

Strategic Commodification of Motherhood in Post-Modern Social Media Spaces: Exploitation of Motherhood by Mothers Themselves within the Late Capitalist Societies to Earn a Living

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood is an identity, an experience, a concept and an institution, a discourse produced by both hegemonic and subversive discursive practices. Therefore, motherhood is an identity constantly negotiated by both normative and non-conforming gender identities. This study proposes that considering the perversion of normative ideas of motherhood that regulate how motherhood is conceptualised and performed, motherhood should be deconstructed to uncover how dominant and hegemonic constructions of motherhood marginalise non-conforming identities. The objective of this study was to assess the exploitation of motherhood by mothers themselves within the late capitalist societies to earn a living. The study adopted a qualitative research approach. It involved a critical analysis of social media posts by female social media personalities who are mothers. Secondary data was obtained through library and desktop research of critical texts. The target population was African mothers who are social media influencers. Analysis of the data was done by organizing information in a logical sequence and eventually presenting it as themes. These themes were presented and discussed according to the findings from the research question in line with the tenets of Commodification theory. The findings were that influencer mothers have debunked the patriarchal views of motherhood by redefining motherhood in the social media spaces. They have turned their commodification and exoticisation into a means of gaining wealth. These mothers serve as an inspiration to other mothers that indeed mothers can regain their maternal agency. Moreover, upcoming authors can draw from their examples to write texts which resonate with the current trends in motherhood.

Keywords: Commodification, Exploitation, Social Media Spaces, Social Media Influencers

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is on motherhood. It is an identity, an experience, a concept and an institution among others. Formerly, motherhood was considered a private affair. However, in the current society, mothers have made the private public through their performance of motherhood in non-conforming ways. The current trends in motherhood cannot be discussed without taking cognizance of the journey that motherhood has taken over the years. The performance of motherhood has for a long time been policed by the institution of patriarchy. This has been foregrounded by a number of scholars. Avila (2016) notes that motherhood reinforces a woman's gender identity because predominant conceptions on motherhood include the duty of nurturing others, especially children (2). Similarly, Arendell (2000), states that, mothering has largely been associated with women because universally, it is women who do the work of mothering (1192). Further, Yildirim (2013) observes that women's designated place in society as wives and mothers limits their potential outside these patriarchal-defined roles. The subservient role of women expected in patriarchal societies is inherent in Yildirim's view that women were expected to do all they could to be of aid in their households, and to please their husbands. He adds that the good wife was to exhibit "purity and domesticity" and was characterized by "tenderness and simplicity" (118). Notably, ideas that inform the performance of motherhood are socially constructed, necessitating a research into the nature of these discourses and their impact.

Both Western and African women as well as male critics of patriarchy highlight in their scholarship how a woman's role in the society has been prescribed by men. One such role is giving birth and nurturing of children, a biological essentialist role that feminists and other critics consider to be a biased portrayal of womanhood. To this end, Rich (1976) postulates, 'woman's status as child bearer has been made into a major fact of her life. Terms like "barren" or "childless" have been used to negate any further identity' (11). Surprisingly, this stigma does not come solely from the men but also women. Evidently, despite the fact that motherhood is not just a biological capacity but also a choice, patriarchal norms expect that all women embrace maternity and live up to the high standards that mothers symbolize. Women in the 21st Century society have deliberately gone against the patriarchal dictates of motherhood by using their status to earn a living. They have redefined motherhood in non-conformist ways as will be discussed.

Statement Of The Problem

Women have redefined motherhood and by so doing, created a new lens under which motherhood can be studied. The traditional view of motherhood has been contested by women who have deliberately chosen to use motherhood as a means of gaining social capital. Towards this end, my study therefore sets out to discuss the strategic commodification of motherhood in (post-modern) social media by mothers themselves within the late capitalist societies to earn a living.

Research Objective

The research objective was to assess the exploitation of motherhood by mothers themselves within the late capitalist societies to earn a living.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. He further states that the process of qualitative research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The research design for the study was discourse analysis. It involved a critical analysis of selected social media posts on Facebook and Instagram by mothers who are social media influencers in Kenya. The collected data was presented by a logical sequence of discussions in line with Commodification theory.

Research Study Findings

Introduction

Artists use different artistic modes and techniques to challenge, endorse and provide means for re-inventing the self and history, resulting in shifting perspectives of self/subject hood. This paper sets out to examine literary works that portray the evolving modes of representation and evolving experiences of selfhood within spaces that are highly digitalised and where selves emerge not as historical subjects in the conventional way, but as subjects whose value is determined by standards set by their publics based on emerging trends and the strength of their social capital and/or brand image. These ideas of selfhood, specifically motherhood, present opportunities for exploring alternative ways of interpreting identities and experiences of subjects occupying positions of (former) marginalisation within late capitalist times and spaces. This paper will focus on the exploitation of motherhood by mothers themselves within the Late Capitalist Societies to earn a living. We choose to call these mothers momfluencers, because of the kind of influence they wield on fellow mothers.

Commercialization of motherhood in social media-social media influencers who have identified motherhood as their niche

"Waist's perfect, but you've still got too much fat on your hips. You can get that off with a few less buns and by wearing a proper corset belt. And your bust's in the wrong place dear -a good light bra will lift that. " The above

quote by Fashion model Lorna Lewis Valerie in 1955 is very relevant today; seventy one years later. It portrays the assumption of what a “beautiful” woman should look like. The patriarchal society has majorly focussed on a woman’s physical appearance as a measure of her worth. Even in bride price negotiations, the price paid is influenced to some extent by the physical attractiveness of a woman. This practice of pegging physical appearance to the worth of a woman has caused duress to many women who have resultantly resorted to doing anything to remain attractive. Some have bleached their skin; others have undergone plastic surgery while others have resorted to starving themselves in a bid to remain slim. The pressure to feel socially accepted and still maintain the ‘gorgeousness’ even becomes worse when a woman has given birth. This is due to the many body transformations that a majority of women experience after giving birth. In this section, we examine how the societal pressure on mothers to adhere to norms on beauty propagates the commodification of motherhood through the embodied concept of yummy mummy. We will discuss how the performance of the yummy mummy subjectivity enables strategic exoticisation of motherhood, hence the commodification of motherhood.

