

Triangular Ethnography: A Ludological Approach to Academic Motherhood

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Abstract: This study explores the complexities of professional and caregiving roles experienced by academic mothers through the innovative framework of Triangular Ethnography. Integrating feminist ethnography and ludology, the study employs memes as ethnographic prompts in a game-based methodology to illuminate the challenges, resilience, and humor of academic motherhood. Participants engaged in randomized storytelling rounds that revealed key themes: the unrelenting emotional labor of being the *default* parent, the blurred boundaries between work and home, the strategic use of humor as resistance, adaptive coping through strategic play, and the undervaluation of academic labor by family, society, and institutions. The findings contribute to feminist scholarship by offering insights into the lived realities of academic mothers while advocating for systemic reforms in institutional policies and academic culture. Methodologically, the study highlights the potential of ludological approaches for qualitative inquiry, emphasizing relationality, reflexivity, and the transformative power of play.

Keywords: Triangular Ethnography, academic motherhood, feminist ethnography, ludology, emotional labor

Introduction

The intersection of academic motherhood and feminist ethnography presents a compelling lens through which to examine the complex dynamics of professional and personal identities (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Mason et al., 2013). Women in academia often navigate unique challenges, balancing the intellectual rigor of their professions with the emotional labor of caregiving (Hochschild, 1983; Hokka et al., 2022). This dual burden is compounded by systemic barriers within academic institutions, where policies and cultures frequently fail to accommodate the realities of working mothers (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). The lived experiences of academic mothers offer valuable insights into broader sociocultural dynamics, yet these narratives are often underexplored or relegated to anecdotal reflections rather than rigorous inquiry.

Feminist ethnography provides a critical framework for examining these experiences, emphasizing relationality, reflexivity, and the systemic critique of power dynamics (Denzin, 2017). By centering the voices of women and challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge production, feminist ethnography enables a nuanced exploration of how academic mothers navigate their intersecting identities (Haraway, 1988; Collins, 2000). In particular, the collaborative and dialogic elements of feminist methodologies align with the relational nature of storytelling, fostering a space where lived experiences can be shared, examined, and theorized collectively (Ellis et al., 2011).

Meanwhile, ludology, the study of games and play, offers a complementary perspective for exploring the strategic decision-making and coping mechanisms inherent in academic motherhood. Rooted in the concept of *meaningful play* (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), ludology provides a unique methodological framework for simulating and reflecting on complex social roles (Bogost, 2007; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). In this study, we integrate the emerging ludic scholarship (Zhu, 2026) with feminist ethnography to create a methodological approach: *Triangular Ethnography*, a relational and game-based framework that uses memes as ethnographic prompts. This proposed method not only captures the humor, struggles, and resilience of academic mothers but also engages with the intersection of individual and collective meaning-making.

This paper examines how the triangulated dialogue of three academic mothers, mediated through meme-based ludological interactions, illuminates the challenges and strategies of navigating academia and motherhood. Through this lens, we explore the lived experiences of academic mothers, contributing to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that merges qualitative inquiry with playful and reflexive methodologies.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How do academic mothers navigate the dual roles of professional obligations and caregiving responsibilities within the context of systemic and cultural challenges in academia?
2. What insights into these experiences can be revealed through a ludological exploration, where memes are used as playful yet critical tools for reflection and dialogue?

Triangular Ethnography: A Methodological Innovation

To explore these questions, we introduce *Triangular Ethnography*, a methodology that combines elements of feminist ethnography, ludology, and collaborative storytelling. This approach is rooted in three pillars:

Relational Dynamics. Drawing from feminist ethnography, it emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge through dialogic exchanges among participants, highlighting relationality and collective meaning-making (Ellis et al., 2011).

Game-Based Framework. Inspired by ludological principles, the study adopts a meme-centered game structure to simulate and reflect on the strategic decision-making and emotional labor inherent in academic motherhood (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

Interdisciplinary Triangulation. By engaging three participants (the triangular framework) in dialogue around shared themes, the methodology creates a rich, multi-voiced narrative that reveals nuanced perspectives and emergent patterns.

The triangular framework of this ethnography represents the three participants and embodies the intersection of individual experiences, shared reflections, and systemic critiques. This dynamic process fosters a layered understanding of the complexities academic mothers face, bridging personal narratives and broader institutional structures.

Interdisciplinary Relevance and Contributions

The interdisciplinary nature of this study contributes to multiple fields:

Feminist Scholarship. By foregrounding the lived experiences of academic mothers, it adds to feminist critiques of gendered labor and systemic inequities in academia (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Haraway, 1988).

Ludology in Qualitative Research. The integration of meme-based gameplay as a reflective tool offers a methodological innovation that expands the boundaries of qualitative inquiry (Bogost, 2007; Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Narrative and Collaborative Ethnography. The dialogic structure provides a model for small-group ethnographies that prioritize relational storytelling and collective theorization (Collins, 2000; Ellis et al., 2011).

Practical Implications for Academia. The findings have potential implications for institutional policies and cultural practices, advocating for more equitable support structures for academic mothers.

Methodology

Triangular Ethnography Framework

This study proposes *Triangular Ethnography*, a methodological framework designed to explore the lived experiences of academic mothers through relational, dialogic, and playful engagement. This approach integrates feminist ethnography, narrative inquiry, and ludology to investigate the intersection of caregiving and professional identities. The term “triangular” reflects both the three-participant structure and the methodological interplay between individual experiences, relational dynamics, and shared meaning-making. At its core, Triangular Ethnography emphasizes the importance of relationality in knowledge production. Rooted in feminist ethnography, this framework prioritizes collaboration and co-construction of meaning, recognizing that insights are shaped through the dialogic interactions among participants (Ellis et al., 2011). The triangular structure allows for a dynamic exchange where each participant contributes unique perspectives while collectively

engaging with shared themes, fostering a multi-dimensional understanding of academic motherhood.

