

Escaping the Dollhouse: Maternal Identity from *A Doll's House* to Digital Motherhood

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving expectations of motherhood by drawing parallels between *A Doll's House* and contemporary digital parenting culture. Through a feminist literary and sociological lens, the research explores how maternal identity remains constrained by societal, economic, and digital forces, despite historical advancements in gender equality. A qualitative comparative analysis is employed, integrating feminist literary criticism, sociological research, and digital media studies. The study critically examines Henrik Ibsen's portrayal of maternal expectations and contrasts it with modern "momfluencer" culture, where maternal labor is performed, monetized, and scrutinized in digital spaces. Findings reveal that while the mediums of maternal performance have shifted—from Victorian domestic ideals to social media branding—the fundamental expectations of self-sacrificial motherhood persist. Economic dependence, emotional labor, and gendered double standards continue to shape maternal experiences, reinforcing unrealistic standards of perfection. However, emerging forms of feminist maternal activism and digital resistance offer pathways for redefining motherhood beyond traditional constraints. Ultimately, this study argues that maternal autonomy remains an ongoing struggle, as societal pressures evolve rather than disappear. By critically engaging with historical and modern representations of motherhood, the research underscores the need for continued examination and resistance against restrictive maternal ideals.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of motherhood has long been a central construct in shaping societal expectations, defining how women should behave, think, and prioritize their lives. Traditionally, motherhood has been associated with sacrifice, selflessness, and unwavering devotion to the family unit, ideals deeply ingrained in literature and cultural narratives. In Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), Nora Helmer epitomizes these expectations, performing the role of a loving, playful mother while simultaneously concealing personal struggles that threaten her autonomy. Written during the Victorian era, *A Doll's House* reflects a time when rigid gender norms positioned women as moral guardians of the home, while men retained authority over finances and decision-making (Chodorow, 1999). The play exposes how these ideals constrained women's independence, forcing them into roles of domestic perfection and subordination. The widespread Victorian ideal of the "Angel in the House," as coined by Coventry Patmore, reinforced the notion that a woman's highest virtue was found in self-effacing devotion to husband and children (Patmore, 1854). This restrictive ideal echoes throughout both historical and modern depictions of motherhood.

Despite the passage of time and significant advancements in gender equality, this paper argues that maternal autonomy remains fundamentally constrained. Societal structures have shifted—

from the Victorian home to the digital stage—but the essential expectation of self-sacrificing motherhood persists. In the 21st century, social media has amplified the scrutiny placed on mothers, creating new forms of judgment and performative pressure. Mothers are no longer just caregivers; they are also expected to curate and present an idealized version of motherhood to an online audience (Abidin, 2016). The rise of “momfluencer” culture—where motherhood is commodified and monetized—demonstrates a modern extension of the societal policing of mothers seen in *A Doll’s House* (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Digital surveillance of motherhood, through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, has further intensified public scrutiny, compelling mothers to construct their identities in ways that meet societal and corporate expectations (Gill, 2007).

The modern ideal of motherhood also aligns with feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) argument that women’s identities have historically been defined in relation to men. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir discusses how women are often confined to roles that restrict their autonomy, much like Nora’s existence within her “dollhouse.” The digital age has further complicated this dynamic, offering mothers both agency and surveillance. Some women have reclaimed their maternal narratives through online communities, but others feel burdened by the demand to present a polished, aspirational version of their family lives (Hays, 1996). The concept of “intensive mothering,” which insists that mothers be wholly dedicated to their children’s well-being at all costs, closely mirrors the constraints placed on Nora in her marriage and motherhood (Faircloth, 2014). The demand for constant emotional labor, self-sacrifice, and societal validation remains a defining feature of maternal identity across different historical periods. Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity further deepens this discussion, illustrating how motherhood itself is a socially constructed and continuously performed identity, shaped by external expectations rather than innate maternal instincts.

Furthermore, the economic dimensions of motherhood add another layer of complexity. Nora’s struggle with financial dependence reflects broader gendered economic inequalities that persist today. In the 19th century, women were often legally and financially bound to their husbands, lacking autonomy over property and income. This remains evident in modern motherhood, where the “motherhood penalty” results in lower wages, stalled career growth, and unequal labor expectations (Budig & England, 2001). For many women, the economic realities of caregiving in the digital age mean turning to social media monetization and influencer culture to generate income, yet these opportunities often reinforce gendered labor expectations rather than dismantle them (Duffy, 2017). Thus, both Victorian and contemporary motherhood are bound by financial constraints that limit women’s independence.

