

The Superwoman in Collectivist Culture: The Social Perception of the Balance Between Motherhood and Career

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Meanings of motherhood have evolved over time, shifting from a valued spiritual and social role to a more narrowly defined biological function. Nonetheless, motherhood continues to hold strong social significance in collectivist cultures. This paper draws on data from a broader study investigating women's perceptions of macrosystem and mesosystem messages regarding motherhood and infertility. The present analysis focuses specifically on perceptions of social encouragement to balance motherhood and career. Findings indicate that motherhood remains central in Romanian women's lives, shaped by family expectations and normative pressures regarding the timing and necessity of childbearing. Participants reported exposure to conflicting institutional messages that simultaneously promote traditional motherhood and modern ideals emphasizing education, career achievement, and female autonomy. Within this context, the "working mother" becomes most valued, reconciling professional success with maintaining family continuity. Women described a fulfilled life as one that integrates self-acceptance, career achievement, motherhood, and romantic relationships. This multidimensional perspective illustrates the internalization of the "Superwoman" ideal and shows how motherhood, career, and relational roles are negotiated within interconnected macro- and mesosystemic influences. These findings guide policies supporting motherhood, reproductive health, and work-family balance.

Key words: motherhood, career, social pressure, collectivism

Introduction

The meanings associated with motherhood and its implications have fluctuated over the

decades, ranging from valorization to stigmatization, and from spiritual to biological understanding, with significant effects on women and on society at large. Ecological systems theory emphasizes that individual

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development is contingent upon interactions with the social and physical environment, as well as with other people (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Recent studies highlight the importance of familial and normative influences on decisions regarding professional life and reproduction (Jasmon, 2020). Drawing on the theoretical framework proposed by Jaspal et al. (2016), the present study seeks to evaluate Romanian women's perceptions of messages related to motherhood transmitted at the macro level (church, school, mass media) and the meso level (family, partner, professional group, friends). The cultural context in which women develop shapes their understanding of reproductive life, encompassing fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood (Liamputtong, 2007; Rich, 2021). Collectivist cultures place greater emphasis on motherhood than individualist cultures do (Rich, 2021), while in countries with pronatalist policies, the maternal role is frequently construed as a supreme mission (McQuillan, 2008). In Romania, values pertaining to family and religion occupy a central position in the cultural framework (David, 2015). The study is concerned with how Romanian women perceive messages conveyed by the macrosystem and mesosystem concerning motherhood and career, and how these expectations may generate inequalities between mothers and non-mothers (including childfree women by choice and women facing infertility). Furthermore, it examines the extent to which these perceptions may shape individual decision making.

Characteristics of Collectivist Culture and Traditional Gender Roles

Collectivist culture is defined by the integration of individuals into cohesive groups that value interdependence, responsibility toward others, and loyalty (Markus & Kitayama,

1991; Xiao, 2021). In such societies, support for work–family balance often relies on familial and community structures rather than formal policies, which can complicate the reconciliation of career and motherhood (Hofstede, 2021). By contrast, individualist cultures tend to encourage more flexible organizational practices that support women in pursuing both career and family.

Studies show that women in collectivist societies face greater normative pressure to fulfill traditional family roles (Yeo et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). Yeo et al. (2025) highlight how collectivist contexts generate stronger “situational strength” – intense social and organizational pressure to conform – which can reduce self-efficacy and happiness, thereby affecting psychological well-being. This suggests that women who remain childfree or prioritize careers may experience significant social strain in collectivist contexts.

Romania is characterized by predominantly collectivistic orientations, in which social relationships, family ties, and group membership are prioritized over individual autonomy. Empirical evidence indicates low levels of individualism (approximately 30/100), highlighting the centrality of loyalty to primary groups and social interdependence – core features of collectivistic cultures (David, 2015; Hofstede et al., 2010; Mone et al., 2014). Using contemporary data from Eurobarometer Standard 90 (2018), Malea (2019) examined the extent to which Hofstede's classical findings regarding Romania's national culture remain valid in the current socio-cultural context. The results show that, with respect to the individualism–collectivism dimension, the collectivistic cultural patterns described by Hofstede remain salient: responses related to cooperation, protectionism, and social attitudes continue to reflect a strong collectivistic orientation within Romanian society, despite ongoing socio-economic transformations and globalization processes.

