

Motherhood Story Project

Transforming Societal Perception of Mothers Through Portraiture & Storytelling

Andrea Caresse Lewis

*Master of Fine Arts Thesis Project
Liberty University*

*School of Visual and Performing Arts
Department of Studio and Digital Arts*



*For my incredible children - Hudson and Ellie.
You have taught me what it means to be a mother.*

*And for my amazing husband - Aaron.
I wouldn't be where I am today without you.*





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Signatures

Monique Maloney, Thesis Chair

Paul Reynolds, Thesis Reader 1


Timothy Isaacson Thesis Reader 2

Todd Smith, Department Chair

Abstract

In our modern western culture, there are two drastically different views of motherhood. Society often paints mothers as women who give up on their bodies and careers to pursue a life of seemingly purposeless identity. While the reality is that women devote their entire being to the growth and development of a new human, continuing the very concept of civilization as we know it. Because of this dichotomy and plurality of worlds, mothers often feel ostracized, alone, and completely unprepared for the new journey they have embraced. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the realities of motherhood and to showcase the real-life stories that take place in the lives of women in today's culture through portraiture and storytelling. By doing so, the real nature of motherhood will be explored and visually represented, providing the viewer with an authentic look into the lives of various types of mothers and their stories.

Chapter One: Introduction



Motherhood is a topic that is deep and wide, as it covers a variety of personalities, individual trials, and experiences. The motherhood journey can vary greatly from woman to woman, and there is no universal concept that adequately defines such a rich topic. With such a deep and broad subject as "motherhood," it is indeed incredible to realize that modern day artistic works surrounding motherhood are often lacking, and visual representations of real-life mothers rarely grace the popular media scene. So often, when mothers are portrayed

visually or artistically today, they are stereotyped and characterized with satire as to minimize their importance in society.

It is for this reason that many women who make the transition from maiden to mother have an almost culture-shock reaction to their new role, as they were truly unprepared for the realities of what motherhood would in store. This lack of visual representation and authenticity is begging to be filled with powerful and genuine imagery that honestly and completely tells the full story of motherhood in all its beautiful and difficult glory.

Introduction

With this in mind, this project hopes to impact this void and deliver a set of work that can inspire and affirm those making the motherhood journey, as well as enlighten and encourage those who are preparing to make that step in their lives.

It will also allow those in society to observe true motherhood and help break down the stereotypes that infiltrate the modern art world. This work will hopefully impact the art community as a source for showcasing how to truly capture people and their stories, and to allow the subject to direct the work itself, creating a genuinely

pure and authentic visual representation of the person.

There are many questions that arise when discussing motherhood and its representation in society. Both from my personal experience, and from testimonies of other women who have made the transition from maiden to mother, there are several questions that continue to arise and deserve to be answered. These following questions will be discussed further in chapter two:

What does it mean to be a mother? What are the ways in which "mother" is defined by society? What are some of the effects

motherhood has mentally, emotionally, and physically on a woman? How can the changes in women during motherhood be captured artistically? What are the ways motherhood has already been captured? What are some aspects of motherhood that are not discussed openly? How is motherhood different from other aspects of a woman's life? How does society (especially western culture) view motherhood? How does society, and the women themselves, handle the changes that may take place during motherhood?

As mentioned, chapter two will provide more

in-depth analysis of these and other questions that arose during the making of this project. Along with these questions, research regarding this topic will be explored and current artistic works will be discussed that are applicable to this subject.

In the following chapters, these and other issues will be discussed and dealt with regarding this project, and the reader will learn how society views mothers, how mothers view themselves, and how photography can be used as a means to shed light on true motherhood.

Chapter Two: Research



No academic or authentic work can be done apart from research, and this chapter of this thesis will examine some of the many works that were investigated in preparation for this project. Research enables an artist to better understand what is currently available, and what still needs to be understood. It also allows for a better comprehension of the topic itself, and is imperative for creating scholarly work that builds on the foundation of knowledge and creativity. In the following sections this paper will examine some of the current texts and artistic works available on the chosen topics of motherhood, and will

help address some of the key research questions outlined in the previous chapter.

Defining Motherhood

When dealing with any scholarly work, an understanding of terms is always vitally important. Having accurate terms and definitions is crucial in providing correct information not only to the readers, but also for informing the entire thesis process. There can often be a multitude of definitions for various terms, so having a reliable source that provides clarity and consistency is crucial for the overall development of the project.

For this reason, research began with utilizing works that helped to identify and clarify key terms that are used in this thesis. This also helps to answer two of the research questions mentioned above: what does it mean to be a mother, and what are the

seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood." This statement alone helps to illustrate the necessity for this thesis and body of work.

Specifically, when answering the question, "what does it mean to be a mother,"

We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood.

ways in which "mother" is defined by society? As well as the question, "How does society (especially western culture) view motherhood?" A quote from Adrienne Rich states that, "We know more about the air we breathe, the

the work, *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* by Andrea O'Reilly includes several references and sources of motherhood related articles and projects, and is useful for reference when researching information. It is excellent

for helping to define key terms, as well as resource other articles related to the motherhood topic. According to O'Reilly, "there are several variations of maternalism, both in its logical and philosophical underpinnings and in its applications." (O'Reilly, 713) These three variations are experiential, socialized, and biological. (713) The experiential aspect of maternalism implies that the bearing, raising, and caring for children are what creates a mother. It is this way that women become caring and nurturing beings. "It is the experience of becoming a mother that makes a woman nurturing,

caring, and peaceful" O'Reilly notes. Socially, however, other women can relate to this ideology through their intentions of becoming mothers and through their admiration for mothers. (O'Reilly, 713) This act of "mothering" and focus on the practical ways to protect and nurture others creates mothers who are committed to becoming engaged and committed to protecting others, and supporting others, and as a result become more invested in promoting those values of protection and nurturing beyond their own children. (O'Reilly, 713) And lastly, biologically, as women have the potential to become mothers, and as



society often expects women to become so, biological potentiality unifies women as mothers and potential mothers. (O'Reilly, 713) "The ideology of maternalism, like all ideologies, is based on a complex web of social experiences, cultural traditions, and historical facts," (715) O'Reilly writes. This statement helps us to understand that there is no singular definitive blueprint of "motherhood," but that it takes many shapes and forms, and can vary greatly based on the individual and their cultural setting. This is important to understand in this project, as each woman who calls herself a

mother has a unique story and perspective on what it means to be a mother. Defining motherhood and maternalism may at first-glance appear to be a straightforward concept, but as we can see from this text, there are many factors in place that help to give understanding to the true meaning of motherhood.

In addition to O'Reilly's writing, *The Mommy Mafia* by L.J. Charleston addresses some of the more common vernacular used towards motherhood, and takes a somewhat comical view at the various motherhood stereotypes. This helps to answer the question, "what

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are the ways in which 'mother' is defined by society?" In this work, Charleston looks at

The various summaries of motherhood are brief, but provide a good overview of

Not only are mothers stereotyped by society at large, but inside the world of motherhood, mothers themselves are their own worst judges and critics.

the modern cultural views on motherhood and more kitsch ideals and definitions. This work could be considered an "urban dictionary," which helps to define the buzz-words or slang terms in society and culture. This work does not take a technical view, but more of a humorous look at the many different types of "moms" in society.

different mothering styles. In the introduction to her work, Charleston makes several observations from personal experience on the complex motherhood politics at play between the various types of mothers. Not only are mothers stereotyped by society at large, but inside the world of motherhood, mothers themselves are

their own worst judges and critics. Charleston notes that, "pre-motherhood, it is difficult to imagine a world where a woman's worth is frequently measured by her child's milestones" or the various ways in which she chooses to birth and raise her child. (Charleston, xi) She paints a scenario that is all-too-familiar to mothers everywhere, as she recalls a visit to a waiting room filled

mothers on her parenting technique, but she views a number of women who react to various situations in very particular (or stereotypical) ways. The author not only examines other types of mothers, but her own quirks and motherly disposition.

Some of the types of mothers that she examines are "Work From Home Mom," (Charleston, 15) "Homeschool Mom," (21) and

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with mothers of various types and backgrounds. Not only is she accosted by other

"Over-Achiever Mom."(11) According to Charleston, the "Work From Home Mom"



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considers herself to have it the toughest of all the moms out there. Not only does she have the stress of work, but she also has the stress of being a stay at home mom. (Charleston, 15) She also feels unable to fully dedicate herself to work or to motherhood, as both pull at her during the duration of the day. (Charleston, 15) The "Home School Mom" is stereotyped as considering herself the only person equipped to teach her children, and that socialization with other children can cause more harm than good. (Charleston, 21) The "Over-Achiever Mom" is known as being a super mom who appears to be able to

do everything perfectly and juggle an enormous amount of tasks and activities for not only her kids, but herself as well. (Charleston, 11) Charleston notes that though it may appear this super mom is handling everything perfectly, she may in fact be so stressed that she isn't enjoying life, or has an underlying issue no one can see on the surface. (Charleston, 11) This work highlights how society and fellow mothers often stereotype mothers into specific categories, and how some women actually do fit the stereotype that is being described. Mothers can often be defined by their category and not seen as an

individual with unique and specific qualities or stories. If a mother says she works from home, a multitude of presumptions are implied upon her from society and fellow mothers. Likewise, if a mother says she wants to homeschool her child, she is automatically labeled as a certain type of person by most in society.

Finally, *The Art of Motherhood* by Marta Alvarez González provides highlights on historical views on motherhood and how various societies have viewed them over the years. There are several quotes within the work that cause inspiration as an artist, and

which have inspired some of my photography. Any modern work is the culmination of history, so some aspect of historical ties are vital in the discussion of any concept in the modern context. The historical art elements are something that will be examined for potential inspiration for this thesis work as well. In González's writings it is noted that, "whatever the language, the word 'mother' is inevitably transformed into a different term, easier to pronounce, and most important, more affectionate, when it is used within the family circle." (7) "The resulting sounds – mama – developed in a spontaneous and entirely

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natural way to fulfill an infant's need to communicate with the one person who would long remain the primary focus

A mother's love is the beginning and end of every love.

of attention and contact, the source of food and daily care." (González, 7)

Additionally, in the collective imagination of society, the mother is often seen not only as the wellspring of life but also as synonymous with a diverse array of values, from mercy and forgiveness and self-sacrifice to altruism and understanding and unquestioning support;

from renunciation of one's own wishes to a total commitment of oneself. Additionally, a mother's love is one that we often count on in our lives, a source of comfort and reassurance in times of trouble, an anchor to which we cling to in our lives. (González, 8) It is for this reason that we are often dismayed by mothers who may abandon their children or mothers who do not necessarily portray this innate motherly instinct that we as a society expect. "A mother's love is the beginning and end of every love," wrote Georg Walter Groddeck. It is this sentiment that makes "a mother's love" universally understood across



a variety of circumstances. This writing by González not only highlights some of the historical understanding of motherhood, but also has implications for the future when it quotes Maxim Gorky as saying, “Only mothers can think of the future – because they give birth to it in their children.” (González, 84)

Motherhood Discussed

For the research portion of this project that pertains to understanding the concept of motherhood itself, several works will be used that dive into the deep waters of this

subject and examine the various aspects of this multifaceted topic. Several questions can be answered using the works discussed in this section. “What are some of the effects motherhood has mentally, emotionally, and physically on a woman?” is one question in particular that will be addressed. As well as, “How does society, and the women themselves, handle the changes that may take place during motherhood?”

