White and gendered aesthetics and attitudes of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking

Francesca Sobande (iD)
Cardiff University, UK

Abstract

Foodwork is a political matter, and baking is no exception. Many messages are associated with the symbolic significance of baking, such as idealised notions of white, middle-class domesticity, femininity and visibility. The rise in home-baking during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a surge in social media content, which conveys much about the different meanings ascribed to baking. Relatedly, scholarship on 'COVID-19 foodwork, race, gender, class and food justice' highlights that intersecting oppressions are implicated in such matters. Drawing on different lines of research that specify and address structural power relations (e.g. gendered whiteness), I analyse the aesthetics and accompanying attitudes conveyed via Instagram posts about #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking. In doing so, I draw and build on critical studies of whiteness and digital food media, and connections between consumerism and COVID-19. This work considers what such online content suggests about the relationship between a 'feminised, white, aestheticised ethos' and digital discourse and depictions regarding food, family, domesticity, work and rest. Consequently, this research ponders over whether the labour and framing involved in documenting #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking on Instagram reflects a neoliberal form of entrepreneurial 'freelance feminism', which is animated by the tension between the 'frequently polarized figures of "the feminist" and "the housewife"'. I examine the significance of three key themes related to #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking: (1) Gendered domestic labour and digital depictions and discourses of motherhood; (2) productivity, pausing and so-called 'soulfulness'; and (3) domestic minimalism and aesthetics of whiteness. In turn, this article critically reflects on the relationship between mediated constructions of gendered whiteness and baking, while echoing calls for more research that explicitly addresses dynamics between digital whiteness,

Corresponding author:
Francesca Sobande, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Two Central Square, Cardiff, CF10 1FS, UK.
Email: sobandef@cardiff.ac.uk

class, aesthetics, gendered racial capitalism, foodwork, feminism and online content creation.

Keywords

Aesthetic, COVID-19, creator economy, feminism, food, influencers, Instagram, labour, whiteness, women

Introduction

This article considers what Instagram posts about baking during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest about the relationship between mediated constructions of gendered whiteness (white femininity) and digital content concerning food(-making), domesticity, family, work and rest. Accounting for the ways that the intersections of race, gender and class are implicated in who was (and who was not) able to work (and rest) from home during the crisis, I examine depictions and discourse related to #pandemicbaking and #quarantine-baking. While baking became known as a common pastime during the COVID-19 crisis, the symbolic significance of baking long precedes it, and includes narratives related to the perceived 'healthy subject' (Tiusanen, 2021) and gendered depictions and discourses of domesticity (Casey, 2019; Casey and Littler, 2022; Hollows, 2016).

The rise in home-baking during the COVID-19 pandemic (The Economist, 2020) resulted in a surge in social media content, which conveys much about the different meanings ascribed to baking. Scholarship on 'COVID-19 foodwork, race, gender, class and food justice' (Swan, 2020) highlights that intersecting oppressions are entwined with such matters. Drawing on these different lines of research, this article analyses the aesthetics and accompanying attitudes conveyed via Instagram posts about baking during the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, this article ponders over whether the aesthetic labour and framing involved in documenting #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking on Instagram reflects a form of entrepreneurial 'freelance feminism', which is animated by the tension between the 'frequently polarized figures of "the feminist" and "the housewife"' (Hollows, 2016: 179). In turn, I build on critical studies of whiteness and digital food media (Perrier and Swan, 2020; Wilkes, 2021) and research on the connection between consumerism and COVID-19 (Arzumanova, 2021; Sobande, 2020, 2022; Sparke et al., 2023). I do so by illuminating gendered, classed and racialised dimensions of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content, such as depictions of domestic minimalism and their association with white middle-class femininities. Although the history of baking and its societal representation includes oppressive ideas about gender, womanhood, motherhood and homemaking, there are also examples of how baking can be imbued with expressions of agency that are akin to various feminist feelings.

My position echoes Casey (2019), whose work 'prioritizes women as active agents within, rather than passive receptors of, popular baking cultures' (p. 581). Casey's (2019) work highlights that the British baking competition series '*The Great British Bake Off* offers a version of baking that is both "hyper-domestic" and a type of "post-feminist homemaking", whereby feminist discourses of choice and equality are entangled with highly conventional modes of domesticity' (p. 579). Contrastingly, and 'blurring the line

between aesthetics and ideology' (Jezer-Morton, 2023) in different media contexts, baking is positioned in gendered ways that are anti-feminist. Jezer-Morton's (2023) work comments on the ideological messages of 'fairly cookie-cutter tradwife content', such as 'bed-making and bowl-stirring while barefoot in a floral dress, abundant sourdough, male dominion over women, and urgent warnings that the government is trying to disrupt the sanctity of the white hetero nuclear family'. Beyond the initial, and often prettified, surface of digital depictions and discourses of baking, are various structural and interpersonal power dynamics, made manifest in ideological messaging that reinforces oppressive ideas about gender, heteronormativity and family dynamics. Turning my attention to the aesthetics and attitudes of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking social media posts, I highlight the ways that gendered whiteness may be baked into such digital content.