Building on narrative ethnography, this methodology foregrounds storytelling as a means of reflecting on and theorizing lived experiences. Through structured dialogues prompted by memes, the study blends personal anecdotes, humor, and critical reflection, creating a space for participants to navigate the complexities of their dual roles (Riessman, 2008). The triangular model enhances this approach by embedding relational dynamics within the narrative process, capturing both individual agency and collaborative exploration.

Ethnography, Temporality, and Ludic Attunement

We acknowledge that *ethnography* is often associated with prolonged temporal immersion and sustained participation in participants' everyday lives. From this perspective, duration and waiting-with are central to ethnographic attention. However, Triangular Ethnography is not offered as a substitute for long-term fieldwork; rather, it articulates a *ludic mode of ethnographic attunement* in which ethnographic knowing emerges through *density, recursion, and relational saturation* within a deliberately designed, dialogic encounter. In this study, ethnographic attention is achieved through repeated rounds of meme-prompted storytelling, where participants return to lived moments from shifting angles, reconfigure meaning in response to others' narration, and make visible the institutional textures of academic motherhood as they surface through laughter, interruption, and collective sense-making. In this sense, temporality is present as *iterative narrative time* produced through cycles of play and reflection.

In addition, our use of ludic design as method aligns with our broader methodological program that treats play as a methodological engine for producing situated knowledge through rule-based interaction, improvisation, and relational co-construction (Zhu, 2026; Zhu & Duet, 2024). Triangular Ethnography therefore names a genre of ethnographic practice that is micro-temporal yet iterative, and intentionally designed to render visible the affective and institutional pressures that academic mothers navigate.

Memes as Ethnographic Prompts

Memes, as cultural artifacts, serve as playful yet potent tools for self-expression and social critique. Their succinct and humorous

format enables participants to engage with complex topics in an accessible and emotionally resonant manner (Shifman, 2014). In this study, memes functioned as ethnographic prompts, eliciting personal narratives and facilitating dialogue about the challenges and strategies of academic motherhood. By leveraging the universal appeal of humor and relatability, memes encouraged candid discussions while simultaneously bridging the gap between personal and systemic critiques.

The study utilized a curated set of 27 memes divided into three thematic categories: *academic life*, *motherhood*, and *self-care (or lack thereof)*. Participants took turns selecting memes, sharing personal reflections, and engaging in collective storytelling. This structured yet flexible process mirrored elements of gameplay, introducing a ludological dimension that simulated the balancing act inherent in academic motherhood (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). The interplay of humor, vulnerability, and strategic dialogue enabled participants to critically examine their experiences while fostering a sense of shared solidarity. The use of memes enriched the data collection process as well as aligned with the study's interdisciplinary ethos. By integrating visual culture, ludic elements, and ethnographic inquiry, this approach captured the emotional, relational, and institutional dimensions of academic motherhood in a novel and engaging manner.

Game Design as Method

To explore the complex experiences of academic motherhood, we employed a game-based methodology rooted in ludological principles. This approach incorporated collaborative storytelling, randomization, and structured gameplay to reflect the unpredictability, negotiation, and relational dynamics of balancing professional and caregiving roles. The game's design facilitated both personal reflection and collective engagement, creating a playful yet meaningful environment for ethnographic inquiry.

Meme Selection and Categorization

Each participant individually selected nine memes that resonated with their experiences, divided equally across three thematic categories:

Motherhood. Highlighting caregiving challenges, emotional labor, and identity as a parent.

Academic Life. Reflecting professional responsibilities, systemic pressures, and workplace humor.

Self-Care (or Lack Thereof). Addressing personal well-being, resilience, or neglect in the pursuit of balance.

This personalized selection process ensured that the prompts were deeply relatable while maintaining thematic diversity.

Shuffling and Numbering

The curated memes were pooled, shuffled, and assigned unique numbers (1–27) to introduce an element of randomness. This shuffling mirrored the chaotic and often unpredictable intersections of academic and personal lives.

Randomized Storytelling Mechanics

Step 1: Determining the Storyteller. At the beginning of each round, a random number generator determined which participant (Mila, Sarah, or Jennifer) would share first. This added an element of chance to the turn-taking process.

Step 2: Selecting the Meme. A second random number (1–27) was generated to select the meme that would serve as the storytelling prompt.

Step 3: Storytelling and Reflection. The designated storyteller shared a personal narrative inspired by the selected meme, connecting it to her lived experiences in motherhood, academia, or self-care. The storyteller could reflect critically or humorously, setting the tone for subsequent dialogue.

Dialogic Exchange and Relational Dynamics

Following the initial storytelling, all participants were invited to:

Reflect. Share similar experiences or deepen the discussion.

Pose Questions. Encourage the storyteller to elaborate or explore new angles.

Challenge. Offer counter-narratives or alternative perspectives.

Dib the Meme. Claim the meme as more reflective of their own experience, adding a layer of playful competition.

The storytelling process emphasized relationality, as participants built on each other's narratives, fostering mutual understanding and collective meaning-making.

Strategic Turn-Taking and Completion

At the end of each turn, the storyteller selected the next participant, who then chose another numbered meme for discussion. This flexible structure allowed for dynamic, spontaneous exchanges

while ensuring that each participant completed three storytelling rounds by the game's conclusion. Over three rounds of gameplay, participants engaged with a total of nine memes, balancing the unpredictability of random selection with the intentionality of relational dialogue.

The design and implementation of the game-based methodology in this study reflect a convergence of philosophical and theoretical considerations, embedding Triangular Ethnography within a broader framework of relationality, play, and co-constructed knowledge. Below, we expand on its foundational principles:

Ludology as Relational Play

Ludology, the study of games and play, informs this methodology by emphasizing the creative and reflective potential of structured play. According to Salen and Zimmerman (2004), play is a mode of engagement that creates “meaningful interaction within a rule-based system” (p. 83). The randomization of memes, strategic storytelling, and turn-taking in this study mirrors the game-like structures academic mothers often navigate in their dual roles, where rules (academic expectations, caregiving demands) intersect with improvisation (decision-making in unpredictable contexts). The structured randomness of the game reflects the chaos of balancing these roles, yet the gameplay's intentional relationality allows participants to co-create meaning from their shared experiences. By transforming memes into ludological prompts, the study blurs the boundaries between play and inquiry, inviting participants to reflect critically while engaging in acts of spontaneous storytelling. This echoes Sutton-Smith's (1997) assertion that play serves as an adaptive response to ambiguity, a space where humor and creativity serve as tools for resilience and exploration.