Yummy mummy is a subjective identity that has been popularised by social media. Liz Fraser (2006) defines a yummy mummy as ‘the ultimate modern woman who doesn’t identify with the traditional, dowdy image of motherhood’ (xvii). Fraser posits that for one to be a yummy mummy, she must get her wardrobe and body ‘right’. Further, Littler (2013) alludes to the expectations of a yummy mummy by observing that the term yummy mummy ‘reverses the idea of the mother as devouring monster; the hungry, castrating monstrous feminine that populates psychoanalysis, flipping the trope around so it is instead the mother herself who is not only edible but also a diminutive tasty morsel’ (10). This assertion contests the traditional notion of a mother being an asexual human being; it argues that a woman can be a mother but still look alluring. Littler (ibid) avers that the term yummy mummy began with the sexualisation of women’s pregnant bodies from the late 1980s. (4) It is from then that the ideology metamorphosed to incorporate mothers. Littler (ibid) confirms this when she observes that, ‘The yummy mummy of today is different because no longer is it merely the pregnant body which is allowed to look sexual, and no longer is the post-pregnant ideal simply to combine work with an attractive motherly saintliness: now mothers themselves are encouraged to look ‘hot’ (5). These transformations in the definition of a yummy mummy are a testament to how ideas on motherhood are constantly evolving, based on the dominant modes of cultural representation within a society at any given time and its societal demands. Andrea O'Reilly (2004) affirms that indeed motherhood is a constantly changing cultural practice in her assertion:

Motherhood is not a natural or biological function; rather it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood. (4-5)

In reference to the above, motherhood has indeed been mutated to fit the changing economic and social times. In view of this, I will study how Kenyan social media content creators namely Amber Ray, Murugi Munyi and Diana Marua have embraced the yummy mummy ideology to their advantage. The three are Kenyan social media influencers who are mothers. An aspect of maternal beauty propagated by yummy mummies is the maintenance of a flat stomach after delivery. A Kenyan socialite, Amber Ray, caused a stir on her Instagram page after posting her photo a few days postpartum revealing a flat tummy. Many people, especially women, took to her page and expressing their admiration of her. However, others criticized this image on the basis that there must be some kind of foul play.

From the Posts, it can be observed from the picture above that Amber Ray’s photo attracted close to seventy thousand likes, most of who are women as revealed by the excerpts. One of her followers, Dianne, expresses her shock that seven years later, she still has a big stomach resulting from her pregnancy yet Ray is only a few days postpartum but with a flat stomach. Dianne wonders whether it is genetic or not. Her surprise is echoed by other followers, hayzonnie and amondie, who are equally shocked. Another value seeker mwaaka- mupe was surprised and wondered what happened to the stomach, and sought to know the technique of flattening the stomach. Assmatic –gurll commented that persons with tummy tuck when they give birth they don’t develop tummy. In response to @assmatic –gurll Curie-trades expressed the desire that she was tempted to ask what tummy tuck means. In response to @curie -brains assmatic-gurll explained that the fats are removed through surgery. It is through this process that commodification is achieved.

Murugi Munyi, is another example of a content creator who performs her motherhood in line with the ideologies of yummy mummy. This alignment is first and foremost evident in her choice to christen herself yummy mummy in her YouTube channel, although she later on went back to using her real name, Joan Murugi Munyi. Being one of the female Kenyan celebrities who have openly come out to discuss their struggles in matters motherhood, she openly narrates her struggles and triumphs as a mother, providing textual references that are useful in the argument presented herein. In a radio interview on Radio Jambo, hosted by Masawe Jappani, Murugi clearly points out her reasons for calling herself yummy mummy in interview (Radio Jambo, 24th February 2022 youtube.com). The interview proceeded as follows:

Masawe: How long have you been struggling with how you look?

Murugi: For over a year, actually, for over a year. You know once you've given birth, you start noticing there's certain parts of your body hazikaangi (that don't look) the same ata ukikonda aje.(no matter how thin you become)

Masawe: Lower belly, lower belly

Murugi: I can see your frustrations my dear

Masawe: Haiendi na haiendi (it doesn't go away)

Murugi: Imeshikilia (It is persistent)

Masawe: Hukuli mandazi, hukuli chapati hukuli sambusa (you don't eat buns, chapati or samosas)

Murugi: It's stronger than people's relationships. That's lower belly by the way. No matter what? Itakaa! (it stays put)

Masawe: (laughs) I know!

Murugi: Na nikaona (I saw) it was starting to make me feel discouraged because nilikuwa naona ata (I used to feel that) no matter how much weight I loose, this part of my body is taking so much of my energy. Kila siku (everyday) you're just thinking, how can I hide it? How do I tuck it in? Which picture is being taken? Na unajua (you know) especially if you're in front of the camera all the time. It's just occupying your mind all the time. So I decided to go for this lipo because nilikuwa na dough (I had money) and my birthday is just next week so I consider it a birthday gift to myself. Nikaona, (I thought) lemme treat myself. Why are we working as human beings? So that we can be able to afford the things that we want.

Masawe: eg dream body

Murugi: Girl, yea! You work for it or you also pay for it. Those two things go concurrently.

Masawe: How much was it?

