# Mum's the Word: Moms and Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Acknowledgments**

Thank you to the wonderful mamas who braved their tears and shared their stories with me. I so appreciate you and the hard work you've done this year to keep it together!

Thank you to my own mom, who talked me off many cliffs during the past two years of working through this program.

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For all of the moms who read this paper, we have done hard things this past year (and counting!). We have worried, entertained, kept positive when we didn't feel it, led the troops, cried, laughed, followed the rules, and broke some too. Let's learn from this experience and know that although we all live different lives and may feel differently about some things, we are mamas first, most and always.

## Abstract

Like moms all over the globe, Edmonton, Alberta moms struggled during the COVID-19 lockdowns for many reasons, including the increased workloads, expectations, and the impacts of the social isolation on their children and themselves. Using a mixed-qualitative approach, this study analyzed Instagram posts from Edmonton moms, and then added virtual interviews to further delve into the content of and motivations behind their posts. Moms in this study used Instagram to feel connected to their social circles and to see what others were doing during these unique and challenging times, knowing that others' posts were likely showing an edited version of their lives. They appreciated those moms on Instagram who showed what "real life" was like so that they could relate, and feel like they were normal to be struggling with the challenges that COVID-19 created for their families, yet they themselves did not generally present the more difficult aspects of their own experiences on this platform, citing the main reason for this as wanting to stay positive for their friends and family. Notably, these moms also reported using Instagram as a digital and visual timeline of their lives that they could look back on when they wanted to, in order to remember and make sense of these unprecedented times.

Keywords: Instagram, moms, pandemic, COVID-19, Alberta, Edmonton, mothers, motherhood, mothering

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Background

For many across the world, the spring of 2020 brought with it unprecedented health, social and economic challenges. A new coronavirus called COVID-19 spread like wildfire across the globe, exposing weaknesses in our social fabric that we may have thought no longer existed, including racial and gender inequality. The routines of our daily lives were put on hold while the case counts, death tolls, and panic rose globally. In Alberta, almost every person was affected in some way, but middle- and working-class mothers were especially impacted by the sudden lockdowns in the spring of 2020. Every aspect of their lives was affected by the health restrictions put in place by the government: an overnight loss of childcare and school for their children; shifting suddenly to working from home, losing jobs or becoming front-line workers; dealing with an increase in house labour when all members of the family were home 24/7; attempting to manage a sharp increase in familial stress while watching their children struggle with isolation and frustration; worrying about the physical health of their families and catching the virus; and worrying about aged parents and how they were going to function. Curiously absent was government policy to support moms through this new reality, and they were left to struggle and figure it out themselves without access to their usual social support networks.

During the early lockdowns of COVID-19 even more of our daily social interaction moved online (A. Ahmed, 2020) and Instagram was one of the platforms that moms turned to to make sense of their new reality. Six of seven of my study participants said that their Instagram

use increased during the first few months of the pandemic. This study focuses on moms' use of Instagram in particular, because like other social media platforms, it is a compelling communications research tool with an ability to provide a view into people's daily lives, yet it is also touted as the most curated (i.e. "fakest") of social networking platforms (Ross, 2019). Because of the architectural design and community norms of this photo-focussed platform, the images take centre stage, with short captions providing some additional context to the photos. As is the nature of images, it is very easy to portray one's life in the best light, or focus purposely on one aspect of lived experience. The pressures that contemporary mothers faced in a time informed by neoliberal ideology and an ethos of "intensive mothering" means that in times of struggle like a pandemic, mothers are particularly vulnerable to taking on an unequal share of the stress, childcare, and home labour. Yet, these realities did not filter through to the posts analyzed in this study. This mixed-qualitative study aimed to look more closely at how women were talking about their lives during this unusual and challenging time, and what their posts can tell us about the intersection of social media and motherhood on Instagram. This research is important because as social media becomes even more important to and enmeshed in mothers' lives, we need to more clearly understand what we are actually getting from it, what we need from it, and the ways in which we can make it work better for us.

### *1.1.1 Instagram*

Instagram is a social media platform owned by Facebook that has over one billion followers worldwide. Instagram is a "directed friendship model [where] users choose accounts to follow and accumulate followers of their own" (Baker & Walsh, p. 4558, 2018). The user can choose who to share their photos with by selecting either a private or public account. When

hashtagging photos, only accounts that are set to "public" are widely visible in these searches. Users can "heart" (i.e. like) or comment on the posts of users they follow, or create their own posts (user-generated content) by uploading a photo, caption, and hashtag (van Dijck, 2013). Statista.com reports that 56.4% of Canadian Instagram users are women, with 52.8% of Canadian users between the ages of 25-44, which is also the age range of the majority of Canadian mothers with children under 18 (Statista.com, 2021). Canadian mothers are, like mothers all over the world, active on Instagram.

### *1.1.2. Goffman's Theory of Impression Management*

When looking at how mothers portray their lives on social media, a helpful frame to view these posts is that of Goffman's impression management theory. Erving Goffman was a Canadian sociologist who studied how people's "actions and behaviour maintain the normative social order" (Baker & Walsh, p. 4554, 2018). He used dramaturgical metaphors to examine how humans make sense of where they fit in society and present themselves in daily life (Hogan, 201; Merunkova & Slerka, 2019). The most applicable of his many theories to this study, is that of impression management.

This theory explores "the efforts made by individuals to control information in order to influence the impressions formed about them in the minds of others" (Richey et al, p. 598, 2015). Impression management explains "how an individual presents an "idealized" rather than authentic version of herself" in order to "selectively give off details" of their lives to their audience (Hogan, p. 378, 2010). This theory can provide another lens with which to view the moms' Instagram posts, as this concept may not be something that these moms would recognize

outwardly or admit to themselves when talking about their motivations for posting content on Instagram, or any other social media platform.

### 1.2. Research Questions

As feminist scholars call for more research into the lives of women and their lived experiences, this project undertakes an examination of one population of mothers using a communications technology in a unique time. This research aims to add to both motherhood studies and communications research. In Canada, as in Alberta, we do not have a large canon of research that focuses on how mothers talk about their lives and experiences on social media, or the ways in which they use it. May Friedman is one of the only Canadian researchers that I found who study moms and social media, but her work is not limited specifically to Canadian moms, unlike the population of this study. Further, most of the Instagram research I reviewed has as its subjects “influencers”, people who are considered influential and having more followers than the average user (1000+). My focus instead is on everyday Edmonton moms who share their Instagram posts with a relatively small group of followers, whom they also know in real life. These women don’t use their Instagram accounts to earn a living or build their brand, they use it to share moments of their lives with friends and family and see what others are doing.

Guney-Frahm (2020) asserts that new research is needed to focus on the specific impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mothers. Although media coverage of women's pandemic experiences is widespread, there are only a few research studies published focusing on this critical group. Archer and Kao (2018) discuss the importance of research of mothers as their issues “can be of significant cost to the economy and have a long-term impact on children’s

development" (Archer & Kao, p. 123, 2018). By doing this research, I aim to explore how mothers were impacted by the pandemic in my area, and how their experiences were presented in their Instagram posts. I want to add to the body of knowledge of this time to inform future policy decisions regarding support for mothers.

There are three research questions addressed in this study:

RQ1: How did everyday Edmonton mothers experience the lockdowns of pandemic?

RQ2: Were their struggles present on their Instagram accounts?

RQ2: How did Instagram function for Edmonton moms during this period?

Not surprisingly, this study found that moms were very impacted by the public health measures put in place to protect lives and our health care system from COVID-19, yet these realities did not appear in their Instagram posts. For the most part the Edmonton moms posted positive or humorous messages that highlighted the good parts of their lives during the lockdowns. They used Instagram as a way to connect with friends and family, but also, importantly, as an easy way to look back at these unusual times. They did not share their frustrations or the depths of their personal struggles on their Instagram accounts, corroborating what other studies have found when concluding that moms focus on maintaining an image of 'good mothering' on social media (Friedman, 2018; Le Moignan et al, 2017). This research clearly demonstrates that even middle-class moms in stable families struggled with the increased expectations and lack of support of this period, yet like government support, this narrative was absent or only vaguely presented on their Instagram accounts. Does this communications

technology do what it aspires to in its mission statement, “bringing you closer to the people and things you love” (Instagram.com)? In most cases the moms I interviewed would agree that it does. Yet it also promotes invisible normative and unrealistic expectations of contemporary motherhood. Here I offer some suggestions for how moms could use Instagram to their advantage in order to broaden narrow societal expectations of mothering, for the good of us all.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 2.1. Overview

In order to adequately answer my research questions, a review of existing scholarship provided context and situated where my research might fit and provide value to the broad canon of Canadian motherhood studies and communications research. For this literature review, three key themes provided background and context: contemporary motherhood, social media, and the pandemic's impact on mothers.

## 2.2. Search Methodology

I performed a number of preliminary searches of the University of Alberta Library databases in order to see if my selected keywords (*mother, motherhood, mama, social media, instagram, media ideologies, self-presentation, impression management, Goffman, 'bad mother', online identity, discourse, ideal, Alberta, Canada)* would be of use to yield the articles I was aiming for. Initially, I also used the keywords found in the first research articles that informed my draft research design brief. Using boolean logic I put together a number of searches using the keywords listed above in different combinations. I searched the following databases: EBSCO, SCOPUS, Canadian Newsstream, Dissertations, Sage Journals, Communications and Mass Media Complete, as well as Google Scholar. As I read through the articles, I added additional articles that the authors had used to build their own literature reviews in the areas that I was particularly interested in. Lastly, I asked my colleagues, family members, and my project supervisor to recommend any additional articles or sources that I could look at to provide an overall picture of current research available. Overall, these searches yielded over 15,000 articles, which were then narrowed to the final list using the following criteria.

### *2.2.1 Criteria*

I used inclusion/exclusion criteria when selecting articles for further examination. These included:

**Recency.** I aimed to select only articles published after 2008. 2008 was selected as this period was just before Instagram was established, but still the heyday of this new communications technology with the launch of Twitter and Facebook. This period saw society's use of these platforms begin to be studied and discussed widely. I wanted to ensure that I had more recent articles, but also wanted to provide a wide enough span of time to adequately capture the breadth of research that existed. As my topic was very specific, I felt that only searching and using very recent articles may not have provided background on current research. I did, however, include articles older than 2008 if there was an argument to do so, i.e. if they were often quoted in the literature, or if they were older, theory-based articles.

**Peer-Review.** I aimed to use only peer-reviewed articles to ensure the quality of the information informing my project. I felt this was particularly important for me as I am relatively new to the fields of both communications research and motherhood studies. I did this by limiting my search at the database level to peer-reviewed articles only.

**Argument, Methodology, Theoretical Framework.** If upon review I determined that the methodology or theoretical framework of the studies were not sufficient to

prove their case, I did not include them in the selection of literature. An example would be if the argument made didn't match my interpretation of the data presented. Another example of an article that wouldn't meet my criteria for inclusion is if the methodology used didn't adequately address the research questions being asked.

**Grey Literature.** I only included grey literature (articles from mass media) in topic areas that were too recent to obtain peer-reviewed articles, i.e. COVID-19 statistics, or when providing an overview or opinion on the pandemic's impact on the world. As my research progressed many of these articles were later backed up by peer-reviewed research.

I did not use criteria like the importance of the journal, publisher or author, as it would have narrowed the yield too much to get a wide enough sample of the available literature. Each of the articles that were selected offered something different but important to the overall literature review.

### *2.2.2. Other Search Tactics*

Other search tactics included reading through the bibliographies of each article to find other studies that, although outside of my library searches, were useful and would provide me with a wider frame of reference. Once I had a list of the names of these articles or books I then searched the library databases or Google Scholar. I also emailed one of the organizations that had published previous studies on these topics in order to ask if there was any current pandemic

research. A UK Cabinet Officer gave me access to a yet-unpublished research study on gender and the pandemic that was extremely useful to provide additional context. Lastly, I repeated the searches that were most fruitful at various times throughout the research period to see if any new research had been completed.

### 2.3. Sorting and Selecting Relevant Literature

Once the searches were complete I sifted through the literature identified using Booth's method of selection (Booth et al, p. 142, 2016), first completing a title sift based on relevance to the topic, then abstract sift to further focus the articles, then a full-text sift to finalize my list of sources. From there I identified over 100 articles for closer examination and uploaded them into PaperPile, my chosen reference software. The final number of articles that I closely reviewed was approximately 70.

### 2.4. Organizing the Information

In order to most effectively and efficiently extract the information I was seeking from such a vast number of sources, I created coding cover sheets to hold all of the key takeaways and important information from the chosen studies. These sheets enabled me to pull relevant information from each article, log key ideas to circle back to, and provide a snapshot of what the article contained that applied to my research questions. The coding sheets were extremely helpful in allowing me to compare and contrast the author's findings and methodologies about similar themes, while also providing an easy-to-use way to search a lot of information for key ideas very quickly and effectively.

| PUBLICATION INFORMATION | |
|---|---|
| Date of Publication | Journal |
| Title | Author |
| **INCLUSION/EXCLUSION CRITERIA** | **Y/N** |
| Is the study/article 2008 onwards? | |
| Argument Reasonable? | |
| Methodology Effective? | |
| Theoretical Framework Appropriate? | |
| Peer Review? | |
| Reasoning:<br>❑ Applicability to my research<br>❑ Validity<br>❑ Reliability<br>❑ Extrinsic factors | |
| Other comments | |
| **STUDY DETAILS** | |
| | Country |
| | RQ/Objectives |
| Participants | |
| | Population |
| | Age |
| | Recruitment/ Sampling |
| Data Collection | |
| | Method (survey, focus group) |

| | |
|---|---|
| | |
| | Validation/Recording (survey tool? Are interviews transcribed? Respondent validation?) |
| Data Analysis | Method |
| **FINDINGS** | |
| Theme 1 | |
| Theme 2 | |
| Theme 3 | |
| **CONCLUSIONS** | |
| Limitations/Disagreements/Gaps | |
| Possible new references to look at? | |
| **TAKEAWAYS FOR MY PROJECT/KEY QUOTES** | |
| | |

*Figure 1: Coding sheets.*

Once the coding of the articles was completed, I sorted the information into categories by dominant themes. From this preliminary research, I identified five broad themes: 1) Mothers, mothering, and motherhood 2) Moms and social media 3) Gender ideologies 4) Media ideologies and 5) Mothering during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also wanted to research more deeply into how other scholars had analyzed their data using Goffman's theory of impression management and how it can frame an analysis of content on social media.