Feminist Epistemology and Situated Knowledges

Feminist ethnography emphasizes the importance of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), recognizing that experiences are shaped by specific contexts, relationships, and power dynamics. The triangular framework of this methodology reflects Haraway's (1988) call for a “partial perspective” (p. 583) where each participant's narrative serves as both a unique vertex and a point of connection within the relational structure of the group. The dialogic exchanges encouraged by this methodology align with feminist epistemological commitments to relationality and reflexivity. In this context, memes

operate as what Haraway (2008, p. 4) might term “material-semiotic nodes”: cultural artifacts that encapsulate humor, critique, and shared cultural understandings. By engaging with these memes, participants collaboratively construct meaning, weaving individual stories into a collective narrative of academic motherhood.

Narrative Temporality and Iteration

This methodology also engages with the narrative temporality articulated by Ricoeur (1984), wherein stories serve as vehicles for reconfiguring lived experience into reflective understanding. The iterative nature of the storytelling rounds ensures that participants revisit and reinterpret their narratives in light of others’ perspectives. This recursive process mirrors the interplay of mimesis in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics: prefiguration (lived experience), configuration (storytelling), and refiguration (shared meaning). Through this lens, the game becomes a temporal and dialogic space where participants recount and reshape their experiences, identifying patterns and connections that might otherwise remain obscured. The storytelling process thus becomes an act of world-building, where academic motherhood is reframed as a site of both struggle and solidarity.

Emotional Economies and Affective Play

The emotional labor inherent in academic motherhood is central to the study’s use of memes as prompts. Drawing on Ahmed’s (2017) work on the cultural politics of emotion, this methodology frames memes as affective texts that provoke immediate, visceral reactions. These emotional responses, whether humorous or critical, serve as entry points for deeper reflection. The intertwining of humor and vulnerability in meme-based storytelling highlights the dual role of affect as both a source of connection and a site of critique. Moreover, the playful dynamics of the game allow participants to explore these affective dimensions without the constraints of traditional academic discourse. This aligns with feminist critiques of disembodied rationality, offering a more holistic and human-centered approach to understanding the lived realities of academic motherhood (Collins, 2000).

Co-Constructed Knowledge and Agency

Finally, the strategic turn-taking embedded in this methodology empowers participants to shape the flow and focus of the game. By choosing the next storyteller and meme, participants exercise agency, transforming the game into a collaborative act of knowledge

production. This reflects Freire’s (1970) pedagogy of dialogue, where participants are co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients of inquiry. The dialogic structure thus becomes both a methodological tool and a philosophical stance, affirming the value of shared agency and collective insights.

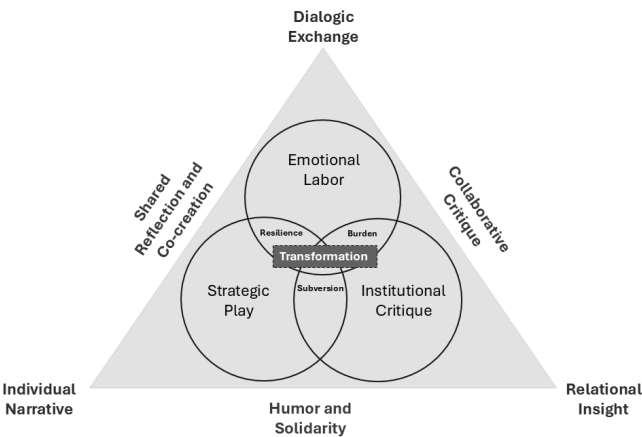


Figure 1

Triangular Framework of Reflexive Narratives: Emotional Labor, Strategic Play, and Institutional Critique

To enhance methodological transparency and comply with publication copyright constraints, Table 1 provides an overview of the meme cards used in the study, including their thematic categorization and representative content descriptions.

Table 1
Overview of Meme Cards Used in the Study

Meme ID	Theme	Representative Content Description	Function in Gameplay
1	Self-care	Tweet joking about needing coffee strong enough to “show up on a drug test.”	Prompted discussions of exhaustion, caffeine dependency, and embodied coping.

Meme ID	Theme	Representative Content Description	Function in Gameplay
2	Self-care	Illustration stating “You’re pretty demanding for a calming hobby.”	Invited reflection on the irony of self-care expectations under constant pressure.
3	Academic Life	Text meme: “The audacity” as first noticed trait in others.	Opened dialogue on academic entitlement, boundaries, and emotional labor.
4	Academic Life	Tweet about explaining academic publishing and pay to a non-academic parent.	Triggered narratives about public misunderstanding of academic labor.
5	Academic Life	“Manuscripts can’t be rejected if you don’t submit” meme.	Facilitated humor around productivity anxiety and institutional pressure.
6	Academic Life	Post critiquing “basic biology” arguments about gender.	Sparked discussions of disciplinary authority and epistemic frustration.
7	Motherhood	Kermit meme about missing a planned time window by minutes.	Prompted stories about lost personal time and maternal scheduling collapse.
8	Motherhood	Image of mother interrupted by children	Highlighted constant maternal

Meme ID	Theme	Representative Content Description	Function in Gameplay
		even while in the bathroom.	availability and boundary erosion.
9	Motherhood	Meme juxtaposing children refusing food with dramatic starvation imagery.	Generated humor-inflected discussion of caregiving frustration.
10	Academic Life	Classroom meme joking about existential despair in philosophy courses.	Invited reflection on teaching affect and performative seriousness.
11	Academic Life	Meme portraying an introductory philosophy classroom where existential dread is humorously framed as pedagogy	Prompted discussion of disciplinary affect, academic humor as initiation ritual, and the normalization of existential exhaustion in academic cultures.
12	Academic Life	Tweet about explaining a dissertation to family and legal inadmissibility.	Prompted stories of translation labor and intellectual invisibility.
13	Academic Life	“Escape room but you must finish writing your paper” meme.	Framed writing as entrapment and survival challenge.
14	Academic Life	Error dialog stating “I have no idea what you want me to do.”	Anchored narratives of supervisory ambiguity and affective confusion.