Taking heed of Daniels (2012) echoing 'the call of other scholars for a more thorough critical interrogation of whiteness on the Internet and in Internet studies' (p. 712), this article focuses on the ways that gendered whiteness and mediated depictions/discourses of baking during the COVID-19 crisis coalesce. Dealing with dimensions of the gender, racial and class politics of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, the subsequent writing discusses the extent to which a form of 'freelance feminism' – which relates to feminist sentiments expressed as part of precarious digital work – may be part of Instagrammable baking. Accordingly, there is consideration of whether such social media portrayals of baking are connected to the sort of 'stories of "ordinary" domestic life' (Casey and Littler, 2022: 496) that are a feature of elements of influencer culture. After an outline of its theoretical underpinnings, this article continues by detailing the digital discourse analysis that it is based on and other methodological musings on baking. Then, the work moves on to discuss key findings and what they reveal regarding the ingredients of Instagrammable home-baking during the pandemic, as well as friction between feminism and the framing of some such content.

Beyond add justice, and stir: Black feminist studies of materiality and media

In the poignant words of Osei (2019), 'the emancipatory potential of material culture has often been categorically positioned as a superficial band-aid of sorts – a whimsical and egotistic distraction that undermines processes of real-time emancipatory work . . .'. (p. 735). However, as Osei (2019) demonstrates as part of a Black feminist autoethnography of gardening and aesthetic practices, material culture can also involve powerful expressions of creativity and self-fashioning. Put differently, aspects of aesthetic culture, including digital media and forms of foodwork, can be a site of struggle and oppression as well as a source of refuge and beauty. As is discussed in essential work on Black feminist cultural criticism, by Bobo (2001):

> The recovery of the merits inherent in quilt aesthetics has guided scholarly research into other forms of creativity and self-definition in women's domestic space and private worlds. The investigations into material cultural artifacts, such as gardening and food rituals, provide insight into ways women have shaped their environments and influenced their families and culture (p. xvii).

Therefore, while grappling with the relationship between gender, feminism, baking and Instagram, this article is intended to avoid dismissively framing or uncritically praising such elements of aesthetic, material and digital culture as either inherently anti-feminist or as innately feminist. In addition, by emphasising that digital cultures – food and otherwise – connect to material conditions and histories, I highlight that mediated discursive constructions of gendered whiteness stem from physical and structural realities.

As McMillan Cottom (2020a) impactfully explains, 'Internet technologies are central to the political economy of race and racism because Internet technologies are the politics and capital of capitalism as we presently experience it' (p. 441). In view of that, I recognise the potential for digital aesthetics and media to convey much about the nexus of race and gender (Wilkes, 2021), including gendered racial capitalism – 'the central role that differentials of race and gender play in shaping capitalism as a system of production' (Harris, 2021: ix) – and which propels the visibility and profitability of content created by/connoting white middle-class women. My work takes seriously the risk of assuming the liberatory qualities of aesthetic and material culture, including the digitally mediated aestheticisation of baking, while also acknowledging the powerful Black feminist aesthetic and material expressions that Bobo (2001) and Osei (2019) describe.

My analysis of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking posts is also attuned to how the visibility of online content is shaped by oppressive algorithms and platforms that reflect the intersections of antiblackness, sexism, misogyny, ableism, and many other forms of oppression (Bailey, 2021; Noble, 2018). Aligned with Black feminist work, which names and tackles the ways that whiteness is implicated in digital culture, I reiterate calls for more research that eschews ambiguous and amorphous 'inequalities' framings to ensure that whiteness – particularly, gendered whiteness – and specific forms of interconnected structural oppression are explicitly and adequately addressed (Wilkes, 2021).

Whiteness and aesthetics: white (digital) space and whitewashing labour

Prior studies affirm that 'popular representations of baking throughout the 20th and early 21st century have offered women a means of dealing with the structural effects of modernity, and anxieties surrounding the entrenchment of neoliberal ideologies' (Casey, 2019, p. 581). In dialogue with such work, I contend that contemporary popular representations of baking include the content clustered around #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, which connect to gendered, classed and racialised notions and experiences of work, leisure, and homemaking. The fraught relationship between food, consumption and power relations (Reese, 2019) is visible in the societal valorisation of depictions and discourses of middle-class domesticity during the COVID-19 crisis (Sobande and Klein, 2022), which contrasts with moralising and shaming responses to the domestic lives of working-class people, including individuals whose paid work could not be done from home during the pandemic. Namely, media and marketing representations of experiences and environments associated with the lives and values of white middle-class families are crucial to numerous advertising and branding campaigns across sectors which range from fashion retail to the food industry. As part of such messages, images and ideas of

whiteness and, typically, heteronormativity, are often promoted and framed as an idealised norm which is imbued with morality (e.g. 'The Good Family' and 'Nice White Ladies' – see the work of Daniels, 2021). Thus, marketplace representations include those that are rooted in 'the ideology of White aesthetics' (Kang, 1997) and 'reinforce whiteness as entitled to luxury' (Wilkes, 2021: 18), such as via popularised online aestheticisations of 'upper middle-class white femininity' (Wilkes, 2021: 2).

