

New Motherhood Isn't Always Magical: Popular Feminism in Frida Mom Commercials

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The media mothers use help shape their expectations around pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, breastfeeding, and motherhood (Hall 47; Tyler and Baraitser 8). Even when mothers recognize media are not always realistic in portrayals of pregnancy or postpartum (Liechty et al. 857), the portrayals still teach mothers about “ways of acting in the world” (Sears and Godderis 185). When the most common representations used to sell postpartum products are seemingly perfectly groomed, smiling mothers who are physically back to their pre-pregnancy selves (Moghe), such as pictures of Kate Middleton mere hours after birth, it is a far cry from the experience many people have after birth. Offering a different depiction, Frida Mom made waves with rarely seen popular culture media representations of new motherhood. In 2020, Frida Mom created a commercial for the Oscars depicting a newly postpartum person¹ getting out of bed in the middle of the night, using the bathroom, and struggling through the process of taking care of a postpartum body. Ultimately the commercial was banned, yet Frida Mom built momentum through online viewership (via YouTube). Frida Mom made headlines again in 2021 as they readied a commercial showing people’s struggles with breastfeeding for the Golden Globes (M. Brown). Both the 2020 Frida Mom postpartum commercial and the 2021 Frida Mom breastfeeding commercial offer important, boundary-pushing popular culture mediated representations of new motherhood. Yet, despite their boundary pushing, these commercials also reinscribe the hegemonic U.S. norm of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood (Hays).

¹ Although not every person who has birthed a baby would identify as mother, I use mother or person, when possible, to highlight that these people do not necessarily identify as women.

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In this essay, I rhetorically analyze the 2020 Frida Mom postpartum commercial and the 2021 Frida Mom breastfeeding commercial through the lens of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser) to identify each artifact's potential as a feminist mediated representation of new motherhood. I begin by briefly discussing mediated representations of new motherhood before detailing popular feminism and neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood in the U.S. I argue that although the commercials are important media representations of new motherhood, they become popular feminism overshadowed by the neoliberal, capitalist consumerism underpinning them. Next, I analyze each commercial before considering what the trajectory of Frida Mom means for future mediated representations and feminism.

Building a Framework

New Motherhood Popular Culture Media Representations. Much of the feminist scholarship surrounding popular culture representations of new motherhood focuses on pregnancy and birth (Das; Feasey; Mack; Takeshita; Wiant Cummins, "Miracles"), but breastfeeding and postpartum, including the fourth trimester (i.e., childbirth through 12 weeks postpartum; Tully et al. 38), are less often the focus. Many of the current postpartum popular culture media representations focus on mothers' changing bodies (Coyne et al.) such as body dissatisfaction (Gow et al.), postpartum embodiment (Johnson), or reclaiming maternal bodies as beautiful (Husbands; Nash; Palmer-Mehta and Shuler). Otherwise, postpartum popular culture media representations focus on postpartum mental health, specifically postpartum depression or anxiety or postpartum psychosis (Frankhouser and Defenbaugh; Moulton Belec). There are few popular culture media depictions of postpartum life, especially immediately after birth. Instead, mothers are presented with social media photos of groomed and polished new moms that "are not a fair representation of the pain and struggle so very many women experience trying to do everyday things for themselves," including using the bathroom (Moghe). As a result, the Frida Mom postpartum commercial is an important popular culture media representation depicting a new mother learning their postpartum body.

Similarly, popular culture media representations (especially in TV and film) of breastfeeding are not as common as pregnancy and childbirth. Katherine A. Foss contends, "Media representations play a significant role in shaping perceptions of breastfeeding, especially for those who lack breastfeeding education from other sources" ("That's" 330). Media can fill in the gaps of people's knowledge by

informing “consumers of health information, define what is considered ‘normal,’ and enact changes in health behavior” (Foss, “That’s” 330). Yet, few studies explore popular culture mediated representations of breastfeeding, especially from television (Brown and Peuchaud; Foss, “Breastfeeding”). Instead, contemporary research more often investigates breastfeeding representations on social media (Beach; Boon and Pentney; Locatelli). That Frida Mom aired a breastfeeding commercial in 2021 aimed at a “real experience” of breastfeeding positions the commercial as an important popular culture media representation. Although popular culture mediated representations of postpartum and breastfeeding motherhood are sparse, they nonetheless inform mothers’ perceptions about parenting (Hall). Thus, media are powerful tools for reproducing hegemonic U.S. normative discourse surrounding the idea of good parenting, namely using neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood as the prevailing standard.

