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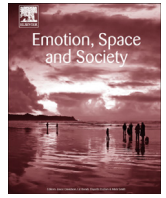in _____
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'What are you feeling right now?' communities of maternal feeling on Mumsnet

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we present an analysis of how communities of maternal feeling are configured by users on the discussion boards of Mumsnet, a popular British online parenting forum. A search was conducted to find threads with the phrase 'I feel' in the title. The first 100 threads in the search results using this term that referred to emotions — almost all of which articulated negative feelings — were then analysed. We argue that forums like Mumsnet provide an important anonymous space where women can talk openly about emotions. In doing so, feeling rules related to 'good motherhood' are established and reproduced. Members of Mumsnet tolerate some expression of feelings such as ambivalence, resentment, anxiety and anger and often provide empathy and friendly support in response. However, the expression of negative maternal feeling is tolerated only to a certain degree. Those posters who go beyond this boundary are positioned as exceeding the norm and requiring professional help. Forums such as Mumsnet often serve to support rather than challenge the political *status quo* in their emphasis on self-responsibility, personal choice and therapeutic solutions to what are positioned as private problems.

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1. Introduction

Parenting online discussion forums and other digital technologies, such as apps and social media sites, have become important media for providing help and support to mothers in the global North, including offering them a place to share their feelings about motherhood. In this article, we present an analysis of how mothers' emotions are expressed and responded to by users on the discussion boards of Mumsnet, a popular British online forum for parents. In so doing, we bring together scholarship in several areas: the emotional and spatial dimensions of motherhood; feeling rules and communities of feeling; and the ways in which digital media can work as specific spaces for the articulation and regulation of feeling.

With the important exception of articles published in *Emotion, Space and Society*, until recently the spatial dimensions of emotions have rarely been addressed (Davidson et al., 2008; Morrison et al., 2013). While a large body of literature has now been published on the sharing cultures and social networks that are inherent features of contemporary digital technologies, surprisingly little of this research has focused on the ways in which emotions are defined

and articulated as part of these digital practices: or what Kuntsman (2012) refers to as 'the affective fabrics of digital cultures'. Even less research has focused more specifically on how the geographies of digital media intertwine with those of motherhood and feeling (Longhurst, 2016).

(Longhurst's 2013, 2016) work on mothering, digital media and emotional geographies in New Zealand goes some way to making these connections, as does research addressing how migrant working mothers maintain relationships with their children living in a different country (Madianou and Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2016). However this research focuses on mother-child rather than mother-mother communication. Previous studies on women's use of online forums for support and information related to pregnancy and parenting have noted that users often find these sites work as outlets for the expression of experiences that they may not be able to articulate elsewhere (see, for example, Brady and Guerin, 2010; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013; Porter and Ispa, 2013). Few such studies, however, have given specific and detailed attention to the content of mothers' emotional expression on such forums and how participants' emotions are responded to by other users.

Our study of the articulation of maternal feeling by members of Mumsnet was designed to address this topic. We first contextualise the study by providing overviews of perspectives on the intense

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emotional climate of contemporary motherhood and then of feeling rules and communities of feeling as they are developed in digital media. We then move on to describing the methods and discussing the findings of our empirical study of 100 posts to Mumsnet discussion boards that use the words 'I feel'.

2. The intense emotional climate of contemporary motherhood

In the global North, contemporary parents (and especially mothers) are performing parenthood in a sociocultural context in which there is a great burden of expectation on them to adhere to idealised norms. Part of this expectation involves women conforming to the 'feeling rules' of 'good motherhood'. 'Feeling rules' is a term employed by Arlie Hochschild (1979) in her influential work on the sociology of emotions. Hochschild asserted that people learn about what emotions are and how they should be felt and expressed as part of their acculturation into specific social, cultural and historical contexts.

