

## Elastic Mothers at a Crossroad

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### A Qualitative and Semiotic Analysis of Motherhood in Advertising in Toronto and São Paulo

*This paper presents the key findings of my doctoral research, which argued that advertising reproduces and reinforces culturally constructed maternal ideals. To do so, I investigated three research issues: first, what meanings are associated with being a mother today; second, what maternal ideals are predominant within advertising messages and imagery; and third, how mothers and pregnant women negotiate these advertising signs. My theoretical-methodological framework includes semiotic and psychoanalytic concepts and qualitative research with mothers and pregnant women. The Canadian research corpus includes advertisements, published from 2010 to 2013 in Parents Canada, Canadian Family and Today's Parent magazines. The Brazilian research corpus includes advertisements, published from 2006 to 2013, in Pais e Filhos and Crescer magazines. I interviewed pregnant women and mothers with children up to eight years of age in Toronto and in São Paulo, to explore how they perceive themselves as mothers and what they think about these advertisements. The advertising analysis aims at identifying thematic groups of advertisements with similar characteristics (maternal representations, images, messages, sales appeals and cultural ideals). I begin this paper by highlighting contextual similarities and differences related to being a mother today in São Paulo and in Toronto. Next, I present key findings obtained from the semiotic analysis of Brazilian and Canadian advertising. To do so, I introduce main ideas from different scholars, which inspired my work. Then, I summarize the thematic groups of advertisements mapped in Brazil, followed by a more detailed analysis of the Canadian advertising. Finally, I conclude by summing up the most important findings obtained in Canada, in contrast to Brazil.*

Over the last ten years, motherhood and mothering have deeply changed my life. In October 2003, I found out I was pregnant and started reading Brazilian

parenting magazines. By that time, I felt really disturbed how advertising was portraying and speaking to mothers. My initial impression was that advertisers were portraying pregnant women as passive and inexperienced in motherhood; and mothers as calm, sweet and totally dedicated to their children. However, all mothers whom I knew were living at a very fast pace and taking on a wide range of responsibilities. This insight motivated my master's and doctoral research developments that led to this paper.

In this paper, I argue that advertising reproduces and reinforces culturally constructed maternal ideals. My central argument will be supported on qualitative research results, motherhood scholars' ideas (O'Reilly; Hays; Douglas and Michaels) and also on Brazilian psychoanalyst Maria Helena Fernandes statement that women are currently confronting a broader-than-ever range of ideals which we are supposed to reach. Inspired by the metaphorical image of mothers, from São Paulo and Toronto, living like "Elastic Mothers at a Crossroad," I will start presenting specific learning from both cities and their qualitative fieldwork. After, I will present thematic groups of advertisements mapped in Brazil and Canada, combining semiotics and psychoanalytic theory and showing a variety of strategies used by them to reinforce and reproduce the dominant culture of motherhood. Finally, I will conclude by comparing the most important findings obtained in Canada, in contrast to Brazil.

### **Being a Mother Today: Contextual Similarities in São Paulo and in Toronto**

Demographic data obtained from the governmental agencies Statistics Canada and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) help us to understand the key similarities between motherhood in Brazil and Canada:

- a) Canadian and Brazilian women currently represent more than 40 percent of the workforce in their countries.
- b) In both countries, the current fertility rate is below 1.8 children per woman (1.61 in Canada and 1.74 in Brazil).
- c) The households depicted as the mythical advertising family—a heterosexual married couple with biological children, where the man is the breadwinner and the mother is responsible for taking care of the kids and the home—no longer represent the dominant family configuration. In fact, the last census surveys that were conducted in Brazil and in Canada have detected diversity of family configurations in both countries, which together represent more than 50 percent of the households which currently exist. Statistics Canada (2012) defines a "census family" like so:

Refers to a married couple (with or without children of either and/or both spouses), a common-law couple (with or without children of either and/or both partners) or a lone parent of any marital status, with at least one child. A couple may be of opposite sex or same sex. A couple family with children may be further classified as either an intact family in which all children are the biological and/or adopted children of both married spouses or of both common-law partners or a stepfamily with at least one biological or adopted child of only one married spouse or common-law partner and whose birth or adoption preceded the current relationship.

In the terms of the Dutch sociologist, Saskia Sassen (1991, 2005), Toronto and São Paulo are both global cities. These metropolis economies are based on business activities related to specialized services, which serve a large international network of connected global corporations. In this sense, I observed many multinational companies, operating in several industries, sell the same range of products and brands in Canada and in Brazil. Moreover, in Toronto and in São Paulo, mothers also have media habits in common: they watch the same Hollywood movies and television sitcoms, they read parenting magazines and mommy blogs, and they interact with friends through social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and so on.