Neoliberal, Capitalist Intensive Motherhood. Sharon Hays names “intensive motherhood” as the pervasive discourse that creates unrealistic goals for individuals, specifically women, to be good mothers. Hays says intensive motherhood is “*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*” (8, emphasis original). Others have studied how intensive motherhood discourses are centralized in the media (Douglas and Michaels) and in breastfeeding discourse (Wolf). Intensive motherhood promulgates the notion of “good” motherhood, that mothering abilities are natural and instinctive (Miller 339). Most mothers want to be considered good, and as Linda Rose Ennis argues, the “good motherhood” club brings security, self-worth, and belonging (9). Yet, intensive motherhood narrowly defines who can be a good mother: The good mother should be a white, cisgender, heterosexual (and ideally married), middle-class woman (O’Brien Hallstein, “Introduction” 3; Newman and Henderson 474) who is also able-bodied and deemed acceptable to reproduce in terms of race, intellectual ability, and appropriate age (Wiant Cummins and Brannon 126). The requirements of intensive motherhood are nearly impossible, and the ideology has negative psychological effects on women (Rizzo et al.), potentially creating motherhood into an oppressive system of control, specifically for white mothers. Indeed, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins each identified parenting as affirming for mothers of color (specifically Black mothers) in ways white mothers do not similarly identify mothering (O’Reilly). Still, as D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein summarizes, intensive motherhood is “the *proper* ideology of contemporary intensive mothering that all women are disciplined into, across race

and class lines, even if not all women actually practice it” (“Silences” 143, emphasis original). Regardless of race, class, or parenting style, intensive motherhood is the pernicious standard.

The pervasiveness of intensive motherhood works in concert with other systems of hegemonic control such as neoliberal capitalism. Catherine Rottenberg explains neoliberalism as “a dominant political rationality or normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents” (*The Rise* 7). Neoliberalism produces “subjects who are individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing,” subjects who are “entirely responsible for their own self-care and well-being” (Rottenberg, *The Rise* 7), often through capitalistic means (e.g., buying and consuming goods and/or services in service of the individual). Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser claim that “neoliberal ‘individualism’ always depended on others, from managing resources (including others as instruments) to trusting in experts as guides” (5007). Thus, a neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood is one in which mothers consume marketplace goods and services in an individual attempt to trust expert information that is financially expensive, labor intensive, and child focused. Harmony D. Newman and Angela C. Henderson note, “The requirements of intensive motherhood are exceptionally stringent given the structural/material reality of the contemporary American family and the capitalist ideology of production,” explaining that these “oppositional expectations” set mothers up to fail (474). This process begins in pregnancy (and before) where mothers and children are, respectively, “laborers and their products” (Rothman 20), where mothers are both the machines producing and the consumers consuming goods and services related to pregnancy and motherhood (Wiant Cummins, “Reproductive” 38). Adept advertisers co-opt feminist buzzwords to reach a broader audience (Lazar), such as Dara Persis Murray describes in Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty.

Neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood regulates mothers through co-opting feminist movements and draining the movements of their power (Chen; Rottenberg, “The Rise”) when not grounded in intersectional, structural, or systemic critique. For instance, Rottenberg explains how neoliberal feminism “hollows out the potential of mainstream liberal feminism to provide a critique of the social injustices generated by the structural contradictions of liberal democracy, and in this way further entrenches neoliberal rationality” (*The Rise* 15). Neoliberal feminism, instead, seeks representation over revolution – having a seat at the table,

however, does not equate to structural critique (Banet-Weiser et al. 10). With this in mind, I use Sarah Banet-Weiser's notion of popular feminism as a heuristic for analyzing the Frida Mom commercials.

Popular Feminism. Popular feminism is a nuanced understanding of the visibility feminism seems to be gaining culturally. Banet-Weiser claims, "Popular feminism exists along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence are more obscured" (4). Popular feminism is not only a lens through which to view culture, it has now "undeniably *become* popular culture" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 884, emphasis original). As Andi Zeisler points out, the term feminist "now seems to be used to lavish praise on anything that isn't overtly degrading, demeaning, or exploitative to women" (32). Popular feminism is important in a media era in which "if you are visible, you *matter*," and this visibility means "being accessible to a large, popular audience" (Banet-Weiser 10, emphasis original). However, when visibility is the end goal, as it is in popular feminism, it "tends to obfuscate the broader and more representational political aims of a feminist movement" (Dejmanee et al. 3950). Thus, calling something feminist is not about a "set of values, ethics, and politics, but merely an assessment of whether or not a product is worthy of consumption" (Zeisler 32). Banet-Weiser explains that popular feminism commodifies feminism, making it "'safe,'" and therefore, welcoming to more viewers (16).