While Kang's (1997) conceptualisation of 'White aesthetics' particularly focuses on 'an epistemology of racial bodily aesthetics' (p. 285), my engagement with such work involves considering how whiteness may be embroiled in the aesthetics of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking – from the presentation of baking processes and food outputs to the composition and colour(lessness) of aesthetic backdrops. My analysis of these matters involves reflecting on elements of the digital documentation of food and food-making practices – precisely, the nexus of whiteness and femininity in relation to digital discourse on baking. Thus, the theoretical framework at the root of this article is also shaped by work on mediated whiteness (Daniels, 2012), 'whiteness and expressions of entitlement' (Wilkes, 2015), and societal notions of 'Nice White Ladies' and their ideological underpinnings (Daniels, 2021). I also draw from research on 'digital food femininity' (Perrier and Swan, 2020: 129) and digital food cultures that foreground a 'feminised, white, aestheticised ethos' (Lupton, 2020: 10). Such research includes work by Wilkes (2021) which involves a crucial analysis of the way that the clean eating trend is 'a vehicle for the ideals of white femininity' (p. 1), and shows how whiteness is produced through mediated and media processes.

In addition, work that informed my article includes Arzumanova's (2021), which incisively outlines how, in response to the Coronavirus crisis, 'the industries that make up the consumer design sector – interior design, decor, architecture, fashion and so on – quickly turned their attention to aestheticizing our new, increasingly private and isolationist realities' (p. 1). This, as Arzumanova (2021) points out, has involved 'reviving a spatial imaginary that indexes urban space according to race and class' (p. 3). On that note, studies of aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017) and the relationship between gender, feminism and food, have drawn attention to the ways that '[b]odies are made. They are made in historical time with respect to class, gender, geography, economy and aspiration' (Orbach, 2017: vii). Social media depictions and discourses of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking can be interpreted as being part of how bodies are portrayed and perceived. What I mean by that is that the bodies of content that such hashtags generate are connected to ideas and ideals of gendered, raced and classed bodies, as well as the 'spatial imaginaries' (Arzumanova, 2021) and associated attitudes that they inhabit and express.

The links between #pandemicbaking, #quarantinebaking and bodies also include beautification practices that people and their online photographs undergo, such as to aid paid entrepreneurial work and/or participate in media creation trends and practices associated with influencer culture and the creator economy. Although some examples of such content indicate who the person that baked the food is, what is more seldom signalled is who sourced the ingredients and how they were sourced.

As Bloom (2022) puts it, '[a]ll recipes have lives that extend well beyond their ingredient lists and codified directions – off the GPS – to encompass not only communities of chefs, home cooks and diners, but society as a whole' (p. 3). Cognizant of this, questions

remain regarding exactly who is doing the work and labour that results in various examples of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content, and particularly in terms of who is growing, harvesting, selling and, in many cases, transporting the produce that makes a recipe possible. So, 'I am mindful of the potential for some influencers (e.g. middle-class white women) to commercially benefit from the structural struggles faced by others (e.g. working-class Black women)' (Sobande, 2024: 119–120), including by becoming the face of practices, pastimes, perceived precarities and forms of freelance employment, in ways that obscure the gendered, classed and racialised work of oppressed women. To draw on the vital research and writing of McMillan Cottom (2020b), '[t]oday, inequality – especially racial inequality – is not only produced through the job market but through people's ability to hustle'. Continued analysis of such issues must be part of research that takes seriously 'the need for a critical understanding of whiteness in Internet studies' (Daniels, 2012: 695), such as by researching the relationship between gendered whiteness, class, geo-cultural power regimes and certain protective framings of the influencer industry and creator economy.

When factoring in the many, and often globalised, layers of work and labour that contribute to baking, eating and consumption in general, the digital entrepreneurialism of some #pandemic bakers might be regarded as an entrepreneurialism which is made possible by the often low paid, unpaid and exploited labour of working-class people in sectors such as agriculture, hospitality and retail. Of course, some people grow and harvest their own ingredients, but even in such cases, being able to do so tends to require access to seeds and materials that may be the outcome of the labour of others who face harmful working conditions in factories and fields around the world. The process of 'From Seed to Feed' (Contois and Kish, 2022: 1) is one that is often opaque, at best, on Instagram. Therefore, although my analysis of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content focuses on posts that are visible to me, I am aware that many of the details of the seed to feed processes that underpin them are absent.

Methodological ingredients

Cooking up social media analysis

Baking was undeniably entwined with domesticity long before the COVID-19 crisis. However, the focus on 'staying at home' during this time means that the hashtags studied in this work are especially tied to societal notions of domesticity. As this research explores aspects of the aesthetics and attitudes communicated by tagging posts with #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, Instagram content was analysed because the social media platform focuses on visual culture and capturing moments. The social media data analysis involved focusing on the top 100 #pandemicbaking posts and the top 100 #quarantinebaking posts that were visible to me on Instagram in June 2022 (spanning from 2020 to 2022). A spreadsheet of information was created to collate the date, uniform resource locator (URL), visual details and caption of each post. Following elements of Sligh and Abidin's (2023) approach to analysing Instagram content, '[c]aptions were analyzed for the presence of hashtags, mentions (using the @ sign to "tag" another Instagram user) and emojis' (p. 624), as well as being interpretively and iteratively analysed to discern key themes.