In my doctoral research, I conducted qualitative research in both cities I was studying. During this fieldwork, I interviewed 48 women matching one of three profiles—pregnant women, mothers of babies (up to twelve months) and mothers of children up to eight years of age—24 in São Paulo and 24 in Toronto. During this phase, the following key similarities were found in both cities:

a) Motherhood triggered deep changes in the interviewees' everyday lives, and motivated changes in individual values, plans and priorities. According to interviewees, being a mother is an experience that implies new responsibilities, so it makes women become stronger and more mature.

b) Pregnancy was considered a controversial phase: despite being a happy and special time, it also provokes anxiety due to the fast and progressive maternal body transformations.

c) In the first year of motherhood, mothers and babies build a strong physical and emotional bond. On one hand, interviewees reported feeling proud and powerful while nourishing and caring for their babies, as well as touched by their babies' daily progress. On the other, they reported feeling physically exhausted and emotionally stressed, due to the intensity of effort required for adaptation to their new daily routines.

d) The mothers of children up to eight years of age reported the processes

of socialization, growth and progressive autonomy of their children. In this phase, mothers reported being concerned with their children's nutrition, health and education. To these ends, they try to stimulate their children's creativity and sense of imagination.

e) In both cities surveyed, women reported facing difficulties to resume their professional activities. Both Canadian and Brazilian mothers reported a constant struggle to reconcile different roles and duties, and difficulties in balancing the time dedicated to their children, their spouses, household chores, work and themselves. Consequently, in São Paulo and in Toronto, many interviewees reported having changed their work schemes: since their children were born, some mothers decided to quit their jobs and others have been working part-time or freelancing from home.

f) The desire to be seen by others as "good mothers" increases feelings of guilt among interviewees. In both cities, mothers reported worrying about failing by doing anything "wrong" for their children. Thus, ideals of maternal perfection deeply affect their feelings, actions and thoughts. Nevertheless, some women talk back and others just follow cultural and media pressures.

### **Being a Mother Today: Contextual Differences and Specific Aspects in São Paulo and in Toronto**

Although Brazilian and Canadian interviewees both feel strong media and social pressures on how they mother their children, these pressures were discussed with greater intensity in Toronto than in São Paulo, within the three target segments studied (pregnant women, mothers of babies and mothers of children up to eight years). In São Paulo, mothers were more concerned with urban violence and other tensions in the public environment. However, in Toronto, maternal worries related to juggling household chores, child care, work, and other activities were more intense. In fact, middle-class women from São Paulo can count on a support network formed by relatives or domestic servants, while in Toronto, the women, despite belonging to the same social class, need to care for their homes and children by themselves. As a result, they reported feeling overwhelmed and dealing with more difficulties. In my interpretation, due to their hard mothering work and domestic routine, Torontonians reacted in a more critical way than respondents in São Paulo when evaluating advertising.

### **Key Findings Obtained from the Semiotic Analysis of Advertising**

The findings obtained in both countries during the stages of qualitative research and semiotic analysis of advertising clarified different types of strategies used

by advertisers to reinforce and reproduce the culturally-dominant motherhood ideals. In general, many claims, messages and advertising images convey promises of success, completeness, safety, efficiency, flexibility and better performance for mothers, but—above all—they reaffirm that mothering work is a female responsibility.

Feminist North American scholars of motherhood (Hays; Douglas and Michaels; O'Reilly, among others) point out that maternal ideals are constructed according to the sociocultural, historical and economical contexts with which they interact. Andrea O'Reilly argues that patriarchal motherhood is informed and sustained by ten ideological assumptions that cause mothering to be oppressive to women. She terms them as follows:

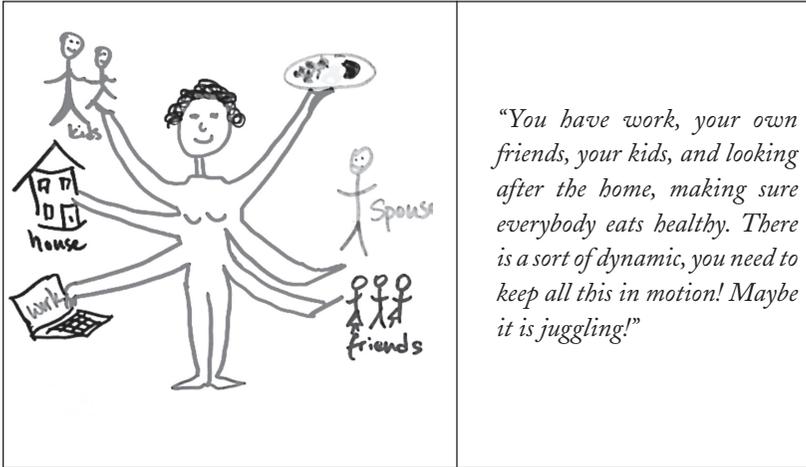
...essentialization, privatization, individualization, naturalization, normalization, idealization, biologicalization, expertization, intensification, and depoliticalization of motherhood.... All ten of the aforementioned assumptions or mandates of patriarchal motherhood work, separately and in unison, to structure and sustain motherhood as a patriarchal institution that causes mothering to be disempowering, if not oppressive, to mothers. (187)

