasis on depictions of children. I identify and define a particular mode of depiction, which I term "matriocular," to call attention to the ways in which the perspective of the presumed mother-consumer-audience is invoked and evoked through portrayals of children. The discussion will proceed as follows. First, I present a conceptual position that makes a case for the analytic and practical inseparability of mothers and children when it comes to consumption and commercial matters, and for the necessary intermixing of commerce and care in the lives and practices of contemporary mothers. I then briefly provide background to the study undertaken, offering some general thoughts on how advertising operates. The final major section examines how different modes of depiction of mothers found in American mothering magazines—as
indicated by how children are or are not portrayed—create different mothers and different senses of motherhoods.

The Inescapability of Maternal Consumption

In recent years, a significant amount of academic research has concentrated on investigating the historical, cultural and political dimensions of the "child consumer" from social science and consumer behavior perspectives. These efforts in large part tend to evince an almost myopic focus on the knowledge and activities of the child consumer, at times minimizing or ignoring the place and roles of parents, especially mothers. To be sure, exceptions to this pattern can be found, but the overall tendency to analytically isolate the child from mother remains dominant.

In marketing circles, especially in the popular publications intended for a public audience, children and the mother-child relationship sit squarely in the center of discussions regarding the mother-consumer. Bailey and Ullman in *Trillion Dollar Moms* lament that many marketers believe they are "hitting" the mother market simply by aiming their message to women generally: "By ignoring her role as a mother and just speaking to her as a woman, you are essentially subtracting from the equation the role that she values the most." Coffey, Siegel, and Livingston take the issue much further by identifying the mother-child nexus as inseparable in terms of consumption and decision-making. They see "mom and kid" as a singular, "super consumer" entity—each side having its own priorities and perspectives, but ultimately behaving as one in and for the marketplace.

I operate from a position in which mothers and children are inseparable, both practically and analytically, when it comes to their consumer lives. "Inseparable" here does not mean they are identical to one another, nor does it obviate the aforementioned moral tensions underlying and informing the worlds and practices of contemporary mother-consumers. Such tensions are themselves inescapable to the extent that key aspects of motherhood arise from and take shape in reference to rubrics of consumption—rubrics directly implicating social identities of children and cultural meanings of childhood. Caretaking activities regularly associated with mothering find material and symbolic expression through commercially-structured arrangements, rendering a good deal of what constitutes "mother's work" into forms of consumer practice carried out on behalf of or in reference to her children. A mother, as parent, engages in multiple forms of provisioning for her children who cannot otherwise provide for themselves and, in so doing,
engages with the exigencies of markets and marketplaces. It is indeed rather difficult to contemplate how contemporary mothering (or parenting) practices in Global North contexts would be undertaken absent some engagement with the worlds of goods, images and meanings made available by the commercial actors and structures that together constitute the everyday consumer cultures of particular motherhoods and childhoods.

The commingling of sentiment and commerce—as noted, evident in some measure since the early 20th century—has taken on particular significance over the last two decades as women's place in the American workforce has increased in size and in scope. Since the 1970s, not only has women's workforce participation continued on its upward historical trend until a stabilization at around 60 percent in 1999, but the female workforce has also become increasingly professionalized, with increasing numbers of women working full-time or returning to full-time employment after having children. Consequently, middle-class women tend to command higher salaries and hold more positions of management and authority in the workforce than in the past, compared to other women, but still lag with regard to men's salaries for comparable work.

At the same time, the desire (and perhaps the perceived duty) to bear and raise children and to attend closely to and be present for their upbringing has not dissipated. The expectation for "intensive mothering" itself may also have increased, as the performance of working mothers in modern times has never escaped the gaze of moral scrutiny. The combination of having less time to devote to children, coupled with an ever-present demand to demonstrate that one's absence is not harmful to her child's upbringing, has put a moral squeeze on many mothers, culminating in the so-called "mommy wars" between career mothers and those who stay at home.

