



Article

“(Un)Being a Mother” Media Representation of Motherhood and Female Identity

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Abstract: This research examines the portrayal of (non)motherhood in television series from 2016 to 2022. The title, “(Un)being a Mother”, was deliberately chosen for its polysemic nature, facilitating an exploration of the complexities of motherhood, its absence, and the implications for womanhood. The study thematically analyzes 15 television series from Hispanic, Italian, and Anglo-American cultures to reveal the diverse perspectives on motherhood. Utilizing the frameworks of Intensive Mothering, Good Mothering, Good Enough Mothering, and Non-Mothering (including both childless and childfree women), the research aims to illuminate representations of motherhood, variations in mothering paradigms, and the influence of cultural and geographical contexts. This study introduces an innovative methodological approach by investigating recurring themes of (non)motherhood across different cultural productions, incorporating insights from media sociology, gender media studies, anthropology, and ethnographic media research for a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Keywords: TV series; motherhood; childfree women; childless women; womanhood



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1. Introduction to the Topic and Literature Review

Why “(Un)being a Mother”? The title is meant to show that the social construct around human reproduction, which is a natural phenomenon, can be made mobile and reversible. Being a mother, mothering, and motherhood are multifaceted, socially constructed concepts that change over time and space according to dominant ideologies. Those ideologies are also, and have been for a long time, closely related to those of patriarchal power (Bourdieu 1998).

To address this topic, the theoretical framework draws on several sources pertaining to the centrality of narratives in the construction of culture, including narratives from television series, with a focus on motherhood and its representations. This exploration leads to an examination of the representation of Non-Motherhood, a subject for which the existing literature is relatively sparse, almost absent.

Since the 2000s, there has been an increase in the production of female-driven television narratives (Buonanno 2006) that emphasize paths of women’s empowerment. The protagonists are not only successful working females in masculine roles and professions (Hidalgo-Marí and Palomares Sánchez 2020) or eminent female leading figures in the world of culture scientists (Steinke 1998; Chambers 2022) but also wicked and aggressive women (Buonanno 2017; Giomi and Magaraggia 2017; Chappell and Young 2017) who challenge the male dominance of violence (Bourdieu 1998) with ferocity. Numerous women of power and diversity have begun to inhabit the screens of our TVs, computers, cell phones, and imaginations.

Despite these changes in media narratives and thus the construction of an alternative, critical, renewed discourse on the feminine aimed at emphasising new facets of women’s biographies, there seem to remain just as many fundamental media narratives, representations, and discourses where specific biographical junctures reaffirm a close, direct, and

necessary connection between biological reproduction and female identity (Laqueur 1986; Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Glenn 2016; Gotlib 2016; Rich 2021).

At a time in history when the issue of low fertility is at the centre of political concerns across much of the planet, particularly throughout the Western world, many countries have set in motion rhetoric and policies aimed at encouraging an increase in birth rates; “[i]t is frequently observed that there are persistent pressures to encourage people to have children” (Monach 1993, p. 44 in Lazzari and Charnley 2016). As a result, the issue of motherhood is a burning and central theme in Western societies and is often repropounded as a requirement of ‘normality’; having children for a woman “in addition to being considered ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and desirable [. . .]—it is often considered an essential requirement for entering adulthood and acquiring full femininity” (Letherby 2002, in Lazzari and Charnley 2016, p. 114).

Therefore, we look at TV series about (non)motherhood as an opportunity to understand whether they, like much of politics and information, still present motherhood as a fundamental step in achieving a satisfying female identity.

1.1. *Why TV Series and Why (Non)motherhood*

Serial products serve an “inescapable cultural function within society” (Tabasso 2008) and stand alongside cinema and literature as vital storytellers of modernity (Buonanno 2006). Their “bardic function” narrates and interprets contemporary life. As Czarniawska notes, narratives are “the primary tool for making sense of ‘social action’ (Czarniawska 1997). By their nature, narratives disrupt the ordinary and, in doing so, construct the extraordinary. Their role is to “bring things back into familiar tracks” (Bruner 2003), making the extraordinary seem ordinary and the unfamiliar appear familiar. Through this process of “domestication”, the characters and stories encountered become part of our everyday lives, despite their initial distance from our own experiences. This premise informs our investigation of TV series.

TV series serve as the documents and archives of the present, reflecting contemporary history, where conventional models of femininity and motherhood are both identified and challenged. They provide alternative models that contest the binary view of gender and the distinct roles, attitudes, and capabilities traditionally assigned to males and females.

In fact, contemporary TV series are gradually moving away from the “pedagogical TV” concerns of the 1950s and into the 1970s, as well as from the 1980s and 1990s of “TV of the growth” aimed at winning audiences (Ellis 2000). The third phase of the “abundance of contents and channels” (ibid.) saw the spread of pay-per-view and on-demand platforms and enabled individuals to build personalized diets. New OTT platforms (SVOD, TVOD, AVOD) such as Netflix, Prime Video, and Disney+, have introduced self-published titles to the market since 2013, starting with shows like *House of Cards*. These platforms analyze audience preferences using algorithms, leading to the creation of innovative content that caters to audiences seeking non-traditional narratives. These narratives frequently challenge the established conventions, cultures, and societal norms, thereby representing the marginalized voices that have historically been underrepresented in mainstream television.

