Saying the unsayable: the online expression of mothers' anger during a pandemic.

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Saying the unsayable: The online expression of mothers' anger during a pandemic

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Abstract

This article investigates key triggers for mothers' anger during the COVID-19 pandemic and some of the positive and negative consequences of its expression online. It uses the UK online parenting forum Mumsnet as a research context and source of data. Our findings support previous research into mothers' anger during COVID-19 that suggests that the pandemic has both exacerbated longstanding sources of conflict and created new ones within their homes. This anger is frequently repressed because women need to continue to work and cohabit with the colleagues and family members who have caused this anger. However, we also identify a further trigger for mothers' anger – their frustration at the government's perceived inaction and mis- or even dis-information about the pandemic. This anger can be exacerbated by mainstream media reports and also the sharing of suspicions and complaints on online forums such as Mumsnet. Mumsnet therefore offers a safe space for the venting of women's anger during lockdown, but also a place where feelings of anger can be perpetuated and perhaps even aroused.

Keywords

mothers, anger, online forum, COVID-19, media, UK

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The COVID-19 pandemic has both exacerbated and highlighted the range of social and economic burdens placed on parents, but in particular mothers. These burdens adversely impact significant issues, including mothers' personal security and mental health, as well as their economic potential. The pandemic has brought to light not only the *types* of personal burdens endured by mothers, but the very real *impacts* of those burdens. Women have always taken on the burden of domestic labour, but the pandemic has exacerbated the situation, adding the demands of constant childcare and home schooling on top of engaging in paid labour from their home (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2021; O'Reilly, 2020). Research into the impacts of the pandemic on women is developing and will aid understanding of the ways in which women's lives have been adversely affected globally. However, research into the *emotional dimensions* of these issues, as well as the ways in which mothers identify and utilise coping mechanisms to deal with these issues, is less advanced.

In many countries, lockdown has inevitably limited face-to-face personal interactions, and has in turn limited the safe channels and spaces available to women to reduce social isolation; to externalise their feelings regarding these burdens; to reflect upon their significance; to share personal experiences and to discuss potential solutions to these problems. It is becoming clear that women, more than men, have continued to use social media for networking and to deal with lockdown loneliness – for example, Kovacs et al. (2021) found that, while men's online networks have experienced shrinkage during the pandemic, women's have not. King (2021) agrees that, during lockdown, men's social networks in general have decreased in size by 30% but women's have not. Focusing specifically on pregnant women based in the UK, Chatwin et al. (2021) suggest that a social-media-based approach has worked well to provide support during lockdown. Additionally, Selva and Andi (2020) suggest that non-political third spaces, such as Mumsnet and Netmums in the UK and Baby Center in the US, have offered women the opportunity to consume news about COVID-19, both through links to the original article and, more frequently, through summaries and the ensuing debates.

While women have therefore continued to use social media for general support, news and networking, this article focuses on its use for the expression of the particular emotion of anger in relation to the pandemic, exploring the triggers for and expressions of mothers' anger and some of the positive and negative consequences of its expression online. It uses the UK online parenting forum Mumsnet as a research context and source of data.

In January 2021 Mumsnet released the findings of its own survey of 1500 users regarding their experiences during COVID-19, undertaken in November 2020: 76% of Mumsnet survey respondents said that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their own mental health; 79% agreed that "responsibility for home-schooling fell largely to me" during school closures and 77% agreed that "it was impossible for me to work uninterrupted". Of those who had been in paid work in March 2020, 70% said they had struggled to balance work and childcare at home (Mumsnet, 2021a). While the survey findings contained references to negative emotions such as anxiety, worry, distress and hopelessness, it is notable that anger was not mentioned. This study therefore

complements Mumsnet's own research by investigating one negative emotion that the site and its users did not overtly discuss in a survey relating to the impact of COVID-19.

Our findings support previous research into mothers' feelings of anger during COVID-19 that suggests that the pandemic has both exacerbated longstanding sources of conflict and created new ones within their homes relating to women's domestic burden. Spaces like Mumsnet are used to safely vent this anger while sharing it with other women. However, we also identify a further trigger for UK mothers' anger during the pandemic, positioned outside the home: frustration at the government's perceived inaction and mis- or even dis-information. This anger can be exacerbated by mainstream media reports and also the sharing of suspicions and complaints on online forums such as Mumsnet. Mumsnet therefore offers a safe space for the venting of women's anger during lockdown. However, it is also a place where feelings of anger can be perpetuated and perhaps even enflamed.

