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**The reconciliation challenge: working mothers’
negotiations of equality, gender and work
on Mumsnet and beyond**

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy
City, University of London
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Table of contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	8
ABSTRACT.....	9
Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION	11
1.1 Introduction to the project	11
1.2 Studying privileged working mothers across the online-offline sphere	15
1.3 Outline of the thesis	19
Chapter 2 THE MATERNAL IN CONTEMPORARY OFFLINE/ONLINE CULTURE ..	23
2.1 The (post)feminist female success story	25
2.1.1 Female work success?	25
2.1.2 Postfeminist ‘(in)equality’	25
2.2 The ‘era of maternal femininities’	27
2.2.1 ‘Can do’ or can’t? Social divisions between women.....	28
2.2.2 At risk of abjection	30
2.2.3 Idealisation: bourgeois balance and the notion of universal success	33
2.2.4 ‘Aberrant mothers’: expanding the maternal landscape and destabilising the idealised bourgeois balanced mother.....	36
2.2.4.1 ‘Mothering while Black’	38
2.2.4.2 Beyond the heterosexual and cisgender motherhood society	41
2.2.5 Retreatism: stay-at-home mothers, happy, thrifty housewives and mumpreneurs.....	43
2.3 Networked mothers: digital mediations of maternity	47
2.3.1 The social significance of the Internet and ‘gendered’ parenting media	47
2.3.1.1 Parenting media and gender.....	48
2.3.1.2 Fathers online	49
2.3.2 Digital mothering media: continuities and shifts.....	51
2.3.3 Reproducing inequality: the privatising tendencies of online parenting forums	56
2.3.4 Mumsnet and the functioning of parenting forums as (feminist) publics	59
2.3.5 Beyond the digital vacuum: the social context of the digital	63
2.4 Conclusion	65
Chapter 3 METHODS: GENERATING ONLINE AND OFFLINE DATA.....	68
3.1 Introduction.....	68
3.1.1 Doing feminist qualitative research	68
3.1.2 Overview of the chapter	69
3.2 Two research sites: juxtaposing online discussion forum contributions and interview accounts.....	70
3.3 Mumsnet Talk	72

3.3.1	The ‘beating heart’ of Mumsnet	72
3.3.2	The communicative architecture of Mumsnet: affordances and features	73
3.3.3	Who is a ‘Mumsnetter’? Membership and the value of anonymity	76
3.4	Collecting online forum data	78
3.4.1	Adaptive ethnographic online observation	78
3.4.2	Thread sampling: considerations and practice	80
3.5	Semi-structured in-depth interviews.....	83
3.5.1	Recruitment	83
3.5.2	The interviews.....	86
3.5.3	Selection criteria and overview of respondents	87
<i>Chapter 4 AN AFFECT-CENTRED APPROACH TO ANALYSIS AND REFLEXIVITY IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS</i>		90
4.1	Introduction.....	90
4.2	Analytical frame: discursive psychology and a cognate approach to the study of affect.....	90
4.2.1	Discourse and online-offline data as discursive, textual resources in two distinct communicative spaces	90
4.2.2	An affective-discursive approach to the analysis of online and offline data.....	93
4.2.3	Analysing mediated maternal working subjectivity through the cognate notions of affective practice, interpretative repertoire and subject position	95
4.2.4	Coding.....	97
4.3	Practising ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’	99
4.3.1	A note on the quandaries of representativeness and representation.....	99
4.3.2	Emotions and the researcher-researched relationship.....	100
4.3.3	‘Giving (back) to research’?	104
4.4	Ethical considerations	106
4.4.1	Reproducing online communications from Mumsnet’s discussion fora	106
4.4.2	Interviewing working mothers	108
4.4.3	Analysing women’s online and offline voices.....	109
<i>Chapter 5 THE BENCHMARKED SELF AND THE ILLUSION OF BALANCE: MOTHERING AND MANAGING TO PERFECTION</i>		112
5.1	Managing the neoliberal maternal self and the family: ‘fixing’ things for herself... 114	
5.1.1	Dual managers	115
5.1.2	‘Fixing’ family life via a ‘cost-benefit calculus’	118
5.1.3	‘Productive’ family time.....	122
5.1.4	Dissonances with calculative logics	123
5.2	Perfection: the benchmarked self	126
5.2.1	‘Perfect’ mothers (make self-sacrifices)	127
5.2.2	Perfection as a realm of suffering or the ideal of the ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker.....	133
5.2.3	Forced priorities: ‘you’re not just an island’	137

5.3	‘You can be anything you want to be!’ Raising confident daughters	139
5.3.1	Confident parenting	139
5.3.2	Cultivating confidence	141
5.3.3	Correctives: holding patriarchal privileges at bay.....	142
5.3.4	The ‘family incubator’	145
5.3.5	Building confident, feminist characters?	145
5.4	Striving for balance and gender-equal futures.....	147
<i>Chapter 6 THE ‘DRIP, DRIP DRIP’ OF DISCRIMINATION: THE TEXTURE OF GENDER INEQUALITIES AT WORK.....</i>		150
6.1	Continuities: disavowing gender at work.....	152
6.2	‘Careers in limbo’: acknowledging gender inequalities at work	153
6.2.1	‘It’s because I’m a woman with young children’: maternity discrimination	153
6.2.2	The ‘drip, drip, drip’ of discrimination.....	157
6.2.3	Making sense of compulsory redundancy and denied promotions	159
6.3	Not ‘propelling women in there’ but ‘asking’ chairmen: rejecting positive discrimination – embracing unconscious bias and merit.....	161
6.4	Being content and “happy with what you have”	165
6.4.1	Accepting ‘natural’ disadvantages: the disruptive female body.....	165
6.4.2	Postponing promotions and enacting self-care	167
6.5	Feeling lucky or the gratitude for being able to work (flexibly).....	174
6.5.1	Luck and flexibility.....	174
6.5.2	Repayments	175
6.5.3	Felicitous working environments.....	178
6.5.4	Foreclosing criticism.....	179
6.5.5	Fortunate promotions	180
6.5.6	The price of flexibility?	181
6.6	Anti-maternal workplace cultures, change, continuities and luck.....	182
<i>Chapter 7 VISIBILISING DOMESTIC INEQUALITIES: THE ‘FACILITATING WIFE’ IN DOMESTICITY TALK ON MUMSNET.....</i>		186
7.1	Unequal (domestic) lives.....	189
7.1.1	The ‘facilitating wife’	189
7.1.2	‘Feeling differently’: the affective register of domesticity talk.....	194
7.2	Family management: reframing gendered divisions of care	195
7.2.1	Wives as family managers: of ‘wifework’ and the ‘mental load’.....	197
7.2.2	‘You should’ve asked!’ Gendered divisions of the ‘mental load’	199
7.2.3	Outsourcing domestic tasks	201
7.2.4	Fantasising a wife	204
7.3	‘Speakable’ experiences of domestic inequality.....	207

Chapter 8 MANAGING DISSONANCES: CONSTRUCTING THE FECKLESS ‘MANCHILD’ PARTNER	211
8.1 Shifting masculine priorities or ‘cherry picking’?	212
8.2 ‘Manchild’	215
8.2.1 Lacking responsibility	216
8.2.2 Hobbies as escapism	219
8.2.3 Emotional detachment.....	221
8.2.4 Sexist detachment.....	222
8.2.5 Mother-blame.....	224
8.3 A corollary strategy: ‘strategic incompetence’	226
8.4 Betterment and reform? The ‘manchild’ in the media	229
8.5 Visibilising a ‘pattern of “uncaring” behaviour’	232
Chapter 9 AMBIVALENT CONSEQUENCES: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF MUMSNET’S FABRIC OF RAGE AND COLLECTIVITY.....	237
9.1 ‘Leave the Bastard’: the intricacies of a combative online culture of feeling on Mumsnet	240
9.1.1 ‘You can always leave!’ LTB as a normalised imaginary resource.....	241
9.1.2 ‘Why aren’t you furious?’ Mandatory digital rage.....	244
9.1.2.1 ‘AIBU to LTB?’	245
9.1.2.2 Policing ‘niceness’ in a combative culture of feeling.....	246
9.1.3 ‘I need to LTB over a chip’: humour and playful excess	249
9.2 Mini-rebellions: palatable, ‘bite-sized’ rage and micro-change?	253
9.3 Dismantling the figure of the ‘raging Mumsnetter’	257
9.3.1 Anonymity, rage and collectivity from an offline perspective.....	257
9.3.2 Dirtiness, disgust and guilt: dissociations	260
9.3.3 ‘It just dragged me down and down’: the injurious nature of LTB	262
9.3.4 ‘Cruel’ attachments and ‘fast anger’?.....	264
9.3.5 An affirmative sense of community via offline relations	266
9.4 Digitally legible rage	267
Chapter 10 CONCLUSION.....	272
10.1 Central arguments and contributions.....	273
10.1.1 Thinking across the online-offline and understanding the affective-discursive landscape of working mothers.....	273
10.1.2 The affective modes of inequality.....	275
10.1.2.1 Continuities and changes in feminist discourse	275
10.1.2.2. Gaping interstices – juxtaposing the online and the offline	277
10.1.2.3 Online rage and collectivity on and beyond Mumsnet and the current feminist moment	281
10.2 Future directions for analysis and research	284
10.2.1 Crises collide: women, care and other equality issues during the COVID-19 pandemic	284

10.2.2	Widening the lens: going beyond the dual-earner, heterosexual, cisgender context.....	286
10.2.3	Researching and addressing women’s repudiation of positive discrimination measures	288
10.2.4	Mumsnet as a habitat: ethnographic research.....	289
10.2.5	Digging deeper into and unearthing Mumsnet’s gender politics.....	289
10.2.6	The challenge of it all.....	291
<i>Appendices</i>		292
<i>Appendix A</i>	<i>Recruitment posts (study advertisements)</i>	292
<i>Appendix B</i>	<i>Participant information</i>	296
<i>Appendix C</i>	<i>Consent form</i>	299
<i>Appendix D</i>	<i>Generic topic guide for interviews.....</i>	301
<i>Appendix E</i>	<i>Interview participants by demographics and occupation</i>	303
<i>Appendix F</i>	<i>Transcription conventions.....</i>	307
<i>References</i>		308

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the reconciliation challenge working mothers encounter, examining how contemporary cultural ideals, shifting feminist discourses and the digital environment mediate working mothers' negotiations of and affective responses to social inequalities on, through and beyond Britain's largest parenting website Mumsnet. It enquires into the way that the popular imagery of work-family balance and female success is lived by women that are primarily being addressed by ideals of balanced femininity. The study employs and develops a feminist affective-discursive approach, and draws on 29 in-depth interviews with users of Mumsnet and 85 online discussion threads posted to Mumsnet's forum. By juxtaposing online and interview accounts, both of which visibilise inequalities in the private-domestic and the public-work realms, the research paints a complex and detailed picture of the ways in which such forms of injustice are discussed and navigated by female working parents across the online-offline sphere.

The research examines the discursive landscape of working mothers and its affective modes of inequality as a way of locating the ways in which emotion and broader cultural currents such as neoliberalism, feminism and individualism are involved in the constitution of maternal working subjectivities. It shows how, in the context of a revitalisation of feminist ideas, gender inequalities at work are no longer 'unspeakable'. Yet, as the affective-discursive approach elucidates, such injustices can still be difficult to address in the face of gendered incitements to manage such and other structural inequalities individually by constructing their own and their children's inner dispositions, rather than the social conditions in which they live, work and parent, as sites of change. Highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of online communication, expression and emotion, the research also sheds light on the way that women with children negotiate particular gendered injustices through the digital space. Through an analysis of the complexion of anger, connectivity and feminism on and beyond Mumsnet, it reveals how digital affordances, conventions and site architecture structure virtual engagements with domestic forms of inequality, and pays close attention to the kind of affective subjectivities that come into being on Mumsnet, including the 'raging Mumsnetter' and the 'angry wife'. These were found to operate in complex ways in women's on- and offline talk, and are theorised in view of their ambivalent consequences for the potential of the digital, and the performances of rage this environment facilitates, to politicise and challenge the wider

structures underpinning inequalities both at home and at work. This thesis, by drawing on both interview and online accounts and employing feminist, cultural sociological and digital theories, offers understandings about the offline and online lives of working mothers, and about the relationship between feminism, sense-making about gender inequalities and the digital.

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the project

This thesis is based on empirical research on the digital and offline lives of women who are parents and workers. More specifically, it engages with women's sense-making of their working and parenting experiences and equality through the lens of Mumsnet, Britain's largest parenting website. At the heart of this thesis are the issues that concern contemporary working mothers in the U.K., such as the inequalities that characterise the present-day U.K. workplace; the ways in which childcare and general household tasks remain often the primary responsibility of women; and the subjective experiences of reconciling working and mothering – as a privatising and individualising demand that is directed at women. At the same time, through its focus on Mumsnet, this thesis attends to questions such as whether, and if so, how the digital environment makes a difference to the ways in which inequalities are discussed; and how users of Mumsnet feel about and relate to the site.