The Birth of a Mother: How the Motherhood Experience Changes You Forever by Daniel N. Stern and Nadia

What a woman gives birth to in her mind is not a new human being, but a new identity: the sense of being a mother.

Bruschweiler-Stern, examines the three major steps in the process of motherhood. First, preparing to be a mother,

This motherhood mindset is not born at the moment the baby gives its first cry.

which includes pregnancy, and the transition during pregnancy. Secondly, the time when the mother is born, when the mother has to ensure the baby's survival, gains responsibility for another life, and begins to seek affirmation. And lastly, when the mother adapts, which is the process of understanding the specific needs of the child, knowing that the career may go on

hold, and adjusting to the new relationship between the husband/father. In the introduction to her work,

the author states that, "In a sense, a mother has to be born psychologically much as her baby is born physically." (Stern, 3) "What a woman gives birth to in her mind is not a new human being, but a new identity: the sense of being a mother." (Stern, 3) The author notes that there are many works related to the physiological and practical aspects of becoming a

mother, but far less about the development of a new identity after motherhood. (Stern, 3) "This motherhood mindset is not born at the moment the baby gives its first cry," Stern writes, "but gradually emerges from the cumulative work of the many months that precede and follow the actual birth of the baby." (Stern, 4) This work is a great contribution to highlighting the transition that takes place for mothers after their child is born, and helps to shed light on the transition that takes place in women from maidenhood to motherhood. This work also highlights an interesting element of

motherhood and society at large. The author notes that in the past 30 years, it might have been expected that feminism would lead the way to examining the inner workings and world of motherhood, but that this movement focused its attention instead on the workplace, sports and politics, rather than the more "problematic area" of childbearing. (Stern, 17) "I have been startled not only by this silence, but by how rarely I find in exploring a mother's inner world, that the experience is described by mothers going through the process. My sense is that individual

My sense is that individual mothers know intuitively that every day they are experiencing powerfully new and all-consuming emotions... but scarcely know how to explain it to themselves, much less to another.

mothers know intuitively that every day they are experiencing powerfully new and all-consuming emotions – fierce love, aching protectiveness, a driving need to care for and nurture a new life – but scarcely know how to explain it to themselves, much less to another.” (Stern, 18) This statement by Stern can be found resonating through many stories of motherhood, as well as in the lives of the women that have taken part in this thesis project. It is for this reason that this project was birthed, no pun intended, and for this purpose that this work hopes to shed light upon.

Along with the illumination of this aspect of motherhood, another element of societal association of what it means to be a mother was examined. Even though in many cases, mothers are deemed as some of the most important individuals in society in regards to their selfless service to another, (Crittenden, 12) this act of service is often still considered a lesser contribution to society and is viewed as immaterial. (Crittenden, 12) In *The Price of Motherhood: Why The Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued*, Ann Crittenden writes on this key aspect: the fact that motherhood is one of the most



important elements of society today, but is still undervalued and sometimes looked down upon. The author takes a look at how women are viewed by society after motherhood,

The job of making a home for a child and developing his or her capabilities is often equated with 'doing nothing.'

and how the institution of motherhood impacts society as a whole. "The job of making a home for a child and developing his or her capabilities is often equated with 'doing nothing.' Thus the disdainful question frequently asked about mothers at home: 'What do they do all day?'" The author remarks on a personal experience

that many mothers can relate to when she says, "I'll never forget a dinner at the end of a day in which I had gotten my son dressed and fed and off to nursery school, dealt

with a plumber about a leaky shower, paid the bills, finished an op-ed piece, picked up and escorted my son to a reading group at the library, run several miscellaneous errands, and put in an hour on a future book project. Over drinks that evening, a childless female friend commented that 'of all the couples we know, you're the

only wife who doesn't work.'" This sentiment can be heard (or felt) in a number of situations for mothers, and is an all-to-familiar statement that surely resonates at the heart of every woman who works tirelessly to care and nurture her children: the future generation. For society to continue, mothers must exist. Otherwise, we would have no children, and therefore no future. But a "mother's work

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is not just invisible; it can become a handicap. Raising children may be the most

important job in the world, but you can't put it on a résumé." (Crittenden, 13) This sentiment is reinforced by several stories that the author uses to illustrate her point. One story specifically is particularly relevant to this issue: "A woman from Long Island, New York, with a master's degree in special education was advised repeatedly that when she went job hunting she should

not mention her thirteen years of caring for her disabled, chronically ill child.



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All those years of courageous tenacity and resilience would be held against her or, at best, considered irrelevant. She was warned that she had better pad her résumé with descriptions of volunteer work and occasional freelance writing.” (Crittenden, 14) It’s important to note here, that if that same woman had worked for a different family caring for a disabled child, she would have been encouraged to add it to her résumé, as that experience would be seen as excellent knowledge on how to deal with a disabled person. Stories like these litter the landscape of motherhood, and telling and capturing

these types of stories and highlighting the importance of motherhood is what this thesis aims to accomplish.

Motherhood Captured

An important element to this research process is investigating work already available on motherhood in the photographic world, and creating a project that is unique and truly captures some of motherhood’s greatest moments. This helps to answer the question, “What are the ways motherhood has already been captured?” It is not the intention of this work to merely repeat what has already been done, but to instead expand on what is

already available and add to the wealth of information that is currently attainable.

The Bodies of Mothers: A Beautiful Body Project by Jade Beall is a photographic work that takes a look at motherhood and tells some of the stories of the women inside its pages. Although this work takes a more raw and intimate look at the nurturing aspect of motherhood, it is still a good reference for capturing the authenticity of this time in a mother's life. The author writes that her inspiration for this work was largely birthed during her own experience with pregnancy and postpartum. As a woman who struggled with body

image her entire life, she marveled that in the first few hours after delivery, her view of self drastically changed from self-hate, to self-love, as she marveled at the work her body had accomplished. "I stood on my exhausted but euphoric wobbly legs and cried while my hands caressed this precious body which was nearly a stranger to me because loving it was a completely foreign act. 'You are magnificent,' I whispered to myself. 'You just made and pushed a brand new human into this world. I love you.'" (Beall, 4) But as Beall continues, this feeling of self-appreciate did not last, and was soon clouded by

*You are magnificent,' I whispered to myself.
'You just made and pushed a brand new
human into this world. I love you.'*

postpartum depression. "I wish I could say that newfound self-love would continue to flourish in those subsequent days, weeks, months, but it did not. Postpartum depression set in much too soon and my obsession with losing weight clouded my ability to be present with myself and my son." (Beall, 5) It is then that Beall decides to take a self-portrait of her post-pregnancy body, and the start of an entire work based on the bodies of mothers was born. She photographed volunteers free of charge to help make her work complete, and in doing so helped those participants understand the beauty of their bodies. Similarly, this thesis

hopes to allow participants to understand the beauty of their baby bodies, and to encourage viewers of this work to appreciate and accept their own selves as well.

Another photographic writing that has impacted this project in a similar manner is *The Honest Body Project: Real Stories and Untouched Portraits of Women & Motherhood* by Natalie McCain. The way in which the author and photographer captures the authenticity of the women is something that is so important and lacking in today's society. McCain notes her inspiration for creating this work when she says, "A new mother stands in front of

the mirror in tears holding her newborn, staring at a figure that is no longer familiar to her. Her once-smooth skin now bears the marks of her expanded belly. She doesn't recognize this woman and all the changes her body has been through. Society has told her she needs to 'bounce back' from her pregnancy – that she needs to fix herself. At a time when she should be celebrating what her body has done, we have convinced her that she should be ashamed of how she looks... Now imagine this same woman, staring in the mirror, yet this time with a different heart. She is marveling at what her body was capable of. She

sees her stretch marks as a beautiful sign that she grew her child. She smiles at her soft belly, where her child was nourished for nine months. She wipes her tears, hugs her baby, and she realizes that she is truly beautiful." (McCain, 11) In today's society, the effects of motherhood on a woman's body are often frowned upon, and make a woman feel as if she should dedicate her time to "fixing" the changes that have taken place. This can be seen in many of the stories of motherhood that this thesis discusses, and is often an issue for new mothers when they return home from the hospital.

She wipes her tears, hugs her baby, and she realizes that she is truly beautiful.



Likewise, *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood* by Susan Bright takes a look at several photographers and their depictions of mothers. The changing conditions of

itself, the expectations and demands of motherhood are in flux; both subject and medium grapple for new meanings," says Bright. (8) In her book and traveling gallery,

Like photography itself, the expectations and demands of motherhood are in flux; both subject and medium grapple for new meanings.

domesticity, the maternal body, and female identity are examined, as well as how mothers are viewed by society. Her work takes a more abstract look at motherhood, but is informational on discussing cultural associations of motherhood and how photography can impact those views. "Like photography

Bright focuses on highlighting the social constructs of motherhood and gender roles. While this thesis does not intend to focus on this element of motherhood in today's society, it is an aspect of motherhood that should briefly be considered. Bright discusses some of the social ramifications of becoming a

mother, and how it impacts her life between maidenhood and motherhood. She traces the history of photographs of motherhood from the nineteenth century to the present, and examines how the culture of the day impacts the defining of motherhood in the imagery. One quote in particular that stood out in her work by Shari L Thurer helps to express how through the years the form of "mother" has been seen by changing societies, "For thousands of years, because of her awesome ability to spew forth a child, the mother has been feared and revered. She has been the subject of taboos and witch-hunts, mandatory

pregnancy and conferment in a separate sphere. She has endured appalling insults and perpetual marginalization. She has also been the subject of glorious painting, chivalry and idealization. Through it all she has rarely been consulted. She is an object, not a subject." (Bright, 8) This sentiment helps to express the importance of including real-life women in this thesis, and using their own words and stories to paint their narrative. Working with the mothers to create images that truly reflect who they are is vital to this project, as they alone are truly able to fully express what motherhood has meant to them.

She has also been the subject of glorious painting, chivalry and idealization. Through it all she has rarely been consulted. She is an object, not a subject.