According to O'Reilly these ten ideological assumptions generate the societal devaluation of motherwork and also reinforce the impossible standards of idealized motherhood. Consequently, mothers feel overwhelmed, exhausted and guilty due to the hard work and responsibility which they take on by mothering alone. However, O'Reilly remembers and emphasizes that these ten ideological assumptions are culturally produced, which means:

...they are neither natural or inevitable to mothering itself; likewise, because these mandates have been constructed, they can also be deconstructed.... We, in interrupting and deconstructing the patriarchal narrative of motherhood, are able to destabilize the hold this discourse has on the meaning and practice of mothering, and clear a space for the articulation of a counter-narrative of mothering.... This counter-narrative of empowered mothering, I wrote, "is concerned with imagining and implementing a view of mothering that is empowering to women as opposed to oppressive." (187-188)

Following O'Reilly's ideas, my doctoral research aims to amplify the discussion of how advertising and the culture of motherhood have been affecting our everyday mothering practices. To do so, I started my work listening to Brazilian and Canadian women.

During my qualitative fieldwork in Toronto, there was one specific drawing, done by a mother of two children, which really called my attention. I asked her to draw “how she felt as a mother,” then she told me mothering was like “juggling.” Her drawing and comments are as follows:



Inspired by her drawing and also by another women interviewed in São Paulo and Toronto, I kept thinking that all of us were, in fact, living like “Elastic Mothers at a Crossroad.” In this sense, the Brazilian psychoanalyst Maria Helena Fernandes deeply expressed what my interviewees and I were feeling when she analyzed Helen Parr.

Helen Parr is the maternal character of the American computer-animated film *The Incredibles*, directed by Brad Bird and produced by Disney Pixar (2004). Better known as the superhero ElastiGirl, after marrying Mr. Incredible, Helen Parr became a dedicated spouse and mother of three children: a teenage girl who becomes invisible, an agile boy who runs very quickly and a baby with diverse superhuman abilities. Her body can be stretched and reshaped in different ways, from a parachute, to a rubber boat. Helen Parr also uses her elastic arms to separate her fighting children in a family dinner scene of the movie. According to Fernandes, the *elastic woman* represents the ideal postmodern woman. Fernandes highlights the fact that changes in cultural ideals are often the result of new social transformations and achievements, as well as of the abandonment of old interests due to the discovery of new interests and new needs. However, as time went by, the set of ideals that women are supposed to seek has been greatly extended. In Fernandes’ analysis, women are currently confronting an accumulation of ideals: a broader-than-ever range of ideals that we are enjoined to reach.

Stretched between a passive and maternal identification and an active and phallic identification, women have been trying to deal with the excess that characterizes all demands they must negotiate in everyday lives. This results in a depth accumulation, which requires an elasticity that never before we imagined as possible. (Fernandes 2, translation by author)

Fernandes says in order to fulfill this wide scope of ideals, the *elastic woman* needs also to have the ideal body, which means being thin, beautiful and in good shape. In addition, she must be: understanding, good-humored, “sexy,” and a dedicated mother; she must sound cultured and well-informed; she must be cheerful, economically independent, professionally successful and, finally, serene and in control. In Fernandes’ words:

Engaged in the pursuit of the slim body and lean beauty ideals, the elastic woman throws herself into this insane race.... Becoming a slave of a diverse scope of ideals, which she needs—at least—to get closer, the elastic woman feels deeply affected by its excess and exhaustion. Despite her incredible powers, she feels guilty when she finds out it is impossible to be all that is required from her. In conflict with herself and other people who surround her, the elastic woman is, by definition, guilty and powerless. Experiencing a painful feeling, she always feels like something has escaped out of her reach, something that always overflows her impossible everyday routine, then, she feels paralysed and helpless, and perceives that her body hurts! (4-5, translation by author)

I agree with Fernandes, based on what I have learned from the mothers I interviewed.

