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Article:
Kerrane, Ben, Kerrane, Katy, Bettany, Shona et al. (2023) 'Othering' the unprepared: Exploring the foodwork of Brexit-prepping mothers. Gender, Work and Organization. ISSN: 0968-6673

https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13086

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Received: 9 June 2022 | Revised: 17 July 2023 | Accepted: 20 October 2023

DOI: 10.1111/gwao.13086

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

'Othering' the unprepared: Exploring the foodwork of Brexit-prepping mothers

Ben Kerrane[1] | **Katy Kerrane**[2] | **Shona Bettany**[3] | **David Rowe**[4]

[1]Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, Manchester, UK

[2]University of Liverpool Management School, Liverpool, UK

[3]Huddersfield Business School, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

[4]University of York Management School, University of York, York, UK

Correspondence
Ben Kerrane.
Email: b.kerrane@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

We explore the foodwork performed by white middle-class mothers in the United Kingdom who were preparing to feed their families in anticipation of post-Brexit resource scarcity. We illustrate their laborious preparations ('prep-work') as they stockpiled items (mostly food) in anticipation of shortages. We reveal tensions in how they envisaged how (and who) to feed. Analysis reveals how our (privileged, white middle-class) participants enrolled 'good' motherhood into prep-work and engaged in a new form of 'othering'. Non-prepping '(m)others' were positioned as deficient, 'bad' parents due to failure to save children from post-Brexit risk/hunger, and participants downplayed their own (classed and material) advantage in being able to prepare. By exploring their prep-work accounts, we illustrate how they assumed a morally superior motherhood position to the non-prepared underclass and make several contributions. First, we extend foodwork categories, recognizing additional foodwork of managing and hiding stockpiles (given stigma/ridicule surrounding prep-work). Second, we illustrate the darker side of motherhood that prep-work revealed, which clashes with elements of intensive motherhood ideology. Third, we illuminate the 'othering' of a new parental underclass: the unprepared.

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KEYWORDS
foodwork, gendered labor, morality, mothering, othering, prep-work, social class

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article explores the foodwork (DeVault, 1991; Sobal, 2017) performed by a group of white middle-class mothers who engaged in 'Brexit-prepping' during Britain's exit from the European Union ('Brexit'). Foodwork reflects the material, physical, and emotional labor surrounding meal planning, food shopping, and cooking (DeVault, 1991; Oleschuk, 2020; Sobal, 2017). In the Brexit negotiation era (2016–2019), UK food retailers and popular press highlighted the possibility of post-Brexit resource scarcity due to breakdown in UK–EU trade relations (Butler, 2019). One in five Britons, mostly mothers, reportedly engaged in 'Brexit-prepping' (Kerrane et al., 2021; The Guardian, 2019) and stockpiling items (predominantly food) to shield their children from anticipated post-Brexit risk/hunger.

In exploring the broader labor surrounding 'Brexit-prepping' (hereafter 'prep-work'), we draw on feminist thought, which calls for the reexamination and revaluation of women's work in all its guises, bringing different aspects of women's labor (both paid/unpaid) to the fore (DeVault, 1991; Oakley, 1974). Given women's disproportionate foodwork within the family (Cairns et al., 2010), we specifically focus on the gendered work of family feeding (DeVault, 1991) during anticipated marketplace disruption as expressive of the physical and emotional labor undertaken by mothers in providing sustenance to others. While prepping is usually explored as a masculine response to apocalyptical crisis, subject to stigma, social derision, and marginalization based on delusional, end-of-the-world views (Barker, 2020), in this paper, we shift focus by exploring the feminization of prep-work (Barker, 2020). We recognize prep-work as an increasingly mainstream phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2019) as recent COVID-19 disruption and the cost-of-living crisis attest.

Using the theoretical lens of intensive motherhood, a 'child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive' (Hays, 1996: 8) practice, we examine how white middle-class mothers legitimize prep-work as they reiterate and re-signify extant norms of 'good' and 'bad' mothering. We show how prep-work requires mothers to negotiate complex tensions in their performance of 'good' motherhood as they were increasingly drawn toward extreme lengths and morally questionable behaviors to shield their children from post-Brexit risk. Accordingly, in this paper, we ask: *how and why do mothers engage in prep-work? And how do they reconcile tensions between prep-work and the performance of 'good', intensive motherhood, given prep-work stigma?*

Our analysis is based on qualitative interviews with self-identified Brexit-prepping white middle-class mothers. Findings demonstrate how participants legitimized prep-work through adhering to the global cultural script of 'good' intensive motherhood (Cappellini et al., 2019). Non-prepping mothers were 'othered' and positioned as deficient parents due to their failure to engage in anticipatory prep-work. However, we reveal tension and complexity in how participants simultaneously met and violated the maternal ethic of care (May, 2008) through three themes. In *responsible/irresponsible*, we signal how participants positioned meeting their children's needs as a responsible activity that 'good' mothers perform, marking ethical boundaries between lesser, non-prepping '(m)others'. To become competent preppers, however, they became radicalized into extremes of (*ir*responsible) prep-work. In *visible/invisible*, we show how participants concealed prep-work, fearful of being 'othered' as deluded, yet engaged in competitive displays of 'good' motherhood within online Brexit-prepping communities. Finally, we reveal *moral/immoral* tension, with participants seeking to care for their children through prep-work, yet envisaged harming/exploiting the unprepared.

We make several contributions. First, we extend the foodwork concept beyond the categories of meal planning, shopping, and cooking (Sobal, 2017), signaling wider prep-work labor. Second, in revealing a darker side to motherhood, we contribute to understanding intensive motherhood, which is more usually explored in developmental and progressive contexts through supportive maternal behaviors. In doing so, we offer insight into the underexplored feminization of prepping (Barker, 2020), informed by intensive motherhood idealizations. Finally, in considering how

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wider, existential threats of moral, social, environmental, and economic collapse impact women's foodwork, we highlight (classed, material, and racial) privileges and inequalities which surround prep-work and extend conceptualizations of 'othering'. The 'othering' of mothers is often a consequence of their classed position (Tyler, 2008), which was not so straightforward in our study. Accordingly, we extend categorizations of 'othering' and introduce a new form of parental underclass: the unprepared.