As writers on the ideal of the 'good mother' have commented (Kennedy, 2013; Lupton, 2000; Powell, 2010), the feeling rules of motherhood are that mothers should harbour genuine feelings of love and affection for their children and that they should express these feelings freely. They should appreciate the joys of motherhood and willingly take on its responsibilities. Negative emotions, in contrast, should be repressed: indeed, the ideal of the 'good mother' suggests that to feel emotions such as anger, hate, resentment or sadness towards or about one's children or the role of motherhood is not to conform to the ideal of the good mother. Women who openly express such emotions, or who appear not to be coping with the demands of motherhood, are often shamed and castigated, if not pathologised: defined as the deviant Other (Kennedy, 2013). As a consequence, women are required to engage in 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1979) as part of regulating and managing any negative feelings that they have about their children (Devault, 1999).

The good mother ideal involves not only intense and unwavering love of one's children but also assiduous devotion to and care of them. Good mothers place their children and the desire to care for and protect them above all else, including their own needs and desires. From preconception through to children reaching adulthood, the good mother is expected to be intensely involved in promoting her children's growth, health, development and emotional wellbeing, including actively seeking information to achieve these ends (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Lupton, 2011, 2012; Thomson et al., 2011; Wall, 2010). Those women who are viewed as flouting these expectations (for example, by allowing their children to become ill or overweight or by smoking cigarettes while they are pregnant or in the company of their children) are treated with a significant degree of moral opprobrium. Women often respond to such judgements (either on the part of others or their own assessments of the quality of their mothering) with shame and guilt (Lupton, 2013a; Wigginton and Lee, 2012; Zivkovic et al., 2010). Indeed, it has been claimed that these emotions have become quintessential affective elements of contemporary motherhood, given that women find it difficult to achieve the impossible ideals of the good mother (Sutherland, 2010).

The discourses associated with children in this social context contribute to those that seek to responsibilise mothers and blame them for their children's ill-health or sub-optimal development. Children are viewed as giving meaning and authenticity to their parents' lives, as precious, pure and vulnerable (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Lupton, 2014; Zelizer, 1985). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 119) use the evocative term 'love as an amplifier' to describe the highly charged emotional nature of the parental relationship with the child. The burden of expectation with which parents must deal is consonant with this moral and affective weight that is assigned to children and their care. Because children are so precious, so important, they require huge investments of time, energy and resources. At the same time, however, in a context in which traditional norms and expectations have dissolved and many parents live away from older, more experienced family members, parents must raise children without the certainties of how best to proceed.

Few studies have examined women's emotions about motherhood that are culturally deemed to be negative (such as anger, fear, shame, grief and hatred) outside of psychiatric and psychological research. Contributors to this scholarship, in the main, tend to pathologise these emotions, rendering them as aberrant and requiring diagnosis and treatment. The possibility that women may feel strongly about motherhood and their children in ways that go beyond accepted cultural norms is barely acknowledged outside these literature. Some feminist scholars have written about the struggles that women have in their experiences of motherhood to reconcile their strong emotional responses to their children. Adrienne Rich (1986) is perhaps the most well-known of these (O'Reilly, 2012), using a literary style to articulate mother rage. Rozsika Parker (1995) also drew attention to what she entitled the ambivalent blend of 'mother love/mother hate' that many mothers feel about their children. Literary fiction and popular media portrayals also sometimes offer places for the articulation of negative maternal emotions (Kennedy, 2013; Podnieks & O'Reilly, 2010).

3. Feeling rules and communities of feeling in digital media

Our approach to the expression of emotion in online media draws on a perspective on emotion, space and place that views digitised communications and relationships as heterogeneous and dynamic assemblages of human and nonhuman actors that are simultaneously material and ephemeral, physically located and dispersed. Rather than drawing a boundary between 'online' and 'offline' identities, or between 'virtual' and 'real' experiences and social relations, contemporary theorising argues that these phenomena cannot be separated. The ubiquity of mobile and pervasive digital media and a sensor-embedded physical environment in which people move and emit digital data means that we are rarely 'offline' (Andrejevic and Burdon, 2015; Paasonen et al., 2015). Via the use of mobile media, people establish co-presences that are simultaneously social, mobile and locative (Hjorth and Pink, 2014); they may occupy a physical space while socially engaging with others outside that space (Enriquez, 2012). In these interactions, the private is constantly made public, as details of users' personal thoughts, habits and actions are shared with other users, the majority of whom they may never have met face-to-face.