## 2.5. Discussion of the Literature

### *2.5.1. Contemporary Constructions of Mothers and Motherhood*

In this discussion I consider a number of perspectives and sources and consider how they shape our current view of contemporary motherhood. Feminist researchers contend that historically mothers have been both silenced and held to impossibly high standards (Friedman, 2018; Miller, 2007), yet feminism has also "left mothers behind in their search for social change" (Johnston & Swanson, p. 263, 2003b; Koerber, 2001). It appears that the feminist movement has been more focussed on women's equality in the public spheres of society, rather than concentrate their efforts and awareness on broadening our narrow societal view of normative motherhood. I aimed to consider this tension and complexity when looking at where we are as mothers in contemporary western society, including consideration of the influences of our societal ideals and norms, economics, mass media and social media.

Although there were several dominant discourses of motherhood discussed in the reviewed literature, most studies indicated that the most prevalent ideology of motherhood is epitomized by sociologist Sharon Hays' concept of "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996). This dominant ideology demands that mothers spend most of their time, money, and energy on their children, in a never-ending cycle of self-improvement, and in competition with other mothers (Chae, 2015; Hays, 1996; Lehto, 2020; Pedersen, 2016). Childcare is best done by the mother, and all activities must be child-centric, with children's needs placed above all else (Lehto, 2020; Mackenzie, 2017; Pedersen, 2016; Valtchanov et al, 2016). The concept of intensive mothering is "primarily only attainable for economically-advantaged, privileged women, who are often heterosexual, partnerned, white, and middle- to upper-class" (Lehto, p. 663, 2020).

Unfortunately, the ideals of intensive mothering are such that “mothers are set up to fail” as expectations outstrip realities (Pedersen, p. 34, 2016). This is especially true of low income mothers.

In the same vein as Hays’ intensive mothering, although not quite as widely known, is the concept of “new momism”, a term coined by Douglas and Michaels (2004). Like intensive mothering, motherhood in this view is fraught with high expectations that are impossible for most mothers to live up to. This ideology focuses on the mother as the primary parent who is responsible for all aspects of the child’s well being (Lopez, 2009; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Powell, 2010). The general contention is that these ideals are very visible in all aspects of contemporary mothers’ lives, especially in their social media posts about their lives (Le Moignan et al, 2017; Mackenzie, 2017).

Another layer of complexity that influences how we perceive mothers and motherhood is informed by the ideology of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism describes our contemporary moment, when the core tenets of modern capitalism reach into every aspect of our lives, including in the raising of children (Archer, 2019b). In this way of thinking, motherhood is professionalized and mothers assume a businesslike responsibility for all matters in the household. The state’s role is replaced by the mother, who also takes the blame if her child rearing doesn’t live up to society’s standards. In this economic-centric model, the work of mothering is neverending, and every mother should try to accomplish her tasks more efficiently and with better results. Competition, along with “consumerism, narcissism, and individualism” (Littler, p. 238, 2020) and not solidarity, support of different ways of mothering, or cooperation among mothers, is at the heart

of neoliberalism. Rottenberg (2016) argues that one of the biggest issues that neoliberalism presents for mothers is that the individualism promoted here undermines any potential of collective action that could ignite political and societal change and improve mothers' lives by lowering our expectations of what good mothering is. The linking of home life to a capitalistic ethos has been building globally since the 1980s, matched by an increasing expectation of parents (specifically mothers). Taken together, intensive mothering, new momism and neoliberalism work against mothers to amplify the stresses of mothering during a pandemic, and create a perfect storm of overwhelm for contemporary moms.

There is, however, some evidence of an emerging challenge to the discourses of normative motherhood. Mari Lehto studied two Finnish mommy bloggers who use confessional posts admitting to being a "bad mother". The definition of "bad mother" in this context is understood as an "easy-going, under-achieving and independent, or even selfish" mom (Lehto, p. 657, 2020). This same concept of "bad mother" is gaining traction among celebrities like Kristen Bell. Bell speaks frankly, if also comically, about the challenges of motherhood during lockdowns in her *Quarantine Momsplaining* episodes. Bell says, "the two worst words in the English language: home schooling" (Bell, 2020), and jokes about how she "day drinks" wine from a coffee mug and yells a lot in an effort to cope with these new expectations on her. These examples are a departure from how moms have talked about mothering practices in the past, and something that could be seen as a subversion of the previously-held acceptable behaviours of motherhood. Yet, scholars like Lehto and Littler are cautious with these new ideas being seen as a victory for feminists and mothers alike. They demonstrate that these "bad mom" discourses may only be presented from a safe social location, i.e. white, middle class (or wealthier) women,

especially celebrities, whose "bad" behaviours are still mild, despite their humorous protestations. It appears that claiming to be a "bad mother" still enforces the norms of intensive parenting (Littler, 2020) and is used as a way to try and make sense of and cope with the ceaseless demands on contemporary mothers, rather than as a protest to these realities (Guney-Frahm, 2020; Lehto, 2020; Littler, 2020; Orton-Johnson, 2017). Performing the role of a bad mother is a luxury that is only reserved for characters in movies, television, and among celebrities, and does not affect change to the social structures and poor or absent policies that enable overloading "too much work, both inside and outside the home… onto women" (Littler, p. 515, 2020).

Many scholars have examined the changing discourses of mothers in contemporary history, from the housewives of the 1950s, the feminist moms in the 1970s, the working mothers of the 1980s, the soccer moms and supermoms in the 1990s, yummy mummies and mumtrepreneurs of the 2000s, and most recently mommy bloggers and "bad moms" in the 2010s and beyond. In sum, their research shows that the evolution of our ideas of what a "good mother" is heavily influenced by mass media and dominated by middle-class values. These ideals are "socially, economically, historically and… technologically constructed" (Orton-Johnson, p. 3, 2017) and thus there are many factors at play here. The evolution of discourses around contemporary motherhood is complex, and this complexity is reflected brilliantly on one dominant societal force: social media.

### *2.5.2. Mothers on Social Media*

Mothers use social media in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons including entertainment, escape, and to feel a connection to others, (Valtchanov et al, p. 60, 2016) and being seen as a good mother on social media is incredibly important to everyday mothers (Friedman, 2018; Lehto, 2020; Le Moignan et al, 2017; Zappavigna, 2016). Mothering is incredibly hard work with little recognition of the ceaseless effort it takes. Not only is it unpaid, underappreciated labour, but it is all-consuming and thankless work enmeshed with high societal expectations. For some moms, social media becomes a way to receive the kudos that are absent in their daily lives through likes and comments of support. Friedman (2018) finds that mothers use Instagram, "as a means of editing the difficult or tiresome or guilty parts of motherhood out and leaving only a very sanitized and carefully cropped image behind" (p. 177). LeMoignan et al studied family snapshots on Instagram and determined that mothers "privilege an 'everything is fine here' social message" (Le Moignan, 2017, p. 4936). These studies also confirm that Goffman's theory of impression management is an appropriate theoretical framework for studying motherhood on social media. On social media, mothers work to manage the impression they are making to their audience so that they will first and foremost be seen as good mothers. Motherhood here is more of a performance than an accurate reflection of lived experiences.

Mothers on social media are continually "negotiating motherhood" (Lehto, 2020; Mackenzie, 2017; Pedersen, 2016) and crafting identities for themselves (Chen, 2013; Griffin, 2014; Koerber, 2001) in these online spaces. Several of the reviewed studies demonstrated that women know clearly what constitutes a "good mother" in our society (i.e. selfless, supportive, loving) and will work to present this image in their social media posts (Chae, 2015; Lehto 2020;

Le Moignan et al, 2017; Pedersen, 2016). Yet, there is also evidence that they may also creatively push those boundaries, often with humorous devices like memes or sarcasm, and will work within the online community norms that are present to subvert or broaden the discourses of contemporary motherhood (Chen, 2013; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Pasche, 2015; Pedersen, 2016). Pedersen's (2016) study finds that moms generally prefer presenting their *own* mothering as 'good enough', and that they tend to search out exemplars of these same attitudes online (i.e. confessional-type influencers or mommy bloggers). Mothers on Pinterest tend to distance themselves from adopting an intensive mothering ideology and prefer viewing a more realistic picture of motherhood that provides inspiration for self-improvement, yet isn't too perfect or unattainable (Griffin, 2014). Chen's 2013 study of mommy bloggers finds that moms are creating a space where they can build a community and find support for their own styles of mothering. Archer and Kao (2018), Friedman (2018), Gray et al (2019) and Lopez (2009) suggest that there is potential for online spaces to subvert dominant discourses, and expand acceptability of a broader array of motherhood's experiences. Subversion of these discourses might take many forms, from showing the realities of the darker or hidden parts of motherhood (i.e. abject parenting failures), or challenging some of the unrealistic and unrelenting expectations of modern motherhood by offering an alternate vision of what a good mother can look like, i.e. having unfolded towels on the floor in front of the linen closet (literally no one appreciates folded towels anyway), kids making their own dinner so mom has more time for yoga (to approach all of life's struggles in a calmer and more centred manner while prioritizing her own self-care), or husbands/partners taking on all or part of the homeschooling duties, even if they don't feel well suited to the task (very few of us well suited, let's be honest).

There is potential on Instagram to push the boundaries and expand the narrow view of mothering that is currently acceptable. Although there is evidence that some subversion of the ideals of normative motherhood exists in the "mamasphere", in general everyday mothers have not yet internalized and presented contrary ideals on their own social media posts, outside of sharing humorous memes or sarcasm (Friedman, 2018; Lehto, 2020; Le Moignan, 2017). May Friedman, an eminent Canadian sociologist, studied Instagram posts from the hashtag #assholeparents to examine if normative views of motherhood were challenged in this online space. She finds that although the hashtag would lend one to believe there was subversion and criticism here of the norms of motherhood, her research instead revealed "deeply normative views of parenting in general and motherhood in particular" (Friedman, 2018, p. 170). Although these platforms are a space for mothers to interact, share stories, support, or challenge widely held beliefs on mothering, more often than not they stridently conform to the ideal of a "good mother" (Le Moignan, 2017). As of yet, most of the research confirms that Instagram does not appear to be used by mothers in a way that subverts these normative ideals and challenges them. Likely, as society evolves what it finds acceptable, these changing ideals will begin to be reflected on everyday moms' social media posts. This study explores whether or not the pandemic's lockdowns and societal re-working of daily behaviour provided an environment that allowed the challenging of these expectations, and broadened how mothers present their lives on social media.

Social media platforms, and Instagram in particular, have architectural designs that can either enable or constrain the users' ability to tell their stories. This includes all of the elements that are built into the functionality of each platform, as well as the acceptable norms of the

community of users (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Ross, 2019). For Instagram, these functions include caption limits (2,200 characters), size of images (800 px x 800 px), and the 10 filters that are available in the app (Zappavigna, 2016). Instagram, along with most of the social networking platforms, have elements of Goffman's impression management theory "*baked"* into these tools; for example, they allow for managing one's visibility and audience to a certain degree (i.e. privacy settings), and they give users the ability to edit and revise their posts according to the audience's feedback (or lack thereof) (Ross, 2019; Richey et al, 2015; Marwick, 2015). The design of Instagram allows for a certain aesthetic to be presented -- that of beautiful, heavily curated images, hashtagged to enter the "attention economy" of the platform (Ross, 2019; Tiidenberg, 2017; Zappavigna, 2015). For most of the everyday mothers in this study (n=6), gaining a widespread Instagram following was not a motivator for posting on the platform, as evidenced by the fact that most accounts are set to "private" so that only close friends and families can view their posts. But even with privacy settings in place, we know that the norms of the Instagram community rewards compliance with these aesthetics, and results in more likes and engagement (i.e. comments) for the user, if only among their small group of private followers. On Instagram, like Facebook and other platforms, "likes" equal social capital, and as Katrin Tiidenberg (2018) finds in her research into women who hashtag their posts #over40 and #over50 on Instagram, "motherhood, if enacted within the socially accepted standards, enhances women's social capital" (p. 6). Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) demonstrated that new moms received important audience validation that they were "good mothers" when posting fun, cute baby photos. These studies show that posting on Instagram is a way for mothers to gain social capital and support from their audience by sharing their experiences. This support helps to assuage the

lonely, unappreciated, or tedious parts of everyday motherhood that do not appear on their Instagram accounts.

A key aspect of social media platforms that is important to consider when studying Instagram posts is that of "networked publics", a concept that moms clearly understand and apply in their use of Instagram. This concept was first introduced in the work of danah boyd and Alice Marwick (2014) and asserts that social media networks are different from previous communications technologies in four important ways: the nature of the digital world's persistence, its searchability, replicability, and the concept of an invisible audience (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Social media platforms can show us new perspectives on societal norms, but they can also -- especially in the case of Instagram -- add pressure to fulfill normative behaviour, as digital images can both last forever and can be widely shared beyond who we conceive of as our audience. Mothers in general are keenly aware of these aspects of the digital realm, and as a result, they are careful to portray their mothering activities safely within the confines of what is considered good mothering, even if their everyday lives are mundane or filled with frustrations (Le Moignan, 2017).