Recent studies further suggest that, although Romania remains largely collectivistic, socio-economic changes and urbanization have facilitated the emergence of individualistic orientations, particularly in urban environments and within nuclear family structures (Mone & Benga, 2018; Dumbravă, 2018). Greenfield (2018) argues that economic development and the transition from traditional rural communities to urban settings are associated with increased autonomy and individualistic values in child socialization, without fully displacing traditional collective values. Consistent with this perspective, Moza et al. (2018) document the empirical coexistence of independent and interdependent self-construals among Romanian emerging adults, reflecting a culturally hybrid context in which traditional collectivistic traits coexist with individualistic influences, rather than being replaced by them. Overall, despite Western influences and the emergence of individualistic tendencies in certain segments of society, collectivistic values – centered on group belonging, cooperation, and social responsibility – continue to dominate the Romanian cultural landscape (Dumbravă, 2017; Malea, 2019; Moza et al., 2018).

Gender roles, as social constructions, shape beliefs, expectations, and attitudes, with notable effects on mental health and well-being (Delgado, 2024). The theory of situational strength argues that environments with strict expectations constrain individual action (Alam et al., 2025). Thus, traditional gender norms influence both women who aspire to motherhood and those who do not. Career-focused women are often judged as less feminine and more selfish compared to mothers (Iverson, 2020). For example, in Mexico, strict adherence to gender roles fosters conformity, as external social demands frequently take precedence over personal aspirations (Delgado, 2024).

The Challenges of Balancing Motherhood and Career

Balancing professional aspirations with maternal responsibilities remains a persistent challenge for women, with significant implications for both career trajectories and psychological well-being. The phenomenon known as the “*motherhood penalty*” illustrates the economic and professional disadvantages that mothers face compared to women without children. For instance, England (2001) found that high-income mothers may lose up to 10% of their annual earnings per child, primarily due to extended absences and limited workplace flexibility. This penalty is further exacerbated by stereotypes associated with motherhood, which often result in lower evaluations of mothers’ competence and professional commitment (Correll et al., 2024).

Cultural and institutional contexts play a crucial role in shaping these experiences. The collectivist norms amplify the pressure on women to fulfill multiple roles, increasing stress and emotional exhaustion, and constraining career options. Although motherhood is highly valued at both social and cultural levels, achieving a balance between career and maternal responsibilities often leads to career interruptions (Archibong, 2020). Empirical data indicate that after childbirth, women’s participation in the labor market declines sharply: approximately 24% withdraw in the first year of motherhood, 17% after five years, and 15% remain outside the workforce even after ten years (Kleven et al., 2023).

The perception of the motherhood penalty contributes to delayed promotions, restricted professional opportunities, and career decisions made primarily in response to children’s needs (Arena, 2022). Working mothers frequently experience conflicting demands, which can result in feelings of guilt, emotional

overload, and burnout (Apostu, 2024). These findings underscore the persistent tension between professional and family roles, emphasizing the critical influence of societal norms, cultural expectations, and organizational structures in shaping women's lived experiences.

“Superwoman” and Its Relevance in Collectivist Culture

In a collectivist culture, women face significant social and professional pressures in simultaneously fulfilling maternal and professional roles. Zhou and Hu (2023) demonstrate that, in China, cultural norms and workplace practices impose a substantial career “penalty” on women after childbirth, undermining career progression and promotion opportunities. Similarly, Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021) emphasize that collectivist norms reinforce expectations for women to assume multiple roles concurrently, thereby consolidating the “superwoman” perception while also increasing levels of stress and emotional exhaustion. The “superwoman” archetype describes the ideal of women who simultaneously undertake multiple roles – mother, professional, wife, among others – and are expected to perform them all with excellence (Chen, 2025; Woods-Giscombe, 2010). The superwoman schema entails obligations such as demonstrating strength, suppressing emotions, helping others, and achieving success despite constraints (Woods-Giscombe, 2010; Sheffield-Abdullah & Woods-Giscombe, 2021). Recent studies indicate that adherence to the superwoman schema is associated with higher levels of stress, depression, and sleep disturbances, particularly among women who perceive normative pressure to be “perfect” in all roles (Sheffield-Abdullah & Woods-Giscombe, 2021; Dogan et al., 2022; Erving et al., 2024). Their findings suggest that defining features of this archetype – such as the obli-