It is at the tearing point between countervailing duties and expectations where the greatest market opportunity arises. Commercial goods and services present a particularly visible and concrete means through which mothers can fill in or otherwise supplement the parenting work they cannot perform and thus can help demonstrate their care and devotion to children and family. Since the 1990s, marketers and social researchers have noted how the tensions and interactions between mothers' paid and domestic labor, coupled with increasing attention to children's consumer desires and preferences, have transformed certain consumer sectors. Ready-made foods and dining out practices, as well as secondary markets such as automobile and
appliance purchasing, and the choice of family vacation locations, have emerged in response to increased women's purchasing power, to mothers spending increasing time involved in their work, and to the increasingly central position of children in the middle-class family. Arlie Hochschild discusses how some American families have begun to "outsource" what were once considered quintessentially family chores—and traditionally women's duties—like cooking, caring for children, and assembling family pictures. In her research among families with various incomes in Northern California, Allison Pugh finds that middle-class families often seek to enable their child's sense of "belonging" in class-based peer groups by providing both goods and experiences commensurate with others. As mothers' parenting practices have garnered increased scrutiny, some point to increased anxiety surrounding parenting and status competition among parents, both of which implicate mothers re-investing in their roles as consumers.

As mothers, women have responded to the squeeze in a variety of ways over recent years. One way middle-class mothers have responded has been to reject the notion that devotion to children necessarily means a corresponding lack of attention to oneself—that focusing on child or self is not necessarily a zero-sum situation—particularly with regard to one's health and appearance. Stephanie O'Donohoe writes of the "yummy mummy" phenomenon in Britain whereby mothers seek—through consumption and personal display—to distance themselves from an age-old, "dowdy" image of motherhood. They seem to seek, in its stead, to emulate celebrity mothers whose media presence has in some ways provided a public guide for a new, sometimes sexy, version of how to appear and behave as a mother, including redefining the stylistic and aesthetic qualities of the pregnant female body. Some writers contend that the experience of mothers in the professional ranks of the workforce assist them in being able to care for and manage children and the household, a twist on and update to the 1920s "little woman G. P. A." notion, except the women are no longer diminutive or confined to the home. Some mothers have also responded by taking up the mantle of morality and re-claiming a political role for themselves, as had been done a number of times in history. Here, the politics range from turning the so-called "mommy brain"—which is characterized as forgetful and focused on small things—into a virtue, to political activism around issues of guns, product safety and women's concerns. With the rise of conservative public figures like former U.S. vice-presidential
candidate Sarah Palin, and others who openly deploy their status as mothers and women, the
political aspects of being a mother span a wide spectrum.

Advertising Motherhoods in Mothering Magazines

If nothing else, contemporary advertising presents typifications—typifications of social
scenes, personages and goods in the attempt to infuse the products or services being sold with
meaning beyond their functional or use value. Analysts often describe such typifications as
"ideal" to the extent that what often is depicted in advertisements is devoid of the imperfections
and tensions that characterize everyday life. Idealizations—of whatever content or nature—
form the basis for "common sense" understandings that advertising exerts significance influence
in social life. Underlying these understandings resides a presumption that "reality" is somehow
both presented and distorted in the publicity image. A significant swath of research and writing
about advertising therefore concerns itself with measuring or commenting on the extent to which
it does or does not "reflect" some social reality—from studies on the representativeness of people
of color in commercials to the misrepresentation of women's bodies and sexuality to the ways
in which gays and the queer lifestyle are depicted.

Indeed, the question of representativeness cannot be skirted, nor can that of "reality"
when it comes to advertising analysis to the extent that commercial representation itself
composes its fictions/idealizations out of the material of everyday life. This insight, to a large
extent, drove Erving Goffman's analysis of gender specifically in the way that he tied portrayals
in advertising images to larger patterns of ritual displays and social performances. Something
of a "reality" underlies or informs these depictions; the problem confronting the researcher is
how to discern and describe the thread(s) that run through layers of representation.

