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2 **Mothers with attitude – how the Mumsnet parenting forum offers space for new**

3 **forms of femininity to emerge online**

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5 Sarah Pedersen and Janet Smithson

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1 **Abstract**

2 This paper investigates the motivations and online behaviour of the users of

3 Mumsnet, a UK online parenting community. The Mumsnet discussion forum is

4 characterised by its difference to other mothering websites in its language use, its

5 celebration of confrontational, opinionated and well-informed debate, its tolerance

6 of aggression and swearing and its focus on entertainment rather than support.

7 Many of these attributes have previously been seen as male online behaviour, but it

8 is argued that new forms of femininities are emerging and a clear-cut binary divide

9 between male and female online behaviour can no longer be applied.

10

11 Keywords: gendered computer-mediated communication; online communities;

12 mothers; parenting

13

1 'You need a witty name. Txt spk, your year of birth or your very common real-life

2 name: all bad. Oblique reference to Salinger book: good.' *Morningpaper*, *Mumsnet*

3 *Talk instructions*

4

5 **Introduction**

6 In the 1990s, researchers such as Herring (1993; 1996), Kramarae and Taylor (1993),

7 Gurak (1999) and Hall (1996) suggested that men and women had different online

8 communication styles. While men were characterised as using aggressive language,

9 swearing, flaming and self-promotion, women were politer, more supportive and

10 appreciative online. There was concern that women might be 'flamed out' of the

11 Internet entirely by aggressive men (Barak, 2005) and the construction of women-

12 only or women-dominated online communities was seen as a possible solution to

13 this problem.

14 This article uses one such community – the UK discussion forum Mumsnet – to

15 investigate how women communicate online. It argues that this women-dominated

16 online community facilitates women to display a wide variety of posting styles and

17 behaviours. The Mumsnet discussion forum is characterised by a robust use of

18 language and a celebration of confrontational, opinionated, literate and well-

19 informed debate. While the site as a whole acts to reinforce middle-class parenting

20 values, its tolerance of aggression and swearing and focus on entertainment rather

21 than support allows its users to celebrate its difference from other parenting sites.

22 This difference can also be found in the explicit discussion of feminism and support

1 for political action on sections of the site. Many of these attributes have previously

2 been seen as male online behaviour.

3 The article firstly reviews literature related to gendered online communication styles

4 and parenting forums online and then discusses data collected from a survey of

5 Mumsnetters that focused on their motivations for use of the site. We argue that

6 Mumsnet is not primarily a parenting site as much as it offers a space for women to

7 find advice, entertainment, debate and the opportunity to compare experiences

8 with other women. In addition, a women-dominated site seems to offer its users the

9 freedom to adopt what have previously been identified as male styles of online

10 communication, including aggressive language, swearing and flaming. This therefore

11 suggests that new forms of femininities are emerging online and a clear-cut binary

12 divide between male and female behaviour can no longer be applied.

13

14 **Literature review**

15 While research into computer-mediated communication dates back to the 1970s, it

16 was not until the late 1980s that research on gendered use of the internet became

17 common. Early research suggested that online communities were gender-neutral,

18 democratic places that offered everyone an equal opportunity to participate

19 anonymously. However, researchers such as Herring (1993; 1996), Kramarae and

20 Taylor (1993), Gurak (1999) and Hall (1996) suggested that, rather than neutralising

21 gender, the electronic medium encouraged its intensification, and that participants

22 in an online community were likely to bring with them pre-existing patterns of

23 gendered behaviour. Herring (1993, 1996), for example, investigated electronic

1   discussion lists and suggested that men and women constituted different discourse

2   communities in cyberspace. She proposed that women and men have different

3   online styles, with the male-gendered style being more adversarial, including strong

4   assertions, self-promotion, lengthy posts, put-downs, and sarcasm aimed at others.

5   Flaming is seen as acceptable behaviour. In contrast, Herring characterised the

6   female-gendered style as including politeness, supportiveness, appreciation,

7   community-based activities, thanks, apologies and questions. She suggested that

8   such differences meant that other users regularly inferred the gender of posters on

9   the basis of their posting styles (Herring, 1993, 1996). Flaming – hostile comments

10   directed at a person rather than an idea – is generally supposed to be a male rather

11   than a female activity (Aiken and Waller, 2000; Vrooman, 2002; Alonzo and Aiken,

12   2004). Indeed, Preece (2001) states that communities in which social support is

13   important – and she gives the specific example of a mother and baby community –

14   have a very low tolerance for aggressive, critical or harsh comments.

15   Looking specifically at sexual harassment on the Internet, Barak (2005) discussed the

16   phenomenon of women being 'flamed out' of either a particular online environment

17   or the Internet entirely by male flaming and suggested that a constructive solution to

18   this problem has been the design of women-only communities where flaming is rare.

19   Cyberfeminists also see women-only websites to be a way of making women feel

20   more welcome online 'as a counter-culture to patriarchal sexist cultures' (Goulding

21   and Spacey, 2003, 39; also see Scott, 2001, Puente, 2008). However, in recent years

22   this binary division has been challenged, with researchers such as Garcia-Gómez

1 (2011) suggesting, for example, that teenage girls are now using aggressive language

2 when relating to other girls online.