Social media and online forums promote interaction and commentary on others' content as well as self-disclosure and confessional modes of self-presentation. Participation in social media and online forums, therefore, is a mode of ethical self-formation, in which certain aspects of selfhood are presented and performed (Bucher, 2012; Sauter, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). Unlike previous eras, these modes of self-formation are far more public, inviting commentary from other members or users of the site. Participation in these sites involves the desire for visibility and to be seen and acknowledged by others (Bucher, 2012; Marwick, 2012). They adopt the sharing and participatory ethos that is central to the newest forms of digital media technologies that have been designed for communication (Beer and Burrows, 2010; John, 2013).

The growth of new social media sites in addition to platforms like online forums has contributed to novel ways of establishing and conducting personal relationships and social networks.

Chambers (2013) contends that a form of digitally mediated intimacies has emerged via these technologies that challenges traditional concepts of friendships and other intimate social relationships. Through the affordances of these platforms, people are able to establish networks and emotional ties with geographically distant others at an unprecedented scale. Social media and online forums have become places where often very personal and previously private expressions, for example of grief, receive very public attention, such as in the case of early pregnancy loss or stillbirth memorialised on YouTube (Lupton, 2013b) and Facebook pages for memorialising the death of loved ones (Brubaker et al., 2013). Such emotional expression can now be viewed by hundreds, thousands and even millions of others, depending on the nature of the platform.

For those who choose to interact with other members of social media platforms and online forums, these platforms provide both a space for the expression of feeling and its regulation via the reproduction of feeling rules. Feeling rules are sometimes established and maintained in 'communities of feeling' (Kuntsman, 2009). Online forums can provide a platform for the development of communities of feeling. Contributors to these forums engage in performative acts of naming an emotion and create definitions and expressions of feeling in a communal context. Indeed, the archives of platforms such as social media sites and online forums may be regarded as digital repositories of feeling that can store and preserve words and images denoting emotion (Kuntsman, 2012). Social media and discussion forums, like all software, direct the behaviour of users in defined ways. The representation of the self in online forums takes place in a context in which certain rules and conventions of behaviour apply and are maintained as part of the community of users. Users of such sites are required to adopt the rules of behaviour to avoid castigation or even banning from community discussions. Users must consider what they feel willing to confess about themselves and how they decide to invite the scrutiny of other users or wider audiences of the site as part of the management and representation of the self (Chambers, 2013).

4. Analysing maternal feeling on Mumsnet

The British parenting website Mumsnet was established in 2000 by a sports journalist and TV producer who met when they were both pregnant. The stated aim of the site is to 'To make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience'. It is now the largest parenting website in the UK with its discussion boards, Mumsnet Talk, receiving over 6 million monthly unique visitors.[1] Although it is difficult to categorise the type of person who uses Mumsnet, it has been suggested that they tend to be highly educated and often feminist in their political sensibility (Jensen, 2013; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013), and overwhelmingly female in their self-identification (Pedersen, 2015).

To post or start discussion threads, posters need to be registered with Mumsnet. However, the discussion board is public and can be read by both members and non-members. There are over 200 different topics under which a new thread can be placed, which range from the more obvious parenting topics such as breastfeeding and antenatal tests to wider issues such as investments, feminism and living overseas. Many very personal topics are discussed on the forums, including details about users' sex lives (Pedersen, 2014) and their experiences of trying to conceive and of pregnancy loss and stillbirth (Gambles, 2010). Posters choose in which topic to place their thread. They are also able to adopt a pseudonym under which to post, meaning that they can maintain anonymity.

There is vigorous debate in the social scientific literature about the ethical issues relating to using content from online forums (and other social media) that are fully open to public view for research purposes. No consensus has yet been established on whether the informed consent of users who contribute content to such fora should be sought if their texts are to be used in research. Our position conforms to that adopted by many other researchers using this type of material (Madge, 2007; Roberts, 2015). We decided that we did not need to seek the informed consent of Mumsnet users to use their content in our research for the following reasons: we did not elicit or comment in any way on the material as forum users but rather accessed it after it had been spontaneously generated; users' identities are not revealed on the site and therefore their anonymity is assured; the terms and conditions of Mumsnet make it clear that it is a public rather than private space in which all users know that any internet user can view their comments; and threads are rendered available and readily searchable even to non-members. We chose not to refer to user names/pseudonyms when we referred to or quoted from members' comments, particularly as some of their comments are very personal and sensitive.