Regarding motherhood, the “digitalization and the distribution of streaming content have led to an increase in the number of works that focus on the reproduction stage” (Visa Barbosa 2018, pp. 291–92). The proliferation of titles spans various geographical regions; in some countries, this emerging field of representation signifies a crucial moment of emancipation and is accompanied by a more robust body of research (Kalorth 2024; Kyong 2023; Aydın and Koç 2024; Paunksnis 2023; Sharma 2021; Faleschini and D’Amelio 2017). In other countries, inquiries are being made regarding the impact of technology on media consumption habits, as well as phenomena that, while related to gender, extend even further beyond our primary focus (e.g., LGBTQIA+ issues) (Boisvert 2024; González-de-Garay et al. 2023; Marcos-Ramos and Gonzales-De-Garay 2021).

Television series serve as a lens for observing socio-political and cultural shifts, featuring diverse narratives and complex female protagonists. The changing dynamics of

motherhood—its regulation and societal scrutiny—reflect a significant transformation, as women gain agency in their choices about motherhood, moving away from historical constraints imposed by religion, state, and nature (Iaccarino n.d., <https://www.inpsiche.it/donne-un-giorno-e-madri-per-sempre-psicologia-e-maternita/>, accessed on 18 July 2024).

From then onward, a track which was considered normal that had guided women's lives also broke down. On the one hand, women could decide not to have children and thus defy God, fatherland, nature, partners, and, most importantly, ideology. These women are, in this contribution and in the literature (Thornley 2022), the so-called childfree—women who are free to decide not to be accompanied in their lives by a child, nor to engage in the reproductive labour that a mother goes through, performing unpaid and unrecognized care work (Federici 2021). On the other hand, some try everything and use science to have children if they do not become mothers naturally, “defying nature” and, sometimes, other ideologies. Indeed, to the childfree and to the feminist world, the advent of science in the field of motherhood was seen as a chance to free women from the burden of biological motherhood (Firestone 1970). However, the possibility of becoming a mother by resorting to medical technology has, again, in the opinion of some feminists, reinforced subservience to the patriarchy. According to the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (<https://www.finrrage.org/>), whose founders include Gina Correa, Renate D. Klein, Maria Mies, Janice Raymond, and Robyn Rowland, the paths to non-biological motherhood are harmful to women and further subjugate the female body to the rules of the patriarchy (Throsby 2004, p. 41).

While numerous studies address motherhood in a manner beneficial to our research, particularly concerning the transformation of the concept (Takševa 2017, 2018; Rosenberg 2014; Ford 2013; Warner 2007; Douglas and Michaels 2005; Thurer 1995), the literature on its representations in various media (Mary et al. 2024; Lepri 2024; Kehily and Thomson 2011; Karlyn 2011; Addison 2009), especially in television series, is limited, focused on specific countries or on a specific drama (Shi and Liu 2023; Natale 2020; Hidalgo-Marí 2017; Lachover 2017; Lacalle and Gómez 2016a, 2016b; Lacalle and Hidalgo-Marí 2016; Natale 2015; Brigidi 2014; Davidson 2011), and largely devoid of comparative analyses. In contrast, the academic discourse surrounding representations of non-motherhood is notably sparse. Our research aims to fill this gap by leveraging existing studies on the diverse categories of motherhood.

In the TV series analyzed within this study, three models of motherhood and a fourth collection of narratives of Non-Mothers are identified, each straying from a strict adherence to either patriarchal norms or critical feminism involving non-biological motherhood. The first model, known as Intensive Mothering, emerged in the 1980s in the United States and later expanded to Western societies. This model is characterized by a child-centric approach, expert guidance, emotional absorption, labor intensity, and high financial expenditures, potentially explaining increased maternal caregiving time, especially among educated mothers (Hays 1996; Sullivan 1997). Intensive Mothering arose as a reaction against the liberating ideologies of the 1970s and was founded on three central tenets outlined by Hays (1996): (1) Children are revered as pure and innocent beings requiring protection from a perceived corrupt world. (2) Intensive methods aim to provide children with ongoing, unconditional maternal love and attention. (3) Mothers bear the primary responsibility for fulfilling these caregiving expectations, viewed as an inherent and instinctive aspect of women (Verniers et al. 2022). The second model is that of Good Mothering (Feasey 2012a, 2012b, 2013), which is not intended as a result of Intensive Mothering and, in fact, far removed from it. Indeed, by Good Mothering, we mean an unreflexively, unproblematized motherhood, typical of the traditional woman who “does what needs to be done” without much doubting and without consulting “expert knowledge” (Giddens 1991). The choice to include this definition in the range of models stems from a survey that reveals the persistence of traditional and almost automatic models of motherhood.

