Editorial

Digital Families: Gendered relationships in online spaces

Abigail Locke, Rose Capdevila & Lisa Lazard

\*Abigail Locke, School of Psychology, Keele University, UK

Rose Capdevila, School of Psychology, Open University, UK  
Lisa Lazard, School of Psychology, Open University, UK  
  
\*corresponding author

This Special Issue sets out to consider gendered family relationships in digital spaces. These spaces, including social media, digital media, streaming services and web pages, have increased access to family focussed content online. Drawing on critical feminist psychological perspectives that question the prioritisation of essentialist and normative conceptualisations of family and gender, this special issue examines the phenomenon of digital mothering within families (Lazard, 2022). Through a feminist lens focusing on gender and relationships, it considers the manifold ways in which mothering is embedded in familial constructions, practices, and representations.

Engagement in digital spaces has notably been subject to negative characterisations in both academic and popular arenas. For example, online selfie posting practices are typically understood as displays of digital narcissism (Maguire, 2018), whilst parental posting about children online is often characterised as “sharenting” (the overuse of social media to share news and images, for example, of one’s children) (Lazard et al., 2019). However, these linguistically gender-neutral characterisations obscure the fact that these practices are, in the context of online platforms, highly gendered and femininized (Ammari, et al., 2015)

While there is now a large body of research on social media and families, little has been said about the potential for positive engagements or how these digital technological practices can support or facilitate family relationships more broadly. The contributors in this issue depart from a mainstream discourse that relies almost exclusively on the problematisation of online behaviour and the social unacceptability of social media engagement along with the suggested threats of high social media engagement and mental health (Karim et al., 2020). Whilst acknowledging these concerns, the purpose of this SI is instead to provide a platform by which we, the authors and editors, explore a range of issues, highlighting the nuances in, and complexities of, negotiating (and facilitating) specific online relationships.

The central question that this Special Issue considers is *how are gendered discourses around mothering (re)produced and resisted online?*  We initially set out to examine this question within a wider context of digital spaces, families and gendered relationships. However, what became apparent is how ‘mothering’, in both display and practice, is at the core of each of the manuscripts. This focus on mothers is perhaps not surprising given that motherhood has long been theorised as a site of gendered, intersectional inequalities in feminist scholarship in which mothers have assumed primary responsibility for home life and childcare (e.g. Green, 2015; O’Reilly, 2020; Russo, 1979; Weisstein, 1968). Such responsibilities for many mothers became even more pronounced during COVID-19 restrictions (Green and O’Reilly, 2021) indicating the continued and heightened pressures placed on mothers to manage the care and well-being of their families, particularly children, in *any* circumstances.

Early research on digital spaces suggested mothers’ participation in online life could potentially help mitigate such pressures for mothers. Prior to the seeming ubiquity of the online environment for families in the resource-rich global north, the visibility of motherhood was circumscribed, mostly confined to the home and other child-orientated spaces (Tyler, 2011) and most mothers had limited networks of offline relationships (e.g. Rose, 2010). Once the digital environment became available to these women, the anonymity afforded by online platforms coupled with the informality of exchanges with other mothers provided supportive spaces. These spaces offered them the opportunity to trouble unrealistic ideals of motherhood and family, gain temporary respite from feelings of inadequacy, and evade romanticised constructions of mothering dominant in the current cultural context. At the same time, they allowed mothers to actively participate in the construction of shared parenting knowledges (e.g. Blair & Takayoshi 1999; Madge & O’Connor, 2006; Mungham & Lazard, 2010). The increased online participation of mothers contributes to the ways in which their identities, bodies, practices and labour have become highly visible and foregrounded in more or less public digital spaces and, often, for a wider audience (Lazard, 2022). These spaces allow for mothers’ hard work to be recognised, made visible and celebrated. However, these environments also became spaces for the regulation through discourses of intensive mothering which foreground white middle class imperatives around what constitutes “good mothering”, and require mothers to perform labour intensive, child-centred parenting to ensure that their children thrive and succeed (Hays, 1996).

Such complex digitally-facilitated constructions of mothering are considered in this Special Issue through a critical, feminist perspective that explores the ways in which these constructions function to produce both emancipatory and regulatory representations of mothering with which women must contend. From the experience of breastfeeding to the frustrations of COVID-19 lockdowns, the celebration of mothering and traditional holidays to the building of communities, and the asymmetry of care, this Special Issue looks at how these constructions of mothering play out online, and how these constructions assist with making sense of a more relational and public version of motherhood than was previously possible. We bring together manuscripts from early career scholars and more established academics, all engaging with debates around digital gender and developing research within the field.

