

Article

Constructions of Family Relationships in a COVID Christmas: An Analysis of Television Advertisements on YouTube

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Abstract

Christmas time is a site of intensified domesticity, a reliance on traditional norms, and centring of family relationships. Christmas in the year 2020 was unique in this regard, given how the COVID-19 pandemic widely disrupted home life and shifted family relationships. Feminist researchers have previously noted how analysis of contemporary cultural artefacts, such as online media, can be a useful way of exploring how different relationships are constructed to serve various functions. Therefore, we thematically analysed 11 television advertisements on YouTube to investigate how family relationships are constructed through a lens of feminist psychology in the context of a COVID-19 Christmas. Our analysis generated three dominant themes. First, the television advertisements in our sample constructed *nostalgia as women's work*. Second, family relationships were positioned as a means of *reclaiming power and purpose* in an effort to instil a new normal. Lastly, television advertisement constructed family relationships as a critical site for *representing gendered norms*. We discuss these themes in relation to feminist scholarship on the function of family relationships, during COVID-19 and beyond.

Key Words

Christmas; COVID-19, family relationships, feminism, qualitative

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COVID-19 has dramatically impacted family relationships (Evans et al., 2020). Here, we focus on family relationships in broad terms, to contend with the difficulties in establishing what constitutes ‘family’, due to the myriad of forms that it encompasses (Turner & West, 2015). Olson et al. (2012, p. 1) suggest that families ‘provide the glue that connects all the parts of our lives’. Others have stressed how the definition of ‘family’ relies on certain cultural conceptions that are context-bound and personally relevant (e.g., Olson et al., 2012). For example, some scholars define families as an interdependent social group with long-term commitments that ‘stem from blood, law, or affection’ (Braithwaite et al., 2010), whereas others take a more social constructionist approach, defining families as a group of people who share a sense of relatedness (Mason & Tipper, 2008). In this work, we take the latter approach to defining what constitutes a ‘family’. We look beyond the construct that a ‘family’ must constitute the traditional nuclear family of a heterosexual married couple with biological children, which is often thought of as the default family (Allen et al., 2011). Instead, we define family as a representation of people living in interdependent spheres of relativity and relatedness.

Recent evidence suggests that families were afforded more intimacy and time together during the COVID-19 pandemic (Prime et al., 2020). For example, in a qualitative study, Evans et al. (2020) demonstrated that while there was great variability in experiences of family relationships throughout lockdown periods, families were often cited as an important source of mental health support, comfort, and routine (see also Kemp, 2021). Pick et al. (2021) studied families across 28 countries during the pandemic and found that family bonds persisted throughout the COVID-19 disruptions and, in many cases, were prioritized to stay connected to others. Similarly, Prime et al. (2020) appraised the ways in which family relationships, including parent-child, inter-sibling, and marital relationships, were negotiated throughout COVID-19, drawing upon qualities such as family resilience as a means of

meaning-making. That is, the authors suggested that family processes (such as beliefs and communication) may provide a useful buffer to the disruption of COVID-19. Others have noted that childcare challenges and home-schooling throughout lockdown resulted in family relationships being challenged and strained (Goodwin et al., 2020). This evidence suggests that these relationships changed in some way during the pandemic, either by bringing families closer together or straining relationships through lockdown (Evans et al., 2020). While this literature is a useful starting point, these studies relied predominately on family's self-reports about their experiences of COVID-19 lockdown. What is missing from the literature to date is a more nuanced analysis of how the media constructed family relationships during the pandemic, particularly through an explicitly feminist lens. Early research has provided some critical feminist commentary of the negotiations, tensions, and contradictions inherent within media constructions during COVID-19 (e.g., see Curran-Troop et al., 2021; Sikka, 2021). The present study extends these enquiries by focusing on television advertisements through a lens of feminist psychology.

A critical feminist approach is appropriate, given the vast gendered impact of the pandemic (e.g., Fisher & Ryan, 2021). The closure of schools to control the spread of the virus placed an unprecedented burden on caregivers, who are overwhelmingly female (Manzo & Minello, 2020). Indeed, the pandemic shed light on the disproportionate burden placed on women to fulfil unpaid caring responsibilities and exposed the precariousness of their roles in the economy, which amplifies inequalities (e.g., Mein, 2020; Whiley et al., 2020). Due to this, COVID-19 has been referred to as a 'disaster for feminism' (Berkhout & Richardson, 2020) and a core concern for feminist scholars (e.g., Ceuterick, 2020; Kay & Wood, 2020).