A search facility allows members and non-members to search the discussion-forum archives. We used this facility to produce a dataset focusing on the term 'I feel', following the methodologies of other researchers analysing the content of Mumsnet thread posts (Gambles, 2010; Hine, 2014; Jensen, 2013) and also Pedersen's previous work on Mumsnet (Pedersen, 2014, 2015; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). Our study involved a qualitative content analysis of these posts, with no attempt made to contact posters or solicit any further personal details. A search was conducted during the months of April and May 2015 to find threads with the phrase 'I feel' in the title. The content of the first 100 threads in the search results using this term that referred to emotions were then analysed by the authors for the types of emotions that were expressed and their contexts. We decided to limit the search using these somewhat arbitrary parameters so as to confine the corpus of posts to a manageable number. We acknowledge that this decision necessarily limits the scope of the analysis in certain (often unknown) ways (as do any such decisions about methods). Searching thread titles alone can provide only a limited snapshot of the types of threads that Mumsnet users start about their feelings, but does allow us to gain an impression of the type of emotions that are felt strongly enough to propel a user to initiate such a thread, in the knowledge that it may be read by thousands of other people. While we acknowledge that emotion is an embodied experience, because we were interested in focusing on how the users articulated a specific emotional state we excluded threads that referred to physical sensations and did not mention an emotion (for example, a statement such as 'I feel the baby kicking' does not identify the poster's emotional state).

All opening posts appeared to be written by women. As posters can use pseudonyms, it is possible that male or transgender posters can choose to use gender-neutral or even feminine names to post (Pedersen, 2015). Regarding the threads collected in our database, all opening posters chose to identify themselves as female by using names that clearly alluded to a female or maternal identity. When we quote directly from the posts, we include the original spelling and grammar used by the posters.

5. 'I feel' on Mumsnet

5.1. 'I just needed to get it off my chest'

The first point to note about our corpus of posts is that, of the 100 opening posts analysed, nearly all (98) discussed negative feelings or situations. The posters clearly viewed Mumsnet as a

[1] Personal correspondence with Mumsnet administrators, 23 April 2015.

forum in which they could openly articulate these experiences and feelings. For example, one interesting opening post asked 'In one word, what are you feeling right now?' The answers she received were: 'Drained', 'Tired', 'Stuck', 'Half awake', 'Demoralised and desperate to get away', 'Excited', 'Hormonal and like a stuck pig', 'Anxious about DD's [dear daughter's] sickness bug' and 'Knackered'.

Posters used Mumsnet to express negative emotions about very different aspects of motherhood, from the niggles of everyday life to much larger issues related to their situation in life. We found a wide range of emotional expression in the threads, from transitory venting about having a bad day with a poorly-behaved child type of accounts to posts that suggested that the author was struggling with depression or even that they were contemplating suicide. It was apparent that many posters were using Mumsnet to express their feelings because there was no one else available for them to talk to: 'I just needed to get it off my chest and no one is about to talk to.' 'I just feel people don't care'. 'No one ever asks how I am or anything about myself'. 'I don't expect anyone to have any answers. I just wanted to vent.' A poster who feared that she might have to go back on anti-depressants, which would impact on her ability to breastfeed, explained: 'I have spent all day trying to relax and have been browsing and posting on mumsnet to try and calm down.' For these users, the act of posting about their feelings on Mumsnet was positioned as a form of coping with negative emotional states.

5.2. 'Does this make me a shit mother?'