Lastly, mothers adopt the role of the "family curator" on social media by sharing their family life with their audience much in the same way as they curated and presented traditional family albums (Hogan, 2010; Lehto, 2020; Le Moignan et al, 2017). They do this by carefully managing the impression they are presenting through choosing the right image and presenting only the most sanitized and beautiful moments of family life. In general, this review of literature

on mothers and social media demonstrated that moms strive to be seen as good mothers on their social media accounts by using all of the online tools available to them.

### *2.5.3. Mothering During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

In 2020, COVID-19 hit the province, country, and the entire world in a way that had previously not been conceived of outside of Hollywood movies. In mid-March all of the provinces in Canada had adopted some sort of social distancing measures to slow the spread of this unknown virus and protect lives and the health care system (Guadagni et al, 2020). In Alberta, this included closure of all non-essential business and schools, along with restrictions on gatherings with friends and family. These restrictions, designed to save lives, came at a high cost to many, including mothers, but with no additional government support. Although in the relatively recent past women have made much progress in moving towards gender equity in the home, workplace, and society, the reality of this period made it clear that there is still a long way to go to achieve equal division of labour inside the home, and policy support from a governmental standpoint. The intensive mothering discourse that presents mothers as the primary parent and "in charge" of most aspects of parenting, coupled with the disappearance overnight of social supports (family, friends, social programs), child care (schools, daycares), and job loss or economic insecurity made this period unprecedentedly challenging for many Alberta mothers.

As mentioned above, expectations of contemporary motherhood have become intertwined with those of a neoliberal society, which focuses on individualism, competition, and enterprise (Guney-Frahm, 2020). This was especially difficult during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, where there was increased stress, escalated expectations of mothers' roles, fewer

supports in place, and a reliance on social media, mass media, and technology for all aspects of information and social connection (Guney-Frahm, 2020). The result, as Guney-Frahm contends, was that mothers were under extreme pressure with increased workloads, as well as constant uncertainty about what was coming next. This led to a strengthening of mothers in the role of primary parent, forcing them to take on an increased share of the workload, even as other supports disappeared. These increased expectations likely had an effect on several indicators of mental health including sleep quality, anxiety levels, and mood (Guadagni et al, 2020).

As previously discussed in the literature review, research finds that the "intensive mothering" paradigm is the dominant ideal in western societies (Powell, 2010; Chae, 2015; Lehto, 2020; Meng, 2020). This 'way of knowing' asserts that children are to be valued, and the focus of most of a mothers' time and energy. Mothers are the centre of socialization, entertainment, education, and well-being for children. This role becomes increasingly problematic when mothers also need to work from home, or outside the home on the front lines, with no access to child care. Although women's participation in the workforce has risen steadily, men's participation in home labour has not matched that rise (Alon et al, 2020; Sullivan, 2015). A spring 2020 study during the UK lockdowns suggested that *only* in families where the father was laid off but the mother still working outside the home were the child care duties split (slightly) more evenly than previous to the pandemic (Sevilla & Smith, 2020). Other sources have determined that "the vastly uneven and gendered nature of childcare [meant that] mothers are bearing the burden" (von Benzon, p. 2, 2020; Hinsliff, 2020). This is not unusual in times of economic instability. As Negra and Tasker (2017) point out, when there is uncertainty, equality is the first thing to go as a "luxury that can no longer be afforded" (Negra & Tasker, p. 4, 2017).

These heavy and unequal burdens can result in increased stress and decrease in mental health. A University of Calgary study determined that during the period of March 23-June 7, women reported poorer quality of sleep, along with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety than their male counterparts (Guadagni et al, 2020). A US study on the gendered impact of the pandemic lists women's jobs as the biggest casualty, as they were most likely to be employed in caring, service or restaurant positions cut to follow health restrictions (Alon et al, 2020, Hinsliff, 2020). If women were fortunate enough to retain their jobs, mothers' home workload increased as they were now also "organiz[ing] the family's daily life during exceptional circumstances" (Guney-Frahm, p. 853, 2020). After a brief burst of pandemic help, fathers/male partners were conspicuously absent from the ongoing childcare and school tasks (Wong, 2021). Also absent was government policy that prioritized mothers' needs, as their usual ways to live and work and raise children disappeared with COVID-19. One can argue that it is the increased expectations and resultant pressure on mothers that was the biggest issue of the pandemic and, at least in the short-term, has "deepened existing problems with regard to gender" (Guney-Frahm, p. 853, 2020; Mittal & Singh, 2020).

***2.5.3.1. Alberta, Canada.*** As the COVID-19 virus spread in Alberta, public health measures began to include closure of all non-essential businesses, including workplaces, schools and daycares. Overnight, learning was switched online, which presented difficulties for families without access to technology or the Internet, as well as those parents who relied on child care and school while they worked. In 2018 in Alberta, 66.2% of women were employed, and it is reasonable to assume this number has increased, as we see growth in this statistic year-over-year (Government of Alberta, 2018). Although many workers in Alberta could do some or all of their

duties from home, the addition of childcare or homeschooling to paid employment was unrealistic and unsustainable for many mothers (Medina & Lerer, 2020). In another unique pandemic twist, the COVID-19 virus presented an increased risk of serious illness or death to elderly grandparents or family members -- people whom mothers would usually turn to for help in times of a childcare shortage (Alon et al, 2020). Many two-parent families who no longer had access to childcare had to face the difficult decision of deciding whose job could be sacrificed in order to allow one parent to homeschool or care for children. More often than not, the woman's job was negatively impacted by this situation (Medina & Lerer, 2020). More problematic still was in the case of single mothers who no longer had childcare, but still needed to continue to work either inside or outside the home (Alon et al, 2020, Hinsliff, 2020). The "quarantine paradox" of increased "economic instability, mental health problems, and isolation" during a pandemic (Mittal & Singh, 2020) was felt acutely by Alberta mothers.

A Health Quality Council of Alberta study done from May-June, 2020 highlighted that 72% of Albertans expressed that their mental health was worse during this period than a year previously (Health Quality Council of Alberta, 2020). An Edmonton study revealed that "moms are not OK", with self-reporting surveys of pregnant and new moms listing depression up to 40.7% (from 15% pre-pandemic) and anxiety up to 72% (from 29% pre-pandemic) (Davenport et al, 2020). A 2021 University of Calgary study concluded that their 1333 Alberta moms, followed longitudinally over 3, 5, or 8 years, demonstrated more depressive and anxiety symptoms than before COVID-19 (Racine et al, 2021). While reasons for this are many, a contributing factor could be that the increased pressure to "be truly emotionally present for children" (Lehto, p. 665, 2020), while trying to balance working either inside or outside the home, along with social

isolation from friends and family has exponentially increased stress on mothers. Impacts of this may have longer and more amplified effects than is contained to this relatively short period of time. Archer and Kao (2018) suggest in their study of new Australian mothers' use of social media, that a lack of support for mothers has wider societal costs (p. 123). Lack of access to appropriate maternal mental and physical health supports could have a long-term detrimental effect on both child development and rates of maternal depression and anxiety long-term (Davenport et al, 2020).

During the lockdowns and quarantines of spring 2020, society moved almost entirely online. The social media platforms of Facebook, YouTube, Tik Tok and Instagram among many others, became among our sole sources of inspiration, news, and social connection. Instagram in particular was rife with videos and images of bread baking, DIY crafts, online school set-ups and schedules, quarantine recipes, and at-home workouts. Guney-Frahm (2020) describes that on social media feeds, in perfect alignment with postfeminist culture, the dominant narrative became that the lockdowns were the perfect time for moms to get in shape and start new projects. A quick scroll through Instagram made it seem as though everyone was enjoying this unprecedented situation, focussed on the positive, and taking it all in stride. Absent was the discourse of moms feeling overwhelmed, unsupported, tired, worried, and at their breaking points (Chemaly, 2020; Ferguson, 2020; Smith, 2020).

In 2013, Jo Littler wrote that it appears that the “cultural expectation is that the mother will constantly be the ‘foundation parent’” (Littler, p. 232, 2013). Clearly, this remains true in Alberta in 2020 during a pandemic. Intensive mothering expectations and postfeminist/neoliberal

ideals, coupled with the uncertainty and stress of dealing with a global health crisis, increased workload, and the challenges of trying to keep everyone healthy, calm, and entertained during lockdowns were a recipe for mothers' PTSD. This study aims to examine the intersection of this reality with the most photo-focused and curated platform, Instagram.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

As discussed in Chapter two, the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic were very challenging for mothers for a multitude of reasons. This study looks at whether or not these realities filtered into the stories they told about their lives on social media, how Instagram supports and constrains the sharing of moms' experiences, and how it actually functions for mothers in a locked down world. The content analysis of this study is informed by a frame that puts the goal of understanding these women's experiences at the centre. Goffman's theory of impression management provides a lens to view how this sample of Edmonton mothers presented their lives on their Instagram posts, while one-on-one interviews clarify how Instagram functions for these moms.

This study is informed by the concept of community-led research, where participants of a particular community study a phenomenon to come up with possible solutions (International Accountability Project, *Community Action Guide on Community-Led Research* 2018). As I myself lived the experience of mothering during COVID-19, with a full-time job, finishing my Master's degree online, and with three children (ages 12, 14, 15) who were home full-time, doing online school and in complete lockdown from all friends and activities, my perspective and my interpretation of the data is influenced by my experience and understandings. Yet my closeness to this subject and this experience does not necessarily mean a biased or unscientific approach. In this case, my own during this unique time in our history often left me wondering, "what is happening here?" A feeling amplified when scrolling through my own Instagram feed. This question informed the crafting of the research questions, the interview guide, and the subsequent data analysis, in order to explore some possible answers to this question.

## 3.1. Study Design

For this study, I used a mixed-qualitative approach. This included virtual one-on-one interviews alongside a general analysis of the same mothers' Instagram posts during the identified time period. Qualitative content analysis of cultural content, including interview transcripts and social media posts, is considered "a way to uncover cultural meanings (Thomas, 1994) around communicative acts" (Johnston & Swanson, 2003b). Working together, these interviews, along with this analysis of their Instagram posts, can allow the researcher to examine how and why these moms chose to present their lives on Instagram in the manner they did, while also providing credible answers to the proposed research questions.

In designing this study, several factors were considered to ensure that the data collection process and subsequent analysis were valid, reliable, and credible, as well as a "conceptual 'fit'" (Braun et al, 2017, p. 6) for the project. I wanted to consider both the motivations and the actual posts to see the connection behind intent versus impact. It was also important to me to "go beyond readily available data sources to seek out the marginalized, the silent, the remote, and the powerless to record and consider their perspectives and experiences" (Bamberger et al, 2012, p. 294).

### *3.1.1. Justification for Design Choices*

When considering Instagram posts as artifacts, the literature I reviewed showed definitively that these communicative tidbits can provide a lot of valuable information about life experiences during a particular time, but there are limitations to using Instagram posts as the only source of data. Because this platform in particular encourages and rewards posting of highly

curated, filtered and beautiful images and text, it can be argued that these images and short captions alone are not adequate to get an *authentic* view into mothers' lives. By using Goffman's theory as a frame for the analysis of Instagram posts, the researcher can accept that they are a potentially edited performance of good mothering, yet still find interesting and informative clues to situate this narrative in a larger context. Although skilled researchers have carefully and successfully navigated some of these issues to reveal the life experiences and motivations of everyday people from their Instagram posts alone (Friedman, 2019; Le Moignan et al, 2017; Merunkova & Slerka, 2019; Ross, 2019), I felt that to answer these research questions adequately required the addition of one-on-one interviews, which would provide a deeper understanding of these mothers' motivations for and choices regarding sharing their experiences. Instagram posts alone can be an effective way to examine *how* mothers presented their lives during the pandemic's early lockdowns, but because researchers have found that moms (and many users of social media) have a propensity to present their lives in an edited way on this platform, one-on-one interviews were crucial to allow for examination of what was missing from their posts and why, as well as dig more deeply into their experiences and motivations for using this platform.

## 3.2. Participants

### *3.2.1 Participant Profile*

The mothers in this study were middle-class or working-class (n=7), heterosexual (n=7), and lived in a home with a supportive partner (n=6). They have large circles of caring family and friends. This group of women is relatively privileged and is a group that is generally insulated when it comes to government policy changes or societal upheaval. For this group to be so

impacted by COVID-19 is interesting and merits further study in its own right. As we usually surround ourselves with people who are similar in circumstance to ourselves, the women I know and the friends of my friends closely resemble my own middle-class life. In the end, this was the most willing and convenient group to study, and one that I had the most in common with and shared their perspective. Despite its relative affluence, this population is crucial to study as it is a large group in the province where I live, yet one that has not traditionally been given much attention, as much of our work as mothers is done in the private sphere and we are generally a pretty quiet group.

Limited demographic information on the participants can be viewed below. Of note, I kept the age categories to be relatively wide as I didn't believe the questions I was asking would have a big impact across age ranges. Secondly, I did not ask demographic questions on race or sexual preference, as I did not feel these factors would play a significant role among a fairly homogenous sample of northern Alberta moms. The factors that I felt were most applicable to my study were number of children, marital status, work status, and geographic location.