One way of interrogating the domestic and gendered constructions of family relationships is to look closely at one aspect of the pandemic that is entangled with traditional roles, unequal distribution of gendered labour, and contested relationships: Christmas time.

While there was an early promise of the COVID-19 crisis ‘being over before Christmas’ (Kohlt, 2020), in the UK and in other countries, public health restrictions remained firmly in place over the festive period and beyond. Therefore, Christmas in the year 2020 saw a rather unique festive period, which occurred against the background of a global pandemic.

The rituals and traditions of Christmas have been subject to much feminist enquiry (e.g., Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Vachhani & Pullen, 2011). To date, this has largely focused on the various roles that people, particularly women, play in the intensely domesticated, ritual-filled, traditional space of Christmas. As scholars have noted, the Christmas period is a site of gendered rituals, which serve to construct norms for women by creating certain cultural ‘performances’ of gender (Geertz, 1966). Durkheim (1965) theorised that the rituals of Christmas are governed by collective representations of gender, which can reinforce traditional norms. Vachhani and Pullen (2011, p. 808) argued that Christmas time “demand[s] traditional requirements of women’s domesticity at home”. Similarly, Bella (1992) recognised the troubling pressure for women to ‘produce’ at Christmas, which is tied to neoliberal notions of femininity (see Warner, 2018 for a more contemporary appraisal of these pressures). However, importantly, women’s roles in the ‘doing’ of gender at Christmas is part of a *collective* family system. Therefore, the collective construction of the family system, or ‘the home’, is associated with symbolic and material meanings of domesticity, femininity, and family organisation (McDowell, 2004); for example, hooks (1991) viewed the ‘home’ at Christmas as a site for women to restore a fulfilled sense of self and suggests that ‘home’ is a place for empowerment and nourishment. Thus, feminist (re)considerations of Christmas discourses allow for a certain ‘troubling’ of gender norms, as they rethink and reconstruct the private/public divide (Vachhani & Pullen, 2011). We would argue that examination of such discourses may be achieved through analysis of media, such as television advertisements.

The value of television advertisements

Advertisements are a useful space to consider cultural representations of family through a feminist lens. While existing feminist work has focused on feminist appraisals of media (e.g., Gill 2007, 2008), these insights could be extended to newer medias, such as online advertising, which has significantly increased in recent years. Indeed, online research has investigated how ‘the family’ is socially constructed in digital spaces; for example, Lazard et al., (2019) studied #family on social media and noted the “curation of family in digital space” (p. 5). Indeed, digital spaces, such as online advertisements, can be a useful mechanism to understand how different groups and relationships are constructed in unique ways. Online television advertisements are another useful source of this cultural and contextual information. By ‘online television advertisements’, we refer to advertisements that are made primarily for the purpose of television but are also shared on online platforms, including social media and streaming services. As the scope for advertising extends beyond television, ‘online’ television advertisements are increasingly popular spaces to widen the reach of advertisements made predominantly for television. Here, we argue that online television advertisements may be particularly useful in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Hermes and Hill (2020, p. 659) note, the COVID-19 crisis has “re-consolidated television as master storyteller and as platform for cultural citizenship”. In this sense, the pandemic has reignited an interest in television as a medium for entertainment, solace, and social ritual.

Online television advertisements are important cultural artefacts that mirror and shape social norms and gender ideologies (e.g., Furnham & Lay, 2019). They represent a form of visual media which can be useful to understand gendered representations. For example, analyses of visual media are useful for disrupting “well-rehearsed present narratives on a topic” (Reavey, 2011, p. 6) and thus can offer a more in-depth, nuanced exploration into a

topic, including family constructions. Analysis of video-based visual media can provide insight into unique “cultural practices...that are impossible to ‘collect’ in other ways” (Wagner, 2011; p. 55). To understand the latent content of television advertisements, this involves a process of “reading between the lines” (Hermerén, 1999, p. 150). In television advertisements, for example, the viewer is prompted to engage in a process of ‘meaning making’, by interpreting advertisements through their own lens. Thus, Frith et al., (2005, p. 189) have argued that the use of textual and visual data offers a unique “range of possibilities” to psychologists, as the two work together to either challenge or reinforce one another. This, therefore, means that analysis of constructions of family relationships depicted in television advertisements may offer a unique insight into gendered relationships. This is broadly the focus of the present study.