Of those threads that focused on emotions relating to motherhood, many discussed the feeling that the poster was letting her child down by not doing the right thing or being the right type of mother. Thus, one poster started a thread to confess that she had lost her temper that morning with her dawdling daughter and brushed her hair roughly ('Feel like I was really harsh to dd [dear daughter] this am, feel bad, was i?'). At the same time a poster on the one-child families topic started a post entitled 'I feel so inadequate' where she described her feelings when watching her son interact with a more traditional family of two parents and two children, confessing 'I feel terrible that I can't give him what he needs' — which she felt was a sibling. Whether they were worrying about losing their temper or destroying their children's chances of happiness, posters focused on not being the perfect mother of their imagination. Such concern might be felt even before the child was born — one poster worried that she did not feel pregnant and, therefore, would not bond with her baby: 'Does this make me a shit mother before I've even begun??'

In the threads we examined, motherhood was often presented as something that mothers needed to work at, and which could be learned from sources such as books and the internet. For instance, one poster, who was having problems with her five-year-old daughter, commented that: 'I need to read 'The Highly Sensitive Child' [book] to re-set my empathy gauge as I'm lower on patience than usual I think.' Posters acknowledged that effort needed to be put into motherhood, but this might also cause unhappiness when such effort was perceived as not having achieved the right results. One poster complained; 'I adore my daughter and have always put a million and one per cent of my love and effort into her and I just feel like she doesn't like me half the time.'

5.3. 'The worst parent in the world'

When posters were articulating their feelings, comparisons were constantly made to what it was perceived a good mother would do or feel in a particular situation. Posters often both judged themselves as inadequate and felt that others also judged them. For instance, a poster dealing with a toddler having a public tantrum at the supermarket felt that everyone was judging her for not being a good mother: 'And people kept looking at me and prob thought I was the worst parent in the world. I just feel awful.'

Posters often seemed to feel the need to apologise for their feelings — stating that they had a wonderful child, family, job, etc., and, therefore, there was no reason to feel the way that they did, which therefore must be wrong. They saw the negative emotions they were experiencing as yet another symptom of not being a good mother, of not appreciating their circumstances, which a better mother would value. One poster, feeling overwhelmed by studying and being a single mother, chided herself: 'I really have no reason to be stressed … Im in tears writing this and ive no reason to be at all because its not a big deal so ive no idea why I cant manage what thousands of people manage all the time.' Another poster, complaining about the pressure her husband was putting on her to contribute more to the family financially, said 'Of course it could be a lot worse and I have it far easier than many.'

As well as feeling that they were being judged, posters made frequent comparisons to the lives of others around them, who were perceived to be coping with motherhood, careers and family life better. One woman commented that: 'I could just sit here and cry. I look around at people who went to uni, they left, they got jobs straight away, they have children, and they still got to go back to work.' Another said: 'I am jealous of people who talk about having quality time with their children and have a good time with them.' In the perception of these posters, other mothers were more able to cope with the challenges of motherhood and, in particular, with the challenges of juggling work and parenting, and thus they felt both guilt at their perceived inadequacies and envy of others' achievements. Some posters even compare themselves negatively to their previous experiences of motherhood, arousing feelings of shame or guilt. For example, one poster looked back on her first pregnancy as a time when she did the right thing (dealt with morning sickness without recourse to drugs) in comparison to a second pregnancy: 'I'm feeling guilty as I managed without [anti-sickness medicine] for DS [dear son] and I'm already struggling with this baby.'

Such women were challenged by falling short of the expectation that they will feel overwhelming love for their child from the moment of birth. These women's posts suggest that, when this expectation is not fulfilled, the assumption is that there must be something wrong with them. Such posters were contrasting their feeling states to how they perceived they *should* be feeling. For example, a poster with a nine-week-old daughter confessed: 'I'm still waiting to have the overwhelming love other mums have. I feel as though she could be anyone's baby at times. When I hear her wake in the morning my tummy turns over and I feel really anxious.'

5.4. What would a 'good mother' feel?

When they are using Mumsnet to discuss their perceived failings and how they felt about them, posters could be reassured that perhaps others were also feeling the same as them, even if they looked as though they were perfect mothers. Many opening posters tried to establish 'the norm' — what would the good mother feel in their situation? They asked other users to validate their emotional responses and reassure them that what they were doing or feeling was right. For example, a woman who was stuck at home with a toddler and a bad cold, asked 'should I feel guilty?' for just curling up on the sofa in her pyjamas. Several others used the phrase 'Is this normal?' to discuss their feelings and seek reassurance. These posters felt a need to establish how a good mother would feel because they felt that they were *not* good mothers.