**Participant Demographics**

| **Pseudonym** | **Age** | **# of Children** | **Ages of Children** | **Marital Status** | **Work Status** | **Work Location** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Corrine | 31-40 | 3 | 8, 10, 13 | Separated | Full time | From Home (no change) |
| Joanne | 41-50 | 2 | 14, 16 | Married | Full time | From Home (no change) |
| Anna | 31-40 | 2 | 16 months/3 mo pregnant | Married | Unemployed (due to COVID) | Outside the home |
| Erin | 31-40 | 2 | 12, 9 | Married | Unemployed (due to | Outside the home |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | COVID) | |
| Kara | 31-40 | 2 | 4 months/3 years | Common law | Stay-at-home mom | No change |
| Dana | 31-40 | 3 | 8, 4 & 2 | Married | Full time | From home (change) |
| Naomi | 41-50 | 2 | 8 & 5 | Married | Full time | From home (no change) |
| Shannon | 31-40 | 6 | 8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17 | Common law | Full time | From home (change) |

*Table 1: Participant Demographics*

### *3.2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Careful consideration of the selection criteria of the participants was crucial to ensure the data collected was appropriate, applicable, and broad enough to accurately capture the information sought. My inclusion criteria were women who:

a) Were living in Edmonton and area during the study period

b) Had at least one child under the age of 18 living at home

c) Had a personal Instagram account

d) Would consent to having the interview recorded (audio)

Exclusion criteria thus ruled out any respondents who were not mothers, did not have an Instagram account or used their account primarily for business purposes, and/or who did not have children living at home during this time period.

### *3.2.3. Recruitment*

Once approval of the ethics application was granted, participants were recruited using a call for participants (Appendix B) on my personal Facebook account, as well as through a post

on a Facebook group called *Spruce Grove Moms Elite*, which the researcher was a member of. Potential participants contacted me either through Facebook Messenger or my University email address. Once interest and eligibility were confirmed, the information and consent letter was sent via email to all participants and they were returned prior to the interview via email. Once consent forms were collected, the participants granted permissions for me to access their Instagram posts by emailing their username to me and accepting my follow request.

One to three posts per participant were collected from Instagram and put into a Google doc. Although I looked through many more posts for each participant to get a general idea of their types of posts and their pandemic experiences, in the interest of the small scale of my project, I only selected a couple to discuss and analyze in detail, focussing on the experiences of COVID-19, raising children, or both. The selected Instagram posts that were to be discussed during the interview were sent to the participants via email. Virtual interviews were scheduled according to the schedules of both the researcher and the participating mothers.

### *3.2.4. Sampling*

To avoid using more time than was required for both myself and my participants, I selected participants who most closely fit the criteria laid out above. Dunscombe (2010) suggests that in qualitative research, purposive sampling allows the researcher to "concentrate on instances which will illuminate the research question at hand" (p. 35). The goal of selecting participants was to produce an "exploratory sample" (Dunscombe, 2010, p. 40) that would provide ample information to answer the research questions of the study. For this study I had 12 moms interested in participating initially, with one excluded immediately as they used their Instagram

account for business purposes. The remaining four potential participants did not get back to me with their consent forms signed, and since I already had other participants who were a good fit, I did not follow up to include them. All participants were middle-class moms of more than one child. All are heterosexual and have male partners in their lives in some capacity. Although not all are white, I felt that the most important demographic factor for this study was the fact that they had children to worry about and have at home during COVID-19 lockdowns. A detailed analysis of demographics of participants appears in section 4.1.

Because of the nature of the vast amount of data that interviews can provide and the scope of this project, the sample size was determined to be between five and ten participants. It was important not to end up with too much repetitive data that was unfocused on the questions at hand. Instead, the aim was achieving data to adequately address the research questions, as well as consider the capacity of the researcher to analyze the dataset. Ultimately eight participants were recruited, interviewed and sent their transcripts to check over and approve for accuracy. Only seven participants approved their transcripts, with one lost to follow up.

#### *3.2.5. Consent/Safeguard Practices*

Bamberger et al ask researchers to consider the ways in which the research may cause "negative personal consequences" (p. 295) to their participants. In the interviews I aimed to be as general as possible and let participants lead discussion in their own direction. Prior to the interview, it was made clear in the introduction/background portion of the interview that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the aim was not to judge them, but only to better understand the intersection of motherhood and Instagram during a challenging time.

The consent form was emailed to all eight participants prior to the interviews. At the start of the interview, the consent form was reviewed again to remind participants of their options and rights regarding data collection and participation in the study.

All interview notes, recordings, and transcripts were backed up and kept on a flash drive in a secure location. After each interview, names and contact information were entered into a spreadsheet on Google Sheets, with each participant provided an anonymized identifier. The key was kept on a secure, password-protected computer. From that point, the identifier alone was used to analyze the dataset from that participant in order to ensure anonymity.

With the understanding that the participants' stories were important to keep confidential and anonymous, great care was taken to be sure to anonymize and store the dataset in a safe and secure way.

#### *3.2.6. Setting*

During the period of the interviews, Alberta was under strict government health restrictions prohibiting in-person gatherings outside of one's immediate household. Thus, interviews were conducted using the virtual meeting platforms of Zoom and Google Meets. There is a precedent for research conducted this way, and there are definite advantages and disadvantages to using a virtual platform for conducting interviews. Firstly, virtual interviews offer a relatively quick and convenient option to reach a wide audience adding no travel time (Hanna & Mwale, 2017). As our pandemic world had transformed almost entirely to operating

via online meeting platforms, the level of comfort of the average person using these relatively new technologies had vastly increased. At this moment in time, virtual interviews as a research instrument are a viable option alongside telephone interviews, yet with the valuable addition of visual cues for the researcher (via video) (Hanna & Mwale, 2017). A clear advantage for the researcher of these types of meetings is the ability to record the interview and then download either a video file, audio file, or both, for later transcription and subsequent analysis. There are also no added costs associated with using this technology as a research tool. Zoom and Skype are both free, although for limited use (i.e. "freemium" model) and U of A students have free access to the Google Suite. All participants in this research study agreed to an audio and video recording of their interview for transcription and analysis purposes.

### 3.3. Research Instruments

As mentioned above, the data for this study were collected using a mixed-qualitative approach that included 1) an analysis of one to three Instagram posts that each participant had posted to their personal Instagram account between March 15 and May 15, 2020, and 2) virtual face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted using Zoom, recorded, an audio file was downloaded, and then transcribed.

#### *3.3.1. Virtual One-on-One Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were selected as a data collection tool because they are able to adapt and flex with the complexity of both the research questions and the ideas and conversation of the participants (Bamberger et al, 2012; Dunscombe, 2010). I chose one-on-one rather than group interviews in order to make the interview process as comfortable and relaxed as possible

for the participants. Each interview was conducted at a predetermined time using an interview guide with 25 questions to frame the discussion. The interviews began with a reminder about the treatment of the data and confidentiality, the participants' right to withdraw their data at any point during the interview or transcription phase of the study, as well as a brief background on the impetus of the study and the researcher. Because of the flexibility of a semi-structured interview method, as the interviews progressed I was able to adjust my questions and add some further lines of inquiry that appeared in earlier interviews and needed further exploration.

As I am a mom who experienced the pandemic herself, I was able to relate to the participant's stories, and ask probing or more sensitive questions when required, as I had also shared many of their experiences. Because each of my participants was known to me in some way (they were all friends, colleagues, or friends of friends), it was easy to secure their cooperation and participation in the interview. As I know how fraught this period was and continues to be, I was worried that moms with whom I had no connection would not be able or willing to take the time to spare an hour to speak with me. It also meant that a potential limitation of this study would be that we are a pretty homogenous group, likely having similar experiences and seeing similar things on our Instagram accounts. Because there is some connection between us, there is potential for the participants wanting to help and then answering in a particular way that they think may be the "right" answer. There may also be hesitation to share the more personal aspects of their lives with me if I know their husbands or other friends. I was aware of this limitation, but I felt that the positives of relative closeness amplified my broad understanding of their circumstances and my ability to relate to them. It allowed me to ask questions that ultimately deepened my understanding of their and my own experiences. We are all moms who

care deeply about our kids, often put them first, and do all we can to make their lives better. We *are* "intensive mothering". However, I did also try to mitigate this limitation by being purposely vague on the specific content of the interview and what I was looking at in particular. I also highlighted that I was not wanting to judge them, but simply explore their experience and how they viewed Instagram in general. Interviews can be a therapeutic experience for participants as it is a chance for them to share their experiences and tell their stories (Dunscombe, 2010). As Dunscombe suggests, the interviewer should maintain a "passive and neutral stance" (p. 179) and I aimed to do this in these interviews. As an added benefit of collecting data from interviews virtually during a pandemic, Dunscombe (2010) also suggests that virtual interviews can reduce the "interviewer effect", or the impact that the interviewer's characteristics and demeanour have on the participant's answers (p. 192) and I believe this may have worked in my favour due to the personal connection I had to most of my participants. After the interview was complete, each participant was provided with a full transcript of their interview and asked to review and provide clarifications or corrections of the data that was captured. At this point, only seven of the initial eight participants got back with their approvals for me to use their data in the study. One was withdrawn as lost to follow up, as they did not reply to my email to approve their transcript.

### *3.3.2. Instagram Content Analysis*

Each participant allowed me to follow their Instagram account for the purpose of viewing and copying applicable posts during the period of study. Firstly, a general scan of each participant's Instagram account was performed to ascertain the general tone and types of posts that appeared in each moms' account. After a few possible posts were selected, one to three from each account were selected and sent to the participants to let them know which ones would be

discussed in further detail in order to provide an adequate sample of the types of posts the moms made during the pandemic, but also to keep the volume of posts to a manageable level. During the interview discussion about the posts, each participant explained what was happening in the post, their motivations for posting this content, and who they imagined the audience to be. The caption, image, and discussion were all included in the general analysis.

## 3.4. Procedure

### *3.4.1. Interview guide*

The interview guide had 23 questions and was divided into four categories: demographic information, which were short-answer, and long-answer questions about pandemic experiences of mothering, Instagram use and post discussion, and the impact of the general architecture of Instagram on their use of the platform. When putting together the interview guide (Appendix A), I wanted to be sure to build-in a chance for discussion to proceed in the direction that the participant directed, while still providing a framework for discussion so that data collected would answer the research questions under study. These types of interviews are called semi-structured, and as Bamberger (2012) explains, “interactive conversation may take the focus in highly informative and unanticipated ways” (p. 309). This was very true of the discussion that resulted during these interviews. Most of the moms are regular and more-than-competent users of Instagram, as well as have large circles of moms that they interact with regularly online. They were truly the experts of the experience of mothering during a pandemic and the presentation of these experiences on Instagram, and our conversations were very detailed and informative, sometimes slightly veering off topic, but always interesting.

#### *3.4.2. Transcription*

I transcribed each of the interviews using a traditional audio file and pedal system, as I also do medical transcription as a freelancer. This was very helpful as it added an opportunity for me to familiarize myself with the dataset and I did not run into the pitfalls that many of my colleagues did with regard to errors in transcripts, as is common with AI transcribers. Each transcript was confirmed for accuracy by the participants via email, as previously discussed. Next, the interviewer's notes from each interview were added into the transcripts, so that additional thoughts that occurred during the interview were included in the analysis. The aim of this was to provide an "audit trail" that can be used as a "permanent and tangible record" (p. 284) to track my thinking process and choices made during the analysis of the data (Dunscombe, 2010).

### 3.5. Data Analysis

#### *3.5.1. Theoretical Framework*

The theoretical framework that guided my data analysis was Goffman's theory of impression management. Many researchers have successfully used Goffman's theories of dramaturgy as tools to examine communicative phenomena online (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Gray et al, 2018; Le Moignan et al, 2017; Merunkova & Slerka, 2019). Through the lens of these theories, one can understand that Instagram posts can be a performative picture of motherhood, yet also can give us telling information about a particular place and time. Added to these posts is the data provided from the one-on-one interviews. Goffman's theories can be used as the lens through which these moms' presentation of their pandemic lives on Instagram can be closely examined.

### *3.5.2. Interview Analysis*

Based on the advice in an article by Bengtsson (2016), transcripts were read through in their entirety in order to become familiar with the content. After reading the data through three times, a first coding pass through was completed, inductively identifying longer codes using phrases the moms used themselves, i.e., “struggled to balance work and kids”. On a second coding pass I put longer ideas into shorter codes, like “evidence of struggle”, or “negative impact”. On a third pass through the data I condensed the shorter codes into basic thematic categories like, “struggle”, or “guilt”. These categories were then inserted into a spreadsheet by question and participant so that commonalities and patterns could be easily viewed. One issue that I ran into was that of outliers. In each category there was mostly a clear pattern that could be viewed, but there was also an outlier opinion or experience in each case. Although there were several findings clearly apparent, there were also experiences here that didn’t fit neatly into the findings. I chose to mention but not focus on these answers to my questions in order to focus my findings and discussion for the purposes of clarity and brevity.

### *3.5.3. Instagram Post Analysis*

There are four important parts to an Instagram post when analyzing it for answers to a question: the image, the caption, the hashtags, and the engagement indicators from the audience like hearts (likes) or comments. For this analysis, I focussed on the first three. The posts were examined together and a brief synopsis was created that included the most salient elements. For the purposes of this study there was not a detailed analysis and categorization of the elements, but rather a general summary produced as most of the posts were strikingly similar in content. Instagram has made some changes to the social capital aspect of their platform in that now it is

impossible to see the scale of engagement on a post (i.e. it now says only "*liked by XXXXX (random IG handle that may be also a follower of yours) and others*", rather than giving an exact number of likes) For this reason, as well as in the interest of time and prioritizing the most telling and appropriate parts of the posts for my study, I chose to focus on the data types listed above.

An equally important part of this analysis was the interview discussion of the motivations and meanings behind the post. As my main goal was to view how these mothers presented their lives and created their own meaning during this period of time, as well as how they "reflect[ed], generate[d] and reinforce[d] cultural messages (Dunscombe, 2010, p. 288), the interview discussion was crucial to examine this.