This paper explores the enduring burden of performative motherhood, drawing connections between *A Doll’s House* and contemporary parenting culture. It examines how financial strain, emotional labor, and social scrutiny continue to shape maternal experiences, despite the illusion of progress. By integrating feminist literary theory, sociological research, and digital media studies, this study assesses whether modern motherhood is merely a new iteration of the restrictive ‘dollhouse’ Nora sought to escape. Ultimately, it argues that although the structures surrounding motherhood have evolved, the underlying societal forces—economic, cultural, and technological—continue to regulate maternal identity and limit genuine maternal autonomy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving expectations of motherhood have been extensively explored in feminist literary criticism, sociological research, and digital media studies. This review examines the ways in which maternal identity has been constructed, performed, and scrutinized across historical and contemporary contexts. By analyzing key theoretical frameworks and scholarly contributions, this section situates the present study within existing academic discourse, highlighting the persistence of gendered expectations in motherhood, the rise of performative maternal labor,

and the intersection of economic constraints and digital culture in shaping contemporary maternal experiences.

2.1.Feminist Literary Perspectives on Motherhood

Feminist literary theory has long interrogated the constraints imposed on women, particularly in relation to domesticity and maternal roles. Simone de Beauvoir's (*The Second Sex*, 1949) foundational analysis argues that women's identities have historically been defined in relation to men, limiting their autonomy and self-determination. This notion is reflected in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), where Nora Helmer's struggle exemplifies the societal expectation that women prioritize their roles as wives and mothers over their individual aspirations. Similarly, Adrienne Rich (1976) distinguishes between motherhood as an institution—structured by patriarchal control—and the personal, lived experience of mothering. This distinction is critical in understanding how maternal expectations persist despite social and economic advancements.

Furthermore, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides an essential lens for analyzing motherhood as a constructed and regulated performance rather than an inherent trait. Butler posits that gender identities are continually reinforced through repeated social actions, a concept that aligns with both Victorian and contemporary portrayals of maternal identity. In *A Doll's House*, Nora's performance of the ideal mother and wife conforms to societal norms, much like modern mothers who curate their maternal image for digital audiences. This performativity reinforces rigid gender roles, demonstrating how maternal expectations are socially imposed rather than biologically determined.

2.2.Sociological Perspectives on Maternal Expectations

Sociological scholarship has extensively examined how maternal identity is shaped by cultural and economic structures. Sharon Hays (1996) introduces the concept of "intensive mothering," which describes the modern expectation that mothers be wholly dedicated to their children, providing boundless emotional and financial resources. This ideology aligns with the Victorian ideal of the "Angel in the House" (Patmore, 1854), reinforcing the notion that a woman's virtue is measured by her self-sacrifice.

Douglas and Michaels (2004) further critique the modern construction of motherhood in *The Mommy Myth*, arguing that media representations have idealized maternal devotion to an unrealistic degree, creating unattainable standards. This aligns with Nancy Chodorow's (1999) psychoanalytic perspective, which suggests that maternal expectations are culturally reproduced, limiting women's agency across generations. Both historical and contemporary frameworks reveal that maternal identity remains deeply regulated by societal norms, with mothers continuously subject to scrutiny and judgment.

2.3.The Rise of Performative Motherhood in Digital Culture

In the digital era, social media has intensified the performance of motherhood, transforming maternal labor into a public, commodified spectacle. Crystal Abidin (2016) explores the phenomenon of "momfluencers," where mothers curate and monetize their parenting experiences through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This digital economy places additional pressures on mothers, as their labor is no longer confined to the domestic sphere but is instead subject to algorithmic visibility and public consumption.

Alice Marwick's (2013) research on social media visibility highlights how digital platforms create an environment of self-surveillance, where mothers must continuously maintain an idealized maternal image to attract engagement and sponsorship opportunities. This aligns with Rosalind Gill's (2007) critique of postfeminist media culture, which paradoxically offers women visibility while reinforcing traditional gender norms. The expectation to seamlessly

integrate professional success with maternal perfection reflects the double bind faced by modern mothers, mirroring the struggles depicted in *A Doll's House*.

2.4. Economic Constraints and the Commodification of Motherhood

Economic factors play a significant role in shaping maternal experiences, both historically and in the present day. In *A Doll's House*, Nora's financial dependence on her husband underscores the broader economic limitations placed on women in the 19th century. This economic vulnerability persists in contemporary motherhood, where the "motherhood penalty" (Budig & England, 2001) results in wage disparities, stalled career progression, and increased financial burdens for working mothers.

Nancy Fraser's (2013) social reproduction theory further contextualizes the economic dimensions of motherhood, illustrating how women's unpaid labor in the domestic sphere remains essential to capitalist economies. Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) extends this analysis to digital labor, arguing that while social media offers mothers financial opportunities, it also reinforces gendered labor expectations, compelling women to engage in self-branding and content creation under precarious conditions.

Moreover, the economic disparity between different groups of mothers underscores the importance of an intersectional analysis. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality highlights how race, class, and socioeconomic status influence maternal experiences. While affluent momfluencers may profit from the digital economy, working-class mothers and mothers of color face additional systemic barriers that limit their financial autonomy and social mobility. The commercialized nature of digital motherhood further exacerbates these inequalities, reinforcing a narrow, privileged representation of idealized maternal identity.