Meme ID	Theme	Representative Content Description	Function in Gameplay
15	Self-care	Meme referencing desire for fantasy-level financial rescue (Grey's Anatomy).	Opened ironic discussion of economic precarity and wishful thinking.
16	Self-care	Image of elaborate sand sculptures dismissed as wasted effort.	Reflected undervalued creative labor and invisible care work.
17	Motherhood	Joke about intellectualizing curly fries as "rotatoes."	Opened lighthearted reflections on identity blending.
18	Motherhood	Meme about grocery substitution replacing milk with an absurd item.	Prompted stories of logistical chaos and cognitive overload.
19	Motherhood	Meme stating going out requires wedding-level planning.	Anchored discussion of maternal logistics and lost spontaneity.
20	Motherhood	Image depicting maternal authority when "checking with the wife."	Sparked dialogue on default parenthood and decision burden.
21	Academic Life	Split-image meme contrasting the joy of "Manuscript Submitted" with the subdued reaction to "Manuscript Accepted."	Anchored narratives about temporal lag, emotional anticlimax, and the affective rhythms of academic publishing.

Meme ID	Theme	Representative Content Description	Function in Gameplay
22	Academic Life	Meme about professors replying instantly to 2am emails.	Invited reflection on blurred work-life boundaries.
23	Academic Life	Meme contrasting desire to escape to woods vs. academic career.	Prompted narratives of burnout and fantasy withdrawal.
24	Motherhood	Meme depicting a visibly exhausted mother captioned with attempting to excel professionally, parent well, maintain social life, exercise, sleep, and “remain sane.”	Prompted discussion of cumulative overload, impossible ideals of balance, and the affective toll of simultaneous role expectations.
25	Motherhood	Image of a smiling mother with caption “When your kids keep telling a story and it won’t end.”	Anchored narratives of attentional labor, emotional regulation, and the endurance required in everyday caregiving interactions.
26	Motherhood	<i>The Lion King</i> still captioned “Everything the light touches is your job description.”	Functioned as a metaphor for maternal scope creep, default parenthood, and the normalization

Meme ID	Theme	Representative Content Description	Function in Gameplay
			of total responsibility.
27	Self-care	Meme contrasting motivation to be productive with collapsing into bed upon arriving home.	Generated reflections on exhaustion, deferred self-care, and the gap between intention and embodied capacity.
28	Self-care	Futurama meme questioning whether one is practicing self-care or procrastinating.	Invited critique of wellness discourse, moralization of rest, and blurred boundaries between care and avoidance.
29	Self-care	Meme celebrating checking off a single item from an overwhelming to-do list.	Prompted ironic discussions of productivity metrics, small wins, and survival-oriented accomplishment.

Note. These memes were contributed by participants and selected for affective resonance rather than analytic representativeness; their function emerged through gameplay and dialogic interpretation.

Data Collection: A Relational Approach

Recording the Dialogues as Ludic Interactions

Data collection was conceptualized as a co-created game, with participants engaged in playful yet meaningful storytelling. Each session was structured as a series of interactive ‘rounds’, blending spontaneity and strategy. These sessions were conducted virtually to

maintain flexibility and ensure a sense of comfort for participants. The storytelling *game* was recorded using secure tools, and transcripts were enriched with annotations capturing laughter, tone shifts, and moments of silence, all integral to understanding the relational dynamics at play.

Triangular Coding and Analysis

The analysis process reflected the triangular ethos of the methodology by integrating the individual, relational, and collective dimensions of meaning-making:

Vertex-Level Coding (Individual Narratives). Initial codes were assigned to personal stories, focusing on themes like emotional labor, humor, and institutional critiques. This phase centered on each participant's unique *voice* and the personal resonance of the selected memes.

Edge-Level Coding (Relational Dynamics). The second phase analyzed the dialogic exchanges between participants, capturing moments of shared laughter, challenges to one another's narratives, and collaborative meaning-making. Codes here included *shared vulnerability*, *humorous resistance*, and *empathetic alignment*.

Interior-Level Analysis (Emergent Themes). Finally, the interplay between personal and relational data was synthesized to reveal the core emergent themes represented at the center of the triangular framework.

This multi-level coding process was complemented by a game-like annotation method, where transcripts were treated as "game boards" annotated with symbols (i.e., stars for humor, arrows for tension, and circles for collaborative moments). This playful approach mirrored the methodology's ludic ethos, highlighting the unpredictable and interactive nature of meaning-making.

Randomization and Humor as Methodological Catalysts

Randomization and humor were central to the data collection process:

Randomization as a Game Mechanic. The random number generator created an improvisational structure, encouraging participants to engage with memes outside their immediate preferences. This randomness disrupted expected patterns, mirroring the chaotic intersections of academic motherhood.

Humor as Relational Play. Humor acted as a dynamic force, softening difficult discussions and creating spaces for critical

reflection. Participants frequently used humor to subvert traditional narratives of motherhood and academia, reframing challenges as moments of shared absurdity and resilience. Together, these elements transformed the data collection process into an interactive and emergent exploration, aligning with the playful and reflexive nature of Triangular Ethnography.

Triangular Ethnography in Action: Relationality, Playfulness, and Reflexivity

The design and implementation of this study exemplify the core principles of Triangular Ethnography by embedding relationality, playfulness, and reflexivity into each phase of the research process. These elements work together to create a dynamic, interactive, and theoretically robust approach to exploring academic motherhood.