As this research relates to discursive issues that require attention to be paid to the details of meaning-making, forms of framing and social media, the analytical approach adopted was qualitative. Based on the theoretical framework outlined earlier in this article, analysis involved examining what such online content suggests about white and gendered aesthetics and attitudes conveyed via #pandemicbaking and #quarantine-baking posts. For example, drawing on Perrier and Swan's (2020) analysis of 'verbal and visual texts which represent white femininity and the aestheticisation of food waste' (p. 130), I analysed textual and visual allusions to white femininity and domestic whiteness more broadly.

Informed by Vásquez's (2022) work, which illuminates the complexities of dealing with multimodal discourse, various component parts of Instagram content were analysed. As well as reviewing the 200 posts, time was spent reflecting on the biographic explanation and 10 most recent posts of the Instagram account from which each was posted. This provided a sense of what the 'accounts normatively posted' (Sligh and Abidin, 2023: 623). Apart from a few of the Instagram accounts, the majority were not explicitly dedicated to professional baking or culinary brands. So, the corpus of social media content analysed may be interpreted as consisting of posts that are more 'every-day' in nature than 'manicured'. Here, it is helpful to turn to the insightful influencer industry research of Hund (2023):

> The industrial construction of authenticity is everywhere media industries are, particularly in times when people who create media content – not just influencers, but journalists and pundits, designers and musicians, and everyday people looking for an audience – have little to lose and a whole lot to gain by cultivating the right kind of 'realness' online (p. 9).

While the Instagram posts of non-professional and unaffiliated bakers can have a polished appearance, as such posts are not typically associated with a specific external brand, they may be interpreted as having a more relatable, mundane and even 'real' quality than explicitly corporate content of a comparable nature. Accordingly, such #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking posts may be associated with domesticity and daily life, more so than business activity and modes of marketing. Therefore, such content is brimming with visual and textual material that may reflect various notions, and even contradictions, of domesticity, work and rest.

Musings on cake-baking and research

Much like the way that baking processes are sometimes presented as impeccable on social media, academic methodologies are often outlined in ways that convey a neatness that conceals their messy qualities. Terms such as 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' are sometimes used to suggest a tidiness that most, if not all, research projects lack. Research, like life, is more than the mere sum of its parts, and can be unwieldy as well as brilliantly unpredictable. Mindful of this, although analysis of social media content is the crux of this article, the overall methodological approach is also shaped by my own experiences of cake-baking and their entanglements with research. Fruitful research is often influenced by the fluid and everyday ways that ideas percolate, such as moments of thinking

and reflecting that occur beyond the context of systematically scrolling through and studying content. In other words, in addition to being informed by the theoretical framework outlined in this work and the social media analysis that has been detailed, my analytical approach was inspired by the tone and tenor of day-to-day content that appeared on my online timelines, my previous research experiences, conversations with friends and family, and how Black feminism shapes my life and the position from which I work.

My prior research has included consideration of how baking food (e.g. cake), can contribute to research interview dynamics (Sobande, 2018):

> Amoke [pseudonym] kindly took my coat upon arriving and informed me that she had put a cake in the oven shortly before. We agreed that she would check on this throughout the interview.
>
> Indeed, 'ceremonies around food have long been significant in Black people's lives' (Bobo, 2001: xvii) . . .
>
> **Over Cake**
> You keep your eyes on the time.
> Watchful of a clock but mindful of our conversation,
> in all its start and stop glory.
> The detours of questions that only lead to more.
> It swells and rises,
> as we speak.
> Back and forth,
> go words,
> between us.
> Leaving room
> for cake.
>
> – *Research diary*, 3 October 2016

In this article, I move away from focusing on the materiality of baking and how it can contribute to the rhythms of research – from the relaxing scent of a cake in the oven to the appreciation of generous hospitality provided by someone who was interviewed. Instead, here, I analyse digitally mediated depictions and discourses of baking; but in doing so, I am reminded of the Black feminist feelings and foodwork involved in privately sharing cake in a domestic space during a research interview. Conscious of this, while my article focuses on baking that is made visible on Instagram, it was approached with an awareness of the reality that many different baking experiences exist away from social media. Further still, Reese et al. (2021) have articulated and tended to the beauty and brilliance of 'Baking as Black Method', as part of vital work that considers questions such as 'What can sifting, zesting, and whisking teach us about the process of researching and writing about Black life?' (Reese et al., 2021). Hence, although my article is not based on a methodology that foregrounds 'Baking as Black Method', it is intended to be in dialogue with facets of such expansive work, including by reflecting on different raced, gendered and classed notions and experiences of domesticity, work and rest.

There are, therefore, many ingredients that make up the methodology at the heart of this article, and which could be mixed in various ways; but ultimately, this work involved critically analysing Instagram posts, while contextualising them in relation to broader discourses and depictions that played a prominent role in media and public discussions of baking during that time. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss every Instagram post in detail, so instead, this work reflects on illustrative examples of the key themes identified.

Gendered domestic labour and digital depictions and discourses of motherhood

While the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has 'foregrounded women's exploitation in the home and challenged feminism to once again go beyond middle-class concern' (Crispin, 2020), it has also highlighted distinct differences between many people's experiences of work and leisure. Despite the common narrative that at the peak of the pandemic everyone spent most of their time at home, numerous individuals had to continue to work outside of the environment that they live in, such as nurses, doctors and supermarket retail workers who were temporarily dubbed 'key workers' and 'essential workers' (Horgan, 2021). Expressly, more middle-class white people were at home, able to post Instagram pictures of their pandemic baking and therapeutic practices, while many people of colour had to work on the front lines in care homes, on buses and in the National Health Service (NHS).