In the modest study on which this paper is based, I examined four magazines geared
toward mothers in the U.S. market—Parents, Parenting, Working Mother and Family Fun—for
a period spanning 2008-2010. Some earlier issues of Parents were also available and were
included in the analysis. At the most basic level, my initial motivation was to interrogate
depictions of mothers and motherhood for their presumptions and idealizations, and how these
intermingled with the products and services being sold. What I found, and will discuss here,
spoke more to motherhoods, rather than a single motherhood, in that multiple "mothers" emerged
from the pages of the magazines. Significantly, the multiplicity of the mothers/motherhoods
arose less from the kinds of depictions of women in the promotions and more squarely from the
depictions (or not) of children. It was not, in other words, mothers who are pictured in the majority of ads but children—a realization that lead me to inquire about both the pattern (if any) of inclusion and exclusion of depictions of mothers and the possible commercial reasonings behind these representational practices. The discussion and presentation that follows represents a preliminary attempt to make sense of this basic finding.

**Multiple Mothers**

Overall, across the publications, the image of a child or of children stands as the most frequently represented figure in advertisements. In a simple counting of a sample of issues from each of the magazines, a basic pattern emerges quite clearly. There are more advertisements with children or with a child depicted alone without adults than there are with adult(s) depicted without children in all publications for the years examined. For *Parents*, *Parenting* and *Family Fun*, the depiction of adult-less child/children out-paced that of childless adult(s) by as much as a factor of 4, and as little as a factor of 2. In *Working Mother*, the ratio was close to even. There were, of course, advertisements that depicted children and adults in the same frame, with extremely infrequent depictions of men with children—averaging less than two such images per issue across all magazines.

I use the term "adult" here instead of "mother" or "father" to call attention to the distinction between subject—i.e., a figure internal to a scene or frame, and model—i.e., a person paid to represent a subject. These terms highlight the choices made by particular companies, and the advertising agencies they employed, in the depiction and re-creation of motherhoods and deployment of the persona of "the mother" in these publishing venues. Consequently, the need to "know" who this mother is and how best to depict her likely informs a significant portion of the promotional endeavor, including the market positioning of the publication itself.

Some simple measures provide the material from which to glean a general gestalt regarding the magazine readership. Table 1 compares some basic measures of audience used by magazines to both assess their audience and inform and attract advertisers. A few items of note: The median household income (Median HHI) for all magazines was above the national median of $52,029 for 2008, indicating the solidly middle-class status of the readership. The readership of *Working Mother*, which understandably tends toward the older segments of the 18–49 year-old age range, has the highest percentage of employed readers who also tend to have the lowest
percentage of children aged 0–5 in comparison with that of the other magazines. Hence, one would not expect many promotions for infant and young children products or an overwhelming number of images of infants and toddlers in Working Mother. By contrast, Parents and Parenting draw readers who cluster toward the younger end of the age range, have comparatively higher percentages of children in the household between ages 0 and 12 (and, more specifically, between 0 and 5) and are more likely than the others to have an expectant mother in the household.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Composition</th>
<th>Parenting</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>FamilyFun</th>
<th>Working Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 18 to 34</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>55.9%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 18 to 49</td>
<td>88.2%</td>
<td>87.9%</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
<td>89.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 25 to 49</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
<td>71.3%</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age (years)</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend/Grad College+</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>55.5%</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median HHI</td>
<td>$52,361</td>
<td>$54,961</td>
<td>$67,108</td>
<td>$57,994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>56.6%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>73.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectant Mom in HH</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under 2</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children age 2-5</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children age 6-11</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children age 0-12</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Parenting Media Kit 2009 as taken from MRI Fall 2008

Measures like these inform both the buying decisions of companies considering the purchase of advertising space and, as well, the production of the advertisements themselves.
Such measures meld with and give shape to shared, sometimes unarticulated, ideological underpinnings of contemporary motherhoods, producing what I elsewhere have defined as "commercial personae." The idea of commercial personae refers to the personages, the figures, and the typifications produced by market actors—i.e., advertisers, marketers, designers and others—in the effort to make the abstraction of the "consumer" knowable through personification. It is an amalgam of characteristics—characteristics derived from research as well as from ideology, from systematic study, and from cultural presumption.

Thus, the visual and textual constructions one encounters on the pages of a magazine, in a television commercial, or on a web pop-up banner are best approached and understood as complex admixtures of audience characteristics molded into identifiable and relatable figures, rather than as imperfect reflections of extant, lived motherhoods. For the social analyst, the advertising image represents the advertiser's construction of the audience-market members' constructions of themselves. The mother-reader may or may not see the advertisement in that way. In either case, it is clear that audience-consumers tend to "read" the images, narratives and vignettes provided in various media in reference to their own lives and concerns whether or not they are in line with the producers' presumptions.