Another work that will speak to a different take on the motherhood photographic essay, is *Mother* by Elinor Carucci. In this work, the author and artist takes a more journalistic approach to capturing her motherhood

The raw, authentic elements of her work are something not often seen in today's motherhood artwork, and definitely stands out from the normal expectations of motherhood photography. Carucci explains the premise

I felt and saw so much in those first months – the beauty and ugliness, the tears and laughter, the extremes you come to know when you're a new parent.

journey. This collection of images was taken by the author herself, and is a personal reflection of her journey into her motherhood story. She captures what it was like to become a mother, and how her life transitioned through her offspring's childhood.

behind her work when she says, "I felt and saw so much in those first months—the beauty and ugliness, the tears and laughter, the extremes you come to know when you're a new parent. I tried somehow to deal with it all through my camera, hoping



to portray the complexity of motherhood as honestly as I could. It was too intense, too rich, to express only through 'Madonna and child' images. It's not that I didn't have those magical, peaceful moments

explored. Many mothers don't have the ability to capture their motherhood story like Carucci does in this work, but the emotions and moments captured in her work can be shared by many mothers.

I tried somehow to deal with it all through my camera, hoping to portray the complexity of motherhood as honestly as I could.

with my babies, and I did take that kind of photo, but there was so much more to tell and to show." (Carucci, 6) The emotion and meaning behind this statement is well known to any mother. The weeks and months that follow birth fly by and each day brings new adventures and new experiences never before

Similarly to this work, this thesis opens the door to raw, authentic photography that doesn't try to sugar-coat the genuineness of motherhood. Although the images in this work are not as intimate and personal as Carucci's they still impart that depth and emotion that is seen here.

Portraits of Pregnancy: The Birth of a Mother by Jennifer Loomis takes a studio portraiture look at the motherhood form, and using monochromatic editing and simplicity to help tell each mother's story. Her work not only discusses the stories of women, but how they're bodies change, and through the use of photography, women can see how they are in fact beautiful in their motherhood form, even though it may be different than their pre-pregnancy body they once knew. In the introduction to her work, Loomis states that, "Having struggled with an eating disorder as a teenager, and

finally overcoming it when I was twenty-one, I understood how losing control of your body, for any reason, can be both a terrifying and liberating experience, if you allow time to truly see yourself. I had a lot of compassion for the women who came into my studio struggling with their new curves. I began to realize that pregnancy photography could help women see their bodies in a new way – as beautiful. If they could feel that way when they were pregnant, no doubt they would be able to continue to see their unique beauty for the rest of their lives. The more women I photographed, the more I heard the same thing, 'You made me feel so

I began to realize that pregnancy photography could help women see their bodies in a new way – as beautiful.



beautiful.'" (Loomis, 13) This work highlights the ability for photography to play a major role in helping women to see the beauty in their new "mom bods" and to appreciate what their bodies were capable of accomplishing. It's easy for women to become obsessed over their physical features, and to have a tangible way to counter those negative thoughts regarding physical appearance is a great resource for new mothers especially. It is partly for this reason that this thesis was started, to provide a source of inspiration for women who have become mothers to recognize the beauty and value of their new motherhood figure. Powerful

imagery, coupled with unique storytelling is one way in which women can find a resource for dealing with their new selves.

Likewise, "Picturing Mothers: A Photovoice Study of Body Image in Pregnancy," an article by Meredith Nash is useful in understanding the process of storytelling in this context. This article examines the narratives and photographs of several women in Australia, and how their body image was affected during the transition of motherhood. As explained in the abstract for this article, "The aim of this qualitative study is to explore how 'photovoice' and participant-produced photographs can be used to

think critically about pregnant embodiment.” (Nash, 242) This article helps to explain how photography is a viable resource for assisting women in the understanding of their new forms. The photographic image is a core way of conceptualizing the self and is beneficial for both those who are pregnant, and those post-pregnancy. (Nash, 242) While this article utilizes participant-produced photographs, it’s a good example of how photography in any form can help shape the mental view that an individual has of one’s self.

Photographic Guides

Another important element to this thesis project was obtaining resources for photographic guidance and technical information regarding this specific topic. This not only benefits the work esthetically, but also helps answer the question, “How can the changes in women during motherhood be captured artistically?” One of the works I used for a better understanding of how to capture the female form, particularly those who may be pregnant or nursing, includes, *Photographing Motherhood: How to Document the Lives of Women and Their Families* by Caitlin Domanico and

Jade Beall. This work teaches various lighting, posing, composition, and other photography techniques for capturing the emotion of the subjects. Unlike other photography guidebooks, this book focuses on the capturing of motherhood elements

for motherhood portraiture, but their intention behind their work is unique: striving to capture the genuine nature of motherhood, and not create a false narrative in their photography. Jade Beall notes that, “a woman is beautiful just the way she is.

I have dedicated myself to empower women to feel amazing about themselves and to makes art together.

like pregnancy, nursing, birth, and care-giving. The photographers who wrote the work have extensive portfolios in motherhood photography, so their experience is very useful for the development of this project. Not only is their technical ability one to study

She doesn’t need to aspire to be somebody else... It upsets people, but I’m never going to stop. I’m going to keep pushing it.” (Beall, 5.) “I have dedicated myself to empower women to feel amazing about themselves and to makes art together.” (Beall, 5.) This is

A woman is beautiful just the way she is. She doesn’t need to aspire to be somebody else.

a sentiment that this thesis also hopes to exemplify as it captures mothers in an authentic and unique way, ensuring that the mothers are well represented in their imagery.

Another work which will be helpful in informing this process will be *Capture the Moment: the Modern Photographers Guide to Finding Beauty in Everyday and Family Life* by Sarah Wilkerson. The author, a photographer herself, examines the various techniques for capturing meaningful photography for families and mothers. While her style is more "lifestyle" and documentary

in nature, it's a good resource for education on lighting, composition, storytelling, and low light photography. Her work strikes a balance between posed and documentary photography that is heavily supported by storytelling and natural beauty. Wilkerson discusses the power of photography to capture brief moments of time and preserve them, as well as our ability as artists to collect visual representations of our memories for our future selves and others. (Wilkerson, 2.) "We become empowered to transform the elements in the frame to convey our moods and emotions," Wilkerson notes. (2)



Finally, one last work that will inform the photographic process is *Photographing Women: Posing, Lighting, and Shooting Techniques for Portrait and Fashion Photography* by Jeff Rojas. Women have unique features and personalities that are best captured when using the appropriate lighting and contexts and this book examines the best practices for capturing the true beauty of women, and is a beneficial research source for creating excellent photographic images of this gender. There is no one-size-fits-all method to photography, and this work sheds light on this. "Women come in all shapes, sizes, and

colors. Although they're all equal, each woman is unique in her own way." (Rojas, 10) The author does, however, make a case for minimalism that this project will echo in the final photography. Rojas states that, "minimalism is extremely important to me, and I believe that simplicity is thoroughly underrated." (Rojas, 7) This mindset of minimalism helps to refocus the viewer to the content of the subject, and not to be lost in the minutia of complex photographic techniques. Likewise, it is the intention of this thesis to be minimalistic in its approach to capturing motherhood in a very real and authentic way.

Women come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. Although they're all equal, each woman is unique in her own way.

Real Stories

With that said, this thesis includes multiple elements of real-life stories involving the subject of motherhood, and features real women, with real lives, and real stories to truly capture the essence of motherhood. By highlighting real stories and the women behind them, it will help to answer the question, "What are some aspects of motherhood that are not discussed openly?" In society, and even among mothers themselves, certain topics are often repressed from discourse or considered too personal for conversation. Such elements include, miscarriage, infertility, post-

partum depression, and more. The following works are beneficial in understanding how to properly record and tell these stories, and use them in a photographic thesis.

A Life's Work: On Becoming A Mother by Rachel Cusk is written from the author's point of view, and provides a personal look at how one woman dealt with the challenges and changes of motherhood. This writing is very authentic and raw in its emotion, and lets the reader see into the intimate thoughts of a woman who became a mother. She discusses how she spends her whole life knowing that childbirth will be in her future, even though



the concept of not being able to have a child is not even a thought in her mind. When she does become pregnant later in life, she notes that her "arrival in this camp is meditated but not informed." "I know about pregnancy only what everybody knows about it, which is what it looks like from the outside. I have walked past it many times. I have wondered what goes on behind its high walls... I have imagined it to be a place in which some secret and specialized process of preparation occurs, in which confidential information is handed out in sealed envelopes that will explain it." What she soon discovers

is that there is no secret answer to pregnancy or motherhood, and she is left to discover what it entails and what it all means for her largely on her own. This can be seen for many women who experience pregnancy for the first time.

Likewise, *Becoming Mother: A Journey of Identity* by Sharon Tjaden-Glass is a writing that almost reads like a novel in that the author tells her real-life story in an almost day-by-day manner, creating a complete visual mental story for the reader. Unlike other personal works or autobiographies, this work includes the daily play-by-play of many of the aspects of the

I know about pregnancy only what everybody knows about it, which is what it looks like from the outside.

author's pregnancy. We can see the conversations she had with friends and family, as well as the author's personal thoughts and struggles. It's a unique look at her story and creates a very intimate look at her life. The author notes that many writings on pregnancy "focus on the physical changes – and their knowledge and advice ends soon after birth. They don't typically explore the mental and emotional wreckage left behind after you are hit by the tidal wave of new motherhood... And what if I told you that a typical story of becoming a mother is also pretty extraordinary?" "Becoming a mother is a metamorphosis – from

individual woman to mother and baby." Tjaden-Glass writes her memoir in several sections: pregnancy, labor and birth, the first days, feeding, the first weeks, and the first year. After the completion of each section she reflects on how she experienced the changes in her identity during each phase, as well as other observations she has made of motherhood. Her reflections are personal and introspective, giving the reader an authentic understanding of how one woman journeyed through the first moments of motherhood. This concept of experiencing motherhood through the eyes of another, is a great way to relay the emotions

and feelings of becoming a mother, which is something that this thesis also hopes to accomplish.

And finally, *Made Beautiful by Scars: Real Women's Stories* by Veronica Farmer includes the stories of several women who open up about the various scars they've experienced in their lives. Some good repercussions, some bad. The emphasis of the work discusses how external (or internal) factors can drastically change our life, and we often still hold the scars of the change on our bodies or in our minds years later. The main heart of the work reveals how scars can make us beautiful in the end if we allow

ourselves to embrace them. "The scar of a broken heart is one many of us explore in our life's journey, along with grief, loss, and disease. These wounds can teach us how to love more, be more, and give more to the world around us. It is the journey of a life richly lived." Not only does this work encompass the world of pregnancy and motherhood, but also those who have experienced scars of other kinds from physical ailments to emotional roller-coasters. Each woman in this work tells a story of overcoming obstacles and realizing their beauty and value despite their particular circumstances.

These wounds can teach us how to love more, be more, and give more to the world around us. It is the journey of a life richly lived.