2.5. The Psychological Toll of Maternal Expectations

The pressure to adhere to intensive mothering ideals and perform maternal perfection has significant psychological consequences. Research on maternal mental health indicates that the constant surveillance and judgment faced by mothers contribute to increased anxiety, depression, and burnout (Steiner-Adair, 2013). The expectation that mothers must balance professional success, caregiving responsibilities, and digital self-presentation leads to heightened self-doubt and emotional exhaustion (Faircloth, 2014).

The psychological burden of motherhood is further compounded by societal double standards. Fathers who engage in minimal caregiving tasks are often praised for their involvement, whereas mothers face criticism for any perceived deviation from maternal perfection (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). This imbalance mirrors the gender dynamics in *A Doll's House*, where Torvald enjoys professional and social privileges while Nora bears the full weight of maternal expectations.

2.6. Resistance and Redefining Motherhood

Despite these challenges, digital platforms have also facilitated new forms of resistance against restrictive maternal ideals. Online communities have emerged as spaces for feminist maternal activism, where mothers challenge the unrealistic expectations imposed upon them and advocate for more equitable parenting roles (Gill, 2007). Movements such as #MomLifeUnfiltered and conscious parenting initiatives promote alternative narratives that reject the demand for maternal self-sacrifice in favor of balanced, sustainable caregiving models (Faircloth, 2014).

The comparison between *A Doll's House* and contemporary motherhood reveals that while societal structures have evolved, the pressures placed on mothers remain deeply entrenched. Whether in the Victorian era or the digital age, maternal identity continues to be shaped by

economic constraints, cultural expectations, and performative labor. However, the growing visibility of feminist discourse and digital activism suggests that the rigid constructs of motherhood are increasingly being challenged. While complete maternal autonomy remains an ongoing struggle, the emergence of alternative parenting models and collective resistance indicates a shift toward redefining motherhood on more equitable terms.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis, integrating literary criticism, sociological research, media studies, and economic analysis to explore how motherhood is constructed and performed across different historical and cultural contexts. By examining Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as a primary literary source, the study provides a historical framework for understanding modern issues in performative parenting, gender roles, and maternal expectations.

3.1. Literary Analysis

The literary analysis is grounded in feminist literary theory, particularly drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) *The Second Sex*, which examines the social construction of womanhood and the restrictive roles imposed on women. Additionally, Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity informs the discussion on how maternal identity is not an innate trait but a performed role, shaped by societal pressures and reinforced through cultural narratives. Adrienne Rich's (1976) concept of motherhood as both an institution and an experience further supports this analysis, distinguishing between the oppressive structures that dictate maternal behavior and the personal, lived realities of mothering.

A close reading methodology is employed to analyze *A Doll's House*, focusing on character interactions, thematic development, and symbolic representations of motherhood. Special attention is given to Nora Helmer's dialogue, behaviors, and shifting identity, revealing how she navigates social expectations, autonomy, and maternal responsibilities. The textual analysis extends to secondary scholarly sources that explore gender roles in literature, particularly in relation to Victorian motherhood ideals and their contemporary reflections. Additionally, the study examines parallels between Nora's resistance to maternal expectations and modern feminist critiques of intensive mothering, reinforcing the idea that maternal agency remains a contested space across historical periods.

3.2. Sociological and Digital Media Analysis

To bridge the gap between historical and modern maternal expectations, the study incorporates sociological research on gendered parenting norms, emotional labor, and the commodification of motherhood in digital spaces. Studies on "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996) provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how contemporary mothers are expected to be wholly devoted to their children, often at great personal cost. Sharon Hays' concept of "intensive mothering" is particularly relevant in analyzing how modern mothers experience relentless expectations to balance caregiving, professional success, and self-presentation in digital spaces. Furthermore, Abidin's (2016) work on digital motherhood sheds light on how social media amplifies maternal performance, enforcing unrealistic standards of parenting perfection.

The study integrates case studies of momfluencers, media representations of idealized motherhood, and research on maternal guilt and self-surveillance in digital culture. By examining Instagram influencers, YouTube parenting bloggers, and TikTok motherhood trends, the research reveals how motherhood has become a public spectacle and an economic commodity, mirroring the societal expectations placed on Nora in *A Doll's House*. Moreover, Alice Marwick's (2013) concept of social media visibility informs the discussion on how digital platforms create a space where mothers must constantly perform an aspirational version of parenting to maintain audience engagement and financial security.

3.3. Economic Analysis of Motherhood

In addition to literary and sociological perspectives, the study incorporates an economic analysis of how motherhood is influenced by gendered labor expectations. Nora Helmer's financial dependence on her husband reflects broader historical trends of economic inequality in marriage and motherhood. The study examines the modern "motherhood penalty," which results in lower wages, stalled career growth, and increased caregiving burdens for women (Budig & England, 2001). Nancy Fraser's (2013) work on social reproduction theory further contextualizes this economic analysis, illustrating how women's unpaid and undervalued labor in the domestic sphere continues to underpin capitalist economies.