gation to display strength, suppress emotions, and assist others – may contribute to stress and adversely affect women's physical and mental health. In collectivist societies, where familial and community responsibilities are central, the superwoman ideal may be perceived as an expression of group loyalty and as a marker of social prestige. However, the psychological costs can be substantial, including burnout, guilt, dissonance between ideal and reality, and emotional exhaustion (Al Issa & Chen, 2025). These pressures are shaped not only by cultural norms but also by public policies and organizational structures. Although professional careers largely exert a negative influence on childbearing decisions, women do not abandon motherhood; rather, they adopt adaptive strategies such as reducing the number of children or postponing childbirth until a certain level of professional stability and consolidation is attained (Apostu, 2017). Contemporary attitudes in Romania regarding women's familial and social roles reveal a form of atypical modernity, characterized by declarative assumptions about status, roles, and familial functions, which nevertheless coexist with persistent manifestations of traditionalism at the level of everyday practices. A progressive orientation toward individualism can be observed, within which differentiated variations are generated by both individual sensitivities and the dynamics and influences of community groups (Apostu, 2013). Theoretical perspectives examine the extent to which collectivism is gradually being replaced by individualism, contributing to emerging patterns of self-construal, cultural influence, and gender roles (Li et al., 2024; Wu, 2025). The existing literature suggests that transitions from collectivism to individualism are mediated by complex interactions among cultural values, social trust, and gender roles, shaping the experiences of superwomen in a collectivist context (Dutta et al.,

2021). Empirical literature reveals significant changes in gender roles within collectivist cultures undergoing transitions, indicating an intensification of individualistic orientations among women and a reconfiguration of social expectations (Jiang, 2016; Dutta et al., 2021).

Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development and Expectation States Theory

Jaspal et al.'s (2016) Ecological Systems Theory of Human Development asserts that, in research on individual social behavior, at least three of the four levels of influence should be taken into account, namely: the micro level, the meso level, and the macro level. Given the considerable importance attributed to motherhood, we seek to understand how the macro, meso, and micro levels influence the decisions of women who oscillate between motherhood and career. We examined the issue through the lens of the Expectations States Theory (Correll et al., 2007). This theory emphasizes the notion that cultural beliefs regarding social categories articulated at the macro level directly influence individual behaviors and evaluations, thereby contributing to the reproduction and reinforcement of status structures aligned with preexisting social representations.

The Present Study

This study, part of the doctoral research of FLN, employed a qualitative research design grounded in a constructivist–interpretivist epistemological framework, assuming that the meanings women attribute to motherhood and career are socially and culturally constructed through the interplay of norms, institutions, and interpersonal relations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Jaspal et al., 2016). Additionally, we draw on the Expectation States Theory to examine whether societal norms produce a hierarchy of

preferred female roles. This theoretical framework posits that cultural beliefs about status (e.g., gender, motherhood, competence) shape performance expectations within social groups and organizations, generating hierarchies that advantage certain categories while disadvantaging others (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007).

Based on this framework, the study addressed three research questions:

1) What messages do women perceive from the macrosystem (church, school, and media) and mesosystem (family, partner, peers, and professional group) regarding the importance of motherhood?

1.1) How are four social roles (stay-at-home mother, working mother, career woman without children, stay-at-home woman without children) hierarchically valued according to perceived social expectations?

2) Which messages from the macro- and mesosystem have the strongest impact on women's personal perceptions of the importance of motherhood?

3) How do women conceptualize the profile of a "fulfilled woman"?

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the focus on socially shared meanings, a focus group methodology was considered appropriate to capture collective representations, normative discourses, and points of convergence and divergence among participants.

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected through six focus groups, comprising 35 Romanian women (21 mothers, 14 non-mothers). Group composition prioritized homogeneity (mothers/non-mothers), with heterogeneous groups allowed when participant familiarity facilitated open dialogue. Recruitment was conducted via social media and messaging platforms, and ses-

sions were held both face-to-face at the researcher's psychology practice and online via Zoom. Each session lasted 120–180 minutes, and discussions followed a semi-structured guide. Prior to participation, women provided informed consent and agreed to audio/video recording.

Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached at the sixth group (Scârnci, 2006). The mean age of participants was 35.37 years (39.09 for mothers, 31.64 for non-mothers). Twenty-seven participants were married or in stable relationships, while eight were single or divorced. Nineteen expressed a desire to have children, and eight reported current or past difficulties with conception. Full demographic information and group distribution are presented in Table 1.