### *3.5.4. Reliability, Validity and Credibility*

Bamberger et al (2012) suggest that "in qualitative analysis it is important to note that objectivity is impossible to achieve" (p. 315), but that there are methods researchers can use to improve the credibility of qualitative research. For this study, several methods were used to enhance the reliability, validity, and credibility of the research.

When analyzing the Instagram posts from each mom, a preliminary analysis was conducted of the selected posts, and then that information was confirmed during the interviews. I wanted to ensure my understanding of the content of the posts was accurate with what was intended. In most cases they aligned, with the notable caveat that what moms portrayed as snippets of their lives on Instagram was a very surface presentation of a moment in their day and often didn't have a deeper meaning or tell a more complex story, to them anyways.

In order to ensure the interview data was as accurately captured as possible, I verified the accuracy of the interview transcripts with each participant. In studies that use more than one coder, lack of coding consistency can lead to issues of reliability. In this study, having a lone coder code all of the data allowed for an equal and consistent application of codes and categories to the raw data.

### 3.6. Summary of Methodology

Scholars suggest that study design for qualitative research must aim first and foremost to adequately and appropriately answer the research questions, yet there are many tools researchers can use to achieve these ends. Qualitative data collection and analysis require careful attention by the researcher to avoid the potential pitfalls of researcher bias, unfocussed or overwhelming amounts of data, and participant authenticity. Here, the closeness of the researcher to the circumstances of the participants, the method of triangulation of data by using both virtual interviews along with content analysis of Instagram posts, as well as having a lone coder and validity checks of transcripts, ensure a research design that is reliable, valid and credible, while also answering the questions under study.

# Chapter 4: Findings

## 4.1. Instagram Use

Six of the seven participants used Instagram daily during the period of March 15 to May 15, 2020. Five participants increased their use, with two using it about the same as before the pandemic lockdowns hit Alberta.

The moms in this study primarily posted content about their kids and family life (including pets) to their Instagram accounts.

All but one of the moms had private accounts (n=6), and their Instagram audience (followers) only included relatively close family, friends, and colleagues.

## 4.2. Findings

The findings of this study are divided into three sections.

1. COVID-19's impact on mothers;
2. How Instagram functioned for moms:
    a. When using (looking/scrolling);
    b. When posting (sharing photos/captions); and,
3. How the challenges or triumphs of this period were represented in their Instagram posts.

### *4.2.1. COVID-19's Impact on Edmonton Mothers*

***4.2.1.1. Finding 1 | Edmonton moms struggled emotionally during the early days of COVID-19.*** As previously discussed in the methodology section of this paper, general

pandemic-related questions began each interview. For many of the moms, remembering this period was difficult and emotional. All seven participants expressed fear, anxiety, worry, and distress over what the impacts would be on their families, and especially on their kids, during the early days of COVID-19 lockdowns.

Not surprisingly, challenges and struggles were present in each woman's story of the emotions they experienced during the early days of the pandemic. The main themes gleaned from the answers to these questions included a severe anxiety over health, finances/employment, and emotional distress of the impacts on their children (lack of school, friends, activities, too much screen time, trying to keep them entertained and educated). Shannon (six kids, common law, working from home), a successful entrepreneur, related the stress she felt during this time due to suddenly having to manage more with less. "I think the additional pressure on my time and the expectations to teach the kids ***and*** work… I found that really challenging." While these are seemingly logistical challenges alone, in a society where moms are responsible for all aspects of their children's well-being, this pressure to be a full time partner, mother, entertainer, teacher and employee within the confines of your house is immensely difficult, especially when none of the former supports are available, like friends, family, teachers, and coaches. Naomi shares, "[my husband and I] were dividing our days, it is still this way, so I am with the kids in the morning, then I work in the afternoon and into the evening. We figure out the school thing in our off-time from work, then work, then do more work because you can't compress your full day into a half-day" (two kids, married, working from home).

Another huge stressor that most of the moms identified was watching their children struggle with having their worlds turned upside down. They went from a regular, activity-, school-, and friend-filled life to suddenly being stuck at home with no in-person connection. “My biggest struggle was watching one of my children struggle...struggle with [online] school and just lock himself in his room. Seeing him unhappy and not having [any in-person interaction with] his friends.” (Joanne, two kids, married, working from home). Where a single person or older couple could have navigated these inconveniences with Zoom fitness classes, online grocery delivery, and a Netflix binge, these moms internalized the struggles of their children and it greatly impacted their own mental health. Naomi shares, “You might go through the motions of trying to seem like you’re enjoying something so that your kids are fine, but no.”

A 2021 University of Calgary study on Alberta moms found that during the pandemic, mothers’ stress, depressive, and anxiety symptoms increased, thereby decreasing their mental wellbeing (Racine et al, 2021). This was corroborated in the findings of this study. Each of the participants indicated that they had suffered mental duress during the early lockdowns. Anna, who had one child and was pregnant with her second, suddenly was at home as she quit working outside the home during her pregnancy due to the risks of being in a front line position and COVID-19. Staying with her in-laws and friends during this period as her home was being renovated, she couldn’t see her family in another province, or even her husband, as he was working on their renovations and also working full time. She described this period as precarious for her mental health, spending many days crying while her young child watched cartoons. “There have been some very, very low points” (Anna, one child and pregnant, married, unemployed due to COVID-19). The women in this study took on extra tasks like education and

entertainment without complaint and with no outside support in order for their kids to remain as healthy and happy as possible, but with detrimental effects on their own mental health. They did this without hesitation, as there was simply no other option. Finding balance with fewer supports while also dealing with their children's social isolation was extremely emotionally challenging for this group of mothers (n=7).

All of the moms in this study were at home during this period, either because of losing their jobs, shifting to at-home work, or continuing to work from home. Only one was already a stay-at-home mom so had no change to employment, yet even in this case the lockdowns did have an impact, mostly because of the detrimental effects on her children.

> "Unfortunately right at this time it was spring and starting to get nicer outside. [Child] was right at the age where she was actually starting to want to play with other kids and then she couldn't… and so it was even more of a guilt of what can ***I*** do for you because you can't even do that anymore. [The neighbourhood moms and I] were taking shifts outside and you're like, 'oh they're out right now so we'll wait until they go in, and then we'll go out.'" Kara (two kids, stay-at-home mom)

In contrast, many of the partners and husbands of these moms continued to work full-time (n=7) and the majority (n=5) remained working ***outside*** the home during this time. The University of Calgary study cited above found evidence that working outside the home during the pandemic had a protective effect on mental health, demonstrated in a population of Alberta moms who were also health care workers (Racine et al, 2021). Kara talks about a conversation she had with her partner in the early days of the pandemic, "you get to go to work and see other

people. I know you're working and it is not a holiday… but you still get to leave the house and see people". Even though she is a stay-at-home mom and her work life was not interrupted, all other aspects of her normal life *were* turned upside down, and she no longer had the option to hang out with friends or see family. As all of the women in this study did not work outside their homes during the lockdowns, it follows that they reported extreme anxiety, worry, and stress related to their daily lives as all sense of normalcy for themselves and their children vanished overnight.

***4.3.1.2. Finding 2 | Moms liked the slower pace of life that the pandemic provided, as well as more opportunities to get outside.*** Among the things several of the moms enjoyed during this time were having fewer scheduled commitments and spending more time outside. In pre-COVID lives, northern Alberta families tended towards overscheduling every minute of the day in planned activities. After COVID, the "work" shifted from driving to and from activities, to planning more family activities to keep everyone entertained in different ways. "All of a sudden I wasn't having to run the kids to practices and their activities. I really enjoyed having my days more open on the weekend", says Shannon, who loves the outdoors and found that the pandemic provided more time and opportunity to do this. Corrine (three kids, separated, working from home) relates, "[I enjoyed] slowing life down, fewer activities, and fewer commitments." The net result of this shift was spending more time outside, as no indoor recreational or leisure opportunities were available during the lockdowns. "I did a lot of outdoor activities whenever I could to help my mental health" (Shannon). Joanne, a mom who lives on an acreage and loves the outdoors, prioritized getting outside and active during this time. "I would take a walk every day… and just love it." This was a unique time to slow down and reconnect as a family, but all

this planning and entertainment, even in an outdoor setting, meant no less work for moms. The moms for the most part aim to keep the parts of pandemic life that worked well for their families, like the increased outdoor activity. However, not all of the moms were appreciative of this extra time to commune with nature and aren't as likely to continue these behaviours once indoor recreation and leisure opens. Kara relates, "it's great for the kids and that is important, but… I'm talking about myself for a second. A walk does nothing for me."

When looking at how Instagram functions for moms, the findings of this study are divided into two sub-categories: looking (using/scrolling/being on the platform) and posting (sharing personal content (images, captions) to the platform. The distinction between looking and posting behaviours is important here, as this study found that there were different motivations and goals behind these separate behaviours on Instagram (Gorea, 2020, AI Arts and Cultures Workshop Series Presentation, University of Alberta). While looking behaviours primarily connected the moms to their larger social networks by way of allowing them to see what others were up to, posting behaviours were instead motivated by wanting to capture these unique moments for themselves to look back on in the future. It is also interesting to note the difference in mental/emotional impact that different behaviours have. A study of social media sites and their relation to well-being during the pandemic indicates that active usage has a positive impact on well-being, while passive behaviours like looking and scrolling have a negative effect on well-being (Masciantonio et al, 2021).

### *4.3.2. Instagram: Looking Behaviours*

When looking at or using Instagram, moms in this study reported using it to maintain a social connection with family and friends that they could not see during the lockdowns (n=6). They also appreciated and engaged with people that they perceived as being more relatable (i.e sharing their struggles, showing the imperfections of their lives) (n=5), something that influencers have known and used to their advantage for years in order to attract and engage their followers and increase their brand presence (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

**4.3.2.1.** ***Finding 3 | Moms reported using Instagram as a source of connection to others.*** Moms in this study cited using (looking/scrolling) the social platform mainly to connect with others in their social circles during this time. As Kara was home with two little kids, her husband works out of town, and her family lives several provinces away, during this time she did not have in-person contact with anyone in her extended friend circles/support networks. She says, “If I didn’t have this [Instagram and other mediated technologies], I wouldn’t have had any connection to anybody else.” With health orders to restrict your in-person contact to only those in your family, even if you had a large family at home, moms were missing out on important social connection and support. For these moms, as work time bled into their free time and reduced the amount of time they could devote to self-care and social activities, Instagram was a quick and easy way to see what other people were doing. “[I used Instagram] to stay connected with other people… to fill that void of connection. To see what other moms were doing to fill their days.” (Shannon) Anna told me that she used Instagram for “connection and seeing how others were doing”. While all of the moms did use other social media and mediated technology like Zoom meetings, texting, calling, FaceTime, etc. to also provide them updates on close family and

friends, Instagram provided the opportunity for moms to share and receive life updates with a wider audience than they may have been calling, video chatting with, or texting, which calls into question the idea that social networks create a vast and anonymous community. Most of the moms in this study have a modest circle of followers on their Instagram accounts, and they purposely keep their Instagram communities small so as not to run into some of the problems that can occur online with privacy issues.

May Freidman points out that much of what moms share on Instagram can be considered "humble bragging" (2018). One mom in this study spoke about this motivation directly. Joanne said, "I'd say my posts are, I'd hate to say the word bragging, but just things I am proud of." Shannon shared that this is what she sees some of her mom friends doing themselves on Instagram, "half the people [I follow] are posting about their perfectly baked sourdough bread... and winning at the pandemic." This "humble bragging" can be challenging for other moms who are not "winning at the pandemic" to relate to and may instead trigger negative feelings.

Because of the nature of Instagram's design and community ethos, this platform in particular encourages presenting a picture of life that is edited, filtered and curated. These moms understood this potential in the posts that they were seeing. Kara talked about the danger of believing other moms' lives were perfect and the impacts it might have.

> "It's extremely dangerous when you are susceptible to it… all you are seeing is what people are choosing to show you online. Then you sit back, turn your phone off, and go back to your reality that looks nothing like that? Let's be honest {laughs}. My reality looks little like what I choose to share."

These moms *do* understand this danger, but would rather have this potentially less-than-authentic way to connect to others, than to not have any information about what their social networks were doing during this time of lockdowns and social isolation. To them, at least it was something.

The moms in this study used Instagram to see what others were doing during the lockdowns and to feel connected to them. They used it to feel like they weren't so alone. One of the moms commented that it was also a way to see who was following the COVID-19 lockdown rules and who wasn't, even though seeing people gathering made her angry as she wasn't seeing any family or friends during this time. All of the moms specifically said that they used Instagram during the lockdowns to see what others were doing, as it was one of the few ways that was available to them to connect with their wider circle of friends when you couldn't gather, go to activities, catch up at the gym, or when dropping off the kids at school.

***4.2.2.2. Finding 4 | Moms found others who shared their own struggles on Instagram during the pandemic to be more relatable.*** The posts or people these moms felt most attracted to and engaged with on Instagram were the ones they perceived as sharing the challenges and struggles of this period. They appreciated seeing that others were experiencing hardships and "real life" and they related most with these types of posts. "The [moms on Instagram] I feel more attracted to are just like "this is real life… it's a struggle" (Shannon). When asked about the importance of "authenticity" in moms she follows Erin replied, "I would say I like photos that are authentic. If I wanted picture perfect, I'd follow celebrities and magazines. I like seeing messy houses, messy hair, and no makeup. It seems cliche to say the struggle is real, but it is nice to see

real people" (Erin. Personal communication, April 11, 2021.). And from Joanne, "For some reason I keep going back to [friend on IG]. She will post some really funny things about the shitty things that happen in their day and she makes light about it… and that's nice to see." Anna explained wanting to see relatable experiences and posts on Instagram when she said,

> "I don't want Instagram to be a place I scroll through and see perfect images of what my life could look like or "should" look like. I want to see posts that I relate to! Mom hair! Dirty clothes because your kids barf on you all day! Homes that aren't perfectly styled just to show off. That's my world right now and I want to see people relating, so I can connect and feel a part of a realistic group, not an idealistic one (Anna. Personal communication. April 12.).