We begin with a paper from Sharon Tugwell (2022, this issue) examining breastfeeding selfies, also called “brelfies”, where mothers post images of themselves online whilst breastfeeding. Tugwell argues that the social and shared nature of the breastfeeding selfie contrasts with what is typically seen as an individual or solitary act and discusses how these images can be considered cultural objects. She notes the paradoxical nature of these selfies, that is, on the one hand, they can form part of “good mothering” discourses, with the act of breastfeeding often seen as a key marker of this, whilst, on the other, they can be seen as an overt display working against good mothering discourses around privacy and discretion. Eventually, Tugwell notes how discourses around brelfies are still shaped by whiteness as is often the case with ‘good mothering’ discourses. She concludes that the sharing of images of the body and feeding practices is therefore one with higher stakes for some than others.

We move on from the sharing of breastfeeding images to considering the sharing of motherhood images on a particular day of the year, in Rose Capdevila[[1]](#footnote-1), Charlotte Dann, Lisa Lazard, Sandra Roper and Abigail Locke’s paper (2022, this issue). Mother’s Day, generally regarded as a socially important celebration in almost 200 countries across the globe and a day where the symbolic power of motherhood is foregrounded (Antolini, 2014), serves as the ideal focus for this study. Beyond a celebration, Mother’s Day also functions as an apposite site for the cultural representation of motherhood. With the spread of messaging on social media, this paper explores how mothers are represented and how mothering is constructed in Instagram and Twitter posts on this day. Capdevila et al. identify three dominant themes: “beauty & biology”; “grief &loss” and “care (& Covid)” and considers these in relation to how normative constructions of mothering are mediated through online familial relationships.

Next, Madeleine Pownall, Eve Eyles-Smith and Catherine Talbot’s paper (2022, this issue) takes as its subject matter another annual celebration — Christmas. This annual holiday similarly serves as a site for the expression of traditional norms and the intensification of family relationships. This paper takes a feminist lens to the television adverts streamed on YouTube at Christmas 2020 at the end of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Drawing on research around the amplification of gender norms during Christmas and the deepening of gendered inequalities during the pandemic, the authors explore the themes of “Nostalgia as women’s work”, “Reclaiming power and purpose through family” and “Representing gendered norms in family”. These serve to illustrate how, while functioning to provide comfort and familiarity during a global pandemic, parents (mothers) are entangled in the inherent consumerist, neoliberal pressures to which we are all subject.

Research suggests that social networking sites have become important sources of support for mothers, particularly first time parents (e.g. Mackenzie, 2018) and while they can function as inclusive relational spaces, they can also serve to circumscribe participation. In our next contribution to the Special Issue, Priscilla Astudillo-Mendoza and Francisca Cifuentes-Zunino (2022, this issue) present their investigation of a Chilean motherhood account on Instagram to unpack these complex engagements. They explicitly reflect on their own subjectivity as engaged followers of this account and as mothers of young children, living far from their families and the communities in which they themselves grew up. Using Critical Discourse Analysis to explore the construction of “good mothering” discourses, they illustrate how these can function to both sustain and resist asymmetrical gendered power relationships.

The special issue then homes in on the matter of online support to consider two papers focused on *Mumsnet*, a UK parenting forum where mothers can seek information, provide advice, or simply chat with other parents. Due to the popularity of *Mumsnet,* it has become increasingly popular as a site for academic research. The first of these papers by Yvonne Ehrstein (2022, this issue) examines working mothers’ discussions of the familial caregiving roles and divisions of domestic labour. Her work sits somewhat in opposition to previous research on *Mumsnet* (e.g. Mackenzie, 2018; Pederson, 2016) indicating at least partial resistance to normative constructions of motherhood. Instead, using a critical discursive perspective, Ehrstein argues that a prevailing discourse of “wifehood” is drawn upon to account for some level of domestic inequality. Furthermore, Ehrstein discusses two complementary constructions framing division of caring, namely the “facilitating wife” and “feckless manchild”. These constructions resonate strongly with the existing research literature on fathers’ roles in parenting and caregiving such as Locke’s (2016) treatment of media depictions of fatherhood in the British press and Roper and Capdevila’s (2020) work on stepmothers’ talk about their male partners. Ehrstein concludes by noting the supportive nature of *Mumsnet* as an online social space where working mothers can air these concerns to others in a similar position.

The theme of online support and *Mumsnet* is picked up in our final paper from Sarah Pedersen and Simon Burnett (2022). In ‘saying the unsayable’ they examine how women’s anger has become exacerbated through the lockdowns arising from the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Pederson and Burnett argue that this anger is the result of the domestic pressures caused by school closures and the requirement to home educate children coupled with institutional pressures, such as Government policies on dealing with the pandemic. They suggest that *Mumsnet* offers a safe space where feelings of anger can be communicated to others with similar experiences. However, they also note how their research demonstrates that it can also work as a space where the growing sense of women’s anger, due to the uneven impacts of the pandemic, could be both aroused and perpetuated in interactions with others.

