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# Exploring Performances of (Hyper) Intensive Motherhood in the Setting of Manchester's Christmas Markets

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## Abstract

This article explores performances of intensive motherhood in the context of taking children to visit Manchester's Christmas markets. Much sociological literature has studied intensive motherhood within the safe, managed space of the home. Less work, however, has examined performances of motherhood in urban spaces. Through in-depth interviews with 16 mothers with recent experience of taking their children to the Christmas markets, we highlight how such festive urban experiences surface tensions in intensive motherhood display. Intensive motherhood is grounded in shielding children from risk, yet our findings reveal how visiting the city-centre during the Christmas period exposed children to a range of perceived dangers. Our mothers reinterpreted the concept of intensive motherhood, performing a hyper-intensified practice in response to the less predictable nature of this 'risky' setting. We contribute to intensive motherhood literature and highlight several risk management strategies that participants employed to manage the risk their children were exposed to.

## Keywords

Christmas markets, intensive motherhood, motherhood, risk, urban spaces

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## Introduction

Although 'intensive parenting' is framed as gender-neutral, much intensive care work falls disproportionately to mothers (Shirani et al., 2012). Intensive motherhood has been studied in several contexts, including practices surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Cummins and Brannon, 2022), schooling decisions (Brown, 2022), shielding children from hunger (Kerrane et al., 2021, 2023) and approaches to infant feeding (Lee, 2008). These examples have in common that they imply some form of risk to the developing child, should mothers not perform their role intensively. Intensive motherhood positions the child as innocent, vulnerable and in need of protection (Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2010). 'Good' intensive motherhood ensures the happiness and later successes of the child (Cairns et al., 2013), with motherhood deeply entwined in public display (Finch, 2007). The choices that 'good' intensive mothers make are seen as important in managing the child as a project (Perrier, 2013), helping to reassert her own (middle-class) identity and limiting her sense of maternal guilt by placing the child's well-being as paramount concern.

This study explores how mothers feel paradoxically torn between offering experiences that enrich children's lives (as 'good' intensive mothers), while simultaneously exposing them to the discomfort of the lived (and sometimes risky) reality these experiences afford. Using the context of Manchester's Christmas markets, we show how our participants felt obliged to provide magical, festive experiences to their children. Yet through taking children to the busy city-centre Christmas markets, participants felt that they exposed their children to uncertainty, risk and potential danger via exposure to crowds of unpredictable others (e.g. the intoxicated, the homeless, the terrorist), and viewed Manchester city-centre as synonymous with deviant behaviours and malevolence (Black, 2012). We critique the notion of the continuously intensive mother, arguing for a more temporal reading of intensive motherhood where mothers intensify their behaviours at certain times/settings.

Our context of Christmas markets as periodic leisure and retail spaces is pertinent because these spaces do not afford the same sense of familiarity and ease as permanent spaces that are visited regularly, and through which routine/order is established. A sense of ontological security, 'the degree to which consumers feel their world, and role within it, is secure and predictable' (Laing, 1960: 314), can thus be placed in jeopardy in such locations when individuals face disruption to their world, real or imagined (Campbell et al., 2020). Mothers may feel a sense of insecurity within temporary spaces more acutely because of their focus on protecting their child from disruption and uncertainty over all else.

Christmas markets tend to sprawl across city-centres, the urban setting further compounding this unease. They are often positioned in designated zones or thoroughfares with, paradoxically, added security (beyond the usual urban surveillance). There is often a sense of uncertainty in how to navigate these more temporary, city-centre spaces and how to interact with other users, as well as how to assess risk in this unusual episodic space. Accordingly, we contribute to understandings surrounding the 'doing' of motherhood beyond the more usual focus on the home (May, 2023) and ask: *how do mothers practise intensive motherhood in 'risky' urban spaces; and how do they manage such risk?*

We organise our article as follows. First, we review the intensive motherhood literature that prioritises removing children from risk. Next, our research context is outlined, which highlights Manchester city-centre as a potentially dangerous, risk-laden location. Our qualitative, interpretive study is subsequently presented. Findings are outlined, revealing that although participants (pre-motherhood) were critical of intensive motherhood ideology, they experienced a 'maternal awakening' that necessitated shielding their children from risk. In wanting to offer their children enriching experiences, such as a festive visit to the markets, they recognised the potential danger (e.g. from disorderly crowds, the inebriated, the homeless or maleficent 'other') that they exposed their children to in this inner-city setting. Accordingly, we show how they performed a *hyper-intensified* version of intensive motherhood, adopting risk management strategies to help them engage with risk.

## Risk and Intensive Motherhood

It is widely recognised that motherhood represents a private responsibility yet is a practice of much public surveillance (Lee, 2008). Mothers follow culturally legitimised notions of 'good' and 'bad' mothering to justify their motherhood performance, with 'good' mothers removing their child from risk (Lee, 2008; Lee et al., 2010). This is fuelled by Beck's (1992) 'risk society', whereby modernity has created insidious, omnipresent and often invisible risks, which garner perpetual feelings of unpredictability and uncertainty, particularly among parents. Society itself has been positioned as toxic for children, placing them 'at risk' (Lee, 2014). Everyday risks to which children are exposed (e.g. chemicals, violence, traffic) are perceived as real and imaginable by parents (Kelley et al., 1998), although others argue that parents may have lost all perspective on safety and danger, with worst-case scenarios top-of-mind, rather than calibrated probabilities (Lee, 2014; Skenazy, 2009).