We first review foodwork literature and discuss how foodwork is an integral display of 'good' motherhood, which is often inaccessible for certain mothers (e.g., low income, working class, and mothers of color). The theoretical lens of intensive motherhood is discussed, illustrating how mothers who deviate from normalized practices are 'othered' (as 'bad' parents). The context of Brexit and the Brexit-prepper is then introduced. After outlining our qualitative methodology, we present our findings. We discuss how prep-work, a practice largely available to privileged mothers, intensifies the inequalities underpinning foodwork, demonstrating a political, racialized, and classed othering of the non-prepared. In doing so, we illustrate how our white middle-class participants overlooked their own (material and classed) privilege in undertaking prep-work.

2 | FOODWORK, 'GOOD' MOTHERHOOD, AND INEQUALITY

Foodwork reflects the 'physical, cognitive, interactional, and institutional labor in the processes of feeding individuals, families, and groups' (Sobal, 2017: 127). Informed by DeVault's (1991) seminal work on family feeding, foodwork encapsulates the emotional, cultural, and health management of eating (Swan, 2020; Wright et al., 2015) through an innate connectedness to others' needs (Brenton, 2017; Oleschuk, 2020). Often hidden and mundane (Morlacchi, 2020), foodwork includes budgeting, planning, sourcing items, price comparison, and transforming ingredients through much gendered labor (Swan, 2020) with women assuming responsibility for family feeding (Cairns et al., 2010).

Foodwork can not only be read as a socially oppressive domestic burden but also as a means to display love and care for children (Parsons et al., 2021), cultivating pleasure (Oleschuk, 2020). Recent foodwork studies include exploration of mothers' labor in protecting children from illness/allergies (Morlacchi, 2020) and feeding on low/reduced incomes (Parsons et al., 2021). 'Good' foodwork is synonymous with 'good' motherhood and normative, middle-class intensive feeding ideology (Brenton, 2017), whereby mothers impart healthy eating habits to children, bypass convenience foods, and cook healthy, nutritious meals from scratch (Cairns et al., 2013), utilizing local, organic, and fresh ingredients (Brenton, 2017).

Intensive foodwork involves significant outlay of energy, time, and money, which many women struggle to enact (Brenton, 2017). Structural inequalities surrounding gender, class, and race intersect with the ability (or otherwise) to display 'good' motherhood through foodwork (Swan, 2020). Meeting this dominant (white, middle-class) foodwork standard is problematic for 'others', such as working-class, low-income women. Socially and economically excluded mothers are pathologized for their lack of foodwork proficiency (Meah & Watson, 2011). Yet, their low-wage work is characterized by long, often unsociable, shiftwork, culminating in poorly stocked kitchens, a lack of time to source and prepare meals from scratch, inaccessible shopping sites, and cost-prohibitive access to high quality, healthy foods (Oleschuk, 2020; Wright et al., 2015). Working-class mothers frequently live hand-to-mouth and often require assistance from community food initiatives (Martin, 2018). They face criticism (despite their lack of resource) for failing to offer children healthy food (Wright et al., 2015) and are positioned as deficient parents vis-à-vis the middle classes (Jensen, 2012).

While 'good' foodwork is often considered a reflection of neoliberal choice, the structural aspects of gender, class, and race-based inequality remain hidden. Working-class mothers encounter foodwork restriction and may have little choice but to offer convenience foods, focusing on immediate needs (Wright et al., 2015). Moralized food standards are cruelly inaccessible for low-income women (Swan & Perrier, 2019), which are especially problematic for women of color, who experience intensive feeding practices as alienating and white, which could lead to the rejection

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of (black) foodways tied to cultural heritage (Brenton, 2017). Jones (2019), countering health disparities of the Black youth in her study (criticized for consuming to greedy excess), also highlights the lack of access to affordable, healthy food choices within the food deserts of marginalized groups.

Good motherhood, however, is framed as raising healthy children through adhering to intensive motherhood ideology, regardless of resource (Brenton, 2017). Norms of intensive motherhood position mothers as responsible for keeping children safe and reaching their potential as responsible future citizens (Cairns et al., 2013), with children considered sacred, inherently pure, innocent, and in need of protection (Hays, 1996). Good mothers demonstrate devotion to children and sacrifice personal needs for the good of their family (DeVault, 1991).

The norms of intensive motherhood are, however, underpinned by white middle-class values (Lareau, 2003; Perrier, 2013); yet they set the standard of 'good' mothering across different classes and cultures (Cappellini et al., 2019). Being a 'good' mother is dependent on successful moral display, with 'bad' mothers positioned as deviant others who transgress middle-class norms (May, 2008). Mothers are subjected to expectations to be 'the keepers of morality' (Hays, 1996: 30) and to impart cultural values of honesty and generosity to their children. 'Moral mothers' are thus valorized based on their ability to consider the consequences of their actions on others, driven by feminine values of connectedness and a desire not to harm (Smart & Neale, 1999). Following this moral path ensures acceptance by society, with motherhood norms particularly clear: 'good' mothers place their children's well-being as paramount, following a nonnegotiable moral ethic of care (May, 2008). Mothers perceived to expose their children to risk are labeled morally questionable (Lee, 2008).

The intensification of motherhood and display runs in parallel with the rise of mother 'blame' (Blum, 2007). While intensive motherhood is valorized, mothers who depart from accepted norms are 'othered' as 'bad' or irresponsible (with motherhood performances scrutinized particularly by other mothers—see Blum, 2007). In relation to social class, the 'chav' mum (Tyler, 2008), a caricature of the working class, is particularly vilified as a 'bad', unfit mother. This reflects a 'loud, white, excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, disgusting' motherhood performance from which middle-class mothers distance themselves (Skeggs, 2005: 965), maintaining boundaries between their 'good' motherhood and those of the deficient '(m)other'. Black/poor mothers are not associated with 'good' mothering and are marginalized by policy and discourses that reinforce inequities while scrutinizing their mothering practices (Elliott et al., 2015). Yet Dow (2016) claims that black mothers integrate the provider role into their motherhood performances and enroll kin and community help with childcare. This demonstrates a more community-focused style of mothering, which may be apparent among some Black women, departing from the individualized norms of intensive motherhood (Dow, 2016).