Throughout this PhD journey, I have encountered multiple reactions to my research topic, which is women's negotiations of working and parenting and their views of equality across the online and offline sphere. Very often responses conveyed the message: yes, it is still difficult for women to negotiate home and work life, but why does it require a PhD thesis to explore this? And what is there to say, given that women can have it all nowadays if they put the work in? Sometimes, after such casual conversations about the 'expendability' of researching working mothers' experiences, I recalled my own mother who was, in the 1980s, dedicated to raising me and continuing to engage in paid work. In very tired moments, after coming back home from a long day at the office and the subsequent rush to pick me up from nursery, she sometimes advised me (with a laugh in her voice) not to have children at all. I have never felt her words as a personal criticism, but rather a sign of the powerful social forces that bear on expectations and ideals surrounding motherhood and waged labour. Clearly, some time has passed since then. And yet, this anecdote, touching on the disjunction between the 1980s flawless super-mother-worker image (aptly captured by Hochschild in her seminal 1989 study on U.S. working mothers' 'second shift') and the frequently exhausting lived experience of working motherhood cues us in to the incongruences between cultural ideas about feminine success and the feelings and experiences of employed women that have children.

This research is situated within critical analyses of the recent rise and currency of feminism (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018). Pointing to a multitude of *feminisms* that currently circulate across different sites of the mediated public sphere, these manifestations of feminism also overlap and converge – they share at least the embrace of a feminist identity and acknowledgement of gender inequalities. While feminist ‘discourses have an accessibility that is not [anymore] confined to academic enclaves or niche groups’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 1), critics caution however that these new variants of feminism are only too often in furtherance of the logics of empowerment and neoliberalism (ibid.; Rottenberg, 2018) and resonate with a postfeminist sensibility emphasising individualism, the notion of choice and women’s self-transformation (instead of focusing on transforming wider socio-economic and political structures) (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2016). Notably, digital culture, and social media in particular, have offered significant spaces for feminist expression and activity, with scholars highlighting both the potential and pitfalls of such forms of digital feminism (e.g. Mendes et al., 2019). This discursive feminist terrain then raises important questions and concerns that intimately relate to my research, such as how the intensified visibility of different feminisms affects working mothers’ sense-making of gender inequalities at work and in the home, and how these formations play out on the online discussion boards of Mumsnet. It is in this complex feminist moment that this thesis explores professional working mothers’ experiences of gendered forms of inequality across the digital and offline sphere. Drawing on data from 29 interviews with users of the website Mumsnet and a corpus of in total 85 online threads posted to Mumsnet’s discussion fora, the thesis addresses the following key questions:

- How is the navigation of various forms of labour, in particular paid and care work, discussed and registered by maternal subjects on and beyond Mumsnet?
- How do working mothers make sense of inequalities at work and in the home, and how, if at all, has the new visibility of feminism affected their sense-making?
- How do mediated images of working mothers relate to and conform with the lived experiences of site users, both on- and offline?
- What is the relationship between the discussions of gendered forms of inequality on Mumsnet and in the accounts of the interview participants?
- How can we account for the social significance and affective specificity of the online conversational space of Mumsnet?

This study aims to explore women's constructions of their subjective experiences as working parents along with the way that the contemporary landscape of gender, work and parenting relates to feminism, and responds to the role of the digital environment. As pointed out above, the feminist landscape has undergone recent shifts towards an increase in feminist activity and consciousness. These shifts in feminist discourse contextualise and form an important background to my research on the study of inequalities in relation to gender, work and parenting. Importantly, such changing feminist formations emerge alongside the heightened visibility of motherhood in the U.K. media and public sphere, and as such are reflected and embedded in the contemporary landscape of maternal figurations, which I discuss in chapter two. While researchers have emphasised the idealisation of bourgeois postponed yet 'balanced' maternity in the cultural realm (e.g. McRobbie, 2013; Littler, 2013; Rottenberg, 2016; 2018; Wilson and Huntington, 2006), the question of how these cultural representations relate to, and affect, maternal working subjectivities is currently under-researched: a deficit that will be addressed in this study. Shani Orgad's (2019) study that focuses on a juxtaposition of lived experiences and media representations of middle-class stay-at-home mothers is a notable exception. In contrast to cultural constructions that often frame women's decisions to 'opt out' of the workforce as a personal 'choice', Orgad (2019) finds that the 'forced choices' of mothers to retreat from the public sphere are impacted by a range of structural factors including partners' demanding jobs, family-unfriendly workplace cultures and inequalities in the home.

Seeking to contrast the lived experiences of mothers who remain *in* the labour market with contemporary representations of desirable motherhood, this research explores the ways in which those mediated images relate and correspond to the lives of women with children, and how their sense of self is affected by current cultural messages. In particular, the present study homes in on how contemporary 'balanced' working maternity (Rottenberg, 2018) is lived out in the digital era, and enquires into the ways in which female working parents discuss and negotiate their experiences in two spaces: on Mumsnet and in the interviews I conducted with users.

This thesis adopts a novel perspective on Mumsnet by developing a research design that integrates analyses of women's posted online accounts together with interviews with Mumsnet users (see chapters 3 and 4). In this way, the project attends to the connections, overlaps and similarities between on- and offline accounts and the respective contexts they are embedded in, but also aims to tell us something about the social significance and affective specificity of

this virtual space. By drawing on the interviews and over 80 online discussions, I trace what happens when working mothers engage with Mumsnet; what is discussed, emphasised and visibilised; which affordances, logics and practices govern this space; what kind of affective registers are circulating on here; how regular users relate to, feel about and account for using the site; and what themes, representations and logics travel across the online-offline context.

As I outline in chapter three and four, this research is a feminist project. It therefore aims to consider both how inequalities are sustained and potential sites of change. As such, it connects the very question of what it is like, and how it feels, to be a working mother in Britain – or how maternal and occupational identities are lived and experienced – to the forms of power that condition and shape social life, and the lives of women in particular. In doing so, this thesis contributes to capturing the changes and continuities in women's sense-making of inequalities in this current moment of a revived feminism.

My primary research site, Mumsnet, is part of a larger online parenting network that Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim (2017) call the 'mamasphere'. Indeed, Mumsnet represents a substantial portion, and to some extent the mainstay, of the U.K.'s mamasphere. The site was founded in 2000 by Justine Roberts and Carrie Longton, two media-savvy women who met in antenatal class. Coinciding with the onset of the user-content focused web 2.0, since the site was set up more than two decades ago its ubiquity and influence among British working mothers has gained increased traction. Mumsnet claims to be 'the UK's biggest network for parents, with around 7 million unique visitors per month clocking up around 100 million page views' (Mumsnet About Us, 2021). It is accessible to all Internet users and yet posters retain their anonymity by posting under a pseudonymous username.

Apart from intimate interactions and exchanges of advice and support between users that occur in this public space, notions of Mumsnet being a politically highly influential community result from the media attention that the site attracted during the 2010 general election campaigns, coined the 'Mumsnet election' (Sylvester, *The Times*, 2009). Mumsnet users were depicted as a group of middle-class mothers with considerable power to impact on the election result, with leading politicians bidding for their votes in live web-chats on the site (Campbell, 2012). Others have highlighted Mumsnet's role as a 'major player in governmental policy campaigns' and key stakeholder through a range of campaigns, for instance on the sexualisation of children issue (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013: 99).

Existing research on Mumsnet has largely produced more or less critical explorations into the cultural and social imperatives of contemporary mothering (e.g. Mackenzie, 2019; Pedersen, 2016; see below 1.2 and chapter 2). However, recent research on the site has begun to focus on the political nature of some of the discussions taking place in this space, for instance in relation to the presidency of Donald Trump (Pedersen and Burnett, 2018) and women's discussion and use of news media during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pedersen and Burnett, 2021). Mumsnet's reach and influence, along with an emerging body of research, suggest that wider cultural images, expectations and views surrounding working mothers are likely to be reflected through and on Mumsnet, and can thus shed light on the ways in which contemporary working motherhood is lived out, negotiated and experienced.

With its focus on Mumsnet, this thesis widens analysis of this site to include, for instance, discussion of the 'facilitating wife' rather than the mother as a key construction through which women frame divisions of care. Importantly too, this thesis contributes to understanding users' perceptions of and relationships with the site by drawing on interviews with its users. As such, it seeks to open up questions around the translation of digitally expressed dissonant views and feelings into the offline sphere, against the backdrop of the visibility of women's anger in the wake of #MeToo (Kay, 2019; 2020). In particular, it aims to offer nuanced answers to the question of whether and how notions of online collectivity and rage transpire and expand into women's offline lives, or remain limited to the digital sphere.

Having introduced this thesis and the research site, in the remainder of this introductory chapter I provide a rationale for studying privileged working mothers' on- and offline experiences on and through Mumsnet, outline the way in which the relationship between the lived experiences of site users as they are being constructed in the interviews and articulated in talk on Mumsnet informs the structure of the thesis and its narrative, and then give an overview of the chapters that follow.

1.2 Studying privileged working mothers across the online-offline sphere

'[M]otherhood', Patricia Hill Collins (1994: 45) observes, 'cannot be analyzed in isolation from its context'; it occurs at a particular time and place, and within intersecting axes of race, social class, sexuality and (dis)ability. In particular, the online parenting sphere is dominated by the voices of white, western women (e.g. Orton-Johnson, 2017; Thomson et al., 2011). Mumsnet does not present an exception and accordingly its population, compared to both other

parenting forums and the population of U.K. Internet users more widely, is distinctive and privileged in terms of cultural and economic capital, with an overwhelmingly female British demographic that is most often heterosexually partnered, white, well-educated and in employment: a cohort of predominantly established mothers who are aged between 30 and 40 and have an above-average household income (Dutton and Blank, 2013; ONS, 2020; Pedersen and Smithson, 2010; 2013). In other words, Mumsnet users are mainly middle-class, educated, professional mothers.

But why study these privileged professional mothers that seem to be living lives that broadly align with the image of contemporary ‘successful’ femininity? To address this question, we need to consider the positioning and role of middle-class professional motherhood in contemporary cultural discourse. Much research has noted that maternity today is recast as a neoliberal version of femininity (e.g. Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015; McRobbie, 2013; 2020; Rottenberg, 2018). A key marker of this cultural ideal is compliance with the ‘new sexual contract’ which aims to surmount dichotomies between working and caring identities and combine waged work with motherhood (McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). In concentrating on women who adhere to this call of the ‘new sexual contract’, the focus of my research is on well-educated, middle-class working mothers as they are regarded as most precisely embodying the contemporary desirable ‘maternal feminine’ (e.g. McRobbie, 2013). In other words, Mumsnet users are part of those subjects that are primarily being addressed by cultural middle-class ideals of *balanced* femininity (Adamson, 2017a; Rottenberg, 2018).

Indeed, Mumsnet has variously and critically been discussed in relation to neoliberal forms of motherhood. Eight years ago, Angela McRobbie (2013: 124) described Mumsnet as having ‘achieved the status of a mother’s lobby’ and as ‘embod[ying] [...] professional middle-class maternity’. Discussing the relationship between neoliberalism and feminism, she made the argument that Mumsnet is part of contemporary feminine mass media, alongside BBC Radio 4’s *Woman’s Hour*, the *Femail* section of the *Daily Mail*, and a number of lifestyle and celebrity magazines. These media, she suggests, are ‘inventing a repertoire of woman-centred positions which will confirm and enhance the core values of the neoliberal project’ (McRobbie, 2013: 121). Mumsnet, in McRobbie’s (2013: 122) account, then emerges as adopting this ‘weak version of feminism’, which incites a ‘more attentive address to women’, and mothers in particular. Similarly, both Tracey Jensen (2018 [2013]: 42) and Richenda Gambles (2010) discuss Mumsnet in association with neoliberal parenting culture, arguing that the site

assembles a maternal public that intersects ‘personal, political and privatising orientations’ and engenders an intricate ‘structure of feeling’ (Williams, 1977), which tends to encourage self-responsibility and reflexive individualism rather than politicise private experiences.

The present study responds to calls for scholars to further focus on Mumsnet in relation to this relatively recent and ongoing social address to professional middle-class mothers. It empirically investigates the dynamics and effects of the ‘new sexual contract’ that addresses women as carers and workers by exploring the subjective experiences of working mothers who are Mumsnet users. This is a gap in the existing literature that my thesis seeks to fill. At the same time, this research critically revisits and interrogates earlier claims that Mumsnet incites a predominantly depoliticised, individualist outlook that aligns with broader neoliberal rationalities (Jensen, 2018 [2013]; Gambles, 2010; McRobbie, 2013). Here, I build on and develop recent research that has found an increasing politicisation of this space (e.g. Pedersen and Burnett, 2018) to explore whether, and if so, to what extent elements of work-caring discourse on Mumsnet break away from such hegemonic neoliberal logics, and instil a politicised, angry register in posters’ talk that has the potential to challenge the status quo.