Posts on Mumsnet also came from those who acknowledged

that the reality of their lives might not match up to how they were perceived by outsiders. One woman admitted: 'My life does feel like a lie too. I've lost all confidence in social situations as from the outside looking in we appear like the perfect family. It's exhausting keeping up the pretence so I avoid going out now.' Another poster said: 'On the outside people admire me — I have a good job, my children are both doing really well (I have always prioritized them) but inside I feel like there is a part of me that is dying and I just don't know how to fix it.'

The belief that there was no one to talk to about how women were feeling might also be associated with the threads that discussed how the opening poster felt overwhelmed by the amount she had to do — her work, the family, etc. — without help. As one woman commented: 'I feel like I am juggling all these balls in the air with very little support from the people I need … then I become the bad guy as I am grumpy old nag'. Another main earner felt that she was also left to look after the children as well: 'Feel I am supposed to play sahm [stay at home mum] alongside full time working mum — frankly it's exhausting.' The posters judged themselves against the expectations of others — their partners, families, and wider society — while at the same time acknowledging that such expectations might not be reasonable.

On the other hand, numerous posters criticised themselves for failing to cope emotionally with their circumstances. As one poster commented: 'I feel really weak and pathetic for having bipolar and not being able to cope with life.' Another woman caring for a baby and a toddler felt that she should be coping better: 'I feel pathetic … I'm finding it really hard to control my temper and end up shouting and getting angry, and then I feel so guilty as he's not being naughty just a 5 yr old.' A third woman recounted that: 'I have such a great life and a great family and yet I cant cope with day to day living without this ridiculous upset.' Another poster, who had a story including an abusive childhood and miscarriages, said about her family: 'They're not so bad compared to many people, so I feel that I'm just playing the victim of my own life.'

5.5. 'We all have days like that'

A dominant feature of online forums for parents is the opportunity not only for users to express their thoughts, experiences and feelings about parenting and their children, but also to receive comments from other users. A high level of supportive and empathetic response was evident in other Mumsnet users' comments to posters, and this often included disclosure of their own feelings. We noted that typical responses to these type of posts included responders making references to their experiences and feelings in an effort to reassure the original poster that they were normal, that their feelings were shared and understood and that they did not flout the 'good mother' ideal by harbouring such feelings.

This certainly happened in the thread about the tantrumming toddler where the opening poster was assured 'we all have days like that', 'we are all human', 'been there sister'. More specifically one poster assured her; 'It doesn't make you a bad mum … it doesn't mean you love your dd any less.' In such responses, the good mother ideal was often rearticulated and redefined to include an ironic and humorous appreciation of the absurdities of parenting. Other users' responses usually assured posters that they *were* good mothers and that changing circumstances and multiple children meant that different standards needed to be applied. Thus, posters reasserted the dominant good mother discourse, supporting the open posters but also dismissing their fears and assuring them that the definition of a good mother could be flexible enough to include them.

5.6. 'I think you might not be very well'

We noted different responses, however, on the part of other users to the posts uploaded by mothers who were perceived to be really struggling. When, for example, women articulated feelings that suggested a high level of emotional turmoil, responses from other users expressed concern for their wellbeing. In response to one such posters' comments about her distress, comments included the following: 'I'm worried about you'; 'I think you might not be very well' and diagnoses of postnatal depression. The poster was urged to talk to her doctor because 'the chemicals in your brain are just a bit fucked up right now'. While some posters did tell her that they had felt like her, all assured her that this was because they had suffered from postnatal depression and that she needed medical help to feel better, as they had sought.

At their most extreme, several threads seemed to suggest that the poster was contemplating suicide. Posts like these included the following: 'I can't do anything because of the family but it seems like dying is the only answer.' 'I can't stop crying. I'm not sure I can find the dedication and strength to go on.' Rather than sharing their own stories and feelings, the advice from responding posters to such accounts was to simply seek help from more qualified people, such as counsellors or healthcare professionals.