Furthermore, the study explores how digital monetization of motherhood through social media sponsorships and branding partnerships has reshaped maternal labor into both an empowering and exploitative enterprise (Duffy, 2017). While momfluencers may find financial independence through online platforms, this economic shift reinforces the commodification of maternal identity, positioning motherhood as a product for corporate sponsorship and public consumption. This study also considers how platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) influences maternal self-branding, compelling mothers to continually create marketable, profitable content in exchange for digital visibility and financial gain.

3.4. Intersectionality and Motherhood

This study also incorporates an intersectional feminist perspective, recognizing that not all mothers experience performative motherhood in the same way. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality is used to analyze how race, class, and socioeconomic background affect maternal expectations and access to resources. The study contrasts the experiences of affluent momfluencers, who often present an idealized version of motherhood, with working-class mothers, whose labor is frequently devalued in both digital and real-world economies. This approach ensures that the study does not present motherhood as a monolithic experience but rather acknowledges its multiple and shifting dimensions across different social categories.

3.5. Interdisciplinary Approach

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how motherhood is idealized, scrutinized, and commodified across different historical periods. The comparative analysis of *A Doll's House* and contemporary parenting culture demonstrates how maternal pressures have evolved yet remained deeply ingrained in cultural narratives. Through literary criticism, sociological research, media studies, economic analysis, and intersectional feminist theory, this methodology uncovers both explicit and implicit mechanisms that continue to shape and constrain women's lives, reinforcing the persistent myth of the "perfect mother."

Furthermore, this interdisciplinary approach allows for an exploration of the psychological toll of performative motherhood, drawing from psychological studies on maternal anxiety, depression, and identity crises. The study integrates research on mental health effects of social media engagement, particularly how constant public scrutiny influences maternal well-being (Steiner-Adair, 2013). By including mental health perspectives, this research expands beyond cultural and economic critique to address the deeply personal costs of contemporary motherhood.

Ultimately, this study's methodology not only identifies structural constraints but also explores potential avenues for maternal resistance and agency, questioning whether modern mothers can redefine their roles beyond the expectations imposed by both history and digital culture.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Performative Motherhood: The Role of Image and Illusion

Nora Helmer's interactions with her children in *A Doll's House* are carefully curated to align with societal expectations of motherhood. She engages in lighthearted games and affectionate gestures, yet she ultimately remains emotionally distant, leaving much of the caregiving to Anne-Marie, the nursemaid. This reflects a fundamental contradiction in performative motherhood—while the outward presentation appears warm and engaged, the mother herself may feel disconnected or burdened (Chodorow, 1999). Nora's performance of motherhood highlights the rigid expectations imposed upon women during the Victorian era, where a mother's role was not necessarily defined by her emotional connection to her children but rather by how well she conformed to societal ideals of maternal devotion.

Similarly, modern mothers experience the pressure to perform an idealized version of motherhood online. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok have become spaces where motherhood is not only documented but also curated and commodified, often emphasizing aesthetics over reality (Abidin, 2016). The rise of “momfluencers” reinforces unattainable standards, pressuring women to appear both effortlessly nurturing and professionally successful, despite the challenges they face. These idealized portrayals reflect what sociologists term the “intensive mothering” paradigm, in which mothers are expected to dedicate unlimited time, energy, and resources to their children's well-being, often at the expense of their own needs (Hays, 1996).

Moreover, the pressure to maintain a perfected maternal image is exacerbated by the economic incentives tied to social media visibility. Many momfluencers monetize their platforms through sponsorships and brand partnerships, creating a financial motivation to present an aspirational version of motherhood (Duffy, 2017). As a result, the divide between authentic maternal experiences and performative motherhood grows wider, as mothers may feel compelled to construct a highly edited, commercially viable version of their parenting journey. This parallels Nora's struggle in *A Doll's House*, as she performs the role of the ideal wife and mother despite feeling deeply trapped and dissatisfied within her domestic role (Ibsen, 1879). Both historical and contemporary examples illustrate that the expectation for mothers to prioritize image over authenticity persists across generations, even as the medium of performance has shifted from the domestic sphere to the digital stage.

Beyond individual experiences, performative motherhood also reflects broader societal mechanisms of control. In both *A Doll's House* and modern digital culture, women's maternal identities are often policed and judged by external audiences—whether it be Victorian society or the algorithmic landscape of social media. Research on social media surveillance has shown that mothers are frequently criticized and scrutinized for their parenting choices online, reinforcing the idea that maternal performance is always subject to public evaluation (Marwick, 2013). This suggests that while platforms offer mothers new ways to engage with communities and share experiences, they also create a digital extension of patriarchal expectations, where failure to meet the idealized standard of motherhood results in social backlash.

Ultimately, both Nora's experience in *A Doll's House* and the contemporary momfluencer phenomenon illustrate the persistent demand for mothers to construct and maintain a socially acceptable maternal identity. Whether shaped by Victorian moral values or digital consumer culture, performative motherhood remains a space where authentic self-expression is often secondary to the societal gaze, reinforcing the enduring constraints placed on maternal identity across time and media.