The question of what it means to study privileged mothers has been previously considered by a number of scholars. I find Arlie Hochschild’s (1989: 19) observation, in her study of dual-income families that were mainly middle-class, particularly insightful: ‘If these middle-class couples find it hard to juggle work and family life, many other two-job families [...] – who earn less, work at less flexible, steady, or lucrative jobs, and rely on poorer daycare – are likely to find it harder still’. Yet such experiences are not uniform. As Orgad (2019: 16-17, original emphasis) highlights, her study of privileged U.K. stay-at-home mothers seeks to ‘expose the contradictions, ambivalences, and forms of oppression that these women experience *within* their privileged lives’, arguing that ‘oppression can be experienced *alongside* privilege’, because ‘choice and inequality are *not* mutually exclusive’. Resonating with this claim, my analysis in chapters five to nine provides ample evidence of the complex ways in which inequalities in the domestic realm and in work contexts shape the lives of the highly educated, privileged women I interviewed, and affect the posted accounts of Mumsnet users. In addition, inhabiting a position of privilege may give subjects a greater scope for the articulation of dissenting and norm-transgressing views, as for example pointed out by Sylvia Jaworska (2018), because challenging such hegemonic formations is ‘less risky’ from a position of social

privilege. This is a theme that threads through chapters seven and eight, and is most fully explored in chapter nine.

Studying working mothers' on- and offline experiences on and through Mumsnet is both a valuable and viable endeavour. I view Mumsnet as both a representation of contemporary U.K. work-parenting culture and a source enabling access to personal narratives that relate to being a working parent (see also Gambles, 2010). While previous research on Mumsnet has focused on the discussions taking place in this virtual space, I have designed this research as a dual-sited study that draws on data obtained from the Mumsnet Talk forum (discussion forum) and interviews conducted with users of the site. Rather than looking across different platforms, this study concentrates on Mumsnet by engaging with discussions taking place in this virtual space *and* drawing on interviews with its users.

In addition to harnessing Mumsnet users' positioning as prime neoliberal maternal subjects, this novel approach not only broadens our understanding of Mumsnet as a platform, but also the British work-parenting landscape it is part of. Underpinning this is the aim to use these two types of data in a mutually contextualising way, as I will elaborate in chapter three, and most distinctively show in chapter nine where I juxtapose posters' online accounts with the accounts of the interviewees to explore whether and how the digital environment makes a difference in terms of the modes of collectivity engendered.

Indeed, at the heart of this thesis are the connections between the lived experiences of site users as they are being constructed in the interviews *and* articulated in talk on Mumsnet. I regard this relationship between the online and the offline as deeply interwoven, which means that, at an analytical level, online and offline data are being used in an integrative fashion. This approach, which focuses deliberately on users' online and offline environments and the dis/connections between these two sites, informs the structure of the thesis and its narrative. My analysis (chapters 5 to 9) starts with two chapters that are based on interview data (chapters 5 and 6) and then moves to three chapters (7 to 9) that draw on my analysis of Mumsnet online discussion forum data. Throughout, I offer links between the two communicative social contexts: I show how the practices, affects and relations that were expressed in the interviews both connect to and differ from what is being discussed on Mumsnet, and how the communication on Mumsnet is embedded in and informs research participants' lives, and vice versa. In doing so, I pay not only attention to both the differences and similarities between

these two sets of data, but distinctively aim to capture whether, how and to what extent these communicative spaces shape, afford and hinder the *speakability* of inequalities.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

After this opening chapter, **chapter two** continues to situate the thesis by outlining and critically navigating the relevant existing key literatures that this study builds on and contributes to. It examines the contemporary maternal landscape through a range of culturally prominent, exemplary maternal subject positions and their relationship to waged work. I draw out the discursive ‘blank spaces’ and absences in these hegemonic constructions, especially those related to class, race, ability and sexuality, by exploring the ways in which the increasing visibility of more complex portraiture of motherhood may challenge the (hetero)normative, white bourgeois ideal of the balanced mother and related incarnations of motherhood. Turning to the online context, this chapter then overviews central debates on the digital mediations of maternity. It traces both continuities and shifts within a heterogeneous field that has considered women’s relationship with digital media from various viewpoints, all of which emphasise different implications. These viewpoints range from a binary perspective that polarises between the liberating, supportive or even politicising potential of online communication on the one hand, and its disempowering, privatising effects that reproduce unequal gender relations suffusing the offline world on the other hand. I then outline accounts that highlight the entanglement of mothers’ lives and work with digital media. The review draws on research from a range of disciplines including media, cultural, digital and psychosocial studies and sociology. I position this thesis in relation to these bodies of scholarship, which provide its theoretical foundations and help to situate it in order to understand contemporary working motherhood.

Chapter three is the first of two chapters that outline and invite a critical engagement with the methodological decisions made. Throughout these chapters, I draw on relevant theoretical scholarship, but also use empirical data from the interviews to illustrate why certain strategies seemed appropriate and particular choices were made. **Chapter three** begins by further introducing my primary research site, the parenting website Mumsnet, providing a rationale for focusing on Mumsnet’s talk fora and discussing some key issues of membership. I then set out the practicalities involved in generating online and offline data in the form of online discussion forum contributions and interview accounts. This includes a detailed discussion of my adaptive approach to online ethnography; the practice of and considerations pertaining to thread

sampling; and the process of designing and conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. In **chapter four** I outline my affect-centred approach to analysis and reflexivity in the research process. I present the analytical frame of this study by examining the synergetic potential of a discursive approach that encompasses affect for the analysis of maternal working subjectivity. The chapter advocates a hybrid approach to discourse analysis that fruitfully combines insights, analytical tools and core concepts from critical discursive psychology and the affective-discursive approach developed by Wetherell. Chapter four also provides a careful account of the role of emotions and subjectivity in research encounters through adopting a reflexive lens that promotes transparency and accountability in regards to the interpersonal and power dynamics characterising the researcher-researched relationship; the navigation of dilemmas arising from my research including the quandary of representation; and ethical considerations.

Chapters five to nine present my empirical analysis. In the first analysis chapter (**chapter five**), I draw on 29 interviews with users of Mumsnet who are professional working mothers to explore three key facets that seem to constitute the neoliberal maternal self. These are successful family management; perfection in the realms of mothering and work; and confidence-instilling parenting. The chapter interrogates the lived experiences of these cultural idea(l)s in relation to their embedding in the neoliberal feminist context. I show how the requirements of the neoliberal workplace and intensive mothering scripts were experienced as contradictory, strain and frequently stress-producing forces rather than as balanceable and leading to happiness. I highlight how the interview participants' responses to such unattainable expectations were often inner-directed and involved affective investments in self-transformation, which came at the cost of invading their own well-being. Yet I argue that such changes in self and disposition extended to the interviewees' daughters as part of their parenting approach to instil confidence as an antidote to structural inequality. Chapter five also gestures towards some of the key discourses and themes that frame the analysis in subsequent chapters such as constructions of the wholly committed, childless 'ideal worker', laying further groundwork for the following analysis.

Chapter six focuses on the interview participants' talk about gender inequalities in work contexts within a shifting feminist landscape. While the chapter documents the prevalence and extensiveness of motherhood-related disadvantages and discrimination in the contemporary U.K. workplace by analysing the interviewees' open discussion of such widespread experiences of inequalities, I show how simultaneously the language of 'luck' and 'flexibility'

along with pervasive defeatist sentiments contributed to disincentivising the imagining of social change in work contexts and beyond. In this chapter I thus make sense of the seeming paradox of the interviewees' open talk about maternity discrimination and inequality in work settings that coexisted with individualist responses, a fatalist sentiment and personal sense of gratitude for being able to work (flexibly).

The remaining three analysis chapters, chapters seven to nine, present my analysis of the affective-discursive assemblage of constructions and practices circulating on Mumsnet, drawing on online postings to the site's discussion boards. Taking a cue from the luminosity of the 'balanced woman' ideal and the cultural visibility of the mother figure, in **chapter seven** I turn to the realm of the 'facilitating wife', which I show is construed as a complement to the roles of mother and worker. I begin here to develop a key argument that what I call 'domesticity talk' on Mumsnet affords visibility to the culturally marginalised discourse of the 'wife' through which posters often frame divisions of care, drawing particular attention to the gendered division of the managerial and 'mental load'. I analyse the 'affective dissonances' produced along this mode of talk and the way it enables women posting to 'feel differently' in regards to experiences of domestic inequality. The chapter argues that the relations women build and engage in through mediated communication on Mumsnet facilitate the articulation of dissonant and transgressive views and feelings in relation to their positioning in the role of wife and associated unequal distributions of home labour, offering some scope for resistance. Nonetheless, the chapter registers how posters' simultaneous investment in 'wifeness' builds on a largely unchanged historical narrative since at least the 1970s that emphasises the difficulties of resolving the anchoring of women's lives in ongoing patriarchal structures.

Chapter eight remains with the modality of Mumsnetters' 'domesticity talk' to consider the construction of men as feckless 'manchild'. It conceptualises the evocation of the 'manchild' as a discursive strategy to manage dissonances with women's positioning as 'wife' and related gendered domestic burdens. As well as exploring the constitution of this highly visible construct across five reciprocal domains in posters' talk that denote its potential to redress gender-power relations at least at a rhetorical level, I discuss the place of the 'manchild' figure in relation to the dynamics of changes and continuities in scripts of masculinity and fathering culture. The chapter theorises how 'men behaving badly' in view of disproportionate housework contributions and further unequal home responsibilities is indicative of what is being left out of contemporary masculinity and fatherhood discourses. Such hegemonic

narratives, I will argue, tend to commend change in the gender order as ‘involved fatherhood’ rather than calling for a comprehensive reconfiguration of the realm of care, contributing to reinforcing women’s positioning in the role of the ‘nagging’ and ‘facilitating wife’.

Chapter nine explores the ambivalent consequences of recognising gendered injustice in the techno-social environment of Mumsnet through an analysis of the possibilities and limitations of its fabric of rage and collectivity. I situate my empirical analysis in relation to the visibility of women’s anger in the mediated public sphere, as it has become manifest in recent digital forms of feminist activism. The chapter attends to transgressive practices such as ‘LTB’ (short for ‘leave the bastard’) that I argue are shaped and regulated by digital-affective affordances, conventions and site architecture, but also incorporates interview data with self-identified regular users of Mumsnet to explore the complexion of anger, connectivity and feminism on and off Mumsnet. Through this contextualisation of the online analysis I am able to show how the figure of the ‘raging Mumsnetter’ animated discussions in this space; however articulations of online rage remained not only limited to the virtual sphere, but were even experienced as dissociative, decontextualised, individualising and sometimes extremely damaging rather than politically effective in the offline world. The chapter argues for re-embedding transgressive online talk and virtual expressions of anger into frames of offline meaning making so as to enhance the possibilities of generating a collective feminist rage that is directed at the systemic causes of the material and social forms of oppression conditioning working mothers’ lives.