3 Parents, and in particular mothers, are a significant group of Internet users with a

4 large number of websites competing for their attention – indeed the amount of

5 parenting information on the Internet has been described as a 'glut' (Carter, 2007,

6 82). Parents are now able to access online the type of information and support that

7 they would once have received from their families and friends. Many of these sites

8 conform to Preece's (2000) definition of an online community: an internet-

9 connected collective of people who interact over time around a shared purpose,

10 interest or need, reliant on people's voluntary commitment, participation and

11 contributions (cited Ren et al, 2007). Because of the demands of an increasingly

12 mobile post-modern society new parents are more isolated from traditional sources

13 of advice and support (Rothbaum et al, 2008). They may also perceive advice offered

14 by their own parents as outdated. At the same time, this new, geographically

15 dispersed, generation of parents is more used to seeking not just information but

16 also virtual emotional support via the Internet (Plantin and Daneback, 2009). It can

17 offer a valuable networking system for those who find themselves otherwise

18 isolated, perhaps because no one else in their group of friends has a baby, because

19 they are a young or single mother (Dunham et al, 1998), or because they are having

20 to deal with particular challenges related to their child's health or development

21 (Fleischmann, 2004; Lowe et al, 2009). For example, advances in pre-natal screening

22 technology now mean that increasing numbers of parents are made aware of

23 possible fetal anomalies they would not have heard of previously. They have to deal

1 with issues beyond their personal knowledge circle and turn to the internet to access

2 not just information but also the personal experiences of other parents who have

3 faced the same issues (Lowe et al, 2009).

4 Online parenting communities can empower mothers by providing them with virtual

5 social support and alternative information sources whilst also allowing them to

6 occupy positions of agency in the production of parenting-related knowledge

7 (Madge and O'Connor, 2006). Social capital can be maintained within such

8 communities through the provision of emotional and instrumental support and

9 community building (Drentea and Moren-Gross, 2005). Involvement in parenting

10 communities can lead to lower rates of depression and higher levels of self-esteem

11 amongst mothers by providing validation for the 'normalcy' of their experiences

12 (Miyata, 2002; Hall and Irvine, 2009). It can also allow new mothers to 'try out'

13 different versions of motherhood (Madge and O'Connor, 2005). While the

14 communities are mainly used by white, middle-class, heterosexual women (Madge

15 and O'Connor, 2006), such websites can cross the 'digital divide' and offer support to

16 lone parents and those with lower levels of education and income (Dunham et al,

17 1998; Sarkadi and Bremberg, 2005). There have been criticisms that many of the

18 communities reinforce stereotypes of mothering and unequal gender roles and have

19 merely moved traditional gender divisions online (Rashley, 2005; Worthington, 2005;

20 Madge and O'Connor, 2006; Brady and Guerin, 2010). For example, Madge and

21 O'Connor's work on the UK-based Babyworld (2005, 2006), Rashley's study of the US

22 Babycenter (2005) and Brady and Guerin's (2010) work on an Irish parenting website

23 all suggest that on these sites baby-care is labelled as women's work, that mothers

1 are seen as the superior care-giver and that fathers are subtly distanced from taking

2 direct responsibility while there is a clear bias in favour of mothers remaining at

3 home rather than returning to work. However, Chan (2008) suggests that such sites

4 can also offer a place for working mothers to perform their maternal role identities

5 while separated from their children.

6 Despite the description of the majority of such sites as 'parenting' communities, they

7 are mainly used by women. Even in Sweden, with relatively high gender equality and

8 explicit social policies promoting involved fathering, the lack of fathers as members

9 of these parenting websites and respondents in related research is pointed (Sarkadi

10 and Bremberg, 2005). This lack of involvement again indicates the continuance of

11 traditional familial stereotypes online, where fathers are frequently seen as an

12 inadequate source of support (Brady and Guerin, 2010). Whilst it is described as

13 being 'by parents for parents', the choice of the name 'Mumsnet' reflects this state

14 of affairs. However, this study suggests that at least a section of Mumsnetters

15 challenge traditional views of parenting and use the site to express and campaign for

16 issues related to gender equality. In addition, their use of more aggressive language

17 suggests that the idea of gender differences in online communication needs to be

18 revisited.

19

20 **The site**

21 Mumsnet was established in 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer who had

22 met at antenatal classes. The stated aim of the site is to **'To make parents' lives**

23 easier by pooling knowledge and experience'.** The site receives more than 1.2 million

visitors each month and 'Mumsnet Talk', the discussion boards, attracts around

25,000 posts every day. The site has been described as an 'internet phenomenon'

(*The Daily Telegraph*), 'a virtual shoulder to lean on' (*The Observer*) and the 'daddy'

of all parenting sites (*The Times*). Its perceived influence with British mothers has

lead to scheduled webchats with politicians, including the former and current Prime

Ministers, and *The Times* newspaper declared the election of 2010 the 'Mumsnet

election'. Not all attention has been positive, however. In 2006 the parenting author

Gina Ford sued the website for libel after negative comments were posted about the

methods she advocates in her books on parenting; in 2010 Mumsnet was criticised

for being a smug "mummy mafia"(Janet Street-Porter, *Daily Mail*) and a "nanny

state" while journalist Eva Wiseman charged: "Mumsnet started in 2000 as a forum

for people to swap parenting advice, but has slowly inflated into a reactionary

offence machine fuelled by the memory of politicians dry-humping them during the

election, imbuing them with the power of a walking skyscraper" (*The Observer*).