Background and rationale

"Good" mothers are not supposed to show negative emotions such as anger. Mauschart (1999) describes how negative aspects of motherhood are hidden behind a "mask of motherhood", which conceals the ambivalence, frustration and conflicted emotions that many mothers feel behind a façade of the competent, cheerful and serene mother (Wright, 2001). Intensive Mothering ideology, for example, assumes that, for the Intensive Mother, childcare is all-consuming, guided by expert advice, and – most importantly – emotionally satisfying (Hays, 1996). Therefore, it is insinuated that any negative emotions that a mother feels must come from a place of ill health or potential deviance. In 2000, Arendell noted that mothers' negative feelings were understudied, but that what research there was suggested that married mothers experienced significantly higher levels of anger than fathers, and that this anger was primarily targeted at husbands, who did little to ease their wives' burdens, and secondarily at children. Thomas (2005) also noted that women's anger had been little researched in comparison to other negative emotions they might experience, such as anxiety and depression, and that it was a confusing and distressing emotion for women. Women who openly express negative emotions, or who appear not to be coping with the demands of motherhood, are often shamed, if not pathologised (Kennedy, 2013), and those few studies of mothers' negative emotions that do exist have tended to be focused in psychiatric and psychological research. However, there has been some change recently, with Garncarek (2020) noting that we are more frequently hearing the voices of women who admit that they do not like taking care of children and regret becoming mothers. This may be related to the growth of anonymous online spaces that allow women to share negative emotions about motherhood. Pedersen and Lupton (2018) found that the discussion boards of Mumsnet provide women with an anonymous space to share negative emotions about their maternal experience, such as ambivalence, resentment, anxiety and anger, while Jaworska (2018) argues that anonymous online discussion forums are important for women to revoke taboos and exercise agency by reworking the hegemonic discourse on motherhood. They receive empathy and friendly support in response. However,

Mustosmäki and Sihto (2021) argue that such sharing needs to be anonymous, otherwise mothers are criticised for opening their children to future stigma.

Investigating the everyday anger of women in the United States, Thomas (2005) found three pervasive themes: powerlessness, injustice and the irresponsible behaviour of others. Women became angered because they wanted someone or something to change but could not make that happen – often women stated that their partners or co-workers would not even listen to their views or requests. A frequent trigger of mothers' anger was identified as the failure of partner or children to do their fair share of household chores. Family members were the most frequently cited triggers of women's anger, but women reported unwillingness to discuss their anger with these family members. This was related to a fear of being labelled a "bitch", "shrew", "nag" or "scold", and led to women stifling their anger to avert negative consequences.

The expression of anger is argued to be beneficial in certain circumstances – it can be important for psychosocial wellbeing, for example. Lieberman and Goldstein (2006) investigated women's discussions on an online breast cancer support group and found that greater expression of anger was associated with a higher quality of life and lower depression. However, while the expression of anger can be healthy, it can also diminish the social influence, or perceptions of competence, of women (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Salerno & Peter-Hagene, 2015). When a woman expresses anger, it can be attributed by others to internal causes, such as her being emotional, and therefore a product of her personality, which can lead to her competence and professionalism being questioned (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). In comparison, when men express anger, it is attributed to external causes, such as having a bad day (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). Kay and Banet-Weiser (2019) discuss the public testimonies of Anita Hill and Christine Blasey Ford against Clarence Thomas and Brett Kavanaugh and the way in which, because of a need to appear "credible", they were rendered unable to express anger.

Introducing a special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* on anger, the media and feminism, Kay (2019) notes that women's anger has rarely been analysed as a concept or category in its own right in feminist media scholarship. She suggests that, in recent years, we have witnessed an extraordinary new visibility of women's anger – referencing #MeToo, women's response to the election of President Trump, and what she describes as a "celebritization" of women's anger. However, in the same issue, Orgad and Gill (2019) suggest that this is not so much an unleashing of women's rage but more of the careful regulation of female anger via the media. Nonetheless, Wood (2019) argues that the increasing use of the word "fuck" in feminist protest offers a way around the double-bind women are in when it comes to the public expression of anger. She suggests that the growing use of the word "fuck" by women in general discourse overturns repressive expectations of femininity. While her analysis focuses on working-class politicians such as the UK's Jess Phillips, the use of the word on a website predominantly used by middle-class mothers is just as shocking to some observers. Mumsnet is both praised and reviled for its acceptance of swear words on its discussion boards (Pedersen, 2020). In 2017 *The Independent* reported that "top brands" had raised fears over "too much swearing" on the site, concerned that their adverts were appearing next to posts containing "offensive" swear

words. In relation to the burdens imposed on mothers during the pandemic, in spring 2021 Mumsnet produced a graph demonstrating that swearing spiked on the site every time there was an announcement about school closures (*The Economist*, 22 May 2021). This indicates that Mumsnet is a space where women feel free to vent anger – thus making it a good site for the examination of women's anger in relation to the pandemic.