In these cases, we see a suggestion that these opening posters are exceeding the feeling rules of good motherhood. Such revelations, indeed, were treated almost as taboo and not treated as open to discussion in the same way that lower levels of distress were. On these threads there were fewer assurances from other users that the opening poster was normal and that everyone felt like that at one point. It should also be noted that these threads tended to be very short, with few responses to the opening poster beyond an urging to speak to a doctor or counsellor. It seems that other mothers did not want to engage in these discussions or to engage in the type of 'me too' sharing that we found in other descriptions of women's emotional struggles on the site.

6. Discussion

Our analysis of 'I feel' threads on Mumsnet demonstrates that the accounts by the initiators of these threads and the responses by other users provide insight into some of the challenges and worries felt by at least some of the users of the Mumsnet forum. As part of these discussions, Mumsnet acts as a space where the ideal of the good mother is articulated and enacted as part of a community of feeling. This is achieved by women initially posting accounts of their experiences and their emotional responses. In many cases, responders' sharing of their own experiences and feelings is an important dimension of both acknowledging maternal feeling and validating it. Many of the initial posters using the 'I feel' phrase sought other users' reassurance that their feelings were normal and appropriate. Others used Mumsnet to reflect on the validity of their emotions and seek other members' assistance in making these judgements.

It is evident that Mumsnet offers users the opportunity to articulate feelings about their children and other aspects of their lives that are more ambivalent or even negative than the ideal of the 'good mother' allows. Women who feel the same type of emotions, which they may not dare to discuss with friends, family or health professionals for fear of being judged a bad mother, can find on Mumsnet posts that describe a less positive view of motherhood. They may even be brave enough to start a thread about such feelings themselves. Because of the archiving function of the Mumsnet discussion forum, these posts remain online and can be searched for by both members and non-members. Thus an ambivalent mother, or one fearing that she must be a 'bad' mother,

is able to find the voices of other women who have felt the same way in this space, allowing a small glimpse into a more nuanced type of mothering than the ideal usually available in mainstream parenting literature and popular media.

Many women engaged in self-castigation at allowing themselves to have these feelings, considering themselves 'pathetic', as some put it, for experiencing the feelings at all. Their choice to articulate their feelings, however, suggests that the forum offered them an important opportunity to engage in a form of confession and even self-examination, by first describing how they felt and then considering whether such feelings were appropriate or normal. Support for such feelings is achieved by a discourse that assumes that they are perhaps inevitable to motherhood, that everyone experiences them, but also they are fleeting and inconsequential, and can be managed via emotion work and seeking support. Such stories were often presented as funny and light-hearted anecdotes, a narrative means of lightening the mood and seeking to help other women engage in the emotional labour of feeling good about motherhood. Even mothers suffering from ambivalent or negative emotions related to their motherhood can be assured that these emotions will pass; that they just need to keep working at it and that others have felt like this as well.

Marotta (2005, p. 15) uses the term 'MotherSpace' to denote the 'built spaces and discursive spaces that contemporary mothers inhabit'. She contends that such spaces 'constitute a powerful force that helps shape their subjectivities and their possibilities, define who mothers can be and what they can do at any given point in time'. Online platforms may be conceptualised as one such 'MotherSpace'. As we noted in our introductory overview, feeling rules and communities of feeling are configured via the affordances of a forum such as Mumsnet, which acts as a type of discursive space for emotional expression. Unlike many other potential discursive MotherSpaces (such as face-to-face networks or friendship groups, for example), forums like Mumsnet offer women an opportunity to talk about their feelings anonymously and at any time, and therefore, perhaps, to express intense socially-proscribed emotions that flout the conventions of feeling rules for mothers that may exist in less anonymous spaces. As we found, however, this articulation of emotion is normalised and disciplined in various ways via conventions that regulate where the boundaries of negative emotion are established. Mothers invited others in this particular community of feeling to help them in their assessment of their emotions. Via such discussion, feeling rules are constantly being made and remade, as are concepts of 'good motherhood' in relation to these rules. If we define emotional labour as engaging in the expression and discussion of emotion (at least partly) to discipline and regulate difficult or proscribed emotions, both the original posters and those responding to these communications can be regarded as participating in the emotional labour of motherhood.

