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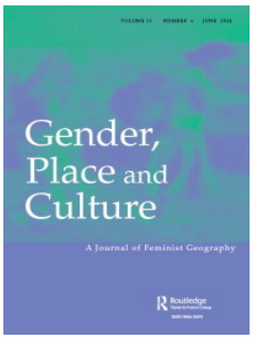

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A containment zone or a place of surveillance? Liminal spaces on Mumsnet during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This article makes use of discussions on the UK parenting site Mumsnet during the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK between March and May 2020 to investigate the ways in which users wrote about liminal sites such as front porches, windows, and front and back doors. We argue that such spaces played a number of different roles for families during lockdown: as containment zones, barriers, safe spaces of interaction, and places of performance and surveillance. These spaces bridged public and private life during lockdown by providing a perspective of the world from within the boundaries of the lockdown home. Such spaces could be perceived as both safe and unsafe – places of relocation and dislocation within which movement between the two worlds occurred and containment and disinfection strategies were performed. We also suggest that Mumsnet itself can be considered a virtual liminal space for its users, where they were able to safely access the public sphere from the comparative safety of their own homes during the pandemic and form a community with like-minded others. We thus position Mumsnet as: a liminal space in its own right, which afforded a safe place for users to be themselves, share anxieties and advice, and find friendship and companionship; a virtual third space for the discussion of politics and news; and, on occasion, a subaltern counter-public where women could formulate and circulate alternative interpretations of events counter to the frames of the mainstream media.

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KEYWORDS
Liminal spaces; lockdown; Mumsnet; clap for carers; subaltern counter-public

Context

The first lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK was announced in an address to the nation by Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 23 March 2020. All non-essential shops and services were ordered to close, and people were

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ordered to stay at home apart from taking exercise once a day, shopping for essential needs, travelling to necessary medical care or to work if that work was vital and could not be done at home. Schools and nurseries were closed, with parents expected to home school their children. As outlined by the Women's Budget Group (2021), women made up most of the employees in industries with some of the highest COVID-19 job losses, such as retail and food services; women were more likely to be furloughed than men; and 46% of mothers who were made redundant during the pandemic cited the lack of adequate childcare as the cause. Mumsnet's own survey of users, published in November 2020, found that 79% agreed that 'responsibility for home-schooling fell largely to me'. From May 2020, the laws were slowly relaxed before the reimposition of restrictions in the autumn of that year.

During the pandemic and related lockdowns, private domestic spaces were perceived to be safer than public spaces – which became reduced to places of transit and movement where it was unsafe to stay still (Marcús et al. 2022). Instead of making use of public spaces, people, particularly those living in urban areas, were forced to reorganize their homes to make better use of liminal spaces such as balconies, windows, entrance halls, porches and terraces. For many, this led to a rediscovery of spaces that had been given over to storage and clutter during the previous decades. It led, for example, to a significant increase worldwide in both Google searches for the word 'balcony' and positive terms associated with balconies in news stories during lockdown (Emekci 2021).

Previous researchers investigating the role of liminal spaces during lockdown have focused on the role of the balcony as the domestic architectural element that allowed those in lockdown at least some access to the public sphere. Such research has tended to focus on warmer weather countries such as Italy (Antchak, Gorchakova, and Rossetti 2022), Argentina (Marcús et al. 2022), Greece (Charitonidou 2020), Egypt (Aydin and Sayar 2020; Khalil and Eissa 2022) and India (Ragavan 2021). They argue that, during lockdown, spaces such as balconies and terraces became, not just new places to live, but also spaces of self-expression where it was possible to connect at a distance with neighbours, to display solidarity, to protest and even to participate in events themselves. They were places to both observe and be observed (Antchak, Gorchakova, and Rossetti 2022). Discussing the so-called 'balcony performances' in Italy, for example, where professional and amateur musicians performed for their neighbours and social media, Antchak, Gorchakova, and Rossetti (2022) argue that community performances on balconies allowed participants to connect with others at a distance and from the safety of their own homes, to express and share feelings, and transform fears and worries into more positive emotions. Building on the work of Henri Lefebvre (2013), scholars describe spaces such as balconies and terraces as liminal spaces that bridged public and private life during lockdown by providing a perspective of the world from within the boundaries of one's own home (Ragavan 2021).