Overview of the Statistical Analysis

Verbatim transcripts of focus group discussions were prepared by the lead researcher (FLN) and two assistants, then cross-checked against recordings to ensure accuracy.

Data were analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), following an inductive, theory-informed approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Renz et al., 2018). This approach was chosen because it allows for a systematic and transparent organization of data while also supporting interpretation of both manifest and latent content. For Research Question 2, the analysis focused specifically on the latent dimension to capture the complexity and subjective weight of the participants' personal choices.

Table 1 *Demographic characteristics of focus-group participants*

Group no.	Initials	Age	Mother (Yes/No)	Marital status	Intention to have children	Notes
1	O.P.	44	Yes	Married	No	
	I.D.	38	Yes	Married	No	
	D.M.	30	Yes	Married	Yes	
	N.S.	24	No	In a stable relationship	Yes	
	A.T.	28	No	In a stable relationship	Yes	
	B.S.	26	No	In a stable relationship	Yes	
2	E.C.	43	Yes	Married	No	Undiagnosed infertility
	L.C.	45	Yes	Married	No	
	F.B.	48	Yes	Married	No	History of infertility
	A.G.	45	Yes	Married	No	
	N.F.	33	Yes	Married	Yes	History of miscarriages; current difficulties conceiving
	A.F.	36	Yes	Married	Yes	

Table 1 continues

Table 1 continued

Group no.	Initials	Age	Mother (Yes/No)	Marital status	Intention to have children	Notes
3	F.V.	24	No	In a stable relationship	Yes	
	A.M.M.	32	No	Divorced	Yes	Couple infertility history
	N.C.	37	No	Single	Yes	
	N.G.I.	45	No	Single	No	Undiagnosed infertility
	L.P.	45	No	Married	Yes	Undiagnosed infertility
	A.M.	25	No	Single	Yes	
	D.C.	20	No	In a stable relationship	Yes	
4	A.P.	45	Yes	Married	No	
	A.C.	42	Yes	Married	No	
	A.M.	33	Yes	Married	No	
	L.B.	35	Yes	Married	No	
	V.B.	36	Yes	Married	Yes	
	A.C.	42	Yes	Married	Yes	Cannot have more children due to health problems
5	S.	39	Yes	Married	No	
	M.A.	44	Yes	Married	No	
	A.R.	31	Yes	Married	Yes	History of infertility
	E.P.	48	Yes	Married	No	History of infertility
	E.G.	28	Yes	Married	Yes	
6	E.G.	48	No	Single	No	
	G.M.	31	No	Single	Yes	
	B.M.	23	No	In a stable relationship	Yes	
	O.P.	36	Yes	Married	Yes	
	R.A.	35	No	Single	Yes	

The analysis proceeded in several stages:

1) Familiarization: All transcripts were read repeatedly by the first author (FLN) to gain an overall understanding of the data.

2) Initial coding: Meaning units relevant to the research questions were identified and coded inductively. Coding focused on participants' descriptions of perceived social messages regarding motherhood, careers, and female roles.

3) Category development: Codes were grouped into categories and subcategories based on conceptual similarity. These categories reflected shared patterns across participants and focus groups.

4) Abstraction and interpretation: Categories were further abstracted to identify overarching themes, with attention paid to latent meanings, including internalized social

norms, psychosocial pressures, and culturally embedded expectations.

5) Refinement: Coding decisions and category structures were discussed among the research team during iterative meetings, leading to the refinement, merging, or redefinition of categories where necessary.

Although the analysis was inductive, the existing literature on collectivist cultures, gender roles, work-life balance, and motherhood informed the interpretive sensitivity of the researchers, without imposing predefined categories on the data.

NVivo 12 software was used to support data organization and retrieval. Frequencies of categories were recorded to indicate salience and prominence, not to imply statistical generalizability.

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Homogenous group formation, prolonged engagement with the data, and iterative team discussions during the analytic process, along with saturation, reached after the sixth group, served as indicators of analytic adequacy. Coding was performed using NVivo 12.

Research Question 1 What messages do women perceive from the macrosystem (church, school, and mass media) and the mesosystem (family, partner, peers, and professional environment) regarding the importance of motherhood?

Women reported receiving influential messages regarding motherhood from both the macrosystem and the mesosystem, shaping their perceptions of timing, obligation, and the ideal maternal role.