In light of the historical and cultural trends discussed above, and combined with the numerical measures taken of the readership of these publications, it would not be surprising that there exists not just one commercial persona of a mother-consumer, but rather multiple mothers—multiple commercial personae—depicted in the advertisements and editorial material. These address different experiences of the readership while serving also as market segments. I identified three such figures: the mother "as mother," the mother "as worker," and the mother "as woman."

The mother "as mother" congeals the traditional understanding of motherhood as an all-encompassing identity, focused first and foremost on the care for children (especially given the nature of the publications consulted). The mother "as worker," particularly for the Working Mother readership, represents those who have careers (as opposed to only employment) and thus who have interests outside of their maternal role. The mother "as woman" persona highlights the ways in which a woman derives pleasure or gains identity outside of her role as mother, specifically in the areas of caring for self through interests in style and beauty. These "multiple
mothers" can represent different mothers with different priorities, or they can serve as aspects of the same woman, representing different roles or selves.

Two of these personae stand in opposition to the third. The mother "as worker" and "as woman" negate or otherwise threaten traditional constructions of motherhood to the extent that the former might be understood as categorically exclusive of or do not necessarily involve children—at least not directly. Behaviorally and in practice, having a job or career and concerning oneself with one's appearance are by no means necessarily at odds with performing "well" (however defined) as a mother. Ideologically, the tensions remain between a woman's efforts to cultivate aspects of her self beyond motherhood and the care for children. When children are depicted in ads where career (mother "as worker") or care for self (mother "as woman") are the central thrust, they are deployed as the focus and concern of the mother—i.e., as unrelated to enactment of career or to the efforts to care for self. In contrast, it is evident that the mother "as mother" stands apart from the other personae in the way that children are positioned as central to the publicity effort and that mothers are visually absent or near absent in many of the depictions.

Hence, I argue and demonstrate that the presence or absence of a child in an advertisement, along with how the child is portrayed when depicted, can provide a key indication of the kind of subject position of mothers that advertisers and marketers seek to address and call into service. The experiences of everyday mothering may not divide the world into "worker," "mother," and "self," but the logic and functioning of the marketplace—particularly with regard to the flow of and exchange of signs and meanings—may indeed work to segment aspects of lived motherhoods into market share based on the focus and use of the product or service. In the context of the pressures of intensive mothering and of the ongoing crossfire of the mommy wars, it makes sense—commercial sense—to steer away from the contradictions underlying maternal practice and existence and to focus messages on targeted aspects of a woman's or mother's interest.

*Mother ‘As Worker’*

Mother "as worker" appears, unsurprisingly, to an overwhelming degree on the pages of *Working Mother*. In fact, in the other publications there are scant depictions or intimations of mothers as workers in their professional role, despite readership statistics (see Table 1)
indicating a majority of subscribers are working for wages. Images of working women in *Working Mother*, however, are sparse, depicted quite infrequently in advertisements or feature pieces, with only about one such image per issue on average in advertisements for the time period examined. It is as if this part of a mother's existence is downplayed, even ignored, in favor of emphasizing either the "woman" or "mother" aspect. Subscribers to the magazine presumably have self-selected based on some commitment to working and having a career, yet perhaps they are not seeking images of career life, but those of home life.

Advertisements depicting mothers "as workers" tend to be placed by companies promoting themselves as employers of women (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). The professional garb, serious font, and dark background with reversed type all testify to the professional—and quite non-motherly—tone of the image. Ernst and Young, in Figure 2, had been voted a Top 10 *Working Mother* company for the employment of minority women who embrace that identity.