Such spaces can be seen as particularly female. For example, in urban middle-class India it is the balcony that provides a sense of relief for women, who typically occupy indoor spaces, allowing them a glimpse of the outside world and a space for engaging with neighbours (Ragavan 2021). In their study of the use of liminal architectural spaces during lockdown in Buenos Aires, Marcús et al. (2022) found that it was women who made more use of such spaces for political demonstrations during lockdown. They connect this to feminist campaigns during April 2020 that organised the hanging of green handkerchiefs in windows and balconies to pressure the government to legalize abortion. Emekci (2021) notes the rich history of balconies for political purposes, referencing their use by both individual politicians and for popular protest, while Sniečkutė and Fiore (2020) discuss the transformation of all kinds of liminal spaces into sites of political communication during the pandemic, making windows and balconies not merely sites to gaze from but also to gaze at.

This article investigates the ways in which women used a digital space to write about such liminal spaces in the UK during the first lockdown, March to May 2020. Unlike previous studies, the UK in spring is not a warm-weather location and fewer homes have access to balconies or terraces. Instead, this article focuses on women's use and reimagining of domestic liminal spaces such as the front porch, entrance halls, front windows and doors of their homes. It therefore contributes to the literature surrounding the use of liminal spaces during lockdown by investigating the phenomenon in a colder-weather country with a more limited use of architectural elements such as balconies and terraces.

The article also contributes to the discussion of digital spaces as potential liminal spaces themselves, which can be used as safe places and third spaces for women's discussions and community formation. The Internet does not necessarily work as a safe space for women. As early as 2005, Barak (2005) was concerned that women would be completely 'flamed out' of either particular online environments or the entire Internet by male aggression. The online harassment of women has been described by scholars such as Jane (2014) and Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill (2017), particularly in reference to hashtag campaigns such as #GamerGate, which allowed the full flow of misogynistic hate to be hurled at women seen to be trespassing on male territory. Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) suggest that online misogyny has risen in response to the heightened visibility of women in the popular media landscape and marks a new era of the gender wars, enhanced by anonymity and the policies of online platforms.

Nonetheless, women have used gatekeeping to reappropriate social-media platforms and establish safe spaces online where they can be themselves, make friends and work collaboratively towards particular goals (Clark-Parsons 2018). Several scholars connect such spaces to the work of second-wave

feminists. For example, Pruchniewska (2019) compares women's use of private Facebook groups to second-wave consciousness-raising groups. Clark-Parsons (2018) discusses the work of the Girl Army Facebook group and draws on Fraser's (1992) notion of subaltern counter-publics to discuss the ways Girl Army members drew boundaries, both discursively and technologically around their secret Facebook group to make a feminist safe space. Similarly, Pedersen (2020) makes use of Fraser's concept to discuss the use of particular areas of Mumsnet, such as the Feminism threads, as places where users can invent and circulate counter discourses in order to 'formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (Fraser 1992, p. 123).

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) introduced the concept of the 'third place' – a public space beyond the home or workplace where people could meet and interact informally. They argued that such spaces perform a crucial role in the development of societies and communities, helping to strengthen citizenship and being central to the political processes of a democracy. At the same time, they are places where people are not required to be anything other than what they are and are therefore places that are essential to people's mental and social health since they are focused on social interaction and friendship. With the development of the Internet, and in particular social media and online forums, some scholars have suggested that social media might offer the type of informal public places that could be identified as third places (Graham, Jackson, and Wright 2015; Rheingold 1993; Wright 2012). In relation to Mumsnet in particular, several scholars have identified it as a non-political digital space that has the potential to act as a third place where women can share experiences and incubate political action (Graham, Jackson, and Wright 2016; Pedersen and Burnett 2022).

The concept of digital spaces as third places, between home and work or school, during the pandemic has been particularly discussed in relation to home-schooling (for example Brown et al. 2021; Johnston et al. 2022). However, there has been only a limited amount of discussion of digital third places outside education during the pandemic, a time during which the majority of 'real-world' third places, such as cafes, pubs, libraries, parks and religious buildings, were closed. Notably, Singh and Kender (2023) discuss their use of queer digital third spaces such as Tumblr and YouTube during COVID-19 lockdowns, describing them as liminal spaces where participants could be themselves and which offered sanctuary and a safe space for finding and creating community: 'A nook suspended in the digital world that offered the warmth of shared solidarity' (n.p.).