In exploring foodwork practices of a group of white middle-class mothers, who engaged in prep-work during anticipated post-Brexit resource scarcity, we shed further light on a new form of 'othering'. Given growing evidence of generalized anxiety stemming from existential threats such as global pandemics, financial collapse, or conflict (Campbell et al., 2019), we explore how our Brexit-prepping participants positioned themselves as superior mothers, marking clear distinction between their elevated moral positioning and that of the unfit, unprepared, 'other'.

3 | RESEARCH CONTEXT: BRITAIN'S EXIT FROM THE EU AND BREXIT PREPPING

Britain's departure from the European Union ('Brexit') caused much uncertainty for UK citizens. Between the referendum vote and exit from the EU (2016–2019), UK retailers warned that a 'no-deal' Brexit (exit without a trade deal) could lead to food shortages (Butler, 2019). Popular press highlighted disruption to supply chains, but UK Government downplayed anticipated disruption and encouraged consumers not to stockpile goods (Butler, 2019). One in five Britons, however, ignored this (The Guardian, 2019)—and we witnessed the rise of the 'Brexit prepper' and online Brexit-prepping communities. Fearful of marketplace collapse and distrustful of government/institutions, Brexit-preppers assumed personal responsibility for their family's self-sufficiency, protecting themselves against shortage/hunger.

Prepping is synonymous with masculine, apocalyptic bunker culture and survivalism. Widely mocked for their delusional, end-of-the-world views, preppers are often driven to the margins of society (Barker, 2020). Despite such

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stigma, prepping is becoming a mainstream phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2019), enveloping concepts of resilience and precautionary consumption (Barker, 2020). As Mills (2019) argues, this new prepping motive is not about apocalyptic events, but rather the kinds of basic security needs (particularly surrounding food) that emerge from the reduction in state support; the ubiquity of precarious work; and the imperative to be self-sufficient, resilient, and entrepreneurial in neoliberal life.

Brexit-prepping can be conceptualized as an individualized, precautionary, and particularly gendered response to envisaged scarcity. In our study, white middle-class mothers assumed responsibility for ensuring the satisfaction of their children's needs, post Brexit. They engaged in 'prep-work' and accumulated stockpiles of consumer goods that they envisaged their family would need during post-Brexit scarcity. This aspect of the re-gendering (or feminization) of prep-work has not been explored (Barker, 2020).

4 | METHODOLOGY

We investigate the experiences of white middle-class mothers engaging in prep-work. We draw on interview data (collected January–April 2019) from 21 mothers recruited from online Brexit-prepping communities. Online groups (comprising 16,000 members, mainly women) were spaces where like-minded others shared post-Brexit resource scarcity concerns and ideas/best practice for prepping (e.g., what to store and how). Several Brexit-prepping communities were identified (Facebook groups with closed membership). Contact was initially made with each group moderator, and details of the project were discussed with them. Moderators highlighted the secretive and private nature of their communities and subsequently offered to help with recruitment by posting appeals for participation among group members on our behalf (enhancing the credibility/legitimacy of our project).

Our intention was to recruit any individual who engaged in Brexit prep-work, but only mothers responded (indicative of their main foodwork role and the gendered nature of prep-work). The women in our sample (aged 27–61 years) self-identified as Brexit-preppers, were white British, heterosexual, middle-class, and lived with their partner and children (3–20 years old). Participants had 3–8 months of food stockpiled, with Sarah a notable exception (two boxes). Participants were working professionals although a small number did not wish to disclose finer demographic detail.

We recognize how recruitment via online spaces may have inadvertently privileged the voice of white middle-class mothers. Given the secrecy of prepping, these communities were, however, hard to reach, and thus, the population demographic was white middle class. We acknowledge how our recruitment may have rendered the voice of minority groups less accessible (we reflect further on this in our discussion). While our sample reflects the broader demographics of the online communities we accessed, we acknowledge that the whiteness/classed nature of our sample could be read as a limitation. However, we recognize that our arguments are particular and grounded on issues of 'whiteness', which reflects the privileged demographic of those able to engage in prep-work (as illustrated by our white, middle-class, and financially privileged sample).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone or videoconference given both the secrecy of prep-work and their geographical location. Interview lasted 60–90 min and participants were offered a gift-card to thank them for participating. A 3-year sensitizing, non-participatory netnography (Kozinets, 2014) of online Brexit-prepping communities helped inform our interview guide. Interviews explored broad prep-work themes (e.g., what prepping meant to them; how they decided what/where to store; how they managed their 'stash'; who they sought advice from) and motivations (e.g., who they were prepping for; family reactions; who else they discussed prepping with). Participants could, however, discuss any issues they felt pertinent to understand their experiences, and disclosed information they felt relevant/comfortable.

The project holds university ethics board approval with pseudonyms used to protect anonymity. Interviews were conducted with a male member of the research team who was positioned as a neutral 'outsider' with whom they could share their experiences of motherhood in a nonjudgmental manner. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006)

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thematic approach to data analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and inductively analyzed. Each transcript was initially read and reread by individual members of the research team (developing within-case stories using the verbatim transcripts). Notes and memos were then exchanged (yielding a developed understanding of each participant). Once this preliminary analysis was complete, the next stage involved looking for patterns, connections, and (dis)similarities across transcripts, a process sharing similarities with Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding.

Across each interview, participants justified their prep-work labor and countered associated stigma by prioritizing their child(ren)'s needs. Analyzing the interviews, we were struck by the love and care invested in prep-work, which informed our use of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) as an enabling theory to help analyze our data. While intensive motherhood has admirable (if unrealistic) idealizations, our analysis revealed how participants simultaneously met and violated intensive motherhood norms. In responsibly anticipating scarcity, participants felt they were 'good' mothers (with non-prepping '(m)others' labeled *ir*responsible); yet participants were driven to potentially dubious sources for prep-work advice/insight. Tensions surrounding the (in)visibility of prep-work were noted. Given stigma, participants hid prep-work from outsiders and were anxious that their efforts may be discredited; yet they displayed motherhood prowess online with like-minded prepping others. Finally, tensions regarding the (im)morality of prep-work became apparent. Prep-work was imbued as moral display of love/care; yet a darker side of participant's motherhood was revealed, as they anticipated restricting aid to those in need, violating the maternal ethic of care (May, 2008). Such tensions informed our identified themes—(*ir*)responsible, (*in*)visibility, and (*im*)morality—and the use of binaries within each. Across our themes, we illustrate how participants 'othered' a new parental underclass (the unprepared), with 'othering' more usually based on social-class derision, which was not so straightforward in our reported findings.