4.2. Financial Strain and the Hidden Costs of Motherhood

Beyond emotional labor, financial constraints play a significant role in both historical and contemporary maternal experiences. In *A Doll's House*, Nora's secret loan, taken to support her family and preserve her husband's pride, exemplifies the unseen economic burden mothers

frequently bear. Her financial autonomy is entirely restricted, and her desperate attempts to resolve her debts without Torvald's knowledge highlight the gendered economic disparities of the time (Hays, 1996). This lack of financial independence serves as a central conflict in the play, demonstrating how maternal sacrifice is often economic as well as emotional.

In the modern era, financial strain remains a defining challenge for mothers. Women still perform the majority of unpaid domestic labor, often in addition to wage-earning responsibilities. The gender pay gap, the high cost of childcare, and expectations of self-sacrifice continue to place economic stress on mothers (Faircloth, 2014). Moreover, the commercialization of motherhood—through consumer goods, social media monetization, and brand partnerships—has transformed maternal identity into a marketplace commodity, further complicating the financial aspects of mothering. Research on digital labor and influencer economies reveals that while social media can offer mothers financial independence through brand deals and sponsorships, it simultaneously creates new forms of labor exploitation, where visibility is contingent upon adherence to idealized maternal performance (Duffy, 2017).

Additionally, economic instability disproportionately affects mothers from lower-income and marginalized backgrounds, reinforcing systemic inequalities in maternal labor. While affluent mothers may have access to resources that alleviate financial strain, working-class mothers often experience compounded economic hardships due to structural inequalities and lack of institutional support (Budig & England, 2001). This reflects the same socioeconomic disparities depicted in *A Doll's House*, where Nora's economic vulnerability stems from her dependence on a patriarchal system that denies her financial autonomy.

The financialization of motherhood in the digital age introduces new dilemmas. Social media enables mothers to generate income through influencer marketing, brand sponsorships, and content creation, but this form of labor is often precarious, demanding, and deeply tied to fluctuating algorithmic systems (Abidin, 2016). The expectation that mothers must both financially provide and maintain traditional caregiving roles mirrors the double burden of labor historically placed on women. Just as Nora attempts to resolve her financial struggles in secrecy, modern mothers navigate financial pressures within an evolving yet still restrictive economic structure that dictates their autonomy and labor expectations.

Ultimately, the economic burden of motherhood—both historically and today—illustrates that financial dependence and societal expectations continue to shape maternal experiences. While platforms offer new opportunities for financial independence, they also reinforce new forms of maternal labor exploitation, echoing the financial entrapment Nora faced in *A Doll's House*. This underscores the hidden costs of motherhood, both in terms of economic vulnerability and the commodification of maternal identity in the digital era.

4.3. The Psychological Burden of Motherhood: Guilt, Anxiety, and Emotional Labor

Beyond the financial pressures and public scrutiny that mothers face, the emotional labor of motherhood remains a significant burden, both in the 19th century and today. Nora Helmer's experience in *A Doll's House* reflects this emotional toll, as she constantly suppresses her own desires and anxieties to maintain harmony within her family. She performs an idealized version of motherhood while internally struggling with dissatisfaction and entrapment (Chodorow, 1999). Her final decision to leave her children is radical precisely because it defies the Victorian ideal of maternal self-sacrifice, a notion that remains embedded in contemporary parenting culture.

Similarly, modern mothers grapple with intensive mothering ideals, a concept introduced by Hays (1996) that emphasizes child-centered, emotionally exhaustive parenting. Social media amplifies these pressures by curating and reinforcing unrealistic expectations, leading to

increased maternal guilt, anxiety, and self-doubt (Faircloth, 2014). Many mothers feel inadequate if they fail to meet the aestheticized and performative standards of motherhood showcased online, resulting in heightened emotional distress and burnout.

Additionally, maternal guilt is exacerbated by conflicting societal messages. On one hand, mothers are expected to dedicate themselves entirely to their children's well-being, yet they are also encouraged to maintain careers, financial independence, and personal aspirations (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). This double bind places an immense psychological burden on mothers, who often experience feelings of failure, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion as they attempt to balance these contradictory expectations (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). The expectation to be a "supermom" who effortlessly manages career success, household responsibilities, and childcare reflects a modern extension of the self-sacrificing maternal ideal seen in *A Doll's House*.

Moreover, the commodification of motherhood exacerbates this psychological burden. The expectation that mothers should not only raise their children but also monetize their maternal identity through brand sponsorships and curated content creates a paradox of empowerment and exploitation (Abidin, 2016). While some mothers find financial independence through digital platforms, others struggle with the emotional weight of maintaining a 'perfect' public image, much like Nora, who realizes that her life has been carefully scripted by societal norms rather than her own free will. The pressure to constantly document, curate, and present an idealized version of motherhood on social media places additional psychological stress on mothers, leading to performance fatigue, self-objectification, and identity crises (Marwick, 2013).