Macrosystem Messages

(a) Church: The church framed motherhood as a moral obligation. Subthemes included

(a1) Obligation – motherhood as a duty (38 mentions); **(a2) Conditions** – marriage (27 mentions), early age (11 mentions), and large family size (9 mentions); and **(a3) Goal** – species perpetuation or divine gift (10 mentions), and support during old age (2 mentions). Participants noted: *“And what is your role? That is why God gave you...”* (N.S., FG1) and *“The essential role of a woman in the eyes of the church is to procreate, to give life”* (E.G., FG6).

(b) School: School messages emphasized timing and educational prerequisites, portraying pregnancy – both in adolescence and during university – as problematic and encouraging postponement until studies were completed. Main themes included **(b1) Timing** – only after completing studies and career (20 mentions); **(b2) Family pattern** – promoting a 1–2 children family model (9 mentions); **(b3) Stigmatization** – early motherhood criticized (9 mentions), illustrated by *“...if you become a mother in high school it’s a tragedy; you are blamed and looked down upon”* (F.B., FG2) and *“During 8th grade, we were taught at school that it’s not good to have a child while you are still young”* (N.G.I., FG3); and **(b4) Educational purpose** – teaching about family roles (8 mentions). Participants also highlighted financial constraints: *“The decision to postpone conception can also be influenced by the absence of a minimum guaranteed income during university, as it is difficult to become a mother while simultaneously being a student and employed”* (L.C., FG2).

(c) Mass media: Media messages were ambivalent. Themes included **(c1) Pattern** – the perfect family with children (24 mentions), strong woman balancing motherhood and career (16 mentions), and independent, child-free women (10 mentions); **(c2) Postponing conception** – motherhood at 30–40 years (11 mentions); and **(c3) Pro-fertility messages** – encouraging pregnancy (7 mentions). Participants highlighted conflicting portrayals:

"...motherhood is deferred to around 35–40 years. First you build a career and then have a child" (L.C., FG2), "...the image of a woman today is that of someone who can be both a super mom and a super career woman, doing everything instead of a man..." (E.C., FG2), and "...recent media messages focus more on not having children. Focusing on career and self leads me to think that motherhood is no longer as important. The image of the powerful woman is emphasized" (E.C., FG2).

Mesosystem Messages

(a) Family of Origin: Families were the most frequent and emotionally intense source of pressure. Themes included **(a1) Obligation** – motherhood as duty (48 mentions); **(a2) Main condition** – completion of studies, marriage, and career (31 mentions); **(a3) Purpose** – having someone to care for you (3 mentions) or ensuring grandparents and continuing the family name (17 mentions); and **(a4) Secondary conditions** – as soon as possible (7 mentions) or having at least two children (5 mentions). Illustrative quotes included: *"My mother always tells me my role is to have children, otherwise I am not fulfilling my purpose" (A.M.M., FG3), and "The message is clear: first school, career, marriage, and only then children – but it must happen" (A.M., FG4).*

(b) Partner: Partners played a central role in decision-making. Most participants described shared decisions (23 mentions), though some reported pressure to conceive the first or additional children (10 mentions), while others experienced encouragement to delay conception (6 mentions) due to career or financial concerns.

(c) Peer Group: Friends exerted subtle social pressures. Some women felt the need to have children at the same time as peers (7 mentions), while perceptions of acceptable family size were influenced, often normalizing a maximum

of two children (4 mentions). One participant shared: *"Throughout my entire pregnancy, I was almost on the verge of depression because I felt like everyone was looking at me strangely. I was the only one in a group who was having a third child, while the others had one, two, or no children" (A.G., FG2), and "When I was pregnant with my second child, I was asked why it was so soon?" (L.C., FG2).*

(d) Professional Environment: Messages were ambivalent. Employer-related barriers and discrimination were the most frequent (20 mentions), subtle peer pressure was less frequent (11 mentions), and supportive responses occurred in some cases (9 mentions). Participants shared: *"Have a child? You mean you don't want to sleep well at night? I have so much to do in my career that I don't need to tie myself down with a child" (A.M., FG4), and "If they ask where I see myself in 5 years at a job interview, the answer that satisfies them is that I see myself alone, working in the office on Saturdays and Sundays, maybe without extra pay" (N.C., FG3).*

Overall, **family, church, and school messages were the most frequent and directive**, while peers and professional contexts provided subtler or ambivalent guidance. Women navigate overlapping and sometimes conflicting messages, shaping perceptions of motherhood, its timing, and the balance between family and career.