In the words of Bloom (2022) on 'The secret life of recipes':

> Where did the recipe come from? What ingredients are in it? Are there alternative ways to prepare the dish? Who gets to make it? Who eats it, and under what circumstances? What is its significance to the eaters? And to those for whom it's taboo, or who simply don't find it to their taste? What connections does it have with other recipes? With other cooks or chefs? (p. 3)

It is with this in mind that I analyse depictions and discourses of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking. Examples of such content include posts that emphasise messages about luxuriating in 'wellness', 'fun' and 'weekend ease', alongside images of intricately decorated loaves of baked goods, which despite the breezy tone of the accompanying messages, may have taken a considerable amount of time and effort to create. Accompanying hashtags such as #healthmama, #eatingwell and #healthypantry hint at the morality imbued messages that allude to being a 'good' mother.

While it is not possible to determine the racial identities of everyone who has posted Instagram content using the hashtags #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, the dearth of depictions of brown-skinned people is noticeable. This, paired with the muted colour palette of many such posts, results in streams of content that may convey an aspirational domesticity that is far removed from, and actively excludes, many people of colour. In the words of Wilkes (2021) on 'Eating, looking, and living clean', '[i]ndeed, the effectiveness of neoliberalism has been the way in which its agents have maintained control over narratives regarding ideal subjects and this has been entwined with the universalizing tendencies of whiteness' (p. 1). Aesthetic whiteness relates to much more

than just the identity of the person behind such aestheticisation. It can include markers of a 'feminised, white, aestheticised ethos' (Lupton, 2020: 10) and examples of 'techniques of white femininity' (Wilkes, 2021: 4), such as visual and textual cues in digital content (e.g. URLs, hashtags associated with predominantly white wellness communities of women, and images of beige/cream-coloured interiors that literally connote whiteness). Also, '[d]espite notions of relatability and generalizability, there are strict parameters around who can access contemporary femininity that is highly valued' (Wilkes, 2021, p. 4), and throughout history in predominantly white societies femininity has often solely been ascribed to white cisgender women. Ergo, much feminine-coded digital content is equated with whiteness.

While examining #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content, I aim to contribute to a quickly growing body of work that addresses pressing questions regarding 'what ideologies infuse today's digital culinary infrastructures, and what do these interventions of making, communication and critique reveal about current visions of both 'good food' and the 'good life'?' (Feldman and Goodman, 2021: 1227). Relatedly, analysing the nexus of domestic labour and influencer culture, Casey and Littler (2022) observed the following:

> In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of female influencers on Instagram who not only offer tips and advice to their followers but also advertise products intended to help facilitate the various domestic labour practices (cooking, cleaning, washing, childcare) that have historically been performed predominantly by women (p. 49).

Such research affirms that '[t]he *neoliberal* context of these social dynamics – social media, everyday domestic life, new modes of entrepreneurialism and gendered self-fashioning – is key' (Casey and Littler, 2022, p. 491). As well as relating to the world of cleaning influencers (cleanfluencers), these dynamics drive aspects of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking Instagram content, which includes social media posts that allude to the empowerment of women through the supposed stress release of home-baking, and the prospect of them developing digital entrepreneurial skills, or at least a visible digital presence, through their online documentation of baking practices.

Although the gender identity of people making such social media posts is not always disclosed, visual and textual facets of them include discernably gendered elements, such as accompanying descriptions and hashtags about motherhood, marriage, daughters and femininity, and/or posted visuals that point to this too (e.g. an illustration portraying a white woman cradling a baby). In one case, an Instagram post analysed was written from the perspective of a baby thanking their mother for feeding them, which highlights how narratives about/of children are enmeshed with online discourses of baking, and, arguably, imagined 'Nice White Ladies' (Daniels, 2021). Use of the imagined point of view of the baby expressing gratitude, rather than a self-praising first-person voice, may also reflect that constructions of modesty are caught up with mediated and universalising portrayals of middle-class white women as relatable (Wilkes, 2021).

As Swan (2020) notes, '[u]npaid domestic foodwork became an additional load for many women during lockdown' (p. 696). Therefore, although #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking includes the baking experiences of people of different genders, it is

particularly associated with the experiences of women. Furthermore, as Jezer-Morton (2023) notes about tradwife content, which is salient in strands of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, the landscape of depictions of baking on social media include posts of 'calming visuals of someone kneading sourdough and pouring milk from one big glass container into another big glass container (they love doing this)', which you may view 'without realizing that you're actually consuming covertly white-nationalist content'. With that in mind, both the gender and racial politics of digital food media requires continued critical attention, including as part of analyses that account for distinct differences between the lives and (anti-)feminist positions of various women.