Murugi: It was just under six hundred thousand.

Masawe: (whistles) Okay

Murugi: Yea, which is actually quite affordable compared to some other facilities in Kenya. It usually can range from about six hundred thousand to about one million. So yes, nikaifanya (I had it done) and I now I am in the recovery process.

Masawe: Do you feel better?

Murugi: Oh yea. Oh my God! Oh, yes. I feel like a hundred times more confident. I feel like, um, I feel like I wake up and I am not concerned about this one thing that has been like the bane of my existence for so long.

Masawe: The weight?

Murugi: Not the weight, but the stomach specifically. Please, it is not like I am thin person and I don't want to be a thin person, lakini iyo tumbo (but that stomach). Na mothers! You guys know.

Masawe: Ulizaa na (did you deliver via) CS?

Murugi: Yes, all three times nilizaa na (I delivered via) CS. Inakuaga different mtu akizaa normally? (is it different with normal delivery)

Masawe: Akuna. Haiendagi. Ata mimi nilizaa na CS. Nakwambia, haiendii. Imekataa. (no. It doesn't go. I equally delivered via CS and I tell you, it hasn't gone. It has refused)

Murugi: Imekataa. (it has refused) You can get a bit of help, you know! The funny thing, ukienda uko majuu (if you go abroad), UK, US these things are so common. It's so normal, you know, it's like everybody does it. It's just that in Africa it's still so taboo ndo maana (that's why) when they're reporting they say 'Munyi admits to having liposuction'. I'm like, admit kwani nilikuwa nimekataa? (had I denied doing it)

Masawe: Wewe ndio ulitangaza. (it is you that broke the news)

Murugi: Exactly! Its my story and I want to own my narrative ndo maana na post (that's why I post). I want to own my own narrative. Sitaki watu wengine wananisemea. (I don't want other people speaking on my behalf)

Masawe: So what is liposuction?

Murugi: Liposuction is a process where wanatoa fats, wanatoa mafuta! (they remove fats) Okay fine. Wanatoa mafuta from any part of your body that is stubborn. So, let's say unaweza toa mostly kwa women itakuwa your arms, kwa tumbo (stomach), thighs, wengine ni matako (others on their buttocks) although akuna mtu anataka kutoa kwa matako (although no one wants fats on their buttocks removed). (giggles)

Masawe: (laughs) So wewe ulitoa wapi? (so where did you have yours removed from)

Murugi: Kwa tumbo yangu (my stomach), my sides, hizi zinaitwa love handles and my back, mgongo yangu (my back). So they basically remove it and the fat never comes back.

Masawe: Never ever?

Murugi: It never ever comes back

Murugi Munyi observes from the above interview that from her experience as a new mother, dealing with the postpartum bodily changes was overwhelming. Due to this frustration, she chose to openly come out and talk about these challenges and how to mitigate them, in order to help other mothers struggling with the same issues. Her confessions from the interview above, for instance when she states, 'You know once you've given birth, you start noticing there's certain parts of your body hazikaangi the same ata ukikonda aje... Not the weight, but the stomach specifically. Please, it's not like I am thin person and I don't want to be a thin person, lakini iyo tumbo. Na mothers! You guys know,' clearly portray a woman trying to be a yummy mummy. The struggle to conform to these societal expectations is worse when it comes to public figures like Munyi. This is because they mould themselves as the epitome of beauty and must therefore maintain this. Munyi is just one among many media personalities who have gone to great lengths to achieve desirable postpartum bodies. Others include Lillian Muli, who started a weight loss program dubbed 'Slimpossible', Wahu Kagwi, and Esther Musila among others. It is worth noting that this pressure also bottles down to other ordinary women, as seen on the comments highlighted in Amber Ray's photo.

Conversations on the embodiment of the maternal body call for reflections on the "negative" effects of a pregnancy on a woman's body. Such bodily transformations that come with motherhood are the major causes of worry in women, most especially the modern woman who would desire to stay in tandem with the latest fashion

trends. Beauvoir, for example, opines how it is “very difficult to remain desirable with dishwasher hands and a body deformed by maternities” (541). A 1956 issue of *Housewife Magazine* advised “[m]ost women, especially if they have had children, [to] wear some sort of support [...] with a panel in front to hold their abdomen flat...women having their third or fourth baby should have a maternity corset specially made” (Your 1956:66). In reference to the above directive from the *Housewife Magazine*, it is quite evident that maternal bodily changes have affected women for a long time. In Africa, things were not any different. Much as there was not much sophistication about how to regain the pre-pregnancy shape since they did not own corsets; they had their own local ways of springing back to shape postpartum. The women were thus advised to tie a “leso” (a rectangular pure cotton piece of cloth resembling a big scarf that is used by women to tie around their waists when working to prevent their clothes from getting dirty) round their waists upon giving birth, so that their stomachs go back to their original size before pregnancy. The situation has not changed in the current times, evident in the confessions of Murugi Munyi highlighted above, only that mothers are seeking more modernized ways of regaining the flat tummies.