Women's burdens during COVID-19

Periods of crisis such as pandemics are already understood to disproportionally impact women. McLaren et al. (2020, n.p.) state that "it is well known that women's vulnerabilities are exacerbated during times of disaster, such as famine, war, natural disaster and disease outbreak". These experiences are not simply limited to impacts on health, which may vary according to sex, but more broadly on social and economic factors, including personal safety and employment (Gausman & Langer, 2020; Osland et al., 2020). The United Nations Secretary General policy brief "The Impact of Covid-19 on Women" notes that: "The pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic." This policy brief, in line with emergent research into the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 (such as Casale and Posel, 2020, and Bashevska, 2020, on women globally), highlights several key areas of impact on women.

In relation to personal safety and wellbeing, lockdown has led to a significant rise in violence directed towards women and an increase in social isolation. Furthermore, the restructuring and reprioritisation of health services has adversely impacted women's health provision. With regard to economic considerations, COVID-19 has also impacted women's ability to earn due to the predominance of women working in the service industries and hospitality, which have been adversely affected by the pandemic. This issue is further exacerbated by the burden placed on mothers with school-age children by additional home-schooling and childcare responsibilities (Petts et al., 2020). As Craig (2020) points out, since both men and women were encouraged to work from home if they could, lockdown actually offered the possibility of a removal of gendered fault lines around unpaid domestic work. However, for most, it is clear that the crisis has just made the situation worse.

While much of the emergent literature on the subject of mothers' emotional response during COVID-19 has focused on feelings of fear, anxiety, worry and despair, there has been some limited research on the subject of anger. Chivers et al. (2020) interrogated all posts related to COVID-19 from January to May 2020 on an Australian online support forum for mothers before and after birth and identified five emerging themes. Three of these related to women's emotional states: despair and anticipatory grief, tempered happiness and heightened distress. Within the despair theme, many posters expressed a range of feelings such as sadness, anger and a sense of loss. In an analysis of dream diaries during the pandemic, Barrett (2020) found that women showed significantly lower positive emotions in their dreams and higher rates of negative emotions, including anger. Focusing more closely on the use of diaries to explore the emotional experiences of

mothers, Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir's (2020) analysis of the diary entries of mothers in Iceland found women describing their stressful lives and the need to balance their own work with childcare and home schooling with words such as overwhelmed, frustrated, tired, annoyed and angry. Also in Iceland, Auðardóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir (2021) found middle-class mothers in lockdown resentful of their male partners' seeming ability to remove themselves from day-to-day domestic chores and childcare, suggesting that "it will be interesting to see if the COVID-19 lockdown results in feminists revisiting the topic of shared domestic work that was so prominent with second-wave feminists but is less visible in middle-class feminist circles today" (n.p.). Similarly, the participants in the Australian survey discussed by Craig (2020) reported feeling that they had been returned to the 1950s while their husbands got on with work in another room in the house.

Thus mothers in lockdown have felt particular anger with their partners, who are perceived as providing insufficient support with pandemic parenting. Calarco et al. (2020b) argue that the pandemic has both exacerbated longstanding sources of conflict (related to equality of parenting work) and created new sources of conflict related to partners' dismissal of mothers' concerns about COVID-19. Similarly, O'Reilly (2020) identifies triggers for mothers' stress in the pandemic, which include taking on the majority of the burden of domestic labour, childcare and home education, on top of engaging in paid labour from their home. Stress could also be amplified by income or employment loss, financial or housing instability, single parenting and abusive situations. She notes that "the essential and frontline work of mothering in this pandemic has been … discounted, disregarded, and dismissed by governments, media, and the larger society" (n.p.). However, it should be noted that other mothers, including mothers with undisrupted childcare, mothers facing less intensive pressures, and some mothers who have lost their jobs, have felt happiness at the increased parenting time they have enjoyed during the pandemic (Calarco et al., 2020a).