Methodology

Mumsnet is a UK parenting site established in 2000. Describing itself as 'the UK's biggest network for parents', the site claims to attract 7 million unique

visitors per month, clocking up around 100 million page views (About Us | Mumsnet). 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). The site states that 75% of its users are in full-time or part-time employment, 78% are between the ages of 26 and 45, and that 91% have children (Advertising With Mumsnet | Mumsnet). The discussion forum on Mumsnet is made up of over 100 different topics, ranging from the more traditional pregnancy and childcare topics to feminism and international affairs. Posters, who use pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity, can start a thread on any of its topics to which other posters are then encouraged to contribute. Threads can extend to 1000 posts, after which the OP (Original Poster) must start a new thread. Mumsnet established a Coronavirus talk topic on its talk boards at the end of February 2020, which by January 2021 had attracted over 27,000 separate discussion threads.

A number of recent studies have investigated Mumsnetters' experience of lockdown, including analyses of the gendered division of work during the pandemic (Handley 2022); lockdown learning (Bailey 2022; Forrester et al. 2021); the discussion of cleaners and cleaning during lockdown (Orgad and Higgins 2021); Mumsnetters' use of the site as a source of news about the pandemic (Pedersen and Burnett 2022); and the expression of negative emotions on the site during lockdown (Pedersen and Burnett 2021; Bailey 2021).

Mumsnet offers its own search engine where it is possible to limit results by keyword and date. Using keywords such as balcony, porch, front door, back door, terrace, entrance hall and window, we identified discussion threads relating to domestic liminal spaces posted during the first UK lockdown, March to May 2020. 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 January and May 2020 using key words. The initial search provided a dataset of 42 threads of differing lengths – the longest close to the 1000-post limit on Mumsnet. A thematic analysis of the dataset was then undertaken using Clarke and Braun (2013) approach to reflexive thematic analysis. The review of the literature was used to identify an initial set of themes that were used as a starting-point and then expanded and deepened using the primary data. The initial themes identified through the literature included public performances, political messaging, community formation, socialising, female-only activities, and the re-use of liminal spaces. Additional themes identified through the analysis of the dataset included liminal spaces as decontamination zones, the rejection of community activities such as Clap for Carers, and liminal spaces as barriers in relation to domestic abuse.

As stated above, Mumsnet posters use pseudonyms on the site. Following Association of Internet Researcher guidelines (Markham and Buchanan 2012), a decision was made to use these usernames when quoting specific posters. Since Mumsnet is easily searchable by either an external search engine or its

own, 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 subject) were used to amplify their feelings or situation, for example 'Worryingworriergal', 'IHateCoronavirus', and 'Claplikeaseal'. Bailey (2022) discusses the way in which users of the site create usernames that challenge, amuse or confront, suggesting that such usage can be playful but also can offer contextual cues for each post – which these names clearly do.

Such online forums can be conceptualised as both public and private spaces, raising questions about whether users are aware of the public nature of their posts when they are writing (Sugiura, Wiles, and Pope 2017). Mumsnet's FAQ page summarises the public/private nature of the site well when it warns users: 'Although it can feel like you're sitting around a table having a cosy chat with your mates, Mumsnet is an open site, and that means it's searchable on Google and legally linkable to – and quotable by – all and sundry' (Mumsnet FAQ 2023). Langer and Beckman (2005) argue that public media texts such as posts to publicly available online communities should be treated in a similar way to the analysis of readers' letters in newspapers. Similarly, Kitchin (2003) argues that such online data are in the public domain and that consent is not necessary. However, Kozinets (2007) argues that a researcher should fully disclose their presence and intentions to community members during such research. Given the use of pseudonyms on Mumsnet, it is not possible to contact posters for permission to quote individual posts. Ackland (2013) notes that this is often the case for such datasets. This project was also a retrospective one, meaning that posters might even have left the site since posting, and many would have changed pseudonyms. For this project, consent was sought directly from Mumsnet for the use of data from the site for this article and the wider project. Pedersen was later invited to write a post for the site discussing the project and engaging in discussion with interested users – she has an ongoing relationship with Mumsnet and has undertaken such engagement previously, so the wider Mumsnet community is aware of her research on the site and has discussed her various publications in some detail.

It should be noted that we are using the British meaning of 'porch' in this article. In the UK, porches tend to be small, covered structures in front of the entrance to a building, usually with windows and a door. They are much smaller than US porches and tend to be used as areas to store outdoor clothes and shoes rather than for sitting.