![KPMG ad in Working Mother](image_url)

**Figure 1:** KPMG ad in *Working Mother.*

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When children are included in images of working mothers, the thrust of the promotional messages moves in the direction of how the advertisers' goods or services can assist mothers in maintaining a balance between home and work. Indeed, the theme of "balance" threads throughout the promotional materials, editorial content, and advertisements of Working Mother. In Figure 3, Bristol-Meyers depicts not the persona of the wage-earning mother, but that of the happy mother enjoying time with her daughter. More often, the working status of a mother understandably is presumed and the focus of the selling points is on how she can make it through her busy life. The ad in Figure 4 could address working mothers specifically and "busy moms" generally.
Figure 3: Bristol-Myers ad in Working Mother. 

Flexibility makes it possible.

Our people find fulfillment in their work, interesting and enhancing the lives of patients around the world. And they find fulfilling lives at home, too. Our flexible range of work-life programmes help our employees at each stage of their lives. Bristol-Myers Squibb is proud to be ranked in the Top 100 of Working Mother magazine’s “Best Companies for Working Mothers.”

Learn more about a career at Bristol-Myers Squibb. Visit us at www.bms.com/career
Figure 4: Ester-C ad in *Working Mother.*
Here, it appears that the fragmentation of the home/work distinction experienced by many working moms is mirrored in promotions directed at her and symbolized by the presence (mother role) or absence (professional role) of children in the advertisement. In this way, these kinds of patterned associations reinforce and reproduce an ideological distinction that equates "full" or "real" motherhood with care for children.

Mother ‘as Woman’

The ideological and moral distinctiveness of the mother "as woman" persona is made evident in the Parents "Your Life" section, which is visually and stylistically marked off from other sections of the magazine (see Figure 5). Within this area, there are special features on beauty, style and health replete with so-called "editorial" copy that discusses and highlights specific products. Sections like these resemble what Ellen McCracken has identified as "covert advertisements" where the "ideology of advice" reinforces and supports the paid advertisements and the mission of the publication to serve first and foremost as a promotional medium.39 In Figure 5, under the "beauty" banner, we see the image of a woman who models one version of a "pretty and polished" face. There are no images of children in the "Your Life" pages per se, or in any other similar sections—such as a similarly-segregated section in Working Mother called "You." However, pages facing the "Your Life" section do have ads with children, and with mothers and children, clearly tempering any suspension of disbelief that the duties of motherhood have departed for a while.
In Figure 6, we see what is a fairly standard beauty advertisement for women. There is no indication that mothers are the target audience. Children indeed are absent not only visually and textually, but stylistically and otherwise. The promotion speaks to mothers only by virtue of its placement in *Parenting*. In no cases did I find adults and children pictured together in ads that address women's style, beauty or health. Children do appear with adult women in promotions for "healthy" foods, but these do not evince an exclusive address to the mother "as woman." Also, one can find "mother-daughter" style promotions in women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, for which mothers are a sub-category of reader.
The "yummy mummy" also has a presence as a promotional device, as in the Nivea advertisement whereby a young woman (presumably a mother) is happy to fit into her favorite jeans, as is her (apparent) husband, subtly denoted by the wedding band on her left ring finger (Figure 7). No children directly depicted here, only implied as a relatively recent, post-partum and off-stage reality—i.e., her recent pregnancy—explaining why she is now happy to again fit into her clothes with Nivea's My Silhouette product that promises to tighten skin in four weeks. She now "rediscover" her favorite jeans and hence returns to being alluring to her mate. This is a self—a depiction of self—that is visually and commercially separated from this mother as a mother, though of course in lived reality their child would only be out of sight in another room, but not out of mind.
**Through Mother's Eyes: Mother ‘As Mother’**

As a matter of advertising practice, the mother "as mother" often finds visual expression in the same frame as children. A number of motifs characterize this mode of depiction. There are, across all magazines examined, images of adult women who look lovingly at the child as the child either looks elsewhere or is returning the admiring gaze. Another pattern of representation has the woman holding the child, often with the child's head above hers, with both looking at the camera. Less often, mother-child scenes are configured with the child engulfed by the woman—and sometimes by the man who stands for father. Goffman notes that nuzzling, snuggling, the elevation of some subjects above others, and the encasement in the arms of another comprise significant elements of ritualized depiction conveying, most often, the ability of those being snuggled and nuzzled to "withdraw from the scene" and of those encased in arms and hugs to be seen as in need of and deserving of protection. As mother, the woman encompasses, protects, and embraces, and does so in the context of commercial promotion, perhaps conveying to the audience something about the security and closeness a product might bring (see Figures 8 and 9).
Figure 8: Thomas Honey Wheat English muffin ad in *Family Fun*.44