The normative standard of 'good' motherhood is discussed by Hays (1996: 9) as *intensive motherhood*, representing motherhood practices that are 'child centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive'. Although often critiqued as an unrealistic and class-based idealisation, ignoring much race and class-based privilege and inequality (Kerrane et al., 2023), intensive motherhood remains the dominant standard by which 'good' motherhood is judged (Faircloth and Gürtin, 2018), regardless of social class or cultural background (Cappellini et al., 2019).

The central tenet of intensive motherhood relates to meeting the non-negotiable maternal ethic of care (May, 2008). 'Good' self-sacrificing, intensive mothers ensure the well-being and safety of their children and are often guided by experts to shield their children from unnecessary risk (Lee, 2008). Imbued with neoliberal thinking and individualised responsibility, intensive mothers are risk-averse, reflected in what Furedi (2001) refers to as 'paranoid parenting', viewing the child as innocent and vulnerable. Children's perceived vulnerabilities perpetuate risk consciousness among parents, 'a way of thinking about the future in which possibilities that are untoward are taken into account more than probabilities' (Lee, 2014: 11), necessitating 'good' mothers to act as risk managers in children's lives (Lee, 2014; Shirani et al., 2012).

Rather than conceptualising risk as something that can be eliminated completely, recognising the pervasive view that risk is everywhere/omnipresent (Beck, 1992), Lupton (1999), instead, positions risk as something that can be managed and reduced by mothers. Writing on the ontology of the pregnant body, Lupton (1999) acknowledges how risk in pregnancy can be acted upon. Risk to the developing child, in its various forms, can be minimised and embraced by mothers, informed by expert knowledge and personal understandings and experiences. Conversely, risks in pregnancy and childbirth cannot be reduced entirely, and are often beyond a mother's control (Lupton, 1999).

'Good' mothers therefore engage in risk management strategies (Lee, 2014) and what MacKendrick (2014: 707) labels 'precautionary consumption', minimising child exposure to external threats (both pre-/post-pregnancy) through a 'better safe than sorry' logic, following a future-oriented ethic of care. Exploring children's exposure to everyday chemicals (e.g. lead paint, pesticides), precautionary consumption (MacKendrick, 2014) relates to the highly labour-intensive mothering practices surrounding protection, surveillance and restriction. As children grow older, different forms of risk emerge that mothers shield their children from, such as threats posed by 'stranger danger', drugs and internet grooming (Jenkins, 2006). Mothers are, however, often recognised to be poor risk managers (Faircloth, 2014; Lee et al., 2010), and in turn may themselves inadvertently constitute an important risk factor in their children's lives (e.g. through failure to be fluent in online worlds and the dangers they pose).

Mothers who intentionally expose their children to risk, departing from normative standards, are labelled morally questionable (McCarthy et al., 2017) and encounter mother blame (Blum, 2007) and shame (Sahagian, 2015). Class-based comparison is also evident. For example, the lower-classed 'chav' mother (Tyler, 2008) is ridiculed as being loud, crass, often absent and irresponsible, and is positioned as a vulgar caricature from which 'good' middle-class mothers distance themselves (Skeggs, 2005). Yet the intensification of parenting culture has garnered equal concerns surrounding 'over-parenting' practices, many of which stem from intensive parenting culture (Bristow, 2014). Helicopter parents, for example, are highly risk-averse (see Lee and Macvarish, 2020), and hover 'over the child, preventing him or her from taking the risks necessary to develop independence' (Bristow, 2014: 201). While such parents may be aware that they are stifling child agency and independence, they do so with the best interests of their children at heart, driven by intensive parenting culture that 'emphasises the need for safety and protection above all' (Bristow, 2014: 203).

Free-range parenting (Skenazy, 2009), paradoxically, advocates child freedom and aims to build competencies, confidence and independence within the developing child in a 'hands-off' manner, affording them freedom to roam, within confines (Skenazy, 2009). This shares similarities with the working-class ideals of 'good' motherhood, which focuses on the 'natural growth' of children (Lareau, 2002) in a less obviously intensive manner, underpinned by the notion that the provision of 'love, food and safety' will ensure that children thrive (Lareau, 2002: 748).

Yet 'alternative' parenting approaches, such as free-range parenting, have received criticism for potentially placing children at *too much* risk – the 'double bind' of parenting, where parents 'can't do right for wrong' (Bristow, 2014: 204). This chimes with the logic of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2002) among many middle-class mothers who

see the child as a project to be managed, and who engage their child(ren) in projects to cultivate their cognitive and social skills, but which creates additional labour for mothers. However, such mothers often struggle to reconcile *which* projects are most imperative to pursue, and whether such intensive parenting risks overwhelming the developing child, leading to detrimental developmental outcomes (Bristow, 2014).