Barriers between safe private space and dangerous public space

Our dataset focuses on the first lockdown in the UK – March to May 2020. In the early days of lockdown, as families struggled to adjust to new living conditions and constraints, those who were still required to leave and enter their

homes, for example for work, planned how they would keep their families safe while so doing. Liminal spaces such as porches and other spaces near the entrance to the house became containment zones where unsafe, potentially virus-carrying, clothes and belongings could be removed and stored. It was often those who worked in the National Health Service (NHS) who wrote on Mumsnet about this type of role for the porch. One Mumsnetter, who worked as a nurse, explained:

> I've emptied our porch and only me or DH [Dear Husband] will use it when we go in public. I intend to strip off in there when I return home and bag up my clothes for washing later. I will then go straight to the shower. My bag and coat will remain in there (Frigginella 23 March 2020).

For those who did not have a physical porch, the zone of 'outside or just inside the front door' could be utilized instead. One poster detailed the family's plans for her husband's return to work on the wards, explaining that he 'must get changed outside our flat with all work clothes, shoes etc double bagged and kept by front door' (boomshakalika 19 March 2020). Another, whose husband worked as a lorry driver, explained how they had designated the spare room by the front door as a place where he would strip on return to the house before showering, 'then coming back out wiping handles as he goes. Then coming into the rest of the house' (Shosha1 17 March 2020). This example shows how the living space of the house for the rest of the family had literally reduced in order to provide a containment zone where those who had to venture into the world outside the home could divest themselves of potentially contaminated clothing and clean themselves before re-joining the family circle.

For posters who were unable to leave their homes for work, liminal spaces such as the porch and front door might start to represent barriers keeping them safe in the security of their own homes. For some, the space outside their homes was worrying and potentially fatal. One poster confessed: 'I feel like as soon as I open the front door I'm exposing myself to some invisible threat, it's making me feel quite loopy' (humblesims 2 April 2020). Another, who was pregnant, was concerned by reports that coronavirus might live on hard surfaces for up to 72 h. She asked whether she was being 'overly paranoid' by using the space by her front door as a containment zone where parcels were left to 'mount up' untouched. However, other posters could be robust in their dismissal of these fears. One respondent to a thread asking: 'Is it safe to actually go for a walk?' advised 'Please do go for a walk. It will do you a great deal more good than reading Mumsnet where some people would have you believe that the virus is waiting to grab you the minute you step outside your front door' (Coachman 9 April 2020). Investigating lockdown in Buenos Aires, Marcús et al. (2022) suggest that those who left their homes more often showed less fear and anxiety about entering public spaces.

Our findings agree that posters whose work meant that they or their family members had to leave homes regularly focused on logistical preparation and organisation, while it was Mumsnetters who mostly stayed within the home who were more likely to refer to anxiety and worries. One poster, who admitted to suffering from severe health anxiety generally, wrote about her concerns when a postman knocked at the door:

> Today the postman knocked on the door, he stood back when I answered but was probably a metre away. We had maybe a 10 second conversation. He was trying to deliver a parcel to the wrong house. I explained and he went away.
>
> I haven't left the house in 3 weeks, not even to exercise or shop. We have been lucky with online deliveries and have a big enough garden so I have minimised our risk of catching anything to as low as possible. This postman interaction is really playing on my mind. AIBU [Am I Being Unreasonable] to think this is how we could all catch it and undo all of my hard work? (Worryingworriergal 9 April 2020).

For this poster, even opening the front door and having a conversation with someone on the doorstep was a threat. The door acted as a barrier, keeping her and her family safe, but by opening the door she had allowed the potential of infection to enter her head and her house. Posters on her thread had limited sympathy for her worries, encouraging her to take a more rational approach and stop worrying so much.