Finally, in **chapter ten** I review the central arguments of my study, explain why they are significant, and reflect on what methodological and theoretical contribution they offer to multiple forms of feminist, digital and cultural sociological literature. Based on my main findings, I discuss directions for further research such as a complete ethnography of Mumsnet and the value of widening the demographic lens beyond the dual-earner, heterosexual and cisgender context of maternity. I also suggest how some of the concerns raised in the analysis could be potentially addressed, for example, by further exploring the reasons why especially senior women repudiate positive discrimination measures such as quotas. I conclude by exploring the relevance and relation of my empirical analysis to recent developments such as the association of Mumsnet with transphobic gender politics and the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2 THE MATERNAL IN CONTEMPORARY OFFLINE/ONLINE CULTURE

This contextualising chapter examines the place of maternity and maternal representations in contemporary culture, both offline and online, by reviewing existing literature in the fields of sociology, media and cultural, digital and psychosocial studies, as well as, to a lesser extent, digital health research. Exploring the ways in which different maternities are culturally represented in offline and digitally mediated environments and discussed in academic literature is essential for this study as one of its main goals is to establish how and to what extent contemporary representations of maternity and lived experiences of maternal subjects correspond. An equally important aim of this chapter is to draw attention to the absences and ‘blank spaces’ in current constructions of maternity. In doing so, the chapter seeks to answer the question of which maternal subject positions are inhabitable at this particular time, and what new subjectivities are engendered through the current sociopolitical formations; to ask ‘[w]hat are the key components of maternal identities at this historical moment?’ (Woodward, 2003: 26)

To begin, the current positioning of women within a shifting socioeconomic landscape is outlined, and it is shown that the notion of female success and enhanced opportunities builds on an increase in female labour market participation and educational achievement. The chapter provides an account of the postfeminist narrative of ‘achieved’ gender equality, which exists side by side continuing inequalities in the gender order. Alongside a discussion of more complex representations of motherhood including the portraiture of (middle-class) Black motherhood in recent U.K. and U.S. literature, the chapter then shows how these formations are reflected in the contemporary landscape of maternal figurations, which is inhabited by a range of dominant mediated images of maternal femininity: middle-class (postponed) working motherhood, early working-class maternity and bourgeois stay-at-home motherhood. Indeed, I use the terms maternity, motherhood and maternal femininity interchangeably, acknowledging however that differentiations may be made especially in relation to the social status of being a mother. Identifying bourgeois working motherhood as the hegemonic maternal figure, it is demonstrated that the perceived success of this classed and racialised figure coalesces predominantly around the reconciliation of female parenthood and waged work. At the same time, I show how more nuanced and complex images of motherhood, as well as changes in the

depictions of Black middle-class motherhood and ‘non-normative’ mothers, families and people, contribute to destabilising the idealised bourgeois (heterosexual, white, able-bodied) ‘balanced’ mother. The remainder of this first half of the chapter considers the abject positioning of lone working-class motherhood and the culturally accepted route of bourgeois stay-at-home mothers. In doing so, I outline the figures’ relationship to different forms of labour while remaining attuned to the ways in which these mediated images contribute to both challenging and reinforcing the middle-class (hetero)normative ideal of the balanced mother.

Turning to the digital sphere, the second half of the chapter considers literature on the online parenting landscape and the mediation of motherhood. Focusing on research on parenting forums in particular, as well as literature that engages with mothers’ complex relationship with digital media more broadly, the section brings out important themes in research on the digital mediation of maternity. The section has five main parts. It first considers the gendered nature of these virtual spaces: discussing both key themes in research on fathering forums and outlining key characteristics of mother-centred websites. Following this, I provide an overview of the literature in sociology, communication and digital health research on mothers’ digital engagements via online parenting media, mapping continuities and shifts by discussing early and more recent key studies. Reflecting the theoretical orientation of the project, the chapter then moves on to give a more detailed account of feminist literature on parenting websites. This comparatively small body of research offers valuable insights into the ways in which forums lean towards reinforcing traditional gender roles and women’s role as the main carer, emphasising the privatising and individualising forces at play in such environments. Following this, I discuss a perspective that considers the functioning of parenting forums and Mumsnet in particular as feminist (counter) publics in which the personal and the political can be connected. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of recent studies that go beyond the ‘digital vacuum’ and offer contextualising accounts of mothers’ use of digital media by considering its embeddedness in everyday offline life.

2.1 The (post)feminist female success story

2.1.1 *Female work success?*

Western women are recurrently perceived to be at the forefront of recent socioeconomic shifts, hailed as seemingly privileged ‘top girls’ and ‘agents of change’ (McRobbie, 2007; 2009: 6). These shifts have been most significantly felt in the sectors of education and employment, where a substantial rise in women’s achievement has been noted (Crompton, 2002; Ringrose, 2007). Women are also often thought to benefit from what has been termed the ‘feminisation of labour’ (Adkins, 1995; Morini, 2007) – the global trend towards an increase in female labour market participation (UNRISD, 2005), with the ‘female worker’ now being the ‘mainstay of the neo-liberal economy’ (Walkerdine 2003: 238) or even the ‘female principal breadwinner’ (Adkins and Dever, 2014b). Indeed, female U.K. employment rates have been rising over the past 40 years and are peaking at nearly 70 per cent (ONS, 2013). Highlighting the prominence of women’s waged *and* unwaged work, ‘female labour is *central* to processes of post-Fordist capitalist accumulation’ (Adkins and Dever, 2014: 2, original emphasis).

While there clearly have been new avenues and enhanced opportunities for women, the weaknesses of the female success narrative are palpable through continuing inequalities such as the persistently high gender pay gap, gender segregations in the labour market and women’s overrepresentation in part-time work (Asher, 2011). What is more, feminist considerations in relation to women’s work pertain to waged labour in the public sphere *and* immaterial and affective forms of labour at home (Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; Weeks, 2007). Taking place as a result of the shift from the state-managed ‘family wage’ earned by the male breadwinner to the ‘two-earner family’ in contemporary financialised capitalism (Fraser, 2016), the recruitment of women into the paid workforce has neither suspended the still-enduring ideology of domesticity (Scott et al., 2010) nor yielded greater appreciation of reproductive labour (Federici, 2012). In contrast, the present era is marked by intensified gendered expectations to balance employment with caring responsibilities (McRobbie, 2009; 2013; Orgad, 2019; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Rottenberg, 2018).

2.1.2 *Postfeminist ‘(in)equality’*

The notion of female success and increased opportunities resonates with postfeminist and neoliberal discourses (McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2013). Research on contemporary femininities highlights the contradictory co-presence of continuing inequalities in the gender

order and discourses of gender equality and female achievement (Aapola et al., 2004; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Harris, 2004; Tasker and Negra, 2007). Theorisations of postfeminism, used as an analytical concept, can provide explanations for this paradoxical status quo of gender relations (Gill, 2007; 2016; McRobbie, 2004; 2009; Negra, 2009).

Gender equality as an essential contemporary norm that characterises present western societies constitutes the core of postfeminist discourses, often converging in the notion that feminism's goal has ostensibly been achieved (McRobbie, 2009). As Angela McRobbie (2011: xi) notes with regards to the production of gendered subjectivities:

Most vivid here is the expectation of 'equality'. Where there is no question of this being fulfilled in socio-economic terms, or even of it becoming a lively subject for discussion, nevertheless it is promulgated as a prevailing cultural norm, as though to say in capital letters 'Girls and Women Are Now Equal'. This provides a new horizon of power against which all sociological analyses must now proceed. Some might see this as an intensification of power through tropes of imaginary freedom, others as the gender logic of neoliberal governmentality.

Supporting the postfeminist semblance of achieved gender equality, the widespread success of women in the education system and their participation in the labour market and consumerism contribute to depict women as beneficiaries of these new opportunities, so there is no need any more for feminist interventions, and feminism as a collective politics to address gender inequities can be repudiated (McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2012).

Postfeminist conceptualisations have recently been challenged through a new popular version of neoliberal, corporate feminism (Fraser, 2009; 2013; McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014b; 2018). Although converging to some extent with liberal feminist aims (Fraser, 2009; 2013), this newly endorsed feminism is 'de-politicised and accommodating' (McRobbie, 2013: 135) and repacks the core question of social justice in individualised terms (Rottenberg, 2014b). I will return to this debate later on.

Continuing structural inequalities in gender, class and race relations are likely to be obscured through a discourse of female individualism that is closely tied to a neoliberal rationality (Couldry, 2010) and deploys the language of personal choice, autonomy and self-

empowerment (Budgeon, 2011; 2015; Gill, 2007). For instance, qualitative studies found that while women were aware of gender inequalities such as unevenly distributed responsibilities for domestic work and childcare (Baker, 2008; Orgad, 2019: 105-136) as well as the gender pay gap and a smaller number of women in managerial positions (Scharff, 2011a; 2012), they sustained narratives of achieved gender equality through insistence on ‘independently made’ choices. This disclaiming and reinterpreting of structural constraints as ‘freely chosen’ does not only evidence the strong hold of the ideology of choice in the lives of women but contributes to the ‘overstating [of] women’s advancement’ (Baker, 2008: 53).

Whilst the postfeminist ‘new sexual contract’ (McRobbie, 2009) invites women to participate in consumer culture, education and employment, the attributed freedoms request in turn that women combine the now both attributed traditionally feminine and autonomous-masculine subjectivities, referring to a new demand to balance private-reproductive realms of life and the public-productive work sphere (Budgeon, 2013). The required reconciliation of the two subject positionalities directs attention from women as seemingly privileged ‘can-do girls’ (Harris, 2004) to women as ‘agents of their own success or failure’ (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008: 227).

Through the discursive positioning of women as empowered actors who are continuously applying neoliberal modes of self-regulation, incongruities in current gender relations, in particular unevenly distributed caring and domestic labour, and inequalities relating to socio-economic and ethnic positions, overwhelmingly remain unspoken and are not perceived as related to structural constraints but instead a private affair (Harris, 2004; Walkerdine, 2003). This assigned personal responsibility for the achievement of gender justice gains particular relevance with regards to representations of maternal subjects.

2.2 The ‘era of maternal femininities’

The contemporary cultural and media landscape is saturated with maternal figurations. Extensively documented in recent literature in the field of gender and cultural studies, these explorations into maternal images respond to and correspond with the heightened visibility of motherhood since around the mid-2000s in the U.K. media and public sphere (e.g. Jensen, 2018 [2013]; McRobbie, 2013; Littler, 2019; Orgad, 2019), as well as in other Western countries such as the U.S. (e.g. Descartes and Kottak, 2009; Douglas and Michaels, 2004), Canada (e.g. Boon and Pentney, 2015; Friedman, 2014) and Australia (e.g. Baker, 2008; 2009). Maternity,

as Imogen Tyler (2011: 22) notes, ‘has never been so visible, so talked about, so public and so deeply incoherent’.

The relationship of maternity to work, alongside processes of commodification and sexualisation, is at the heart of cultural representations of motherhood (Littler, 2013; Tyler, 2011). Emerging as a key site where increased contradictions between notions of achieved equality and neoliberal incitements to free choice and self-discipline, and ongoing gender inequalities are played out significantly, the cultural register of successful femininity is emphasising the reconcilability of paid work and female parenthood.

Cultural messages that illustrate the successful combination of occupation and motherhood can be found across numerous sites, such as feminist manifestos advising women to *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013) and explaining ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have It All’ (Slaughter, 2012), as well as popular television series such as *The Good Wife* (Orgad, 2016; 2017; Rottenberg, 2014), giving rise to a new ‘cult(ure) of confidence’ (Gill and Orgad, 2016). This ‘new mediated maternalism’ (McRobbie, 2013), reinforcing a neoliberal logic, calls upon women’s self-responsibility, capacity and continuous self-improvement in order to achieve equally shared childcare and manage domestic labour arrangements.

2.2.1 ‘Can do’ or can’t? Social divisions between women

There is an increasing social divide between women who inhabit maternity and employment-related ‘can-do’ and ‘at-risk’ positions (Harris, 2004). This polarisation is shaped by class and age (Graham and McDermott, 2006) and contrasts with theses of individualisation that claim a rising classlessness and a decrease in gender inequities due to the importance of individualised decision-making and the increasing dissolution of social structures (Beck et al., 1994). Available options are restricted to the prioritisation of career ambitions and postponement of motherhood, or the early decision for children that requires the renouncement of high-achieving vocational aspirations, indicating the social devaluation of early motherhood (Harris, 2004).

This marks the relation between employment and the timing of maternity as divisive cutting point in terms of the assessment of life choices leading to either success or failure, with sociological studies suggesting enhanced career prospects for women in higher-level professions who defer motherhood (Miller, 2011) and societal expectations for financial independence as principal reason for late maternal decisions made by well-educated women

(Benzies et al., 2006). As a result, the prospect of occupational success, requiring appropriate educational qualifications, is seen as main determinant of the age at which women become mothers (e.g. Nicoletti and Tanturri 2005; O'Donoghue 2011); yet success in education and profession is still dependent on economic and cultural capital that is determined by social background and ethnicity (Bhattacharyya et al., 2003; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Reay et al., 2005; Schoon, 2010; Walkerdine, 2003). What these findings strongly indicate is the tendency towards a normative and normalised, highly classed female life trajectory, in which decisions relating to maternity and employment signify the perceived success or failure of women's lives.

These constellations are reflected in contemporary figures of motherhood, which are characterised by class(ed) and racialised dynamics and become apparent through highly polarised images of 'failing' and 'achieving' motherhood (e.g. Allen and Osgood, 2009; Allen and Taylor, 2012). These social distinctions construct 'achieving' maternal subjects as predominantly middle-class, white, able-bodied and heterosexual, and it is important to note here that these interplays, and the concomitant marginalisation and erasure of 'non-normative' mothers and families, will be further discussed in the next sections.

Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey and June Melody's psychosocial study (2001) into the discursive production of maternal subjectivity illustrates this significant relationship between classed success and the timing of maternity. It brings out how the formation of the rational bourgeois subject requires an immense effort on the part of middle-class girls whose lives are affected by expectations of high-achieving academic and, later on, occupational success and excellence. For the reason that work has to have priority in young middle-class women's life plans, early pregnancy poses a 'great threat to straightforward progression through education and up the career ladder' (Walkerdine et al., 2001: 172). Motherhood, the authors highlight, is equated with 'going off' the prescribed career path since maternity and success, as defined through current discourses, are seen as not reconcilable – at an early age. Because middle-class parents invest heavily in their daughter's education, they make considerable efforts to avert early motherhood as it endangers the route of ambition.