Popular feminism works in concert with neoliberalism, thereby also furthering normative discourses such as intensive motherhood. Tisha Dejmanee et al. contend that popular feminism "embeds feminism within the ideals of neoliberalism and consumer culture, relying on commercial messaging to disseminate feminist ideas and to gesture toward the responsibility of the individual in adopting and enacting feminist activism" (3949). As others have shown, companies are willing to use feminist slogans or ideas when they can be used to increase profits (Alkan; Murray). Typically, these companies draw on feminist ideas that are "commensurate with market logics," or those that are "useful to neoliberal self-reliance and capitalist success" (Banet-Weiser 13) such as the popular book *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg. Again, the focus is on the individual as the nexus of action, obscuring feminist structural critique. Instead, the visibility of popular feminism in the marketplace is the "apotheosis of empowerment" rather than "recognizing, naming, or disrupting the political economic conditions that allow that inequality to be profitable" (Banet-

Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 886). Popular feminism ultimately maintains a neoliberal status quo. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer warn, popular feminism does not grant us political tools to guard against “the violence that erupts wherever popular feminism gains a foothold”; indeed, feminist “popularity will not protect us” (887).

Popular Feminism as a Lens. Because popular feminism uses “media-friendly expressions” (Banet-Weiser 4) in which visibility matters, I use it as a heuristic in this rhetorical analysis. I start by describing the media representation and considering to whom the expression is visible (i.e., determining who is the audience). Then, I parse out the message within the media expression. Next, I consider the implications of the message as this is where popular feminism will be most apparent. Given the recent popularity of feminism as a “trendy identity” (Dejmanee 346), popular feminism as a lens creates an important framework to view media expressions hailed as feminist for whether they contribute to structural change and/or uphold the status quo. Naming something as popular feminism, of course, is not the same as recognizing ways to work against its aims; knowing a media expression is popular feminism is not the same as being able to intervene in its use. Popular feminism as a lens offers a starting place for people to identify nuances in “feminist” media expressions thereby allowing intersectional feminisms to critique, dismantle, and/or replace problematic media expressions. To test this method, I begin by describing the messages of the Frida Mom commercials through the lens of popular feminism.

A Deeper Reading

2020 Postpartum Commercial. Frida Mom posted the postpartum video, titled “Oscars Ad Rejected,” to their YouTube channel on February 5, 2020. The ad begins with about 30 seconds of words appearing across the scene to set the stage that the commercial was banned, and that Frida Mom disagrees with the ban. The screen then fades to black before viewers hear a baby begin to stir and cry out. A white-appearing person reaches up to turn on a lamp as viewers glimpse that the clock reads just before 3 am, so the whole commercial is rather darkly lit, being in the middle of the night. The new mother with a still-swollen postpartum belly struggles to waddle to the bathroom, displaying pain on their face as the camera draws attention to the mesh underwear and thick pad they are wearing. Viewers watch the mother brace herself to urinate, going through the process of changing

the pad, cleaning themselves with a peri bottle after urinating, and spraying some type of presumably medical spray onto their vulva. About a minute into the commercial, the music and focus changes. Viewers have been hearing slow and almost dirge-like music in the background, but viewers see the words, “Postpartum recovery doesn’t have to be this hard” (Frida Mom, “Frida Mom. Oscars Ad”), as the music becomes more upbeat, faster tempo, and even a bit louder. The commercial ends by quickly displaying well-lit Frida Mom boxed products and the tagline, “Be postpartum prepared” (Frida Mom, “Frida Mom. Oscars Ad”). Frida Mom’s products are only seen for about two seconds before a light pink translucent screen covers them with the tagline and there is no product demonstration in the commercial. The audience for this commercial appears to be (new) parents – those that have experienced something similar, have watched a partner experience birth, and/or those who may be embarking on that journey soon.

After discussing the media expression, I next look at the message. The focus of this Frida Mom commercial is on the newly postpartum body. Lesley Husbands argues that the postpartum body, when not outright ignored, is presented “only in a very particular and narrow way in order to avoid transgressing social mores” (69). The social mores to which Husbands refers are about boundaries and western societies’ discomfort or disgust with boundaries being crossed (Shildrick). As Deborah Lupton states, “the female body in western societies has traditionally been understood as symbolically leaky, open, fluid, its boundaries permeable and blurred” (333). Lupton says this is especially true for menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, but it is no less true in the time immediately following postpartum when mothers’ bodies may still be leaky as they heal and/or newly leaky with milk. Frida Mom invites the leaky body back into the narrative. For one, actually hearing a person urinating in primetime is unusual. Additionally, the leaky body is present when red blood appears briefly on the sanitary pad as the person is changing it. The appearance of *red* blood in the scene is surprising. According to JR Thorpe, the 1990s saw the rise of blue liquid as a stand-in for menstrual blood, regardless of the fact that blood could be seen on primetime television in other situations. While other colors were associated with other “organic bodily fluids or functions,” blue evoked cleanliness with its connotations of cleaning products (Thorpe). Although not directly menstrual blood, the fact that Frida Mom shows red blood means the commercial contains a rawness that does not try to sugar coat the postpartum experience.