The growing body of academic research into parenting communities is coterminous

with a growing use of some of these sites by government agencies. The online

community Netmums is in partnership with statutory agencies and the voluntary

sector in the UK (Russell, 2006) while Mumsnet is now a major player in

governmental policy campaigns and considered a key stakeholder on children and

sexualisation issues. Mumsnet's 'Let Girls be Girls' campaign was launched in 2010 to

curb the premature sexualisation of children by asking retailers not to sell products

which play upon, emphasise or exploit their sexuality. In early 2011 the campaign

was extended to tackle lads' mags, calling on shops not to display them in children's

1 sight. The campaign was supported by the UK Education Secretary Michael Gove and

2 its main points were endorsed by the 2011 Bailey Review into the sexualisation and

3 commercialisation of childhood, to which Mumsnet submitted evidence. In 2012

4 Mumsnet launched its 'We Believe You' campaign aimed at victims of rape and

5 sexual assault and another campaign focused on the need for better miscarriage

6 care.

7

8 **Methodology**

9 This paper uses the results of an online survey that investigated the motivations of

10 Mumsnet users. In addition, we have analysed the results of a census of 5,201

11 Mumsnet members undertaken in 2009. This article is part of a wider study that

12 investigated how the site is used by Mumsnetters (see Pedersen and Smithson,

13 2010).

14 Both researchers are members of Mumsnet and met on the discussion boards.

15 Permission to link to a survey hosted by one of their universities was given by the

16 owners of Mumsnet, and their dual identity as long-term site members and

17 academic researchers was made clear to all participants. This mirrors the example of

18 previous researchers into both online and offline parenting communities (Madge and

19 O'Connor, 2006; Vincent and Ball, 2007). We understand that this means that we are

20 part of the processes that we are aiming to analyse and thus need to make explicit

21 our situation *within* the group that we are studying rather than 'othering' them. Our

22 approach included an online web survey with closed and open-ended questions,

23 together with consideration of relevant media discussions about the Mumsnet

1   website and analysis of online discussions on the website that related to the survey

2   questions, which were identified by a frequent monitoring of the site's Active

3   Conversations threads during the period of the survey. The use of such material

4   raises questions related to online ethics. As Seale et al (2010) point out, opinion in

5   the Internet research community is divided on the subject of informed consent for

6   use of material published in such forums. Mumsnet is an open-access public forum,

7   and users are advised of this fact and that postings are open for all to see. Users post

8   under user names and not all choose to accept contact from others in the

9   community so contacting each poster quoted for informed consent is not possible.

10   Seale et al (2010) argue that such messages are in the public domain and therefore

11   informed consent for their use in academic research and publication is not

12   necessary. The Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee

13   (Markham et al, 2012) also acknowledges that this is an area of debate and

14   recommends seeking the approval of the researcher's ethics review board, a

15   procedure that was undertaken with reference to this particular project. It should

16   also be noted that Mumsnet has published several books using quotes from its

17   discussion boards, such as *Babies: The Mumsnet Guide*, and so posters are aware

18   that they may be quoted in a publication outside the forum with no further consent

19   requested.

20   After contacting Mumsnet for permission, an online survey consisting of 28

21   questions was hosted on the Mumsnet site for two months. After the collection of

22   some demographic data, the questions focused on motivations for using Mumsnet,

23   asking respondents about the satisfactions and problems related to their use of the

site; the parts of the site they enjoyed/disliked; and their behaviour on the site (with questions related to lurking, trolling, bad or good behaviour and 'flouncing' – leaving the site/discussions). A thread linking to and explaining the aim of the survey was placed in the Media/Non-member requests section of the website, which also allowed it to appear on the Active Conversations listing. The placing of the survey was undertaken by Mumsnet administrators and the usual fee was waived. No incentives were offered for completing the survey. Both researchers discussed their academic work and the survey on the thread on a number of occasions and invited potential respondents to contact them directly if they wished any further information. The majority of the questions were closed, although space was allowed for further comments to be added by respondents. The majority of responses occurred in the first week after the first posting but by bumping the thread a number of times and promoting the survey in discussion 391 responses were achieved before the end of the two-month period that the survey was hosted by the site. Six months after the survey was posted a basic analysis of the results of the survey was posted and discussed on the Mumsnet forum. As O'Connor and Madge (2004, p.354) have pointed out, the importance of having the support of the site providers for the research cannot be underestimated.

Motivations for accessing online communities

A successful online community must be able to offer different satisfactions to different users. Wang et al (2002) argued that members participate in online communities to satisfy three fundamental needs – functional, social and

1   psychological. Later research by Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) added hedonic needs.

2   Functional needs include information, efficiency and convenience. Ridings and Gefen

3   (2004) argue that information exchange is the most important function of any online

4   community, pointing out that an online community can be an ideal place to gain

5   information from relative strangers. Such anonymity can be another attractive

6   feature about online communities, particularly ones dealing with problems such as

7   mental health problems or parenting children with special needs. Users are able to

8   confide in anonymous but empathetic 'listeners' who share their problem

9   (Fleischmann, 2004), and advice from strangers can be accepted or rejected more

10   easily than advice from real-life friends and family (Morrow, 2006). On the other

11   hand, Brandtzaeg and Heim (2008) identify nine reasons why users decrease their

12   participation in an online community over time, including lack of trust, lack of

13   interesting people and bullying and harassment.