Evidently, the maternal body is a site upon which cultural and social norms are embodied. Bordo (1997) observes that, “It is now generally accepted that the body is a cultural as well as a physical medium; observations of its shape, clothing and adornment reveal it as a “powerful symbolic form [and] a metaphor for culture” (90). In line with Bordo’s observation above, the subjects under study in this section show continuity with these dominant practices of embodiment, although with a subversive twist in the sense that through strategic exoticism, the maternal figures re-inventing themselves as yummy mummies cash out from discourses on their bodies. For example, Murugi Munyi and Amber Ray largely depend on the number of likes and comments on their social media posts so that they earn from them. Moreover, by Murugi as a yummy mummy promotes various brands of products, thus earning by being their ambassador. Resultantly, the products also get more buyers. This is evident in the Instagram posts as indicated in appendix

In the first photo, Murugi Munyi posts about her lucrative deal with BIDCO Company. She had been selected as their brand ambassador. In the second photo, she has invited her followers to attend the launch of her online store where she will be selling her favourite beauty products. In the third photo, she is advertising Garnier skin products. In the Last photo, she is inviting her followers to an online discussion about the journey of motherhood. The show is sponsored by Cussons, a baby product company. In view of the above, we can opine that the maternal body has become social capital. Transforming the body into social capital has therefore become part of the cultural practices of the age of late capitalism, where societies and resultantly, mothers, are conscious of the pitfalls and opportunities of commodifying their maternal experiences and bodies through identification with commonalities and difference of expectations of patriarchy enshrined in the patriarchal discourses on motherhood.

Further, the yummy mummies have disregarded patriarchal expectations of motherhood by promoting the culture of not breastfeeding so as to maintain a good shape. New mothers are conversely enticed by influencer mums not to exclusively breastfeed their babies contrary to conventional practice of feeding newborns breast milk exclusively for at least the first six months before the introduction of other foods. A Kenyan momfluencer, Diana Marua, stopped breastfeeding her four month old baby. In an interview with Base Radio, Marua reveals that she stopped breast feeding her almost five month old daughter, Malaika, because her milk dipped then dried.

Diana goes further to advice mothers, “Don’t give yourself pressure when you are not getting enough milk. If you have enough, breast feed. I feel so sad that the baby is on formula, but of importance is that she is healthy because there is nothing I can do.” The public, commonly referred in Kenyan urban speak as Netizens, had diverse reactions to this, some stating that that was an excuse for not breast feeding. In her own defence, Marua argued that one day she woke up feeling a lot of pain in her breasts, and that was the last time she ever had milk. She was only able to express 30ml of milk. She therefore resorted to feeding her daughter on formula milk. Such are the stunts put up by socialites to land advertising deals from various companies that sell baby and infant products.

A majority of the socialites have gone against this medical directive by either totally refusing to breast feed their babies or supplementing breastfeeding with bottle-feeding. The milk used in bottle feeding can either be expressed breast milk or formula. Some of them cite reasons like lack of or insufficient breast milk and the infant

totally refusing to suckle. This is a trend that has been adopted by young mothers, owing to the influence by socialites. The Instagram post below on the Citizen TV Kenya handle reveals the struggles of young women who have decided not to breastfeed their babies so as to remain beautiful.

It is evident from the above texts that young mothers have chosen to disregard breast feeding and openly attributed the process to sagging breasts in women. Resultantly, women like Stella whose careers are pegged on their physical appearance have chosen the controversial path of disobeying medical advice on matters breast-feeding.

The practice of bottle-feeding paves way for commodification through sponsorships and getting brand ambassador contracts from baby formula companies and/or shops selling baby supplies like breast pumps and feeding bottles. Anthropologist Douglas (1982) observes that, “The body is a surface on which the rules and expectations of society can be inscribed, and thus reinforced,” or even challenged/inverted as is the case here. The view is further upheld by Waddilove (2019) who opines that, “The body, envisaged as a socially-constructed product which is infinitely malleable, can be ‘written on’ in response to external imperatives concerning self-regulation and presentation, and adapted into ‘ways of being’ (252). My study further argues that one of the most overlooked angles in such discourses is how subversive practices may not always be committed in the interest of the common good; rather for personal economic gains through self-exoticisation.

Yet another of these rules is the traditional tendency of new mothers being kept in seclusion for forty days postpartum. This was considered a time for the woman to heal properly and take care of the newborn. Exposure to the public would slow down her healing process and even expose her to people with an “evil eye”. When Amber Ray appears on social media a few days after giving birth, many people are shocked and they comment on this move.

Kendi Shariffah is surprised that as opposed to her one year and seven month postpartum seclusion, Amber Ray dared to expose herself after five days. Another netizen, Olpha, comments that Amber Ray is causing the women who observe the forty-day seclusion period a lot of pressure. Iron lady bliss expresses the frustration that the common woman would get when her husband comes across this photo and inquires why his wife had to ask for a bed rest for two months. All the above comments especially from women are two pronged; on one hand, they show admiration for Amber Ray breaking the forty-day rule while on the other hand, they disapprove the pressure that Amber Ray’s action will end up causing on new mothers. Ray is a public figure with a huge following especially women. Therefore, standards that she sets can easily become a benchmark for other women trying to fit in the current society. Ray is not the only media personality who defies this rule. Other socialites who have done the same include Vera Sidika, and Diana Marua.

Another tradition-governing mothers during the postpartum stage is that of feeding. A new mother is overfed; pots of porridge among other delicacies would be offered to her after short intervals to ensure that she feeds well to be able to produce sufficient milk to breastfeed the baby. Social influencers have chosen to indulge in any kind of feeding that pleases them, including taking wine while expected to still be breastfeeding. Amber Ray poses a photo of herself with a tumbler of wine five days postpartum to the shock of her followers. She asserted that she would do it over and over again.

Moreover, a nursing mother had to exhibit a considerable amount of weight gain as an indicator that she is indeed feeding well. This tradition has been overturned by the media personalities who have gone to great lengths to cut on their weight so as not to look “obese”. Some have constantly visited the gymnasiums, others have resorted to dieting while some have chosen to undergo plastic surgery. They have attained “admirable bodies” that have left fellow women in awe, thereby getting pressured to also attain such looks. A netizen comments on Amber Ray’s five days postpartum body photo attracted mixed reactions. The section brings to light how societal expectations coupled with the hard economic times have majorly contributed to the lifestyles of mothers. Socialites have not made things any easier since they have set the bar very high for young mothers. Resultantly, these young women keep struggling to keep up with the latest trends. For those in the low class cadre, affording that kind of lavish lifestyle is a pipe dream. This does not however dampen their spirits; they will do anything within their power to remain appealing.