Intensive motherhood requires a narrowed focus on the child(ren), on the individualized family unit, above all else. This means the selfless, and therefore good, mother does not worry about their own healing postpartum, only about taking care of the baby according to expert advice. *Frida Mom* challenges that narrative by showing a person awakening to the baby's cries but not forsaking their own needs for the baby. Instead, the commercial follows the mother, and the baby is never physically seen, undermining the core tenet of intensive motherhood – that the baby should be the most important person in the mother's life. *Frida Mom*'s focus solely on the mother is, in this simple way, boundary-pushing. Rather than seeing the mother holding and (audibly) comforting the baby, viewers see and hear the mother groaning and sighing through the pain and discomfort of the postpartum experience. *Frida Mom* makes the mother the center of the discussion, creating space for mothers to consider their own bodies and needs. Although it is the primary purpose of the products being sold, this focus on the mother and their recovery is still an important message speaking back to intensive motherhood discourse.

Speaking of pain, *Frida Mom* does not shy away from capturing the pain the person is experiencing. The commercial shows the person grimacing, clenching muscles, curling toes, and even struggling with seemingly simple tasks (for an able-bodied person) like sitting or rising from the toilet. Displaying the mother's pain itself challenges the motherhood mystique of postpartum as there is rare focus on what the mother is experiencing outside of a happy exhaustion. Rarely do viewers see examples of mothers healing after birth, aside from important issues with mental health (e.g., Ryan). Moreover, *Frida Mom* foregrounds the mother's pain without the simultaneous narrative that the pain is "worth it" because of the baby – a common trope in popular culture media representations that claims the pain of labor is fleeting compared to the lasting joy of a child. There is no easy resolution of the tension between mother's needs and baby's needs offered; instead, there is a focus on the mother that is often glossed over or outright ignored in postpartum representations. The commercial resists hegemonic discourse calling birthing and postpartum bodies "disgusting and grotesque" (Yam 81), by foregrounding the mother and postpartum pain, by making visible that which is typically hidden (Young).

The implications of this media expression can certainly be read as feminist as viewers are confronted with an experience seldom depicted. The *Frida Mom* commercial is an important popular culture media representation of postpartum precisely because it exists. After all, as *Frida* CEO Chelsea Hirschhorn told *Today*,

society wonders “why women remain so completely unprepared to navigate this very fragile time period” of postpartum; she says it is due to the “very narrowly defined ways in which we can share information” about it (qtd. in Breen).

However, from a popular feminism perspective, Banet-Weiser says that “visibility becomes an end in itself” (22). Unfortunately, much of the controversy surrounding this commercial was not about its feminist nature but was about the Academy Awards banning it from airing in primetime. Specifically, Frida Mom was told that the commercial was rejected “due to ‘partial nudity and product demonstration,’” but, Kerry Breen explains, there was no nudity in the actual advertisement. Still, the Academy’s guidelines for advertisements to be broadcast during the Oscars state that no commercial may be of “political candidates/positions, religious or faith-based messages/positions, guns, gun shows, ammunition, feminine hygiene products, adult diapers, condoms or hemorrhoid remedies” (Breen). Breen quotes Hirschhorn saying she “was surprised, in this day and age, to see that whomever at whatever organizational level at the Academy and at ABC [on which the Oscars aired] put in writing that they would analogize feminine hygiene to some of those other, more offensive categories of advertising,” perhaps indicating that Frida Mom knew the ad might be banned and draw additional attention. Hannah Seligson also quotes Hirschhorn as saying she understands the Academy and ABC have to be careful not to create polarizing opinions in the commercials they choose to show so they can appeal to the broadest base, but she does not see pregnancy and postpartum as polarizing topics. Seligson reports Frida Mom was asked by the Academy to consider a different product to advertise or to offer a “kinder, more gentle portrayal of postpartum.” As the quotes from Hirschhorn suggest, a “more gentle portrayal of postpartum” is partially what Frida Mom was trying to combat with this commercial. Regardless of the official reason(s) the Frida Mom commercial was banned the allure of a banned commercial has still garnered 6.3 million views on YouTube as of March 2023.