The present study

The shift in family relationships prompted by the pandemic, coupled with the highly gendered practices of Christmas time rituals, mean that a ‘COVID-19 Christmas’ offers a unique opportunity to study how dominant discourses of family relationships are enacted, negotiated, and constructed in digital media. Thus, in the present study, we aimed to bring together two strands of feminist literature: (1) the literature which demonstrates how COVID-19 has intensified gender inequalities and shifts in ‘performances’ of gender in the domestic sphere; (2) the body of work which demonstrates how Christmas time is a unique site of amplified normativity of family constructions, leading to different constructions of motherhood in this space. This was explored through a lens of media constructions of family values. To achieve this, we focused on online television advertisements. Therefore, we used a feminist lens to address our core research question: “How are family relationships constructed in Christmas 2020 adverts?”.

Method

Data collection

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Leeds School of Psychology Ethics Committee on 7th March 2021 (Reference: PSYC-229). “Christmas 2020 adverts” was inserted into the search engine of YouTube.com. We then screened the top 20 videos as relating to ‘family’ or showing evidence of family relationships, using the definition broadly provided above.

Inclusion criteria. Our inclusion criteria for online television advertisements included the following core criteria:

1. Online television advertisements in YouTube that include a representation of at least one family relationship.
2. Contains ‘Christmas’ in the advertisement title.
3. Uploaded in November or December 2020.
4. Advertisements in English.
5. Uploaded by a company.

Table 1. An exhaustive list of the advertisements included in the sample. Some of the most popular adverts (e.g., John Lewis, Marks & Spencer) did not meet the inclusion criteria, because they were either no available on YouTube or did not contain a clear representation of a family relationship.

Advertisement	Upload date	YouTube link	View count (as of 14 th April 21)
Erste Group	29/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTjtqualL9E	6.7m
Disney	09/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t157Gy5X_Kg	4.2m
HomeBase	16/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSJqKcKRmD8	2.9m
Sainsbury	14/11/2020 16/11/2020	Part 1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSJqKcKRmD8	2.7m 1.3m

		ch?v=GqtcpLywgRU	
		Part 2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEHGzRqxH-U	
Doc Morris	06/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2N2eSsIWtNI	15.8m
Amazon	02/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQdLD6kk960	1.3m
Lamborghini	14/12/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VgrDTdehAI	8.3m
McDonalds	12/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJntbYytPz8	1.8m
Very.co.uk	01/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JR_ZVamR5YE	78k
Notonthehighstreet	07/11/2020	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hi0ShcJp66g	11k

Data selection process. The first author curated a list of advertisements that fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Some were then excluded, primarily due to a lack of a clear ‘family relationship’ in the advertisement. The second author then made a written summary of each advert, whilst also checking that each fulfilled the inclusion criteria. We decided to include advertisements that have a depiction of a family relationship, whether or not COVID-19 was explicitly a feature of this content. There were 11 adverts in our final dataset, which were all watched by the whole research team. This was considered to be an adequate dataset, because the advertisements were suitably varied in their representation of family relationships, context, story line, and tone.

Analytical approach

We took a social constructionist approach to this thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) approach. We considered this type of analysis appropriate because we were interested in patterns of meaning and wanted to centre our subjectivity in the analysis, using it as an important “analytic resource” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 331).

Analysis of visual media such as advertisements can generally centre upon the content of visual representation, its form and style, the related processes of production of visual media, or verbal reactions to visual stimuli (Pauwels, 2011). In our analysis, we were interested in the former of these foci, namely, understanding how family relationships are constructed within the content of the visual representations of online television advertisements.

First, the first and last author met to discuss the theoretical framework and key concepts underpinning the analysis. Our preliminary discussion was centred around our core research question: “How are family relationships constructed in Christmas 2020 adverts?” Our coding was thus predominantly inductive, with the background of feminist concepts and theory in mind. To achieve this, all authors initially watched the advertisements and made initial coding ideas. We then regrouped to share ideas and generate initial codes. We predominantly made notes on the *content* of the advertisements (i.e., the story line of each advertisement), as well as wider notes on the visual and audio content of each advertisement (e.g., notable quotes by characters, visual depiction of characters, use of music). We began by defining our initial code ideas and subsequently coded the data, while also formulating inductive codes from the advertisements. Our approach to the analysis was also informed by Pauwels’ (2011) recommendations that analysis of visual media can be theory-driven whilst also embedding more exploratory and intuitive approaches to the data. The initial codes included items such as ‘includes depiction of a mother/father’ ‘intergenerational relationships’, ‘affect’, and ‘gender norms’. Moving images, sound, and aesthetics of the advertisements also informed the coding. When coding, we attended to the creation of character stories throughout that were articulated through multimedia forms (e.g., the presence of speech, sound, and images). All authors then met to discuss and finalise the themes.