Further, considering the binary oppositions in life as stated by Derrida, patriarchal hegemony has been the overriding force in how women conduct motherhood. As discussed in this chapter, unwritten societal rules have guided women on how to perform motherhood. These range from what they do, eat and even wear postpartum. As subalterns, women have faithfully followed the script. However, as has been discussed, socialites whom I have chosen to call momfluencers have chosen to go against these societal expectations by making the private, public. This has upset the binary opposition as described by Derrida since the weaker group is now dominating over the stronger one. Foucault in his theory of power observes that in every society where power is exercised, there has to be resistance. In the absence of this, then there is no power. The momfluencers confirm this assertion when they openly defy the old ways of performing motherhood.

Portrayal of Kenyan urban mothering; consumerism culture is dominated by baby shower parties, that is, baby shower parties are parties held a few weeks before delivery, basically to celebrate the mother to be in advance. However, in Kenyan urban mothering practices, this simple celebration has been turned into a gender reveal party. Gender reveal parties have become the latest sensation meant to commoditize motherhood, something that was initially treated with utmost privacy. They are social gatherings hosted by a couple, designed to celebrate and announce the gender of their unborn baby to the invited guests. This can be done in form of balloons stuffed with blue or pink confetti, smoke in blue or pink, themed cakes or décor made in blue or pink, among others. Blue is meant to symbolize a baby boy while pink symbolizes a baby girl. The practice started ‘by accident’ in 2008 by an American lady Jenna Karvunidis, who only wanted to share the great news with her family after experiencing several miscarriages. Langmuir (2020) in her Guardian Newspaper article reports, ‘In 2008, while pregnant with her eldest child, Bianca, Jenna Karvunidis threw a party at which she announced the baby’s sex by cutting into a cake filled with pink icing. She wrote about the event on her blog, and her post went viral’. What began as a simple gesture ended up attracting so much attention and presently, celebrities have gone to great lengths to outdo one another in their gender reveal parties. This section will discuss how this consumerism culture has infiltrated into the Kenyan celebrities sphere and how the momfluencers are using it to gain fame and endorsements from companies that manufacture baby and beauty products. I will make reference to Kenyan social media personalities namely Amber Ray and Vera Sidika.

Traditionally, pregnancy was a private thing. Expectant women would dress in maternity dresses that were big enough to conceal their bulging tummies. However, with time, pregnancy has been made a public affair, with pregnant women flaunting their bellies in figure hugging dresses. Biscaldi (2020) observes that, pregnancy, no longer a period of expectation and suspension, of intimate and unspoken imaginings, a moment of fixed rules and prohibitions – something not only to be concealed, but also to be mentioned publically as little as possible – has now become a time to be shared, displayed and shown off, and also a moment “to be enjoyed” or lived through as another of the many consumer experiences. (2) Indeed, pregnancy has become a conduit through which celebrities compete on whose journey is better than the other. They go to great lengths to outshine each other in all aspects; dressing, make up, baby reveal parties and even the mode of delivery.

The momfluencers have gone against the traditional dressing code meant for an expectant mother; big maternity dresses. They dress up in figure hugging dresses that expose their tummies. Others take photos of themselves only draped in pieces of fabric while leaving out their bare tummies. These outfits are specially designed for the occasion and the momfluencers are keen on tagging their designers to make them marketable. Amber Ray is dressed in a white flowing skirt, but her upper section of the body is not fully covered. Her entire belly is bare; only the chest is covered. On the photo used in the billboard behind her, she only has a piece of cloth covering her chest and a wrapper round her waist, leaving her tummy and thigh bare. Her hands in both pictures are holding her bulging tummy. This public display of the maternal body is something uncommon in the African setting. Further, from the excerpt gender reveal parties have become some sort of competition among the celebrities. Whoever displays the highest levels of opulence carries the day. In the Instagram post, Amber Ray is standing at the roadside holding her bare tummy. She is visibly at an advanced stage of her pregnancy. Behind her is a big billboard which bears her image. The billboard has two colours, blue on the left with the words; AMBER RAY’S GENDER REVEAL while the right side has been painted pink and has the words: IS IT A BOY A GIRL? She has commented on the photo ‘Wadau, niko kwa billboard na siombi kura’(People, I’m on a billboard yet I’m not seeking votes). The post has over sixty one thousand likes from her fans.

From excerpt 1, Amber Ray has posed next to a helicopter which she used to announce the gender of her child. Her message below it talks about her joy at celebrating the great news with friends and family; news of her getting a baby girl. She goes ahead to tag all the companies and individuals whose services she contracted; from her outfit, make up, hair stylists, photographer sound crew, set up crew and the dj. This is a way of popularizing the mentioned companies and by so doing, Ray gets paid for referrals. The companies equally make profit by having her as an ambassador.

Similarly, Vera Sidika does lavish gender reveal parties for her two children. In her first gender reveal party, she does an invites only all white party. She pops a balloon which emits pink fumes symbolizing a girl. In her Instagram post, she writes her unborn daughter a message titled ‘Letter to my Unborn Daughter’ in which she expresses her joy for having her in her life. The letter reads, ‘I believe that God sent you into my life to give me something to fight for, to show me there is love in this world, to give me hope and bring me joy, all the proof I need in God is in you. You will always be the miracle that makes my life complete’. She then goes ahead to invite her fans to watch the full video on her YouTube channel. In the first photo, Vera is dressed in a white dress with pink and blue frills on the neckline, just before the unveiling of the unborn baby’s gender. In the second photo, she has changed into a pink dress to symbolize a girl. Behind her are props bearing the message: Very Pink Baby Shower. Her post has attracted over forty thousand likes from her fans. Vera tags her service providers; the photographer, event planner, designer and make-up artists. These are endorsements that are done at a fee. As a momfluencer, she is able to convince many mothers to be, to buy into her idea of a gender reveal and reach out to the same service providers to organize their events.