Post and mail caused concern because they broke the barrier between the outside and the inside world. At this early stage of the pandemic there was uncertainty about how exactly COVID-19 was transmitted and public health messages emphasised the possibility of fomite transmission – inanimate objects that could become contaminated and then transmit infection. Later understanding placed more emphasis on droplet/airborne transmission. One Mumsnet poster noted that she had 'followed the rules' but had neglected to consider objects that came into her home, and now felt considerable anxiety over it: 'I touch any Post/Letters/Parcels/Shopping/Food etc. (basically everything that comes into the home) and I've not been washing/wiping it down or washing my hands afterwards […] I feel like such an idiot!!!' (louise5754 1 April 2020). The post displays not only the extent of anxiety caused by lockdown, but the specific focus on the door as a porous barrier between home and the virus. Responses stressed the limited likelihood of transmission: 'Don't stress now, it's done. The risk from mail is slim' (BrokenBrit 1 April 2020), but the concern remained. Strategies for minimisation included 'spraying mail' (aahah 11 April 2020) and 'leaving mail and shopping for 2/3 days if possible' (Breckenridged 27 March 2020).

The use of boxes for storage of deliveries was frequently mentioned in Mumsnet threads around the logistics of using the front door or porch as a place for deliveries of all kinds, most particularly food. Several reasons were given for this: to reduce human-to-human contact; to allow storage of deliveries for a period of time before they could be safely brought inside the

home – sometimes after some sort of disinfection; and to support those members of the community who might be most vulnerable, particularly the elderly. In the early weeks of the pandemic, threads were frequently started by posters who had not used food delivery services before, asking how they would work and particularly the etiquette of receiving a delivery.

> I'm assuming that the delivery man will unload into the front garden/door step, and i can then sanatise [sic] and bring it in. But just wanted to make sure this was the done thing. Don't want to look cheeky expecting him/her to unload it all while I keep a distance. What's the protocol? (Fluffballs 29 March 2020).

All of the examples above demonstrate the way in which Mumsnetters sought advice from the forum about how to navigate their private spaces, and how many users were happy to provide what can be seen as public health advice. Since its establishment twenty years ago, Mumsnet has been used as place of support and advice by its users – both specifically about childcare but also much more generally. A 2013 survey on the site about satisfactions gained from using Mumsnet (Pedersen and Smithson 2013) found that 86% of respondents turned to the site for advice and 64% for support, with another 54% using it for company – potentially a more frequent satisfaction during lockdown. It is perhaps not surprising then that, when faced with the crisis of a pandemic, Mumsnet users turned to the site for advice about everything from wiping down post with disinfectant to negotiating the etiquette of doorstep encounters.

While the front door was perceived by many posters as a barrier protecting their family, there were also hints in some threads that it might be seen as a barrier trapping someone inside the home. One poster discussed her fears that she might be too ill to open the door to reach help and described how she had taught her four-year-old daughter to open the door and planned to pack suitcases to be stored near the entrance. A similar thread was started by a poster who lived alone and was concerned that paramedics might need information about her next of kin and pre-existing medical conditions 'in case we need carting off to hospital' (ElectricMartha 18 March 2020). She had taped a list with this information at the top of the stairs leading to her flat in the hope that it would be read if she needed medical aid. For these posters, the front door had become a barrier, not only against infection, but potentially preventing those who might help from entering the home.

Of course, for another group of posters, being unable to leave the home had much more serious consequences. Worldwide, the circumstances of lockdown typically led to perpetrators of domestic abuse spending more time with their victim, with more opportunities for monitoring and control of their behaviour (Lyons and Brewer 2022). In fact, lockdown conditions were often used by perpetrators of abuse to intensify or conceal their violence, coercion

and control (Johnson and Hohl 2021). According to the Centre for Women's Justice (2020), in the first month of lockdown there was a rise of 49% in the number of calls to domestic abuse services in the UK and 16 homicides related to domestic abuse. For such women, doors might form a barrier impeding their access to help, support, and safety. Several threads were started in the Coronavirus topic during the first lockdown by women seeking guidance on how to leave their home and abusive partner. Mumsnetters were quick to respond with links to police and third-sector advice, and Mumsnet itself stepped in on several occasions. One long-running thread started by a poster who called herself 'Stupidanduseless' (again demonstrating the use of pseudonyms to reflect the poster's mental state) described a situation in which her husband would not allow her to leave home to collect vital medicine and also monitored her use of Facetime and WhatsApp to ensure that she did not reach out to friends and family for support ('Stupidanduseless 28 March 2020). Thus barriers created by domestic abusers could be virtual as well as physical.