The various mothering approaches identified, such as helicopter or free-range parenting, each stem from, and revolve around, risk and its management, and can be seen as moving along opposing poles of an intensive mothering continuum. While each pole is pathologised, regarded as either too lax or uncaring (e.g. free-range) or overly neurotic and obsessive (e.g. helicopter), 'good' mothers work to distance themselves from such stigmatised extremes, engaging in what Cairns et al. (2018) refer to as 'calibrated motherhood'.

## Motherhood, Christmas and the City

Mother work is particularly heightened during the festive period, especially in recent times where consumption appears more conspicuous (Miller, 1993). Family display (Finch, 2007) is nowhere more apparent, particularly in the media (Brewis and Warren, 2011), than during the holiday season, with images of families in matching pyjamas, opening Christmas Eve boxes, visiting festive light shows and Christmas markets. Studies of Christmas recognise the central role women play, linked to the invisible work of kinship and caring (Sinardet and Mortelmans, 2009). The mother is the hub for Christmas celebrations, assuming the brunt of affective labour and mental load, viewed as a 'festive domestic goddess' (Brewis and Warren, 2011: 754; Vachhani and Pullen, 2011).

The idea of domestic labour is thus challenged during the festive period and, 'with the onset of Christmas, the marginal and neglected space of home is cast as central; woman becomes centre stage, man becomes other' (Vachhani and Pullen, 2011: 811). This centralisation of the child and mother during the festive season has rarely been considered within intensive motherhood literature, yet perfectly aligns with notions of the mother making sacrifices to provide the perfect Christmas experience for her child(ren).

Christmas is, however, no longer confined to the domestic setting and there has been a rise in organised activities, such as light festivals and outdoor specialised markets (where 'good' motherhood is displayed). This shifts the focus from the privacy of the domestic sphere into public, potentially risky spaces, which presents a challenge to the (risk-averse) intensive mother. Further attention has been called for, which explores family practices in public spaces (May, 2023). Within the leisure studies literature, however, there has been a focus on outdoor family leisure practices for some time (see Harrington, 2015). Indeed, Harrington (2015) suggests that family leisure and social class are firmly related, which is of relevance to our study. Harrington (2015) finds that middle income families are more likely to engage in leisure that is about teaching children 'good' values and to perform this in places where they could display such family 'goodness'. However, this line of enquiry rarely considers risky/urban family leisure as complicating the 'good mother' narrative.

In Lupton's (1999) view, there is pleasure to be found in taking risks and this is seen in engagements with leisured activities in general but rarely addressed in relation to family leisure. Scraton and Watson (1998) similarly highlight how urban leisure is talked about as something separate from children, exploring how mothers mitigate risk when alone in the city *because* they have children. Although Skeggs (1999) highlights how women alter their behaviours upon entering leisure spaces according to social positions such as race, class and age, motherhood is rarely considered. Indeed, in the context of risk and children, considerations of children's risky play in urban spaces (Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2008) or how mothers manage risk during children's free time (Clark and Dumas, 2020) dominates in line with Furedi's (2008) paranoid parenting, rather than in relation to mothers purposefully taking children into these risky places.

## Research Context

Manchester's Christmas markets have been an annual tradition in the city-centre for over 20 years. Held for six weeks each November/December, with over 225 stalls spread across nine sites, they attract an estimated nine million visitors each year (Jackson, 2023). Visitors primarily comprise younger consumers, who partake in the vibrant drinking and night-time culture; youths (who visit during weekends and after school/college hours) and young working professionals (socialising over after-work drinks) are regular visitors (Robson, 2021). Although not specifically promoted as child-friendly, a Christmas parade and 'festive family Sundays' have been introduced in a further attempt to attract families.

The markets have seen a considerable increase in security over recent years, implemented following a vehicular attack at a Christmas market in Berlin (2016), which heightened safety concerns. Concrete crash barriers now line the market's perimeter, body scanners are installed to detect weapons and other malicious objects, CCTV surveillance is utilised and security personnel are commonplace. A heavy (often armed) police presence was reported as necessary to 'tackle criminality and negative perceptions of [Manchester's] Piccadilly Gardens' (Holt, 2023), an area of the Christmas market where the homeless and drug users congregate.

There are few controls on visitor numbers or who enters the Christmas market, meaning that over-crowding and antisocial behaviour are common (Robson, 2021). The sprawling, congested and temporary nature of the space continues to present visitors with challenges as they navigate stalls. The festive atmosphere, fuelled by the consumption of alcohol, has the potential to quickly turn, with large groups of male youths a common sight fuelling a heightened awareness for marginalised groups such as elderly visitors and females (Robson, 2021). This framing of gangs of youths as a potential threat is often underpinned by classed and racialised undertones.