This disregard of the maternal burden during the pandemic is one reason why further research into the impact of COVID-19 on mothers is needed. It is clear that mothers have seen an increasing domestic burden during the pandemic, related in particular to the lack of childcare and demands of home schooling, which has impacted on their mental and emotional health. Feelings of increasing resentment and anger need to be vented somewhere, but they may create even more problems if shared with close family and friends. Spaces such as online forums offer spaces for the anonymous sharing of such negative and "unmotherly" emotions. It is therefore important to research the online places where mothers have been able to share their negative emotions about this situation, in particular because the very act of venting on social media may also contribute to or exacerbate this anger.

Methodology

The UK parenting website Mumsnet was chosen for this study as an appropriate context to examine mothers' anger during COVID-19. Mumsnet describes itself as "the UK's biggest network for parents", with over 8 million unique visitors per month clocking up around 1.2 million page views (Mumsnet, 2021b). While Mumsnet states that it is

"by parents, for parents", the vast majority of users are women, with men making up only 2–5% of core users (Pedersen, 2015). Of its users, 91% have children (Mumsnet, 2021b). The popular discussion forum on the site is made up of over 100 different topics, ranging from the more traditional "baby weaning" and "pregnancy" topics to "feminism", "employment" and "human rights". In spring 2020, Mumsnet added another topic relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the number of discussions on the site on this subject. By January 2021 this topic held over 27,000 separate threads. Individual threads can accept up to 1000 posts before discussants need to establish a new thread.

This research focuses on linked threads in a long-running series entitled "Worried about Coronavirus", which was started in the early weeks of February 2020. It was chosen for analysis because it was the longest continuously running thread in the COVID-19 discussion topic on Mumsnet in spring 2020. Using keywords relating to the emotion of anger, posts which directly expressed a poster's anger were identified from this series of threads between 28 February and 30 April 2020. Keywords used included: anger, angry, furious, pissed off, annoyed, cross and raging. A dataset of 209 posts was thus formed. Here we follow the work of Chivers et al. (2020), who interrogated posts relating to COVID-19 on an Australian online support forum for women pre- to post-birth between 27 January and 12 May 2020, using key words. A similar methodology was used by Pedersen and Lupton (2018) in the compilation of a dataset of Mumsnet posts using the words "I feel" to identify positive and negative emotions about motherhood.

Clarke and Braun's (2013) approach to thematic analysis (reflexive thematic analysis) was employed to analyse the content of the threads (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach to thematic analysis was used due to its inherent flexibility and its applicability to a broad range of research contexts. Notably this approach is also inclusive of a variety of "orientations", including both inductive and deductive approaches. For the purposes of this research the review of the literature was used to identify an initial set of themes which were used as the starting point for thematic analysis. These were then iteratively expanded and deepened using the primary data.

This approach uses six phases. The first phase, familiarisation, was achieved through reading and re-reading the threads. During these readings, the researchers took note of patterns in the data and identified some preliminary analytical observations. Following these initial observations, the second phase (coding) expanded upon the initial observations, identifying topics within the text which formed the basis of the themes used in the next phase (theme generation) to present the findings below. The next two stages, defining and naming the themes, were conducted by researcher one, and validated by researcher two, and continued the process of refining and specifying the themes. The last stage of Braun and Clarke's approach, writing up, was used in the structuring and presentation of the themes shown in the findings.

It is interesting to report that researcher one also undertook a number of engagements on and about Mumsnet during the period of data collection in relation to another project. These engagements included webinars and a book discussion group. On a number of occasions reference was made by participants in the events to Mumsnet being a place where women can safely express their anger, which resulted in a number of affirmatory comments both at the time and later in discussion threads.

With regard to ethical considerations, it should be noted that, when quoting specific posters, a decision was made to use their Mumsnet username. All Mumsnet posters use a pseudonymous name and Mumsnet is eminently searchable, both via its own search engine and Google. This means that direct quotes can be easily identified and attributed to individual posters. In addition, it is clear that some users' names (which can be easily changed by posters to fit a mood or a particular subject) were used to amplify their emotions, for example "SansaSnark" and "AngryRant55". Here we follow the recommendations of the Ethics Working Committee of the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