For the young women themselves, the prospects of educational achievement and occupational success operate as 'contraceptive' so that young motherhood appears as the 'ultimate failure, to be avoided at all costs' and is even being put on a level with death (Walkerdine et al., 2001: 194). Walkerdine *et al.* conclude that it is not lower sexual activity or moral condemnation

from their social environment that differentiates young middle-class women's behaviour from that of their working-class counterparts but 'the regulation of the consequences of their sexual activity', resulting in the impossibility of early middle-class motherhood due to striving for uninterrupted academic success and making 'teenage motherhood a mainly working-class affair' (ibid.: 188). The research demonstrates that the construction of the 'bourgeois subject/career woman' (ibid.: 195-96) takes places in relation to what is imagined as the 'fecund Other' (ibid.: 187) – working-class young women, pointing to the complex entanglement of culturally constructed discourses and lived maternal middle-class realities: 'the deep embeddedness of the production of subjectivity in the social and cultural' (ibid.: 15).

In the remainder of this section, three culturally prominent and exemplary maternal subject positions are examined, alongside a discussion of more complex representations of motherhood in recent U.K. and U.S. literature. There is first the stigmatised figure of the lone white lower working-class mother who is outside the workforce – a framing which has striking parallels to the pernicious trope of the Black 'welfare queen' in U.S. public discourse. The second is the ideal(ised) white bourgeois mother who is also a worker; and finally the full-time bourgeois stay-at-home mother and her home-working counterpart, the 'mumpreneur', whose choices to – according to the neoliberal-financialised logic – not contribute actively to the economy, or only 'top up' the family income, are culturally depicted as an accepted route. While the 'figurations' key features, in particular their relationship to work, and relations between the figures are one focus of the following review, it also pays close attention to the intensifying destabilisation and fracturing of the idealised bourgeois (heterosexual, white) 'balanced' mother as highlighted by recent scholarship, including research about the experiences and portraiture of (middle-class) Black motherhood.

2.2.2 *At risk of abjection*

Arguably, the production of 'successful' maternal femininity is only understandable in relation to the vilification of early working-class maternity. In other words, the figuration of the abject, disgust-provoking mother is to an extent always already contained in ideas of celebrated (upper) middle-class motherhood. While maternal identity is never fixed but subject to ever-changing socioeconomic, cultural and political conjunctures, 'whatever current conceptualisations of the bad mother figure dominate, they will always haunt other constructions of motherhood' (Woodward, 2003: 26).

It is the early reproductivity of youthful (often white) lone mothers from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds that, especially in the recent austerity climate in the U.K., has been constructed as failure in media and political discourse – predominantly due to an unfavourable association with welfare reliance and acting irresponsibly (De Benedictis, 2012; McRobbie, 2007; 2013; Tyler, 2008). The positioning of poor single working-class mothers is historically related to middle-class fears around moral conduct (Gillies, 2005; 2007; Lawler, 2000; Skeggs, 1997). However, cultural commentators observe that recent anxiety about the ‘unruly’ sexuality and ‘feral’ parenting of this mediated maternity tends to be overlain by neoliberal concerns over economic inactivity and lack of work-based achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Allen and Taylor, 2012; De Benedictis, 2012; McRobbie, 2009), signifying an ‘unwillingness to work’ (Tyler, 2011: 22).

Helen Wilson and Annette Huntington’s (2006) exploration of anglophone teenage motherhood discourses is particularly insightful in relation to the embeddedness of this mediated vilification in broader economic contexts. They find that (white) young lone mothers occupy a position of abjection since they defy taking up their ‘assigned’ position in the economy and do not follow the normative middle-class trajectory that demands the gaining of educational credentials and the establishment of a career before considering motherhood. The ‘wrong’ choice of early maternity is constructed as a social problem and associated with willful welfare dependency and a rejection of entering the world of paid labour. Thus, youthful mothers are despised

because these young women resist the typical life trajectory of their middle-class peers which conforms to the current governmental objectives of economic growth through higher education and increased female workforce participation (Wilson and Huntington, 2006: 59).

There is an interesting parallel to the figure of the Black ‘welfare queen’ that inhabits primarily the U.S. public and popular space. The pernicious stereotype ‘places the blame of the nation’s socioeconomic deterioration on black women’ but nevertheless continues to be ‘pervasive in public discourse and continues to influence US policy making as well as white Americans’ public opinion and attitudes toward poverty and welfare spending’ (Ayee et al., 2019: 463). Being part of a longstanding history of framing single poor African American mothers as lazy and licentious, the ‘welfare queen’ trope (or ‘title’) emerged in U.S. public discourse in the

context of a broader anti-welfare campaign that started around the time of Reagan's presidency in the 1980s and became the centrepiece of the shaming of Black, Latinx and Native women for their social reproduction that continues until today (Briggs, 2017; Lubiano, 1992).¹

Shifting the focus back to the U.K. and British media, in her examination of the female 'chav' figure – the 'chav mum' –, Tyler (2008: 18) suggests that the emergence of this excessive figure refers to an 'underlying social crisis or anxiety' about desirable and disparaged forms of motherhood and fecundity. In this way, the evocation of class disgust needs to be seen as a result of classed relations, in which disgust reactions play a role in the formation of middle-class identities and identifications (Lawler, 2005), enabling the middle class to differentiate itself from the white poor (Tyler, 2008; Tyler and Bennett, 2010). As an overdetermined figure that attains social and political impact through repetition across various media, Tyler (2008: 26) analyses the cultural spread of the prominent example of the BBC comedy series character Vicky Pollard – a 'quintessential sexually excessive, single mother: an immoral, filthy, ignorant, vulgar, tasteless, working-class whore'. Tracing the ways in which the television fiction intermingles with social realities, she observes the forceful equation of the created character with real social subjects when in other media sources and public debates the fictional character is being read as 'representative of a genuine social type' (2008: 28). This in turn, Tyler suggests, influences and transforms the social perception of those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and potentially impacts on those who are being imagined as 'chav'.

Indeed, a small body of research has explored how the culturally produced stigma attached to youthful white working-class motherhood affects young mother's self-images and experiences (Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Nayak and Kehily, 2014; Yardley, 2008). While young women are aware of stereotypes and negative associations surrounding their pregnancy such as welfare dependency, promiscuity and irresponsible parenting practices, stigma is still considered a factor that shapes the experience of early motherhood, and can only be deflected to a certain extent (Ellis-Sloan, 2014). However, other researchers emphasise that 'some forms of

¹ See also Hancock's (2004) insightful study on the disgust-provoking 'Public Identity of the Welfare Queen' that has links to political outcomes as well as may impact on the lived experiences of those connected to such label. And see Allen *et al.* (2015) for a discussion on austerity's U.K. benefits mum and related incarnations of motherhood ('chav mum' and 'welfare queen').

negotiation, resistance and re-appropriation', as well as 'reflexive engagement' with the derogatory labels ascribed to this social identity emerge in the accounts of those represented as aberrant (Nayak and Kehily, 2014: 1331; see also Yardley, 2008).

Importantly, the culturally demonised maternal feminine is not congruent with what has been called 'slummy' and 'beta' motherhood (Littler, 2013; Jensen, 2018 [2013]; Orton-Johnson, 2017). These knowing, confessional forms of 'bad' motherhood, for example portrayed and acted out on mommy blogs (Orton-Johnson, 2017), in hen lit novels (Littler, 2013) or on parenting forums (Jensen, 2018 [2013]), are self-reflexive, often humorous accounts of parenting 'failures'. While these are sources that demonstrate struggles to live up to 'perfect' mothering ideals and increasing demands to maintain a sexually attractive appearance during motherhood, the value system of normative motherhood remains intact (Littler, 2013). As Jensen (2013: 140-41) observes, the playful self-identification as a 'bad' mother is fundamentally different to being identified as a failing parent, and the 'obligatory postfeminist humour' of ironic 'bad'-mother confessions presupposes an agentic mother subject that can be said to distinguish oneself from both unachievable mothering ideals and those who are being labelled as deficient, depreciated parents.

The absences of racialised mothers, mothers with disabilities and queer and trans mothers from the majority of the presented (U.K.) analyses here refer to their frequent erasure from the hegemonic narratives of maternity. In line with critical scholarship on the construction of whiteness as unmarked and 'unremarkable' (Frankenberg, 1993; Ware, 1992) that renders whiteness an invisible racial position in dominant discourse (Dyer, 1997), this can be understood as further supporting the normalisation of white, middle-class, heteronormative, able-bodied motherhood. I turn now to discussing these processes of normalising a particular form of parenthood – one that is classed, gendered and racialised in distinct ways –, and then discuss some recent trends that indicate an expansion in the representation of motherhood and a consequential destabilisation (and at least implicit challenge) of the white bourgeois balanced 'ideal' mother.

2.2.3 Idealisation: bourgeois balance and the notion of universal success

As we have seen, maternity today is recurrently cast as a neoliberal version of femininity (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015; McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014b; 2018). A key marker of this cultural ideal is compliance with the 'new sexual contract' (McRobbie, 2009) through

‘hard work; post-feminist sexual respectability; and the work-home life balance’ (Allen et al., 2015).

‘[P]rogressive womanhood’, Catherine Rottenberg (2014: 147) argues, is currently envisioned as ‘the ability to happily balance public and private aspects of the self’. Building her argument on an analysis of the self-declared and widely discussed feminist manifestos of the high-powered career women Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) and Sheryl Sandberg (2013), she shows that the achievement of a happy work-family balance emerges as a reworked feminist ideal. These neoliberal feminist voices, Rottenberg (2014: 147) suggests, add an emphasis of ‘positive affect’ to earlier feminist debates on work-family balance (Hochschild, 1989; 1997). Disclaiming the contradictoriness of the division between public and private aspects of life in neoliberalism, the new insistence on the achievement of happiness through balance interpellates women as individual, aspirational subjects who are held responsible for its realisation (Rottenberg, 2014). At the same time, the discourse of ‘balance’ reinvigorates the naturalising assumption that women should have, or should have the desire to have, children (ibid.). Importantly, as Rottenberg (2018) highlights, this discursive formation implicitly presupposes and addresses white middle-class women, and simultaneously relegates immigrant, poor and women of colour to the position of (unacknowledged) domestic and care worker who, through their labour, enable white/privileged women to achieve ‘balance’.

A similar observation has been made in relation to the hyper visibility of maternal figures, both pre (Tyler, 2011) and post-pregnancy (Littler, 2013). Serving to obscure gendered inequities in relation to work and pregnancy/motherhood, the contemporary ‘fetishization of the maternal’ as a response to difficulties to combine caring and paid labour represents a disconnection from sociopolitical discourses and conditions around insufficiently tackled structural issues such as the provision of affordable, high-quality childcare and pregnancy discrimination (Littler, 2013: 233; Tyler, 2011).

Crucially, encouragements to defer motherhood until career success is established relate to a ‘temporal shift in the balance discourse’ (Rottenberg, 2016: 332). As McRobbie (2013: 131-32) argues, this address to postpone maternity pertains to a particular group of aspirational, privileged, heterosexual women – ‘new norms of middle-class life are directed towards young women’, communicating the message to not consider parenthood before stable financial circumstances, including the ‘right’ partner choice to avoid family breakdown, are

accomplished, requiring detailed and foresighted life planning, which becomes the tool to achieve the new benchmark of “‘affluent, middle-class maternity’”. In addition to these economic and life circumstances, Kirsty Budds, Abigail Locke and Vivien Burr (2016: 183) suggest that cultural definitions of ‘women’s “readiness” to mother’ according to notions of ‘good’, child-centred motherhood also play a role in explaining the postponement of motherhood as ‘older’ mothers are perceived to align with this requirement. Therefore, “‘successfully balanced” femininity’ (Adamson, 2017a) is inextricably linked with the concept of ‘planned parenthood’ (McRobbie, 2009: 85). Motherhood is a desirable feature of female life trajectories; however careful life planning is indispensable so as to accommodate the importance of female workforce participation and procreation (McRobbie, 2013; 2006; Rottenberg, 2016), and be in a position to meet standards of intensive mothering (Budds et al., 2016).

Idealised middle-class femininity is related to the expected reconciliation of occupational success and maternity and marks a discursive change, as Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine (2008: 232) highlight:

The feminist political dilemmas of housewife versus career woman and struggles for educational and workplace access and child-care provision have been replaced by narratives of renaissance women who juggle thriving careers (attained through the right modes of education) with motherhood.