14   Previous research into online parenting communities suggests that the main

15   motivating factors for parents to use such communities are the need for support and

16   advice. Studies suggest that parents use communities such as the UK's Babyworld,

17   Hong Kong's HappyLand or Sweden's *FöräldraNätet* to: learn from the experience of

18   other parents; have their own experiences and expertise validated; supplement

19   information given to them by health and other professionals; act out their role as

20   caregivers even when away from their children; and garner advice and support from

21   anonymous others from different backgrounds and with different experiences

22   (O'Connor and Madge, 2004; Rashley, 2005; Sarkadi and Bremberg, 2005; Madge

23   and O'Connor, 2006; Chan, 2008; Rothbaum et al, 2008; Plantin and Daneback, 2009;

1   Brady and Guerin, 2010; Helsper, 2010). This study suggests that hedonic needs are

2   particularly important for the users of Mumsnet but that the site also provides

3   support and advice to its users, although sometimes of a very robust nature.

4

5   **The satisfactions of Mumsnet**

6   There were 391 respondents to our survey. 97% of the respondents were mothers,

7   0.2% fathers (one respondent), 1.6% were other carers (e.g. grandmothers or

8   nannies) and 1.4% were not parents or carers. Thus our sample mirrored the mother

9   dominance reported by previous researchers, perhaps not surprising in a website

10   called Mumsnet.

11   We wished to explore how far Mumsnetters were similar to the users of other

12   parenting communities in predominately valuing the site for its support and advice.

13   The survey asked respondents to select any number of satisfactions from a list. The

14   findings are given in Table 1.1 below.

15

Possible satisfaction	Number of respondents (n = 391)	Percentage of all respondents
Entertainment	354	91
Advice	336	86
Support	249	64
Company	211	54
Validation of your opinions	181	46
Other	49	13

16

1   *Table 1.1: Satisfactions gained from using Mumsnet*

2

3   As can be seen from Table 1.1, Advice was an important satisfaction for respondents,

4   which was to be expected given the emphasis put on this motivation in the literature

5   relating to online communities in general and parenting communities in particular.

6   While a motivation for 64% of respondents, Support did not figure as strongly as the

7   literature might suggest and certainly nowhere as strongly as Entertainment. The

8   results of the Mumsnet 2009 census agreed overall with this finding. Here the three

9   most popular satisfactions were Advice (76% respondents), Information (75%) and

10   Entertainment (59%). Support came much further down the list with only 30%. Both

11   surveys demonstrate that users of Mumsnet are seeking primarily to satisfy

12   functional and hedonic needs, with social needs such as support less important for

13   this group. In comparison, the most important motivations for users of the

14   BabyWorld site investigated by Madge and O'Connor (2006) were: knowledge (78%),

15   support (76%), convenience (73%) and range of audience (73%).

16   Some respondents elaborated on their satisfactions in a related open question:

17   *A sense of community of mothers with an enormous pool of experience.*
18   *Information – anything you want to know, just ask on MN!*
19

20   We also found agreement with earlier research about the way in which parenting

21   communities could be used to supplement rather than replace professional advice:

22   *Absolutely invaluable when dealing with my first child. Constantly looking for*
23   *validation and answers to silly questions. Using MN avoided calling my midwife for*
24   *trivial queries.*
25

26   find real-life friends locally:

Catching up with friends that I met on Mumsnet and now see in real life.

and to validate mothers' experience:

Knowing that despite not feeling it I am quite normal.

Interestingly, however, the most frequently selected satisfaction in our survey was one that is rarely mentioned in earlier literature relating to parenting communities. 91% of our respondents saw Mumsnet as a source of entertainment.

Just to have a giggle with other mums!

A bloody good larf!

Currently enjoying it more than Real Life – and I do have a very happy Real Life!

It has kept me company at my loneliest times after moving abroad. I love the sense of humour on MN, there is, I think, something quite British about it, which, once more, means I feel less lonely here, where the sense of humour is quite different.

Entertainment is not often mentioned in literature discussing parenting online communities, which tend instead to be constructed as communities of anxious, first-time parents seeking validation, advice and, in particular, support rather than a good laugh. Outside parenting communities, however, entertainment is acknowledged to be a motivating factor for the use of online communities (Wang and Fesenmeir, 2004; Brandtzaeg and Heim, 2008). Investigating the respondents' favourite discussion topics also emphasized their enjoyment of the more entertaining elements of Mumsnet, as shown in Table 1.2. Respondents were asked to name their three favourite topics on the discussion board. (Mumsnet divides its discussion board into general topics and all threads are

1   posted under one of these topics.) Table 1.2 shows the top most popular topics

2   chosen by respondents.

3

Topic	Number of respondents (n = 391)	Percentage
Chat	199	51
Am I Being Unreasonable?	154	39
Behaviour and development	50	13
Relationships	49	12.5
Education	49	12.5
Style and beauty	47	12
Breast and bottle-feeding	45	11.5
Parenting	45	11.5
Food	33	8
Postnatal	28	7

4

5   *Table 1.2: The top ten most popular topics chosen by respondents*

6

7   As can be seen in Table 1.2, by far the most popular topics – Chat and Am I Being

8   Unreasonable? – are not specifically related to parenting. Again, the entertainment

9   aspects of the topics were mentioned by some respondents:

10

11   *Am I Being Unreasonable (Full of comedy those topics!)*

12   *AIBU (the pmt topic :D).*

1 *AIBU because that is where the bunfights take place.*

2

3 Note that the entertaining aspect of the topic that was frequently mentioned was

4 the fact that arguments could occur, in particular in Am I Being Unreasonable, the

5 'pmt' (pre-menstrual tension) topic! In fact, as Table 1.2 demonstrates, only four of

6 the ten most popular topics were focused solely on parenting: postnatal, parenting,

7 breast and bottle-feeding, and behaviour and development. This finding suggests

8 that, at least for our respondents, hedonic needs are equally as important as

9 functional, social or psychological ones in their use of Mumsnet.