However, my concern is if elasticity is a demand which synthesizes the pursuit of this multitasked and perfect maternal ideal, exhaustion is often the price. After all, elastics may break. And the rupture of the desired stretching skills has been noticed in the contemporary psychopathologies—postpartum depression, panic disorder, physical-emotional stress and burn out syndrome, for example—which are already affecting some women in Brazil and in Canada.

### Mapping the Brazilian Advertising Thematic Groups

The Brazilian research corpus includes advertisements that were published in *Pais e Filhos* and *Crescer* magazines from 2006 to 2013. Mapping the advertisements in this corpus resulted in four thematic groups with common

characteristics with respect to images, visual elements, messages and sales appeals; as well as to cultural ideals and maternal representations which stood out among advertising signs.

a) The first group consists of Brazilian advertisements that present images of pregnant women. Their messages seek to soothe insecurities and ambivalent feelings often associated with pregnant women. Their depictions of pregnant figures convey the image of an ideal pregnant woman who seems always quiet, serene, pure and asexual; unlike the pregnant women made of flesh and blood, who reported daily experiences of intense physical and emotional transformations. Perhaps advertising representations of pregnant women evoke such a calming feeling, because it is implicit that the depicted ideal consumer has already followed the advertiser's recommendation. By having joined the consumption rituals, the pregnant woman in the advertisement has already "everything which she needs," therefore, she feels completely ready for the arrival of the baby.

b) The majority of Brazilian ads fit into the second group, which comprises advertisements focused on images of mothers and babies. Their messages aim at provoking emotional responses from mothers of babies who are living at a symbiotic stage (see Lacan's Mirror Stage). Hence, in most advertisements, images of mothers and babies look each other in the eye: their pictures are framed in close-ups, communicating sensations of bonding, togetherness, happiness, peace and harmony.

Despite the fact that mothers appear totally available to care for their babies into the advertising scenes; in real life Brazilian mothers must return to work. Consequently, a majority of them feel guilty and worried about leaving their children with other people (nannies, day-cares, grandmothers), since full-time maternal availability is only an imaginary and ideal condition represented in advertising.

In this group, messages of protection, safety, comfort, care, bonding, total dedication and maternal affection insert consumer products into the symbiotic mother-child context. However, the discourse of happiness and togetherness does not include imperfections and everyday difficulties, which are very relevant experiences for contemporary mothers.

c) The third group of Brazilian advertisements was constituted by brands which integrated father figures into the familiar scenes. However, the appearance of father figures is uncommon in the advertising scenario studied in Brazil. Besides that, the few paternal depictions found generally had the fathers occupy secondary roles within the contexts illustrated: for instance, they appear behind mothers and babies, with their faces hidden or out of focus, as evidence that most advertisers tend to maintain mothers as their key target market and do not speak directly or exclusively to fathers.

d) Finally, the main characteristic of the fourth group was the absence of images of pregnant women, mothers and babies or father figures. Therefore, this last group was composed of Brazilian advertisements that used other verbal and visual resources to provoke emotional responses from mothers. Three key sales appeals were identified within this group:

1. Advertising messages associated with better maternal performance, and also reinforcing the ideals of multitasking maternal perfection.
2. Focus on product images, functional attributes and benefits: in this case, advertising lacks emotional appeals and an integration among brands, mother and children, but communicates product attributes and benefits that incorporate maternal functions.
3. Products and brands associated to supportive roles in children's growth, playful development and discoveries.

It is worth mentioning that the spontaneous attention of Brazilian interviewees was drawn by maternal images and depictions of pregnant women within the advertising corpus analyzed. Most Brazilian respondents focused their debates on emotional reactions and sensations evoked by advertising scenes. Consequently, I chose images as the main criteria to guide me when I was mapping the Brazilian advertising corpus into thematic groups, because visual signs provoked more impact among mothers than textual messages in São Paulo.

Because Cesarotto and I already published a detailed analysis of the Brazilian advertising mapping (see Mendonça and Cesarotto), I will present a more in depth analysis of Canada's findings in this paper.

### **Mapping the Canadian Advertising Thematic Groups**

In Canada, the research includes advertisements placed in *Parents Canada*, *Canadian Family* and *Today's Parent* magazines from 2010 to 2013. But, unlike in São Paulo, the Torontonians respondents were less receptive, and more critical, of the advertising evaluated. Moreover, advertising images provoked less impact and lower engagement among them, in comparison to the reactions of women in São Paulo.

In general, the written messages provoked much more impact among the respondents in Toronto than did images and visual signs. Consequently, the focus of spontaneous attention in Toronto was verbal texts. The key issue raised by Canadian respondents related to how advertising communicates mothering practices. In other words, the strategies advertisers use to promote a certain standard of maternal performance, and to encourage the practice of

mothering according to the dominant values of the patriarchy and consumption culture. Consequently, semiotic analysis conducted on the Canadian advertising campaigns identified four new thematic groups, different from those that were already identified in Brazil.