Findings

Our analysis identifies three key triggers for Mumsnetters' anger on the Coronavirus threads: the government's perceived inaction or lack of information; the transgressive behaviour of other people, particularly work colleagues or school-gate associates; and the unsupportive behaviour of close family. Importantly, Mumsnet users expressed anger not only about the behaviour of those in their households and the growing domestic burden brought about by the pandemic, but also about government policy and communication strategies. While previous research into the impact of COVID-19 on mothers and families has focused on the disruption of the domestic household, analysis of Mumsnet threads on the pandemic demonstrates that no clear distinction can be made between the different issues that concerned and angered Mumsnetters. Discussion on the threads ranged back and forth between the micro and the macro – concerns about government statements immediately followed by worry about a local family who had returned from skiing in Italy or irritation at a husband's dismissive attitude towards a poster's fears. The linear nature of the threads on Mumsnet means that no distinction is made between matters of state affecting the whole nation and domestic affairs in one poster's home. It is also important to note that Mumsnet offers the possibility of the production of a collective voice on issues that have affected posters – as the media coverage of its reports on the impact of the pandemic on mothers demonstrate.

Mumsnet discussions of these triggers for anger were underpinned by reference to stories in the wider media, which pointed the finger of blame at a variety of targets and fuelled public anger. Thus mainstream news stories and social-media posts referred to by Mumsnet posters presented the government as a legitimate target for anger during the pandemic, while the government and the media presented other people, for example those who broke lockdown rules, as similarly legitimate targets. Much of the anger expressed on these Mumsnet threads came from frustration and was shared for cathartic purposes and to bond with other posters on the threads. Family, friends and employers, however, were more problematic as targets for anger, particularly close family with whom posters were living. Here, Mumsnet offered a safe space to share anger without repercussions. All three of these targets for anger support Calarco et al.'s (2020b) suggestion that the pandemic has both exacerbated longstanding sources of conflict and created new ones. However, connections can also be made to the findings of older studies, such as Thomas's (2005) identification of three pervasive themes of women's everyday anger: powerlessness, injustice and the irresponsible behaviour of others.

Anger at the government

The most frequent trigger for the expression of anger relating to COVID-19 was the perceived failings of the British government and local authorities. Much of this anger focused on a lack of official information about the pandemic, and was often compared to other countries, where information was deemed to be more easily available.

> I've been reading these threads for a while and I'm getting increasingly annoyed by the lack of information from the government and local authorities. (Louabella, 28 February 2020)

> Jumping on to the thread to say how angry I am that we are being denied the full picture here. I want to know where clusters are developing so that I can act accordingly. Other countries are providing this information to their citizens – why is our government refusing to? (Greeniac, 4 March 2020)

Expressions of anger about the government's lack of communication ran throughout the dataset, and it is clear that the feeling of being kept in the dark fuelled women's anger and feelings of powerlessness. As one poster commented, "This is what is annoying about them not giving us information. It just makes people worry more" (OfWarren, 28 February 2020). Another demanded: "Are they effing serious that they aren't going to tell us where the new cases are? I am truly shocked and very angry" (User1775564212, 4 March 2020). Several posters suggested that the government was keeping secret data that it did not plan to share with the public for fear of general panic.

The mainstream media's coverage, or lack of coverage, of the pandemic in the early weeks of spring 2020 was also seen to be related to the government, with several posters expressing the opinion that pressure had been put on the media by the government to keep the true nature of the situation away from the public. A number of others agreed that the decision of the government not to report the locations of COVID-19 cases was "going to fuel false media reports" (Confusedandtired99, 4 March 2020) and "false rumours" (Littlealexhorne, 4 March 2020), which made them angry and frustrated.

There was particular criticism of government briefings, which started to be televised in February 2020. Posters stated that they tuned in for these briefings but felt anger because they did not feel that government ministers delivered an adequate quality or quantity of information. In fact, some posters went further than anger at lack of information and shared their suspicions that the briefings were delivering misinformation or even disinformation.

> It is obvious they are lying in the briefings, and I share your anger about that. (SansaSnark, 5 April 2020)

Anger was also expressed at the government for allowing certain large events to go ahead in February and March 2020, such as the horse-racing event the Cheltenham Cup, football matches and music concerts. The blame was firmly placed by Mumsnet posters on government inaction rather than attendees.

As leader of the government, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was frequently mentioned by name as being a particular focus for anger, especially when his behaviour was seen to be going against government guidelines, such as his stated determination to visit his mother on Mothers' Day. One poster expressed this as: "I'm so bloody angry we're all being used as pawns in Boris's game of Germ Pokemon where we have to catch it all" (Kuponut, 13 March 2020). This anger did not diminish when the prime minister himself became ill.