Relationality: Knowledge as Co-Creation

At the heart of Triangular Ethnography is the principle that knowledge is relational and emerges from the interplay of individual narratives, collaborative critique, and shared reflection (Haraway, 1988; Collins, 2000). The storytelling process foregrounded participants' unique voices as well as amplified the collective insights that arose through their interactions. Relationality was most evident in the dialogic exchanges that formed vertices of the framework, where participants co-constructed meaning by challenging, affirming, and deepening each other's stories. The study's structure transformed storytelling into an inherently relational act, where humor, empathy, and critique operated as tools for collective reflection. This underscores Ahmed's (2017) assertion that relational practices disrupt isolation and foster solidarity, particularly for those navigating marginalized identities like academic mothers.

Playfulness: Subverting Seriousness

Playfulness was a philosophical stance within this study. The game-inspired design, with its randomized meme selection and improvisational storytelling, infused the research process with spontaneity and creativity, echoing the ludic principles outlined by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) and Sutton-Smith (1997). The act of engaging with memes, a culturally rich medium, blurred the boundaries between "serious" academic inquiry and everyday humor, enabling participants to critique systemic pressures while laughing at their shared struggles. Sutton-Smith (1997) frames play as an adaptive response to ambiguity, a space where participants could

momentarily subvert the rigid structures of institutional norms. Playfulness also allowed participants to approach heavy topics, such as emotional labor and institutional burdens, with a sense of levity. Such an approach aligns with Bogost's (2007) notion of procedural rhetoric, "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (p. 3), where play serves as a mechanism for both engaging with and resisting oppressive systems.

Reflexivity: Iterative and Dialogic Praxis

Reflexivity in this study extended beyond individual self-awareness to encompass the iterative and dialogic exchanges that occurred during storytelling and analysis. The triangular coding framework emphasized how individual experiences, dialogic exchange, and relational dynamics (vertices) were shaped and reshaped through shared reflection, humor and solidarity, and collaborative critique (edges) to produce emergent and transformative insights (interior). This reflexivity aligns with Ricoeur's (1984) concept of narrative refiguration, where the act of storytelling allows participants to reinterpret and transform their lived experiences. By engaging in recursive storytelling rounds, participants reflected on their personal struggles while contextualizing them within broader systemic critiques.

Findings: Navigating Academic Motherhood through Triangular Ethnography

The findings from this study illuminate the multifaceted experiences of academic motherhood as explored through the playful and relational framework of *Triangular Ethnography*. By engaging in randomized, meme-inspired storytelling rounds, participants unearthed deeply personal narratives while collectively reflecting on shared struggles, triumphs, and critiques of institutional systems. Emerging from the iterative storytelling and dialogic exchanges are five key themes that capture the relational, systemic, and affective dimensions of academic motherhood. These themes weave together individual experiences with collective insights, offering a nuanced understanding of how academic mothers navigate overlapping roles and identities. Each theme is supported by vignettes from the

storytelling sessions, enriched by the humor, vulnerability, and reflexivity that characterize the triangular framework.

Theme 1: Emotional Labor and the Gendered Default Parent

The narratives shared during the storytelling sessions highlight the unrelenting emotional labor academic mothers shoulder, often as the *default* parent. This labor extends beyond physical caregiving to include the mental and emotional demands of anticipating, managing, and resolving family needs, even in co-parenting arrangements. Despite the presence of other caregivers, academic mothers often find themselves the primary point of contact for their children, embodying the societal expectation of maternal omnipresence.

Jennifer, for example, described waking up to a late-night text from her son, who was staying at his father's house, asking, "Mom, where's my inhaler?" She noted, "It doesn't matter where you're at or what you're doing... my kids will still all come to me, even if they're with their dad." This constant availability underscores the invisible labor of being the go-to problem solver, even when another caregiver is physically present. The assumption that mothers, rather than fathers, will handle every need, from locating items to providing emotional support, reflects entrenched gender norms that perpetuate maternal responsibility.

Similarly, Sarah reflected on societal critiques of her decision to work full-time while raising young children: "I've always heard, 'You don't spend enough time with your kids because you work full-time.' Especially when they were babies and I was breastfeeding and pumping... but they never asked my husband those questions." This commentary highlights the double standards academic mothers face, where professional ambitions are seen as *selfish* or *detrimental* to their children's well-being, while fathers are rarely held to the same scrutiny.

This emotional labor is not confined to the physical home but extends to digital spaces. Jennifer shared that even when her children are at their father's house, they reach out to her via text for routine concerns, like asking where items are or for advice: "There's just no escaping it. If I'm not physically available, then they'll text me." Such instances illuminate how technology, while intended to facilitate communication, often reinforces the maternal expectation of constant availability.

These vignettes reveal how academic mothers are often positioned as the *default parent*, expected to anticipate and meet their children's needs regardless of context or co-parenting arrangements. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of emotional labor, first articulated by Hochschild (1983), as the unrecognized management of feelings and interpersonal dynamics. For academic mothers, this labor is compounded by societal pressures that frame caregiving as an exclusively maternal domain. The persistence of these gendered expectations also reflects broader systemic issues. Ahmed (2017) argues that the affective economies of care disproportionately rely on women, reinforcing structures that demand constant emotional availability without acknowledgment or support. This creates a paradox where academic mothers must navigate their professional responsibilities while being perpetually on-call as caregivers, leading to significant emotional and cognitive overload.

Moreover, the narratives reveal the emotional toll of being perceived as "always on." The mental load of coordinating schedules, addressing needs, and absorbing societal critiques underscores the need for institutional reforms. These might include policies that explicitly recognize and mitigate the emotional labor associated with caregiving, such as flexible work arrangements and normalized co-parenting roles.