Our data captured a particular period of existential concern that many Britons experienced surrounding withdrawal from the EU (Browning, 2018). The data reflect the felt trauma, which fueled participants' agentic prep-work, to regain control amid political turbulence. We approached data analysis with an open mind, recognizing the emotiveness of Brexit.

5 | FINDINGS

Prep-work was undertaken over time (often years/several months) and encapsulated the work of deciding which items to store (via careful consideration of family need, inventorying items such as food, water, and medicine), procurement (building their 'stash' incrementally, via shopping savviness), storage and stock rotation (using complex spreadsheets, detailing stockpiled items, shelf life, and curated meal plans), learning prep-work skills (e.g., canning, dehydrating, and pickling), and ensuring family life could be maintained during difficulty. To illustrate the tensions revealed in motherly prep-work, we organize our findings around three themes: (ir)responsibility, (in)visibility, and (im)morality.

6 | THE (IR)RESPONSIBILITY OF PREP-WORK

Rather than developing a radical, interconnected, and collective response to government (in)action, participants assumed individualized prep-work responsibility in anticipation of post-Brexit shortages, with fathers largely bracketed from participant's accounts. Faced with existential anxiety that their family's world was destabilizing (Browning, 2018), participants followed their "*motherly instinct*" to prepare, adopting an anticipatory, future-oriented approach. Melanie explained:

> Prepping is about trying to predict, and saying hang on a minute, I don't trust the government to make a good decision. You have to deal with it, on your own…I'm following my motherly instinct to prep, so I can personally make sure my daughter, my baby [3-years old], can be fed. Her wellbeing, that's all that matters to me, and my prepping will secure that.

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Participants regarded failing to shield the child and allowing them to go hungry as the epitome of 'bad' motherhood. Although each participant reported concerns surrounding meeting their post-Brexit feeding obligations, mothers of younger children (like Melanie) and those with specific dietary needs (e.g., Judy's celiac daughter) stockpiled greater amounts of food (Melanie, e.g., has 6 months of supplies; Judy, 5 months). Ethical boundaries were drawn between participants' 'good', proactive, and future-orientated approach to provisioning and the 'bad' parenting of the unprepared. Most participants made links between non-prepping '(m)others' and critiques of the working class as Kelly highlighted:

> I'm not one of these sitting on the settee, dole-scum[1] mums. I mean, I could put my fingers in my ears and do nothing, take the easy route. But I love my kids too much for that. I'm better than that, and I want to be the best mum I can be when things get difficult.

Kelly's comment introduces the classed 'othering' participants directed toward non-prepping '(m)others'. Working-class mothers are labeled inactive and lazy (Tyler, 2008), which many participants felt characterized non-preppers, indicative of a deficient motherhood style.

To help preserve their family's way of life, participants turned to online prepping communities for advice (on storage/meal plans/quantities to stockpile). In wanting to ensure that their children's needs could be met when 'SHFT' ('shit hits the fan': the prepping mantra), they were driven to interact with "*hardcore*" preppers with extreme views, who ordinarily, in their pre-prepping world, "*wouldn't dream of approaching*". Anna explained:

> I put a great deal of stock in my own credibility and my reputation. I'm a parish councillor, I'm re-training to be a counsellor, I've been a teacher for 20 years, kind of one of those people in society that somebody might come to you and say can I have a bit of advice on this…there are the more radical members, who I used to look at and think no thank you, that's not for me. But then they post things about water purification tablets and advice on canning, pickling, and you think, do you know what, perhaps there's something in it?

Participants like Anna were gradually radicalized to more extreme forms of prep-work (e.g., seeking advice on knife skills; animal trapping; or bug-out bags[2]), which they once considered *ir*responsible or unwarranted. Chiming strongly with Perrier's (2013) work on the concerted and constant cultivation of white middle-class moral authority, however, in displaying responsible motherhood (e.g., feeding the innocent child/prioritizing their needs at all costs), the women drew upon their sensibilities as upstanding community members to reframe questionable and pathologized behavior through socialization with hardcore preppers (which they once 'othered' as "*tin foil*[3] *hat wearing loons*"). Models of intensive motherhood recognize how mothers are guided by expert advice (Hays, 1996), more usually from legitimate sources (e.g., child-development/pediatric experts). To manage the risk of uncertainty, however, participants felt compelled to push the limits of acceptable, responsible prep-work to extremes (adopting a "*just in case*" mentality).

Yet, illustrating the individualized nature of this form of responsibilized mothering (Cain, 2016), most of our white middle-class participants foreground prepping as a 'choice' open to all. They highlighted how their actions "*didn't cost much*" with their stash incrementally built through sales promotions/adding additional items to weekly grocery shops:

> It's the sales promotions that have built what I've got. Buy one get one free promotion type things, we'll use one of them a week, and the extra one goes in the stash, so it's not cost me much money. Anyone can do this; it doesn't cost much. (Emily)

Emily's quote was emblematic of most women we spoke with that savvy and prudent shopping facilitated prep-work as a low-cost 'choice' that 'sensible' (and therefore responsible/'good') mothers made to care for their family during anticipated difficulties. Thrift and frugality were fetishized by our participants and practiced by most as a

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lifestyle choice rather than through economic necessity (Jensen, 2012). Given the apparent lack of financial barriers surrounding prep-work, most women dismissed 'other' (*ir*responsible) mothers who failed to take similar action—with the intensification of motherhood practices linked with the 'othering' of mothers and mother blame (Blum, 2007). Non-prepping '(m)others' were labeled "*lazy*" and "*feckless*", lacking drive and commitment, and positioned against the responsible version of 'good' motherhood our white middle-class participants displayed to themselves/the prepping community:

> Food is love, and therefore to provide for your family as best you can, it's the least you can do, really. I can't believe that everyone isn't doing this. What's the harm to have some extra supplies squirrelled away, just in case? What kind of mother doesn't want to protect her kids and give them something to eat when the food dries up? (Andrea)

A minority of participants, however, felt uneasy 'othering' non-prepping '(m)others'. Hannah, who had experienced poverty, but who was now upwardly mobile, and Maria, who suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome, were aware of prep-work barriers (mostly financial and time related), which render prepping inaccessible to some, as Maria commented, through "*no fault of their own*". Similarly, Sarah, who was experiencing a period of reduced income and volunteered at a food bank, was more sympathetic. Earlier and ongoing lived experiences of restriction and restraint meant that participants like Hannah, Maria, and Sarah appreciated their privileged (classed, material, and racialized) advantage to prep (and understood why some mothers could/did not).