> I find I am increasingly disliking Boris Johnson. To be honest I'm seething. I'm not a Tory fan anyway, but honestly that has nothing to do with why I'm angry.
>
> I'm angry because we are in desperate need of professionalism and clear information during such a serious situation.
>
> I'm sorry but I'm so fucking sick of him bringing anecdotes and nonsense language into it. Firstly it was him saying he was shaking hands with Covid patients (!!), then the "take it on the chin" comment. (Owlstooting, 30 April 2020)

Other posters, however, were angered by criticisms of the government shared on the threads. This demonstrates the presence of an ongoing meta-narrative where the discussion of posters' anger on the threads made other posters angry and caused them to leave the discussion.

> The comments trying to make this political are really annoying me. (Springinsight, 2 March 2020)
>
> [T]here's certainly too much ridiculous anger and pontificating. I need to leave this thread now, it's becoming a bin fight. (Fourducksate, 12 March 2020)

The overwhelming driver for Mumsnetters' anger with the government was thus a feeling of powerlessness and despair over a perceived lack of leadership in the face of a global pandemic. This can be linked to the government's failures of communication and the confusion caused by backtracking, apparent unwillingness to act in comparison to other countries, and the behaviour of the prime minister. Much of this anger was fuelled by wider mainstream and social-media discussion, but was personalised by Mumsnetters' concerns about how government (in)action impacted on their own homes and families. However, while some Mumsnetters were quick to politicise the pandemic, others felt anger at this move – meaning that the discussion on Mumsnet allowed a venting of anger but could also feed its flames.

Other people

Another key trigger for Mumsnetters' anger were people with whom the poster worked. There were several posts discussing anger caused by the response of work colleagues to COVID-19, mostly because the colleague was perceived not to be taking enough precautions and was therefore putting the poster and her family at risk.

> I'm starting to feel really cross and hurt with a colleague. She's our HR manager and keeps telling anyone who asks that there nothing to worry about as it's no worse than the flu and spreading misinformation on Facebook about it being more likely to win the lottery than to catch it right now. (Nemophilist Rebel, 29 February 2020)

This reference to posts on social media was echoed in other posters' comments about the anger they felt at some of the posts on social media, which were again seen as dangerous and irresponsible misinformation.

> I'm so unspeakably angry with the idiocy and gullibility of people. I've literally just been blocking people on Facebook and Twitter including people I considered friends as I cannot believe the stupidity. (BiBiBirdie, 2 March 2020)

Those who posted photographs on social media of their spoils from shopping during the rush on the shops during spring 2020 were also a cause of anger, much of it from women who stated that they were shielding and could not go to the shops themselves. The injustice of their comparative situations thus triggered anger.

> The profiteers and those posting their "haul" of every bloody bottle of hand sanitizer in Superdrug on FB [Facebook] really make me quite angry. (NeckPainChairSearch, 7 March 2020)

The behaviour of those who had been abroad during the half-term holidays, for example skiing in Italy, and now refused to self-isolate also angered posters at this early stage in the pandemic, who felt that they and their families were being put in danger by this irresponsible selfishness. Davidson et al. (2020) suggest that, in the context of COVID-19, moral outrage at the behaviour of others can manifest as anger or frustration and is provoked by the perception of a violation of ethical principles. On Mumsnet, this anger, however, was often targeted at both the people perceived to be behaving badly *and* the authorities who should be stepping in.

> And wtf [what the fuck] are they doing about people who are knowingly risking others by not self-isolating? I feel so angry that my kids' school is at risk due to a family thinking they are above guidance. Lovely family too but no fucking sense it seems. (SistemaAddict, 2 March 2020)

Others vented their anger at their children's schools, which were perceived as not doing enough to protect their pupils.

> I am frustrated with my DD's [dear daughter's] primary school. They have not taken any active measures to ensure and oversee children wash their hands. … We have children in the school with immune system issues (including my daughter) and other children receiving cancer treatment. I do feel angry and let down and am aware that this school is by no means an exception. (Alib838, 4 March 2020)

Mumsnet also offered a space for the expression of repressed anger against employers. Posters expressed anger on Mumsnet that needed to be hidden at work because of potential consequences. Several posters commented anonymously on the lack of hand sanitiser and personal protective equipment supplied at their places of work.