Figure 9: Vyvanse ad in *Parenting*.45
The most dominant and intriguing representations of mother and motherhood by far, however, are those where only children are depicted, without adults in the frame. The mother "as mother" persona derives much of its ideological, representational and commercial force, I contend, precisely by featuring images of children without adults/parents in the frame, or in frames where they are only partially implied. Images of children from the point of view of "mother," it would seem, seek to evoke the emotional response of what companies wish mothers to see and to feel as a consequence of possessing or contemplating their products. The image of the child, as focal point, anchors the mother-audience to the advertisement without having to concern itself with depicting a "mother" herself. Thus, this mode of depiction removes from the frame any subject that would present an image of an ideal mother to the reader that may invite comparisons with the reader herself, thereby siphoning attention away from the child-product-brand message.

I refer to this mode of depiction as "matriocularity"—or seeing with and through mothers' eyes. Advertisers who make use of this mode of depiction, I argue, present a representation of motherhood without picturing a mother. They represent her viewpoint and perhaps her desires or aspirations for what they presume she hopes to see—a pleased child. Depicting happy children is perhaps the most direct and basic way of connoting matriocularity as in, for instance, the image of an infant on high-chair enjoying a Yoplait yogurt (Figure 10). Lone children quietly playing with Crayola crayons would be another pleasing sight for mother or parent, as would the images of a child engrossed or fascinated by a toy—a toy like one from Fisher-Price that captivates the child in a form of play that is purported to be an avenue to growth (Figure 11). The mother-reader-audience-market here is something of a spy, surreptitiously observing her child in the process of growing and learning with the help of Fisher-Price.
Figure 10: Stonyfield Farms Yobaby ad in *Parenting*. 46
In this mode, children can return a loving gaze directly to the viewer while "performing" childhood, leaving the product promoted in the background where the mother-audience is assured that the hair product is "#1 Mom Trusted" (Figure 12). Additionally, some ads explicitly invoke a typical mother/adult perspective, as in the view from the front seat of the suburban family van (Figure 13) where the children, by their very nonchalance, appear pleased with their "kid's meal" from the Sonic fast food chain. Here, advertiser and mother share a secret over the children about how "sensible" the meal actually is, a collusion visually enacted in the way that both advertiser and mother share the same perspective in viewing the children through the frame. In a similar vein, Dixie paper plates comically dramatizes the ability of the product to hold many vegetables, to the apparent chagrin of the child recipient (Figure 14). The humor and playfulness in these ads function as kind of a wink to the mother-viewer that the advertiser understands both the frustrations and the joys of what comes into her field of vision—a kind of visual empathy.
Figure 12: Texture Softener ad in Working Mother.49

Figure 13: Sonic food ad in Working Mother.50
No doubt, professionally-crafted, full-on, subjective views of children trade on the "cute value" of smiling children and of "wondrous innocence" perhaps sought by parents and mothers, as Gary Cross has theorized. Cuteness is most evident in the extreme close-up photography of an infant, a framing which simulates the "intimate distance" a mother or parent will have with a child who is indeed larger than life-size (Figure 15). Here, the frame may momentarily dissolve and the viewer-mother may enter it. The tag-line "Wrapping you in comfort and security right from the start" coupled with the image delivers something of a productive ambiguity to the reader. "You" can refer, at once, to the infant who is comfortably and securely wrapped, as well as to the mother-audience-consumer, who would be said to gain a measure of comfort and security by using the wrap. Hence, the publicity copy can represent both the company speaking to the out-of-frame mother whose perspective we as an audience enter by virtue of how the image is framed, and it can also represent the mother's voice or thought process regarding her infant.

Figure 14: Dixie Ultra ad in Parents.
The cute/wondrous child represents one kind of promotional imagery, albeit powerful and persuasive, among others. In the range of images offered in these publications there exist, as well, curious children, engrossed children, smiling children, and active children. Not all necessarily evince cuteness or wondrousness, but all represent the commercial interpretation of what a mother-reader-consumer would most likely want to see—a pleased, satisfied, and safe child.