Research

Beyond Motherhood

Other works that have impacted this project, that may not at first appear to be contextually relevant, were also used. These works and photographic projects were selected based on their content and inspiration that they provide to the overall voice of this thesis, as well as their ability to answer the question, "How is motherhood different from other aspects of a woman's life?" First, *The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill* by Maggie Wykes adds needed facts and details to the statistics of how society views women during the pregnancy and postpartum

process, especially relating to weight gain/loss and eating disorders that may be a result of this. The author notes that, "journalists have agreed that 'anorexia is powerfully fueled by media images' because women 'measure themselves against the ideal images captured on camera' and distributed in the fashion and beauty magazines and find themselves wanting." If "magazine fashion images are culpable" and "can distort women's self-image and impel self-destruction," then similarly, images of healthy women embracing their physical forms of motherhood can help to

encourage new and old mothers that their bodily changes due to pregnancy are not something to be ashamed of, but can be something to embrace and be proud to have.

Two other photographic projects by individual photographers will also be carefully considered during this thesis process. The first is "From Brokenness To Beauty: Turning Scars Into Works of Art" by Cindy Johnson. This project was one of the original inspirations for this thesis topic. When viewing the images and purpose behind this project, it became evident that there needed

to be something similar in existence regarding motherhood specifically. The artist truly captures a unique aspect of people by highlighting their physical scars, and showing that those scars can bring about absolute beauty. She uses gold paint to accentuate the marks and scars on her subjects, bringing them to light and exposing their unique beauty to the life of the wearer. "Inspired by the Japanese art of kintsugi, in which the artist fuses a broken piece of pottery with gold in order to repair it, Johnson's volunteers of all ages applied gold paint to their own (and their loved

ones) places of brokenness: their scars." In a video regarding her project, Johnson mentions that her clients "often think their scars look smaller in photos than they expect," showing that people often exaggerate the negative aspects of their bodies, and tend to ignore the more positive elements. Similarly, it is easy for women to focus on the negative aspects of their pregnancies and resulting aftermath, versus the majestic and awe-inspiring ability of their bodies to grow and bring forth a new human being into the world.

Additionally, "The SCAR Project" by photographer

David Jay is a large inspiration for the emotion and power of this thesis. The dramatic and raw imagery of his project is palpable, and very genuinely portrays a story to the viewer. His real and honest images of breast cancer survivors spark the viewer to analyze their own lives and to be thankful for the blessings they have. Capturing how scars can bring beauty from the ashes is an aspect that is very important, not only to this thesis project, but also in life. Although the topic within Jay's work are far from the motherhood itself, it is about the human condition, and his images beautifully

capture that same emotion that this thesis hopes to capture. Jay notes this in the mission statement of his project when he says, "Ultimately, The SCAR Project is not about breast cancer, but the human condition itself; the images transcend the disease, illuminating the scars that unite us all."

These works outlined above provide a foundation for the imagery used in this thesis, and are instrumental in providing a starting point for the additional research done through the use of survey. In the following section, this thesis will explain the survey questions and results, and how they informed this thesis process, as well.





Chapter Three: Survey

All art is fluid, and all research is limited. Nothing can be fully known in all completeness from written material, and for this reason supplemental research needed to be attained in order to achieve the most full and empowered information available. No writing or art piece can fully capture every aspect of a topic, and this thesis does not presume to understand every nuance of motherhood. That said, while a number of written and artistic sources for this project have been examined, one major piece of information that was used for this thesis has yet to be fully discussed.

In order to complete this project, new and never-before published real-life stories from women were gathered who would be willing to participate in this project. Some of whom are the subjects of my photographic work, and their stories are the launching point for their imagery. In total, over fifty women were asked a series of questions concerning their transition from maidenhood to motherhood. The following paragraphs take a brief look at these questions, and highlight a few of the answers received.

The first question of the survey helped to understand the point in time that these mothers were currently

experiencing. Whether they were planning towards motherhood, currently pregnant, in their first year of becoming a mother, were an experienced mother (of one year or more), or were a grandmother. From the women surveyed, the majority identified as experienced moms, having been a mother for at least one year. The second largest group of women were those who identified as new moms, or within their first year of motherhood.

The second question of the survey asked the mothers what they have experienced regarding the more technical aspects of

becoming a mother. Among the list of options were: infertility, miscarriage, c-section, vaginal delivery, VBAC, stillbirth, pre-term birth, other birth-related issues, and none of the above. Not surprisingly, a vast majority of women had experienced a vaginal delivery, at 74%, while about a third of the women had experienced a c-section at 32%. More surprisingly, 40% of the women surveyed had experienced a miscarriage, and 13% had experienced infertility. We're often told that "1-in-4" pregnancies end in miscarriage, but this is nearly double that statistic. Considering that so

many pregnancies end in this manner, it's truly surprising that this topic is so taboo in our culture. As someone who also experienced miscarriage in her first pregnancy, I was shocked at the total lack of understanding that accompanied that experience, and how little I was told beforehand by others. We had many people tell us not to announce our pregnancy, "just in case,"

Considering that so many pregnancies end in this manner, it's truly surprising that this topic is so taboo in our culture.

which seems to be a terrible way to handle this issue. We are essentially telling mothers

to hold off on being excited about their pregnancy until we know for sure it will last, instead of treating each pregnancy as valuable.

The remaining questions in this survey ask open questions that allow mothers to write in their responses, as desired. So no metrics are available for these questions. Instead, we will discuss some of the more interesting responses that were provided for these

questions, as well as common themes that developed from the answers. The third

question in this survey asked mothers what "motherhood" meant to them before becoming a mother, or if they were not yet a mother, what it currently means to them. There were some common threads in responses regarding someone who was mature, older, someone who had children, etc. Many responded with positive answers such as, "loving and taking care of your children," or "loving another human more than myself." But there were also some more negative answers such as, "housekeeping, cooking and setting boundaries and worrying if what the children were doing was safe. Not very glamorous," and "Motherhood

seemed scary, and like lots of work." From the survey answers, it appears that most women had good opinions of motherhood, and most of them anticipated being mothers themselves one day.

The fourth question in this survey asks the mother's how they think society defines motherhood. This is where we really begin to see how mothers really think society treats them and views them. Some common themes are "slavery, energy-sucking" and "not as important as being a strong career driven woman." Along with this, comments regarding being a "house cleaner," and "not sexy" are common threads.



One participant put it well when she wrote, "Society, though self-proclaimed 'pro-woman' seems pretty down

Society, though self-proclaimed 'pro-woman' seems pretty down on motherhood...

on motherhood... It's OK to be a Mom but society seems pretty convinced it will ruin your life, steal your spirit, ruin your relationships, and compete with your career which, according to (American) society, should be your number one priority. It seems that seeing motherhood as a vocation is often scoffed at and that clearly you're just settling and maybe you aren't too smart

or ambitious enough if you settle for 'just' being a Mom." Another older mom made an interesting observation when

she says, "Society's definition of motherhood has changed drastically in my lifetime. I have seen transition from stay-at-home moms being the norm, through a period when that was considered somehow a tragic waste of talent, to a more balanced view where the contributions of a mother in the home are given value regardless of other roles a woman may choose. However, this puts

a great deal of pressure on women to do all of these things tirelessly and with excellence." Other women echoed this last thought by saying, "If you're not being fully lost in motherhood, not completely giving yourself up to be a mom, then you're not truly embracing motherhood. At the same time you're not doing it right if you're giving too much of yourself up. There's a societal pressure to be this very compartmentalized person

Society knows that motherhood is messy, but you should keep that mess a secret.

when you become a mother and if you're not perfect in

all of your compartments and you're not compartmentalized enough then motherhood isn't for you and you're not doing your children justice." Yet another wrote, "Society's perfect picture of motherhood is one where a beautiful young mother manages to work, parent, care for her spouse, clean her house, go out with her friends, and cook all-natural meals for her family while still maintaining a Pinterest-perfect physical appearance. Society knows

that motherhood is messy, but you should keep

that mess a secret--keep up the appearance that motherhood is effortless while working your tail off to keep all the wheels turning." This question really gets to the heart of the issue, that mothers are really torn between all the roles they are supposed to live in perfectly, and how they are often viewed and treated by society.

The fifth question follows this one up by asking how motherhood has impacted them mentally, emotionally, and physically. In almost every answer, moms were very honest about how it has changed and pushed them, but also how motherhood

fulfills them. "Motherhood is definitely draining mentally, emotionally, and physically. You are ALWAYS on the go, your kids will test every ounce of patience you have and push all your buttons just because. They can make you mad and crazy one minute then the next super happy and full of love! It is such a crazy roller coaster ride but it is the best roller coaster ride I will ever be on."

"Motherhood has changed my perspective on life and what is most important" another mom wrote. "It has forced me to slow down and has made me more emotional and has shown me more of my flaws and insecurities. It has made me feel less sexy,

it has made me feel more overwhelmed than I have ever felt. It has also made me feel very powerful and unstoppable at times." And again, another mom said that, "Motherhood has a tendency to bring out the best and worst. It can be challenging, exhilarating, tiring, joyful, and so many other things... exhaustion was (regrettably) often the overwhelming characteristic, as I tried to do too many things as well as possible." One mom put it very well when she wrote, "Motherhood has put a lot of things into focus. I can say with complete honesty and humility that it has made (and is continuing to make) me a,

(God willing,) better person. Being a mother shows you weaknesses and flaws that you could conveniently hide from yourself and others and have to come to terms with. Emotionally I have been shown a sort of love that I didn't know I could feel and also has shown me great sadness and even humiliation as I grappled with postpartum depression, anxiety, and the humble process of letting go of the way I used to run my life. The joy in Motherhood is unparalleled for sure. Mentally it has made me keep learning and find new ways of teaching and exploring the world, new ways of running my household, new creative

Survey



challenges, and has pushed me to keep educating myself and adapting in all sorts of ways. Physically I have

or at least put things in better perspective now.”