Next, I will detail the Canadian advertising groups, but, before that, I would like to highlight that both Brazilian and Canadian analytical parameters were inspired by what I have learned from women who participated in qualitative research. As mentioned above, while Brazilian women focused on images, sensations and emotional aspects communicated by motherhood in advertising, Canadian women focused on verbal messages regarding mothering practices and patriarchal values within the culture of motherhood. The different reactions of the Canadian participants to the advertising material led me to a different set of parameters for analysis of the Canadian corpus. The different thematic groups that resulted provided an interesting framework for comparative analysis. Finally, I sketch the beginnings of such an analysis in the conclusion.

The mapping of Canadian advertisements resulted in four new thematic groups:

- a) The first group consists of advertisements whose strategies undermine mothers and whose communication approaches evoked negative or unpleasant feelings among interviewees.
- b) The second group consists of advertisements which promote better maternal performance. Their communication approaches evoked positive and pleasant feelings among respondents.
- c) The third group consists of advertisements based on appeals to fear. These evoked potential risks towards the children, and therefore raised parental feelings of insecurity and, consequently, mobilized negative or unpleasant feelings among mothers.
- d) The fourth group consists of advertisements whose strategies focused on the development of children through play, creativity and discovery. This group elicited positive and pleasant feelings among interviewees.

Feminist and Motherhood scholars (Hays, 1996; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Warner, 2005; Katz Rothman, 2004 and 2007) state that the ways in which we raise our children nowadays have been evaluated as successful or unsuccessful, through measurements of performance and efficiency. These criteria are applied in the marketplace, which also guides advertising and mass media discourse. In this context, the parents-children relationship has been managed as a work project to be carried out efficiently.

Everyone craves happiness, which is associated not only with pleasure, satisfaction, and completeness, but most importantly with material achievement

which means success (Birman, 2010). Consequently, to produce winners, family everyday life becomes a game where everything relates to parents and children's performances, "and, of course, players play to win" (Warner, 2005, p.224).

In this sense, two key words—performance and strategy—stood out during the analysis of Canadian advertising. As the marketing scholars Stanton, Etzel and Walker (1994) have written, strategic planning is considered extremely important business management activities:

Planning is deciding now what we are going to do later, including how and when we are going to do it. Without a plan, we cannot get things done effectively and efficiently, because we don't know what needs to be done or how to do it. (ibid 61).

Marketing is pragmatic. As Stanton, Etzel and Walker state, "an objective is simply a desired outcome. Effective planning must begin with a set of objectives that are to be achieved by carrying out plans." (ibid 62) Dense strategic planning guides and defines what should be communicated about brands and products in marketing operations. After all, product sales and advertising campaigns need to perform well and achieve the marketing and communication goals, which have been previously determined.

The problem is when this strategic logic is transferred to consumers' everyday lives. In such cases, there is also a migration of methods and criteria for evaluating mothers' performance. Practical recipes which indicate successful or socially appropriate mothering practices are often informed by the media, but they tend to ignore the mothers' life experiences and acquired learning. As a result, products and brands promise agility and better performance for mothers, as well as illusions of fulfillment, pleasure, satisfaction, security and protection for the children.

### **Canadian Advertisements Whose Strategies Undermine Mothers**

The first group of Canadian advertisements communicates how mothers must act in order to meet the performance expectations, shaped by the patriarchal culture of motherhood. These strategies use appeals that devalue current maternal knowledge. And these campaigns also devalue diverse mothering practices, by constructing maternal representations that portray women in conservative, subservient and submissive positions, depictions which were disapproved of and criticized by the interviewees.

It is worth noticing the appropriation of maternal knowledge by advertisers in many ads of this group. Their messages initially diminish maternal skills, emphasizing feelings of guilt or failure related to maternal performance; soon

after, they say if mothers count on the help of products and brands, they will succeed in performing their maternal functions, satisfying their children's needs to the fullest.

Consequently, these advertising strategies reinforce a binary opposition between the mythical figures of the good and the bad mother (see Caplan 2007: 592-600). Moreover, they also promote an unattainable ideal of maternal perfection. By highlighting maternal difficulties in taking care, breastfeeding or nourishing the children, these texts intentionally undermine the self-confidence and self-esteem of mothers; thus, they feel even more guilty or insecure, and therefore vulnerable to follow advertising proposals.