As perhaps inevitable with any urban environment, Manchester city-centre has been victim to several terrorist attacks, such as the IRA (1996) and the Manchester Arena bombing (2017). Alongside a historic gun and drug culture, the threat of risk and danger has permeated the Mancunian psyche (Black, 2012). In this sense, our context makes risk more visible/front of mind, offering an opportunity to observe how the white, middle-class mothers in our homogeneous sample navigate these more challenging spaces

outside the home. As argued by Arnould et al. (2006: 108), 'contexts excite comparison' making Manchester the ideal setting to examine how this subset interprets perceptions of risk.

## Method

We conducted 16 in-depth interviews with mothers from the Manchester area. The data form part of a wider research project (2019–2023), which collected data from 39 participants, drawn from 26 in-depth interviews, two focus groups and 20 observational field-visits to the markets where extensive fieldnotes were taken. In this article, we specifically focus on the voice and experiences of mothers alone, given their heightened safety concerns surrounding visiting Manchester's Christmas markets with their children. Their children were aged from nine months to 11 years old, with most falling into primary-school age.

The mothers were purposefully recruited (Patton, 2002) to ensure they had recently visited the markets with their children. Appeals for participants were made shortly after the Christmas period via social media (Facebook and Twitter) and via personal contacts. A snowballing approach to recruitment was subsequently utilised, with participants able to suggest one further contact to approach to take part. Each interview was conducted virtually, via Microsoft Teams, and lasted approximately one hour. Given that motherhood is often hectic, we felt that the virtual interview format was appropriate to accommodate participants' schedules due to the reduced time commitments required (Harvey et al., 2024), recognising mothers' often extensive workloads. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim with participant consent.

This project obtained ethical review board approval, and ethical issues were closely followed. Pseudonyms are used to conceal participants' identities. While no specific ethical challenges were encountered, the women freely discussed personal motherhood issues with the fourth author (who is not a mother) who conducted each interview. With reflection, we feel, given her positionality as a non-mother, that this facilitated conversations (and several participants commented on their willingness to disclose information to her, which they were assured would be treated in a non-judgemental manner).

During interviews, the women were asked (among other topics) to reflect on their transition to motherhood (e.g. the type of mother they imagined they would become/subsequently became); the activities they undertook with their children; and moreover, their reflections on their recent visits to the markets. Where necessary, the women were probed further to understand who accompanied them; what time they visited; whether the trip was planned; and if they had any safety concerns when visiting, and if these had been disclosed to their partner/children. Participants were asked to explain any steps taken to manage their concerns/the perceived risks they disclosed. The women self-identified as white and middle class, which we recognise is far from ideal, and is a result of our approach to recruitment. They were all in professional employment, holding manager-level roles or higher. Participants' middle classness is important because, as prior research shows, middle-class mothers appear most susceptible to intensive motherhood norms (Perrier, 2013).

Interviews were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each member of the research team initially analysed each interview and then came together as a team to compare/contrast notes to agree common themes, moving from a within case to across case method of analysis. Analysing the data, we were struck by how our participants depicted visiting the Christmas markets as an activity that 'good' mothers performed; but tensions were simultaneously revealed as participants recognised how they purposefully exposed their children to perceived risks that the city-centre afforded. Accordingly, we draw on intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) as our enabling theory to reveal tensions in their intensive motherhood performances and their approaches to addressing paradoxical reactions to risk.

## Findings

We present our findings around two main themes. First, we show how participants assessed risk throughout the life-course. We highlight how their intentions to perform a relaxed motherhood style were usurped by a 'maternal awakening'. Exploring motherhood practices outside the home (May, 2023) allowed nuances in mothering performances (and engagement with risk) to be captured. Second, given ideas surrounding risk society (Beck, 1992), we illustrate the risk management strategies that participants employed to help manage and engage with risk, through a 'hyper-intensive' motherhood approach when in the city-centre. These strategies, however, often had unintended consequences, and increased mother and child anxiety, which diminished their enjoyment of the festive setting.

## Evolving Risk Consciousness

Across our interviews, participants reflected on their transition to motherhood and their evolving risk consciousness. They were initially critical of the all-encompassing, continually self-sacrificing nature of intensive motherhood ideology, which advocates shielding children from all unnecessary risk (Hays, 1996; Lee, 2008). The women (pre-motherhood) envisaged allowing their children freedom to develop at their own pace and envisaged performing a 'laid back' motherhood style (which was child led). Alice, for example, hoped to perform what she labelled 'free-range parenting', inadvertently referencing Skenazy's (2009) parenting approach, which affords children agency to roam and explore, often unsupervised. Over-protective mothers, who shield children from risk, were initially criticised by participants who, instead, wanted their children to learn through their own mistakes. Clara explained:

> I had hopes to be like this relaxed mum, not to wrap them up in cotton wool and watch their every move. I wanted them to be able to explore on their own, without me hovering over them all the time. I wanted to be a good mum, you know, but not one who interfered or picked them up, caught them every time they fell over, just in case. I wanted to give them that bit of freedom, to go off on their own, to be able to play out on their own as they got that bit older . . . I didn't want to be this neurotic mum, with constant eyes on them.