A note on reflexivity. All three authors of this paper are white, self-identified feminists who do not have formal caring responsibilities. Our feminist identities means that we are inherently alert to certain issues, such as the ways in which women are depicted and constructed online; however, all authors are also childfree and have no unpaid caring responsibilities, which also contextualises the lens through which we view the data. We are acutely aware, for example, of the notion that parenthood is a ‘moral imperative’ (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017) and our analysis is inherently attuned to these kinds of issues. As other discussions of family relationships during a pandemic have also expressed (Whiley et al., 2020), our analysis is rooted in the socioeconomic privilege that we experience as white, educated, cis-gender women.

Results and discussion

Three core themes were generated through our analysis, showing how family relationships are constructed by the notion of *nostalgia as women’s work*, family relationships as a means of *reclaiming power and purpose*, and *representing gendered norms*. The following analysis presents the manner in which the construction of family relationships is negotiated, privileged, and claimed across these three themes.

Theme 1: Nostalgia as women’s work

Our first theme concerns the ways in which nostalgia, or staying connected to the past, is constructed as being ‘women’s work’ in the context of family relationships. We define nostalgia here as meaning a sentimental, affective, or wistful desire to be and stay connected to the past. In some adverts in the sample, this was exemplified through reliving old memories, with the help of other (often intergenerational) family relationships that typically centred around women’s role in keeping families joined together. This was often constructed in the unique context of Christmas time, whereby nostalgia is a particularly salient mechanism to relive old memories, connect with one’s ‘younger self’, and seek

comfort in the familiarity of the past. In this sense, family relationships were constructed as a means to stay connected to past ways of being. We also considered that nostalgia plays out in different ways in the context of gender, in that nostalgia (and staying ‘connected’ to the past) may represent a form of domestic labour or familial duties that must be adopted by a family member. Our analysis noted how women characters in the family relationships (e.g., daughters, mothers, grandmothers) often engaged most frequently in this role of keeping the family connected to domestic rituals. This was present in six of the 11 advertisements.

The notion of nostalgic duties as ‘women’s work’ at Christmas time was echoed throughout the advertisements. For example, in the Erste Group Christmas advert, a young woman helps an older man, who we assume to be her grandfather, reconnect with his past through playing the piano. In this instance, the granddaughter is already engaging in the maternal domestic duty of keeping families connected to the past, by way of promoting and nurturing moments of nostalgia. In the advert, the granddaughter locates a song that her grandfather wrote “For Mum” and uses this to rebuild his memories through music. This points to the potential power of family connections as a means to stay connected to one’s past, which has been echoed throughout previous literature (e.g., Green & Singleton, 2013; Kramer, 2011). For example, Bennett (2018) theorised that family histories are important tools to build authentic identities and connection to our sense of self and our community. When this connection is untenable or lost (i.e., when there is “a break in the family story”, p. 449), nostalgia can be a mechanism to mend our stories and anchor us to family histories, allowing for ‘ontological security’ and comfort. Consistent with this, we conceptualise the COVID-19 pandemic as being a notable ‘break’, or at least ‘disruption’, in family stories. We see Bennett’s (2018) interpretation of family connections echoed throughout our sample of online television advertisements, whereby nostalgia was a core component of the links between family members at Christmas time.

We posit that this topic of nostalgia fulfils certain gendered functions, which all ultimately are aligned with the notion that women bear the brunt of domestic duties and caregiving. This reflects Petrassi's (2012) argument that gendered roles are influenced by the discourses and narratives that are deemed acceptable according to social and cultural norms (see also Nentwich, 2008). This notion of caregiving, connectedness, and 'nostalgic duty' as women's work may also be amplified during COVID-19. Some scholars have also noted that COVID-19 has prompted a heightened desire for nostalgia and connection to the past via familial relationships. For example, Martin (2021) describe how the pandemic has driven a more intensified desire for 'nostalgic domesticity' in television during COVID-19.. This notion of nostalgic femininities is present in the McDonalds' Christmas advertisement "Inner Child", which focuses on a Mother-Son relationship. In the advertisement, the mother grapples with trying to connect with her son, as she attempts to bring out his 'inner child'. Throughout the advert, the son has an 'inner child' character who lives within him and who urges him to 'get out' and (re)connect with the mother. Eventually, the boy's inner child is released, and the mother and son enjoy time putting up the Christmas tree together, before engaging with other traditional rituals of Christmas, such as putting a carrot out for Father Christmas on Christmas Eve. This advertisement constructs the family as a way of experiencing the comfort of the nostalgic. This is a particularly striking example of the 'nostalgia as women's work' concept that we observed throughout the advertisements. Importantly, much of this affective nostalgic work is hidden labour. This is problematic, given how feminist research has also demonstrated how hidden household work may highlight and extend gender inequalities in the domestic sphere (Doucet, 2001; Nentwich, 2008).