Research Question 1.1. Please rank the four hypotheses (stay-at-home mother, career mother, career woman [non-mother], housewife [non-mother]) according to perceived social endorsement.

To summarize the previous discussions, participants were asked to express their opinions regarding the social message about the value of the female role in one of the four positions: stay-at-home mother, career mother,

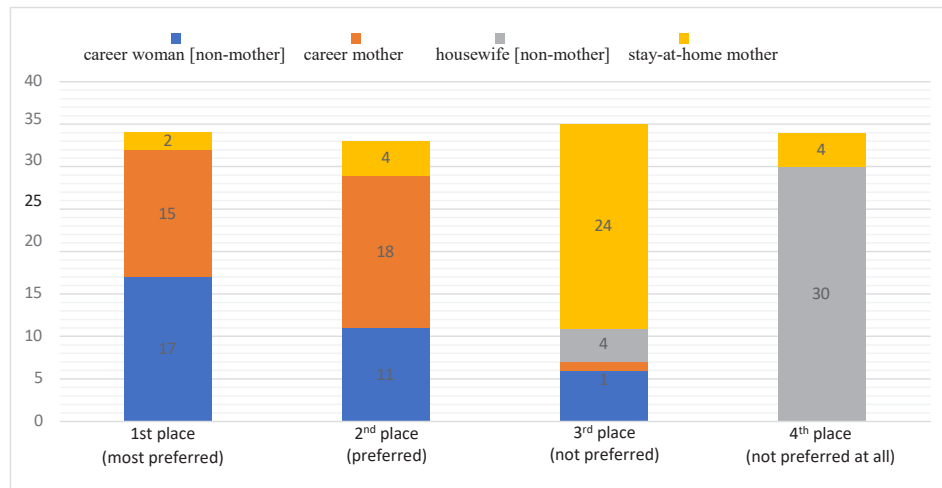


Figure 1 The value of the female role/status in relation to perceived social messages.

career woman (non-mother), and housewife (non-mother). Participants concluded that society primarily encourages women to pursue careers, preferably while being mothers.

The results revealed a clear consensus: society values and places on a higher rank the woman who successfully combines motherhood with a career. This position was perceived as the social ideal, in which a woman is expected to perform in both the family and professional spheres simultaneously.

In contrast, motherhood without a career was viewed as significantly devalued. Participants emphasized that the role of a stay-at-home mother is often socially perceived as incomplete or insufficient, stigmatized, and lacking the professional recognition that confers status and independence. One respondent stated, *"Being just a stay-at-home mom is no longer enough; people expect you to work as well"* (I.D., FG1)

Research Question 2 Which messages perceived by women as coming from the macrosystem (through the church, school, and

mass media) and the mesosystem (through the family, partner, friends, and professional environment) contribute most to their personal perception of the importance of motherhood?

This question examined how messages from the macrosystem – via institutions such as the church, school, and mass media – and the mesosystem – through the direct influence of family, partner, friends, and professional peers – shape women's perceptions of the significance of motherhood. The research aimed to identify the most influential sources of messages and how they affect decisions and values related to motherhood.

Findings indicate that the nuclear **family** exerted the strongest influence on women's perceptions of motherhood ($n = 32$). Most participants reported that their life trajectories – including decisions about education, marriage, childbearing, and career – were heavily shaped by familial values and messages, reflecting cultural and traditional expectations internalized from childhood. In this

context, motherhood is perceived as an essential life stage closely tied to family norms. At a deeper level, messages from the nuclear family function as a moral compass; choosing a path other than motherhood is perceived at a latent level not just as a different lifestyle choice but as a potential rupture in family cohesion and traditional continuity.

School messages were reported by 15 participants, significantly influencing decisions about the timing of motherhood, with many women completing their education before becoming mothers. The emphasis on completing education before motherhood reflects a latent social contract: motherhood is “earned” only after fulfilling the role of a productive, educated citizen.

Mass media influence was reported by 13 participants, reinforcing social norms regarding the “appropriate” age and marital status for childbearing; one participant noted, “*Of the three, I was influenced by the mass media [...] to have a child within a family, that is, to be married and to have the child after a certain age.*” At a deeper level, these messages act as a form of “social risk management,” in which women align their reproductive decisions with external norms to avoid the stigma of being “too early,” “too late,” or “unprepared.”