Pre-motherhood, the women engaged in Cairns et al.'s (2018) 'calibrated motherhood', separating themselves from the pathologised 'bad' inattentive mother and the overly controlling 'neurotic' mum in their pursuit of a socially accepted middle-ground. On becoming a mother, however, participants described what we refer to as a 'maternal awakening'. Their intentions were replaced by a highly risk-averse motherhood style more akin to a hyper-controlling motherhood approach (Cairns et al., 2018), which, they felt, necessitated shielding children from perceived risks at all costs. Cassie, for example, reported how she felt that her 'spider senses' had been triggered on becoming a mother, explaining a newfound need to be constantly 'on watch' to ensure her children's safety. Each participant recalled feeling this overwhelming sense of protection and responsibility towards their children.

The mothers explained how they regularly visited the same playgroups, soft play centres or other child-friendly 'sanitised' public venues (e.g. highly regulated spaces, like museums, with designated first-aiders nearby and emergency exits/procedures considered), with routine (and formalised risk assessments) driving their mother/child time and space. Lorraine, like most women we spoke with, commented 'I'm a Mum that is very much into routine . . . I'm a bit of a routine freak' and therefore any departure from their usual 'safe' havens, where regular routine was absent, threatened their sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). Yet even in these more managed 'safe' spaces the mothers exhibited risk aversity. They reported often feeling overwhelmed and as if adhering to the taxing, gendered norms of intensive motherhood was an impossible idealisation. Yet this was, nevertheless, something our participants pursued. These initial accounts of participants' transition to motherhood, and their evolving risk consciousness, were important to capture in our exploration of their ensuing narratives surrounding their visits to Manchester's Christmas markets.

Despite participants' self-acknowledgement of their risk-averse mothering style, they had all undertaken trips to the Christmas markets with their children, regardless of recognition that the city-centre 'always felt a bit like, this is not [a] particularly safe place' to visit with their (vulnerable, precious) children (Holly). However, the mothers were keen to provide children 'with enough opportunity to learn about life. So, it wouldn't be sitting in front of the telly. It would be getting them out there, showing them the world' (Michelle). Visiting the markets was positioned as a cultural experience, and opportunity for family togetherness, which participants recognised was often rare:

> We're usually all in different places, doing different things. It's rare for us to be together . . . in one place. So that's a nice part about going. Being together, away from screens, and giving the children the fudge, the sausages, all the sweets. It's a bit unusual. Ordinarily I wouldn't let them eat junk food, but I think that adds to the magic of the experience, its unusualness. (Annie)

As Annie highlights, visiting the markets was positioned as a 'wholesome' nostalgic family experience of togetherness, away from technology and conflicting familial obligations (which outweighed, or at least suppressed, concerns participants had surrounding visiting).

However, in wanting to offer magical, Christmas experiences to their children, participants experienced tensions through the anxiety and stress that visiting the 'risky'

city-centre afforded. While the markets were recognised as offering a picture-perfect depiction of yuletide (with festooned lighting and cinnamon scent), participants, paradoxically, regarded their experience as something that they 'dread' and needed to 'endure'. Despite this, it was our participants, and not their children directly, who drove their Christmas market trips. Visiting was a way participants marked the beginning of the festive season, and displayed 'good' motherhood to others, while offering their children a (supposedly) joyous and magical time. Clara explained:

> It means Christmas is around the corner. The kids seem to enjoy it, the twinkly lights, seeing the Father Christmas inflatable, the decorations. Christmas is for children, isn't it? And that's why I'm doing this, pushing myself to take them, and then I can say 'of course we've been to the markets this year, haven't you?'. It's usually me that dreads going, thinking about what could go on when we're there . . . I usually just try and get in and out as fast as possible, get home and breathe a sigh of relief that we've made it out, unscathed.

Clara highlights the expectations of 'good' motherhood display ('of course we've been to the markets'), which is exacerbated during Christmas time when mother work is heightened (Vachhani and Pullen, 2011). An element of peer pressure is obvious within our dataset, with participants reportedly feeling 'obliged' to visit the Christmas markets and 'on show' when doing so, despite their safety concerns. Through internalising the need to display 'good' motherhood to others, participants appeared to monitor themselves against the norms of intensive motherhood, marking comparison with other, less-able or committed mothers who depart from such normative standards – mothers that Harman and Cappellini (2015) recognise are often positioned as 'troublesome'. Like other participants, Clara perpetuates the sense that visiting the markets with children is something that all 'good' mothers should do, despite private acknowledgement that visiting is stressful and anxiety-inducing. Idyllic family display at the markets was, however, clouded with much personal dread and affective labour, which the women performed for their child's enjoyment and to maintain their standing as 'good' mothers (synonymous with intensive motherhood ideology).

Participants undertook extensive risk assessments of the market before visiting, informed by their perceptions that the city-centre was a dangerous place to visit. Several apparent dangers were identified (revolving around the malevolent 'other'), which fuelled their anxiety. Annie reflected:

> You've got to plan what to do *if*. How to get out in an emergency, where the exits are. You've got to think ahead, think of the unthinkable. Get your head in a really unpleasant place, just in case. Don't get me wrong, this isn't usual behaviour. This isn't something I need to do in everyday life. There's something different about the city-centre . . . It's not pleasant. It brings lots of stress and effort. You're always second-guessing people. But you think of the children, and their enjoyment, and push on.