In her second gender reveal Vera Sidika arrives at the venue in a sleek limousine. Afterwards, a helicopter arrives as the invited guests watch. It emits blue smoke, indicating that it is a baby boy. All guests are amazed at the show of opulence. The photo captures her reaction upon the revelation that she is carrying a baby boy. She invites her fans to watch the videos of the full reveal on a reality program she was involved in called Real Housewives of Nairobi airing on Showmax. In the second photo, a picture of the helicopter emitting blue smoke can be seen. Vera Sidika in her accompanying post applauds herself for being a pacesetter. She comments, ‘Our 1st Gender Reveal party was epic. This time, we wanted something unique & different so we went for a chopper reveal. TEAM BLUEEEE whoop!’ Competition amongst the momfluencers has led to conflicts concerning who copied the other. For instance, Vera Sidika accuses Amber Ray of copying her idea of using a helicopter during her gender reveal party in her Instagram post. In Vera Sidika’s instagram post above, she dismisses Amber Ray for cpying her idea of a chopper gender reveal. She further accuses Amber Ray of telling her planers to copy the entire reveal. Amber Ray responds to Sidika’s claims in a legthy post, citing that all gender reveal parties were copied from Jenna Karvunidis. She sarcastically tells Sidika that she even copied her marriage and gender of the child. She asks Sidika to lead with love then she would be able to take everyone by surprise.

Gender reveal parties have become the latest trend in Kenyan urban mothering sphere. This can largely be attributed to the influence of the momfuencers on social media. Young women are trying to keep up with the social media personalities who they resonate with. However, it comes with a huge price to pay because of the expenses involved. As discussed earlier, the momfluencers throw lavish parties and costly stunts like the hiring of helicopters to announce the gender of their unborn children. For the momfluencers, it goes beyond showing off; it is indeed a business venture since they involve partnerships with various companies. These companies provide a range of products; clothes, props, venues, make-up artists, Djs, photography and meals. Applequist (2014) affirms this when she observes, ‘For gender reveal parties, there is always a cost associated with the event – something must be purchased and presented to others in a way that allows parents to gain social capital’ (55). Unfortunately, the fans may not be able to afford all these, but they will try their best to pull up such stunts. This can be seen from their comments on the momfluencers posts; some asking about the service providers and their location.

Critics have however expressed their disapproval of the gender reveal parties for various reasons. Gender rights activists have argued that such parties force identities on unborn children. This argument arises from Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, that gender is socially constructed. Butler (1999) states that, ‘gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts’ (179). Gender should not therefore be misconstrued to mean sex. Gender reveal parties, therefore, have been accused of premeditating gender for a person who might not agree with the prescribed gender later on in life.

Applequist (2014) affirms this when she opines that, ‘If identity is shaped by the views that are represented to others, then it can be argued that hosting a gender reveal party prematurely allows parents to decide, on behalf of their children, how they will be represented to, and by, the world’ (54). Basing on this view, gender reveal parties can be viewed as an infringement on the rights of the unborn child.

Further, critics of gender reveal parties have pointed out the accidents and unfortunate occurrences that have happened in such parties. The initiator of these parties, Jenna Karvunidis has expressed her disapproval of the parties, citing the risks that are involved because of the stunts parents-to-be pull up. In Arizona, such a party led to a wild fire that destroyed a 47,000 acre piece of land. Karvunidis in her Guardian interview with Langmuir in 2020 comments, ‘When I first saw that a gender-reveal party had caused a forest fire I cried because I felt responsible’. Karvunidis feels guilty for initiating something that has led to more harm than good. She confesses that she has had two more children after her first gender reveal party and she has never conducted any other party. It is quite ironical that the initiator of the parties feels that they should be done away with it, but those who copied her have embraced them fiercely.

In conclusion, momfluencers have taken advantage of the capitalist society to gain economically through motherhood. In this patriarchal society where motherhood has been used to subjugate women, momfluencers have strategically essentialised themselves and used the same tool of subjugation to benefit themselves. Seiden (2019) states that ‘The gender reveal party as a modern phenomenon aligns with the increasing popularity of websites like Pinterest or Instagram, where products can be marketed as an extension of gender and thus necessary to reaffirm gender’ (10). The digital space has thus provided a favourable arena for momfluencers who depend on social media to earn a living. This raises the major question “Is it Exploitation or strategic commodification? Debunking the baby mama ideology?”

Traditional norms concerning family and especially motherhood are being renegotiated. Currently, there are many families that do not conform to the traditional composition of a nuclear family; father, mother and children. For diverse reasons, we now have families composed of a mother and children, a father and children, a mother, father and children, and even queer individuals also raising families. This section will study the families where we only have a mother raising her children. I will not just study any single mother, but the focus will be on celebrity mothers who intentionally bear children with influential men without getting formally married to them. They are popularly referred to as ‘baby mamas’. Opeyemi et al (2021) state that, ‘Etymologically the term baby mama stems from a Jamaica Creole used by fathers with illegitimate children to describe the mothers of their children with no form of marriage’ (38). The term has gained prominence and currently, it is mostly used by female celebrities who have children with rich men whom they are not married to. These celebrities have used their motherhood status to accumulate wealth from the rich men they bore children with. I will study one such celebrity in Kenya, known as Esther Akoth Kokeyo, popularly known as ‘Akothee’. Akothee is a famous Kenyan female social media personality. She is 43 years old and has five children; three girls sired by one father and two biracial sons sired by different fathers.