As mentioned in the literature review, Griffin (2014) found that the mothers in her Pinterest study wanted to engage with moms who they felt were not too perfect in their daily lives. This appears to hold here, even in times of strife. My understanding of "authenticity" or "picture-perfect" in this context means sharing a photo that doesn't necessarily reflect your actual life. For example, taking a beautiful picture of your clean kitchen and presenting it as your only reality, while World War III erupts behind you and the living room looks like a bomb went off. As moms, we engage more with people who are presenting *both* the struggles and challenges, as well as the small wins that pandemic life afforded. This helps us to feel like our lives are normal, and not like everyone *but us* is doing fine.

### *4.2.3. Instagram: Posting Behaviours*

When posting on Instagram, this study found that moms used it during the pandemic in two important ways. Firstly, they posted on their Instagram accounts to share the positive things that were happening in their lives, so as not to add to the negativity of this period on their friends and family. Secondly, they used it to create a visual diary for themselves to look back on and remember these unique and challenging times.

#### *4.3.3.1. Finding 5 | Moms post positive things on Instagram in order to avoid spreading negativity.*

While challenges of the pandemic's lockdowns were subtly present in three out of fourteen Instagram posts (2/7 participants' posts), the majority of these moms sought to express the positive things they were doing to cope with the challenges of COVID-19 lockdowns, rather than focus on their negative experiences during COVID-19. They each pointed to not wanting to add to the negativity that was happening everywhere. On discussing taking front porch photos with her children, Corrine shared,

> "We are all locked up but we can still find unique and creative ways to celebrate our family… I think I was just trying to portray the most positive things that we did on a daily basis because there was so much negativity in the world already that I just wanted to put a smile on people's faces."

Kara talked about why she chose to only post lighthearted photos and content during this time.

> "I think we just don't want to add to somebody else's load… they [the audience] want to see the good. That is what we all go there for. We don't want to share [negative things] because we don't want to add to the load of what somebody else is feeling."

Joanne posted funny or positive content on her Instagram account as well. She talks about sharing a series of photos about her child's birthday celebration in lockdown.

> "I just wanted to share with everybody that it's not all doom and gloom in quarantine, we can have some fun too… I try to be really positive… especially to my family and friends. I think it is my way of coping… not to make myself look better, but to make myself feel better."

This statement is supported by the findings in the Masciantonio et al study (2021), as they determined that people who actively share on Instagram have increased well-being over those who simply scroll through the content of the users they follow (Masciantonio et al, 2021).

The moms in this study posted content to their Instagram accounts to share their lives with their audience (most often close family and friends), including things that they were doing and that were helping their children cope with the pandemic's difficult times. Although some of the study images could be seen as presenting a challenging moment when discussed in detail, from the perspective of an outsider (not a close friend or family member) these moms presented their photos in a lighthearted or humorous way, i.e. a dreary day from the previous year captioned "somehow more fitting this year <laughing emoji>", in a photo of a barefoot child looking wild and standing over a firepit hashtagged #feralchild, or in an old baby photo with shocked expressions on their faces captioned "they have the same look this year as #quaranteens". They hinted at struggles they were experiencing, but didn't complain or share details with their audience.

In a couple of the posts I analyzed there was a subtext of advice-giving or sharing what was working in the moms' lives. This is one thing we do as moms a lot in order to support each other. Often we will listen to an issue in our friend's household and then say, "this is what worked for me". This clearly happens on Instagram during a pandemic. When discussing a post during the lockdown when her child was struggling with anxiety and online schooling, Shannon explains the motivations behind her post. "I don't want to tell people what to do, just what I was doing… this is how we are trying to cope with the pandemic." Naomi also shared on her Instagram a beautiful art project/ceremony that helped her child with nightmares. She shared photos of drawing the bad dreams, then destroying the drawings, and then drawing some happy hopes for the future. "I think it was just that it was a really crappy time for so many of us with little kids, and this is what we were doing, and it worked." When we share what works for us as moms, we also offer a glimpse into our challenges as well. These glimpses, plus the valuable information they share, provides important support for other moms in our circles.

These moms consciously sought to present the good times, the unique experiences, and the resilient ways they chose to navigate through the challenges of mothering during the pandemic and in doing so maintained the status quo of normative motherhood, even during the seemingly never-ending lockdowns in Alberta.

***4.2.3.2. Finding 6 | Instagram functions as a visual diary/timeline, especially during challenging or unique times.*** These moms reported their use of Instagram as a visual diary/timeline of their lives, and that it functioned as a way to remember these moments (n=5).

Often they post to their accounts with this use in mind, as much as they post to share their experiences with friends and family. Naomi describes this function of Instagram.

> "I think at that moment [I post to] share with a few friends or family, but then in terms of where it does most of its work, it really is for me to look back on… to easily access those memories in that space."

When discussing a COVID-19 mask selfie post, Anna said that this post was important for her to remember during these strange and unsettling times, and that Instagram was an easy way to do this. She remembers going out to a store to purchase spring flowers and how it felt so weird to finally be out of the house. Her mom had made her a mask, and although many people weren't wearing them (it was not a usual practice in Alberta until into the summer and not municipally and provincially mandated until the fall), she wanted to thank her mom, show it off, and remember this moment. "When I look back at it, [the post] was some kind of representation of COVID and what I was doing." Anna wanted to remember this time and be able to reflect on and process it at a later date.

Here Instagram functions as a meaning-making activity -- a way to look back on "and easily access" what you have experienced without the hassle of printing photos and putting them in a photo album (Naomi. Feb 2021. Virtual Interview.). It captures the family memories and stories that would have traditionally appeared in those family albums (Le Moignan et al, 2017), yet is shared widely with others and is accessed across different time periods (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Moms post images of their days for many reasons, but one important reason is so they can look back later and reflect on these times. This ability to look back on a visual timeline and make

sense of your experience is particularly important during a challenging time, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

***4.2.3.3. Finding 7 | Struggles were only subtly hinted at in Instagram posts.*** Despite the finding that moms appreciated seeing the "real" version of others' lives, with all the mom hair, messy houses, and sharing the frustrations or disappointments of extended lockdowns, most of the mothers did not do this in an obvious way in their own posts. During the interviews when discussing the feelings and motivations behind the posts, they talked emotionally about particular struggles and hardships they were going through at the time of capturing and posting these moments, but to a casual onlooker this was not visible. Without a detailed explanation of what was going on in their posts, challenges were only hinted at and were well within a frame of what is socially acceptable for mothers to be feeling and posting about on Instagram, including proud moments, capable and compassionate parenting, and being able to handle whatever life throws at you with grace and aplomb.

The most important takeaways from this study are the findings listed above. Moms were very challenged during COVID-19 lockdowns for many reasons, most notably the impact of the lockdowns on their children. Not everything about lockdowns were horrible, as they did allow a chance to get outside more and slow life down to reconnect. Moms used Instagram to feel connected and to see what others were doing during these unique and challenging times. They appreciated those who showed what "real life" was like so that they could relate, and feel like they were normal to be struggling with the challenges that COVID created for their families, yet they often did not present the depth of their own struggles in their posts. While they did use

humour at times to subtly hint at the challenges of mothering during a pandemic, its work was not to overtly challenge pervasive ideals about the norms of motherhood and the unfair pandemic expectations of mothers. Finally, moms used Instagram as a digital and visual timeline of their life that they could look back on when they wanted and make sense of these unprecedented times.

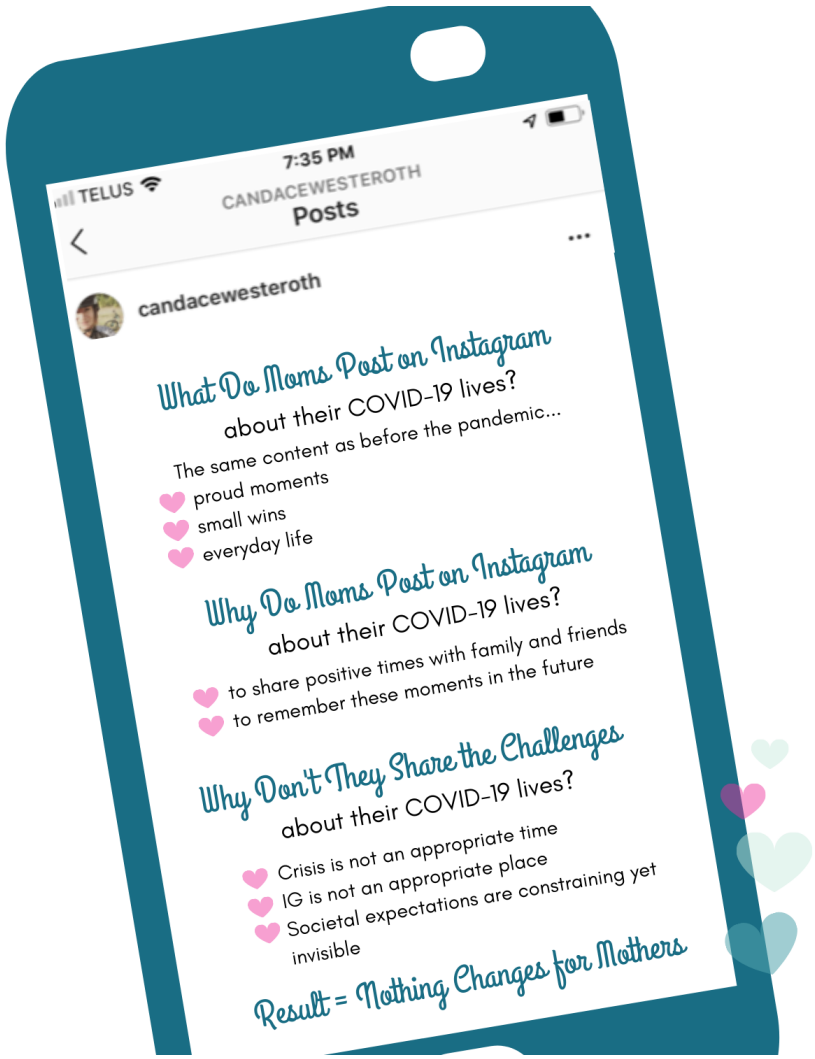


*Figure 2: Summary of findings*

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Why didn't moms share the challenges of their COVID-19 lives on their Instagram accounts? There were several reasons. Firstly, they didn't want to add to the struggles of this unique time by sharing negativity on Instagram. Secondly, they felt that Instagram wasn't an appropriate platform to share their negative experiences, as they were more interested in sharing their life experiences in this space. Instagram was not political for them during this time, and these moms preferred to keep these spaces for family experiences and social connection. They did not use this platform for social issues awareness, which is something that we saw change for other groups over the course of the pandemic.[1] Thirdly, the societal expectations of mothering in COVID-19 demands that we follow the rules, make the best of things, and be good citizens and moms for the good of the family and society at large. These moms did this. Both on their Instagram accounts and IRL.

Past studies have found that one of the main motivations of moms posting on social media is to present themselves as good mothers by depicting all of the norms of motherhood that we take for granted in our society (Chae, 2015; Lehto 2020; Le Moignan et al, 2017; Pedersen, 2016). This finding *does* bear out in my analysis of these moms' Instagram posts during the early days of COVID-19, although interestingly *not one* of the moms described her own posts in these terms. This motivation is obviously so buried in our expectations of ourselves that we have

[1] While Instagram was not previously used widely for political awareness, this did shift over the course of the pandemic with the BLM movement and #BlackoutTuesday. https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/6/24/21300631/instagram-black-lives-matter-politics-blackout-tuesday

internalized it to the point where it has become invisible to us, or at least we are as yet unwilling to talk about it as our motivation. All of the posts that were analyzed had the subtext of "good mothering" in that these moms were sharing the unique, creative, and sometimes humorous ways that they were mothering during the pandemic. Their children were safe, well cared for, entertained, and celebrated, solidly in line with the normative expectations of contemporary mothers. In this way, Instagram functions as a way to share, promote, and support the expectations that society places on mothers.

This study found that Instagram connected moms to their friends and family, as expected, but also functioned as a way for them to look back at their lives and remember these times vividly. By using Instagram in this way, it performs two important tasks with one post. The mom can remember all of the intimate or private details that may not be obvious to everyone else, just like when flipping through a traditional family photo album of times past, while also sharing the goings-on of their lives with friends and family. A photo can represent one thing for the audience (i.e. a beautiful garden) but something else for the mother, which may be entirely invisible to the audience (i.e. a challenging time, a proud moment, or a bright spot in another otherwise gloomy day). Although a couple of the moms I spoke to did think about the potential privacy issues when using Instagram in this way, (i.e. the way the platform itself or other bad actors can scrape the images and data that its users provide in sometimes shady ways), ultimately the benefits they receive from having an easy way to recall their lives and memories outweighs the privacy trade-offs that are inherent in online social media platforms.

This study found that moms posting on their Instagram accounts chose to present the positive moments of their lives during the challenges of the pandemic. There were very few choices at this point in time, other than making the best of this situation. They shared the things that were filling up their days like walks or bike rides with the kids, the small wins, like a new organizing project completed or a quiet moment alone, and the things that were working for them, like how they successfully slayed online school set up or got rid of nightmares. They shared the things that they found interesting or funny in their locked-down lives. They did not share the full scope of their burdens, fears, or frustrations with their audience -- not because they didn't have them, or because they consciously wanted their lives to appear perfect -- but as they reported, it was because they didn't want to add to the negativity of this time and the "load" on their friends and family. However, their reasons for not showing the entirety of their struggles is more complicated than simply the ethos or design of the platform of Instagram, or the societal expectations of either themselves or their audiences. This motivation, of not wanting to upset or burden others in their social circles, might be in part due to this unique time and the lack of options at hand to improve the situation.