2021 Breastfeeding Commercial. The attention Frida Mom received due to the banned 2020 postpartum commercial may have worked in their favor. Before the 2021 Golden Globe Awards, news media reported another boundary-pushing advertisement from Frida Mom. Headlines such as “Frida Mom’s New Ad Shows Completely Unfiltered Reality of Breastfeeding, and It’s About Time” (M. Brown) drew attention to the forthcoming commercial while very little media coverage came after the airing. Frida Mom’s “Stream of Lactation” commercial was a 75-second commercial that aimed “to normalize the breastfeeding journey by touching

on a variety of universal lactation challenges – from massaging out clogged ducts with an electric toothbrush to feeling like your breast pump is talking to you” (M. Brown). ABC banned the 2020 commercial and Frida Mom did not edit the commercial as a result, for which Frida Mom received speculation that they were playing a publicity game of a banned commercial for shock value (Neff). In 2021, NBCUniversal, who hosted the 2021 Golden Globe Awards, released a statement saying “We agree that the ad may push the envelope, but it is the context surrounding the visuals that makes this ad different, and we stand by it” (Ferme). Working with NBCU, Frida Mom cut the original commercial down to a 30-second spot that would be airable, noting that the main message of the commercial would remain (Hsu). Frida Mom CEO Chelsea Hirschhorn remarked,

The reality is that women are unprepared and blindsided by the physicality of lactation/breastfeeding. No one tells you that it can be as painful as your vaginal recovery. The anthem video is a universal depiction of the realities that women and their breasts – breastfeeding or not – go through postpartum. (qtd. in M. Brown)

Hirschhorn notes elsewhere that the commercial was to help mothers not feel they must “perform” breastfeeding, that they should not “be expected to prioritize making milk over their own physical discomfort” (Hsu). Thus, the Frida Mom breastfeeding commercial was created to push the boundaries of acceptable breastfeeding representations on primetime television. I begin by describing the commercial as a media expression.

The 75-second, “Stream of Lactation” breastfeeding commercial was posted to the Frida Mom YouTube channel on February 24, 2021, with 6.7 million views on YouTube as of March 2023. The commercial again opens with the sound of a baby crying. The commercial switches between a mother of color (Black-appearing) and a white-appearing mother, who each ask questions or comment in voiceover as they engage in new mothering, especially breastfeeding. After hearing the baby cry, the person of color’s face appears on screen, looking tired, as in voiceover they say, “Alright, Girls [to their breasts], you’ve got this,” and the camera tilts down to their bare breasts. As they try to latch the baby, the mother manipulates their breast to make it easier for baby. The scene then switches to the white-appearing mothering saying in voiceover, “Oh, God! Unlatch. Unlatch. And, raw,” as they examine their nipple with a look of consternation. The mothers ask questions alluding to the anecdotal common experiences of breastfeeding mothers in new motherhood (e.g., “Is it too early to call a lactation consultant?” or “And do I love my baby?”).

The next part of the commercial demonstrates the mothers getting up throughout the night to breastfeed, including pumping, nursing, and dealing with engorged and/or leaking breasts before each mother comments how tired they are. Throughout the commercial, the mothers' bare breasts are seen a few times as they breastfeed their babies and/or manage breastfeeding-related activities (e.g., using a breast pump). The white-appearing mother is shown working out clogs in their breasts in the shower, first using the butt-end of an electric toothbrush and then a dildo, letting the vibrations help unclog breasts. The mothers mention issues with over- and under-producing milk, and the white-appearing mother is shown accidentally spraying a mirror with milk as they investigate their nipples, looking surprised as it happens. The commercial then shifts to positive reflections about the baby: "And I love his smell," says the Black-appearing mother, "And wrinkled toes," adds the white-appearing mother (Frida Mom, "Frida Mom. Stream"). Toward the end of the montage, a baby cries again before the Black-appearing mother appears on screen, sleeping in a chair and jumping at the sound of the baby's cry on a baby monitor, only to knock over an open container of breastmilk and clearly curse (i.e., saying "Fuck!" censored by a bleep). Then, like the 2020 commercial, a translucent pink screen appears with, "Care for your breasts. Not just your baby," written in white font, before Frida Mom's breastfeeding products are shown in a well-lit room with the same mid-tempo, upbeat music in the background that has played throughout the commercial. Again, the products are only shown for about two to three seconds before the Frida Mom logo ends the commercial.