Despite decades of feminist critique of the dominant representations of mothers and motherhood (Williamson 2023; Takševa 2018; Smart 1996), images of “the Good Mother” appear as prevalent as ever. These images persist in public policy, the media, popular culture, and workplaces, and they saturate everyday practices and interactions. They continue to powerfully shape women’s lives. As Sara Ruddick (1989, p. 189) argued, the Good Mother “casts a long shadow over other women’s lives”. Mothers thus remain subject to close social regulation. It is also clear, however, that contemporary representations of the Good Mother are not uniform, nor are they stable. The Good Mother appears differently in different settings—she is a nuanced and multiple form. Historically and culturally specific notions of what constitutes a Good and Bad Mother are crucial in media representation. We decided on including the category of “Bad Mother” (Feasey 2012a, 2017) in that of the Good Enough Mother and the “Comic Mother” (D’Amelio 2017; Smart 1996; Feasey 2012b) in the Good Mother. Typically, in media representation, these discourses (bad and/or comic) are also classed and raced, with discourses of deviancy involved in the production and reproduction of differently classed and raced “types” of mothers (Feasey 2019; Podnieks 2012). The Good Mother discourse shapes the activities of mothering, constructing, and defining what mothers do. As Sharon Hays (1996) explained, through discourses of Intensive Mothering, “A good mother would never simply put her child aside for her own convenience. And placing material wealth or power on a higher plane than the well-being of children is strictly forbidden” (Hays 1996, p. 150). “Finally, good mother discourses are shown to shape the identities of mothers and the meaning of mothering for individual women, constructing and defining how mothers feel” (Goodwin and Huppertz 2010, p. 6).

The Good Enough Mother (Winnicott 1971) represents a deviant and overturned version of Winnicott’s definition. Here, the focus is on the mother and not on Winnicott’s child; she distances herself from her child not so much to induce growth in the child but to grow and opt for her autonomy. The Good Enough Mother is the mother who perhaps initially becomes absorbed in caring for her child but soon returns to her busy life and sways in a dual role—that of a mother and a busy woman living her life in society (Wardrop 2012; Natale 2020). She is not a perfect mother, but she is good enough.

Lastly, we decided to consider Non-Mothers, dividing the whole into the following two large groups: Childless, that is, women without children, and childfree, women (who call themselves) free of children. The greater presence in TV stories of the latter case shows us the possibility of seeing women’s biographical paths recognized and represented beyond motherhood.

The representation of Non-Mothers, particularly childfree women—those who choose to prioritize their bodies, emotions, and interests over motherhood—suggests a disruption within the male dominance model as proposed by Bourdieu. He states that “the division between the sexes [is] part of the order of things, normal, natural, to the point of seeming inevitable. It is present [...] in the embedded state, in bodies, in the habitus of agents, where it functions as a system of patterns, perception, thought, and action” (Bourdieu 1998, p. 16).

In line with Foucault’s recommendations to illuminate the dynamics of power, it is essential to identify the channels and discourses through which power impacts individuals (Foucault 1976). Television series serve as both channels and discourses that can convey power in a manner that either supports its incorporation or presents a critical opposition.

Additionally, the desire or need to become a mother—present among all types of mothers and childless women—is often absent in childfree women, who resist societal expectations of motherhood as a defining characteristic of femininity.

As noted above, while there exists a body of literature—albeit limited—on the television representations of motherhood, the academic discourse surrounding the representations of Non-Motherhood remains notably sparse. It is precisely within this gap that we intend to situate our work, drawing from studies on motherhood to address this deficit.

2. Methodology

2.1. Analysis

Qualitative methodologies are the most frequently employed in research on the mediated representation of motherhood. Thematic, textual, ethnographic, and narrative analyses (Feasey 2012b, 2016, 2017, 2019), along with critical discourse analysis (Lachover 2017), have served as foundational inspirations for this work. A smaller subset of studies combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches, particularly in socio-semiotic analyses (Lacalle and Gómez 2016a, 2016b).

Few studies rely exclusively on quantitative methods. Among these, Davidson (2011) quantitatively analyzed frames from *Mad Men* to conduct an interpretive examination grounded in critical theory. Additionally, a systematic review examining motherhood in media texts employed quantitative techniques to identify key themes (Mary et al. 2024).

In this research, we have chosen to adopt a thematic analysis utilizing a socio-ethnographic perspective. The ethnographic approach examines media products as “texts”, employing operations characteristic of textual analysis to deconstruct and reconstruct them through synthesis and interpretive patterns. Thus, narratives are conceived as textual constructs; they can be systematically read, coded, and recoded to uncover emergent themes (Kim 2015). Ethnographic questions are also posed regarding the production process to explore potential connections and their impacts on the contents of the series.

The sociological perspective aids in identifying themes and exploring the presence or absence of stereotypes and power dynamics among characters, which can be correlated with established categories in the literature. Specifically, Intensive Mothering refers to a child-centered model that emphasizes expert guidance, emotional involvement, and financial investment, positioning mothers as primarily responsible for providing unconditional love and protection (Hays 1996; Verniers et al. 2022). Good Mothering describes a conventional and unreflective approach in which mothers satisfy their roles without questioning or seeking advice from experts. This concept is reinterpreted as the “traditional mother”, highlighting the persistence of instinctive motherhood models distinct from Intensive Mothering (Feasey 2013). The Good Enough Mother (Winnicott 1971) shifts the focus to the mother’s autonomy, emphasizing her initial immersion in caregiving and the subsequent balancing of her roles as both a mother and an active participant in society (Wardrop 2012; Natale 2020). Although not perfect, she is deemed “good enough”.