Conclusion

Just as children figure centrally in the understanding and definition of motherhoods, so too the representation of children (or absence thereof) frames and informs the commercially depictions of mothers in these promotions. Children's presence or absence, how they are depicted, and the point of view from which they are seen, constitute some of the key interpretive and persuasive devices visually deployed to reach particular audience-markets of mothers. The rather clear, though not completely exclusive, pattern whereby including children would detract from the marketing message—i.e., as when the focus is on mother as worker or on products for style and beauty—encodes a cultural tension between total devotion to children and attention to self that many mothers face every day in the context of U.S. cultural-economic relations. It does
not, however, necessarily speak to how mothers themselves handle the competing demands of job, self, and family.

When images of children are included in advertisements, most exclude adults. The point-of-view, "subjective" framing of child-only ads allows the mother-audience member to read herself into the scene and into the brand message without having a purposefully-and professionally-contrived image of "mother" at the ready for (favorable or unfavorable) comparison. The visual, cultural and moral focus rests on the child. Yet, I contend, that the child-only image—and its attendant invocation of matriocularity—constitutes a representation and (re)creation of motherhood. Situated outside the frame but implied as the viewer, the mother-audience-consumer imagined by the advertiser sees herself and the success of her efforts in the pleased, wondrous, curious child juxtaposed with the color schemes, specialized type fonts and logo of a company producer. As mother, she is represented as a refraction of the child-image—which is not of her child—in a manner akin to that theorized by early American pragmatists George Herbert Mead and, specifically, by Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the "looking-glass self." That is to say, in the contexts discussed here, to see the child is to view the construct of the mother that produced the child image. That construct comes not from mothers directly, but from the world of commerce. It is this version, this representation of motherhood, that assists in eliding the distinctions and tensions between commerce and care. Within this frame, these traditionally-opposed motivations fuse into one as a viewer's eyes alight on the happy and pleased child.

Depictions of self-conscious, self-involved preoccupations like concerns about beauty and profession stand neatly separated from the child-only image, much like the profane and sacred require some sort of boundary, however porous it may be. The existence of this separation in the way it is manifested in these publications serves, to my mind, as a way to elide the tensions and contradictions a mother most likely encounters on an everyday basis. That is, when the (presumed or construed) subject positions of mothers (i.e., as worker, woman, mother) are made the basis for publicity efforts and market segmentation, readers of such publications and advertisements are presented with similarly-fragmented commercial personae of the mother-consumer. On one page, a version of this persona models care for oneself; on another it models the appearance and concern of a working professional. But it is when the mother persona is made visually absent yet strongly implicated in the subjective framing of scenes with children that its
ideological robustness becomes evident. The "child" is here made to stand for a particular, morally-infused style of mothering precisely because it, at once, centers the constructed view of "the mother" while crowding out other subject positions or aspects of self. In the matriocular mode, there appears to be no visual or ideological room for anything other than mother as mother. Anything other than complete child devotion, it seems, remains incompatible with career or desires to care for oneself and hence, in these promotional forums, the twain rarely meet.

Acknowledgements
I gratefully acknowledge Deborah Valentine, who provided valuable research assistance on this project, and Cynthia Maurer for editorial assistance and support. I express my appreciation for the anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions proved quite helpful in the revision of the manuscript.

Notes


30. Goffman, Gender Advertisements.


35. KPMG ad in Working Mother, May 09, 5.

36. Ernst & Young ad in Working Mother, November 2010, 23.


41. Olay Body Lotion ad in Parenting, April 2006, 49.


43. Goffman, Gender Advertisements.

44. Thomas Honey Wheat English muffin ad in Family Fun, April 2010, 44.


48. Advertisements for food and food-related products constitute the modal category whereby the mother's perspective is utilized as a persuasive device, as food and eating constitute a morally-charged domain of mothering and site where social blame and maternal guilt intersect.

49. Texture Softener ad in Working Mother, April 2009, 2.

50. Sonic food ad in Working Mother, April 2009, 43.


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