10 Mumsnet's demographic profile may help to explain both respondents' appreciation

11 of entertainment and the type of entertainment that is most appreciated.

Age range	Frequency (n = 375)	Percentage
21-30	79	21
31-40	228	61
41-50	64	17
51-60	4	1

12

13 *Table 1.3: Age ranges of Mumsnet respondents*

14 The Mumsnet sample appears to be a comparatively older group of mothers, with

15 three-quarters of the respondents aged between 31 and 50. This is confirmed by

16 Mumsnet's own survey of members in 2009, which set the average age of

17 Mumsnetters at 36 with only 121 out of 5,201 (2%) respondents being under the age

18 of 24 (Mumsnet census 2009). It should also be noted that the vast majority of

respondents already had children rather than being pregnant or trying to conceive

for the first time. 40% of respondents to our survey had one child, 40% had two and

16% had three or more. Only 11% of the respondents to the Mumsnet 2009 census

were pregnant and an overwhelming 82% stated that they would not be attempting

to conceive again. Thus Mumsnet appears to appeal more to established mothers

than to parents-to-be, which may also be related to the predominance of older

mothers.

Mumsnet also appears to attract a high number of working mothers. Only 21% of

respondents (28% in the Mumsnet 2009 census) identified themselves as full-time

stay-at-home-mothers (SAHM) with the rest working at least part time in paid

employment either inside or outside the home. In comparison, the US parenting

board investigated by Drentea and Moren-Cross (2005) had 53% SAHM. The high

number of working mothers also relates to the high average household income of

Mumsnetters: in 2009 74% of respondents had a household income of over the

national average of £35,000 (Mumsnet census, 2009; ONS, 2010). Advertising sold

around the website tends to be for aspirational companies and products such as

Boden, Isabella Oliver, Abel and Cole and Featherdown Farms. In comparison, 40% of

users of a rival UK parenting community Netmums are from families with low

incomes (Russell, 2006) and 68% of the users of the Swedish *FöräldraNätet* have

income levels at or under the national average (Sarkadi and Bremberg, 2005). There

was also evidence in the survey responses of the same phenomenon discovered by

Chan (2008) in her analysis of the Hong Kong site HappyLand – that working mothers

were using Mumsnet to enact a mothering identity whilst at work.

Feeling connected to other mums during the working day (when I'm surrounded by people without children)

In addition, 13% of respondents stated that using Mumsnet had led to new work contacts.

The high educational achievement of the average Mumsnetter should also be noted. In the Mumsnet census of 2009, 34% of respondents had a university degree, 27% a postgraduate qualification and 14% were undertaking postgraduate studies. There is evidence to suggest that the higher the socio-economic status of a parent the more likely it is that they will use the Internet to search for information to support their parenting (Rothbaum et al, 2008). It can therefore be suggested that Mumsnet attracts – or retains – an older, often well-educated user who is likely to be over the initial stages of pregnancy and first-time parenthood. Having older children means that these mothers are more likely to be working outside the home, which will of course boost their household income, but also means that their need for advice and support is not focused entirely on parenting issues. These factors may explain why entertainment was prized equally highly as advice and much more highly than support by respondents.

Entertainment on Mumsnet

A sense of fun towards the daily grind of parenting/housework/work/family. I regularly laugh out loud at posts on MN :0)

This article starts with a quote from the Mumsnet 'How to Use the Discussion Boards' page that recommends that a new poster choose a witty posting name. The

1   type of name indicated – an oblique reference to a J D Salinger book – demonstrates

2   the type of highly literate quips deemed amusing on Mumsnet. As we have discussed

3   elsewhere (Pedersen and Smithson, 2010) trolls on Mumsnet can be tolerated –

4   indeed even applauded – for their wit and enjoyable postings, and the entertaining

5   quality of a poster's writing is frequently seen as important. Mumsnetters can

6   subscribe to a weekly round-up of witty posts and posters that cannot offer well-

7   written posts can be ignored or even criticised. The competition for a limited number

8   of tickets to the Mumsnet 10th birthday party was based around the writing of a

9   witty and original haiku, to be judged by the first female poet laureate Carol Ann

10   Duffy, and there are occasional threads on the discussion boards written entirely in

11   haiku or pastiches of classic novels. Meanwhile, Netmums, Babycenter and other

12   sites are much scorned on Mumsnet for their supposedly supportive but not

13   intellectually challenging approach. Netmums is another UK parenting site

14   established in 2000. It claims to have one million members and 25,000 new

15   members joining each month. The difference between the two sites is often

16   discussed on Mumsnet and such discussions frequently refer to the supposed

17   shortcomings of those who use Netmums as far as education, income and class are

18   concerned. A Netmums survey of May 2011 found that 33% of Netmums were full-

19   time stay-at-home parents (in comparison to the 21% of our Mumsnet respondents),