The desire for women to gain freedom in the patriarchal society has led to many shifts, the structure of families notwithstanding. This fight for their space has led to the rise of baby mamas. Previously, women who had children out of wedlock were uneducated or semi-educated and led impoverished lives. Their children lacked the necessities of life and such women or girls were frowned upon. They were viewed as a bad example to other women. Wariboko and Isichei (2022) posit,

Culturally and religiously, children are normatively products of marriage which is considered a sacred institution. In the past, it was absolutely inglorious and distasteful for a woman to have a baby outside wedlock. With time, the baby mama ideology has mutated into something prestigious for the womenfolk (58).

Baby mamas have gone against these patriarchal views concerning motherhood by embracing their status as mothers and strategically commoditizing themselves so as to get rich and live affluent lives. Opeyemi et al (2021) opine that this culture has infiltrated into the teenagers who ‘now take pleasure having children out of wedlock as long as it raises prestige and status to stardom; not the companionship but the financial gains for having children for men with a high standards of living’ (38). Bearing children has ceased from being a confine to those who are in a nuptial relationship, but rather a gateway to riches.

Social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok and Instagram have largely spread the baby mamahood ideologies. These platforms are extremely crucial for baby mamas to assert their identities. Celebrities rely on them to showcase their lavish lifestyles courtesy of being baby mamas. These celebrities have a large influence on their followers. Resultantly, these followers also strive to lead their lives in the same manner as their role models. Wariboko and Isichei (2022) affirm this by observing that, ‘Celebrities are usually ‘idols’ or models in society. Their fashion, parlance/accent, music genre, dance steps, demeanour and other mannerisms have shown to be fascinating to and emulated by their teeming young fans’ (58). As the followers keep tabs with what their role models are up to, the fan base of the celebrities also grows, translating to more earnings for them. Akothee boasts of over 2.9 million followers on her Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube channel, which enables her to earn over four thousand US Dollars monthly. She taunts her critics citing that they cannot make such an amount of money and some use her name to gain likes and followers on their social media pages. Notwithstanding Akothee thanks her fans for watching her new show called ‘Menopause’ which airs on her YouTube channel. She informs her followers that in two days, she already has over one hundred thousand views. Akothee markets herself as a brand, citing that she charges seven hundred thousand Kenya shillings just for her appearance at events. She warns those who cannot afford to pay her not to tag along. Her post reads partly, ‘Trending with this brand will cost you marketing costs which is not less than 2m tread carefully’.

Akothee has excelled in the entertainment industry by recording several songs. She has also started a foundation called Akothee Foundation which sponsors needy students. Moreover, she is a brand ambassador for the Chandaria Industries, which manufacture products like tissue paper, hand wash, wipes, shower gels, facial tissue and other toiletries. Additionally, she has gone back to school to gain a bachelor’s degree and even a Master’s degree. Recently, she launched a book titled ‘Turn your Pain into Purpose’ in a colorful event at a five star hotel, attended by only the prominent people in the society. All these accolades attained by a baby mama who calls herself ‘the president of single ladies’ are alluring to her admirers. Further, Akothee makes a post about her rise to stardom despite the challenges has gone through. She informs her audience that ‘Akothee is a reminder that a woman can rewrite her story loudly, boldly, and without apology.’ This post is meant to tell off those critics who are discrediting her success. In the second photo, Akothee calls herself madamrosy. She is advertising the Rosy products which she promotes. She is calling out to customers to make purchases so as to win gift hampers. As a brand ambassador, Akothee earns for popularising the items she is advertising. Moreover, she gains more likes, translating to more income from her social media accounts.

The baby mama culture has shifted the traditional roles of mothers in families. Oriakpono and Babayemi (2004) aver, ‘by seemingly normalising baby mamahood and downplaying the role of absentee fathers, media narratives may inadvertently reinforce gender inequalities and perpetuate stereotypes about women's roles and responsibilities within the family unit’ (97). This assertion is evident in the lives of these baby mama celebrities since they have taken up the roles of both parents in the family. Oriakpono and Babayemi (ibid) further argue that ‘the romanticisation of baby mamahood in television dramas and film have an immense impact in the society. This is attributed to their portrayal of baby mamas as strong, resilient and determined personalities worth emulating’ (99). Akothee has single handedly raised her five children; three daughters from a first failed marriage and two biracial sons from different white lovers. Akothee boasts of the accolades her daughters have achieved so far.

In the first photo, Akothee acknowledges her daughter, Vesha Awuor Okello, for establishing her own company. She captions the post, ‘My prayer every single day is for God to give me more days & wisdom on this planet earth to see my children winning. Being a single mother, raising my 3 girls on my own without a job nor degree, no parenting manual is something I will hold close to my heart’. Her fans applaud her in the second photo for the great job of ensuring her children get the best.

Marriage requires commitment from both parties. The couple engages in consultations over issues to do with their family and each one is expected to respect the union and be faithful to their partner. This commitment to marriage has been upheld mostly by the women, who are taught to be faithful and submissive to their husbands. Feminists view this as being patriarchal, thereby denying women equal rights in the marriage. Wariboko and Isichei (2022) posit that ‘Some strands of feminism identify marriage as a patriarchal institution with oppressive tendencies against women, especially in Africa’ (60). Baby mamas have debunked this patriarchal notion that burdens the woman while giving the man the freedom to live a carefree life. Baby mamas have declined to get

into formal marriages intentionally, so as to have the freedom to live as they please. They engage in sexual relationships with multiple men without being accountable to anyone of them. Akothee has had several boyfriends, whom she flaunts on her social media pages. Akothee first got married to Jared Okello at fourteen and he divorced her after their third daughter had been born. She has three daughters with him.