Interestingly, the notion of nostalgia and promoting connections to the past was not necessarily constructed as 'mother's work' in our analysis of the television advertisements.

Instead, women of all ages and caregiving statuses appeared to be engaged in different ways in the domestic rituals of Christmas, which served to establish strong connections to the past. For example, in the Disney Christmas advertisement titled 'From Our Family to Yours', a young woman's character is depicted as a way for her grandmother to stay connected to the past. The story in the advertisement begins in 1940, when a little girl is given a Disney toy. We then jump to 2005 when the girl is now a grandmother, and both she and her granddaughter are making star lanterns for the house. Later, when the granddaughter is grown up, she revisits her grandmother to find the grandmother's previously beloved toy looking torn and old. After finding photographs of the two of them together, she fills the house with star lanterns and fixes the toy. On YouTube, Disney described this advert as centring around the notion that "beloved family traditions make lifelong memories that cross generations and hold us together". This aspect of family memories holding us together has important consequences for feminist scholarship in family work. For example, it is notable here that the advertisement positions the young woman as the source of connectedness and nostalgia, further extending the idea that nostalgia is women's work. When conceptualised against a background of COVID-19 throwing lives into chaos and uncertainty, this reliance on family relationships as a mechanism to stay connected to other people may be an important aspect of the collective pandemic response. For example, Evans et al. (2020) surveyed Australian parents during lockdown and found that while parenthood prompted 'unprecedented demands', and 'unequal burdens', there was also a core theme that related to how family relationships were ultimately the "things that keep [participants] healthy" (p. 5) throughout lockdown.

The issue of nostalgia, reminiscence, and 'the past' is important for feminist scholarship, given that feminist psychology is particularly attuned to issues of legacy. That is, feminist scholarship is inherently concerned with ensuring that the past is appropriately and

accurately preserved, in a way that fosters connections with the past and provides opportunities for moving forward (a concern present within feminist psychology itself; Shields, 2015). This focus on legacy and connection also reflects Scodari's (2013) claim that family histories enable a connection between one's own experiences and a wider, more complete past. For example, in the Disney advertisement, the relationship between the granddaughter and grandmother is presented as an important link to the character's past. They help each other to stay connected to past memories and use their relationship to keep these memories alive, enjoying moments of nostalgia together. Daly's (2001) interview study also supports the idea that family relationships can be a vehicle for nostalgia. Daly (2001) demonstrated how 'family time' constructs the 'social production of memories', i.e., the 'carrying on' of tradition, the obligation to honour memories, and the role of nostalgia as an "anchor to a secure past" (p. 288). Similarly, Shaw et al. (2008) explored constructions of 'the family' in holiday times and showed how overarching goal of family holidays are to enhance family cohesion and construct a positive sense of family through the creation of memories together. Overall, therefore, in the advertisements included in this theme, we note that family relationships are portrayed as a mechanism for staying connected to the past, engaging in collective nostalgia, as well as forming new memories together. Need a sentence here to link to your theme e.g. "and this production of nostalgia was most often constructed as women's work." Or something like that.

Theme 2: Reclaiming power and purpose

Our second theme relates to the function of family as a means to find one's (own) sense of power and purpose, particularly against the backdrop of turbulence prompted by COVID-19. Some advertisements had a distinct nod to connectivity in the context of distance, which we interpret as reflective of the distancing imposed by COVID-19 restrictions. For example, the Lamborghini advertisement 'The Christmas Gift' (with the

tagline ‘Nothing can Stop Real Love’), tells the story of a man receiving a Virtual Reality headset in the post, which allows him to experience driving a Lamborghini car and ‘meet up’ with his adult son. The gift comes with a note that reads “Hey Dad, our passion is stronger than distance”. This notion of passion or love being ‘stronger than’ the distance imposed by public health restrictions allows the family members to reclaim their relationship in a way that transcends COVID-19. In this sense, the relationship between the men in this advertisement is constructed as forging new ‘ways of being’ and new, technology-facilitated mechanisms of intimacy.

Moreover, we see parallels between the masculine language of being ‘stronger’ and how ‘nothing can stop’ the relationship between the two men in the Lamborghini advertisement with the militaristic language that has been associated with COVID-19 responses. For example, Branicki (2020) demonstrates how crisis management situations, such as the COVID-19 global response, can evoke masculine, militaristic language. Branicki (2020) explores how feminine voices may resist these masculine logics and instead centre a feminine ethics of care which dismantles the masculinized ideals of competitive, neoliberalism performances. A feminist crisis management approach focuses more on relationships, ethics and connections, to promote a feminine ethics of care (Gilligan, 1993). Reclaiming power through family relationships is an important facet of a localised crisis management strategy.