The Special Issue finishes with a book review from Marianna Latif (2022, this issue) of Leah Williams Veazey’s *Migrant Mothers in the Digital Age*. The book, Latif tells us, considers the role of digital platforms in facilitating both the maintenance of relationships with home communities as well as the possibility of forging new relationships in the host country. Taking a more extensive look at some of the experiences touched on by Astudillo-Mendoza and Cifuentes-Zunino, Latif reports on how the monograph serves to document the critical role of social media in meeting the social, emotional and practical needs of migrants.

Together these seven contributions to the Special Issue bring the reader closer to an understanding of the role of the digital environment in shaping how sense is made of mothering and motherhood, often in relation to family members or other mothers. Mothering is, by definition, a relational identity and digital spaces are produced through relational technology. In exploring these relationships, this collection allows the reader to consider the ways in which mothering becomes constituted, resisted and reinscribed in these spaces and provides some hints and possible directions for approaches to challenge gender asymmetries.

To conclude, this Special Issue set out to examine gender and family relationships in online spaces. What became apparent through all of the papers contained here is how, when discussing families and gender, mothering became centred, whether it was in terms of displaying nurturing/feeding practices (Tugwell), mothering practices (Astudillo-Mendoza & Cifuentes-Zunino; Capdevila et al, Pownall et al) or discussing gender roles and division of care (Ehrstein, Pedersen & Burnett). This was not altogether surprising as mothers still tend to be seen as holding the caring and domestic responsibilities within many families and societies (Locke & Yarwood, 2017). Nonetheless, each of the papers finds spaces where the digital has made feminist challenges more likely. In taking up this challenge, we would argue, feminist researchers have an opportunity to contribute to the digital world in which we find ourselves evermore often.

**Funding**

This Special Issue is based on a seminar series organised by the Networking Families Research Group made up of the three guest editors as well as Charlotte Dann and Sandra Roper. The seminar series received funding from the British Psychological Society’s Research Seminar Series Award.

**References**

Ammari, T., Kumar, P., Lampe, C., & Schoenebeck, S. (2015). Managing Children's Online

Identities: How Parents Decide what to Disclose about their Children Online.

[*CHI '15: Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*](CHI%20'15:%20Proceedings%20of%20the%2033rd%20Annual%20ACM%20Conference%20on%20Human%20Factors%20in%20Computing%20Systems)*,* <https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702325>

Antolini, K. L. (2014). *Memorializing Motherhood: Anna Jarvis and the Struggle for Control*

*of Mother's Day*. West Virginia University Press.

[Astudillo-Mendoza](https://journals.sagepub.com/action/doSearch?target=default&ContribAuthorStored=Astudillo-Mendoza%2C+Priscila), P., & [Cifuentes-Zunino](https://journals.sagepub.com/action/doSearch?target=default&ContribAuthorStored=Cifuentes-Zunino%2C+Francisca), F. (2022). Mothering on the web: A feminist

analysis of posts and interactions on a Chilean Instagram account on motherhood. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32 (3), xx-xy

Blair, K., & Takayoshi, P. (1999). Mapping the terrain of feminist cyberscapes. *Feminist Cyberscapes: Map-ping Gendered Academic Spaces. Stamford, CT: Ablex*, 1-18.

Capdevila, R., Dann, C. Lazard, L. Roper, S., & Locke, A. (2022). #mothersday: Constructions of Motherhood and Femininity in social media posts. Feminism & Psychology. 32 (3), xx-xy

# Ehrstein, Y. (2022). “Facilitating wife” and “feckless manchild”: Working mothers’ talk

# about divisions of care on Mumsnet. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32 (3) xx-xy

Green, F.J. (2015). Re-conceptualising motherhood: reaching back to move forward. *Journal*

*of Family Studies*, 21 (3),196-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2015.1086666

Green, F. J., & O'Reilly, A. (Eds.). (2021). *Mothers, Mothering, and COVID-19: Dispatches from the Pandemic*. Demeter Press.

Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. Yale University Press.