Safe spaces of interaction

Many of the references to liminal spaces such as porches, front doors and windows in the dataset were related to their function as a safe space for interactions with others. Windows, in particular, were used as a space through which family members such as grandparents could be safely visited or at least see grandchildren from a safe distance. Mumsnet users were clear that 'talk through window' (millerjane 4 April 2020) was at least one way that communication could carry on and be considered safe. Moreover, posters who thought windows needed to be shut were forcefully told that this was not the case. A thread entitled 'Anyone else scared of opening windows' (CrapTVAddict 28 March 2020) was met with forceful replies: 'Jesus wept. Yes… you can open your sodding windows' (SouthsideOwl 28 March 2020), 'I know anxiety can sometimes mean common sense escapes us, but no, opening your window is very safe' (elQuintoConyo 28 March 2020).

As the weather improved, porches and front doors were also utilised as safe spaces to sit at least partially outside to get some fresh air, safely watch the world go by and acknowledge neighbours. One of the few posters in the dataset to mention a balcony wrote about how she and her neighbour 'both work from home, so the last couple of evenings we've both popped out on our respective balconies for a glass of wine and a chat' (Coldemort 7 April 2020). Another noted 'On our street (all houses) there is pretty decent camaraderie and community from people standing at their front doors or at a window to speak' (MarinaMarinara 28 March 2020). Others, however, complained about the smoke from neighbours' cigarettes and the screams of young children disrupting their time on their balcony.

According to Bernardo Zacka (2020 cited in Charitonidou 2020), 'balconies may be nominally private, but they are just as much a continuation of the public realm up in the air' (n.p.) and come with all the irritations and annoyances of public space even though the balcony user is positioned within her private space.

Performative space

While not achieving the balcony performances celebrated in Italy, there is some evidence that front doors, windows and porches did provide space for public performance and display. Most of the discussion in the Mumsnet data-set related to 'Clap for Carers', an event that was established in the early days of the first lockdown. Following the example of other countries such as Italy, France and Spain, people were encouraged to stand outside their front doors or at open windows on Thursdays at 8 pm to join a national round of applause to thank all doctors, nurses, carers, GPs, pharmacists, and other NHS staff working to help those affected by coronavirus. As one poster described it:

> DP [Dear Partner] and I opened the door to clap… And heard our neighbours and our neighbours' neighbours clap. It was lovely to hear so much appreciation for our health and care workers (ItWillBeFridaySoon 26 March 2020).

Mainstream media coverage of 'Clap for Carers' was almost uniformly positive. At the end of May 2020, after nine weeks of such clapping, the left-wing newspaper *The Guardian* ran an article entitled 'The very UnBritish ritual that united the nation' (28 May 2020) (Guardian 2020) while a similarly timed *Daily Mail* article (14 May 2020) described how NHS workers 'got emotional' as they joined others outside their front doors (Daily Mail 2020). There is also evidence on Mumsnet of posters who worked in the NHS appreciating the gesture. One poster commented 'When it happened the first time, it was lovely, and I cried. It was so rare and special to feel genuinely appreciated' (GnarlyOldGoatDude 23 March 2020). However, as the weeks rolled on, most of the threads on Mumsnet became complaints about the performative aspect of the clapping, the noise it made (particularly for those with young children in bed by 8 o'clock) and the community surveillance some felt had become a factor.

Previous research into Mumsnet has suggested that the anonymous nature of the site allows the expression of negative opinions and emotions, and that it acted as a safe space for catharsis and even the expression of anger during lockdown (Pedersen and Burnett 2022). This is certainly true of discussion of 'Clap for Carers'. Much of the discussion on Mumsnet about these moments was negative, as posters used the site as a safe space to write about their unhappiness with the demands made on them by their neighbours and by the performative nature of the whole event.

> Ordered NHS flag off Ebay, mostly to stick in the front window to stop the woman across the road glaring at us for eating dinner instead of clapping on Thursday's. I know this is probably considered equally as virtue signalling, but my neighbours LOVE their fireworks and tambourines and banging kitchen pans right now and I can't stand another Thursday stood listening to it so the flag is my middle ground (Cornana 23 May 2020).

There was little appetite amongst Mumsnet posters for the type of community performances enjoyed by the Italians, with one suggesting that it would be much better to give money to charities instead: 'It's not loud, it's not public, your neighbours won't know you've done it, but it will make a damn bigger difference' (oatlyexhausted 3 April 2020).