In the sixth question, the survey asked moms to

Motherhood has changed my perspective on life and what is most important.

experienced the most pain and the most exhaustion of my life, but I am also stronger and have shown myself that I can do more, push myself harder, and overcome more than I thought before. I am less anxious or self-conscious than I was before becoming a mother. Though I feel like my patience is pushed on harder, and my control-freak tendencies definitely creep out, I also feel like I am able to let go of things more easily

describe some aspects of motherhood that are not discussed openly, that they wished they had known about before motherhood. The majority of moms discussed the “fourth trimester” as it’s called, and the healing and hormonal adjustments that take place during this time. Another major theme was breastfeeding and how difficult it can be in the beginning. One mom wrote, “I wish people talked more openly

about what breastfeeding is like. It's HARD and no one prepared me for the amount of physical and mental energy it would take to exclusively breastfeed. I'm so glad I was able to, but I wish I had been told about it. I also wish couples talked more openly about how it changed their relationship. My relationship with my husband changed drastically, we have continued to work at marriage to make us stronger than before and have never wanted to leave each other, but it changed a lot. Women change after pregnancy and birth (physically, emotionally and mentally) but our husbands/ boyfriends/ fiancés/ partners

don't change physically and emotionally." Miscarriage was another common topic with one mom saying, "I feel like miscarriage is still such a hot button topic. That people looking at my situation from the outside only see my daughter. Not the son I lost prior (or her twin for that matter) I was told by the physician when I lost my first baby (a boy): 'at least you got pregnant, you'll probably have more'... I STILL mourn my babies lost over a decade later and dream of what could have been and still hear comments like 'at least they weren't real babies, or actual children'. I fell in love with them as soon as I knew I was pregnant, and even more

so as I watched them grow inside." One participant made an excellent observation when she said, "I think everything is discussed but it's done in such a way that you feel inadequate and judged all the

think you don't love your kids. If you're too focused on what's great they say you didn't talk about the real stuff. The truth of it is there's great and there's terrible and what each of those are is different

I think everything is discussed but it's done in such a way that you feel inadequate and judged all the time.

time. There's always someone who thinks some aspect of motherhood should just be this easy beautiful thing but for you that's the thing that feels like torture and you wonder how you'll survive. There are discussions about what's hard, but if you're too focused on the hard people

for everyone. Sometimes you won't like your kid. Sometimes you'll fantasize about a week off of mom life and you'll feel guilty about it for days because Susan down the street for sure never thinks that, but really Susan just doesn't talk about it but has a secret Pinterest board with very specific plans

for what she's going to do with her week off that she's too ashamed to take. We all talk about motherhood all the time but we all do it in a way that makes people feel judged. That's the hardest part of the

and is part of the reason for this project.

The seventh question asks the participants to describe some differences between their maidenhood and motherhood. The most

That's the hardest part of the motherhood conversation. You don't know when you're safe to talk about it in a real honest way.

motherhood conversation. You don't know when you're safe to talk about it in a real honest way." And this very clearly shows the conflict for many women today. There may be many things that they wish to discuss, but society doesn't allow for open conversation, even among mothers. It's something I've noticed myself,

common thread between the answers were the mom's feelings of freedom before motherhood, and the feelings of responsibility and love that they have now. Encouragingly, most moms said that their new identity as a mom is by far greater than their lives before, and outweighs any inability to do things as they



previously would have. One mom wrote, "Of course, it goes without saying that there's been a change in my level of freedom. My husband and I can't just do whatever we want whenever we want anymore. We can still be spontaneous and go do fun things, it just requires a little more effort and planning in some circumstances. That is one misconception I'd like to see change: that once you have a baby you're all of a sudden tied down to your house and can't ever go out. That hasn't been our experience at all. Our baby has already traveled with us on multiple trips and even flown, and we've always had a

great time! As with anything, life is what you make it. So if you have a positive attitude and low expectations, you can really enjoy still traveling and making new memories as a family." Another wrote, "Maidenhood was so free, almost to the point of selfishness. I could eat, sleep, entertain myself, etc. basically whenever I wanted for as long as I wanted. Motherhood surprised me in how absolutely time-consuming it is. It's the shift that never ends. But that forced selflessness is forced growth. The love of that total selflessness feels deeper, richer, more grounding. Also, fear and worry for

someone else in maidenhood is entirely different from fear and worry for your children. The former feels shallow in comparison." Many women echoed these thoughts in their answers as well.

Nearing the end of the survey, question eight asks moms to describe how society, or those around them, have been affected by their motherhood in regard to how people interact with them. One of the best responses was a mom who said, "In my experience, the public is way more helpful towards you when you're pregnant. They hold doors for you, part like the Red Sea when you walk by, help you in any

way they possibly can. But put a newborn in your arms, and those helpful people are nowhere to be found. They want to see your baby, ask how old, how many, etc. but the offer to help is gone. You're back to opening your own doors, being given the side eye when you nurse in public (even when you're completely covered!) and looked down on when you can't calm your baby. I've found it best to IGNORE EVERYONE. Know that you're doing the very best you can, your baby loves you and that's ALL that matters." Another said that, "I lost a lot of friends after my first was born because no one understood the amount



of planning going out with them would be. I couldn't just drop everything and go. No one wanted to sit around the house with me and baby, and didn't understand why I didn't just want to leave the baby at home with dad." And another mom put it this way: "I feel like you are judged way more as a mother. Everything about your personality and life becomes more scrutinized because you have a child. Seemingly as if you don't fit into a mold placed on you by society, your peers and your own parents you are unfit as a mom. I have been accused of being too lenient, too tough; too lazy with housework, too

uptight; too career oriented, too home bound... Etc."

Question number nine asks moms how they have handled these changes that took place in their lives since becoming a mother. One mom wrote, "I did not handle the changes well at first. I was so nervous during the first month of my son's life that I could not fully enjoy my new baby. Although I don't believe I had/have postpartum depression, I do believe my anxiety levels increased because of my fear of SIDS, fear of social criticism, fear of being unable to know what my baby needed, etc. However, as I became more familiar with my baby and what his various

cries represented, I began to relax and enjoy motherhood more. As a result, I have been able to take each new stage in stride and adjust to my son's ever-changing needs without becoming paralyzingly overwhelmed." Another said, "The hardest part was going from having lots of adult conversation and socialization all day long to having very little. I was the first of my friends to have a baby so I didn't have a "built in" support system. I also have no family in the area. And we dropped down to one income so any break for me was due to the kindness of friends or my husband. So I started to find social events specifically for mothers; story time at

the Library, the motherhood collective playgroups and cafes, for example. At these places, I met other mothers, made friends, and experienced some much needed socialization. I realized that if I could leave the house once a day, even for a short stroller walk, I felt like an entirely different person." And yet another mom said that, "The first year with our first child was rough, I don't think I handled it very well for a while. It was a very difficult transition for me between postpartum depression, moving to a place I didn't know, not working anymore, and having never had any sort of experience with babies. I don't think I can underline how hard the first

three months were especially. The learning curve was sharp."

The final question of the survey was very open-ended and simply asked moms to share their motherhood story.

Everything about your personality and life becomes more scrutinized because you have a child.

For some, this meant the birth story itself, for others it meant how they view motherhood and their parenting style, and for others, it was a quick overview of the last few years of their life, and how events have impacted them. I intentionally left this question very vague so that the participants had the freedom to say what they really wanted

to, without any prompts or required scripts. One very striking story was. "I was Team No Kids for a long time but when I was 22 I literally changed my mind overnight. I

had a dream about a blonde haired blue eyed little boy and I woke up the next day knowing that I was supposed to be a mom. I didn't become a mother until I was 27. It felt like the longest wait from the moment of realization until the test said yes. Pregnancy was brutal. I'd fantasized about it for so long I was completely shocked by how

terrible it was for me. I never stopped being sick, I had to take the hardcore nausea meds to survive, and I ended up on bed rest for irritable uterus starting at 28 weeks. I just couldn't wait to meet my son, though. I wanted him so desperately and I felt so terrible for hating the growing process. Labor was looooong. I went 68 hours before getting the epidural and then 14 more before they finally gave me a c section which didn't go well, I had been contracting for too long and my uterus just went to mush and I hemorrhaged. I don't remember the first time I met my son. The next day, though, when I was conscious and I got my nurse

to bring him back to me... it was instant unbearable love. I expected it to feel like meeting a stranger but he was exactly the little boy I dreamed of. Literally he looks like the boy I dreamed about when I knew I wanted to be a mom. We fought reflux pretty bad when he was new, and had a bad sleep regression at 4 months, but mostly he was a dream baby. He rarely cried. At seven months old he had his first anaphylactic reaction to food and we got thrown into the food allergy world. When he was 13.5 months old I had to give him his first epipen injection. Allergy parenting is... awful. People don't believe you. Public



places don't feel safe. Having people who don't know what it's like say you're being dramatic or overprotective is torture. You don't want this to be your reality. I'm haunted by watching food nearly kill my child on more than one occasion now, and I have to fight like hell every day not to be buried by that trauma and fear. But mostly for me, motherhood over the last fifteen months has just been like waking up. Ironically I'm

I'd fantasized about it for so long I was completely shocked by how terrible it was for me.

more tired than ever before, but I feel like I'm finally waking up to who I really am.

It's made me more myself. My child isn't my identity and motherhood isn't my identity, but being a mom has made me see who I am, and fall in love with myself really. I didn't know that I'd be this strong, confident, fun, happy woman with it until my son. I'm excited to see what else I wake up to as we expand our family."

Another mom wrote, "I think my motherhood story really started with the fact that I was an only child, which


was a great childhood, but it gave me no experience with babies at all. I also was

pretty used to being able to do things my own way. I had always imagined I would eventually have a family, but I wasn't one of those girls who dreams about her wedding or plans out her kids names; I wasn't very girly, and maybe not even that maternal, I have never liked dolls and don't ever recall playing with a baby doll or even having one in the house. I was very excited when I found out I was having our first child, but I had no idea what to expect. Both of my pregnancies were healthy, thanks be to God, but I had horrible morning sickness and threw up all day with my first, and felt like I needed to throw up all day

with the second. There was a little bit of jealousy but mostly disbelief when I would meet women who raved about how amazing they felt when they were pregnant. I felt guilty sometimes because I knew I was perfectly healthy and my babies were healthy, but pregnancy is just not that fun for me; even when

People don't believe you.