20   and just over 30% of Netmums had an above-average household income in

21   comparison to 70% of Mumsnetters. Netmums tends to be seen as an inferior site by

22   Mumsnetters, who focus in particular on its heavier moderation and swear filter and

23   the use of textspeak and sparkly tickers by its users as evidence of its inferiority. In

1 comparison, Mumsnet is celebrated for its straight-talking, educated posters and

2 higher level of debate. For example:

3 If you ask for advice on Mumsnet, you'll get advice. You might not like it, but it'll
4 be offered.
5 If you ask for advice on Netmums, you'll get 27 posts that say "U know ur bubba
6 hun, happy mum = happy baby XXXX" (Poster on Mumsnet, 10 March 2012)
7

8 In their disdain for Netmums, Mumsnetters display a type and level of cultural

9 capital that can be read as forms of class distinction and class othering. As Byrne

10 (2006) points out, much of the work of mothering involves the repetition and

11 negotiation of gendered, classed and raced norms. Researchers such as Reay and

12 Lucey (2000), Vincent and Ball (2007) and Duncan (2005) have discussed how

13 parenting and particularly mothering is a classed activity, with middle-class

14 mothering focusing on the active manipulation of social and financial resources to

15 achieve the best for the child in contrast to a working-class emphasis on the child's

16 natural growth – as long as food, love and safety is provided the child will thrive

17 (Lareau, 2002, cited Vincent and Ball, 2007). Sites such as Mumsnet help to reinforce

18 such classed norms to their users, emphasising a middle-class approach to mothering

19 and seeing the practices of middle-class mothers as the right ones. Thus the (middle-

20 class) advice given on Mumsnet is perceived to be of far more value than the

21 (working-class) blind support Netmums is portrayed as offering.

22

23 **Mumsnet and feminism**

24 The wide range of discussion topics to be found on Mumsnet emphasizes that users

25 are not drawn there only for support and advice related to parenting. As well as

1   topics on weaning, pushchairs and nappies, the discussion boards include topics on

2   adult fiction; philosophy/religion/spirituality; politics; investments and feminism.

3   The feminism topic is a recent (2010) addition and was a response to demands

4   stimulated by Mumsnet campaigns on issues such as the premature sexualisation of

5   young girls – and a campaign in January 2010 against an Outdoor Advertising

6   Association (OAA) marketing campaign that aimed to highlight the power of outdoor

7   advertising through the use of controversial posters. The OAA hired the London-

8   based advertising agency Campbell Lace Beta, fronted by Garry Lace, to help them

9   run their campaign. The poster that raised the ire of Mumsnetters was one that bore

10   the words 'Career Women Make Bad Mothers', giving the URL of a website where it

11   was hoped that people would debate this suggestion. The advertising campaign

12   started on 4 January 2010 and was followed by an explosion of rage on Mumsnet,

13   where, as has been seen, the majority of users undertake at least part-time paid

14   work. Mumsnetters exercised their political muscle and professional knowledge

15   (some posters on related threads stated that they worked in advertising, marketing,

16   PR, campaigning and for women's advocacy groups). They emailed and called the

17   OAA, complained to the Advertising Standards Authority, and contacted the

18   directors of communications and chief executives at UK firms who use outdoors

19   advertising and other clients of the advertising agency. The discussion threads

20   devoted to the issue on Mumsnet also saw the appearance of many haiku, some of

21   which made personal comments about Garry Lace and his genitalia. By 6 January the

22   OAA had issued an unreserved apology and Beta worked with Mumsnet to produce a

1   more positive outdoor advert to replace the controversial one. The controversy was

2   covered in detail in the advertising trade press, UK newspapers and the blogosphere.

3   In a later article in *Campaign* discussing the issue, Beta's co-founder Robert

4   Campbell stated that the agency had learned one important lesson:

5   Don't mess with Mumsnet. It is like wrestling with an octopus. There is huge diversity
6   within it. There are those with political ambitions as well as many looking for advice
7   and support and everything in between. They can organise themselves very quickly...
8   We have been asked the question: has the "Mumsnet incident" done lasting damage
9   to Beta? It's hard to say. We were kicked off a pitchlist last week as a result of
10   Mumsnet's protests. And it is scary to have a group of people e-mailing your clients
11   demanding they fire you. (*Campaign*, 22 January 2010)
12

13   Possibly as a result of this demonstration of Mumsnet power, several UK retailers

14   have recently been working with the community over products such as children's

15   clothing, with companies such as the UK supermarket Asda (part of Walmart) asking

16   Mumsnet members for guidance on whether certain girls' clothes were acceptable

17   (*Marketing,* 21 April 2010).

18   The feminism/women's rights topic appeared in March 2010 and discussions include

19   subjects such as 'Do you have to be a ball-breaker to make it in your industry?',

20   'Domestic violence – why do victims blame themselves?' and 'How can you be

21   religious if you are a feminist?'. Several of the threads are openly proselytizing with

22   recommendations of books and blogs to read and discussions about what feminism

23   can offer contemporary women. Other threads look for advice and support for

24   particular campaigns, for example against the establishment of lap-dancing clubs.