> Not naming where I work but I was very pissed off that considering we did actually sell the product no one had bothered buying any for staff. (Fezzesarecool, 4 March 2020)

However, again, some posters were of the opinion that it was government strategy to encourage angry citizens to blame each other rather than the government.

> I'm very angry they [the government] STILL can't see this. They bloody owe the country a massive apology for ignoring empirical evidence, dithering and taking us down a path not suited to this particular virus. Instead they're blaming the public for tempering their BS [bullshit] herd immunity strategy. (EmMac7, 18 April 2020)

The policy of encouraging citizens to blame each other – or even themselves – for the ongoing situation came to a head some months later at the start of 2021 with the release of a series of government advertisements in the media focusing on personal responsibility that encouraged viewers to "look in the eye" an exhausted health worker or patient with coronavirus and think of the impact of their individual actions. The adverts were much criticised in the media. For example, Rachel Cunliffe in the *New Statesman* (28 January 2021) commented, "It is not the public who should be forced to look patients in the eye and think hard about their actions – it is the government."

Mumsnet is known for its combative tone in discussion (Pedersen, 2020), and so it is not surprising that some of the "other people" that triggered posters' anger were on Mumsnet itself. There were several spats on the COVID-19 threads where arguments broke out between posters, particularly in relation to perceived attempts to control the discussion.

> Oh for fucks sake. You're determined to stop people talking, you're determined to control this thread, and you've successfully fucked about with it to the point it's too annoying to find meaningful posts in between the derailing. I give up, you win. You've successfully

taken a source of support away from me so thanks a bunch for that. (Michelleoftheresistance, 8 March 2020)

However, other posters were quick to propitiate those they were assumed to have angered, and to apologise and explain.

I'm sorry @unluckyagain if you thought I was implying that you were dismissing the virus as the flu as that wasn't my intention. I don't think you do at all. I think the vast majority of people on my Facebook are, and it's annoying. (Confusedandtired99, 7 March 2020)

It has already been pointed out that discussions of anger might make other posters angry about the perceived validity of that anger, for example, attacks on the government. It is particularly interesting, in the context of this paper, to note several posts where posters addressed their own anger. One poster tried to apply the Kübler-Ross grief cycle to the anger she and other posters were feeling. In 1969 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described five common stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The use of this concept in the quote below may function to legitimise the anger felt, demonstrating the normality of such emotions and thus warding off potential accusations of being emotional or irrational.

Many people are still in the "denial" phase. Those of us on the "anger" phase (the next step in the cycle) are definitely going to get irritated with their attitude while they'll be annoyed with us for trying to bump them out of comfortable, calming denial. No wonder so many of us are arguing with our DHs [dear husbands]! (NotJustACigar, 2 March 2020)

There were also posters who tried to measure their anger against other, previous, triggers. One poster, reporting her anger at her sister, who had visited their elderly parent with some cakes, thus putting him at risk in her opinion, estimated, "It knocks Brexit into a cocked hat in terms of how angry I am with her right now" (MurrayTheMonk, 20 March 2020).

Family and friends

It has already been noted by previous scholars that mothers' anger is often triggered by the behaviour of their partners. The Mumsnet dataset supports this: posters used the Mumsnet COVID-19 threads to vent anger about their partners, both in terms of the unequal distribution of domestic tasks and in relation to the pandemic.

Several posters were angry with their partners for what they perceived as a *laissez faire* attitude towards the dangers of the pandemic.

Have ended up having a huge argument with DP [dear partner] over my saying that, if it's in our Borough, I'm not risking it and we will have to go on lockdown to protect our DS [dear son]. … He rang his poxy sister and both ganged up on me, saying I'm mad and need to see the GP (due to her being a bullying bitch when he was born early I had a nervous breakdown.

I'm not ashamed but it's wheeled out anytime I don't tow [sic] the fucking line and agree with the pair of them). (BiBiBirdie, 29 February 2020)

The post by BiBiBirdie is particularly interesting because it makes the connections between women's anger and mental health problems identified by Mauschart (1999) – if BiBiBirdie shows her frustration or anger to her partner or his sister she is accused of being mad. Her mental health problems are also explicitly linked to her experiences of childbirth and motherhood, reminding us that women who appear not to be coping with the demands of motherhood are often shamed or pathologised (Kennedy, 2013). BiBiBirdie therefore faces the choice of expressing these emotions anyway and suffering the consequences, repressing them, or sharing them in a safe space, such as Mumsnet.