Furthermore, the emotional burden of motherhood is intensified by social surveillance. In the Victorian era, a mother's role was subject to community judgment and rigid moral expectations, dictating how she should behave, dress, and interact with her family. In the digital age, this surveillance has evolved into algorithmic and peer-driven scrutiny, where mothers are judged not only by their immediate communities but by millions of social media users (Duffy, 2017). This level of public exposure leads to heightened anxiety and vulnerability, as many mothers feel pressured to present an idealized version of their lives while suppressing authentic struggles with parenting, mental health, and personal identity (Gill, 2007).

The psychological toll of motherhood also extends to feelings of isolation and emotional burnout. Many mothers report that social media engagement, rather than fostering genuine connection, often exacerbates feelings of loneliness and inadequacy (Steiner-Adair, 2013). The expectation that mothers should always be available, attentive, and emotionally present for their children creates an unattainable standard, leading to self-doubt and exhaustion (Faircloth, 2014). Nora's emotional isolation in *A Doll's House* parallels this modern experience, as she finds herself trapped in a role that demands constant self-sacrifice at the expense of her personal fulfillment.

Ultimately, the psychological burden of motherhood—whether in the 19th century or the digital age—reflects deeply embedded cultural expectations that position women as primary caregivers while limiting their emotional and personal autonomy. The demands of intensive mothering, the pressures of digital self-performance, and the societal surveillance of maternal identity collectively shape an exhausting and often unsustainable model of motherhood. Whether through Nora's radical decision to reject societal constraints or through modern mothers' struggles with mental health, burnout, and self-worth, this analysis reveals that the emotional weight of maternal expectations remains a persistent, intergenerational challenge.

4.4. The Double Standard: Mothers Under Surveillance, Fathers Rewarded for Minimal Involvement

Another striking parallel between *A Doll's House* and modern motherhood is the unequal scrutiny placed on mothers versus fathers. Nora is expected to embody maternal perfection, yet Torvald faces no such expectations; his role as a father is secondary to his professional and social status. Even when he expresses affection for his children, his participation in their upbringing is seen as optional rather than essential (Shaw, 2003). This reflects long-standing gender norms that position women as primary caregivers while allowing fathers to engage in parenting at their own discretion.

This double standard persists in the 21st century. Studies on digital parenting cultures reveal that mothers are far more likely than fathers to be criticized for their parenting choices, whether it be how they feed, educate, or discipline their children (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Meanwhile, fathers who engage in minimal caregiving tasks—such as changing a diaper or attending a school event—are often praised for their involvement, reinforcing the gendered division of parental responsibility (Faircloth, 2014). This imbalance in parental expectations mirrors Torvald's role in *A Doll's House*, where he enjoys social privileges that free him from the daily responsibilities of caregiving while Nora is expected to assume full maternal responsibility.

Social media exacerbates this inequality by subjecting mothers to public judgment, while fathers enjoy more flexibility and fewer consequences. A mother who fails to meet societal expectations is often branded as neglectful or selfish, whereas a father's parenting efforts—no matter how minor—are celebrated as exceptional and admirable (Abidin, 2016). This uneven societal gaze contributes to the broader struggle for maternal autonomy and reflects the same rigid gender roles that constrained Nora Helmer's life in *A Doll's House*.

Moreover, algorithmic visibility in digital parenting culture disproportionately favors fathers when they engage in caregiving. Studies show that content created by fathers who perform basic childcare tasks often goes viral, reinforcing the notion that fatherhood is an exceptional feat rather than an expected responsibility (Marwick, 2013). Conversely, mothers are expected to display constant devotion to their children, making their labor less visible and less celebrated (Duffy, 2017). This imbalance in digital representation reflects broader societal patterns in which men are rewarded for engaging in tasks traditionally assigned to women, while women receive criticism for not meeting unrealistic caregiving expectations.

The double standard extends beyond parenting to professional and social spheres, where fathers are often applauded for "helping" with childcare, while mothers are expected to shoulder the majority of domestic responsibilities by default. Research indicates that working mothers face a "motherhood penalty," experiencing career stagnation and wage gaps, while fathers are often rewarded with the "fatherhood bonus," gaining social and professional credibility for being involved parents (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). These disparities reflect deeply ingrained patriarchal structures that continue to shape perceptions of parenting roles in both domestic and public life.

Additionally, cultural narratives reinforce this divide, portraying fathers as "babysitters" rather than active parents. Media representations of parenthood often depict fathers as comedic figures struggling with basic childcare tasks, while mothers are expected to handle domestic responsibilities with skill and grace (Gill, 2007). This societal framing not only absolves fathers from parental accountability but also undermines the labor and expertise of mothers, reinforcing the perception that motherhood is an innate and self-sacrificial duty rather than a shared responsibility.

The effects of this disparity in parental expectations extend to mental and emotional well-being. Mothers frequently experience higher levels of parental burnout, as they are expected to consistently provide emotional, physical, and logistical support to their children (Steiner-Adair, 2013). Conversely, fathers are less likely to experience parenting-related stress due to reduced societal pressure and more flexibility in defining their parental role (Faircloth, 2014). This unequal emotional labor load contributes to maternal exhaustion, decreased self-worth, and heightened anxiety, paralleling Nora's eventual realization that she has been expected to sacrifice her own identity for the sake of her family.