This notion of using family relationships to *reclaim* power, purpose, and value was seen throughout the advertisements. This reclaiming was particularly pertinent in the context of COVID-19 in the Amazon advertisement ‘The Show Must Go On’. In this extended advert, we see a young girl whose ballet performance has been cancelled due to the pandemic. Her family came together to put on their own ‘show’ for her to perform her dance routine, thereby simultaneously reclaiming her self-ascribed purpose and also ‘taking back

power' from COVID-19. This advertisement resembles the collective and communal efforts that people experienced throughout COVID-19, in an effort to instil a sense of normality. Here, family relationships are constructed to be at the heart of this 'new normal'. More broadly, while the girl in this advertisement is engaging in highly gender-stereotypical practices (i.e., ballet dancing), we conceptualise this 'taking back power' through a feminised practice as serving a feminist function, given that feminist scholarship is particularly attuned to the ways in which collective efforts can result in shifted power dynamics and action. Indeed, while the girl may represent a particularly feminized and stereotypical portrayal, she is using this practice to disrupt power with COVID-19, offering a nuanced account of how femininity, power, and purpose can be negotiated. In a similar nod to using collectivity to reclaim power, this time not in the specific context of COVID-19, the 'Doc Morris' advertisement sees an older man training with weights over the Winter months in his garden shed. It is only at the end of the advertisement that we learn that he has been training to be able to lift up his granddaughter so she can put the star on the Christmas tree. This advertisement prompts feelings of determination and (literal) strength, which signify the characters grappling with reclaiming their agency and power.

The issue of reclaiming purpose and power through family relationships is pertinent in the context of COVID-19. Feeling 'powerless' or 'out of control' was a core response to the COVID-19 pandemic among health-care workers (Liu et al., 2020), social activists (Venturini, 2020), and the general population (Waddingham, 2020). One attempt to reclaim the power that COVID-19 has taken from us may be the ability to rejoice in the elements of Christmas life that feel familiar, comforting, and even mundane. For example, the Notonthehighstreet advertisement places the smaller, mundane aspects of family life at Christmas centre stage. The advertisement centres around the "small joys" of Christmas time: drinking hot chocolate with whipped cream, children sneaking food from the family buffet,

and falling asleep after Christmas dinner. The voiceover of the advertisement reminds us to enjoy “the magic of small things”.

A similar appreciation of the mundane, familiar aspects of Christmas time is demonstrated in the Homebase advertisement, which sees a young girl present her mother with a handmade Christmas decoration made out of a toilet roll tube. Laughing, her mother then places it on the tree and pivots the decoration to the back of the tree, out of sight. The voiceover then tells us that Homebase has “everything you need to make Christmas just right.” and that it “feels good to be home”. This advertisement has a unique use of humour, which we conceptualize as serving an increasingly important function in COVID-19 times. For example, in a discussion of how women may negotiate domesticity in COVID-19, Ceuterick (2020) recognises humour as “a great feminist weapon in avoiding being dismissed as “too emotional,” or worse “hysterical.” (p. 897). With this in mind, the woman in the Homebase advertisement may be thought of as dismissing traditional norms by engaging in this humour. In this sense, she uses this humour to resist the cultural mothering mandate which dictates that women should embrace and enjoy homemade, domestic products at Christmas and shun consumerist offerings. Instead, the mother rejects this construction and instead prefers the more aesthetic mass-produced decorations and rejects her daughter’s homemade offerings.

While the example in this advertisement is related to children’s craft, this also aligns with Warner’s (2018) discussion of how there are pressures on women to produce the “perfect family Christmas” (p. 121). Therefore, when the Homebase mother rejects, rather than embraces, her daughter’s offer of a homemade craft, she also distances herself from Warner’s (2018) construction of the hyper-feminine, labour-intensive construction of motherhood at Christmas, and (arguably) achieves some level of autonomy (McBride, 1990). However, there are also tensions within this representation, given its wider consumerist

context of advertising which has the ultimate aim of selling products. Carrigan and Szmigin (2006) showed how mothers must regularly contend with tensions of authenticity (vs inauthenticity), idealism (vs pragmatism), and time (vs convenience) in domestic life. This may also be conceptualised through postfeminist interpretations of motherhood; as Riley et al (2018) explained, post-feminism is linked to ‘intensive mothering’, which serves to produce a mandatory subject position for mothers that is “empowering and pleasurable” for women who are able to fulfil it, but exclusionary and blaming towards women who cannot, or who reject this societal offering.