Karim, F., Oyewande, A.A., Amdalla, L.F., Ehsanulla, R.C., & Khan, S. (2020). Social

Media Use and Its Connection to Mental Health: A Systematic Review. *Cureus* 12(6): e8627. doi:10.7759/cureus.8627

# Latif, M. (2022). Book Review: *Migrant mothers in the digital age: Emotion and belonging*

# *in migrant maternal online communities* by Leah Williams Veazey. *Feminism & Psychology,* 32(3) xx-xy

Lazard, L. (2022). Digital mothering: Sharenting, family selfies and online affective-discursive practices. *Feminism & Psychology*. Online first. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09593535221083840

Lazard, L., Capdevila, R., Dann, C., Locke, A., & Roper, S. (2019). Sharenting: Pride, affect and the day‐to‐day politics of digital mothering. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *13*(4), e12443. https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/spc3.12443

Locke, A. (2016). Masculinity, Subjectivities and Caregiving in the British press: The Case of the Stay-At-Home Father. In E. Podnieks (Eds.) ‘*Pops in Pop Culture’.* Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 195-212.

Locke, A.,& Yarwood, G. (2017). [Exploring the depths of gender, parenting and ‘work’:](http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/617384/)

[critical discursive psychology and the ‘missing voices’ of involved fatherhood.](http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/617384/)

*Community, Work & Family.* 20(1), 4-18. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13668803.2016.1252722?journalCode=ccwf20

Mackenzie, J. (2018). *Language, gender and parenthood online: Negotiating motherhood in Mumsnet talk.* Routledge.

Madge, C., & O’Connor, H. (2006). Parenting gone wired: Empowerment of new mothers on the internet. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 7(2), 199-120. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360600600528

Mungham, S., & Lazard, L. (2011). Virtually experts: Exploring constructions of mothers’ advice-seeking in online parenting communities. *Radical Psychology: A Journal of Psychology, Politics, and Radicalism*, *9*(2). Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20111108154739/http://www.radicalpsychology.org/vol9-2/mungham.html

Maguire, E. (2018). *Girls, Autobiography, Media.* Gender and Self-Mediation in Digital Economies. Palgrave Macmillan.

O’Reilly, A. (2020). “Trying to Function in the Unfunctionable”: Mothers and COVID-

19. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, *11*(1). Retrieved from https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/40588

Pedersen, S. (2016). The good, the bad and the ‘good enough’ mother on the UK parenting forum Mumsnet. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 59, 32-38. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S027753951530159X?via%3Dihub

# Pedersen, S. & Burnett, S. (2022). Saying the unsayable: The online expression of mothers’

# anger during a pandemic. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32 (2), 246-264. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F09593535221074131>

Pownall, M., Eyles-Smith, E., & Talbot, C. (2022). Constructions of family relationships in a

COVID Christmas: A qualitative analysis of television advertisements on YouTube. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32 (3), xx-xy

Roper, S., & Capdevila, R. (2020). Hapless, helpless, hopeless: An analysis of stepmothers’ talk about their (male) partners. *Feminism & Psychology*, *30*(2), 248-266. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0959353519900212

Russo, N. F. (1976). The motherhood mandate. *Journal of Social Issues*, *32*(3), 143-153. https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1976.tb02603.x

Tugwell, S. (2022). Online Breastfeeding Publics: Sociality, Support and Selfies. *Feminism & Psychology*, 32 (3), xx-xy

Weisstein, N. (1968) *Kinder, kuche, kirche as scientific law: Psychology constructs the female*. New England Free Press.

**Author Biographies**

**Abigail Locke** is a Professor of Critical Social and Health Psychologist and Head of School of Psychology at Keele University, UK. Her research expertise focuses on issues around gender, identity and parenting where she has published on a wide range of topics including stay-at-home-dads, mothering identities, advice to parents, digital families and media representations. Abigail uses advanced qualitative research methodologies to approach her work and has particular expertise in Critical Discursive Psychology.  She is the Co-Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Health Psychology* as well as sitting on the editorial boards of *Journal of Gender Studies* and *Feminism & Psychology*.

**Rose Capdevila** is Professor of Psychology at the Open University, UK. Her research focuses on the construction and transgression of discursive boundaries around identity – in particular political and gender identities. She has recently been conducting research on gender and digital spaces as well as the history of feminist psychology in the UK. Rose co-edits the book series *Feminist Companions to Psychology*and was co-editor of the award-winning *Handbook of International Feminisms: Perspectives on Psychology, Women, Culture, and Rights*.

**Lisa Lazard** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology and Counselling at the Open University, UK. Her research interests include gendered identities in digital cultures, parenting and sexual harassment. Her recent 2020 book Sexual Harassment, Psychology & feminism presents a unique analysis of the #MeToo movement. She is a long-standing member of the Psychology of Women & Equalities Section of the British Psychological Society where she has previously served as Editor of Psychology of Women & Equalities Review and is currently Chair Elect.

1. This manuscript was not action edited by the guest editors of the Special Issue because of an obvious conflict of interest. An Associate Editor of Feminism & Psychology oversaw the action editing process to ensure fairness and rigour. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)