Ultimately, this double standard highlights the enduring gender biases that shape parental roles. Whether in *A Doll's House* or on social media platforms, mothers are burdened with the expectation of perfection, while fathers receive praise for minimal contributions. This analysis reveals that the unequal distribution of parental responsibility persists across time, reinforcing the structural barriers that prevent true gender equity in caregiving. The persistence of these gendered expectations suggests that both literary and contemporary narratives must be challenged to create a more balanced and equitable understanding of parental roles.

4.5. Escaping the Dollhouse: Is Maternal Liberation Possible?

Nora's decision to leave her family remains one of the most controversial acts of defiance in literary history, as it directly challenges the Victorian construct of ideal motherhood. Her choice represents a rejection of the performative, restrictive expectations imposed upon her, an assertion of personal autonomy over societal obligations (de Beauvoir, 1949). However, the question remains: Do contemporary mothers have more freedom than Nora did, or have the expectations of motherhood merely evolved into new, digital forms of control?

While modern mothers theoretically possess greater legal rights and social mobility, they remain entangled in complex expectations of maternal perfection, emotional labor, and digital performance (Faircloth, 2014). The rise of momfluencer culture has, in some ways, replaced the physical limitations of the Victorian household with a new digital form of surveillance, wherein mothers are still expected to perform caregiving as a public act (Abidin, 2016). The constant documentation of maternal life through social media has transformed motherhood into a marketable commodity, reinforcing new pressures that dictate how women should present themselves as mothers (Duffy, 2017). This suggests that while women may have gained greater mobility in some aspects, they remain subject to systemic pressures that demand conformity to idealized maternal identities.

The commercialization of motherhood has created a paradox of empowerment and control. While some mothers use digital platforms to generate income and find community, they also experience immense pressure to curate a flawless maternal image. This dual reality mirrors Nora's initial belief in the possibility of self-reinvention, only to realize that societal forces continue to shape her identity. In contemporary culture, the expectation to seamlessly integrate financial independence with intensive mothering creates an unsustainable burden on modern mothers, reinforcing the idea that maternal autonomy is still deeply constrained by external pressures (Hays, 1996). The paradox of modern motherhood lies in the illusion of choice—while platforms provide women with opportunities for self-expression and income, they also reinforce patriarchal expectations of caregiving, self-sacrifice, and aesthetic perfection (Duffy, 2017).

Moreover, digital labor in maternal branding has introduced new forms of labor exploitation. The pressure to monetize motherhood leads many women into unregulated and precarious work conditions, where visibility and financial stability are contingent upon algorithmic engagement and audience approval (Marwick, 2013). This mirrors Nora's dependency on Torvald's approval, as modern mothers often find themselves financially bound to digital platforms that

dictate their value through arbitrary metrics of influence. In both cases, women's labor—whether domestic or digital—remains undervalued and commodified within systems designed to benefit others.

However, digital spaces have also created new opportunities for resistance. Some women use online communities to challenge dominant narratives of motherhood, reclaiming their voices and pushing back against unattainable ideals (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Social media activism, maternal blogging, and feminist discourse have created spaces where mothers can articulate frustrations, expose the unrealistic nature of intensive mothering, and advocate for more equitable parenting roles (Faircloth, 2014). Hashtags such as #MomLifeUnfiltered and #RealMotherhood have gained traction as women challenge the polished, performative nature of digital parenting culture, fostering more honest discussions about the struggles and realities of motherhood.

Furthermore, some women reject intensive mothering expectations altogether, advocating for alternative parenting models that promote shared responsibility and emotional balance. Scholars argue that conscious parenting movements—which emphasize emotional self-awareness, child autonomy, and a rejection of rigid maternal self-sacrifice—represent a growing shift toward more egalitarian and psychologically sustainable parenting structures (Gill, 2007). These emerging frameworks contrast sharply with both Nora's complete rejection of motherhood and the hyper-visible digital maternal performance, suggesting that true maternal autonomy may lie in the ability to redefine motherhood on one's own terms.

Nevertheless, the question of true maternal liberation remains unresolved. While digital platforms offer more visibility and self-expression, they also impose new expectations that dictate how mothers should present themselves. Just as Nora ultimately chooses self-exile to escape societal constraints, modern mothers often find themselves negotiating between visibility and self-preservation, between financial independence and performative labor. The persistence of these contradictions highlights the enduring struggle for maternal autonomy, demonstrating that while the structure of the dollhouse may have changed, its walls still remain intact in new, digital forms.

Ultimately, the pursuit of maternal liberation is not a singular act of defiance, as in Nora's case, but an ongoing negotiation of power, agency, and social expectation. The struggle for autonomy, self-definition, and work-life balance continues to evolve, reflecting the cyclical nature of societal control over motherhood. While some women embrace maternal visibility as a tool for empowerment, others resist the pressure to perform caregiving for public consumption. Whether through economic independence, digital activism, or structural redefinition, the challenge remains the same—escaping the dollhouse is not just about leaving, but about dismantling the walls that keep women confined, no matter where they are.