Theme 3: Representing gendered norms

Our third theme concerns family relationships being constructed as a site for representing and negotiating gendered traditions and norms. The families depicted in the advertisements were constructed as grappling with conforming to the traditional rituals of Christmas, whilst also, in many cases, seeking to transgress some gendered norms. Whilst we were predominantly interested in the construction of family relationships in television advertisements, the constructions of *motherhood* or, more specifically, the mothers’ place within certain family relationships, was also a core feature of our analysis. Central to this theme was the notion that mothers are the primary agents of traditional domesticity in the home setting, particularly at Christmas time, which is a period of more intensive domestic normativity (Freeman & Bell, 2013). This relates to the ‘hegemonic ideology of motherhood’ (Henderson et al., 2016, p. 512), which is based upon what Friedan (1963) first called ‘the feminine mystique’, i.e., women’s passive acceptance of the limited roles of either domesticated wife or mother (Allen et al., 2011). Further, while women’s ‘place’ (particularly in the context of Christmas) is a contested site, *post-feminism* offers a more nuanced perspective on this (see Gill, 2007), in which women are afforded the capacity to *choose*

traditional gender norms for themselves. This largely disrupts the notion that occupying a traditional domestic role within the family construction is necessarily problematic for women.

Evidence of mothers as the ‘hub’ or centre of the family was echoed throughout our sample. For example, the first of the Sainsbury’s adverts “Gravy Song” hears a phone call between a Father and daughter. The daughter starts the call with a reference to the Mother (“how’s Mum?”) before noting that she “can’t wait for Mum’s roasties”. Even when the Father talks about his excitement to make his ‘famous gravy’ at Christmas, this contribution is situated firmly around the mother as hub (“how does Mum put up with you?”). This is demonstrated throughout this advertisement; the mother is the ‘focal point’ of the family and the peripheral jobs of Christmas are delegated to the father. This mirrors Vachhani and Pullen’s (2011) observation of motherhood, who note that Christmas is a time where ‘woman becomes centre stage, man becomes other’, such that it moves away from work as a site of gendered inequality and serves to ‘give the gift of purpose’ (Vachhani & Pullen, 2011, p. 811).

The mother as the ‘hub’ of the family can also be contextualised against the concept of the ‘forgotten’ or absent father, that some feminists have grappled with in their scholarship (e.g., LaRossa, 1988). The second Sainsbury’s Christmas advert “Perfect Portions” (Part 2 of 3) centres around a phone call between what we presume to be a mother and son, who speak fondly about “Dad” in the past-tense (“he was the best”). The mother explains how she is making preparations for Christmas (“getting a few bits in”) and is feeling “ready as I’ll ever be” for the day. This audio plays over a series of home footage videos of family Christmas scenes, including clips of families eating and putting up Christmas decorations, which serves to position the advertisement firmly within the domestic sphere. In this presentation, the father figure is absent or missing, and thus the mother and son must re-negotiate and re-envision new ways of being at Christmas time. This negotiation from the mother’s point of

view is perhaps most pressing when faced with traditional roles that are, according to gender norms, reserved for fathers. For example, towards the end of the call, the mother tells her son about her “secret weapon” of an electric Turkey carver, and they exchange jokes about her excitement and the connection with memories of the absent father (“he was the best at [carving turkey], that was his thing”). Again, this advert situates the mother as the centre of the family at Christmas, firmly within the domestic sphere, whilst also acknowledging her grappling with re-envisioning the elements of Christmas that are typically, or traditionally, occupied by a father figure. This illustrates how women must sensitively negotiate the fulfilment of traditional gendered norms at Christmas time, in a way that continues to allow family members to have a “perfect” Christmas day, while also shouldering the affective labour of such negotiations (as per Hjalmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2021).

Similarly, the Very.co.uk advert “Christmas is this Very moment” provided further evidence of mother’s reclaiming or, at least, making *visible* the festive labour of Christmas (labour which is typically invisible or underappreciated). In this advert, a mother speaks directly to the ‘audience’ or viewer, discussing the parts of Christmas that she “loves”. While the labour of Christmas in the advertisement appears to be roughly split between the family members, in this instance, the mother is uniquely assigned the affective labour. This likely reflects the cultural mandate of affect, care, and emotional sensitivity that is associated with mothering in these kinds of domestic spheres (Choi et al., 2005). For example, the mother character explains “I love giving presents” and “I love surprises” and makes her emotions a dominant feature (“it’s a bit emotional”). This advert ends with a nod to the societal pressure for women to ‘do it all’ at Christmas, as the mother panics about forgetting to buy their bin collector a Christmas present. She then fixes her ‘error’ by ordering a gift from Very.co.uk to ‘correct’ this. This, again, represents the hyper-reliance on women as unpaid caregivers

during a) Christmas time, b) the COVID-19 pandemic, as even the bin collector is, unofficially, assigned the mother as a caregiver.