Non-Mothers are divided into the following two groups: childless women, who are unable to have children for various reasons, and childfree women, who consciously choose to remain without children.

The research codifies these tropes within the fifteen television series under analysis. We thoroughly examined all seasons and episodes, selecting three specific episodes per series for an in-depth analysis (resulting in a total of 45 episodes). For each set of three episodes, the constant comparative method was employed to provide a clear analytical baseline. The use of this method, drawn from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), slightly modified the categories of motherhood identified in the literature (see Section 1.1).

The choice of the three representative episodes followed the compass of the distribution of ratings during the duration of each individual season by TV series. The variable adopted was the percentage measure of high ratings given to the episodes (defined as an 8 or more on IMDB or a 3 or less, respectively).

For the space category, we chose three specific geographical areas, namely Italy, Spain, and the English-speaking countries of the UK and North America. This selection was based on the global prominence of Spanish and English television productions, as both utilize widely spoken languages. Furthermore, comparing Spanish and Italian television series offers valuable insights due to the strong relationship between the conceptions of motherhood and Catholicism in these countries. While Spain has demonstrated a greater acceptance of change and a commitment to inclusion regarding gender issues, Italy’s approach has been more inconsistent, likely influenced by the presence of the Vatican

City and by the political success of right-wing parties. This contrast provides a significant context for our analysis.

Regarding time, we focused on television series that have aired very recently or are still ongoing, specifically within the timeframe from 2016 to 2022.

Finally, with respect to the person category, we concentrated on the thematic analysis of the biographies of the leading female characters. Our analysis explores their narratives, including aspects of love, family, and professional lives, thereby examining their relationships with the categories of (non)motherhood. Furthermore, we deemed it significant to determine whether the production was led, or at least primarily composed, by women to assess whether this presence influenced the content.

To quantitatively summarize the material, we examined 15 television series, with 5 from Italy, 4 from Spain, and 6 produced in English between 2016 and 2022 (many of which are still airing). For the majority of these series, we viewed a sample of three episodes from each season, resulting in a total of 45 episodes out of 710 that were completely viewed. We analyzed the biographies of 23 female protagonists (11 from English-speaking countries, 7 from Spain, and 5 from Italy), along with the indefinable ensemble roles of certain series. The selected television series were drawn from those available on on-demand platforms.

This research aims to test the following hypotheses underlying our work:

1. Digitalization has rendered specific content a key component of successful media offerings.
2. The inclusion of women in the creative teams of television productions promotes a more diverse and realistic representation of motherhood.
3. There is a significant lack of representation of Non-Mothering in television series, and this absence varies across different geographical areas.

2.2. The Series' Titles and Stories

The TV series were selected based on the following two variables:

- (1) Content: We focused on types of motherhood or content that originally or critically present motherhood-related issues (motherhood and work, motherhood and crime, motherhood and adoption, motherhood and diversity, surrogacy, etc.). This choice was based on what was explained in Section 1.1 regarding the increase in the early 2000s, which saw a significant rise in female-driven television narratives featuring women in traditionally masculine roles. The selected titles include empowered professionals, cultural leaders such as lawyers and academics, as well as aggressive or criminal figures who challenge male dominance. These female protagonists exhibit power in diverse male-dominated fields (such as profession, academia, and crime) and/or explore alternative paths to motherhood (adoption, surrogacy). The aim is to prompt an inquiry into their effectiveness in addressing a new female identity or, conversely, in perpetuating restrictive stereotypes related to the female identity tied to natural biological reproduction.
- (2) Commercial success: This was understood both in terms of preference and in terms of reviews on social networks. We used IMDB, Netflix, Rotten Tomatoes, and TVDB as datasets.
 - (a) English-speaking countries: UK, Canada, and the US

Jane the Virgin, created by Jennie Snyder Urman, follows 23-year-old Jane, who, despite planning a career and choosing not to have sex before marriage, decides to proceed with her unplanned pregnancy after her gynecologist accidentally performs an artificial insemination. (Year of production: 2014–2019; Country: USA; Production: Poppy Productions, RCTV International, Electus, Warner Bros. Television, CBS Television Studios; Distribution: Netflix; Seasons: 5; Episodes: 100).

The Handmaid's Tale, created by Bruce Miller and based on Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, is set in a future ruled by the Christian-inspired regime of Gilead, which combats declining birth rates via an organization focused on procreation. The series

revolves around the handmaids—fertile young women forced to bear children. (Year of production: 2017–ongoing; Country: USA; Production: MGM Television, Gilead Productions, TV Network: HULU; Distribution: Tim Vision, Prime Video; Seasons: 5; Episodes: 52).