She later got into an affair with a white man whose identity she conceals. He abandons her after impregnating her while pregnant with her first son. She gets into another affair with yet another white man, with whom they bear her second son. He is the source of her riches. She applauds him for always providing for all her five children, despite being a father to only one. Her appreciation to him is captured in the post below. The message partly reads, 'Just from the day you collected me with my baggage, as a lactating mother of 4, broke taxi driver, you have never turned your back on us...thank you for being there for me & with me always to the best interest of my children'. In the second photo, she celebrates his 73rd birthday, acknowledging the role he played in her life. She mentions, 'From the day you set your eyes on me you told me one thing. I will make you a queen that you should be, I will be there for you till death do us part'. Akothee chooses autonomy by divorcing the man, while still maintaining financial dependence on him.

In 2023, Akothee has an affair with yet another white man, Denis Schweizer. She conducts a glamorous wedding in which she invites very influential people. In the first photo below, Akothee had just wedded her boyfriend Denis Schweizer, whom she had christened 'Omosh'. She can be seen flaunting her ring to the audience. The caption reads, when God says YES NOBODY will say NO'. However, the marriage does not last as the man turns out to be a con. Kenyans mock her for having imagined that she would get money out of him, but she has ended up being tricked. Akothee puts up her defense stating that Denis was dishonest with her and she cannot accept that. She posits, 'he never disclosed to me that he was battling mental health since birth and since I figured out by myself I couldn't carry on with the ndoa [marriage] because I felt betrayed.'

Akothee gets involved with another white South African man whom Kenyans christen 'Yesu' to mean Jesus, due to his striking resemblance to the image of Jesus. A fan of Akothee tells 'Jesus' that he is not being fair, since they are waiting for him to resurrect but he is busy having the time of his life with the nudist Akothee. Akothee responds jokingly by telling Kenyans that they are always poking their noses in her affairs and that they had asked her to get saved because she is dating Jesus. Further, Akothee complains that she has warned 'Yesu' to shave his beards but he seems not to listen. She states, 'mulimuambia ile tabia yangu mbaya ya relationship tourist?Asiponyoa narukanchi ingine. Ata rashia nitaenda' (Did you warn him about my bad behaviour of being a relationship tourist?If he doesn't shave, I will even go to Russia).

Shortly after her stint with the White South African man, Akothee gets entangled again with another white man whose identity she conceals, only referring to him as her 'jackpot'. In the first photo below, she is seated with him at a restaurant; he is praying for their food. Akothee's eyes are wide open. She comments that she cannot close her eyes, lest he turns out to be a Christian narcissist. She then adds, 'Nimechoka kuzunguka mimi na hii menopause yangu nitapata wapi mwingine? (I'm tired of roaming but with my menopause, where will I get another one?). interestingly, a fan comments that Akothee is like a movie, basing on the many relationships she engages in. Another one asks her, 'Did Jesus go back to his father? I mean the carpenter, not God'. This is in reference to the White South African man she had been flaunting less than a month before. Akothee maintains a young Kenyan lover by the name Nelly Oaks, who always turns up when her relationships with her white lovers fail. Finally Akothee takes breakfast, then she sets for Jinja with her only Do or Die Nellyoaks. It is evident from the above discussion that marital freedom is an aspect in the lives of baby mamas that makes them hop from one partner to another, seeking financial stability.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion, this research has explored the growing acceptance and glamorization of the baby mama ideology in the Kenyan context, this being a representation of the African context of baby mamahood. It has mainly focused on how social media has fuelled the baby mama ideology. Findings show that the baby mama ideology is a carefully crafted strategy by women majorly meant to attain financial freedom. In the capitalist society where everything has a price tag, women have chosen to use motherhood to their advantage, while at the same time resisting the patriarchal expectations of motherhood placed on women. Oriakpono and Babalola (2024) posit

that ‘the increasing acceptance of unmarried motherhood can be seen as a form of resistance against the traditional expectations placed on women, offering a form of autonomy and self-determination’ (105). Critics argue that baby mamahood is a man’s way of objectifying a woman, basing on the fact that it is the woman who will bear the sole responsibility of nurturing the child. Wariboko and Isichei (2022) opine that, ‘This time, they are not just seen by men as objects for men’s sexual gratification, they willingly subject themselves to be used by a man who may or may not have the intent to become a father with no more than their financial commitment’ (66). Ironically, this is exactly what the baby mamas are interested in; the financial benefits of having a child with a rich baby daddy. The baby mamas and their children can lead glamorous lives without struggling about the financial implications. Wariboko and Isichei (ibid) avers that the baby mamas ‘not only achieve their goal but also use the baby as a pawn to get the man to pay their bills and sponsor an ostentatious lifestyle for them which could be the target ab initio’ (67). It is notable that for as long as men continue to express economic dominance over women in the society, the baby mamas will continue making use of them as a conduit to an affluent lifestyle.

The study explores how mothers in the late capitalist society have commodified their maternity to their advantage. This is a paradigm shift from the previous eras where motherhood was treated as a private affair. Momfluencers as I chose to call them have used their pregnant bodies, their children and their fecundity for commercial gain. Murugi Munyi and Diana Bahati have adopted the yummy mummy ideology, where they have done all it takes to remain sexy as mothers; Vera Sidika and Amber Ray have used their pregnant bodies to propagate the baby shower and gender reveal ideologies to their financial gain while Esther Akoth ‘Akothee’ has embraced the baby mama ideology to gain wealth. All these women have active Facebook and Instagram pages where they are followed by thousands of fans which translate to royalties for them.

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