For instance, the milk formulas Enfamil A+ and Similac reinforce that good mothers naturally want their children to develop well and be happy; to this end, mothers try to nurture their children properly. If they aren't successful, of course, mothers can use these products, because they are very similar to breast milk, which is the "ideal" food to nourish the babies.

The Enfamil A+ campaign states: "You want her to be healthy, happy, curious, playful, smart, successful, energetic, funny, athletic." It also tells mothers: "It's natural to want what is best for his memories, happiness, education, development, friendships, childhood, health, future. New Enfamil A+® is closer to breast milk than ever before." This brand campaign also address the following message to mothers:

#### Enfamil A+ (Formula)

You want the best for your baby as he begins to learn the beauty and wonder of the world all around him. Health and happiness go hand in hand, so if you choose a formula for your baby, choose the one that is our closest to breast milk. The ingredients in New Enfamil A+® are designed to promote normal brain and eye development and normal healthy digestion, making it the natural choice. Breast milk is the optimal nutrition for your baby. It is the gold standard by which we design our formulas.

The competitor, Similac Advance, builds up a very similar discourse, affirming that: "You'll nurture her big dreams. We'll help nurture her growing body." Similac also highlights its formula ingredients in order to communicate technological and product similarity to mother's milk:

#### Similac Advance (Formula)

Nutrition for every milestone. Similac Advance with Omega-3 and Omega-6 is the only formula containing galactooligosaccharides and lutein, a nutrient babies can only get from breast milk or Similac

Advance®. Learn more about our closest formula ever to breast milk at [Similac.ca](http://Similac.ca).

The point of departure in both advertisements is basically the same: both brands (Enfamil A+ and Similac Advance) begin talking about the problem, which consists of maternal “failure” to nourish babies in an adequate way, in order to position their products as ideal solutions. Paradoxically, despite the fact that interviewees criticized negative approaches of these campaigns, their texts actually do touch relevant concerns among mothers. It is worth noticing both products’ names: Enfamil gathers the French word *enfant*, which means *child* and derives from Latin term *infans*: “one who does not speak or can not communicate through verbal language” (Veríssimo 6); plus *milk*, in English. Similac gathers the adjective, *similar*, and the term *lac*, a Latin word referring to milk, reinforcing the similarity between the formula and the mother’s milk.

Other advertisements included in the first group, present maternal figures in submissive positions, reinforcing patriarchal values and traditional codes of gender and femininity. For instance, there is a Nutella advertisement, which was deeply criticized by interviewees for the domestic and servile attitude of the female figure that was serving breakfast for the children, behind the kitchen counter. Nutella’s message was not only seen as irritating, but also considered questionable, since the product wasn’t considered natural or adequate for a breakfast situation: “Their day. Made by Mom. Nutella.® All natural ingredients. No preservatives. No artificial colour. Source of Vitamin E.”

### Canadian Advertisements Whose Strategies Enhance Maternal Performance

The second group was composed of advertisements which claim to facilitate mothers’ everyday lives using technology; as well as advertisers which claim to show a closer understanding of the intense daily routine of their multitasking target audience, employing a humorous tone of voice. These campaigns’ images and messages connect with maternal “needs” in positive ways, aiming to mobilize their target and increasing their maternal performance.

For example, CTV Canada presents a couple of their morning show presenters juggling objects such as a ball, a laptop, a cell phone, and a pot; while a Vicks VapoRub advertisement presents two children jumping on a bed and their mother looking at them, standing at the bedroom door. Both campaigns refer to maternal daily juggling efforts in humorous ways and seek to demonstrate an understanding of the busy routines of Canadian mothers.

These advertisements actually generated identification with the everyday life situations of the interviewees. Therefore they position brands as allied to

mothers, using a pleasant tone of voice to transmit messages of adequacy with respect to cultural values of the public sphere, such as dynamism, speed and flexibility. Their messages are clear and objective:

CTV Canada

Making sense of your morning.

CTV Canada AM. Weekdays mornings on CTV.

VicksVaporub

Sorry Vicks Vaporub only quiets their cough and cold symptoms.

Trust Vicks VapoRub to soothe their coughs and nasal congestion with Vicks vapours.

### Canadian Advertisements Focused on “Fear and Failure” Strategies, Evoking Parental Worries Towards their Children’s

The third group of Canadian advertisements emphasizes potential risks or threats related to the children’s safety, health, well-being and future. Through appeals that evoke parental worries related to the current well-being and the future development of their sons and daughters. By appealing to parents’ needs for control and caution, these messages encourage the purchase of different types of products and services.