Others were angered by their partners' refusal to share domestic responsibilities.

So pissed off with my DH [dear husband]. … The thing is he flatly refuses to cook and won't even let me teach him a few basic meals so if I get ill he will need easy to prepare food. I pay for the food and he expects there to always be meals and stuff to eat so he can just fuck off. (Originalyellowbelly, 14 March 2020)

One poster was distressed by her husband's attitude to risk.

Hubster thinks it's all joke, swings here in his work uniform with god knows what germs are on, saying that people cough and sneeze nonstop at work. He [is] pissing me off, he stays in his work clothes the whole fucking evening! Hardly uses hand wash, thinking it's all joke. (Homkaismycat, 10 March 2020)

When other posters on her thread urged her to challenge him on his behaviour, she shared "he just says that I'm nagging him and he is working so hard and I just moan and nag!" – supporting Thomas's (2005) suggestion that women repress their anger for fear of being accused of nagging or scolding.

Conclusions

This article has presented key findings into triggers for mothers' anger during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Using the online forum Mumsnet as its research context, our study reveals that users' anger during the pandemic was directed towards three distinct communities: the UK government, other people, and close family and friends. Users' anger was driven by feelings of powerlessness, injustice and anger at the irresponsible behaviour of others – drivers identified by Thomas (2005), demonstrating that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown has exacerbated and further refined already existing causes for women's anger. Powerlessness and frustration were particularly strong in the discussions of anger against the government, especially when discussing the response of other countries to the pandemic and the miscommunication of

government plans. In relation to the behaviours of others, this broad category identifies anger at the response of colleagues, schools and employers to COVID-19. Like anger directed at the government, much of this emotional response focused on the role of others as agents of misinformation, for example on social media. In addition, the perceived injustice of breaches of guidance and lockdown measures also acted as a critical trigger for women's anger. Lastly, the irresponsible or ineffectual responses to COVID-19 of family and friends were frequent triggers for anger. Our findings support those of other researchers who have identified the increase in mothers' already heavy domestic burden during lockdown as being a key driver for anger within households, but also the unsupportive nature of partners' response to women's concerns – concerns that might find more sympathetic listeners on sites like Mumsnet. Significantly, our findings have revealed that the impact on women's mental health is largely dismissed, and indeed the use of familiar tropes such as "the nagging wife" and the "mad" mother are still very much in evidence.

However, it is important to point out that triggers for anger on Mumsnet were just as likely to be a government statement or the behaviour of the prime minister as it was a partner or school-gate acquaintance. Previous research into the impact of the pandemic on mothers has tended to focus on individual households and the extreme demands put upon women by lockdown. It is, however, important to recognise that, like any other members of the community, mothers are engaged with concerns and fears about the pandemic on both a micro and a macro level. Analysis of posts on Mumsnet demonstrates that users' anger can be triggered just as much by government press conferences as by the behaviour of partners. And it is perhaps easier to unite in condemnation of the government, particularly when encouraged to do so by the media and other posters.

For the posters on Mumsnet, the COVID-19 threads could act as a positive source of support and a safe space to vent their anger, particularly against family members with whom they were confined during lockdown. Thus the site acts as a safe and anonymous space for the expression of women's repressed and frustrated anger, contributing to the growing visibility of women's anger in general, and about the impact of the pandemic in particular. News media coverage of Mumsnetters' swearing about school closures demonstrates that there is still a shock value put on the display of mothers' anger. However, it also demonstrates that sites like Mumsnet can be used to channel and publicise the collective anger of women, raising public consciousness of the impact of the pandemic on mothers and their families.

However, these threads might also have a negative impact on users' mental health, exacerbating their anger by exposure to the anger of others and also being the site for hostile exchanges. The response of some posters to becoming the target of online anger was to leave the threads and thus lose this valued source of support. Mumsnet therefore offers both a safe space for the venting of women's anger but may also function as a space where feelings of anger can be perpetuated and enflamed.

While this research has utilised Mumsnet as a research context, further research into the forms of emotional responses presented in other platforms is essential in understanding the generalisability of these results. In addition, while this research has focused on the triggers and expressions of anger, we acknowledge that other emotional responses have also been triggered during the pandemic, and that these are also highly significant.

In addition, our work highlights the continuing need for better visibility of mothers' anger, whether related to the pandemic or wider issues. Spaces like Mumsnet offer the potential to reach the wider media and public consciousness through the production of a collective female voice articulating women's response to the pandemic.

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