25   It should be pointed out that, while there may be threads on feminism and

26   campaigns against padded bikinis for seven year-olds, these are a small minority in

27   comparison to the threads on celebrities, clothes, baby names and pushchairs. Much

1   of the advice on threads such as 'Relationships' or 'Good housekeeping' is traditional

2   in tone. The feminist topic is only one topic amongst over 100 and tends to be used

3   by the same small group of vocal posters. Nonetheless, Mumsnet has more explicit

4   feminist discussion than other popular parenting sites, for example Babyworld,

5   where stay-at-home-mothering is presented as the norm (Rashley, 2005) and where

6   online parenting roles and relationships reflect unreconstructed ideologies of

7   parenting and reinforce traditional gender roles (Madge and O'Connor, 2006). It

8   should also be noted that the appropriation of feminist terminology and arguments

9   can be found outside the feminist topic, particularly when addressing issues such as

10 equality in childcare and housekeeping, equal opportunities in work, and sex roles. A

11 June 2011 thread asking 'What was the moment you realised the Mumsnet

12 Feminism thread was affecting the way you think?' received 91 posts covering

13 subjects such as negative responses to magazine covers, 'using the term patriarchy

14 at coffee mornings', using the Bechdel Test to rate films, and changing the gender of

15 storybook characters when reading aloud to children. These posters are women who

16 have benefited throughout their lives from the changes brought about by Second

17 Wave Feminism and see no reason to adapt to more traditional values just because

18 they have had a baby. Indeed, they may now find feminism more relevant to their

19 lives than ever before both because of the changes in their own circumstances

20 brought about by maternity – in a society where motherhood still impacts negatively

21 on a woman's career and earning potential – and because of a new appreciation of

22 society as a place in which they are bringing up children.

23

1	**Wit and aggression**

2	Many posters on Mumsnet openly celebrate the site for being out of the norm for

3	parenting communities, evidencing both its feminist discussion and a more

4	combative style of posting. While many of the respondents to our survey

5	commented on the supportive nature of the site, it is clear that a livelier, more

6	aggressive type of posting was seen as part of the Mumsnet 'style'. Unlike some

7	other online communities, textspeak is more frowned upon than swear-words,

8	which can be written with impunity (one poster is called AnyFucker), and witty posts

9	are applauded even if they take the thread off-topic. This acceptance of off-topic

10	discussion, if it is entertaining, may put off new-comers, but it provides opportunities

11	for self-disclosure and friendship and therefore can be popular with more

12	established members (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2003 cited in Ren et al, 2007).

13	Ren et al (2007) suggest a distinction between bond- and identity-based attachment

14	to online communities where users can either become attached to the online

15	community as a whole or to individual posters. In our survey 36% of respondents

16	agreed that they looked for posts from certain posters. On the other hand, many

17	respondents were also very critical of a perceived cliquiness of the site (Pedersen

18	and Smithson, 2010). Those who disliked such cliquiness were also uncomfortable

19	with the sometimes aggressive style of some posters.

20	*I am wary of upsetting people or people giving me advice to 'pull myself together' or*
21	*people being rude. There appear to be some cliquey posters.*
22	
23	*A lot of the regular posters are very confident in what they write. I feel that if I post*
24	*something that they don't agree with, then I may be publicly ridiculed.*
25

1 The somewhat robust style of Mumsnet is thus not appreciated by all, and there are

2 frequent threads criticising Mumsnet's style. In these cases, those who protest are

3 usually recommended to go elsewhere, sometimes in quite explicit tones. An

4 example of this type of discussion is given below where one poster, having been

5 upset by the aggression on a thread about coffee, asked 'Am I being unreasonable to

6 F**k off to Netmums because after a 'MN' break I return to find this place has got

7 swamped by even more pretentious, snobby, bitchy talk than ever before?'

8 By **itsmeolord**
9 nope, yanbu [you are not being unreasonable] to fuck off. 🙂
10 <passive aggressive>
11
12 By **RichardGereandtheGuineaPi...**
13 Make sure the door doesn't bang your arse on the way out......
14 …
15 By**wordsonascreen**
16 MN has always had snobby pretentious bitchy talk on it... thats its niche shurely?
17 …
18 By **EdgarAllenSnow**
19 wait not on the order of thy going, but go...
20
21 …
22 By **GetOrfMoiLand**
23 There is *nowt* that could be classed as offensive on that coffee thread.
24 There   was   more   vitriol   on   the   denim   skirt   thread   last   week.
25 FFS if you actually *prefer* talking about weaning ur babbee on rusks n chatting bout
26 ghetto prams I think perhaps NM *is* the place for you 🙂
27 …
28 By **thatsnotmymonkey**
29 oooh I was on the denim skirt thread. it was handbags at noon I tell you
30 …
31
32 By **AnyFucker**
33 oh dear, I hope you won't try to use that potty mouth over at NM's 😡
34 …
35
36 By **MarineIguana**
37 You can't fuck off to netmums - that is way too MNish of you. You will have to potter
38 or tootle off to netmums.