A threatening tone of voice is a common characteristic in the campaigns of this group. As a result, it was harshly criticized by interviewees from all three segments in Toronto (pregnant women, mothers of babies and mothers of children up to eight years of age): they named this group “*fear & failure strategies*.”

Despite the fact that our lived experience constantly indicates how unpredictable life can be, we all tend to believe in the illusion of control, because it is comfortable and also brings us desired wishes of safety and protection. As a result, any indication that our illusion of control over our children’s safety is just that—an illusion—powerfully touches any mother or father.

In this regard, a campaign by the CIBC bank portrays a girl, looking into the blue sky, through a telescope. She watches the horizon through this instrument, which expands her vision towards objects anyone would like to see better. Because we generally read magazines from the left to the right page, the CIBC advertisement invites us to perform this visual motion, from left to right, while we observe the image of this little blonde girl and read its headline on the left page, which says: “Expanding horizons. Because in life there’s no shortage of things to save for.”

Below, and also to the left, we see a text box that says: “Life adds up. Your finances should too. CIBC eAdvantage™ Savings Account™.” The “natural”

life trajectory is envisioned as progressive, happy and fulfilling; but—in this campaign—this dream will only become possible if the family saves money! On the right page, the advertiser warns that customers must save today, in order to allow their families to enjoy adventures and exciting opportunities in the future:

CIBC Bank (eAdvantage™ Savings Account)

Whether it's sharing exciting new adventures and opportunities with your family or setting money aside for the future, a CIBC eAdvantage™ Savings Account helps you built your savings. Speak to a CIBC advisor today. Visit and branch, go to [cibc.com/savemore](http://cibc.com/savemore) or call. CIBC. For what matters.

Another advertisement in this group, by Children's Education Funds, has a message which first threatens, then encourages parents to invest in the future of their children. On the left page, their warning headline says: "Kids grow fast. So do tuition costs." Next, on the right page, they motivate parents to save some money to guarantee their children's future: "Nurture the dream." Finally, the text offers an appropriate solution, which is Children's Education Funds, itself, of course:

Children's Education Funds Inc.

Before your child grows another inch, start saving with Children's Education Funds Inc. CEFI has the greatest selection of Register Education Saving Plan offerings. It's easy and very affordable. You can get started for under \$10.00 per month! Keep saving: you'll be surprised at how much you can accumulate.... Visit [www.cefi.ca](http://www.cefi.ca) or call 1 (800) 246-1203.

The Children's Education Funds advertisement portrays a forest landscape, with lots of green trees, where we can see a father figure who is holding a little boy over his shoulders. The father points up, to the treetops, so that the boy can look up. Once again, we are invited to perform a visual movement, this time ascending. These two campaigns both use visual strategies which connect parental desires for their children's achievement and consequent success in the future.

This thematic group also includes campaigns that anticipate maternal concerns, raising anxiety among expecting mothers. For instance, *Ovol*, which is a medicine to soothe baby colic, asks pregnant women if they are prepared to face the upcoming suffering:

*Ovol*

It's most beautiful time in your life. But if your baby has colic, will

you be prepared? Colic occurs in about 10 percent of babies. Bouts of crying can last from one to two hours. Ovol® is a brand pharmacists recommend most for relief of infant colic due to gas. Easy to administer and 100 percent alcohol free, Ovol® can bring your peace of mind when you need it most. Be prepared for colic with Ovol®.

Using the same strategy, an advertisement by the company Boiron, for Camilia, a medicine intended to relieve teething, depicts an illustration of a baby, who is crying dramatically. Its text warns mothers: “First tooth, first pain, first treatment. Boiron® offers Camilia®, a homeopathic medicine for teething babies. Discover Boiron® unit-doses, particularly well suited for little-ones!” In both situations, that portrayed by Ovol and that portrayed by Camilia/Boiron, pain may happen or not; the sales appeal, however, is focused on anticipating maternal worries and encouraging consumption.

### **Canadian Advertisements that Appeal to Stimulating Children’s Playful Development**

In Canada, the fourth group of advertisements encourages mothers to support a playful development of children, through providing an everyday learning atmosphere, filled with scenarios of family fun and magical moments. Their campaigns depict families indoors and outdoors, in moments of leisure inside the home, or adventure and fun away from home.

Just as family outdoor experiences are now shaped by consumption codes, the moments of everyday life indoors have also been shaped by diverse objects and gadgets, such as toys, books, games, etc., claiming to help parents in educating the children in joyful ways. The belief in the magic of a child’s exploration of the world lends a sort of a magical Disney-esque mood to everything from children’s room decoration to their birthday parties. According to this belief, life needs to be always fun. Everything should match and shine during the spectacular princess or superhero party. Every “good mother” must wish for and, above all, put on a perfect production!