The tropes of the ‘pregnant beauty’ (Tyler, 2011) or the glamorous ‘yummy mummy’ (Littler, 2013; O’Donohoe, 2006) represent the ‘new bourgeois fantasy of femininity’ in popular culture that successfully inhabits and must balance both traditionally feminine realms, including sexual desirability, domesticity, caring and consuming, and the masculine public-productive work sphere. Ostensibly overcoming binaries, ‘[t]his new consumer/mother/sex goddess is to surmount the Madonna/Whore dichotomy in the bedroom and be independent breadwinner/consumer in the market’ (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008: 232).

Embodying the ‘post-feminist ideology of “having it all”’ (Tyler, 2011: 29), the classed, racialised and heteronormative dimensions of these mediated figurations remain unnamed, yet it is clear that ‘yummy mummies’ belong to the privileged group of white, ‘thirtysomething

middle-class career women' whose deferred decision to have children in a heterosexual partnership is deemed socially eligible (Littler, 2013: 232).

The seeming universality of this maternal ideal is a particular feature of postfeminist culture, which tends to grant more visibility to a white, economically privileged demographic. As Diane Negra (2009: 9) observes, postfeminist texts 'present the habits, interests, and desires of the wealthy as universal'. The middle-class trajectory, requiring the simultaneous balancing of care and career as well as the weighing up of occupation and the pivotal timing of motherhood, is thereby evoked as an idealised and normalised format. Despite being bourgeois, successful neoliberal femininity is 'coded universal, normal and attainable for all' (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008: 228). Regulating maternal subjectivities according to their ability to live up to this normative image of femininity, the postfeminist success narrative promotes the idea of the 'imagined successful mainstream' as a powerful image, while at the same time invisibilities and inequalities pertaining to class, race and sexual positions are neglected (Harris, 2004: 36).

2.2.4 'Aberrant mothers': expanding the maternal landscape and destabilising the idealised bourgeois balanced mother

The anglophone cultural sphere, in conjunction with the increased and sustained visibility of motherhood over the last two decades, has undergone recent shifts towards a broadening of representations of motherhood and mothers (Orgad, 2019; Littler, 2019; Walters and Harrison, 2014) that contribute to challenging the 'imagined successful mainstream'. Current representations offer 'a more nuanced and complicated portraiture of motherhood from that which marked previous eras' (Orgad 2019: 112). These more complex images of mothers contribute to fracturing the ideal of the middle-class white 'balanced' mother by providing images that 'deviate from the good mother/bad mother binary, destabilize taken for granted associations between biological sex and gender identity and defy the "mommy myth", which has persistently governed the cultural landscape' (ibid.).

Television, as feminist media researchers Suzanna Danuta Walters and Laura Harrison (2014: 39) argue, has offered screen-based representations of a new type of 'aberrant', 'unapologetically non-normative' mother that challenges 'normative familialism' and departs in quite radical ways from the 'the binary lines of saintly sacrificers ... or viperous spiders'. They suggest that characters such as the drug-dealing, widowed mother Nancy Botwin in

Weeds, the dissatisfied housewife Betty Draper of *Mad Men*, or the ‘unabashedly sexual and refreshingly professional’ lawyer/mother Alicia Florrick in *The Good Wife* mend the gap between ‘the idealization (or demonization) of motherhood in popular culture and the actual lives of real mothers’ (ibid.: 47; 39). Walters and Harrison (2014: 48) observe the pleasure in watching these deviant mother figures ‘revel in their slatternly parenting’, thereby resisting male control and the societal rule book of good mothering. In contrast to earlier televised (and cinematic) images of mothers, the parenting of these recent characters is neglectful and cursory if not ‘assiduously avoid[ed]’, and yet – crucially – despite their maternal failures and even, in part, meanness, they are not ‘unequivocally intended to be “read” as a bad mother’ (ibid.: 42).

Similarly, Littler (2020: 499) argues that the vast number of ‘mothers behaving badly’ and in chaotically hedonistic ways in contemporary anglophone media texts is ‘indicative of a widening and liberating range of maternal subject positions’. At the same time, she notes that this progressive expansion in representations of motherhood is directly related to and ‘symptomatic of a profound contemporary crisis in social reproduction’ characterised by overwork and inequality (ibid.). Echoing key tropes of ladette/new lad culture (see chapter 8 for a discussion of the new lad), the inscribed hedonism of this figure manifests in an emphasis on (frequently excessive) bouts of partying and drinking, which function as impermanent release and escape from the multiple pressures and stresses that shape contemporary (anglophone) mothers’ lives, induced in large parts by ‘firstly, an overwork culture, and, secondly, partners who do not or who are not able to co-share parenting in a fully egalitarian fashion’ (ibid.: 509). Thus, the mother behaving badly/hedonistically unambiguously revokes the paradigm of the perfect (McRobbie, 2015), and is not castigated but rather presented as justified in adopting these moments of transgression (based on Littler, 2020: 500). The political ‘horizon of possibility’ of this figure however is truncated in several ways. Notably, Littler’s (ibid.) incisive analysis foregrounds how this discourse centralises white middle-class mothers, but largely excludes the greater burdens, difficulties and precarious work-family realities faced by working-class mothers. Black mother characters in turn often have supplementary roles, and the subject position of the ‘mother behaving badly’, along with the ‘transgressive pleasures’ of nonconforming behaviour, is not equally on offer for Black mothers (ibid.: 514).

2.2.4.1 'Mothering while Black'

Although Black mothers feature less (or in highly circumscribed ways) in contemporary anglophone television, there have nonetheless been changes in the depiction of Black motherhood that correspond to the expansion in images of maternity in public discourse and some sites of popular culture. Indeed, there has been a heightened popular and scholarly interest in representations of Black motherhood. In this vein, some cultural scholars commenting on the shifting U.S. terrain observe that Michelle Obama, the first Black woman to become First Lady of the United States, 'ushered in a new era of visible representation for black women' (Ayee et al., 2019: 479). Indeed, Michelle Obama and the 'politics of motherhood' surrounding her persona (as First Lady and 'mom-in-chief') drew extensive media and scholarly attention (Ayee et al., 2019). Her 2018 bestselling memoir *Becoming* topped several bestseller lists as part of this popular attention and was even 'adapted into a Netflix documentary', signifying the 'recent visibility of Black motherhood in the popular anglophone cultural sphere' (Orgad and Baldwin, 2021: 179).

As the work of feminist theorist Jennifer C. Nash highlights, Black motherhood has a distinct 'political life' in the contemporary moment (Nash, 2018), which she calls 'the era of Black Lives Matter (BLM)' (Nash, 2021: 4). Nash's analysis builds on the rich work of Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000 [1990]) that have discussed and analysed the experiences, role and precarity of Black motherhood, rethinking and contesting the different versions of motherhood and womanhood that 'continue to inform the treatment and expectations of women from different racial and economic groups in the United States' and beyond (Dow, 2019: 126). Nash examines how in this context of BLM and expansive Black feminist scholarship Black motherhood 'has become a site of cultural interest, empathy, fascination, support, and seemingly benign regulation' (ibid.). And yet, she argues, this comes at a price. Black motherhood has been reframed as a site of crisis, suturing Black mothers to 'a new set of "controlling images" [Collins, 2000] that center trauma and injury' and bring 'Black mothers into view only through their capacity to stand for brokenness of a different kind' (ibid.: 5). At the same time, she shows how progressive forces including the U.S. political left as well as Black feminists continue to be involved in generating, sustaining and using this crisis rhetoric that is now attached to Black mothers. In particular, Nash points to the dangers of embracing the symbol of the Black mother as living in crisis – that is so seductive in times of anti-Black state-sanctioned violence, but also risky because, following Lauren Berlant, it

‘obscures how crisis actually refers to ongoing conditions of the ordinary and the labor ... that people are forced to perform or endure’ (13-14). Indeed, she suggests to counter the crisis symbolism and rhetoric by refocusing on the material realities of Black mothers’, and women’s, lives.

Nash (2021) offers different examples of how Black maternity is connected to crisis, ranging from the ‘black breastfeeding gap’ that constitutes the new aesthetic and celebration of Black breastfeeding as both a sign of state resistance and ‘emotional and even political sustenance in the face of Black precarity’ (32); the amelioration of the maternal mortality crisis (that has a particular significance for Black women who are at a much higher risk to constitute maternal fatalities compared to their white counterparts) through doulas that are ‘called upon to be agents of crisis mitigation’; to analyses of a range of contemporary Black maternal memoirs (including Obama’s *Becoming*). As part of her more expansive argument, she suggests that the current imagery of Black maternity is reconstituted and expanded through certain Black maternal celebrity (self-)performances, including those of Serena Williams, Beyoncé and Michelle Obama (Nash, 2019; 2021). These three “masters of self-fashioning”, she suggests, ‘circumvent the prevailing constraints of the black maternal political role’ (Nash, 2021: 106) and offer alternative depictions of Black motherhood that break away from the crisis frame (see also Hamilton, 2022). The prominence and media attention accorded to the maternities of Obama, Williams and Beyoncé are part of a chorus of Black celebrity voices that were allowed to speak, ‘perhaps for the first time, in the register of the universal – not as Black mothers, but simply as mothers’ – a position that, importantly, is unracially marked (Nash, 2021: 105).

This, in broader terms, indicates the widening of maternal voices and the continuous fracturing of white ideals of motherhood. Echoing at least partially overlapping themes in their analysis of the mediated constructions of yet another (self-identified) mother of colour with celebrity status, Orgad and Baldwin (2021) discuss several prominent ‘media moments’ surrounding Meghan Markle’s maternity as well as wider implications for the meanings of Black maternal labour. They find a complex terrain that is intensely shaped by both the U.S./global celebrity sphere *and* the U.K. royal sphere that Markle, as a ‘liminal figure’, inhabits, and in which ‘Markle’s mediated appearance may open up a space for rewriting Black motherhood’ (ibid.: 191). Yet, Orgad and Baldwin (ibid.) note how especially the mediation of Markle’s recent exit from the royal sphere has been a site where ‘the fraught meanings of motherhood, and of Black maternity and maternal labor in particular, are exposed, negotiated, contested, regulated, and

reinforced'. Nonetheless, they highlight that 'celebrity voices continue to overshadow the more mundane, quotidian, and diverse experiences of women of color whose lives may diverge from the overarching themes of Black celebrity' (ibid.: 179).

Dawn Marie Dow's (2019) *Mothering while Black* taps into precisely this gap about the everyday experiences of Black mothers by focusing on the complex lives of African American middle-class mothers. Dow's sociological study challenges the prevailing approaches that have been adopted to investigate motherhood, parenting and work in the social and cultural U.S. context, and beyond, and as such offers an important corrective to the white mainstream narratives about motherhood. Offering an intersectional perspective, it traces the social exclusion of middle-class African American mothers from the scope of both dominant ideologies of 'good' motherhood and work-family research and reveals their 'cultural, racial, and economic specificity' (ibid.: 186). In particular, her research sheds light on how mothers navigate and respond to this uneven terrain by employing parenting practices and strategies aiming to create racially safe and comfortable spaces (e.g. in school, extracurricular contexts and their neighbourhood) for their children. As well as inculcating the skills needed to retain middle-class status, these spaces enabled their children to form racial identities whilst being sheltered from institutionalised racism and the impacts of gendered racism (for instance in relation to lacking positive images of Black female beauty).

Dow's analysis also highlights the 'alternative expectations' that are directed at Black middle-class mothers from both their African American communities and white mainstream society, shaping their work-family decision-making. In contrast to their white counterparts, African American mothers have continuously participated in both the private home and the public work sphere, as part of their economic and structural exclusion from the separate spheres ideology (e.g. Christopher, 2013; Collins 2000 [1990]; Landry, 2000). Dow's intersectional analysis challenges the universality of this and related ideologies by demonstrating how existing work-family frameworks do not account for the experiences of more diverse groups of mothers, and shows in particular that the experiences of the Black middle-class mothers in her study do not align with the hegemonic construction of these two realms as conflicting. Indeed, their accounts suggest they affirm their 'identity as a mother *through* their public-sphere ... activities' (ibid.: 191, original emphasis). At the same time, middle-class Black mothers confront mainstream gendered expectations to mother intensively.

2.2.4.2 Beyond the heterosexual and cisgender motherhood society

A similar shift towards an increased scholarly and popular visibility has occurred in relation to the ‘non-normative’ sexual identities of mothers, people and families (e.g. Bower-Brown 2022; Estrellade et al., 2022; Goldberg and Allen, 2020; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2019; Haines et al., 2014; Taylor, 2009). Along with research on ‘non-normatively’ classed (see section 2.2.2 and Gillies, 2007; McDermott and Graham, 2005) and racialised mothers (Dow, 2019; Holloway et al., 2008; Phoenix et al., 1991; Reynolds, 2005; Urwin et al., 2013), this varied corpus of literature continues to provide further and ample evidence that the actual experiences of those who parent are by far more diverse than suggested by the bourgeois, white, heterosexual, able-bodied norm. Normalised parenthood indeed is not only associated with the female gender but also has a particular sex, class, ethnicity and (able) body. Importantly, much research emphasises that maternal identities and experiences are multilayered and embedded in as well as intersecting with a range of other identities (e.g. Holloway et al., 2008).