Yet, most participants downplayed the cost of purchasing specialist prep-work equipment (e.g., food dehydrators, food-grade storage containers, and canning machines), with items purchased secondhand (on eBay) or via Amazon sales promotions (in further display of the 'good', responsible, savvy mother). Their elevated moral positioning ignored how many non-prepping '(m)others' would struggle to undertake prep-work, lacking both time (through precarious employment) and resource (e.g., financial, space to store goods, access to cars, and out-of-town supermarkets with sales promotions) to prep and secure bargains to stockpile. Low-income mothers, for example, already struggle to provide food daily (Martin, 2018), which is exacerbated for mothers of color (Swan & Perrier, 2019), and their ability to source/secure *extra* goods to stockpile is problematic. Most participants myopically obscured their privilege and did not connect a lack of prep-work with a lack of resource for 'deficient' '(m)others'. Participants' choice-based empowerment discussions masked the kinds of structural inequalities that performances of responsible 'good' mothers rely upon.

7 | THE (IN)VISIBILITY OF PREP-WORK

The women's prep-work was undertaken across different layers of visibility/invisibility. The families on display literature (Finch, 2007) recognize how women feel judged/surveilled in performing a maternal role. Participants reported the need to outwardly display 'good' motherhood practices in everyday life (which prep-work did not support, due to need for secrecy). Participants enrolled the image of the thrifty, white middle-class housewife (Jensen, 2012) as part of a gendered responsibilization of prep-work. Yet, while characteristics of frugality and domestic efficiency (alongside prioritizing child needs) represented admirable neoliberal values (Cain, 2016), participants carefully navigated a complex movement between visibility/invisibility, given prep-work stigma.

Upon joining online prepping groups, the women were warned: "*the first rule of prepping club is: don't talk about prepping club*". This level of invisibility to outsiders was later understood as necessary for fear of being ostracized and 'othered' as neurotic (and thus 'bad' mothers) should their prep-work be revealed. Preppers are vilified in mainstream press, blamed for inciting panic buying, causing shortages, and holding deluded views. Ironically, the potential revelation of their thoughtful and highly laborious prep-work (e.g., consideration of what children would/would not eat;

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post-Brexit meals plans; and acquiring skills), which participants associated with 'good' motherhood, risked jeopardizing their standing as responsible mothers, as Kelly commented:

> I think people see me as a good mum, and I'm very proud of that. It's taken time and work, helping with the PTA,[4] school fundraisers, that sort of thing. I do my bit. If they knew I was a prepper, well that would be it, my reputation would be gone. Or worse, they'd think I was an unfit mum.

While 'good' white middle-class motherhood is often visibly and purposefully displayed (Harman & Cappellini, 2015), this was not the case for prep-work. Pushed to precautionary extremes, participants kept prep-work secret, recognizing that outsiders may brand their heightened maternal responsibilization as pathological, paranoid parenting (Furedi, 2008). This mirrors Goffman's (1963) work on stigma, with the discreditable nature of prep-work causing anxiety amongst participants, who managed the effects of being stigmatized as a prepper through concealment (a form of identity management). The lack of precautionary action by non-prepping (m)others was, in turn, discredited and stigmatized by participants (Goffman, 1963), considered incongruous with their identity as 'good', child-centric mothers. Most participants recounted how they had momentarily revealed their actions to immediate family/close friends during their prepping entrée. However, they encountered overwhelming skepticism that their efforts were wasteful or erratic and potentially exposed children to unnecessary anxiety, which heightened ongoing secrecy. The potential consequences of being outed as a prepper varied. Some participants were concerned that their child would be tarnished, others felt their social group would be diminished or that disclosure would make them a target for the unprepared, should scarcity actualize.

Although secrecy defended the family from outside scrutiny and adverse judgment, it was often difficult to maintain. While male partners were aware of the women's prep-work, but largely ambivalent, younger children were shielded from prepping and their mothers' anxiety (as much as was possible). As stockpiles grew, however, children reportedly became more inquisitive, with prep-work more difficult to hide. Older children who were rendered more competent were entrusted with the family secret. Smaller stashes, or those housed in discrete locations (e.g., in loft space and garages), posed fewer problems and were less obvious markers "*that their mum's lost it*". Yet, even with the invisibility afforded by discrete storage locations, some women worked further to hide their stash/prepper identity. Nicola, for example, housed her goods in a garage, hidden: "*behind boxes of stuff that looks like garden gear or other random things that you might find in a garage…we've thought, well, if someone sees us getting the* car *in or out with the garage door open, we don't want them seeing the nice rows and the shelves of food*". Nicola's comment further illustrated how prepping identities were hidden to outsiders at all costs.

However, within the confines, security, and relative anonymity of the online prepping world, women often engaged in highly visible displays of preparedness (and thus 'good' motherhood) to like-minded prepping-mothers. Participants circulated and consumed online images of highly stocked pantries in what they referred to as "*prepper porn*" (see Figures 1–3 for examples):

> There's a lot of prepper porn on there, photos of floor to ceiling shelves stocked full of everything you could possibly imagine. People do like to show their stash, especially as it's all anonymous, no one knows where you live. It does make you think, ooh, look, they have sanitary pads, I'd not thought of that, or bandages, first-aid kits, gas bottles for heat, cooking, if the gas goes off. You think great, I'll go out and get what they've got, so it's a help. But then it makes me think how stupid am I for not thinking of all that? And clearly, they're a better prepper, a better mum, than me (Sandra)

Of note is Figure 1, which reinforces how many of our white middle-class participants viewed prep-work as accessible to all, even those with limited space ("*only one foot by four-foot floorspace used*"). Most participants dismissed—or were naively unaware of—the barriers and structural inequalities which surrounded prep-work (and they failed to recognize how many mothers would struggle to simply "*go out and get*" extra supplies).