This woman-centric duty speaks directly to the ‘burden of blame’ that is a feature of constructions of Western motherhood (Jackson & Mannix, 2004; Sutherland, 2010). Indeed, Whiley et al. (2020) note that this pressure to be the ‘perfect mother’ resonates in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to self-policing and ‘pull-push discourses’ of mothering during this time. Therefore, while motherhood is ‘packaged differently’ in the Very.co.uk advert, through the use of humour and an apparent rejection of domestic duties, the mother remains firmly bound by the gendered mandates of society. This may be reconciled with Douglas and Michaels’ (2005) argument that ‘modern motherhood’ may “seem[s] on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but in reality, promulgates standards of perfection that are beyond [one’s] reach” (p. 5). This also reflects the findings of Choi et al.’s (2005) qualitative study which demonstrated how mothers face pressures to combat feelings of inadequacy that pervade early motherhood.

In the context of the family unit, our findings suggest that the mother remains the hub at Christmas time in television advertisements. Consistent with prior work, while new parents may have some subversive potential in rejecting traditional discourses of heterosexual parenthood, the mother remains the ‘main parent’ (Nentwich, 2008). Importantly, this issue of emotional labour as ‘women’s work’ in Christmas time has also been noted in a specific COVID-19 context; Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir’s (2021), through diary entry study indicated that mothers are experiencing the pressures of ‘keeping everyone calm and safe’ in COVID-19, which is a heavy emotional labour.

Conclusion

Overall, our analysis has demonstrated the various ways in which family relationships are constructed to fulfil different functions in the context of a COVID-19 Christmas. This has

centred predominantly around an investigation of family relationships through a feminist lens, in a way that responds to the uncertainty of COVID-19 and its impact on homelife and family. This study connects two important threads in feminist scholarship: (1) the literature exploring the performance of traditional domestic norms at Christmas time, particularly for women, (2) the literature demonstrating how COVID-19 has intensified gender inequalities. Our findings suggest that online advertisements presented family relationships as fulfilling distinct gendered functions. Women's work was constructed as being related to traditional domestic performances, including negotiating the maternal, grappling with pulls of consumerism, and keeping the family connected to one another and the past. However, our analysis also noted that family relationships were constructed to fulfil positive functions that could, in some instances, resist the traditional mandates of gender norms, such as by offering sanctuary from the chaos of COVID-19. This study is unique and important, because it considers how such constructions may be considered a heightened, or amplified, version of existing gendered pressures that are more readily exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Curran-Troop et al., 2021).

The gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been highlighted by scholars over the past year, noting increased caregiver burden which disproportionately impacts women (Manzo & Minello, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020). As other feminist scholars have noticed (e.g., Sikka, 2021), the pandemic also gives way to critical feminist (re)considerations of consumerism. As Sikka (2021) stresses, critical views of the pandemic through a feminist lens are urgent given our "media-saturated, interconnected, highly politicised environment" (p. 4). We contend that our study responds to this call, by addressing how television advertisements may serve to construct family relationships in distinct ways in the context of the pandemic.

Overall, our analysis has explored how family relationships are constructed in the unique context of Christmas time in COVID-19. This has centred around the gendered tensions and opportunities that family relationships afford. While the advertisements that we have analysed here may serve useful, comforting, and positive functions in the COVID-19 context, they are inherently tangled up in consumerist, neoliberal pressures. That is, although these online advertisements serve to reclaim power, connect us to the past, and rethink traditional norms, they also ultimately serve to sell us products and services. This creates a tension between the subject matter and the function of the data, which should not be overlooked in the interpretation of our analysis. Indeed, this is also further exacerbated by the notion that Christmas time is a period of heightened pressures to ‘consume’ and spend (see Fischer & Arnold, 1990 for a discussion of Christmas gift shopping). This also means that there is a level of privilege that exists in the consumption and depiction of these advertisements. However, despite differences in privilege and the gendered tensions inherent within the Christmas period, our analysis demonstrated the *power* of family relationships to connect us to one another, which, in the times of COVID-19, is increasingly necessary.

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