U.S. findings highlight that societal discourse and policies have become more affirming of LGBTQ individuals and the multiple forms and ways in which they form families (Gillig et al., 2022). However, LGBTQ parents within both the U.S. and the U.K. face continuing challenges in mainstream family spaces. In particular, many aspects of legal, sociocultural and institutional family-oriented contexts remain deeply shaped by heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Bower-Brown and Zadeh, 2021), ranging from institutional ‘paperwork that uses [] gendered language’ (father and mother rather than e.g. parent) (Gillig et al., 2022: 315) and unsupportive healthcare systems and in particular reproductive healthcare (Charter et al., 2018; Kerppola et al., 2020) to judgements of LGBTQ parents’ ability to parent (Massey et al., 2013). These contexts frequently prompt parents to consider their family identity as ‘non-normative’, and to respond to such perceptions that situate LGBTQ parents outside dominant frameworks and identity constructions (Gillig et al., 2022).

The publication of a handbook on LGBT-parent families, now in its second edition, along with a growing body of scholarly work, indicate the emergence of this field of research, as well as point to the increasing acceptance of nonconforming forms of family (Goldberg and Allen, 2020). However, the parenting experiences as well as pregnancy and perinatal mental health of queer individuals, gender diverse and trans and non-binary (TNB) people and families are still sidelined in research (Bower-Brown, 2022; Greenfield and Darwin, 2021). In particular, TNB

parenting is an understudied area (Goldberg and Allen, 2020) – although Hafford-Letchfield *et al.* (2019: 1124) note that ‘trans populations are [simultaneously] over-researched and underserved by the research conducted’, suggesting a need for research that takes seriously how social institutions, legal framework and public perception shape trans parents’ lives who face distinct challenges. These challenges are multifaceted and relate inter alia to the navigation of prejudice, discrimination and stigmatising environments, as well as the often difficult integration of parenting and gender/trans identities, with relatively little support available to ease re-negotiations of family and work roles after transition (Bower-Brown and Zadeh, 2021; Haines et al., 2014). Research consistently highlights issues of navigating institutional settings and accessing services that are ‘designed to exclude’ (Charter et al., 2018: 73) and can constitute ‘unsafe spaces’ for trans people (Bower-Brown and Zadeh, 2021: 109).

Trans(masculine/gender) pregnancy provides a vivid example of this lack in social and medical support as well as scant understanding of trans bodies and identities, with trans men experiencing considerable difficulties accessing fertility services and reproductive assistance (Charter et al., 2018). Within this climate, the pregnancy experiences of trans men can therefore create feelings of isolation and loneliness, but also related ‘feelings of exclusion from dominant parenting narratives’ (ibid.: 73) because trans people’s experiences of parenthood are also shaped by normative gendered assumptions about what constitutes motherhood and fatherhood (Bower-Brown, 2022). Thus, on the level of identity, trans men’s experiences of desiring gestational pregnancy and parenthood are situated both in response and resistance to dominant cultural narratives of cisheteronormative parenting (Charter et al., 2018).

In the domain of popular culture, mainstream media representation of trans pregnancy tend to be sensationalised and ‘rely on the trope of novelty’, reflecting a ‘wider tendency towards sensationalism and narrow, predictable narratives in media reporting on trans issues’ (Pearce and White, 2019: 764; see also Pfeffer and Jones, 2020: 203). The supposed ‘newness’ of trans pregnancy was emblematised by the narrative of ‘the first pregnant man’, tellingly titled ‘the story of one man’s extraordinary pregnancy’ (Beatie, 2008). Within a social and cultural context that has framed trans pregnancy as ‘unthinkable’ (Toze, 2018), media coverage of Thomas Beatie’s pregnancy marked the ‘entrance of transgender reproduction into the mainstream consciousness’ (Lampe et al., 2019: 866), however the trope of novelty continues to shape media and public discourse of trans parenthood and pregnancy. Indeed, there were several ‘first’ pregnant *men* within and beyond U.K. media (Toze, 2018). Notwithstanding the

narrow depictions of trans pregnancy within mainstream media, ‘[t]here has been an enormous growth in trans art and media-making in recent years’ that transcends the ‘now-standard narrative of the “pregnant man”’ (Pearce and White, 2019: 765; 764).

Notably, mediated accounts of trans pregnancy occur within a media landscape that has seen a relatively recent increase in visibility of transgender, especially transmasculine, bodies (e.g. Halberstam, 2005), with both amplified manifestations of transphobia (e.g. Hines, 2019; and see section 2.3.4 which discusses trans-exclusionary feminism in relation to Mumsnet) and intensified, often lurid and restricted, attention to transgender celebrities representing a two-sided coin of the visibility afforded to transgender (Lovelock, 2017). As Michael Lovelock (2017: 738-739) observes in relation to the transgender celebrity personas of olympian and reality TV star Caitlyn Jenner and Youtuber Jazz Jennings, these ‘have worked to augment the parameters of normative personhood to encompass a narrow model of transgender subjectivity’. Thus, while transgender celebrities and the mediated attention they are being afforded clearly contribute to making transgender identities and some attached issues visible (which may open up alternative ways of thinking about, for instance, parenthood), it is a ‘particular model of transgender life’ that figures as ‘a recognisable and legitimate form of subjectivity’ by way of ‘reaffirm[ing] highly normative understandings of gender, race and self-identity’ (Lovelock, 2017: 747; 739).

Crucially, it is significant that at least some of the discussed tropes of trans parents as well as broader scholarly and public discourses surrounding ‘non-normative’ parent identities go well beyond the image of the cisgender, biological mother, further complexifying and expanding the maternal or parental landscape. At the same time, mediated representations tend to paint a fragmented, incomplete picture of trans individuals and parents that simultaneously risk contributing to reinforcing traditional norms surrounding parenthood (particularly in terms of gender and whiteness), at least within mainstream culture. Shifting the focus to the discursive production of a further counterpart to hegemonic middle-class maternal femininity, the next section examines the bourgeois stay-at-home mother (SAHM) and the figure’s complex relationship with, or rather disconnect from, the sphere of paid labour.

2.2.5 Retreatism: stay-at-home mothers, happy, thrifty housewives and mumpreneurs

Full-time stay-at-home motherhood appears to not align with contemporary sociocultural encouragements to balance motherhood and workforce participation: giving up paid work

‘seems at odds with the commonsensical popular/neoliberal narratives of women’s pursuit of a successful career and motherhood as empowering’ (Orgad, 2017: 169). And yet, those female maternal figurations who are withdrawing themselves from the sphere of paid labour occupy a similar familial and socioeconomic environment as the ‘yummy mummy’ and related idealised figures – the middle-class, stable heterosexual family unit, where parenthood and financial self-reliance (no dependence on state benefits) are part of a carefully drafted life plan (Allen et al., 2015; McRobbie, 2013). Constructed as a culturally and economically valued choice, bourgeois stay-at-home motherhood contrasts with aberrant depictions of single lower-class maternity.

The assembly of mediated, overlapping figurations that are reconnected to the private sphere includes the self-determined bourgeois SAHM (Orgad, 2016; 2017; Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015), the nostalgic ‘happy housewife’ (Bramall, 2013; Jensen, 2012) and the home-working ‘mumpreneur’ (Ekinsmyth, 2013; 2014; Littler, 2018; Luckman, 2016; Taylor, 2015; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2015). Their presence has intensified during and after the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent precarious (post-)recessionary times (Littler, 2017; Jensen, 2012).

Yet, the romanticised ‘retreatism’ from the world of work has a longer history as ‘one of postfeminism’s master narratives’ (Negra, 2009: 5). The ‘pull back by affluent women to a perfected domesticity’ (Negra, 2009: 9) comes along with an increased ‘investment in marriage, motherhood and domestic life’ (McRobbie, 2013: 130). Evacuating the public sphere in order to perform care work at home, this politically ambiguous route is illustrated by Lisa Belkin’s 2003 *New York Times Magazine* article entitled the ‘Opt-out revolution’. Being representative for a ‘group of exceptionally privileged women’ who can afford to prioritise full-time child-rearing over waged labour without dependence on welfare, the “‘pull to motherhood’” represents a choice that is reserved and relevant for affluent and mainly white women (Watson, 2016: 271). For instance, research on Black mothers in Britain (Reynolds, 2001) and ‘Black working wives’ in the U.S. (Landry, 2000) highlights that full-time paid work is, predominantly due to structural economic factors, a norm and a widely shared experience ‘to make ends meet’, but also, for instance among the Black American middle class, perceived as a ‘duty of motherhood’ that builds on particular ‘racial histories of family and work’ (Dow, 2019: 185). These ‘different pushes and pulls’ that incite African American mothers to engage in paid work can lead to the stigmatisation of mothers who set alternative priorities, turning decisions to stay at home, or even reduce work commitments, into ‘radical acts’ (Dow, 2019:

18). To give a second example, American scholars find that blue collar workers are rather ‘pushed out’ than freely choosing to ‘opt out’ of the workforce because of inflexible, rigid work schedules that are typical for these unskilled jobs and do not accommodate family requirements (Williams and Dolkas, 2012: 152). The resonant interpretation of feminism as enabling the ‘choice’ to either pursue waged labour outside or caring labour inside the home can therefore be understood as a ‘quasi-feminist empowerment’ that is not equally available for all women (Negra, 2009: 25).

While cultural scholars see this ‘either/or choice’ being replaced with a neoliberal discourse of balance (Rottenberg, 2016: 335, see 2.2.3), the contemporary ‘redomestication’ and re-orientation towards the private can also be read as a renewed popularisation and idealisation of stay-at-home motherhood, as analysed by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004; see also Littler, 2013). In their critique of the American early-twenty-first century media-provoked phenomenon Douglas and Michaels (2004: 5) carve out the cornerstones of this ideological formation that they call ‘new momism’ and define as ‘a set of ideals, norms, and practices most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach.’ Thus, at times when women have entered and established themselves in the workforce, women are faced with intensive mothering standards that can barely be met even if a professional working life is renounced, pitting SAHMs against those who continue to pursue a career.

The more recent resurgence of SAHMs in the mediated public sphere is shaped by notions of stay-at-home motherhood as a freely and actively chosen path (Orgad, 2017; 2019; Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015; Thomson et al., 2011). The SAHM, as depicted in the U.K. press during and post the recession, ‘is not a productive labourer contributing directly to the neoliberal economy, yet she embodies the neoliberal/postfeminist values of choice, agency, individualization and female liberation’ (Orgad and De Benedictis, 2015: 432). Juxtaposing media representations of mothers who ‘opt out’ of and return to the workplace with lived experiences of SAHMs, Orgad (2019) shows that these are ‘incongruous encounters’. Her research (2016; 2017; 2019) exposes a junction of both structural (e.g. workplace policies and affordable, high-quality childcare) and personal factors that contribute to women’s decision to leave the workplace but are left out of current representations of mothers who seem to

successfully balance working and caring expectations through the smooth management of childcare and an unobstructed transition back into paid work.

The self-determined choice to either exit or remain part of the paid workforce has been discussed in relation to an 'individualistic striving' to perfect domesticity (McRobbie, 2015). As neoliberal subjects, mothers are prompted to turn inwards to change themselves and overcome newly identified 'deficiencies' such as a lack of confidence (Gill and Orgad, 2016) or insufficient self-discipline or self-investment (McRobbie, 2015). Through continuous application of these modes of self-regulation and self-work, mothers are incited to make the internal self over in order to live up to the height of the 'perfect' who surmounts the dichotomies of work and motherhood, domesticity and sexual attractiveness with apparent ease, supporting a reading of stay-at-home motherhood as a personal choice (ibid.).

If popular maternal discourses coalesce around 'opting out' or 'leaning in' (Watson, 2016), then those who have become known as 'mumpreneurs', mothers who run their own business from home, select yet another route (Ekinsmyth, 2013; 2014; Littler, 2018; Luckman, 2016; Taylor, 2015). The spatial and temporal flexibility of 'mumpreneurship' can allow to configure 'business around the daily routines of family work' (Ekinsmyth, 2013: 525). Celebrated as a technology-enabled, "'magical solution'" (Luckman, 2016) to bridge the competing demands of family life and the world of work, other readings of the phenomenon suggest the 'mumpreneur' being a 'new mystique' (Taylor, 2015), reinstating the 'happy housewife' ideology of the postwar era (Friedan, 1963). The rise of entrepreneurial home-based activities evokes imageries of the family as a small business in which the mother manages both childcare labour and entrepreneurial work, pointing to the blurring of mother/entrepreneur identity (Ekinsmyth, 2014). This entrepreneurialisation of family life (McRobbie, 2013) represents a response to gendered inequalities in relation to paid work and parenting and a lack of work-family policies and sufficient, affordable childcare provision:

The mumpreneur promises a meritocratic solution to the overwork culture, the inflexibility of institutionalised labour, inadequately funded and socialised childcare, and the costs of recession within neoliberalism, all wrapped up in a package of glamour and self-realisation (Littler, 2018: 201).