As widely acknowledged in existing literature, mothers are poor risk managers (Faircloth, 2014), and often focus on imaginable (rather than probable) outcomes. However, our participants rendered the city-centre setting (a venue not usually frequented with their children or deemed by participants as child-friendly) as posing an array of (potential) risks to their child, which they needed to manage.

## Working with Risk

Potential risks were identified by our participants when visiting the markets (e.g. terrorism, drunkenness, sexual predators), which they felt compelled to act against. Although ameliorating risk was acknowledged to be the responsibility of parents in general, participants recognised the 'hyper vigilant' (Annie) stance of mothers, who were regarded as most attuned to child safety needs. Cassie, for example, commented that while her husband would consume alcoholic Glühwein during their family markets visits, she would not: 'from that security point of view, I think it's so important that you've got 100% awareness of what is going on'.

Manchester's troubled past, and the recent terrorist attack at another nearby leisure space (the Manchester Arena), was a particular cause for concern among participants. Janet, for example, depicted the city-centre as being a 'prime hotspot' for terrorism, with Holly highlighting Christmas time in the city-centre as: 'a bloody headline waiting to happen . . . if you want to kill a lot of people, this is the time to do it'. Terrorist acts were top-of-mind among our sample, as Michelle explained: 'I always have it at the back of my mind, the worst-case scenario of what could happen, and I purely think that's because of different events that have occurred previously.'

Whereas an actual terrorist attack was improbable, reflective of parents being unable to read and manage risk effectively without expert help (Faircloth, 2014; Lee, 2008), terrorism was still rendered *imaginable* among our sample. As such, they felt that risk (in all its guises) needed extensive consideration as their more usual, quotidian routines of suburbia (and child-centric/friendly spaces) were held in stark contrast with their annual visit to the (unsafe/disorganised) 'mean city'. The inner-city environ (and its patrons) was rendered unsafe, risky and dangerous by all participants. Annie's earlier comment, for example, alludes to using the market space with different 'others' ('you're always second-guessing people'), which afforded its own concerns. Whereas our (middle-class) participants more usually socialised with like-minded others at organised, child-focused activities (e.g. ballet classes; baby signing groups; National Trust events), the Christmas markets attracted a greater diversity of 'different' others (e.g. the young, non-parents, the intoxicated).

To illustrate, Jennifer discussed the 'bad people' who she felt frequented the markets (and specifically referred to large groups of young male drinkers, whom she regarded as being potentially deviant, given their under-age consumption of alcohol). Other participants directed mother blame (Blum, 2007; Kerrane et al., 2021) to women who visited with their children, but were loud, drunk and used vulgar language, reflective of work on class-based othering (Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2008). Others' perceived lack of care risked, participants explained, harming their child(ren) and dampening their enjoyment of the festive setting through, for example, spilling hot alcoholic drinks on them or exposure to inappropriate behaviours.

While crowds of others enhanced the market's festive atmosphere, too many people stifled movement between stalls; blocked emergency exits; and potentially cloaked unwanted behaviours (e.g. theft, sexual assaults), with assailants easily hidden among revellers. The most deviant 'other' was inevitably described as 'the bad man', a sexual deviant who posed utmost risk to children. Such risks detracted from our participants'

enjoyment of the Christmas markets (hence their dread of attending); yet despite their concerns, they visited annually for their children's enjoyment/to help with their 'good' motherhood display.

Despite encountering the perceived threatening 'other' on their visits (participants commented on the city-centre's unusual concentration of drunks, drug users and the homeless), they were keen to use this setting to role-model altruistic behaviours and to educate their children about their middle-class privilege. Jodie for example, recalled an interaction with one such 'other' – a rough sleeper – who she felt got 'too close' to her children as she was offering him money for food:

> It's not like we're [an] anti-homeless family, we want to raise money. It's just that when they're coming up to you with their teeth missing and they've not washed and they're trying to touch your child. I was like 'please go away' . . . You don't know how they're going to behave . . . they're on that many substances.

Jodie's quote highlights the differences between our (middle-class) participants and the less fortunate encountered in the city-centre. Participants inevitably made distinction between themselves and the 'other' (e.g. clean/unclean; safe/dangerous; intoxicated/sober). While participants used such exposure to educate children about their privilege and to impart 'good' values (e.g. offering financial assistance to those in need), reflecting Harrington's (2015) work, this engagement with risk often backfired (e.g. Emily described her children's subsequent fear of the homeless, following a similar altercation as Jodie).