Theme 2: The Collapsing Boundaries of Work and Home

The narratives in our study reveal how academic mothers experience the blurred boundaries between professional and personal spheres, especially in remote or hybrid work contexts. The spatial and mental collapse of work-life separation creates a perpetual state of multitasking, where professional responsibilities intertwine with the immediacy of family needs. These overlapping roles lead to constant adjustments and significant emotional and cognitive demands.* *Mila humorously described her child's interruptions during remote teaching as living with an "8-year-old roommate." She explained, "I have to make a disclaimer at the beginning of every semester, letting them know that I still unfortunately live with an 8-year-old roommate, because he'll just randomly wander into the camera with no pants, saying, 'Mom, I pooped.'" While humorous, this anecdote highlights how caregiving responsibilities intrude on professional spaces, requiring academic

mothers to navigate these interruptions with both patience and adaptability.

Sarah reflected on the mental juggling act required to manage academic and familial responsibilities simultaneously: “I could slide over to my computer desk and type out a couple more paragraphs on that manuscript I’m working on, or I’ve got three students who really need a question answered... I have to kind of coordinate when the kids are home after school, making sure I’m paying attention a little bit because I can get caught up in my to-do list”. This constant toggling between roles underscores the challenge of prioritizing tasks in a space where work and home overlap, often without clear boundaries.* *Jennifer shared her frustration with societal misunderstandings of working from home, explaining how others often conflate “working from home” with simply “being home.” She noted, “There’s a misunderstanding. Working from home and being home are two very different things.” This misconception adds to the burden academic mothers face, as the flexibility of remote work is frequently mistaken for ease or leisure, minimizing the complexity of managing dual responsibilities.

The dialogues highlight how academic mothers perform a constant balancing act, moving fluidly between professional productivity and caregiving demands. This collapse of boundaries often leads to multitasking at the expense of mental well-being, with participants describing the struggle to find uninterrupted time for either role. As Ahmed (2017) notes, affective economies disproportionately rely on women to perform invisible emotional and logistical labor, making these blurred boundaries an additional layer of systemic inequity.* *This theme also exposes how institutional expectations exacerbate the challenge. The conflation of working from home with availability reinforces the undervaluation of academic mothers’ time and labor. As Hochschild (1997) observed, the time bind** is particularly acute for working mothers, who face societal pressures to excel in both professional and caregiving roles while lacking structural support.

Moreover, the narratives reveal the dual necessity of humor and strategy in navigating these blurred boundaries. While humor offers a temporary release from the stresses of multitasking, strategic boundary-setting becomes critical for managing the competing demands of work and family. Mila’s ability to embrace humor during

Zoom interruptions and Sarah's deliberate efforts to coordinate tasks highlight how academic mothers employ creative solutions to mitigate the challenges of collapsing boundaries.

Theme 3: Humor as Resistance and Resilience

For academic mothers, humor serves as both a survival strategy and a subversive tool, enabling them to navigate exhaustion, overstimulation, and systemic expectations. Whether used to cope with daily challenges or to critique institutional norms, humor offers a means of reclaiming agency in the face of relentless demands.

Mila shared how she embeds humor into her teaching practices by sneaking references to Spongebob Squarepants into course content: "I will secretly embed a code in a random course recording. For example, Spongebob Squarepants in week 4. If they email me a meme or smartly incorporate Spongebob into their weekly reflection, I'll give them extra points. Students ask, 'Why Spongebob?' And I say, 'Because [her child] is a fan.'" This playful integration of her personal life into professional spaces not only amuses her students but also creates moments of joy and surprise that break up the monotony of academic routines. Humor, here, functions as both a pedagogical strategy and a personal outlet for creativity. Similarly, Jennifer recounted joking with her doctor about her caffeine consumption, a humorous acknowledgment of the physical toll of her daily responsibilities: "My doctor asked, 'Do you drink a lot of caffeine?' and I said, 'Oh yes, like on an IV.' She laughed, but when she suggested cutting back, I said, 'Probably not. What's my other option? I need coffee to survive.'" This lighthearted exchange illustrates how humor helps her manage the overstimulation and fatigue inherent in juggling work and motherhood.

Humor emerges as a critical form of resistance for academic mothers, allowing them to push back against the weight of systemic expectations and societal norms. As Sutton-Smith (1997) notes, humor and play serve as adaptive responses to ambiguity and adversity, creating spaces for individuals to navigate and critique the constraints of their environments. For the participants, humor functioned as both a coping mechanism and a relational tool, fostering moments of connection with students, colleagues, and even healthcare providers.* *Incorporating humor into professional and parenting contexts also reveals its transformative potential. By embedding Spongebob references into course content, Mila subtly

disrupts the rigid boundaries of academic professionalism, blending personal joy with pedagogical innovation. Similarly, Jennifer's self-deprecating humor about caffeine dependency highlights the absurdity of societal and institutional demands, reframing them with a sense of agency and defiance.

Ahmed (2017) argues that humor can be a radical act, transforming exhaustion into collective solidarity by allowing individuals to share and critique their experiences in accessible and emotionally resonant ways. In this study, humor enabled participants to reclaim their narratives, using laughter as a form of rebellion against the pressures of academic motherhood.* *Ultimately, for academic mothers, these small acts of playfulness and rebellion offer a means of preserving their well-being while challenging the systemic norms that perpetuate their struggles.

Theme 4: Strategic Play and Adaptive Coping

For academic mothers, strategic play emerges as a critical mechanism for navigating the overlapping pressures of caregiving and professional life. This adaptive approach reflects a blend of flexibility, creativity, and intentional boundary-setting, enabling them to sustain resilience while addressing emotional and physical overwhelm. The participants' narratives illustrate how small but deliberate acts, whether retreating to decompress or engaging imaginatively with their children, become vital tools for coping with the relentless demands of academic motherhood.