I get past the constant morning sickness, I'm not very comfortable, I'm tired, and then the last bit I am so uncomfortable and exhausted it's like a long slog to the end. After my second child was

A close-up, low-key photograph of a woman with dark hair, seen from the side, holding a newborn baby. The woman is looking down at the baby with a gentle expression. The lighting is soft and focused on the woman's face and the baby, with the background being dark. The woman is wearing a dark-colored top.

born I felt so good not being pregnant any more that I had two friends actually comment on how happy I seemed suddenly haha. My first birth was induced because I was a week over due and baby was measuring on the large side for my size, so said my OB. I had a successful vaginal delivery, but I barely avoided a c-section after a very long induction and a long time on an epidural because of the intense pain of the induction. I cannot really complain because all of us came out healthy and happy, but I would definitely have done things differently if given a second chance. Thankfully, I got that second chance 3 years later

and I went into labor on my own and got to experience all of what I missed the first time around. I happily opted for an epidural at the very last moment which I was grateful for, and it was a fast delivery after a nice peaceful time with my husband doing laps around the L and D floor of our hospital. The two experiences were very different, the second one much preferable, but I am grateful for both and have two happy healthy boys who are the light of my days. Nursing was a nightmare the first few weeks with our first child, but we became a champion nursing team and I love being able to nurse my babies a long time. My first

child nursed until he was 2 and my second still nurses to sleep at 2 and a half and shows no sign of wanting to give it up. My own mother was a stay at home Mom, something I didn't think a lot about as a child, but am eternally grateful for now. I think at first I thought I would go back to work after baby was born, but in my heart I knew I wanted to be home with my littles too. The funny thing is, even though I had this amazing experience of a great stay at home Mom, I remember even myself kind of thinking that a "vocation" to motherhood was a little bit cheesy, I mean, come on, a vocation of "just" being

a Mom? But boy have my eyes been opened! I LOVE being a mom, I absolutely think it is a vocation and as I have mentioned before, I have grown in ways I never knew possible because of it. I have learned far more about myself and about my husband through the experience of becoming and growing as parents than I would have otherwise. I am learning all the time, I fail often, but I cannot imagine doing anything better with my life than this profound calling of motherhood. We are hopeful to welcome a third child in the next year or two and while sometimes I feel a twinge of anxiety

at the prospect, I know my husband and I are a stronger team than we've ever been, I know that my friends and family are there for us, I know how amazing this love is between parents and child, and I know that whatever

flu for the first week we were back, so I basically took care of both of them and myself for the two weeks immediate postpartum because of it. During the first year of my sons life, my husband and I have worked 5 jobs between

Nursing was a nightmare the first few weeks with our first child

God permits He will also surely send the grace for."

Another mom wrote, "During the birth of my son I punctured a hole in my lung, which caused me to be separated from him for the first day that he was born. When we got home from the hospital my husband had the

the two of us and I finished my Bachelors degree. This made for a challenging time where my husband was basically the caretaker for my son and I would be home during the day only to nurse him and leave again for school or work. Despite the obstacles I completed my degree with a

new baby while working and continued to have an amazing breastfeeding relationship through now (he's 13 months). Right now my husband and I are struggling with conceiving our second which has been discouraging but because of the amazing support system I built with our first, I feel a lot more emotionally prepared and able to weather the trying time of trying to conceive."

Another mother said, "Motherhood has been a slow transformation that feels much like turning into the HULK-. It's uncomfortable at times and emotionally taxing, some rage and frustration here and there, but I think that 3 years in, I finally have my

identity lined up with being a mother and I think I'm a really good mom. I feel lucky to have my children and I really do love them and sharing them with my husband of five years has been a gift.

And this mom put it very simply when she only said, "Realizing nobody knows anything about parenting and we are all in this crazy world treading water and trying to keep our heads above water."



Chapter Four: Photography



In addition to completing the survey, I asked several momstoparticipateinaportrait series that highlighted their motherhood experience. As well as participating in the survey itself, these women took part in the portraiture aspect of this project, along with their children. My inspiration behind the style of these photos was to capture motherhood in the most simple and authentic way possible. My desire was for these images to represent who they were individually, as well as represent their motherhood.

For this reason I decided to use a very simple set up and style for their portraits.

A black backdrop with singular lighting, which would create a focus on them, and minimize any distractions. I asked the participants to wear minimal (or no) makeup, stating that they should wear what they normally would for a day at home as a mom. For their attire, I asked them to wear solid, neutral colors, that did not distract or take away from their faces. This also allowed the color themes to be very calming and natural. The tan, grey, and white tones helped to create a more organic vibe to the images, which helped to emphasis the authenticity of motherhood. Some women chose to wear their hair up in a "messy bun" which helped

Photography

to demonstrate their normal day-to-day aesthetic, as well.

The materials that I used for the photographic set-up itself consisted of black fabric hung from a portable backdrop stand, two umbrella lights, a stationary (tripod) video camera, and the camera that I used for the portraits. This very simple setup allowed me to take the backdrop to locations that were easy for participants to locate, and had plenty of room for children to play, if needed. I even took the display to some of the women's residences, as this was easier for them and their children. Due to the large volume of women being photographed, I created an

Eventbrite.com event (<https://goo.gl/HKFeTS>), and set up several days with blocks of time that mothers could reserve as their timeslot, and was able to shoot them back-to-back, instead of having to schedule multiple days/times with each mother. This helped to considerably lessen the amount of down time and made the process very efficient. I was able to photograph the mothers in the course of a few days, instead of a few weeks. It also eliminated the hassle of having to organize a time for each mom, as the participants simply selected their preferred time slot from the list.

For each mom, I blocked off a slot of a full hour. This allowed for cranky kids to be calmed, babies to be fed or changed, and for several different poses and styles of photos to be taken. Some mothers brought props, or items of sentimental value that were incorporated into the images, and this allowed time for that as well. As the photographer, and also a mother, I was "baby-wearing" during all the sessions, so this extra time allowed for me to take care of and nurse my baby throughout the day, as needed. Over the course of a few days, I was able to shoot 5-7 moms a day, and get the images I needed for

the project with relatively low stress for myself or the mothers who participated.

To help the moms understand what was required of them, I put together an "FAQ" sheet that answered numerous questions about the project and the photo sessions themselves. This sheet can be viewed at <https://goo.gl/CvTyty>. I used Google Docs for this, which allowed me to update the sheet with new questions and answers, as needed. This was very helpful not only to the mothers so they could have access to all the information quickly and easily, but was particularly helpful for me as it prevented me from having



Photography

to answer the same question multiple times. I could simply direct the moms to the document, and then if they had further questions could answer those, instead of having to repeat myself to all of the participants.

When the moms arrived, I had them fill out a model release form, which allows me to use the images as I desire, and gives me the rights to their images and stories for publication. Once this was complete, we started the photo session. During the sessions, I intentionally allowed the moms and children to interact with one another and to gently guide their posing. I wanted to create

fluid and organic images that represented their relationship and personalities well. Some women were comfortable doing this, and others were a bit more stiff and required a little more direction. I first posed for the light, followed by the features, and finally, the interaction. I wanted the light to fall on the subjects in such a way that it created a longing in the viewer to want to see more. The use of shadow was really important for this aspect of the work. I used two umbrella lights, and alternated between the two sides to create different looks and effects. Some shots required both lights to be on to allow for multiple faces not to be in shadow.

Photography

One thing I did try to focus on while shooting was to create flattering images for the mothers. Standing in front of bright studio lighting with little-to-no makeup is a nerve wracking thing, even for those who are very confident in their bodies. But to those who may be less comfortable in their skin, I didn't want to create images that made them self-conscious, but to create images that were flattering and that they would cherish. I saw this project as more for them than for myself. Some mothers would say, "just pose me however you want, this is your project!" But I would respond with, "but it's your story! Just

be yourself and I'll do the rest," this created a very mutual dynamic to how the posing took place, where the mothers would interact with their children in a natural way, and I would simply facilitate their motions to best suit the lighting and their features.

One of the more difficult aspects of this project was trying to direct the children. Unlike with adult subjects, working with children requires a considerable amount of patience and flexibility. Most of the children were not old enough to take direction well, and required a lot of back-and-forth to get the right angles and lighting. I would frequently need to stop and

reassure some children that we were having fun and show them some of the pictures. A few silly faces were always a good way to get them relaxed and to enjoy the process as much as their moms and I. Even though this project was about the mothers, I knew that these images would be photos that the children would cherish many years from now, and wanted to create a positive moment for them to reflect on in case they remembered it.

Once all of the mothers were captured, I then undertook the process of editing all of the images in a consistent style. My original concept was a monochromatic

one. I had mentally pictured black and white images for this project, but quickly discovered that the life in the children's and mother's eyes was immediately muted with the greyscale style. Likewise, there were several moms who had incorporated elements of their motherhood story that were better represented with color. To ensure that these images all matched in style and tone, I created a custom Lightroom preset and used source images as references and would adjust each set accordingly. This gave the entire project a cohesive look and feel for the final collection of images. Although each mother's story

is unique, there is a common thread among all motherhood stories, and I wanted to create that sense of unity in the way they were edited.

Every mother has moments of doubt, joy, hesitation, confidence, pride, and guilt. Every mother has loved a child in a way that no one else can understand. This common thread can be felt in these images with their emotion and personal connection through the use of light and authentic posing.

To showcase these images and stories in the best possible way, it was decided that a coffee table book should be developed. In this way, the art is not stagnant,

handing on a wall unable to be shared. A book is portable, able to be enjoyed privately or with friends, and can very easily house the stories and portraits within this project.

Each mother was given multiple spreads within this lay-flat book to tell her story and showcase her imagery. This allows the viewer to take a moment to truly stop and reflect on each mother's story, and take a brief look into their lives. This large book utilizes the use of negative space to help create a focus on the mother's identity and personhood, as well as create a sense of solitude, or singular focus on her and her children. Their stories were spread



out over several pages, and quotes were pulled from the stories to help add dimension to the spreads, giving life to the stories as the viewer's eye bounces between the words and the images.

In addition to the photography, video footage was also taken for this project. The stationary camera that was set up during the photo session ran continually capturing B-roll of the mothers and children during the photo sessions. Along with this video footage, I recorded separate audio clips of mothers telling their motherhood stories. These audio clips were often recorded while mothers were feeding or changing their

children, and the soft coos of babies in the background can frequently be heard, adding to the motherly aspect of their stories. While I was unsure how I would most likely use this material for the project, I nevertheless took the time to record it just in case I wanted to create a promotional video. Ultimately, I did decide to create a short mini-film which really added to the depth and emotion of this project. For the mini-film, I chose clips from some of the mothers, and one mother's story that was particularly impactful. Her voice was very soft and her cadence of speech was very calm, which made the

perfect backdrop for this film. I sourced music that was inspiring and emotional to accompany the video using a music licensing membership, and added it to this short promotional-type film that I can now use to market the project, as well as provide inspiration for the viewer. This film can be seen on the website, and is sharable online.

On the following pages are a few excerpts from the photobook, previewing some of the mother's spreads.

Christina

“In giving birth to our babies, we may find that we give birth to new possibilities within ourselves.”

— Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn

Christina was the first mom I photographed for this project, and her story truly touched my heart.

She is a new mom, still experiencing her first year as a mother to her sweet baby girl, and being with them during their photo session was such a joy.

She shared with me that her daughter inspired her to start her creative painting business. So it made absolute sense to incorporate this element of her motherhood transformation into her portraits.

In the images on these pages, her daughter's tiny hand playfully paints her mother's shoulder, and nothing could be more perfect.



What do you consider yourself?
New mom (first year)

So far in your motherhood story, what have you personally experienced?
Miscarriage, Labor & Delivery, Other birth-related issues

Before you became a mother, what did "motherhood" mean to you?
Caring for others more than you for yourself. Maintaining the family routine and direction. Being available.

What are some ways you think society defines "motherhood"?
House cleaner, the cook, overwhelmed, a breeder, a housewife, a loss of identity.