By comparison, "Golden Globes Spot" is the 30-second version of the commercial which actually appeared on air during the Golden Globes and was posted to YouTube on March 9, 2021. As of March 2023, the shorter version only has almost 134,000 views. The 30-second version eliminates or obscures the moments where nipples are seen by creating a quicker version of the 75-second montage but captures many of the same moments. For example, the white-appearing mother can still be seen surprising herself by squirting milk on the mirror, of course without the visual of the nipple inspection. Many of the questions and concerns of the original commercial are kept in the 30-second spot as well. At the very end of the commercial, the products blur and white font appears on the screen reading, "For the rest of the breast, go to [fridamom.com](https://www.fridamom.com)" (Frida Mom, "Frida Mom. Golden Globes"). This is, presumably, why the 30-second version of the commercial has significantly fewer views than the original; most viewers were seeking out the extended version of the commercial. The extended version of the

commercial and the news coverage leading up to the Golden Globes created an audience primed to view this commercial in primetime.

Next, I consider the message of the 2021 breastfeeding commercial. Like the 2020 postpartum commercial, these commercials also demonstrate the “leaky, open, fluid” (Lupton 333) body of new motherhood. As mentioned, in both versions of the breastfeeding commercial, viewers see surprise on the white-appearing mother’s face as they squirt milk onto the mirror. To see the actual leaky body in action, in primetime, forces viewers to reckon with the ways breasts are typically used to sell products. Rather than see breasts as only sexualized, *Frida Mom* blurs the clear border between sexualized and maternal understandings of the breast (Young 88). Furthermore, breastmilk is a common trait among mammals; seeing the leaky body in primetime may also blur understandings of humans as clearly separate from animals (Dickinson et al.). Indeed, breastfeeding also blurs boundaries between mothers and children, destabilizing the “[mother] subject as closed, complete, and singular” (Boon and Pentney 1761) and, instead, creating a subject that is mother-child-both. Thus, *Frida Mom*’s breastfeeding commercials create opportunities to deeply consider how U.S. Americans are culturally conditioned to understand breasts and their functions as inherently sexualized.

The implications of *Frida Mom*’s breastfeeding commercials also expose important understandings of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood. In the 75-second version of the commercial, the Black-appearing mother is seen looking at herself in a mirror and exhaling forcefully as in voiceover they ask, “Am I a bad mom if I stop now?” Then, the scene switches to them apparently researching various ways to hold the baby while breastfeeding as they claim, face aglow in the light of a computer screen while the rest of the scene is dimly lit, “Good moms should know how to do this.” Both statements are seen in the 30-second version, but they are in reverse order. That a mother is questioning whether they and their mothering are good enough considering breastfeeding is not accidental. With intensive motherhood’s focus on caring for the needs of a child first, good (intensive) mothers are those who prioritize breastfeeding above their own needs. Hirschhorn (qtd. in Hanson) identifies this idea, without the intensive motherhood label, saying mothers are “conditioned to focus entirely on the needs of their babies when they’re born. Much of the discussion about breastfeeding has to do with nourishing the baby, rather than making the mother comfortable.” As the mother of color claims, “Good moms should know how to do this.” The implication is that

good moms have an instinctive understanding of precisely how to care for their children, often feeling daunted when that does not bear out in reality (Miller).

With breastfeeding rates historically lower for Black mothers than for white mothers (Beauregard et al.; Morrissey and Kimball), Frida Mom's choice to use a Black-appearing mother in the commercial is important. The Black-appearing mother speaks back to intensive motherhood as they are outside of the intensive motherhood ideal of the white, cis woman. By intensive motherhood standards, the Black-appearing mother is rarely, if ever, considered a good mother. That they are the one grappling with what is good or bad mothering accentuates how pervasive intensive motherhood is across race and class lines. As Linda M. Blum notes, breastfeeding is not the easy and free choice it is portrayed to be; given the amount of time, energy, and labor that may attend breastfeeding, it is a "less-than-viable option for many groups of women" (Blum 299).

In terms of intensive motherhood, unlike in the postpartum commercial, viewers do see the mothers responding to babies' cries; yet Frida Mom does not sugar-coat the experience. Frida Mom shows the mothers' responding to and holding their babies, but also displays the mothers' exhaustion. Importantly, Frida Mom also shows the mothers questioning not only the breastfeeding experience but also their own love of their babies. Normalizing the variety of thoughts that may go through a new mother's mind is an imperative step toward opening conversations about postpartum experiences. With the launch of the Frida Mom brand in 2019, Hirschhorn reportedly told Parents.com, "Knowledge is confidence, and confidence during that delicate stage of new parenthood can mean the difference between a good experience and a debilitating and isolating experience" (M. Brown). The stream-of-consciousness portrayal of jumbled thoughts about new motherhood and breastfeeding the commercial depicts (using "and" as connectives among the stream of thoughts), coupled with claims that this representation is a "realistic look" at breastfeeding (Hsu), creates an example for new mothers to see their own experiences perhaps mirrored on television. Ultimately, like the postpartum commercial before it, the 2021 breastfeeding commercial is a popular feminist depiction where value is equated to visibility, and accessibility to a large audience is easy when the commercial is in primetime (Banet-Weiser).