If we look a little deeper beyond the mothers' stated motivations, there may be a couple of possible explanations for the focus on positivity and exclusion of any sign of struggle in these moms' Instagram posts, given the reality of their actual struggles during COVID-19. Firstly, as Albertans we have seen negativity explode in the past 18 months, both online and off. Albertans were polarized and the conflicts were played out daily on our social media accounts. Between the flame wars of anti-vaxxers, anti-maskers, conspiracy theorists, and general disagreement over restrictions, this group of moms was not interested in fanning these flames on the feeds of those

in their social circle. “Negativity and anger are things that should, in my opinion, be left to the privacy of those directly impacted” (Joanne. Apr 21. Personal Communication.).

A second possible reason for the sharing of positivity and positive messages points, perhaps, to mothers perceiving one of their duties as a good mother is to make the best of every situation for the good of their children. We don’t complain; we cooperate and we persevere, like good citizens and family members. While understandable, perhaps we need to ask whether *not* complaining more or sharing the negative parts of this experience does mothers a service or a disservice? Does it allow us to band together in solidarity under a shared experience and better support one another? Does presenting only the best parts, on Instagram at least, allow us to move the needle on improving all of our lives as mothers? Could we better use Instagram to achieve all of the things we want from it, while also making it work for us to improve our lives? Recent use of Instagram as a political platform shows that it is a powerful tool to bring awareness of issues and solidarity and support to an undermined, ignored, or mistreated group. Although perhaps in the past it could have been argued that middle-class Canadian mothers are not an underprivileged group, after COVID turned life on its head, that may have brought to light some unfinished battles yet to be waged.

Thirdly, it could be that Instagram just wasn’t the right platform for these moms to do this work on. Naomi alludes to this when she says, “[When reviewing each platform separately during this period] immediately I was seeing how differently I was using each of these spaces”. These moms may have felt these inequities and the heightened expectations during the early days of COVID-19 lockdowns, but they didn’t share these feelings on Instagram. They may have been

challenging the social constructions of motherhood on other platforms, or in other ways in their lives, but on Instagram, they followed the platform norms of posting only curated and beautiful images, and leaving Instagram as the "nicest" place on the Internet.

Why, if these moms appreciated seeing other moms share their struggles during this difficult time, did they overwhelmingly choose not to share this themselves in their posts? The societal imperative to be seen as good mothers who can handle anything and are unrelentingly positive, outweighs the benefits of sharing negative aspects of life on social media, even if the latter offers a better chance at solidarity with other moms and perhaps social change by a widespread dismantling of these unrealistic expectations. Although initially the pandemic provided an opportunity to begin to overtly and publicly challenge some of these unrealistic expectations of mothers, that they will abide by the tenets of intensive mothering no matter what else is going on, this study found that even during times of great struggle during COVID-19, Edmonton mothers toed the line, kept their chins up, put their best foot forward, and did all they could for the good of their children and families thereby supporting normative expectations of good mothering on their Instagram accounts.

### 5.1. Moms ❤️ Instagram

What is clear from these interviews is that these moms love Instagram. They like that it is a simple platform where the "picture speaks for itself" (Corrine) and that their audience can take what they need from it without a lot of judgement, or endless discourse and debate, "no one's throwing shade on Instagram" (Shannon). It's easy to post a pretty picture, add a filter, and type a

quick caption, rather than a long-winded explanation. Instagram is a nice place to spend time with less negativity than they see on other platforms. Perhaps as a reaction to all of the negativity on social media platforms, Instagram has recently begun hiding all comments after the first one, unless you click to view them, which makes it more difficult for others to view your post's comments. This means that even more importance is placed on the image and a short caption, as the rest is hidden from view, except for those of your followers who are motivated to see more. This change is likely designed to give users the feeling that Instagram is a "nicer" platform and as a result, users feel less judged there. Until now, Instagram has also remained relatively free of advertisers, although several of the moms mentioned that this too has changed over the course of COVID-19. Almost every participant indicated that the part of Instagram they disliked the most were the ads. But still, moms believe that Instagram works well for them and provides them a creative outlet, a way to connect to other moms, family, and friends, an easy way to remember what they have experienced, and to provide them some entertainment and escape from their own lives.

### 5.2. We have a platform but what are we saying?

Is a mediated social connection like Instagram -- which was one of the few ways that these seven moms had to connect to their larger circle of friends and family during the lockdowns -- enough to provide the crucial connection to others that moms want and need? These moms discussed how Instagram did reduce their feelings of social isolation during the lockdowns as they could see what others were doing and feel more connected. But, discourse analysis of the moms' posts reveals that most of the content they themselves posted on Instagram was the "highlight reel", not a "highlight REAL" (Kara). Would sharing a less curated and more

messy life, or even directly challenging the idea that all of these pandemic jobs had to fall on mothers, have offered a more satisfying social connection to their friends and family? Would publicly challenging an incredible lack of government support for mothers have helped improve their lives? Would it have offered more solidarity and support between and among other moms in their circles and have had a more protective effect on mental health? Could anything have improved the situation for moms during this time? Maybe not. But we had the platform, yet we remained solidly married to our societally imposed role of good mother, rather than rocking the boat in already very stormy waters. But, now it is Mother's Day 2021, and what we see is a movement of moms who are fed up and who are starting to challenge these normative views and expectations of modern mothers. It is my hope that this movement will become widespread among the posts of everyday moms too, as it is crucial to raise awareness, challenging these ideals, and pushing back on these expectations on every platform and in every way we have available to us. COVID-19 showed us that if we just say yes to everything and demand nothing, the world will keep piling on the work and not even say "thank you". During the period of study for this project, these moms did the best they could and found support and connection where they could, and sometimes they shared this on Instagram. The moms here weren't relying on it to do much beyond keep them informed of what others were doing and they seemed to have a clear understanding of its limitations. It was just a way to feel connected to others during a tough time and provide an easy way to look back and remember these times. But what if they had used this platform differently?

Feminists agree that it is important for all women, including mothers, to tell their stories and share their experiences, and Instagram is one way we can do this. We need to honestly share

the many different ways we can raise children and divide the work in order to normalize a wider set of mothering experiences, and overtly challenge the narrow and tightly held norms of intensive mothering. By avoiding vulnerability and not sharing the unpleasant bits, we miss the opportunity to share a narrative that may ultimately help to take the pressure of perfection we're all held to, down a notch.

### 5.3. Learnings from COVID-19

One lesson learned from the pandemic is that we need to better support moms' mental and emotional health during times of social disruption. They are the ones who are primarily responsible for children and family health, so it makes sense to prioritize this group to reduce the wider societal impacts. Other studies have provided great suggestions with regard to government supports and services (i.e. don't close schools and daycares) (Guadagni et al, 2020; Racine et al, 2021), but what might this look like with regard to everyday moms on Instagram?

As most moms know, and have learned again during the pandemic, if you want something done, you most likely will need to do it yourself. In that vein, there are some quick wins that can improve our use of Instagram and its impact on our lives as mothers. Firstly, moms should be careful to view the content of others' posts on Instagram through a lens of impression management. As discussed, moms are experts at presenting a picture of good mothering on social media, but it does not necessarily mean that their lives are perfect. It is important to view Instagram posts as just one moment in time that other moms curate and share for the number of reasons pointed out in this study, keep that frame top-of-mind, and be gentle on yourself when

your own life doesn't look like an Instagram post. Perhaps parenting through a global pandemic is enough.

Secondly, it may be helpful if we made an effort to share a more balanced view of our lives on Instagram, sharing the struggles as well as the victories of #momlife in an effort to resist and/or deconstruct these unrealistic constructions of a "good mother". In this way, moms may feel solidarity with other moms and work together to support each other. A more concerted effort to present a balance of the good and the bad of everyday life may allow moms to collectively lower their high expectations for themselves and have a positive impact on widening the narrow view that society has when thinking about how mothers can and should behave.

Moms could make a concerted effort to grow their own mom tribes and to support other mothers on Instagram and off. One of the most important parts of mom culture, to me anyway, is the support and advice I get from other mothers. Life is really tough when raising kids under sometimes crushing situations and expectations. We must support and be honest and vulnerable with each other. This could happen in small ways like a heart, comment ("crushing it, sister!" or "thinking of you today"), phone call, text, email, or in bigger ways like a porch visit or park walk. Of course, this may add to the already full list of things we feel we need to do every day to simply survive, but even a small act of support can go a long way to reminding us that we are in fact "all in this together" as mothers (High School Musical, 2006; Hinshaw, 2020).

That said, some societal structures need to change as well. The above are ideas that we as mothers can use Instagram smarter and support each other, but why don't we also demand that

the platforms better support their #1 users? Instagram and other social media platforms need to do a better job of helping moms by promoting and sharing content that privileges different mom voices and challenges normative societal expectations of mothering. Women of all ages are the largest group of Instagram users globally, yet our unique concerns and challenges are not prioritized by the platform, partly because we don't demand it. Instagram could easily push out some of this great influencer or random mom content to a wider audience of mothers who don't currently follow them, so that their messages can be amplified and gain more traction. This may increase widespread buy-in and adoption from everyday moms in their own posts, contributing to the mom movement gaining tsunami-like momentum. Below are examples of three recent posts.


*Figure 2: (Instagram) @workingmomnotes*

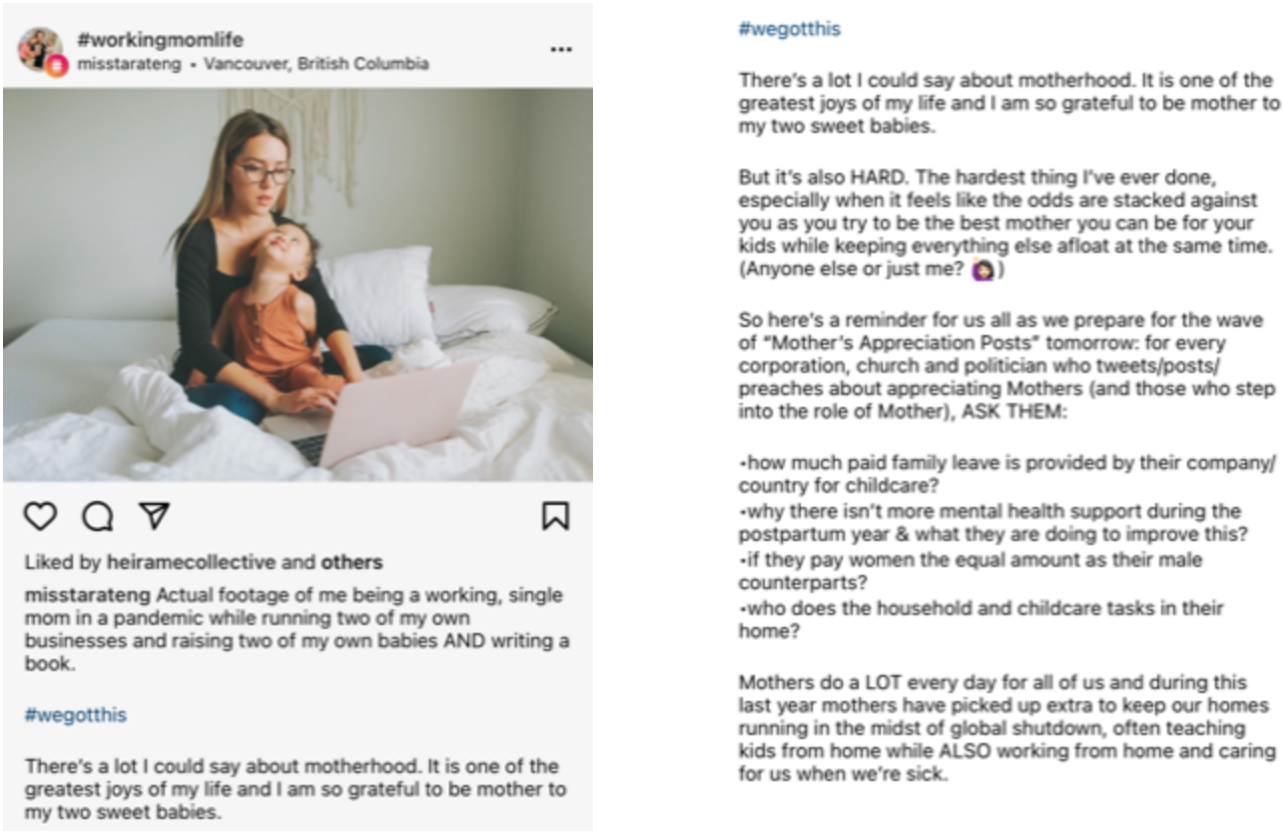


*Figure 3: Instagram @misstarateng*

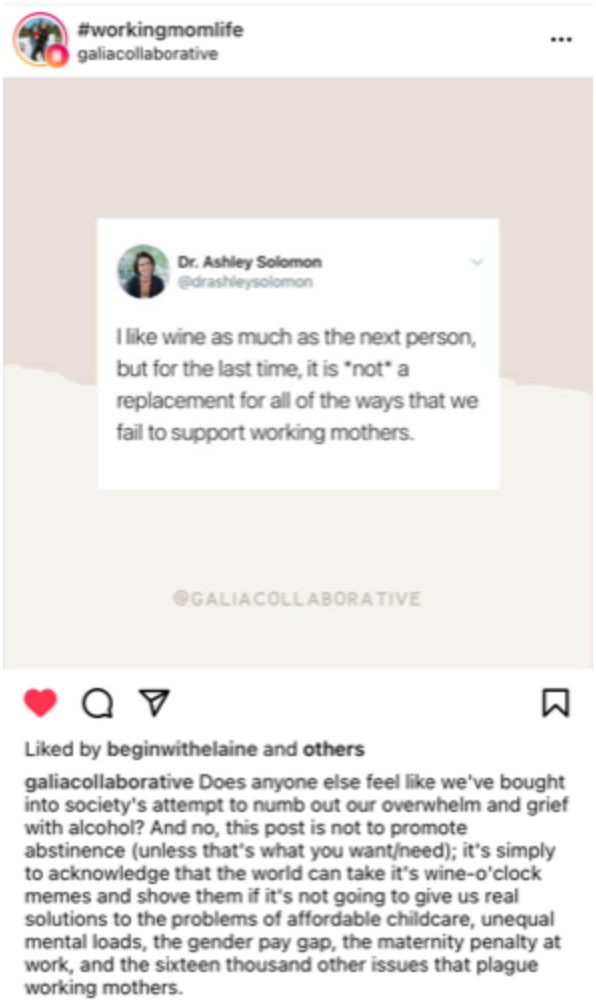


*Figure 4: Instagram @galiacollaborative*

Finally, it goes without saying that government policy must better recognize, prioritize, and support mothers. For most families, at least in Alberta, Canada, we are the linchpins holding this whole show together, and as studies in other countries have found (Archer & Kao, 2018), if we break, the impact can be widespread and lasting.