Messages from the **church** were reported by eight participants, whereas **friends** ($n = 7$), the **professional environment** ($n = 3$), and the **partner** ($n = 3$) were cited less frequently, suggesting that these sources exert minimal influence on perceptions of motherhood compared to family and educational contexts. This also suggests, at a deeper level, a significant shift in the locus of authority. While the church was historically a pillar of reproductive norms, its influence has become latent or secondary to the immediate, emotional authority of the nuclear family. The low frequency of “partner influence” may latently reflect a per-

ception of motherhood as a primarily female responsibility or a decision already “pre-settled” by family upbringing before a partner even enters the scene.

Research Question 3 How do women perceive the profile of a fulfilled woman?

To synthesize previous discussions, participants were invited to complete the sentence stem, “*A woman feels fulfilled only if...*”, to outline the profile of a fulfilled woman. Responses revealed a complex profile encompassing multiple essential life domains rather than a single dimension.

Fulfillment was primarily perceived as closely tied to self-acceptance and personal satisfaction ($n = 22$). Women considered fulfilled were those who knew and appreciated themselves, were content with who they are, and had a clear sense of life purpose [“*She is satisfied with herself,*” (O.P., FG1) “*She manages to find the meaning of her life*” (R.A., FG6), “*She is at peace with herself if she knows and achieves her goals*” (A.M.M., FG3), “*She knows herself well enough to realize what she truly wants in life*” (A.C., FG4; E.P., FG5)].

Career emerged as another key source of fulfillment ($n = 14$), exemplified by statements such as “*A job where she can do what she likes and is skilled at*” and “*She has a successful career.*” (F.B., FG2). Motherhood was also central for many participants ($n = 11$), viewed as a unique and deeply satisfying experience: “*To be a mother, to go through motherhood, because it is something unique*” (A.M., FG4), and “*To have children and the possibility to spend as much time and interact as much as possible with them.*” (F.B., FG2)

Romantic relationships were identified as essential ($n = 11$), with fulfillment linked to supportive, loving, and respectful partnerships: “*She has a relationship of support and growth together with her husband,*” (A.M.M.,

FG3), "A man with whom she can build her family and together they can overcome obstacles," (O.P., FG1), "She a husband has beside her who loves her, respects her, and makes her feel like a woman." (L.B., FG4).

Educational attainment, while valued by the church, school, and family as a prerequisite for motherhood, was not explicitly mentioned as a source of personal fulfillment ($n = 2$), appearing more instrumental for career success.

The nearly equal emphasis on motherhood, relationships, and career reflects the combined and sometimes conflicting messages from macro- and mesosystems, highlighting the internalization of the "superwoman" ideal among participants.

Discussion

This study provides insight into how Romanian women perceive motherhood and the interplay between family, career, and social expectations in a collectivist cultural context. The analyses confirm that motherhood remains a central element in women's lives, understood not only as a personal choice but also as a social expectation, a duty, and a source of fulfillment (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Rotariu, 2006). Participants reported a strong influence of the *nuclear family*, which consistently conveyed normative messages regarding the timing and necessity of motherhood. Questions like "What about you – when are you having a baby?" illustrate the emotional intensity of familial expectations, reflecting the collectivist emphasis on conformity, intergenerational loyalty, and the perpetuation of family lineage (Gorla et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2023).

At the macro level, institutions such as the church, school, and mass media provided conflicting messages, in line with previous studies on stability (Correia et al., 2014; Beaujouan, 2021). The church emphasized early moth-

erhood as a moral duty, framing procreation as central to a woman's role. Schools, by contrast, highlighted the importance of completing education before childbearing, often stigmatizing early pregnancies. Mass media conveyed ambivalent portrayals: idealized families with children, the "superwoman" capable of excelling as both a mother and a career professional, and independent, child-free women pursuing autonomy and career goals. These mixed messages exemplify the tension inherent in *collectivist societies undergoing modernization*, where traditional gender roles coexist with emerging ideals of female autonomy and professional achievement (Davis, 2019).