Sarah described how overstimulation often leads her to withdraw and reset: "When you've hit like you're overstimulated, like, how do you cope? And for me coping... I go by myself in a dark room, and that sounds really scary, but like I turn the lights out and go in a dark room. I usually go take a nap, like if I'm just overstimulated to the max." This act of retreating is not simply a withdrawal but a deliberate strategy to recharge, recognizing the need for moments of solitude in a context that often demands constant presence and engagement. Mila recounted an experience during a conference trip, navigating her child's interruptions with creative engagement: "He just randomly started talking about sharks, about Pokémon, about anything he's passionate about. And you just have to listen." While managing conference logistics and unfamiliar roads, she transformed her child's interjections into an opportunity for connection,

demonstrating the improvisational adaptability that defines academic motherhood.

The deliberate use of “strategic play” highlights the ways academic mothers navigate the emotional and cognitive demands of their roles. Ahmed (2017) frames such strategies as acts of *affective adjustment*, where individuals reshape their environments and interactions to better align with their capacities and needs. For Sarah, retreating to a dark room exemplifies the intentional boundary-setting required to manage overstimulation. This practice mirrors Sutton-Smith’s (1997) concept of play as a means of creating order amidst chaos, offering a momentary escape from the unpredictability of academic and parental responsibilities.

Similarly, Mila’s engagement with her child reflects the parallels between strategic play and improvisational gameplay. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) argue that play functions as a *meaningful interaction* within a rule-based system, a framework that resonates with the adaptive maneuvers academic mothers employ. By reframing interruptions as opportunities for connection, Mila demonstrates how strategic play can transform potentially stressful situations into moments of shared joy. These narratives also emphasize the importance of recognizing and respecting the limits of emotional and physical capacity. As Hochschild (1983) observed, emotional labor often involves suppressing or managing personal feelings to meet external demands. Strategic play, however, allows academic mothers to renegotiate these dynamics on their terms, integrating self-care and relational connection into their daily practices.

Ultimately, these strategies both mitigate the stresses of academic motherhood and align with the study’s ludic framework, reinforcing the value of creativity, adaptability, and improvisation in navigating complex and overlapping roles. By embracing these practices, academic mothers carve out spaces for resilience and connection, even within the constraints of systemic pressures and personal responsibilities.

Theme 5: Perceptions of Academic Labor: Family, Society, and Institutions

The narratives from this study reveal the complex and often contradictory perceptions of academic labor, highlighting its undervaluation by family, society, and institutional structures. Academic mothers navigate these perceptions while balancing their

roles, often facing misunderstandings about the nature and rigor of their work.

Jennifer shared how her children viewed her publishing a book as a significant achievement compared to her academic articles: “They’re completely astonished by that, like, ‘Mom’s going to have a book!’ They don’t care about the articles that I’ve written and published. To them, having a book just seems so prolific.” This reaction underscores how academic labor, especially in education, is often seen as abstract or inaccessible, even by those closest to academic mothers. The tangible nature of a book provides a rare moment of recognition, yet it is accompanied by questions about its value: “They’ve asked, ‘What do you get for that, Mom? Are they going to pay you?’ And I have to explain that it’s not like writing a bestseller at Barnes and Noble.” At the same time, Jennifer noted that her children’s exposure to her career had shaped their views on work-life balance and career aspirations. While they were proud of her accomplishments, they expressed no desire to pursue academia or education themselves: “They tell me, ‘I just can’t. I’m not that personality, Mom. I can’t just pour into everybody else all the time.’” These mixed perceptions reflect the visible demands of academic labor, which may inspire pride but also serve as a cautionary tale for the next generation.

Sarah described societal judgments about her choice to work full-time while raising young children: “I’ve always heard, ‘You don’t spend enough time with your kids because you work full-time.’ Especially when they were babies and I was breastfeeding and pumping... people asked, ‘How could you leave your baby to go work?’ But they never asked my husband those questions.” This commentary reveals the patriarchal-centered double standards in how caregiving and professional ambition are judged, with women bearing the brunt of societal scrutiny.

The narratives illustrate the widespread misunderstandings of academic labor, both within the family and broader society. Academic work is often perceived as intangible or esoteric, its value diminished by its association with intellectual pursuits rather than material production. Such phenomena align with Ahmed’s (2017) critique of institutional affective economies, where the emotional and intellectual labor of marginalized groups is systematically undervalued. Children’s perceptions of academic labor as both

admirable and exhausting reflect the visible toll it takes on their mothers, whose professional and personal lives often overlap without sufficient institutional support. The narratives in this study highlight how these overlapping demands shape family dynamics, as children witness firsthand the sacrifices involved in academic careers. At the societal level, the double standards described by Sarah point to the gendered expectations surrounding caregiving and professional identity. While men's work is often presumed to coexist seamlessly with their roles as fathers, women are held to higher and conflicting standards, expected to prioritize caregiving without compromising professional excellence.

Discussion

This study set out to explore two central questions:

1. How do academic mothers navigate the dual roles of professional obligations and caregiving responsibilities within the context of systemic and cultural challenges in academia?

2. What insights into these experiences can be revealed through a ludological exploration, where memes are used as playful yet critical tools for reflection and dialogue?

Through the lens of *Triangular Ethnography*, this study illuminated the intricate balancing act academic mothers perform daily, as they negotiate the overlapping demands of work and home. The storytelling sessions, prompted by meme-based randomness and relational exchanges, revealed how participants adapt to systemic pressures, manage emotional labor, and maintain resilience through strategic play and humor. These narratives expose the deeply personal yet collective dimensions of academic motherhood, showcasing its complexity, challenges, and moments of solidarity.

The integration of a ludological framework provided unique insights into these experiences. By transforming storytelling into a playful and dialogic process, the study uncovered the ways academic mothers creatively navigate their dual roles. Memes served as accessible cultural artifacts that bridged personal and systemic critiques, offering participants a space to express vulnerability, humor, and resistance.

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges and strategies of academic motherhood, organized around five key

themes that reflect the relational, systemic, and affective dimensions of participants' experiences. These themes are interwoven with theoretical frameworks, offering deeper insights into the lived realities of navigating professional and caregiving roles.