What are some ways motherhood has impacted you mentally, emotionally, and physically?
Anemia and loss of rest; high anxiety. My days go by a lot faster. I have more respect and care for my own body. It's not about being skinny, but about being healthy; self care is a priority. I react and have a ton of opinions. Physically, I feel fragile at times like my nails rip and my ankles swell a lot. Other days I feel like I have more strength than normal, it's a see-saw. I'm also wishing my baby would slow down. She's had so many growth spurts. I also gotta work on time for myself and partner.

What are some aspects of motherhood you discovered that are not discussed openly that you have experienced and wished were talked more about?
Healing techniques are hushed between mom and daughter, or even friends until after birth and months later. Breastfeeding is complicated and it changes a lot individually and for the baby's development.

In your personal experience, what are some differences between pre-motherhood (or "maidenhood") and motherhood?
Time, routine, love life, work goals, place in family, diet.

“The motherhood process is fun, sweet, and tough. A lot of adjusting but a lot of proud moments. A lot of preparing, then finding out you still aren’t done.”



In your experience, how has society, or people around you, been affected by your motherhood?
I think if you believe your identity has changed, then yes it affects relationships around you. It goes both ways.

How have you handled the changes that have taken place in your life since becoming a mother?
It took the first few months to transition and get into a routine.

What is your motherhood story?
The process is fun, sweet, and tough. A lot of adjusting but a lot of proud moments. A lot of preparing, then finding out you still aren’t done. Having faith and family around was key. Getting back into work was a challenge and letting people babysit was a hurdle. Let’s just say people can only have her if I’m watching or just a few hours. Having her also inspired two new business ideas.



Jennifer

“Birth takes a woman’s deepest fears about herself and show her that she is stronger than them.”

— Unknown

Just before Jennifer was married, her mother presented her with her wedding ring to have as her own. Jennifer’s father had passed away, and in this gesture, her mother was able to bless Jennifer with a part of her father, as well as herself, for her daughter’s special day. But before her day arrived, her mother passed away. That ring now symbolizes so much love and the meaning of family for Jennifer. Every time she sees it, she is reminded not only of her marriage, but of her mother’s love, as well as the love of her father. For this reason, it takes center stage on the following page.

What do you consider yourself?

New mom (first year)

So far in your motherhood story, what have you personally experienced?

C-section, Other birth-related issues

Before you became a mother, what did “motherhood” mean to you?

My mom was my entire view of motherhood. She was a constant. She did whatever she could to help her children. She sacrificed so we always had enough. I always knew that I would be okay as a mom, because I would have her to give me guidance. Then a month before I got married, she passed away.



I became a stepmom a month after she passed, and then a few months after that my husband and I got this wonderful, terrifying, surprise. We were going to have another. Something I had once looked forward to now seemed so overwhelming without her.

What are some ways you think society defines "motherhood"?

I guess it depends on each person's experience. For me it was someone I could always depend on, for my husband that wasn't the case. But I think innately we know we should be able to count on our mothers to be there for us. To love us no matter what.

What are some ways motherhood has impacted you mentally, emotionally, and physically?

It's made me reevaluate what's really important to me. In terms of time, money, what I invest in. It's exhausting. It's frustrating. But nothing else has ever made me feel more complete.

What are some aspects of motherhood you discovered that are not discussed openly that you have experienced and wished were talked more about?

I think that's it's okay to have your experience be different. It's okay if things don't go as planned. If you can't breastfeed. Or if you have to go back to work. Or you miss the first time they roll over. I wish people would talk about trying to be a mother to a child who already has one, and you're just trying to figure out your role in their life. I wish people would talk about the fear you can feel when you don't always know what you have to offer a child.

In your personal experience, what are some differences between pre-motherhood (or "maidenhood") and motherhood?

To me the biggest difference is that you don't really have to consider anyone else. You are ultimately only accountable to yourself. And having a family means having a whole group of people you are accountable to. For some, that probably sounds awful. For me, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

“Innately we know we should be able to count on our mothers to be there for us. To love us no matter what.”





In your experience, how has society, or people around you, been affected by your motherhood?

I don't know. Maybe they do and I'm too tired to notice. But I now understand parents. It's like a language that I suddenly learned when I became a mom.

How have you handled the changes that have taken place in your life since becoming a mother?

At times, with lots of tears and chocolate. At times, with laughter. At times, with just hugging my husband and telling him I'm not done hugging yet.

Lots of prayer. Lots of wishing my mom was here to give me advice.

What is your motherhood story?

I spoke a little on this earlier. I was a girl without her parents who suddenly, seemingly overnight, became a mom of two boys. And I felt very unprepared. I couldn't afford the birthing class, so I researched everything I could, and watched every video I could find. I knew everything I could find about giving birth, postpartum care, and what items were appropriate for newborns.

And then a test my doctor had taken as just a precautionary thing came back as positive for cholestasis. And I was told to get to the hospital so they could induce labor. From there, I was told 18 hours into labor they would have to do an emergency c-section, and I lost so much blood they were talking about having to do a hysterectomy. Luckily that didn't end up being necessary. But everything I had planned for kept going the other direction. I felt scared. And so grateful for my husband. God blessed me with the perfect man for me. Without him through all this, I don't know where I would be.

And even with all the sadness, and everything that happened, I am so grateful for what I have. For these three guys in my life. For the ways I feel so blessed by God.



Rachel

She was told she could never have children, so Rachel gave up on even trying. Then, by sheer miracle, it happened! Through most of her pregnancy, her joy was clouded by fear and worry that the baby couldn't survive, but she chose to embrace her pregnancy and baby, and soon became the mother she never thought she could be.

What do you consider yourself?
New mom (first year)

So far in your motherhood story, what have you personally experienced?
C-section, Other birth-related issues

Before you became a mother, what did "motherhood" mean to you?
Before, "motherhood" was a word I thought would never apply to me. It was something I pushed out of my mind and tried to be content without. An unattainable dream.

What are some ways you think society defines "motherhood"?
"slavery," "energy-sucking"

"Sometimes the strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws."

— Barbara Kingsolver





What are some ways motherhood has impacted you mentally, emotionally, and physically?

Mentally: made me stronger, more protective, more compassionate, more gentle

Emotionally: far happier, more fulfilled

Physically: more energetic (having to get things done while she's sleeping), made me bigger and gave me stretch marks, for sure, but it's worth it, after the pain of thinking I couldn't have kids

What are some aspects of motherhood you discovered that are not discussed openly that you have experienced and wished were talked more about?

I wish people knew what to say to women who are not sure that their baby will make it to full term. The best advice I was given was by a nurse. "It's good to get completely excited and attached to this baby. If you lose the baby, grieve completely. If you are able to carry, rejoice wholeheartedly. This is a real life that deserves to be loved."

In your personal experience, what are some differences between pre-motherhood (or "maidenhood") and motherhood?

Motherhood has given me confidence. I feel I can "conquer the world" for this baby.

In your experience, how has society, or people around you, been affected by your motherhood?

While pregnant I felt judged by a few doctors who knew of my physical issues. The fact that I got pregnant regardless must have seemed foolish to them.

Now that I have a baby I feel far more approachable. People ask me questions in the grocery store.

Some friends who aren't parents stopped asking me to hang out once I had a baby. It seemed like they thought I didn't need them. Or maybe they thought me having a baby would put a damper on conversation.





How have you handled the changes that have taken place in your life since becoming a mother?
For me, this transition has been a dream. I have loved every second of it and it came easy to me.

What is your motherhood story?
After my husband and I got married, we found out that I have a split uterus. Because of this, the doctors told me I would most likely not be able to conceive. They added that if I did get pregnant, I would most likely not be able to carry the baby to term. It would be a high risk pregnancy and the chances of miscarriage and stillbirth would be alarmingly high.

You can only imagine our surprise three years later when my husband and I found out we were pregnant! Honestly, though we were overjoyed, my happiness was shrouded in fear. Throughout the whole pregnancy I was reminded of my chances of stillbirth and miscarriage, which only increased more as I progressed in pregnancy. I fought back tears throughout my baby showers, afraid I would never have the chance to put these adorable outfits on my baby girl.

Thankfully, the doctors were able to see that she was breech and perform a c-section at 39 weeks, delivering our healthy baby girl. I am overwhelmed with gratefulness that God chose us to be her parents

I wrote this to her on the day she was born, "Oh, my sweet, sweet daughter. No words are adequate enough to describe your birthday for your daddy and me. For years we thought this day could never come. When your daddy and I got our first glimpse of you on the operating table, we both cried. When they first set you on my chest, you instantly stopped crying and just stared at me with those beautiful, glassy eyes. When you first heard your daddy's voice, you turned to look for him. I didn't know my heart could hold this much love."



“I
didn't
know
my
heart
could
hold
this
much
love”

Chapter Five: Social



As discussed earlier in this thesis, the purpose of this project was to highlight the stories of women and analyze how they are viewed by society, themselves, and each other. Since there is a cultural disconnect between how mothers truly live, and how society views them, this project helps to bridge that gap and create a visual work that helps to encourage and support mothers and soon-to-be-mothers.

The main goal of this project has been achieved through the work of the portraiture and video, but I decided that this project deserves more than just a "flash-and-bang," one-time visual story to truly

solve the problem of how moms are viewed by society. For this reason, a website and social media accounts were established for this project, in hopes that current moms, and those who are looking at becoming mothers, can view, share, and relate with stories of motherhood on a daily basis. I created the website www.motherhoodstoryproject.com to provide a landing point for those who would like to share their stories and images. Here they can upload an image of themselves, as well as share their motherhood story. They can even participate in the survey that this project utilized. These stories, once approved, are then posted on

the website's blog, as well as the Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter pages associated with the project.

These pages are listed below. Similarly, there is also a Facebook group for moms to join who would like to develop community with one another at www.facebook.com/groups/motherhoodstoryproject. This is a "closed" group, meaning that only those people who an admin approves are allowed to join, making it a relatively secure, and safe environment for women to interact and engage in. Part of the group rules is that there can be no "mom shaming" or belittling of different parenting styles, which hopefully will eliminate

social judging of different parenting techniques, which was a common complaint of the moms who were surveyed. Here, mothers can share their daily ups and downs, and reach out to others for support and encouragement.

A mentorship system will be set up using a built-in Facebook add-on that allows mothers to offer mentorship, as well as sign up to be mentored. This is a 5-week process that allows mentors and mentees to engage on needed topics and find support with each other. There will also be social learning units established so mothers can learn new topics on motherhood, as desired.