Discussion

Using popular feminism as a lens through which to view the postpartum and breastfeeding Frida Mom commercials highlights that they are powerful examples of more realistic popular culture media representations. They forefront the mother and their pain without “brightsiding” (Ehrenreich 49) the experience. Brightsiding involves minimizing the pain or other potentially negative emotions or feelings regarding an experience and instead focusing solely on all the good that can be found, such as viewing all the difficult and/or painful parts of new motherhood as “worth” the joy of a new baby. In other words, Frida Mom does not portray that intensive motherhood should be upheld at the expense of the mother. In this case, Frida Mom forefronts the mother’s pain with their postpartum and/or breastfeeding body rather than downplaying it in favor of reminding viewers that the baby makes all the pain worthwhile.

The Frida Mom commercials create space for a reckoning with what should be part of public or private life. For so long, the experiences of new motherhood have been relegated to private life, to friends and family sharing their tips and stories to teach new mothers what to expect. The rise and accessibility of information on the internet has helped new mothers search out their own information, even if the sheer amount of information available can be overwhelming. Yet, social media has complicated this process. As more mothers, especially celebrities, share their new motherhood journeys, the conversation has slowly changed from the private sphere to a more public possibility. This process is, of course, still dominated by normative motherhood discourse as Hirschhorn (qtd. in Rodolfo) herself observes, “I think culturally, it’s taboo to speak in anything other than magical, unicorn, butterfly experiences when you become a new mom. The reality is that it’s not all Instagram worthy, filtered moments that are beautiful and fun.” Moreover, Hirschhorn hopes Frida Mom will be able to change the public dynamic around new motherhood conversations through its advertising (Rodolfo). By depicting new motherhood in more “realistic” representations, Frida Mom is working to push boundaries.

While Frida Mom pushes what was typically private conversations into the public sphere, they are also changing the private-public dynamic of new motherhood bodies. As new motherhood bodies heal, they represent a challenge to dominant social norms. As Alison Bartlett explains, social institutions “act to limit, dry up, hide, pathologize, remove and stem the flow of women’s wet, juicy, bleeding, lactating bodies, which profoundly disturbs the dichotomous biomedical logic of bodies’ inside/outside surface/depth” (118). Frida Mom’s depictions of bleeding postpartum bodies and leaky breastfeeding bodies bring the private,

unbounded body back to the public conversation where bodies are expected to be contained within their own, clear boundaries. Furthermore, confounding the private-public dynamic also might garner more visibility. By showing the products for only two to three seconds at the end of each commercial, Frida Mom encourages consumers to seek out the company, its products, and even its videos which can be quickly shared on social media – again, collapsing the private-public dynamic and increasing the visibility of Frida Mom. This is an important feminist contribution to popular culture media representations of new motherhood.

Yet, both commercials ultimately support a neoliberal, capitalist consumerism. As Banet-Weiser notes, “The visible body is also the commodifiable body” (25). Living up to the neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood demands that mothers’ bodies uphold U.S. American ideals of thinness and tightness (and dryness), creates a lucrative market in which to sell mothers products and services designed to help them achieve the proper new motherhood body, expanding the market of weight-loss/diet products and services to be directly marketed to mothers. Regardless of any feminist values Frida Mom may claim (Raphael), the company employs a neoliberal, capitalist logic in selling products for new motherhood. Instead of focusing on community help for new mothers, these products are marketed as helping women or empowering them to overcome their postpartum bodies, focusing on the individual being responsible for their own body. Similarly, Frida Mom suggests that mothers should purchase their products to manage their unruly postpartum bodies (Nash). After all, the commercials make plain that “an answer is at hand, and with only the right products, anything is possible” (Banet-Weiser 7). In this way, Frida Mom benefits from a “corporate friendly” popular feminism, taking up new motherhood from a kind of feminist perspective that still allows for individual, neoliberal consumerism to sell their products (Banet-Weiser 12). In other words, the commercials are important popular culture media representations, but they do not push toward structural critique and/or change, relying instead on the individualism of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood values.