On 28 March 2020, Clifford (2020) reported that '[a]s of Friday, the hashtag #stress-baking had over 26,000 posts on Instagram, while #quarantinebaking had nearly 12,000'. In February 2021, people continued to write about the power of pandemic baking. 'Anecdotally and instinctively, many of us know how a couple of hours in the kitchen gathering and chopping ingredients, getting creative with a challenging recipe or simply kneading dough can make us feel better' (Brasted, 2021). By November 2022 #quarantinebaking had more than 342,000 posts, and similar hashtags such as #pandemicbaking had more than 24,000. Clearly, these baking practices are still very present in society, or, at least, appear to be very visible online. Content tagged with #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking is not solely created and posted by parents but it does overlap with the momfluencer world in ways that reflect the reality that contemporary experiences of motherhood and times of crisis are entwined with the pressures and precarious promises of influencer culture. While commenting on the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic catalysed an increase in momfluencers is beyond the focus of this article, what is apparent is that some of the conventions of the pre-existing momfluencer industry (e.g. depictions of domesticity and baking) map on to key characteristics of the #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking landscape.

Instagram posts about baking during the pandemic include content that is framed as promoting family values, such as by upholding norms associated with motherhood (e.g. demonstrating how to feed your children, and how to teach them how to bake and feed themselves), which align with the aesthetics and attitudes of much tradwife material. This is not to suggest that all such content simply reinforces heteronormative and gendered expectations of parenting and family life. Rather, some such content reflects that what #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking entails can, in some cases, be a form of, typically gendered, care work. Consequently, care must be taken to avoid dismissing the digital documentation of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking as being nothing more than another social media trend, as such posts are the by-product of a range of complicated factors and experiences that are coloured by the interconnected effects of race, gender, class and other structural power relations. That said, such content is not beyond reproach, particularly when accounting for how it may, at times, simply valorise aesthetics and gendered ideals of middle-class domesticity in ways that 'obfuscate the predominantly precarious and working-class labour of those who farm and provide the ingredients that make such baking possible' (Sobande, 2022, p. 24).

Any attempt to identify the potentially feminist qualities of #quarantinebaking and #pandemicbaking social media posts, including the foodwork that they relate to, must wrestle with the opaqueness of exactly who and what did the various forms of work and

labour that led to such an Instagrammable aesthetic. Stating this does not serve as a caveat for this article. Instead, I make this comment to clarify the unavoidably imperfect and interpretivist nature of perceptions and understandings of the potentially gendered, raced and classed attributes of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking. Aware of the limitations of analysis of visible digital content, in analysing this topic I seek to emphasise the importance of critically reflecting on who and what is absent and out of shot from such posts.

Productivity, pausing and so-called 'soulfulness'

During the pandemic, 'many women – already disproportionately affected by furloughs and unemployment due to women's overrepresentation in the service jobs in hotels, travel and restaurants most directly impacted by lockdown orders – had to step away from work in order to prioritise caregiving responsibilities' (Crispin, 2020). Such circumstances of precarious employment and heightened caring demands result in conditions that are ripe for a rise in freelance forms of work or, at least, expanding entanglements of entrepreneurialism and gendered forms of digital self-representation and aesthetic labour. Cue the ascent of marketable messages about productivity and pausing, some of which coalesce in the form of social media narratives about baking. Think, less 'rise and grind' and more 'rest and bake', which raises questions about what constitutes work, leisure and care during times of global crisis, and who tends to have access to which experiences (often, at the expense of others).

As is pointed out in Dini's (2022) research on #cleanergate, popular discourses of home life during the pandemic are part of 'a story that skews white, middle class and hetero – while perniciously reinforcing conservative notions of domesticity', including the narratives of white, middle-class feminists who

> reinforced the assumption that men and children were incapable of housework, while implying that the safety of some women (the working-class, immigrant, and women of colour who comprise the majority of professional cleaners) was worth sacrificing for the sake of others (wealthy white ones)' (p. 181).

I cannot determine whether any of the people who posted the #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking posts analysed would claim such a position, but a thread woven throughout much of the content was the tidiness and sparseness of the environmental backdrop of images of food. In short, such content was free of mess, begging the questions: who did the cleaning and tidying? Would knowing those answers complicate perceptions of such content as depicting restfulness and/or productivity?

The pronounced and codependent idealisation of 'nice white spaces' (Dini, 2022) and, arguably, allusions to imagined 'Nice White Ladies' (Daniels, 2021) during the pandemic, includes examples of aesthetic whiteness in #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content. Some of such content simultaneously pushes messages of wellness and productivity (e.g. 'eat well' to 'work better') and empowerment and entrepreneurialism (e.g. 'self-care' to 'hustle') in ways that may be akin to a form of 'freelance [neoliberal] feminism', predominantly embedded in the experiences of white, middle-class women,

for whom both rest and sustainable paid work from home have been possible throughout the pandemic and even before it.

Photographic images of individuals are few and far between in the collage of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content available on Instagram, but pictures of people are still part of some posts. Thus, such digital documentation of baking during the COVID-19 crisis is still linked to portrayals of people and their bodies – from what they eat, to how some individuals pose alongside their baked goods. Explicit reference to work is absent from many of the #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking posts, but some do refer to productivity or allude to it by using descriptors that ascribe certain values to the baked goods, and hint at competitive elements of this practice too (e.g. #showstopper, #elegantsimplicity, #breadart). Moreover, some posts include text-based visuals that feature spirited statements about life, including the sentiment that surviving the COVID-19 crisis is a form of productivity. Such allusions to productivity and its value are symptomatic of the pervasiveness of a capitalist logic, which results in compulsions to justify the worthiness of something, such as baking, by suggesting that it is productive in nature.