Emotional Labor and the Gendered Default Parent. The participants' narratives underscore the unacknowledged emotional labor that academic mothers perform, perpetuating their role as the *default* parent. Despite shared caregiving arrangements, participants described being the primary point of contact for their children, even during their supposed off-duty hours. Jennifer noted, "My kids will still all come to me, even if they're with their dad," exemplifying the expectation of maternal omnipresence.

The Collapsing Boundaries of Work and Home. The shift to remote and hybrid work environments has exacerbated the already blurred lines between academic and caregiving responsibilities. Participants described a constant state of multitasking, where professional productivity was often interrupted by caregiving demands. Mila humorously referred to her child as her "8-year-old roommate" who frequently interrupted Zoom calls, reflecting the spatial and mental collapse of work-life boundaries. This theme resonates with Ahmed's (2017) analysis of affective exhaustion, further emphasizing the toll that such boundary collapses take on women. The narratives highlight the need for institutions to rethink their approach to remote work, addressing the misconception that working from home equates to flexibility or reduced effort.

Humor as Resistance and Resilience. Humor emerged as a recurring theme, serving as both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance against systemic pressures. Mila shared her practice of embedding Spongebob references into her course materials, using humor to surprise and engage students while creating moments of joy amidst the monotony of academic routines. Similarly, Jennifer joked with her doctor about needing caffeine on "an IV drip," using humor to navigate conversations about the physical toll of her responsibilities.

Humor as Generative Suspension and Speculative Rehearsal. Our analysis also suggests a more generative function of humor: it can temporarily suspend the gravity of institutional hierarchies, loosening the demand to perform professionalism-as-distance and opening a brief interval in which alternative relations become thinkable. In these moments, laughter does not merely "react" to the absurd; it

reconfigures the scene, enabling participants to rehearse different ways of being academic, being maternal, and being in community. Read through a ludic lens, humorous exchanges function as *micro-events of world-making*, a speculative space in which participants experiment with new pedagogical tones, re-author the meaning of interruptions, and imagine practices of care that exceed individualized resilience narratives. Thus, humor operates simultaneously as critique and creation, both naming what is untenable and momentarily generating what might be otherwise.

Strategic Play and Adaptive Coping. Participants described deliberate strategies for managing emotional overwhelm and overstimulation, highlighting the role of strategic play in sustaining resilience. Sarah described retreating to a dark room as a way to reset after reaching her sensory limits, while Mila engaged her child in imaginative discussions about their passions during conference travel, reframing interruptions as opportunities for connection. These strategies reflect the improvisational elements of gameplay, where individuals adapt to changing circumstances through creative problem-solving (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Ahmed (2017) frames such practices as acts of affective adjustment, where individuals reshape their environments to align with their capacities.

Perceptions of Academic Labor. The findings also reveal the complex and often contradictory perceptions of academic labor, both within families and broader societal contexts. Jennifer's children marveled at her book publication but dismissed her academic articles, viewing the former as a more tangible accomplishment. Meanwhile, Sarah recounted societal critiques of her decision to work full-time, highlighting the double standards faced by working mothers.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study highlight actionable insights for institutions, academic culture, and methodological innovation, providing pathways to address the systemic challenges faced by academic mothers. Institutions must take proactive steps to support academic mothers, recognizing their dual roles and the systemic inequities they face:

Flexible Work Arrangements. Implement and normalize flexible scheduling, remote work options, and caregiving leave policies that account for the unpredictability of parenting demands.

Recognition of Caregiving Roles. Acknowledge caregiving as a legitimate component of academic labor, integrating it into performance evaluations and tenure considerations. This could include crediting the emotional labor and mentorship academic mothers provide to students and colleagues.

Equity in Professional Evaluations. Redesign evaluation criteria to reduce biases that penalize caregiving responsibilities, such as productivity gaps or limited travel for conferences, and emphasize holistic contributions to academia.

By addressing these structural barriers, institutions can foster a more equitable environment where academic mothers are not forced to choose between professional success and family well-being.

Cultural shifts are equally critical in creating supportive and inclusive academic spaces:

Normalize Caregiving Challenges. Promote open discussions about the realities of caregiving in academia, reducing the stigma associated with balancing family and professional roles.

Value Emotional Labor. Recognize and celebrate the emotional and relational contributions of academic mothers, from mentoring students to fostering collaborative environments.

Foster Solidarity. Encourage peer networks and mentorship programs for academic mothers, providing opportunities for shared learning, resilience-building, and advocacy.

Such cultural changes require intentional effort from leadership, faculty, and staff to create an academic community that values diverse lived experiences.

The study also demonstrates the potential of ludological approaches for exploring relational and emotional dimensions of lived experiences:

Innovation in Qualitative Research. The integration of memes, randomization, and storytelling as methodological tools highlights the value of playful, interdisciplinary approaches to qualitative inquiry.

Engaging Relational Dynamics. Ludological methods can uncover nuanced interactions and collective insights, making them particularly valuable for studying intersectional identities and systemic challenges.

Reframing Research Spaces. By incorporating humor and play, future research can create spaces where participants feel

empowered to express vulnerability, critique norms, and co-create knowledge.

These methodological contributions offer a model for expanding the boundaries of qualitative research, particularly in feminist and relational frameworks.

Concluding Reflections

This study sheds light on the lived realities of academic mothers through an innovative and playful lens, combining feminist ethnography and ludology to explore the complexities of caregiving and professional roles. By centering relationality, humor, and strategic play, the study highlights the resilience and adaptability of academic mothers as they navigate systemic and cultural challenges. The findings underscore the importance of addressing the structural inequities and cultural stigmas that persist in academic institutions. By valuing emotional labor, normalizing caregiving challenges, and implementing equitable policies, academia can move toward a more inclusive and supportive environment. These changes are beneficial for the broader academic community, fostering diversity, creativity, and collaboration. The methodological innovations in this study demonstrate the transformative potential of playful and relational research approaches. Combining ludology with feminist ethnography offers a powerful framework for uncovering the relational and emotional dimensions of lived experiences, paving the way for future research that is both rigorous and deeply human.

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