There were also comments and discussion threads which directly contrasted the public doorstep performances on behalf of the NHS with the result of the recent general election. Such comments demonstrate the use of Mumsnet as both a safe space wherein users could anonymously criticise their neighbours and also a third place for the discussion of the politics of such gestures:

> This makes me cringe. The UK shrugged its shoulders and voted for a government which they **knew** [original emphasis] decimated the NHS a few months ago. And now people are standing on their doorsteps clapping. I think it's beyond insulting. I know we didn't all vote conservative but how patronising when NHS staff are putting their lives at risk (Moomin8 2 April 2020)

Other posters agreed, citing weekly clapping performances as a way for people to outwardly display support for the NHS without offering practical assistance:

> Yes making it a weekly thing is ridiculous. I thought it was a nice gesture last week but now it feels like a way for all the Tory voters to absolve themselves and 'do something' to support the NHS, when a few months ago the voting majority were happy to see it run into the ground (Peapod29 2 April 2020)

Mumsnet debate was largely cynical towards public Covid performances, although there were examples of people who felt the events were important unifying experiences during the isolation of lockdown. Interestingly, the more negative opinions about such performative actions included the media coverage of the Italian balcony performances, which led one Mumsnetter to demand to know whether everyone in Italy had a balcony since she was sure this was not true of the UK. She complained, 'I feel like there's this unrealistic message that people are spreading, that we just need to wave at each other from our balconies and all will be well and we'll have instant camaraderie' (Curdsandwhey 28 March 2020).

In addition, many of the posters who did not wish to participate in the clapping referenced a feeling of surveillance from their neighbours – that if they did not appear at their front doors each Thursday they were judged as

being insufficiently full of community spirit. This applied equally, or perhaps even more, to NHS staff. The poster quoted above who had cried the first time it happened, now confessed: 'I get home knackered after a stressful day at the hospital and all I want to do is decompress. But I feel I can't not go outside as everyone knows we are both NHS' (GnarlyOldGoatDude 23 March 2020). Another NHS worker agreed that the clapping had become a social obligation divorced from the realities of working in the NHS: 'I'm now sick of it, I'm sick of my hypocritical neighbours texting me asking where I was when they were clapping for us' (EverdeRose 23 May 2020). Thus the performance of the Thursday clapping while positioned in the liminal space of the front door – where you were visibly participating – became an important moment of community surveillance during which families could be judged for their non-appearance or lack of enthusiasm. One Mumsnetter stated 'I know I can simply not take part but I've felt awkward enough for not going out to religiously clap. It's like social judgement if you don't' (FTMF30 2 May 2020). Another, who explained that she had a two year-old who was upset by the noise of the clapping and pot banging and therefore they had not participated as a family, posted to ask for advice after she had received a letter 'about how the 'community' had noticed we hadn't been clapping and they were upset we were letting the 'community' down and they hope we make an effort next time' (Claplikeaseal 24 April 2020). Several of those commenting on her thread noted that this was not the first time they had heard of this kind of surveillance by what one poster called 'the clapping STASI'.

These discussions demonstrate how Mumsnet was used as more than a safe space to share irritation about the performative aspect of Clap for Carers. In the site's discussion threads, users were able to formulate and circulate alternative interpretations of this weekly event that ran counter to the frames of the mainstream media. While both right- and left-leaning media celebrated Clap for Carers as a moment when Britons came together to celebrate the NHS, making comparisons to the equally celebrated Italian balcony performances, Mumsnetters criticised the demands of what they saw as a performative exercise that ignored political realities and led to the imposition of a local surveillance culture.

Note the reference to the NHS flag in the front window in one of the quotes above. Aronis (2022) suggests that liminal spaces are often used as stages or surfaces for messages without the actual presence of people within these spaces; hanging flags, religious symbols or posters that project an identity or invite a feeling of belonging. During lockdown, people staying at home were encouraged to demonstrate their solidarity with NHS workers and others by displaying flags and posters in their windows. While many of these were produced by children – a useful project for those home schooling – professionally produced NHS flags could also be purchased. Sniečkutė and Fiore (2020) discuss the interconnectedness of neoliberalism of these

pre-packaged shows of support in their analysis of a similar phenomenon in the Netherlands, noting that the companies that produced such flags stated that all direct profits were given to the Red Cross, but that profits could be made from items such as delivery costs.