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FIGURE 1 "Only one foot by four-foot floorspace used".

Although online prepping forums were predominantly described as supportive spaces, participants acknowledged how they fostered competitive spirit with prepping prowess rendered synonymous with 'good' motherhood display (Harman & Cappellini, 2015). Failings as a prepper affected the women's sense of competency as 'good' mothers. Carefully managed, grandiose stockpiles were interpreted by most participants as indicative of the love and attention that 'good' mothers transferred into their stash and displayed via prepper-porn as Jane (who had 6–8 months of food/water stockpiled) explained:

> When I only had [a] couple of boxes of stuff, I felt awful, that I was late to the party and that I wasn't doing enough, acting quickly enough, for the children. Kind of that I was putting them at risk by not doing enough…I'm sorted now, and I can hold my head high online and show everything off.

While prepper-porn motivated Jane to accumulate more goods, to match the 'good' motherhood displayed online, a minority of our participants, like Sarah, commented on its "*vulgar and disgusting*" nature. Sarah highlighted how prepper-porn plagued anxieties, which "*risk[ed] mucking up people's mental health. Have you got this? Have you got that? I just can't afford to get all they have; it makes me feel awful, like I've failed*". A trained chef, Sarah planned to rely on her

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FIGURE 2 Carefully organized/labeled stockpile.

culinary skills and accumulated cultural capital to "*make the most*" of the two boxes of food that she managed to store under the stairs, on a restricted budget.

Placing child needs as integral to their efforts, the women embraced intensive motherhood discourse through assuming the individualization of risk, mitigated via precautionary consumption practices (MacKendrick, 2014). Movement between visibility/invisibility was carefully managed, tailored to different audiences to maintain their standing as 'good' mother in public and 'good' prepping mother in private. Hiding prep-work was necessary to avoid participants being 'othered' as neurotic, anxious, 'bad' mothers. Instead, participants 'othered' the ill-prepared. They downplayed their privilege in being able to prep and structural inequalities surrounding prep-work.

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FIGURE 3 Under-stairs cupboard with goods neatly arranged.

8 | THE (IM)MORALITY OF PREP-WORK

'Good', moral motherhood involves removing children from risk (Shirani et al., 2011) and meeting the universal moral ethic of sharing, caring, and not harming others, particularly innocent children (May, 2008). Participants demonstrated morality by removing their children from risk of hunger, anticipating post-Brexit shortages. Yet, prep-work revealed a potentially darker, immoral aspect of motherhood as participants envisaged who would/would not benefit from their stash. They refused to share their stockpiles with unprepared 'others', particularly those who voted to leave the EU, violating moral motherhood norms (e.g., generosity, connectedness, and do no harm) (Hays, 1996; Lee, 2008).

Participants were clear that they would not help those beyond their immediate family, should scarcity actualize ("*I have five, possibly 6 months of food, but I won't be sharing it with anyone beyond my house, as harsh as that sounds… definitely not the idiots that voted leave, they* can *all starve*"). The emotional consequences of violating moral motherhood norms (May, 2008) and intentionally causing sufferance to others were neutralized by participants. Participants enrolled intensive motherhood ideology (caring for *their own* children) to justify what could be read as morally dubious behavior. Drawing on a neoliberal responsibilization of individuals, participants redirected blame toward unprepared '(m)others' who were vilified as directly causing their children's future suffering through their lack of prep-work agency or voting behavior.

Brexit voters, and their offspring, were particularly 'othered' as unworthy of support ("*if it's my children or theirs that go hungry, I know who I'm choosing*"). Even participants like Hannah, Maria, and Sarah, who were sympathetic toward social inequality and initially reluctant to 'other', directed blame toward leave-voters, as Maria explained:

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> We did not vote for Brexit, we do not support the UK leaving the EU so I will try and make sure my family do not suffer as a result of other people's stupid, ill-thought through actions and lazy lack of awareness or competence at what Brexit will mean for us, the damage it will do to our country and to our children.

Whereas this subgroup of participants understood how social inequality was involuntarily imposed (c.f. Maria's earlier comment that prep-work was inaccessible to marginalized groups), supporting that Brexit was not so easily reconciled.

Existing research highlights the 'othering' of mothers mainly based on social class or income derision (Brenton, 2017; Wright et al., 2015), with lower-class 'others' characterized as lacking intellect and being easily duped (Tyler, 2008). Our data revealed a different, yet linked, 'othering' of the non-prepared: those who voted for Brexit, and as our participants explained, vicariously placed others at risk through their moral failure to 'reflect on the decisions they take and weigh up the consequences of their actions' (Smart & Neale, 1999: 114). Although the Brexit referendum cut across social classes, poorer households, and those characterized by lower education were widely portrayed as having voted for Brexit (Goodwin & Heath, 2016), yet more thorough analysis revealed how Brexit was disproportionally delivered by the affluent middle-class (Bhambra, 2017). Rather than direct blame upward, or to their white middle-class counterparts who fueled Brexit, participants, instead, directed criticism downward to lower-class 'others'. The middle class adopt a 'multitudinous effort not to be recognised as working class' (Skeggs, 1997: 74) with the working classes seemingly easier to target/criticize, already subject to derision (Tyler, 2008). Class derision was, however, not always so simplistic with participants critical of their wider (middle-class) family members, who similarly voted to leave the EU.

Participants revealed further glimpses of (im)morality when they explained how they envisaged securing their stockpile. Anna, for example, discussed repurposing her leisure skills to fend off looters amid imagined post-Brexit resource scarcity and civil unrest: "*I'm actually an archer, so I have a bow and arrow in the garage. And I'm a bloody good shot, I'm not kidding…I'd need to protect the family*". Anna's account transverses—and problematizes—accounts of 'good', moral motherhood. She enacts her maternal identity of caring for *her* children via prep-work but simultaneously envisaged harming others who posed a risk to their well-being (violating the moral ethic of care/not harming others). While Anna's view was most extreme among our sample, all participants expressed concern that prep-work and its labor should be protected.