Workin’ Moms, created by Catherine Reitman and Philip Sternberg, explores the lives of four working mothers who meet weekly in a self-help group to cope with feelings of inadequacy. (Year of production: 2017–2023; Country: Canada; Production: Wolf and Rabbit Entertainment; Network: CBC; Distribution: Netflix; Seasons: 6; Episodes: 70).

How to Get Away with Murder, conceived by Peter Nowalk with Shonda Rhimes, Betsy Beers, and Stephen Cragg, stars Annalise Keating, a lawyer and university professor struggling with emotional instability and her desire for motherhood. (Year of production: 2014–2020; Country: USA; TV Network: Shondaland Nowalk Entertainment, ABC Studios ABC; Distribution: ABC and Netflix; Seasons: 6; Episodes: 90).

Fleabag, created by and starring British actress Phoebe Waller-Bridge, portrays a woman grappling with unresolved trauma. Using sex as an emotional outlet, she contrasts with her sister, Claire, who is successful yet childless and in a troubled marriage. *Fleabag* also breaks the “fourth wall”, engaging viewers directly. (Year of production: 2016–2019; Country: UK; Production: Two Brothers Pictures; Network: BBC Three, BBC One; Streaming platform: Prime Video; Seasons: 2; Episodes: 12).

The Chair follows Ji-Yoon Kim, the newly appointed Chair of the Humanities Department at Pembroke University, as she navigates her role while addressing issues of diversity and facing challenges in her relationship with her adopted daughter. Created by Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman. (Year of production: 2021–ongoing; Country: USA; Distribution and Netflix; Seasons: 1; Episodes: 6).

(b) Spain

La casa de papel: Conceived by Álex Pina, the series has become a phenomenon in its own right, largely due to the construction of its characters, especially the female ones—Tokyo (the narrator), Nairobi (who has an adversarial relationship with her son), and Raquel (the inspector who becomes a robber for love). (Year of production: 2017–2021; Country: Spain; Production: Antenna 3, Netflix; Distribution: Netflix; Seasons: 5; Episodes: 48).

Madres—Amor y vida: Created by Aitor Gabilondo and Joan Barbero and produced by Media-set España, the series is set in the Pediatrics Department of San Juan de Dios Hospital, where the life stories of young patients, their mothers, and the medical staff intertwine. (Year of production: 2020–ongoing; Country: Spain; Mediaset España, Alea Media; Distribution: Prime Video/Mediaset Infinity; Seasons: 4; Episodes: 52).

La reina del sur: More than a TV series, this is a telenovela based on the novel of the same name by Arturo Pérez-Reverte. It follows a Mexican woman’s rise to power in the world of international drug trafficking while her daughter is kidnapped. (Production year: 2011–ongoing; Country: Spain; Production: Antena 3, Telemundo Studios, RTI; Telemundo Global Studios, Netflix; Distribution: Netflix; Seasons: 3; Episodes: 124).

Vida perfecta: Conceived by Leticia Doler, this series is defined as a journey into the female universe, exploring the joys, fears, needs, difficulties, lightheartedness, and sexuality of three women in their thirties. Maria and Esther are sisters, while Cristina is Maria’s lifelong best friend. Maria is a meticulous and established woman who, in a rare moment of fun, becomes pregnant by a stranger with a mental disability. Esther is a homosexual painter, and Cristina is a lawyer, wife, and mother of two who refuses to abandon her own needs and career. (Year of production: 2019–2021; Country: Spain; Production: Movistar+; Distribution: Disney+; Seasons: 2; Episodes: 14).

(c) Italy

Mina Settembre: Created by Tiziana Aristarco and based on Maurizio De Giovanni’s short stories, the series follows Mina, a 35-year-old social worker living in Naples. After separating from her husband, she returns to live with her mother, Olga, with whom she has a complicated relationship. (Year of production: 2021–ongoing; Country: Italy; Network: Rai 1; Platform: RaiPlay; Seasons: 2; Episodes: 24).

Imma Tataranni, sostituto procuratore: Produced by RAI, the show is based on Mariolina Venezia's novels. Imma, an exuberant deputy prosecutor in Maexubtera, frequently clashes with her daughter due to work commitments while her musician husband takes on the role of homemaker. (Year of production: 2019–ongoing; Country: Italy; Network: Rai 1; Platform: RaiPlay; Seasons: 2; Episodes: 14).

Le indagini di Lolita Lobosco: Inspired by Gabriella Genisi's novels, this series features Lolita, a deputy officer in Bari leading an all-male team. Without children, she navigates her relationship with a younger man throughout the series. (Year of production: 2021–ongoing; Country: Italy; Network: Rai 1; Platforms: RaiPlay, Disney+; Seasons: 2; Episodes: 10).

Gomorra: Inspired by Roberto Saviano's novel, this series explores the Camorra clans in Naples, showcasing female figures like Donna Imma Savastano, Scianel, and Azzurra, who are both mothers and criminals, except for Patrizia, who is a protective mother to her siblings. (Year of production: 2014–2021; Country: Italy; Platform: Sky Italia; Seasons: 5; Episodes: 58).