Outside the home, families supposedly need to travel to perfect destinations during weekends or summer vacations. Moments of instant fun and fabulous adventures are mandatory. At Transat Resorts your family can experience the “perfect holiday,” but if you would rather go for adventure in a “perfect campsite,” just buy whatever you need to “set it all up in a few minutes” at Canadian Tire:

Transat Resorts

Title: Our select resorts. Your perfect family holiday. Text: ...this entirely renovated resort provides the backdrop for a fabulous family

vacation! Enjoy the best of Riviera Nayarit: breathtaking scenery, fine dining, a kids' club your children will love, a lively disco, a relaxing spa and superior services. Ready to have some fun?

#### Canadian Tire

Title: Family adventure bring it on. Text: It takes hours to drive the family to the perfect campsite, but it shouldn't take more than a few minutes to set it all up. Broadstone™ pop-up tents and accessories make camping a breeze. Find more products designed for life in Canada only in Canadian Tire.

Consumer culture capitalizes a child's play, development and discoveries, and adds lots of branded magic into it. Advertising campaigns invite mothers to incorporate their new role of providing their families with moments of playful fun. Even indoors, everyday life now must be filled with magic and sensory exploration, because educating children appropriately must be fun. After all, contemporary children are said to need stimulation to develop creativity, intelligence, imagination and other skills. All of this growth requires parental involvement.

#### Conclusion

In Brazil, most advertising messages are aimed at meeting the insecurities of pregnant women and mothers of babies, and the majority of campaigns depict mothers and babies in poses of warmth and harmony. In Canada, this was not the case. There were, however, similarities:

- a) In both countries, father figures are infrequent in the advertising studied.
- b) Moreover, appealing to the idea of learning as play is considered an effective approach, to encourage mothers in supporting their sons and daughters' development, with the help of consumer products in a magical and fun atmosphere.
- c) In both countries, advertising promises better maternal performance. In this way, campaigns analyzed in Canada and in Brazil both reinforce the existing patriarchal culture of motherhood values. Advertisers set implicit standards for how Brazilians and Canadians should practice mothering, in trying to sell a wide range of products using both rational appeals (convenience, better nutrition, killing 99.9 percent of viruses and bacteria, etc.) and emotional appeals (caring, comfort, safety, security well-being).

Nevertheless, I must emphasize that it is not only patriarchal values that are communicated, but also the ideologies of neoliberal capitalism and individualism. Both of these sets of values also guide contemporary maternal performances. North (and South) American media culture instructs mothers to be dynamic, efficient, versatile and flexible in both countries studied. However, these media pressures have been affecting the women we interviewed in Toronto more deeply and more negatively than in São Paulo.

As we have learned through qualitative research, Torontonians mothers had reported lonely, exhausting and more intense mothering work. That might explain why Canadian respondents' general reactions to advertisements were more critical.

Practical recipes for better maternal performance are stamped on the covers of both Brazilian and Canadian magazines. But the fear of failure seems to be affecting Torontonians mothers, in the surveyed sample (middle-class women, readers of the magazines studied), in a deeper way.

Torontonian interviewees helped us to map *Motherhood in Advertising* by opening new perspectives, which contrast as complementary to the thematic groups previously identified in Brazil. Their deeper criticism of the ideal of maternal perfection was particularly salient. The Torontonians mothers expressed more intensely how media pressure has been affecting their mothering practices and self-images, and influencing feelings of guilt and exhaustion.

Finally, from the perspective of motherhood studies this research may itself be interpreted as a critical analysis of advertising signs, considering different practices of mothering and stimulating the deconstruction of the patriarchal culture of motherhood.

My research stage in Toronto was deeply important for conducting a cross-cultural study. I finish this article by expressing my gratitude to my research advisors (Dr. Oscar Cesarotto and Dr. Andrea O'Reilly) and also to the women who participated in my qualitative fieldwork in both cities. Last but not least, there is a lot to be discussed by motherhood scholars concerning advertising, consumption, motherhood and mothering. I hope what I have just presented motivates scholars who wish to extend this debate.

*Author notes: This article was proofread by Colin Gorrie. Access to the author's dissertation, A Maternidade na Publicidade. Uma Análise Qualitativa e Semiótica em São Paulo e Toronto (Motherhood in Advertising: A Qualitative and Semiotic Analysis in São Paulo and Toronto), with all of the texts and images and in its original Portuguese language, is available online through the following link: <[http://www.sapientia.pucsp.br/tde\\_busca/arquivo.php?codArquivo=17303](http://www.sapientia.pucsp.br/tde_busca/arquivo.php?codArquivo=17303)>.*

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