Moreover, Frida Mom is selling the idea that these products are necessary to alleviate pain and are therefore worth the price, going so far as to claim that their products are “at a price point that is universally acceptable to women” (qtd. in Raphael), demonstrating their target audience as at least middle class which is in line with the intensive motherhood ideal. Frida Mom is selling the importance of self-care. This is not, of course, an inherently terrible argument. However, it can be a slippery slope between self-care for new mothers who can afford it and a reliance

on neoliberal or popular feminist ideology about the individual responsibility to care for the self. So, individual mothers must care enough about themselves to purchase the products (and have enough disposable income to afford the products) in addition to caring about their child(ren)'s well-being. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer posit, "Feminism has found its most visible popularity in the messages about self-making, self-love, and self-care that abound on social media and in corporate campaigns, messages mostly aimed at privileged white women and lacking a subtext of self-care as political warfare" (884). Self-care, from a popular feminist perspective, ultimately becomes another marker on the neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood checklist to be considered a good mother.

Where mothers would have once been instructed to selflessly pour themselves into caring for their child(ren) rather than themselves, the narrative has changed. Now, mothers must adequately care for themselves in addition to caring for their child(ren), all while toeing the line between selfish and selfless, a balancing act that is difficult when mothers struggle to know whose needs should be addressed (Barkin and Wisner 1053). The tension of so many competing needs and responsibilities can also compromise the health and well-being of mothers and children (Tully et al. 38). In this way, performative self-care becomes part of the "parenting to-do-list" by requiring "an already empty adult to give more" (Lakshmin). Pooja Lakshmin argues that because self-care might be "an app click or exercise class away" mothers feel burnt out when they do not feel they have time to care for themselves causing more stress and guilt. Thus, to be a good mother means to be focused on the child(ren) but not to forsake self-care. This is consistent with popular feminism, too, where self-care relies on "cultural contexts such as institutionalized racism, conditions of poverty, and so on," requiring people to "cultivate and acquire status as a form of currency, in order to make themselves marketable" (Banet-Weiser 29). In other words, self-care is not only one more item on the infinite to-do list, it can also be a way to make oneself better fit the standards of a neoliberal, capitalist society. Unfortunately, *Frida Mom* helps push this narrative by suggesting that their products are the easiest way to navigate new motherhood.

Again, although the *Frida Mom* commercials are important popular culture media representations, they still fall victim to a neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood agenda. While visibility is what matters in popular feminism, it cannot be the end goal. Banet-Weiser offers hope that popular feminist visibility could open space for broader, collective action and structural critique of an intersectional

feminism. The key is, of course, that collective action must resist the neoliberal, capitalist focus on the individual. Collective action must include any co-parents or close caregivers involved in raising child(ren); the focus cannot be solely on mothers, especially those who fit the intensive motherhood ideal, as changing the normative discourse requires a community effort (Verbiest et al.). Parents need societal support “from family, from government, from the workplace and from one another” (Ennis 8) to be successful. Societal support must happen at the federal and state levels to be taken seriously by workplaces. This support might include paid parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child (for all parents involved), especially as it has been shown to result in better health outcomes (Jou et al. 224); free or subsidized, accessible, safe childcare; and flexible employee time to manage family emergencies, among other emerging ideas. As Solveig Brown explains, the U.S. has continually relied on intensive motherhood to fix issues of cultural change in relationship to raising families (40), an issue currently magnified by the global COVID-19 pandemic in which mothers are the “shock absorbers” of society (Grose). Ultimately, this means more demands placed on mothers (parents) who have finite energy and time. So, although the Frida Mom commercials are important popular culture media representations of new motherhood, their popular feminist agenda continues to uphold the powerful normative discourse of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood.

Conclusion

In early 2020, the Academy Awards banned a Frida Mom commercial from its annual awards show for what it considered graphic content. In 2021, Frida Mom offered a boundary-pushing breastfeeding commercial in primetime during the Golden Globes. Frida Mom sought to change public conversations around new motherhood by offering “realistic” representations seldom seen on television or in popular culture. By showing the mother’s pain and blood in postpartum, and by showing mothers struggling and questioning during their breastfeeding journeys, the Frida Mom commercials bring the leaky body back into the public sphere, centering taboos that often provoke disgust.

Still, the commercials are a popular feminist representation of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood, underscoring the narrative that self-care is individual and up to mothers to provide for themselves. The focus is on the individual at the expense of a collective critique of structural oppressions.

Specifically, motherhood must be seen as a potential site for political action, with a focus on “what makes mothers particular kinds of embodied citizens, with needs, rights, and perspectives on the public good” (Hausman 275). Collective parental support (e.g., paid parental leave; affordable daycare) and collective reimagining of motherhood (e.g., hooks; Hill Collins) are the only ways to transform normative discourses like neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood that ultimately hurts all people.

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