While our sample appeared, to the outside world, more accustomed to quotidian, charitable ways of life, a small subset also planned to exploit others' unpreparedness and sufferance for personal gain. Envisaging post-Brexit supply and demand shortages ("*the shelves will be empty*"), participants like Paula purposefully added *additional* items (more usually alcohol, coffee, and tinned meats) to their stash to trade on the black market:

> I tell you what other thing that I've bought is good, decent coffee. We don't even drink coffee in our house, we're more tea drinkers. I've stashed some prize items away, just to trade…I've got a few jars of the decent stuff just in case an opportunity comes knocking. I bet some people would think that's grotesque, but it's not like I'm hoarding insulin or anything.

Themes of white middle-class privilege endured with Paula having financial means to exploit others' unpreparedness. Through intention to exploit the sufferance of the unprepared, participants recognized the 'grotesque' nature of their intentions (but not their classed privilege to be able to do so), violating mothers' more usual moralized maternal identity. Here, with the needs of their children in mind, the women oscillated between care work and temptation to exploit others for their family's gain.

9 | DISCUSSION

This article investigated the foodwork practices (DeVault, 1991; Sobal, 2017) of 21 white middle-class mothers who were preparing to protect their family from anticipated post-Brexit food shortages. Our analysis revealed the

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significant physical and emotional labor that the mothers undertook via prep-work to ensure that their children could be fed during envisaged resource scarcity. We respond to calls to reexamine and revalue the unpaid domestic work of women within the family (DeVault, 1991; Oakley, 1974) by documenting laborious prep-work. The first section of analysis highlighted prep-work stigma with preppers associated with neurotic or irresponsible 'others', whom participants approached for prep-work advice (with responsible intent). The second section foregrounded participants' careful movement between (in)visibility, maintaining display of 'good' motherhood across different (prepping/non-prepping) audiences. The third section illustrated (im)moral display of motherhood via prep-work. Participants prioritized food needs of their children; yet they refused to help others in need (the unprepared/Brexit supporters), violating moral motherhood norms.

Across each layer of analysis, we demonstrate how our white, middle-class participants engaged in a form of mother blame—'othering' unprepared '(m)others' who placed their children at risk of potential post-Brexit hunger. Through engaging in the stigmatized practice of prep-work, participants were, however, keen to avoid being 'othered' themselves, and we recognize the pervasive nature of intensive motherhood, which fueled prep-work and its secrecy. By exploring the intersection of foodwork, gender, and class, we make several linked contributions as we (1) extend foodwork categories, (2) illustrate a potentially darker side of intensive motherhood, and (3) introduce a different form of 'othering'. In doing so, we highlight (classed, material, and racial) privileges and inequalities, which surround prep-work and the 'othering' of a new parental underclass: the unprepared.

We introduce 'prep-work' to broaden Sobal's (2017) central foodwork categories of planning, shopping, and cooking. Prep-work involves emotional foodwork undertaken through a detailed needs analysis of which items to obtain and store. We extend foodwork categories by highlighting the *additional* foodwork involved in managing stockpiles (e.g., inventorying goods, rotating items to ensure minimal wastage, and learning new skills) and the greater imperative to *hide* this work from outsiders (due to prep-work stigma). Mothers disproportionately perform foodwork within families, and prep-work exacerbates further gender inequality within the family. Mothers' 'double-shift' (of paid work/unpaid domestic labor) is well-documented with prep-work aggravating the already considerable domestic burden of mothers through the additional tasks of anticipation, mitigation, and preservation which prep-work involves.

> 'Good' mothers engage appropriately with foodwork in all its guises. However, implicit in such discussion of 'good' motherhood is the privilege and resource of the (white) middle-class. We lend additional support to understanding the social inequalities surrounding foodwork, evidencing the class-based underpinning of those who can afford to engage in prep-work. Prep-work requires resource (time, financial, spatial) which is beyond the reach of 'others' in society. The resourcing of intensive motherhood disproportionally privileges the white, middle-class, who (as illustrated in our study) prefer to attribute specialist skills and abilities to themselves and their elevated parenting approach (as 'thrifty', savvy consumers), rather than acknowledging the disadvantage experienced by marginalized 'others' (e.g., lower income, lower class, mothers of color) who are unable to prep.

We illustrate a potentially darker side of intensive motherhood, revealed by prep-work. Intensive motherhood norms are often negatively experienced by women as an unrealistic idealization (O'Reilly, 2016). Yet, meeting this culturally pervasive discourse of 'good' motherhood drove participants' prep-work accounts. While prep-work was experienced as demanding and labor-intensive, participants felt compelled to prep to meet child needs, saving them from anticipated hunger. Although the lived reality of adhering to intensive motherhood is often impossible to meet (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), it nevertheless underpinned prep-work. This, we feel, illustrates the power of intensive motherhood ideology, which ('good') mothers are compelled to follow. Intensive motherhood ideology (however critiqued) is considered the 'gold standard' by which contemporary mothers are judged, so it is perhaps unsurprising that participants were reluctant to question or redress this dominant discourse for fear of being 'othered' as a lesser/incompetent parent.

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'Good', intensive mothers are 'the keepers of morality' (Hays, 1996: 30). Yet the episodic disruption of Brexit altered the women's motherhood approach. Certain moral issues (such as care for all others) appeared 'not relevant' in such extraordinary contexts. Prep-work revealed selfish, exploitative intent, allowing others to go without food. Participants' fears and anxieties surrounding meeting their own children's food needs, post-Brexit, and accordingly adhering to the values of intensive motherhood, drove their transgression of the maternal moral ethic of care. Yet the women enrolled the ideology of intensive motherhood to explain and justify their norm-violating behaviors, such is its pervasive effect. Accordingly, we contribute towards exploring the feminization of prepping (Barker, 2020) by illustrating how women draw on the moral ethic of care/'good' mother ideology to justify their prep-work in protecting their family at all costs, however extreme.

In recognizing the whiteness of our study, we acknowledge how mothers 'othered' by our participants could well have engaged in a different style of prep-work, which our data could not reveal. For example, Dow (2016) highlights how employed Black mothers in her study often sought help (e.g., childcare) from a network of extended community members. This more community-minded, offline style of motherwork could reveal an alternative to the individualistic/selfish prep-work accounts revealed by our data/practiced by our white middle-class participants. We recognize the racialized nature of prep-work and the need to explore whether 'other' groups would/could practice prep-work in a similar (or very different) manner.