Posters to discussion forums such as Mumsnet can use them to both present evidence of their good mothering to the wider world and challenge societal norms — but only up to a certain limit. As Thomson et al. (2011) pointed out in their analysis of parenting magazines, such issues are seen as temporary aberrations that can be rectified with the right help. Boon and Pentney (2015) suggest that mothers uploading photographs of breastfeeding to the parenting forum Baby Center conform to accepted maternal ideals, demonstrating how they are good mothers, but also challenge patriarchal discourses of sexualised femininity. Some users of Mumsnet have used the site to express and organise feminist politics (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). However, for the most part, these forums tend to reinforce rather than undermine the *status quo*, reinforcing gender stereotypes (Boon and Pentney, 2015; Brady and Guerin, 2010; Gambles, 2010; Madge and O'Connor, 2006).

Jensen (2013) discusses this celebration of 'failed' parenting and rejection of the pressures to be a perfect mother, which she suggests resonates across postfeminist parenting culture. While online discussion forums such as Mumsnet might be seen as providing a place for the articulation of a more realistic approach to mothering, Jensen argues that engaging in this talk is *itself* constitutive of good mothering — ironic confessions of failure taking place within a context of care and diligence. Overall, these sites conform to societal norms around the concept of the good mother — the good mother, after all, is someone who seeks information and advice about how to take care of her children in the best way possible. In the therapeutic culture of the global North, articulating one's concerns about performing parenthood (or any other type of subject position) and seeking advice tends to be acknowledged as a fundamental practice of selfhood and self-optimisation (Rose, 1996). For those parents who see their children as a challenging project to be performed well, discussion forums can offer advice on everything from weaning to schooling, offering guidance towards the 'right choices' and away from those that are judged to be inadequate or just plain wrong. Mothers can demonstrate their right choices and their commitment to and care for their children by posting or even just lurking and reading the discussion threads.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we contend that while sites such as Mumsnet provide an important forum for women to express their feelings about motherhood, including those emotions that are socially censured, they do so only within certain limits. The expression of such feelings is tolerated only to a degree and according to culturally normative conventions of good motherhood. Furthermore, the responsibilised mother, while overtly participating in a community of feeling in which she receives support from other users, is positioned as remaining an atomised agent, essentially divorced from more tangible or economic forms of support that could be offered by government policies providing better financial support to women taking maternity leave or for childcare provisions and other social-welfare provisions. As other critics have noted (Gambles, 2010; Jensen, 2013), forums such as Mumsnet often serve to support rather than challenge the political *status quo* in their emphasis on self-responsibility, personal choice and therapeutic solutions to what are positioned as private problems.

Apart from the common comment that was made that Mumsnet allowed an opportunity to discuss negative feelings that women did not have elsewhere, we have no way of knowing to what extent the women who were expressing their feelings on Mumsnet are able to do so in other fora, including face-to-face meetings with other mothers. Other studies that we have undertaken, however, support the findings of many other researchers: that women with young children increasingly rely on digitally-mediated forms of communication to connect with those in a similar situation and also often use these media to arrange in-person meetings (Lupton et al., 2016). Indeed Mumsnet itself offers a function by which users can find other users in their local area for meet ups and engaging in established playgroups groups. Digital forums, therefore, are important to many women as a way of not only expressing their often difficult feelings about motherhood but also seeking emotional connections and friendships both with women they will never meet in person and those with whom they might arrange meetings via these forums. Future conceptualisations of the spatial dimensions of digital media engagement should acknowledge these intersections, as well as the growing complexity of digital media. Women move back and forth between online forums such as Mumsnet and sites such as Facebook. They chat online

and also sometimes in person with women they have met on these forums, all for the sake of developing the intimate connections that many so desperately seek in dealing with the often intense emotional challenges of contemporary motherhood.

Funding

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