5. CONCLUSION

The comparison between *A Doll's House* and contemporary motherhood reveals that while societal structures have changed, the expectations placed on mothers remain deeply entrenched. Both Nora Helmer and modern mothers navigate performative caregiving, financial strain, emotional labor, and public scrutiny, demonstrating that the myth of the perfect mother endures across time. Despite advancements in women's rights, workplace equality, and digital opportunities, the expectation of maternal self-sacrifice has simply adapted to new cultural frameworks rather than being dismantled.

This study highlights the persistent pressures of maternal identity and raises critical questions about the extent to which women have truly gained autonomy in their parenting roles. While digital culture provides new opportunities for empowerment, it also reinforces restrictive ideals

that continue to confine women within an updated version of the dollhouse. The expectation for maternal self-sacrifice, once tied to the private domestic sphere, has now extended into the digital realm, where social media, corporate interests, and societal judgment create new challenges for modern mothers. Just as Nora's perceived failure as a wife and mother was met with societal condemnation, contemporary mothers face similar scrutiny in digital spaces, where deviation from traditional maternal ideals is often met with public shaming and backlash.

The dual role of digital platforms—as both tools of empowerment and vehicles of exploitation—is central to understanding modern motherhood. On one hand, feminist momfluencers and content creators use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and blogs to challenge dominant narratives by sharing honest, unfiltered accounts of parenting. Movements such as #MomLifeUnfiltered and other grassroots hashtags have cultivated online communities that embrace imperfection, vulnerability, and emotional honesty. These spaces provide mothers with opportunities to connect, validate their experiences, and advocate for more equitable parenting roles, serving as counter-narratives to the polished ideal of maternal perfection.

On the other hand, corporate-sponsored content and influencer branding often reinforce idealized, commodified versions of motherhood. Many digital creators are incentivized—through algorithms and brand partnerships—to present carefully curated images of family life that align with commercial aesthetics. This blurs the line between authenticity and advertisement, pushing mothers to perform their identities in ways that are emotionally laborious and marketable. Empowerment through digital platforms is thus frequently contingent upon conformity to these consumer-friendly norms, reflecting a broader commodification of maternal identity within capitalist systems.

Moreover, while some women may find financial independence through digital content creation, the labor involved—constant content production, self-branding, algorithmic engagement—can be exhaustive and precarious. Success is often measured not by the quality of caregiving, but by likes, followers, and sponsorships, further commodifying maternal identity. For those unable to achieve or maintain this visibility, digital motherhood can become another space of exclusion, reinforcing socioeconomic disparities and marginalizing mothers who do not fit the mold of the affluent, white, hyper-organized online persona.

Despite these ongoing constraints, the contemporary maternal experience is not without avenues for resistance and redefinition. Online communities remain critical spaces for challenging unattainable ideals of maternal perfection, fostering conversations about burnout, mental health, and gender equity in parenting. The rise of alternative parenting models, feminist discourse, and conscious mothering movements suggests that while maternal expectations remain rigid, they are also increasingly contested. This shift mirrors Nora's act of rebellion, yet it also signals a broader cultural reckoning with caregiving and gendered labor.

Nevertheless, maternal liberation remains an ongoing struggle, rather than a resolved achievement. While Nora's radical decision to leave her family challenged Victorian norms, modern mothers often find themselves negotiating between visibility and self-preservation. The choice to disengage from digital surveillance or reject intensive mothering ideals can come at great personal and financial costs, just as Nora's departure came with significant social consequences. The persistence of these contradictions highlights the enduring struggle for maternal autonomy, demonstrating that while the structure of the dollhouse may have changed, its walls still remain intact in new, digital forms.

Furthermore, the complexity of maternal autonomy must also be considered through an intersectional lens. Not all mothers experience performative motherhood in the same way; race, class, and socioeconomic status significantly shape the ability to resist, redefine, or conform to

maternal ideals (Crenshaw, 1989). While affluent, white momfluencers may have the privilege to commercialize their maternal identity for financial gain, lower-income mothers and mothers of color often face systemic barriers that prevent them from achieving similar visibility or economic stability (Duffy, 2017). The continued policing of Black mothers in media and policy discussions, the lack of workplace protections for working-class mothers, and the increased surveillance of low-income mothers by social institutions all point to the fact that the struggle for maternal liberation is not universal, but deeply stratified.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests that the ideal of maternal perfection is not just a historical relic but an evolving construct shaped by economic, social, and digital forces. The fight for maternal liberation, much like Nora's journey, remains an ongoing battle—one that requires continuous interrogation and resistance. While escaping the dollhouse is possible, true maternal autonomy demands the dismantling of both visible and invisible barriers that continue to regulate and commodify motherhood. In doing so, the narrative of motherhood may finally shift from one of expectation and sacrifice to one of agency and self-definition. The question that remains is whether future generations of mothers will fully escape the performative expectations imposed upon them or if the pressures of maternal identity will simply continue to evolve under new forms of social, economic, and technological control.

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