While flags might be purchased, a more common phenomenon referenced on Mumsnet was children's drawings of rainbows to be placed in windows. These images were multi-functional – displaying support for NHS workers but also providing an activity for children and their parents on their daily walk around the neighbourhood. There were many references on Mumsnet threads to going for walks to spot rainbows in people's windows. Others commented that in their neighbourhood people were putting teddy bears in the window so children could follow the popular children's book by Michael Rosen and 'go on a bear hunt'.

Conclusions

During the first lockdown in the UK, women made use of virtual third places such as the parenting forum Mumsnet to share their fears, ask for information and offer advice. As outlined by Oldenburg and Brissett (1982), a third place is somewhere where people are not required to be anything other than what they are. Mumsnet offered such a space during lockdown, as users shared their fears, anxieties and anger, but also formed a loose-knit online community which offered support, advice and a place to vent. The site is well established as a fiercely guarded woman-focused discussion forum and therefore its female users were able to share their lives, anonymously, with the assumption that they were joining in discussions with other women who were living through the same experiences.

The focus of many of the discussion threads in the newly instigated Coronavirus topic was on keeping themselves and their loved ones safe and adjusting to lockdown living. In common with families around the world, domestic liminal spaces loomed large in such discussions. However, unlike residents in warm-weather countries, it was not balconies that were the focus of families' new way of living. Instead, front doors, windows and porches became places of containment, (in)security, performance and surveillance. These spaces bridged public and private life during lockdown by providing a perspective of the world from within the boundaries of one's own home (Ragavan 2021).

Such liminal spaces became places of transfer and containment where members of the household moved from the comparative safety of home to the worrying public sphere. Front doors and porches were perceived as barriers to the outside, helping to keep families safe, but sometimes also a concern, particularly for those living on their own. Doors could also become barriers preventing women from seeking safety and help, for example in the

case of domestic abuse. Thus such liminal spaces could be perceived as both safe and unsafe – places of relocation and dislocation where movement between the two worlds occurred, or did not occur, and where containment and disinfection strategies were performed. Fears and anxieties about breaches of these containment zones could be shared anonymously on sites such as Mumsnet, where household plans could be shared and critiqued and the most anxious posters might find support but also a robust common sense.

Such spaces were also utilised as a place to demonstrate community spirit. Rainbows, bears and NHS flags were hung in windows to demonstrate the household's participation in community-spirit-raising initiatives but also its conformity to the social obligations of performing such participation. Thus, these spaces became sites not merely to observe the world but to be observed doing the 'right' thing (Sniečkutė and Fiore 2020). Liminal spaces such as front doors and windows became the place where families were expected to gather to Clap for Carers, even if they were actually NHS workers or had caring responsibilities for young children. Community surveillance ensured that those were did not appear might be criticised or coerced into appearing. Thus, in this context, liminal spaces were places to both observe and be observed (Antchak, Gorchakova, and Rossetti 2022), but not necessarily places of self-expression.

In response, Mumsnet offered a place where women could safely and anonymously criticise these public performances and share their own distaste or anger at being observed and coerced. Mumsnetters' dislike for the performative aspect of the clapping, and its political messaging, could be safely expressed on the site, which acted here as a place for the formation of a counter-public. While the mainstream media celebrated Clap for Carers and linked it to the praised balcony performances in places such as Italy, a more critical discourse was formulated and circulated on Mumsnet. The dominant tone in the discussion threads was negative, particularly as the weeks wore on. Posters were critical of what they saw as the hypocrisy of those who had voted for a government that was perceived to be under-funding the NHS celebrating it in this way and uncomfortable with the performative aspect of the event – both their own performance and that of others. Thus, the discussion threads on Mumsnet offer a more nuanced discussion of such community performances and a corrective to the mainstream media celebration of displays of community spirit.

In this way, Mumsnet itself acted as a virtual liminal space for its users – accessed from within the domestic space of their homes but allowing a glimpse into the public sphere. Women's use of online discussion forums increased during the pandemic, in direct contrast to that of men's (Kovacs et al. 2021). This may be connected to the fact that women were more likely to be furloughed or found it necessary to give up work altogether to meet caring and home-schooling responsibilities. Third spaces like Mumsnet offered these women a virtual liminal space through which they could still be in

contact with the outside world and within which they could form a community connection with others of like minds and in similar positions. For those surrounded by a community with whose values they sometimes disagreed, Mumsnet offered a place where women stuck in the home could access a wider and more compatible virtual community.

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