These are suggestions that may offer some ways to improve both the function of Instagram and better support the “mom”entum forward.

### 5.4. Limitations and Further Research

Through the entire research process from preliminary literature review to the data analysis phase, I was aware of my potential bias toward the topic of the intersection of Instagram and motherhood, especially during a time of great challenge. Having my own ideas about this, I tried to be open to seeing the perspectives of the mothers in this study with fresh eyes. That said, all qualitative research is affected by the perspective of the researcher, so this is a potential limitation of this study, despite my best efforts to avoid it.

In order to keep the study to a reasonable size, I only reviewed a couple of months' posts to select the ones for further analysis and discussion. This can be seen as a limitation to this study as it is not an exhaustive analysis of all posts during the period of study, or even of all pandemic posts.

Another potential limitation is the homogeneity of my participants and their relative affluence in comparison to the mothers who experienced the pandemic's lockdowns with zero support, either financial or social. Although I do feel this is a valuable group to study, it does mean that the perspective of those mothers who struggled to put food on the table while also coping with all of the rest is absent from this study. This is an important group as well and perhaps this is a population who could be the focus of future research.

Lastly, it would be interesting to compare each moms' posts across different platforms during the same time, in order to see how each differs, confirming that the platforms do in fact shape the content and presentation of our posts.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic's early lockdowns were hard on many different groups of people in Alberta, even reasonably affluent, middle-class mothers, who through history have been relatively protected from war, famine, and strife. Despite these moms facing struggles with maintaining their family's mental and physical health, taking on an increased workload plus childcare and facilitating online learning, along with the stress of dealing with constant uncertainty and social isolation, the data from this study shows that most chose not to share the depths of these daily challenges in their Instagram posts. Although sometimes subtly present, generally the focus was on the mundane daily activities of family life, small wins, or interesting things from a locked-down life, in line with what moms would usually share on their Instagram accounts in "normal" times. Their reasoning was that sharing the hard times was too negative for their families and friends, and they didn't want to add to the burdens of others. They instead focused on sharing positive messages and using Instagram as a tool to look back on this time and remember, much like a traditional family photo album.

Did the way these moms used Instagram during the pandemic positively impact their lives or the lives of other mothers in their circles? Yes and no. They used it to see what others were doing and keep connected as best as they could, when they couldn't leave their houses. Yet, Instagram was probably not the best and healthiest way for these moms to stay connected, due to the platform's ethos and focus on sharing the most perfect moments of one's life. "In the beginning, I remember this very vividly, how many moms were posting pictures of their at-home classrooms… beautifully organized with time charts and schedules. I was like, 'this is a whole

other level of expectation that I am not going to meet and just guilt-inducing bullshit. Let's just calm down everybody"' (Shannon). Viewing everyone else's successes on your Instagram account when you feel like you can't stand another day of being locked up is likely not protective of moms' mental health. Sharing a more balanced look into life may have offered much needed support to other moms, as well as have allowed mothers to begin to challenge the difficult and overwhelming expectations of contemporary mothering that became clearer during the lockdowns of COVID-19. Maybe Instagram, made up of more than half women users globally, is in fact the perfect platform to grow an everyday mom counter movement to these normative and oppressive views of mothers into 2021 and beyond.

What is clear through this research and the research of others since the onset of the pandemic, is that the Alberta government, and governments across the world, were not adequately prepared to support mothers during the COVID-19 lockdowns, yet this fact was strangely absent from their Instagram posts. An entirely new way of organizing life fell entirely onto mothers who picked it up, brushed it off, took a photo, and posted it to their Insta with the caption, "we're all fine here, everything's FINE!".

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# APPENDIX A

**Interview Guide:**

- Introduction
- Background of researcher
- Consent Form Overview
    - Explain the project and discuss the risks
        - You may feel uncomfortable or vulnerable during the interview
    - It's important to know that you can withdraw all or part of your information at any time, you just need to ask.
- Recording
- Transcription
- Interview structure
    - Demographic information
    - General pandemic questions
    - Instagram use
    - Your post(s)
    - Instagram platform
- That there are no right or wrong answers and don't worry if you don't have an answer to a question.
- All of your information will be anonymized in the final report, which I can send to you if you're interested.
- Do you have any questions before we start?

So to provide you with some context and remind you (in case you had forgotten) about the early days of COVID-19, I have some background info on where Alberta was from March-May of 2020:

***In late 2019, a novel coronavirus had been found in China and was spreading quickly around the world. In Alberta, no cases were detected until March 5 in Calgary.***

***On March 12, the Government of Alberta issued a ban on all gatherings of over 250 people. Travellers returning from outside the country were now required to quarantine for 14 days. On March 16, schools and daycares closed. On March 17, the provincial government declared a provincial public health state of emergency. This meant the following:***

- ***Elective surgeries were postponed***
- ***All non-essential businesses were closed including most retail, movie theatres, all recreation and leisure opportunities, restaurants, bars, kids sports teams, etc.***

- ***People were told not to gather with anyone outside of their immediate household members - especially with elder relatives like grandparents***
- ***People shifted to working from home where possible, but many people lost jobs***
- ***Initially, the direction from the government was to not leave your home except for essential reasons like grocery shopping.***
- ***This continued until restrictions began to be lifted in June of 2020.***

**Demographic Information**

1. Which of the following age categories do you fit into:
    a. 21-30
    b. 31-40
    c. 41-50

2. How many children do you have?

3. What were their ages when COVID began?

4. During the period of March 15-May 15:
Were you:
- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Unemployed
- Stay-at-home mom
- Student
- Other (retired, on leave)

5. If employed, were you mostly:
- Working from home
- Working outside the home
- Combination of both

6. What is your marital status?
- Married (living with a partner)
- Common law (living with a partner)
- Single (living alone with children)
- Separated/Divorced (sharing custody of children)

7. Where did you reside mostly during the above period?
- Edmonton
- Spruce Grove
- Stony Plain

- St. Albert
- Sherwood Park
- Devon
- Leduc
- Other

**General Lockdown/Pandemic Questions:**

8. In general, thinking of this period between March 15 and May 15, 2020, can you recall some emotions or feelings that you had about the pandemic?

9. Did you have anything you particularly enjoyed doing or experiencing during this time?

10. Was there anything that you particularly did not enjoy during this time?

11. How did you fill your days during this time?

***This next series of questions is to better understand your general Instagram use during the early days of the pandemic.***

**Instagram Use:**

12. During the period from March 15-May 15, 2020, to the best of your recollection, would you say that you used Instagram:
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Other

13. During the above period, would you say that you used Instagram:
- More than before March 15
- Less than before March 15
- About the same as before March 15

14. Thinking about your Instagram use during this time, what would you say was the main reason you used Instagram?

15. Thinking about your Instagram POSTS in general, what types of things do you post to your Instagram account? (i.e. family activities, celebrations/traditions, daily life, etc.)

16. When you are posting on your IG do you have an idea of who your audience is?

**Post Discussion:**

17. Regarding post #1, what was happening here and on this day?
    a. What do you think was your main motivation for posting this content on Instagram?
    a. Who was the main audience that you thought might engage with or be interested in this post?
    b. Would you say this post is an accurate reflection of your reality at this time?

Repeat the above if there are more discussion posts.

18. Thinking very generally about other moms that you know personally and follow on Instagram, would you say that their posts during the early days of COVID were an accurate reflection of their lives? Why or why not?

**Instagram (Media Ideology):**

19. Do you think that the way Instagram is designed or the social norms that exist on the platform impact the things you post on the platform? Why or why not?

20. What do you like best about Instagram?

21. What is the worst thing about Instagram?

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me and share your thoughts.

22. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

23. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you again for your help. I will be emailing you the transcript of the interview in the next week or so. If you could have a look and get back to me with any corrections required, that would be greatly appreciated.

**APPENDIX B**


Calling All Moms!
Study Title: Mothers and Instagram During the COVID-19 Pandemic
U of A Ethics ID: Pro00107505
Please join us...
in a research study that looks at how moms used Instagram during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Reach Out...
By emailing the researcher:
Candace Westeroth
westerot@ualberta.ca
for more details or to participate!
TELUS
7:35 PM
CANDACEWESTEROTH
Posts
candacewesteroth
How are YEGMOMS talking about their lives and experiences in their Instagram posts during COVID?
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
MA COMMUNICATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

# APPENDIX C

**UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA**
FACULTY OF ARTS

**Study Title: Mothers and Instagram during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Research Investigator:**
Candace Westeroth
3-73 Humanities Building
Faculty of Arts
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Edmonton, AB, T5J 2E5
westerot@ualberta.ca
780-886-5532

**Supervisor:**
Dr. Jonathan Cohn
3-73 Humanities Building
Faculty of Arts
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2E5
jcohn@ualberta.ca

**Study Background**

- You are being asked to be a part of this study because you are a mother, with one or more children under 18, who used and/or posted to a personal Instagram account during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 15-May 15, 2020). You represent a demographic of particular interest to this research as I examine how moms talked about their lives on Instagram during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The study results will be used in support of my final capstone project for completion of my Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology at the University of Alberta. There is no funding backing this project, and findings will not be commercialized.

**Purpose**

- The purpose of my study is to explore how moms presented their lives on Instagram during the above period and how Instagram functioned for them to this end.
- The COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges for mothers in particular. I aim to examine how moms presented their lives during this time on their Instagram accounts.

**Study Procedures**

- With the desire to gain meaningful and insightful information, and an interest in understanding how people present their offline experiences in their online identities, I will use qualitative and interpretive description to address my research question.
- Research will be obtained from a qualitative mixed methods approach: virtual one-on-one interviews conducted via online meeting platform, as well as content analysis of Instagram posts posted between March 15-May 15, 2020.
- Interviews will be either video or audio recorded in order to be transcribed.
- Interview transcripts will be emailed to participants for verification prior to use in the study. If there are any omissions or inaccuracies, the researcher will correct prior to use. All participants will be granted access to the final project.

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**Benefits**

- There are no direct benefits to participants of this study.
- This study primarily benefits society overall, advancing knowledge of the intersection of motherhood and social media during a global pandemic. However, the potential benefit of the proposed research to the participants is the opportunity to tell their story, and to therefore contribute to research that has the goal to better the long-term understanding of maternal social media use and the motivations, benefits and drawbacks of that use.
- There are no costs involved in the research, other than your valuable time. Participants will not receive any compensation for their involvement.

**Risk**

- There are few foreseeable risks involved in this research. However, participants might find the act of sharing their experiences during COVID-19 to be emotionally vulnerable, and may therefore feel minor emotional distress. To mitigate this risk, data will be anonymized to protect participant identity. Participants will also be aware that statements can be redacted and removed from the final project upon request, and that they can withdraw from the study at any time.
- Any use of Instagram images will be de-identified (faces or identifying factors blurred out), all Instagram captions or account names will be anonymized.

**Voluntary Participation**

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study and participation is completely voluntary. Further, you are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study. If you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time before the report is finalized, which is estimated to be June 30th. If withdrawal occurs before this date, all relevant data will be destroyed and excised from the final research report.

**Confidentiality & Anonymity**

- The results of this study will be used exclusively in support of my final capstone project, for completion of my Masters of Arts in Communications and Technology at the University of Alberta. Data will be kept confidential, accessible only by myself, my research supervisor, Dr. Jonathan Cohn, as well as may be accessed by the Research Ethics Office or University Auditors.
- Recordings of interview files will be kept on secure servers that may be stored in another country, thus may be subject to their privacy laws. Files will be deleted once transcribed.
- Data will be kept in a secure locked cabinet for a minimum of five years following completion of the research project. Electronic data will be encrypted and password protected on computer and backed up on a flash drive stored in a locked cabinet. Hard copies will be locked in a cabinet until destroyed.
- If participants are interested in receiving a copy of the report of the research findings, please contact me via email.

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**Further Information**

- If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Candace Westeroth via email (westerot@ualberta.ca) or phone (780-886-5532). Alternatively, participants with questions can contact the research supervisor, Dr. Jonathan Cohn at jcohn@ualberta.ca
- The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

**Consent Statement**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____

Participant's Name (printed) and Signature Date

_____

Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

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