Sometimes societally referred to as a coping mechanism, #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking became synonymous with discourse on health, care, wellbeing and even pausing and disengaging from the pressure to be productive. Contrastingly, it has also become associated with (side)hustle culture and the online efforts of people – particularly women – who have sought to source new income strands via digital entrepreneurialism. While the potentially cathartic qualities of baking are not at all contested in this article, it is important to consider the problematic impact of baking uncritically being regarded as therapeutic and, even, inherently soulful. Baking takes time, energy and resources, that certainly not everyone has access to. Also, baking is often work – from baking as unpaid care work to baking as paid labour. For these reasons, it is vital that #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content is viewed through a lens that is sensitive to the soul-nourishing nature of baking to some people and the fact that baking can be work and is a far cry from therapy and catharsis for many others.

As Clifford (2020) noted, it was 'pandemic baking', which particularly took social media by storm and became synonymous with discussions of coping mechanisms, care and family time during the crisis. Instagram posts that signal this articulation include content captioned using hashtags such as #rest, #easyfamilymeals, #bakeyourworldhappy, #familysupper, and #creativebaking, which appear to be connected to other 'contemporary representations of baking as "fun" rather than as work' (Casey, 2019: 579). Other accompanying hashtags such as #soulfulliving reflect the reality that some #pandemicbaking content may be part of a wider wellness industry, which has spawned a digital landscape that tends to equate consumerism with nourishment and often flattens feminism into marketable material mainly fronted by slender and able-bodied white women (Wilkes, 2021).

The genre of #pandemicbaking content that is situated as exemplifying #souffulliving contains various ideological elements, and often seems to be distinctly detached from the Black American history and culture of soul food. As such, social media posts about 'soulful' baking during COVID-19 include content that features visuals (e.g. austere yet aspirational aesthetics and beige palettes) and written textual elements (e.g. 'nourish')

that can resemble those of online 'wellness' food media, which is known for discursively upholding a distinctly disciplined/disciplining gendered whiteness – namely, expressions and experiences of white, middle-class, femininity focused on diets of 'clean' and 'pure' food (Wilkes, 2021). Ultimately, digital narratives about #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking include those teetering towards postfeminist 'self-improvement' food messaging rather than emphasising a sense of sustenance.

At times, positioning #pandemicbaking as soulful may even invoke a post-racial wholesomeness that veers into the terrain of spirituality that is often associated with communing around soul-nourishing food and the breaking of bread, but without engaging with the Black history and culture of soul food. Some of this content includes posts that promote the perspectives of conservative and religious 'trad' mothers and wives who comment on the virtues of women demonstrating home-baking. Such content sometimes contrasts this activity with others that are positioned as deviant (e.g. children watching TV and spending time on the Internet). Thus, while the invocation of 'soulfulness' as part of #pandemicbaking posts may initially seem innocuous, in some cases, such whitewashing posts push puritanical perspectives that are at odds with many feminist positions and uphold restrictive and heteronormative ideas about gender roles (e.g. who is expected to do the feeding and who is expected to be fed).

In the words of Hollows (2008) on home-making and domestic cultures '. . . reheating a can of beans or creating a "family kitchen" might be experienced as leisure activities, they are also undoubtedly experienced as labour by many people' (p. 75). The comments of Hollows (2008) highlight that it is not only making a meal seemingly from scratch that is a form of labour. Recognition of the labour that can be involved in reheating tinned food is a reminder of the oppressiveness of moralising that underpins aspects of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content that frame home-baking as a 'good' and 'wholesome' craft, while implying that eating preprepared food is somehow less 'wholesome' or even soulless. Such binary ideas about 'good' and 'bad' approaches to preparing and eating food are often ultimately rooted in sexist, misogynist, classist, racist and fatphobic ideas about how women should spend their time (e.g. cooking, baking and feeding others) and what they should and should not eat (e.g. avoid eating foods deemed as 'processed' due to an assumption that it is likely to lead to gaining weight).

As well as describing what was baked and how it tastes or looks, some #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking Instagram posts include explanations of what 'this' is not, in ways that point to the existence of different hierarchical genres of such content (e.g. luxury #pandemicbaking and potentially more relatable homely #pandemicbaking). Although such distinctions articulate differences between Instagram content about baking during the pandemic, they stop short of overtly naming how disciplining, gendered, racialised and classed notions of wellness (e.g. #realfood) and appearing to try too hard are implicated in this. While they were in the minority of content analysed, Instagram posts that seem to revel in the perceived imperfection of what was baked or visual evidence of the seemingly unedited baking process (#unfiltered), might move towards a framing that some tenuously deem to be potentially feminist due to its refusal to mask (some of) the mess of making or to perform the perfectionism that is often demanded of women. Relatedly, the research of Casey and Littler (2022: 490) highlights that the

online content of cleaning influencers (cleanfluencers) during the crisis has involved depicting 'a light-hearted yet loving cultivation of domestic cleanliness'. What appears to be a relatively manicured and muted aesthetic across much of the #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content, amounts to a domestic minimalism, complimenting a marketable domestic cleanliness, certain concepts of 'clean' eating (spaces) (Wilkes, 2021), and cultivating overall white aesthetics.