Mare fuori: Conceived by Cristiana Farina, the show tells the stories of young inmates and staff at an imaginary juvenile penitentiary in Naples, inspired by the Nisida prison. Key figures include Naditza, a Romani teenager who is in prison to escape her patriarchal family while also struggling with her relationship with her mother, Donka. (Year of production: 2020–ongoing; Country: Italy; Network: Rai Fiction, Picomedia; Distribution: Rai2, RaiPlay; Seasons: 3; Episodes: 36).

3. Results

The Series and Their Representations of Motherhood

As the first step in our ethnographic media analysis, we sorted the TV series (see Table 1) viewed according to the following themes: motherhood and work; motherhood and crime; and adoptive and adapted motherhood (e.g., mothers whose children were placed in foster care; motherhood due to “unwanted assisted fertilization”). Although the results are preliminary, the figures are very telling; the distribution of TV series is fairly homogeneous across the three countries in terms of the contingencies of motherhood and professions and motherhood and crime. English-speaking TV series on mothers are the most numerous. Almost all series see a range of characters with multiple contingencies. The placement in multiple categories is only to a small extent due to multiple protagonists with different characteristics. More often, the double placement is due to the presence of complex characters (e.g., Annalise from *How to Get Away with Murder*, a highly successful career woman who covers up the murder of her husband and is thus an “accomplice” in the crime). Kim, another career woman, who chooses to resort to adoptive motherhood to which she does not feel she is devoting the necessary attention and time. The women of *La casa de papel*, including Nairobi, born a forger and a woman with a long criminal career, suffering greatly from her son being removed by social services and put in foster care, and Raquel who goes from being an inspector to becoming a key member of a criminal gang. *Vida perfecta* sees Maria, an assertive and established woman, struggling as a mother and voicing the inconvenient truths about being a mother.

Spanish and Anglo-American productions put forward complex and composite characters whose biographies evolve. According to Bernardelli (2017), they propose “well-rounded” figures, capable of delving into the depths of humanity that divert us from the myth of the hero and allow us to explore the realm of the antihero. Less variable and less complicated are the protagonists of Italian TV series, whose biographies are rather predictable and unoriginal.

In Table 2, we first analyzed the types of motherhood represented in the series according to our categories, Intensive Mother, Good Mother, Good Enough Mother, and Non-Mother, which is further divided into childless and childfree women. We then investigated whether other types of representations were present, incorporating additional categories such as LGBTQIA+ individuals, homemakers, etc.

Table 1. Motherhood and life contingencies per country.

Life Contingencies	Spanish-Speaking Countries	Italy	English-Speaking Countries
Motherhood and professional life	Madres	Mina Settembre	Workin’ Moms
	La casa de papel	Imma Tataranni, Sostituto procuratore	The Handmaid’s Tale
Motherhood and crime	Vida perfecta	Le indagini di Lolita Lobosco	The Chair
	La reina del sur	Gomorra	How to Get Away with Murder
Adoptive/adaptive/adapted mother	La casa de papel	Mare fuori	The Handmaid’s Tale
	Vida perfecta		The Chair
Adoptive/adaptive/adapted mother	La casa de papel		Fleabag
			Jane the Virgin
			The Handmaid’s Tale

Table 2. Motherhood and Life contingencies; Mother Types.

Category/Contingency	Intensive Mother	Good Mother	Good Enough Mother	Non-Mother Not Mother at All (Childfree and/or Childless)	Non-Biological Mother
Motherhood and professional life			Workin’ Moms	How to Get Away with Murder	
			Imma Tataranni, Sostituto procuratore	Mina Settembre	The Chair
			La casa de papel	Jane the Virgin	
			Vida Perfecta	Le indagini di Lolita Lobosco	
Motherhood and crime	La reina del sur		Gomorra		
Mother and housewife		Jane the Virgin	Jane the Virgin		
LGBTQIA+ mother			The Handmaid’s Tale	Vida perfecta	
Other	The Handmaid’s Tale			The Handmaid’s Tale	The Handmaid’s Tale
	Madres			Fleabag, childfree	Fleabag, childless
				Fleabag, childless	Madres

Almost all the protagonists seem far from wanting to represent the ideology of Intensive Mothering as it is present in only three of the series investigated, particularly the wives of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and some biographical instances in the Spanish series *La reina del sur* and *Madres*. Otherwise, the series surveyed hint at and seem to portray female identities that entertain a wide-ranging relationship with motherhood. Most of them fall into the Good Enough Mother category. Some series, such as *Fleabag*, *The Chair*, *Jane the Virgin*, *La casa de papel*, *Madres*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, also refer to other types of motherhood and the possibility, or the choice, not to take the path of reproduction, as we will see further on.