To counter the variety of risks that were perceived by our informants, they employed a range of risk management strategies. Apart from Debbie and Janet (who had the youngest children among our sample, 9- and 10-month-old daughters, respectively), other participants, regardless of the age of their children, explicitly discussed risks with them before visiting, to justify their hyper-vigilant risk consciousness. Karen, for example, talked about 'drilling it into' her children (aged 7–10 years) that the city-centre was dangerous, and she discussed emergency plans with them (e.g. agreed meeting points, should they become separated):

> I always try and pre read the boys a little bit, to say, like, you know, it's going to be busy where we are. So, I need you to listen. I need you to stay with me. Nobody wanders off.

Clara, rather than her husband, similarly spent time before her family's visit explaining the possible risks that her children (aged 8–11 years) *could* encounter ('they know to run, hide, to keep quiet, but to ring me if it's safe'). Other women discussed visiting the markets with family and friends to off-set the different 'otherness' they encountered ('I don't think I've ever been when it's just been me and the boys . . . I think I went with my brother-in-law and his family, so there was like a, you know, a decent group', Karen). Participants carefully timed visits to avoid peak or after-work periods ('If you go later then they're absolutely rammed . . . I think they've just got busier and busier', Alice); younger children were secured in pushchairs ('we didn't get Josh out at any point. We didn't feel like it was a safe enough environment', Michelle, mother of a two-year-old

boy); reins were used to stop toddlers getting lost/snatched ('I explain if you can't see me, I can't see you . . . the bad man will get you', Jodie, mother of a four-year-old boy); and children were taught what to do if they went missing ('I tell them to find a woman, stay put with her until I get there, that they know I'll come looking and find them'). Often, a gendered reading of risk was obvious, with 'the bad man' (the sexual deviant) highlighted to educate children on his malicious intent and other 'stranger danger'; whereas other women, and mothers in particular, were identified as 'safe' actors that children could approach for help, if needed.

Paradoxically, the festive, joyous experience of the Christmas markets appeared tarnished by the mothers' assessment – and engagement – with risk management strategies that inadvertently hampered children's experiences (e.g. reins stifled exploration; pushchairs restricted views; discussion of terrorism/deviants '*put* the children on edge'): 'it probably takes the edge off things a little, but they need to know the risk of being snatched and interfered with, so they're on guard, should any weirdo come up to them, try to take them' (Clara).

As 'good' mothers, the women attempted (as best they could) to shield their children from their personal anxieties. The deployment of risk management strategies helped respond to their risk consciousness, while simultaneously alleviating their personal anxieties. However, in being risk-averse (and employing such risk management strategies), they inevitably heightened children's fears: 'I do see it in their eyes a little. In explaining what might happen, something bad, their fear levels go up, and they're on edge, but this type of situation warrants it, I think' (Annie). Janet explained how she 'didn't want to, like, push my anxieties' on to her daughter. For mothers like Janet, it was important, despite their concerns surrounding risk, to offer the festive market experience to children:

> I'm thinking really carefully about when we go at the end of this year. I might just have to try and might be a bit more rational about it, because I don't want her to grow up with the same fear, to like give her opportunities.

Whereas Janet's quote introduces the sense that her concerns may be unfounded/irrational, a view shared among a minority of our participants, the high-stakes consequences of children being 'snatched' or 'interfered with' fuelled their extreme behaviours/hyperintensive motherhood performance.

## Discussion

Our article addresses an important gap in sociological literature by exploring family performances, and motherhood in particular, beyond the setting of the home (May, 2023). We provide insight into how our sample of middle-class women seek to engage and manage perceived risks that their children were exposed to during visits to Manchester's Christmas markets. Rather than seeking to remove children from all unnecessary risk, as advocated by intensive motherhood ideology (Hays, 1996), informants, instead, worked with risk given its omnipotence in risk society (Beck, 1992). Their risk consciousness (Lee, 2014) garnered (classed, racial) concerns surrounding the malevolent other (e.g.

the intoxicated, the paedophile, the terrorist) who potentially threatened the safety of their vulnerable and innocent child (Hays, 1996). While it could be argued that our participants were displaying a confident, relaxed approach to motherhood in taking their children to the 'dangerous' city-centre, this was certainly not the case (with each participant describing the considerable anxiety and stress that their visit afforded).

We show how our participants worked *with* risk through employing a range of risk management strategies during their market visits (which simultaneously helped alleviate participants' personal anxieties surrounding the 'risky' city-centre setting). We illustrate tensions, however, in how such strategies played out. While the deployment of risk management strategies (e.g. visiting with others, during daylight, using pushchairs and reins, and schooling children on 'what to do if' scenarios) align with 'good', responsible intensive motherhood ideals, they yield negative affordances (e.g. making children anxious, stifling child agency and diminishing their enjoyment of the festive setting) through participants' practice of what we label '*hyper-intensified*' motherhood.