1
2 By **Marinelguana**
3 They will welcome you with an instant coffee.
4 …
5 By **Moodlum**
6 BTW, you'll not be allowed to use the word *bitchy* over there - its censored - you
7 have to use *itchy* to express the same emotion. 😜
8
9
10 The above responses (edited mainly to remove quite a few posters who merely

11 posted 'off you fuck then') offer good examples of the mocking and aggressive style

12 that can be found on Mumsnet, and explicit contrasts to the perceptions of other

13 parenting sites – in this case Netmums – as not condoning such language. At the

14 same time, a thread that has descended into argument (the denim skirt thread) is

15 recommended for entertainment; Mumsnet is celebrated for being snobbish and

16 pretentious; one poster, who seems to have followed the guidelines given at the

17 beginning of this paper and uses a literary pun as her posting name, [mis]quotes

18 Shakespeare, and the use of language in the original posting is analysed.

19

20 As stated earlier, flaming – hostile comments directed at a person rather than an

21 idea – is generally supposed to be a male rather than a female activity (Aiken and

22 Waller, 2000; Vrooman, 2002; Alonzo and Aiken, 2004). Garcia-Gómez (2011)

23 investigated teenage girls' use of aggression and hyper-sexualised language when

24 relating to other girls on Facebook and suggests that, although the girls he studied

25 used aggressive, masculine-type language, theirs is a post-feminist discourse

26 focusing on fighting over boys, hyper-sexualised embodiment and self-regulation for

27 the girls, and thus such language could not be seen as empowering. Remembering

1   that Preece (2001) gave the specific example of a mother and baby community when

2   describing communities in which social support is important as having a very low

3   tolerance for aggressive, critical or harsh comment, Mumsnet's acceptance, and

4   even celebration, of arguments, swearing, flaming and home truths, makes it

5   unusual in a parenting community. Indeed, Mumsnetters frequently define

6   themselves as not being the norm for parenting communities. Interestingly, they also

7   see themselves as being *more* supportive – offering *real* support and advice, if

8   necessary through home truths, instead of merely sympathy. Again, in response to a

9   poster complaining about the Mumsnet style, one poster explains:

10   By LadyBiscuit
11   OP [Opening Poster] - you're right, it's not fluffy here. There are lots of women here
12   who are very strong minded and some of them are very, very clever and a bit scary in
13   some ways. I could say that you should scurry away to Netmums if you find MN all a
14   bit much. BUT what you get here is the benefit of all those strong minded and very,
15   very clever women when you have a **real** problem.
16
17   When I say real, I am not talking about boiling water for babies or if it's okay if you
18   leave your DC [darling child or children] if you nip to the loo but real stuff. Like your
19   employer not wanting to allow you to work flexibly or your husband being
20   emotionally abusive or that you think your child has an undiagnosed SN [special
21   needs]. That kind of stuff. For that, MN gives women a wealth of free expert
22   knowledge and support. And I don't think you would get that anywhere else.
23
24   So I think it's a pretty small price to pay personally for the occasional robust debate
25   where some people may get a bit shouty and sweary
26

27   **Conclusions**

28   Mumsnetters perceive themselves as being different from the users of other

29   parenting communities. They like to see themselves as supportive but tough,

30   offering real support rather than 'fluffy' sympathy – a stance that also reinforces

31   middle-class mothering values. The (middle-class) advice given on Mumsnet is

1	perceived to be of far more value than the (working-class) blind support sites such as

2	Netmums are portrayed as offering.

3	They swear and flame, engage in some discussion of women's rights (however

4	limited), celebrate witty posters and write haiku about men's genitalia. They feel

5	that they and the site have a specific identity, distinct from other (rival) sites.

6	Mumsnet's demographic differences from most other parenting online communities,

7	especially in terms of number of working mothers and higher levels of education and

8	income, may be related to the satisfactions that users are seeking from Mumsnet.

9	While advice/information and, to a much lesser extent, support are sought,

10	entertainment and lively debate are also important. The requirements of such

11	entertainment can be related back to the users' demographics – erudite, literate and

12	witty posts are preferred, swearwords are allowable but textspeak is abhorred.

13	Users who are uncomfortable with this are invited to go elsewhere, with the

14	implication that other parenting communities are lesser than Mumsnet. Mumsnet

15	*does* offer advice and support relating to parenting and the ability to compare

16	experiences with other mothers, but discussions related to parenting are only one

17	part of the site, and it would be more accurate to describe it as offering advice,

18	entertainment, support and the opportunity to compare experiences with other

19	*women*.

20	Can Mumsnet therefore be seen as the type of safe space for women envisioned by

21	cyberfeminists? While not women-only – one of the discussion topics is entitled

22	'Dadsnet' and male users are generally, if not always, accepted – the vast majority of

23	users are women. Mumsnet users seek and offer advice and information from and to

other women and undertake community-based activities and, increasingly, politically-oriented campaigns.

Many of the descriptions of male-gendered styles of computer-mediated communication (Herring 1993, 1996; Barak , 2005), can be related to posts on Mumsnet: flaming is generally seen as an acceptable Mumsnet trait, posters make strong assertions, use put-downs and sarcasm aimed at others and can be extremely adversarial. Thus some posters use the freedom of being in a female-dominated online community to adopt what have previously been identified as male-gendered styles of computer-mediated communication, and unlike the girls in Garcia-Gómez' study this aggression is not used to fight over men. Further research on male users of women-dominated websites might help establish whether acceptance of male posters depends on their adoption of female-gendered styles of CMC. Our findings here suggest that women-dominated communities may facilitate women to display a wider variety of posting styles and behaviours. Previous research into behaviours such as flaming has mainly focused on male or mixed-sex communities, and our findings regarding Mumsnet suggest that the situation may not be as simple as a male/female division. Mumsnet provides a forum for shifting gender norms online and possibly the performance of new forms of femininity via digital communication. It is, perhaps, not for nothing that *The Times* newspaper described it as the 'daddy' of all parenting sites.

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