Mardy Ireland (1993) in *Reconceiving Women* outlined the following three types of women who are not mothers: the “traditional woman who cannot have children, that is, childless; the “transitional woman: between childfree and childless”, and the “transformative woman, or childfree (childless by choice)”. In the TV series investigated, Non-Mothers

are very few and are represented more as childless than childfree (Claire, Fleabag’s sister; some categories of women from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *La casa de papel*, the Italian protagonists of *Mina Settembre*, and *Lolita Lobosco*). Some women who are not mothers are also depicted as selfish, lacking, self-centered, boisterous and thus somewhat bad women. But some mothers, and even pregnant women, are also cynical and mean, such as Inspector Alicia Sierra, who does not soften even in the face of Nairobi’s story, whose child was taken away. Very little representation of both traditional housewives, apart from Jane’s grandmother, and LGBTQIA+ people (there is only one lesbian handmaid in *The Handmaid’s Tale*; the protagonist of *How to Get Away with Murder* who is bisexual; and Esther, the lesbian sister in *Vida perfecta*). Scarce is the figure of the so-called Good Mother, apart from Jane’s grandmother, probably because—as we have already mentioned—the model, or rather, the social and contemporary models, refer to much more problematic motherhood. From our classification (Table 2), only a few series feature Intensive Mothering (two Spanish, one Anglo-American). Good Enough Mothers, on the other hand, have a higher and more homogeneous representation across all language and cultural areas of production for the reasons stated earlier (see Table 3). Good Enough Mothers are, for the most part, working women—*Workin’ Moms*, *The Chair*, *Imma Tataranni*, to name a few—and they have come to terms with a guilt-ridden stereotype like that of female criminals (donna Imma from *Gomorra*, to mention the most emblematic example). The theme of professional life and its problematization within identity and romantic and family relationships are present in most of the series.

Table 3. Mother types per TV production countries.

Mother Type/TV Production Countries	Intensive Mother	Good Mother	Good Enough Mother	Non Mother	Non Biological Mother
Spanish-speaking countries	La reina del sur		La casa de papel Vida perfecta		
Italy			Imma Tataranni, Sostituto Procuratore Gomorra Mare fuori	Mina Settembre Le indagini di Lolita Lobosco	
English speaking countries			Workin’Moms	Fleabag childfree Fleabag childless How to get away with murder	Fleabag childless The Chair
English- and Spanish-speaking countries, focused specifically on motherhood	The Handmaid’s Tale Madres	Jane the Virgin	The Handmaid’s Tale Madres	The Handmaid’s Tale Jane the Virgin	The Handmaid’s Tale Madres

Table 3 indicates that Italian shows provide minimal representations of Non-Motherhood. In contrast, English-speaking countries present a more varied portrayal of the topic, while Spanish countries navigate different aspects of motherhood. Both English-speaking and Spanish contexts produce series that either focus specifically on motherhood and its complexities (such as *Vida perfecta*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and *Jane the Virgin*) or integrate significant narrative lines around it, as seen in *La casa de papel*, among others.

Comparing the Italian, Spanish, and Anglo-American contexts, Italy remains the most connected to motherhood as the key to fully realizing female identity. The analyzed Italian TV series reveal that Italian media culture retains distinctly conservative and patriarchal tones. Protagonists in *Mina Settembre* and *Lolita Lobosco* cautiously attempt to break traditional molds by depicting women whose identities are defined primarily by their careers (Mina as a social worker and Lolita as a police inspector) and who are not yet

mothers despite being over 35 and 40 years old. In contrast, Imma Tataranni challenges traditional couple models as a mother accused of not being sufficiently present.

A fact that begs further reflection is that the chosen Italian shows are all set in the South of Italy. Thus, they represent the quintessential topos of traditional femininity, where women are almost prisoners of their biological and social destiny. Italian women here are already represented as fiction, as essentialized staging.

4. Discussion

Some interesting details emerge from the results as follows:

1. From the perspective of authorship, both Anglo-American and Italian series feature strong female leads, while Hispanic shows often have male creators capable of challenging gender stereotypes related to motherhood. Spanish productions, particularly those showcasing biographies of women who confront traditional female roles, can disrupt the patriarchy more decisively (e.g., *La casa de papel*) than the predominantly female Italian authorship, which struggles to introduce new discourses on motherhood. This is not to diminish the importance of authorship; provocative series like *Fleabag* and *Vida perfecta* exemplify women positioned far from the stereotypical societal roles.
2. In terms of networks and distribution, Italy produced only one male-authored series, *Gomorra*, which presents the female mafia boss archetype globally. The rest are RAI productions, reflecting a pedagogical tradition that preserves convention. The significant disparity between Italian and international series indicates that challenging gender stereotypes requires the creation of successful content that resonates with audiences accustomed to diverse on-demand series and the understanding that their preferences can rapidly determine a series' success.
3. Many of the female characters depicted are “well-rounded” as defined by Bernardelli (2017), evolving throughout the narratives. In contrast, the mostly flat characters in Italian shows—such as Mina and Imma—are simplistic and predictable, limiting viewer engagement. Well-rounded characters always maintain an aura of mystery, inviting audiences to delve deeper into their complexities. This aligns with Bernardelli's conception of the antihero, where some protagonists defy feminine expectations; *Fleabag*, friends from *Vida perfecta*, and figures like Annalise and Kim exemplify this.
4. The analyzed shows frequently employ narrative devices to encourage immersive audience participation in the protagonists' stories. For instance, Tokyo in *La casa de papel* as well as *Fleabag* function as narrators, breaking the “fourth wall” to engage viewers. This promotes the female gaze (Jacobsson 2011) in contrast to the traditional male gaze (Mulvey 1989). Other devices that explore women's lives include personal confessions (as seen in *Workin' Moms*) and therapy sessions (Maria in *Vida perfecta*), effectively inviting viewers into the female perspective.
5. Should we celebrate the emergence of the Good Enough Mother? This seems plausible, particularly in competition with the childless woman, another well-represented model given the scarcity of depictions of women without children. This interpretation risks reinforcing a notion of innovative imagery that better reflects the multifaceted female experience, characterized by priorities beyond motherhood, wherein women often navigate identities as either Good Enough Mothers or Non-Mothers desiring children. Conversely, one might argue that being an imperfect mother is preferable to remaining childless.