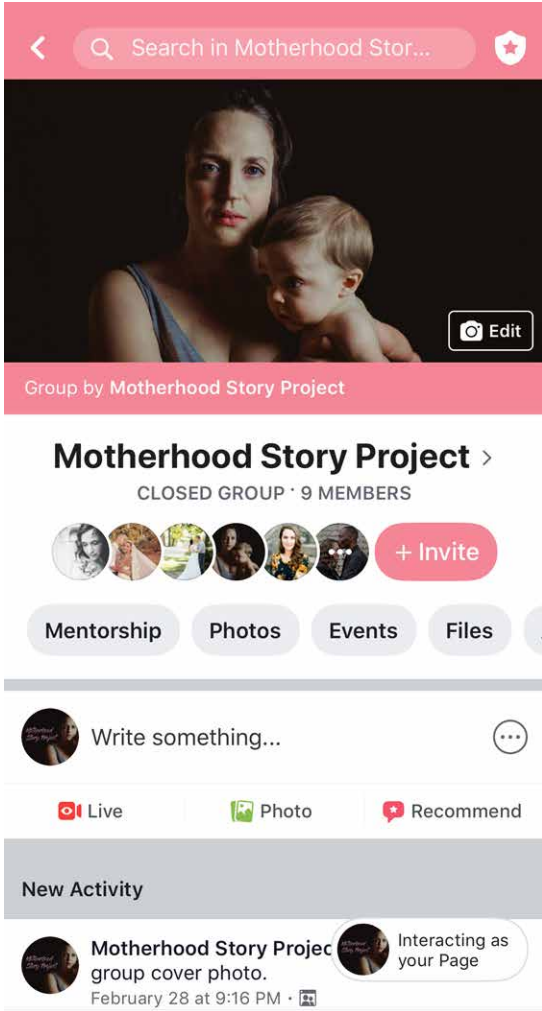
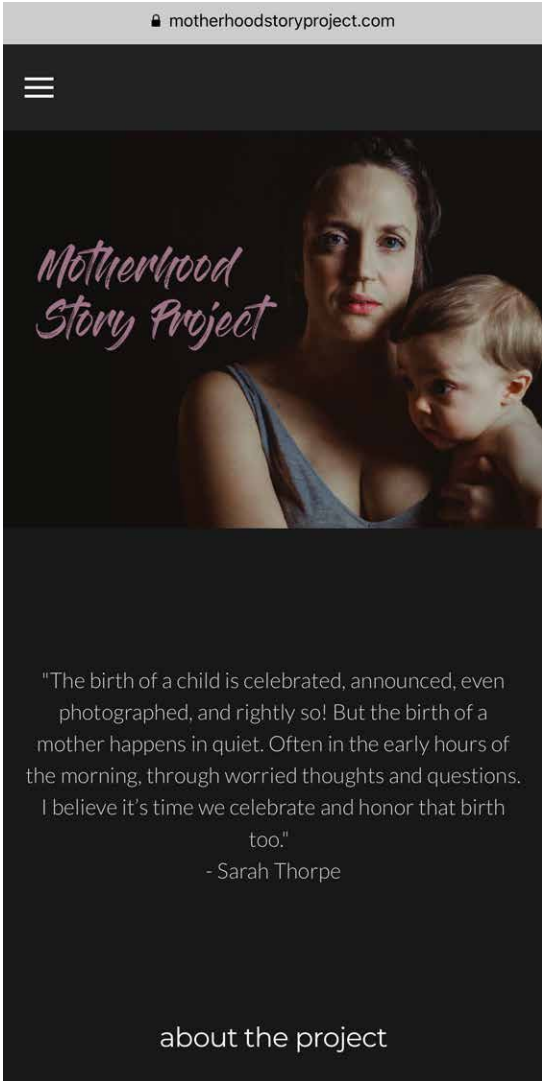
Likewise, mothers will be encouraged to participate in weekly photo posts, which will help focus them on their cherished memories with their children, and help them to see their lives through a fresh lens. This aspect of the group will encourage mothers to use photovoice to tell their daily stories, trials, and successes.

In addition to these, a second weekly post will ask moms what new thing they have learned each week. This will spark conversation and allow women to share new insights as mothers, and encourage moms to support and motivate one another, as well as learn from each other. Other types of interactive

posts may be developed, as needed, to help motivate and communicate the concept of community within the group.

Through this group, the website/blog, instagram, and twitter, there will be a large network in which current and future mothers can engage and interact with one another and participate in open dialogue about motherhood topics. In this way, mothers will hopefully open up about the many ups and downs that are part of the motherhood process. While many "mom groups" already exist, this group will be different in that each member will know that the purpose of the group is not only for encouragement,

www.facebook.com/motherhoodstoryproject
www.instagram.com/motherhoodstoryproject
www.twitter.com/motherhood_



Social

but for breaking down the social barriers that are inevitably in place based on societal patterns as have been discovered in the research of this thesis. Unlike other mom groups, this group will not only encourage weekly conversation about the motherhood journey, but will invite mothers to visually share a part of their lives for the purpose of support the motherhood community.

As this is a safe and respectful community for mothers to participate in, the admins of the group (namely Andrea Lewis until other responsible mothers volunteer to assist, as needed), will monitor

conversation and will take the responsibility to delete or report any conversations that are harmful, negative towards mothering styles, socially hostile, or in any way demeaning to fellow moms in the group. One of the biggest issues with motherhood groups on social media is the inevitable "mom shaming" that takes place. One anecdotal poem that has frequently circulated groups online goes, "10 little monkeys jumping on the bed, 1 fell off and bumped his head, mama asked the mom group and the mom group said, 'Have you tried essential oils?'

'Hyperactivity is a vaccine injury.' 'I'm calling CPS.'"

Although this little rhyme is somewhat exaggerated, its point is not far from the truth. Go to any mommy blog online, and almost everywhere there are comments of judgment and various forms of passive-aggressive mom-shaming. This sort of commentary will not be allowed in the group. Members will receive one warning before being deleted from the group. This will hopefully create an environment where women can interact without fear of being criticized for parenting styles that are just varied in

their opinion. Most choices a parent makes today are just a matter of preference. And as mothers we should be able to support one another, even if we disagree on how we prefer to raise our children.

Chapter Six: Conclusion



In conclusion, this thesis project was initially inspired by my personal observation of how motherhood was drastically different from my maidenhood life, and how little I knew about motherhood before becoming a mom. Similarly, as a new mom, I felt I was treated very differently that I was pre-motherhood, and felt that motherhood was judged by society in a variety of ways. When discussing these issues with other mothers, there was a similar agreement that very little had prepared them for motherhood, and that they now feel that society criticizes them on multiple levels as a mother, and that

there is no outlet to truly share their experiences with, or engage with other moms on the topic in a real way. This project not only highlights the stories of several women through photography and storytelling, but also creates an environment where women can interact with each other, and share their stories with the world through blogs and social media.

The photographic aspect of this project is especially important for the success of this solution, because it makes the stories real and relatable to not only other women, but also to other members of society who can put a face to the realities of motherhood.



Conclusion

No longer is motherhood this generic term for women with children, but it is a face holding a child, whose name is Sarah, who had a miscarriage and is now expecting her second child. Motherhood is Rachel who was told she would never have children due to a medical condition, but is now holding a chunky, rosy-cheeked infant lovingly in her arms. Motherhood is Megan, who is empowering herself and other women with physical wellness and exercise. And motherhood is Christina who was inspired by her baby daughter and now owns a successful art business.

These stories and others help to inspire and encourage

current and future mothers, and the details of their stories help open the doors for honest conversation about the motherhood journey. Although each story is different and unique, there are aspects and common threads among each story that help to tie mothers together. Not only this, but each mother's story has a common thread to those in society who are interacting with moms on a daily basis. This common thread is that we each may have unique experiences, but we are all human and each of us have been born of a mother. Each mother may be different, some may be good, and some may be bad, but we as human beings should

respect the office of mother, and respect that this is a station that is very much needed and should be valued in our society. Mothers are the only way that we as a civilization can continue, and without a woman allowing her body to be used for the development of a human being, we are lost as a race of beings. This should be respected and appreciated by society, not scoffed at or belittled as "not good enough." This project sheds light on just how precious and unique each motherhood story is, and that we should respect and cherish the role of mothers in our society. Because of this project, hopefully many women will be encouraged and will

continue to participate in the work that is being produced, and a community of mothers will join together to encourage one another and to inspire and inform those who are planning towards motherhood. As the Motherhood Story Project is a living project, and will never truly end, I am inspired as a mother to know that people will continue to see and share the stories of real mothers, and that motherhood will hopefully be honored in our society in part because of this project. As with all living things, I hope to see this project grow and mature over time, and blossom into a truly valuable resource for mothers and members of society as a whole.



LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 8, 2019

Andrea Caresse Lewis
IRB Approval 3559.010819: The Motherhood Story

Dear Andrea Caresse Lewis,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School



Survey Questions:

1.

What do you consider yourself?
(select which applies most to you)

a.

Planning toward motherhood

b.

Mom-to-be (expecting/preparing for adoption)

c.

New mom (first year)

d.

Experienced Mom (greater than 1-year)

e.

Mom of Mothers (you have grandchildren)

2.

So far in your motherhood story, what have you personally experienced? (check all that apply)

a.

Infertility

b.

Miscarriage

c.

C-section

d.

Vaginal delivery

e.

VBAC

f.

Stillbirth

g.

Pre-term birth

h.

Other birth-related issues

i.

Problems with adoption procedures

j.

None of the above

3. Before you became a mother, what did “motherhood” mean to you? If you are not yet a mother, but are in the process of becoming one, what is your current view of “motherhood”? (short answer)
4. What are some ways you think society defines “motherhood”? (short answer)
5. What are some ways motherhood has impacted you mentally, emotionally, and physically? (The way you think about things, how you react to things, your body image etc?) If you are not yet a mother, how do you think this change will impact you? (long answer)
6. What are some aspects of motherhood you discovered that are not discussed openly that you have experienced and wished were talked more about? (problems such as miscarriage, nursing issues, birth healing, the first 3-months of a newborn, etc) If you are not yet a mother, are there any topics you wished were discussed more that may help prepare you for the transition? (long answer)
7. In your personal experience, what are some differences between pre-motherhood (or “maidenhood”) and motherhood? (ability to stay out late, feelings of love and

protection, etc) If you are not yet a mother, what do you think those differences might be? (long answer)

8. In your experience, how has society, or people around you, been affected by your motherhood? (do they treat you differently, do you treat them differently, etc) If you are not yet a mother, what do you anticipate in this regard? (long answer)
9. How have you handled the changes that have taken place in your life since becoming a mother? (did they come easy to you, were they a challenge, etc) If you are not yet a mother, how are you planning to help this transition? (long answer)
10. What is your motherhood story? (what was the process like, what major events transpired?) If you are not yet a mother, describe your journey so far. (long answer)

If you would like to remain anonymous, please click the submit button below. If you are okay with being identified and possibly contacted further regarding your motherhood story, please include your name and email address below, then click submit (Please note: your survey responses will no longer be anonymous if you include your contact information.):

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www.MotherhoodStoryProject.com

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