The dominance of the "working mother" as the most valued social role reflects a complex negotiation between traditional-collectivist values and modern-individualist imperatives. Viewed through the lens of the *Expectation States Theory*, this hierarchy suggests that status is no longer granted solely based on the maternal role, but is increasingly contingent on professional competence and financial autonomy. In this context, gainful employment is not merely an economic necessity but a "status marker" that validates a woman's competence in the macrosystem (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). However, our analysis of the **latent content** reveals that this preference does not signify a move away from motherhood, but rather the internalization of a "double burden." Participants perceive that to achieve the highest social status, they must satisfy both the mesosystem's demand for family continuity and the macrosystem's demand for professional success, effectively striving for the "Superwoman" archetype to resolve these competing role expectations (Jaspal et al., 2016). For many, career success and financial stability were prerequisites for motherhood, reflecting the *dual demands of collectivist norms and modern professional*

expectations, specific to individualist cultures. Professional environments often exacerbated this tension, with employers perceiving maternity leave as a disruption and mothers sometimes facing discrimination, consistent with the literature on the *motherhood penalty* (Stan, 2019). Conversely, supportive colleagues and employers were rare but notable, highlighting that social support can mitigate the stress of navigating competing roles (Zhang et al., 2020).

At the mesosystem level, partners were described as central in decision-making, often negotiating the timing and number of children. At a deeper level, our findings suggest that partners act as ‘gatekeepers’ of the transition to motherhood; the negotiation of timing and family size may be inextricably linked to the woman’s need to maintain her ‘competence status’ in the professional sphere. This indicates a latent internalization of the ‘working mother’ ideal not just by the women, but by the couple as a unit. Peer influence, while subtler, contributed to reproductive decision-making through social comparison and implicit pressures to align with group norms. Beyond simple comparison, peers exert an implicit ‘status pressure’ that compels women to align their reproductive choices with the dominant group norms to avoid social marginalization. Together, these findings illustrate how *gender role expectations* and social norms are internalized and enacted within relational and institutional contexts.

When considering women’s perceptions of a fulfilled life (Research Question 3), self-acceptance emerged as the most salient dimension, followed closely by career achievement, motherhood, and romantic relationships. Self-acceptance may suggest a latent psychological response to the overwhelming demands of the ‘Superwoman’ ideal. Analysis indicates that self-acceptance functions as an internal ‘buffer’ or a negotiation strategy,

allowing women to reconcile the inherent contradictions between the desire for professional autonomy and the altruistic expectations of motherhood. Motherhood was described as uniquely rewarding but inseparable from societal and familial pressures. Career success provided autonomy and social recognition, whereas romantic partnerships offered emotional support and relational validation. Education, although frequently emphasized by family and institutions, was primarily instrumental, enabling both career and maternal achievements. We may say that education is not merely a personal goal, but a ‘competence prerequisite’ that justifies a woman’s entry into the professional sphere, thereby facilitating the highest rewarding role through the lens of the *Expectation States Theory* – the ‘working mother’ status. This multidimensional understanding reflects the *integration of personal fulfillment with culturally prescribed roles*, illustrating the internalization of the “Superwoman” ideal and the balancing act required to navigate collectivist expectations.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that *motherhood, career, and relational roles* are interconnected and negotiated within a complex web of macro- and mesosystemic influences. The data highlight the enduring influence of collectivist culture on women’s choices, the pressures of traditional gender roles, the modern-individualist imperatives, and the contradictions between personal aspirations and social expectations. These results underscore the importance of *psycho-educational interventions*, workplace policies, and public campaigns that address reproductive health, social pressures, and gender equity. Supporting women in making informed reproductive and career decisions requires recognizing both the cultural imperatives of collectivist societies and the individual pursuit of fulfillment.

Limitations and Future Directions

A key limitation is the lack of an intersectional perspective that examines how socio-economic status, education, or residential context affect experiences. Future research should adopt a more nuanced approach to examine how these demographic variables moderate the negotiation of the 'Superwoman' ideal. For instance, women in rural or lower-income settings may face different mesosystemic constraints than those in urban professional environments. Additionally, cross-regional studies could further illuminate the variability of macro-systemic impacts, such as how local institutional policies or religious intensity influence reproductive decision-making. Expanding the research to include diverse socio-economic backgrounds would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the structural barriers and personal agency involved in navigating contemporary motherhood.

Conclusion

This study advances understanding of perceptions of motherhood in a collectivist culture. Findings underscore the importance of education and social interventions to inform women about reproductive health and risks of delayed motherhood, while addressing social and professional pressures. Educational programs on reproductive health, family planning, and work-life balance should be integrated into schools, universities, and public awareness campaigns to support informed reproductive choices.

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