

Digital families: Gendered relationships in online spaces

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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-focused 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 feminised (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

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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 Special Issue 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, 1976; Weisstein, 1968). Such responsibilities for many mothers became even more pronounced during COVID-19 restrictions (Green & 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, 2011). 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, pp. 318–335), 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. Tugwell notes how discourses around brelfies are still shaped by whiteness, as is often the case with “good mothering” discourses, concluding 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, Charlotte Dann, Lisa Lazard, Sandra Roper, and Abigail Locke’s paper (2022, pp. 336–356).¹ 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 consider 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, pp. 357–375) 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, Astudillo-Mendoza and Cifuentes-Zunino (2022, pp. 376–393) 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, pp. 394–412), 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; Pedersen, 2016), indicating at least partial resistance to normative constructions of motherhood. Instead, using a critical discursive perspective, Ehrstein argues that a prevailing discourse of “wifedom” 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 the “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 Pedersen and Burnett (2022).² 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. Pedersen 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, pp. 413–417) 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 these challenges, we would argue, feminist researchers have an opportunity to contribute to the digital world in which we find ourselves ever more often.

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Note

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.
2. Due to an administrative error, please note that this article does not appear in *Feminism & Psychology*, Special Issue 32(3). Please find Pedersen & Burnett (2022), *Saying the unsayable: The online expression of mothers' anger during a pandemic* in *Feminism & Psychology*, Issue 32(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F09593535221074131>

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