Whereas (in the context of maternal foodwork) mothers are found to practise 'calibrated motherhood' (Cairns et al., 2018), carefully finding middle-ground by separating themselves from the pathologised opposing figures of the inattentive and overly protective mother, our participants felt compelled to practise an extreme form of motherhood, albeit temporarily, informed by their reading of the unique, risk-laden city-centre environ. While such extreme motherly performances are usually stigmatised or labelled neurotic (Cairns et al., 2018), our ordinary, middle-class mothers rendered their hyper-intensive motherhood approach as necessary given the imagined high-stakes consequences at play in this less familiar environment (e.g. their child being snatched by a sexual deviant; their child becoming embroiled in a terrorist attack). We therefore define '*hyper-intensive*' motherhood as a temporary motherhood performance that is situation specific, involving heightened risk consciousness and mitigation, as informed by particular contexts, where unfolding perceptions of risks were rendered possible (however improbable). The high-stakes consequences of not engaging with risk in such settings informed this temporal (but perceived as necessary) shift in motherhood performances.

We suggest, therefore, that in less familiar settings (e.g. shopping centres, holiday destinations), in adult-centric spaces, replete with unfamiliar 'others', and in high-stakes contexts, mothers may perform a temporarily *different* motherhood approach vis-a-vis that enacted in their routine, everyday, quotidian lives. With male partners largely absent from their accounts, we show how participants assumed personal responsibility for much emotional work (e.g. they supressed their anxieties, where feasible, and pushed themselves to take their children into this 'risky' setting) and performed risk management practices (e.g. undertaking a personal reading of risk and its assessment, which often involved discussions with their children and, in turn, managing their concerns) to simultaneously ensure child safety through this festive family experience. Like Harman and Cappellini (2015: 778), we demonstrate the intensification of motherhood and its display outside the home, noting how articulations of 'good' motherhood permeate the private/public boundary, recognising the surveillance and judgement of those who fail to follow the prevailing social norms of 'good' mothering (Harman and Cappellini, 2015; Skeggs, 2005). Whereas the calibrating mothers in Cairns et al.'s

(2018) maternal foodwork study often offered unhealthy treats/snacks to their children, neutralised through a 'what's the harm?' mentality, our participants considered any deviation from their overly protective ('hyper-intensive') motherhood performance in this context as equally pathologised (as the imaginable consequences of their child being snatched, for example, however improbable, were intolerable). Accordingly, we make several contributions to the intensive motherhood literature.

First, we critique the sense that 'good' intensive mothers can remove children entirely from all unnecessary risk. From our participants' perspective, risk was not something that could be removed completely, bound in understandings of risk society (Beck, 1992), but was positioned as something that needed to be managed, mirroring Lupton's (1999) work. To afford children memorable experiences, our participants felt compelled to embrace risk and take steps to manage it. Second, hyper-intensive motherhood broadens our existing understanding of intensive motherhood practice by being both child- *and* mother-centric in focus. Risk management strategies were, for example, employed to protect the child, but they were also utilised to attend to mothers' concerns and personal anxieties. Third, we suggest that hyper-intensive motherhood, as another variant of intensive motherhood, is context and situation specific. Exploring intensive motherhood practices beyond the home, what May (2023: 61) refers to as the 'blind spot of family', allows nuances in motherhood performances to unfold, and we would encourage further research in this area.

We argue that, in wider motherhood practices, it stands to reason that mothers may perform different versions of risk-averse intensive motherhood at different times (e.g. during global pandemics)/in different spaces. For example, from a risk perspective, the home has already likely undergone a form of risk assessment (with toxic substances and medicines out of reach, the hard corners of fireplaces cushioned and stairgates installed to mitigate falls), but mothers have less control over outside, public spaces, where they might feel compelled to be more attuned to risk (beyond the comfort and sanctity of the home). Similarly, their approach to risk and intensive motherhood likely fluctuates across the life-course (e.g. as their transition to motherhood matures and their confidence grows) and may even vary in relation to the unique needs of individual children (where, for example, different approaches to risk management may be rendered necessary for different children).

We therefore question the continuous uniformity implied by intensive motherhood practices in all settings, and for all children; and call for further research that explores potential differences in mothering practices. Our findings illustrate internal critiques of intensive motherhood that participants shared with the research team but appeared unwilling to disclose to other mothers. Our research, therefore, contributes to the idealisation of intensive motherhood norms, which many mothers (through fear of public deviation from 'good' motherhood) perpetuate, but do not challenge. Finally, we contribute to the gendered nature of intensive parenting, highlighting how (in the context of risk), mothers in our study assumed personal responsibility for keeping their children safe in this unusual locale, despite risk often being codified as masculine. In our participants' accounts, although male partners were present during Christmas market visits, they were largely absent in its planning or risk consciousness, which is ripe for further exploration.

We recognise the classed/racial privilege of our participants, which provides a unique window into perceptions of risk from a particular perspective (i.e. the very nature of the 'other' from a white/middle-class standpoint is likely to be different from other perspectives). Accordingly, we see merit in further exploration of how mothers, from varied (classed, racialised) backgrounds approach and manage risk from diverse perspectives. Exploring whether they, too, perform such hyper-intensive motherhood practices in specific settings/circumstances, or whether Lareau's (2002) natural growth approach continues to endure, would be worthy of re-examination given perceptions of heightened risk society.

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## Ethics statement

The research referred to in this article gained ethical approval from the Business and Law Ethics and Governance Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University: EthOS Reference Number: 15004.

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