5. Conclusions

Discussing Motherhood and Non-Motherhood inherently involves the consideration of gender. In contemporary society, gender occupies a central role in public discourse and political agendas, often also in light of the fluctuating birth rates.

In that way, conclusions begin by taking into consideration *The Handmaid's Tale*, a “dystopian text with a prophetic nature”, as noted by [Tabuyo-Santaclara \(2024\)](#). The series effectively highlights the relationship between narrative and motherhood policies, portraying women as reproductive machines. Its impact is evident in the flash mobs in Ohio, Texas, and Missouri, which protested restrictive abortion laws and challenged Trump's stance on these issues. Furthermore, *The Handmaid's Tale* exemplifies the interplay between cultural artifacts and society/politics; Atwood's original novel emerged amidst Reagan's anti-abortion policies, while the recent television adaptation was launched in the context of Trump's policies. Thus, the political dimension of popular culture in this instance is both clear and explicit ([Tabuyo-Santaclara 2024](#); [Riva 2021](#)). Talking about Motherhood or Non-Motherhood means talking about gender. Gender is currently at the center of public discourse and political agenda as birthrates fluctuate.

This double reciprocal interdependence and circular influence between society/politics and popular culture is not always easily recognizable and is influenced by a variety of factors, which are outlined as follows to address our three research questions:

1. Digitalization has rendered specific content a key component of successful media offerings. The analysis shows that successful media production increasingly hinges on breaking gender stereotypes through engaging content. For instance, productions like *La casa de papel* and *Fleabag* effectively resonate with audiences accustomed to on-demand viewing. The algorithms of streaming platforms play a crucial role in identifying and promoting narratives that address contemporary issues, such as (alternative) motherhood and (alternative) identity ([Ortega 2023](#); [Shapiro 2020](#); [Lotz 2017](#)). Additionally, they play an important role in experimenting with innovative narrative techniques—like breaking the “fourth wall”—that further engage viewers and enhance their immersion in the story, demonstrating a shift towards dynamic storytelling that reflects the current societal norms.

On the other hand, it is still important to consider the identity of production companies. The Anglo-American and the Spanish series are mainly produced by streaming production companies. In Italy, although the series are distributed through streaming services, they are produced by Italian Public Television (RAI), reflecting a cultural context that emphasizes the traditional models of femininity (see Section 2.1 for the Gender Equality Index).

2. The inclusion of women in television production teams promotes a more diverse and realistic representation of motherhood, although female creators in Anglo-American, Spanish, and Italian television impact their cultural contexts in different ways. Shows like *Fleabag* and *Vida perfecta* showcase complex female characters that challenge traditional stereotypes and illuminate the multifaceted nature of femininity. Thus, having women in creative roles is essential for enhancing diversity and expanding the portrayal of motherhood on screen. However, while Italian series often feature strong female leads, they are usually produced by networks like RAI, which adhere to the conventional values, resulting in a less progressive exploration of maternal identities.
3. The analysis has revealed a significant absence of representations of women who choose not to become mothers, particularly in Italian media. Although Non-Mothers are present in the narratives, they are often portrayed as deprived and lacking the experience of motherhood. In contrast, Spanish and Anglo-American productions offer a broader portrayal of Non-Mothers, including childfree women who embrace their choice and thus embody completeness as individuals. This lack of representation highlights the influence of cultural context on the visibility and complexity of female identities depicted on screen, emphasizing the need for a more diverse representation of Non-Motherhood paths. Addressing these gaps can foster a deeper understanding of the societal implications and cultural narratives that shape women's experiences today.

Moreover, it is essential to celebrate the emergence of a different discourse illustrated by characters who begin to occupy varied spaces in our collective imagination. This shift

often starts from a niche perspective but serves to ignite discussions and elevate the ongoing evolution of genre definitions.

However, this analysis indicates that the Non-Mother remains an underrepresented category among women in contemporary serialized media. The series examined in this research can serve as a crucial platform for redefining women's roles, moving beyond the traditional portrayals of motherhood and the supportive female figure subordinate to male characters and instead positioning women as protagonists in their own right. These characters often navigate the complexities of work, career, and family, while also seeking alternative perspectives that are not bound by the myth of motherhood. Among these representations, the "Good Enough Mother" emerges as the most commonly depicted figure in television series. Interestingly, the POGE (Principle of Good Enough) from software development appears relevant to the discourse on motherhood as well.

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