Domestic minimalism and aesthetics of whiteness

'Food is hot right now, a trendy as well as life-sustaining topic' (Bloom, 2022, p. 1). However, as Perrier and Swan (2020) affirm, 'digital food studies as a field has yet to grapple in any meaningful way with how digital representations of food are irrevocably entangled with race, and with white femininity' (p. 131). Responding to their calls for more work that addresses such issues, and informed by extant studies that do (Wilkes, 2021), this article examined white and gendered aesthetics and attitudes of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking. Many such Instagram posts depict immaculate baked goods that are free from the surrounding clutter that can be part of some people's experiences of baking, and the everyday mess in/of many people's lives. This visual minimalism may uphold a marketable – or at least, aesthetically appealing – spatial imaginary that dovetails with discursive constructions of a gendered whiteness which typifies certain online 'wellness' scenes and their accompanying disciplining concepts of 'purity', 'cleanness' and 'nourishment'.

That said, digital content that accompanies different hashtags such as #blackgirlcooking, which cultivates Black digital culinary communities (Caldwell, 2022), distinctly differs to #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking posts, and is far removed from hollow, post-racial and postfeminist notions of 'soulfulness' and 'self-improvement'. The sentiments of social media posts about baking during COVID-19 vary and can be shaped by how they are captioned, and whom by. However, #quarantinebaking and #pandemicbaking posts that blend beige aesthetics and interiors (e.g. #naturalcolour) with gendered messages about domesticity, rest, productivity and/or parenthood, include content that discursively points to gendered whiteness – specifically white, middle-class, femininities and furnishings. Such digital content seems symptomatic of 'a post-pandemic discourse of the urban environment, where racialized urban space is newly marked as contaminated and where wealthy, mostly white consumers are urged to seek suburban retreat' (Arzumanova, 2021: 2–3), where they may even benefit financially from digitally documenting such domesticity.

The research of Hollows (2008: 23) documents that during Victorian British times, '[d]omestic material culture signified the idea of home as haven from industrialized public sphere'. In a similar vein, the muted and sometimes completely colourless interiors that appear to be a defining feature of some #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content are suggestive of how, as Arzumanova (2021) observes, whiteness quite literally has become a marker of domestic sanctuary in ways that are raced, gendered and classed. The aesthetic minimalism and whiteness of some visuals that have been tagged with #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, may reflect that practices that are societally praised and promoted as coping mechanisms during (and

beyond) times of societal crisis, are typically those deemed to be 'tasteful' by white and middle-class standards (e.g. 'nice white spaces' – see the work of Dini, 2022), which are implicated in the spatial imaginaries of the interior design industry (Arzumanova, 2021), 'contemporary neoliberal food culture' (Wilkes, 2021), and digital entrepreneurial domains. So, even if #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking includes expressions of neoliberal feminism – be it in the form of appreciating and supporting the creativity and digital entrepreneurialism of (some) women or calling for more substantial recognition of their domestic and care work – such content includes the posts of people who are curiously reluctant to portray life in full colour (mess, and all). After all, as Wilkes (2021: 3) notes, 'neoliberalism ignores structural racism in its discourse of freedom to choose your future'.

There have been times 'when home-baking during the crisis was misguidedly equated with a radical refusal to bend to societal pressures of productivity by appearing to embrace seemingly "restful", yet often essentially gendered and "traditional" practices of home life' (Sobande, 2022: 24). Regardless of an appearance of ease or the performance of casualness, baking processes and their online documentation are always made possible by forms of work and labour. These include forms of work and labour from which some women benefit (e.g. predominantly white middle-class mothers in the United Kingdom who can purchase the ingredients for baking, but do not have to farm or harvest them), and which oppresses other women (e.g. Black and Asian working-class women who work in precarious and often dangerous farming and harvesting roles in Latin America, the Caribbean, Southeast and West Asia). Thus, claims of the feminist and entrepreneurial nature of some #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking endeavours must be critically contextualised by carefully considering exactly who and what makes such baking and its potentially popular digital documentation possible.

The feminist credentials of #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking content continue to be up for debate, as do the intricacies of whose experiences and perspective of feminism, if any, such content symbolises. However, what is apparent is some of the myriad ways that the compounded impact of race, gender, class and capitalism influences this patchwork of content, some of which, arguably, reflects the pervasiveness of gendered white aesthetics, experiences and spatial imaginaries, including during times of global crisis. We are now at a point in time that has been referred to as a state of permanent crisis – permacrisis, raising questions about how notions of 'ordinary' and 'everyday' life – including digital food practices and domestic spaces – might change. With that in mind, there remains a need for more research on normative and digital discourses of gendered whiteness, including by studying changing digital food trends and norms.

Data availability statement

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ORCID iD

Francesca Sobande iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4788-4099

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Biographical note

Francesca Sobande is a writer and senior lecturer in digital media studies at Cardiff University. She is author of *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), *Consuming Crisis: Commodifying Care and COVID-19* (Sage, 2022) and *Big Brands Are Watching You: Marketing Social Justice and Digital Culture* (University of California Press, 2024). Francesca is also co-editor with Akwugo Emejulu of *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* (Pluto Press, 2019), and is co-author with layla-roxanne hill of both *Black Oot Here: Black Lives in Scotland* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and *Black Oot Here: Dreams O Us* (2023).