While Brexit disruption and its envisaged difficulties could be considered an extraordinary and peculiar context, we have recently witnessed a range of extraordinary events, which have permeated everyday lives and become a new normal to contend with (e.g., Brexit, COVID-19, disruption caused by the war in Ukraine, and the cost-of-living crisis). It is possible that the darker side of motherhood, as revealed by prep-work, is present in other activities that mothers perform, yet conceal, so not to jeopardize their 'good' motherhood standing in public. However, we recognize the need to explore such issues within a broader participant base, mindful of the more community-minded approach of mothers of color, for example, which Dow's (2016) study suggests. Similarly, although our findings focus on mothers, future research could explore whether/how fathers (absent in our accounts) practice prep-work during future shortages (anticipated or actualized).

We illuminate a new underclass: the unprepared. The 'othering' of mothers is often a consequence of their classed position (Tyler, 2008), with working-class or low-income mothers characterized as deficient and inactive (Wright et al., 2015). While middle-class parenting is normalized and foundational to the lauded display of intensive motherhood, working-class motherhood is pathologized as deficient (Perrier, 2013). Economic disparities clearly hindered access to prep-work with our findings similarly illustrative of the 'othering' of lower classes. We show some understanding among our sample, however, of the (classed, income, and race-based) structural inequalities, which prohibited access to prep-work. While a smaller number of participants understood such conditions as demonstrative of restricted choice through involuntarily imposed economic and social disadvantage, another form of 'othering' (based on political views/Brexit voting behavior) could not be as readily overlooked.

However, this new form of othering was not always so clearly class-based. Our white middle-class participants criticized and 'othered' all those who failed to embrace 'good' intensive motherhood, which prep-work demonstrated, regardless of social class ('othering' the unprepared in general). Access to prep-work necessitated social, material, and individual resources, however, which our privileged, white middle-class sample failed to acknowledge. Given powerful discourses surrounding the moral and class dangers of being seen as a hoarder (Barker, 2020), this reframing of the non-hoarder (the 'unprepared') as pathologized within the intensive motherhood context is a significant outcome of our research.

10 | CONCLUSION

We have shown how prep-work is complex and imbued with contradictory tensions and behaviors. Returning to our research question, white middle-class mothers engaged in prep-work to ensure they could meet their children's

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needs during anticipated scarcity. Norms surrounding intensive motherhood (i.e., to remove the innocent child from risk) helped to rationalize their efforts. Prep-work was positioned by our white middle-class participants as demonstrative of 'good' moral motherhood. Unprepared '(m)others' were viewed as deficient, failing to shield their children from post-Brexit risk/hunger. The women's prep-work helped reconcile their children's needs but simultaneously transgressed maternal/feminine norms (i.e., altruism, connectedness, and desire not to harm), rendering such behavior as 'thinkable' and 'doable' (Murphy, 2004) during crisis.

In 'othering' the unprepared, participants overlooked their (classed, material, and racial) advantage, with financial and physical resources to store and manage stockpiles, viewing themselves as superior mothers, compared to unprepared, careless '(m)others' (Cairns et al., 2013). By framing their prepping practices as expressions of agency and empowerment, women drew accomplishment from their classed performances. However, despite prep-work becoming increasingly mainstream (Campbell et al., 2019), low-income mothers/mothers of color may find it more difficult to engage in prep-work than their white middle-class counterparts, while feeling considerable pressure to demonstrate their resilience (MacKendrick, 2014).

Given ongoing threats to ontological (in)securities (e.g., global pandemics, vicarious employment, and reductions in state support), further research is needed to investigate whether activities like prep-work will become more mainstream and visible over time. Exploration of the classed and raced nature of prepping and how/if those in less privileged positions approach (or can approach) such acts of resilience in a similar or different manner would be worthy of exploration. Given our homogenous sample, we also acknowledge that issues of race/ethnic status are somewhat missing from our analysis, as, indeed, they are from foodwork research in general (Brenton, 2017). What constitutes 'proper' food provision varies among ethnic/racial groups, with convenience/tinned foods (easily stored in prep-work) contrasting with the 'expected' displays of care that many mothers from racially minoritized groups feel compelled to provide (Chytkova, 2011). This needs further investigation, recognizing the whiteness of our sample and additional cultural barriers that 'other' mothers may encounter in undertaking prep-work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ORCID

Ben Kerrane https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2114-5965

ENDNOTES

[1] Dole refers to unemployment benefit in the UK.

[2] Bug-out bags allow quick evacuation following disaster. They contain essential supplies to grab (often left by the front door) during emergencies and contain equipment/food/water to last a set period (often 24/48 h).

[3] Tin foil is the UK equivalent of aluminum foil.

[4] PTA refers to Parents Teacher Association, which works to make schools a better place for children to learn (enrolling parents to help with fundraising).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Ben Kerrane is a professor of marketing at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. His research interests include family consumption, fatherhood, childhood, gender relations, and consumer socialization. He has presented his research to a range of audiences and has published in *Sociology*, *Gender, Work & Organization*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, and *Advances in Consumer Research*.

Katy Kerrane is a lecturer in Marketing at University of Liverpool Management School. Her research interests revolve around ethnicity and consumption. Her doctoral research explored the transition to motherhood drawing on a sample of second-generation British Indian women. She has presented her research to a range of academic audiences (e.g., British Sociological Association and European Advances in Consumer Research) and has published in *Sociology* and *European Journal of Marketing*.

Shona Bettany is a professor of marketing at Huddersfield Business School, University of Huddersfield. She is a consumer ethnographer focusing on consumer culture in all its guises but specifically on consumer trends and critical approaches to marketing and consumer research, with a particular interest in feminist criticality. She has presented her research to the US and European meetings of the Association for Consumer Research and has published in *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, *Marketing Theory*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, and the *European Journal of Marketing*.

David Rowe is a lecturer in marketing at the University of York. His doctoral research investigated the historical shift during 100 years of British sexual health advertising. He has published in *Sociology* and *Marketing Theory*.

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How to cite this article: Kerrane, Ben, Katy Kerrane, Shona Bettany, and David Rowe. 2023. "'Othering' the Unprepared: Exploring the Foodwork of Brexit-Prepping Mothers." *Gender, Work & Organization*: 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13086.

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