Crucially, fantasies of retreat to the private sphere seem to be depoliticising and masking rather than challenging structural gender inequalities through ‘offloading the costs of social reproduction onto the unwaged realms of the home’ and the work of women instead of pushing towards more equitable solutions (Dowling and Harvie, 2014: 869; see also Allen et al., 2015).

2.3 Networked mothers: digital mediations of maternity

In this second half of the chapter, I review the literature in sociology, communication and digital health research on mothers’ digital engagements via online parenting media, focusing particularly on parenting forums. The section has five parts. It begins with the social significance of social media more generally and discusses the gendered and gender-segregated nature of parenting forums before it moves on to discuss father-focused forums. The next part traces both continuities and shifts in the large field of female-dominated parenting forums. Exploring a range of key themes in early and more recent key studies, such as users’ motivations to use the forums, the value of anonymity and the demographic of parenting forums, throughout my discussion shows how a bifurcation continues to characterise this heterogenous scholarship, with celebratory accounts on the one hand, and dystopian ones on the other. Subsequently, I discuss a smaller body of feminist research on parenting forums that emphasises the privatising and individualising forces at play in these spaces as well as the reproduction rather than challenge of the female main carer role and associated gendered inequalities as well as class formation. Next, I discuss the functioning of parenting forums as (feminist) publics by reviewing literature that explores the potential of online parenting spaces to politicise by connecting the private and the political. Finally, I conclude this review with a discussion of a range of recent studies that go beyond the ‘digital vacuum’ and offer contextualising accounts of mothers’ use of digital media by considering its embeddedness in everyday offline life.

2.3.1 The social significance of the Internet and ‘gendered’ parenting media

The ubiquity of the Internet and social media in everyday life has generated much research. Being more than ‘a way of transmitting bits of information from one computer to another’ (Hine, 2000: 2), the contemporary Internet is a complex techno-social system consisting of ‘both a technological infrastructure and (inter)acting humans’ (Fuchs, 2014: 37). The emergence of web 2.0, synonymous with the ‘social web’, and social media brought a crucial shift from web 1.0 one-way dialogues on the earlier static web pages to increased user participation (Terranova and Donovan, 2013: 297). Enabling communication, interactivity and

community building, these forms of media-fostered sociality take place via the curating and sharing of texts, images, videos and sounds across a multitude of sites (Mandiberg, 2012). Definitions of social media are numerous, but most prominently relate to three interrelated aspects – user-led content creation, the sharing of these contents, and online communality. In this line, social media are a ‘collection of services’ that ‘allow participants to create and share their own content’ (boyd, 2014: 6), and, drawing attention to the social dimension, ‘online facilitators or enhancers of *human* networks – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value’ (van Dijck, 2013: 11, original emphasis).

2.3.1.1 Parenting media and gender

Parents, and mothers in particular, have been online since the web became accessible for a wide public in the 1990s. While the longest-established media developed specifically for and by parents are parenting websites and blogs (Friedman, 2010; Lopez, 2009), the digital parenting sphere has broadened and now includes mobile phones and digital messaging, social network sites and applications, or apps (Lupton et al., 2016). Although the use of mobile devices (Gibson and Hanson, 2013) and pregnancy and parenting apps (Barassi, 2017; Johnson, 2014) increases and smartphones with app functions are described as ‘one of the best tools for a modern mother’ (Gibson and Hanson, 2013: 319), parenting websites that are predominantly accessed via computers remain nonetheless a popular medium (e.g. Lupton et al., 2016; O’Higgins et al., 2014).

Throughout the literature there is a strong emphasis on female users of digital parenting media, and the research interest in ‘motherhood online’ continues to grow (Mackenzie and Zhao, 2021). Thus, research in the field of ‘parenthood and the Internet’ (Daneback and Plantin, 2008) could be, more truthfully and accurately, labelled ‘research on mothers and the Internet’. Analyses of women’s websites has brought to the fore ‘the way the category of women becomes defined in very familiar terms such as domesticity, fashion and beauty, heterosexual romance and relationships, pregnancy and maternity, menstruation and fitness’ (Consalvo and Paasonen, 2002: 6). There is, on the one hand, a particular focus in the design of studies on female parents as online information and advice seekers for parenting-related issues (e.g. Daneback and Plantin, 2008; Johnson, 2015; Lupton et al., 2016; Margalit and Raskind, 2009), and on the other, an array of literature that finds a lack of fathers in such digital spaces (e.g.

Brady and Guerin, 2010; Madge and O'Connor, 2006; Niela-Vilen et al., 2014; Sarkadi and Bremberg, 2005; Worthington, 2005).

2.3.1.2 Fathers online

Yet, some recent studies focus on fathers' use of digital media and parenting forums in particular. This small body of research from Scandinavia, Australia and the U.K. shows that fathers' Internet use and use of digital media more broadly (including for instance parenting apps) is similar to mothers' in that they also seek peer advice, support and value the sharing of parenting experiences and concerns (Eriksson et al., 2014; Eriksson and Salzmänn-Erikson, 2013; StGeorge and Fletcher, 2011; Friedewald et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2018). However, this literature also illustrates the perception of men's parenthood and caring activities as peculiar in the gender-segregated online parenting sphere, and highlights that some portrayals even trivialise and marginalise men's role as involved father (Thomas, 2018). This reflects the persistence of powerful 'mother-exclusive parenting ideals' in Western societies (Mackenzie, 2017: 2; see also Gillies, 2007).

As a result, male participation in female-dominated online spaces can be perceived as violation of homosocial norms (Brady and Guerin, 2010). For example, Sarah Pedersen's (2015) research on fathers' use of Mumsnet demonstrates that men's awareness of being part of a minority group influences decisions on how and where to post and leads to careful consideration whether to reveal their gender. Yet, fathers in Pedersen's (2015) study opted for using Mumsnet because of the variety and quality of discussions and the activity of the forum, which are more limited in fathering forums.

As Lisa Rashley (2005: 59) notes, '[i]t is something of a commonplace in studies of Internet culture to note that men and women use the Web in different ways, and that women's usage often focuses on communication'. Accordingly, there is some evidence suggesting that forums are visited for different purposes by fathers and mothers, and used less by fathers: while male interests have been described as rather focused on information and humorous communication, communal forms of support are regarded as more valued by mothers (Niela-Vilen et al., 2014; O'Connor and Madge, 2004).

In contrast, research has foregrounded fathers' interest in and the benefits associated with father-specific online forums. They can be valuable resources that help learning about fatherhood (Ammari and Schoenebeck, 2015), particularly because fathers may receive less support from health and social services in their transition to parenthood (StGeorge and Fletcher, 2011; Hamilton et al., 2016). Fathering platforms allow to discuss paternal coping with other expectant (Friedewald et al., 2005) and new fathers of children with severe illnesses (Nicholas et al., 2012), facilitating the sharing of diverse experiences in all-male environments (Nystroem and Oehrling, 2008). Humour has been identified as an important mode of expression amongst fathers who engage in care-giving (Fletcher and StGeorge, 2011; Niela-Vilen et al., 2014) and can contribute to incorporate 'caring into a repertoire of masculine activities' (Eriksson and Salzmänn-Erikson, 2013: 66). However, while homosocial parenting forums for male users can open up a space for reflection upon fathering roles (Eriksson and Salzmänn-Erikson, 2013), researchers find a 'complex interplay of gender traditional and gender progressive attitudes' among participants (Eriksson et al., 2014: 64).

While there are only few studies that explore negations of work-related topics in mother-focused forums or websites (see e.g. Berridge, 2019; Moor and Kanji, 2019, and the next section 2.3.3), a number of studies has examined the construction and negotiation of work-family issues on fathering forums. These studies focus on the social and institutional challenges encountered by stay-at-home dads (SAHDs) (Ammari and Schoenebeck, 2016; Fletcher and StGeorge, 2011) and fathers taking parental leave (Salzmänn-Erikson, 2017). The researchers highlight that online forums can serve as a response to SAHDs' feelings of being "left out" and socially invisible due to their exceptional position as main carer (StGeorge and Fletcher, 2011). Similarly, virtual discussions with fathers in a similar situation can help SAHDs coping with experiences of isolation, disapproval and judgement with regards to their chosen full-time care role (Ammari and Schoenebeck, 2016). Further, fathers who take paternal leave may turn to online forums to ease anxieties regarding work-family-life collisions and discuss concerns relating to societal and employer expectations to be working rather than taking parental leave (Salzmänn-Erikson, 2017). Forming the main body of research on parenting websites, the next section explores key aspects of studies on female-used parenting spaces.

2.3.2 *Digital mothering media: continuities and shifts*

Parenting forums and digital parenting media more broadly have attracted considerable scholarly attention from primarily sociologists and researchers working in communication studies and health-related sciences for about two decades. This subsection starts by focusing on some of the early key studies in this heterogenous field and presents crucial themes that are foregrounded, but it also points to continuities by showing how several aspects and outlooks continue to shape the debate until today, such as an emphasis on the liberating and supportive potential of online communication on the one hand, and on the other hand, a framing of digital engagements as disempowering, risky and involved in shaming and blaming mothers for their parenting. This bifurcation continues to condition not only perceptions of online parenting media, but social media more generally, including their complex relationship with feminism(s) (see e.g. Locke et al., 2018). Indeed, research conducted in the early 2000s tended to adopt a binary perspective that ‘polarize[d] between overly pessimistic perceptions of the internet and the overly idealistic’, as Annie Hau-Nung Chan (2008: 169) has observed. And Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (2020: 38) have recently highlighted how digital technologies are empowering and attractive, yet ‘they are also anxiety producing, both the key to freedom and the source of (self-) recrimination’. Thus, mapping this shifting and at times contradictory terrain helps to not only frame this study, but provides a useful foundation for the contextualisation of more and most recent literature, allowing to paint a more coherent picture of continuities and shifts in (academic) thinking about digital media and the digital media practices of mothers in particular, which of course occur alongside and in response to broader shifts in the perception and mediation of motherhood and mothers.

Several early studies have explored why and how mothers access and use parenting sites, thereby often focusing on the positive dimensions associated with the use of parenting forums.² Their findings have emphasised that mothers go online and use dedicated websites for the exchange of parenting information and because they are looking for peer support and advice (Burrows et al., 2000; Madge and O’Connor, 2006; Niela-Vilen et al., 2014; Sarkadi and Bremberg, 2005). In particular, early researchers studying mothers’ engagement with parenting websites have highlighted the value of emotional support that female users find online (Brady

² In the following, I use the terms mothering forum, parenting forum, parenting website and online forum synonymously, but I would like to re-emphasise their orientation towards female users. I also acknowledge that use of the term parenting forum (rather than mothering forum) may invisibilise gendered power relations that characterise many parenting practices (Thomson et al., 2011)

and Guerin, 2010; Hall and Irvine, 2009; Margalit and Raskind, 2009; Moravec, 2011), and the social capital that it can sustain and enhance (Drentea and Moren Cross, 2005; 2011). This emphasis on social support is exemplified through the use of terms such as ‘online support network’ (Brady and Guerin, 2010), ‘Internet-based peer-support group’ (Niela-Vilen et al., 2014) or ‘computer-mediated support group’ (Han and Belcher, 2001), as well as various classifications of the types of support that mothers can receive online, e.g. virtual community care through interactive forum participation (Burrows et al., 2000). There is also the generation of surreptitious support (Johnson, 2015), gained through passive (and invisible) participation – a practice that in more informal terms is known as ‘lurking’ –, as well as ‘instrumental support’ as an information-sharing practice (Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005) that has been discussed especially in relation to ‘alternative [non-medical] forms of expertise’ (Johnson, 2015: 237). However, research (tellingly on Mumsnet) has also suggested that entertainment can be an important motivation to participate in mothering forums (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013).

While the majority of studies focus on white, heterosexually partnered, middle-class site users, reflecting the dominance of the voices of white, Western women in the online parenting sphere (Orton-Johnson, 2017; Thomson et al., 2011), some studies have, for instance, also focussed on less educated mothers with low incomes (Sarkadi and Bremberg, 2005) and lone mothers (Dunham et al., 1998). More specialised websites exist, e.g. for parents in the military (Christensen, 2009), parents who have put their children up for adoption (Kim, 2007) and parents of children with cancer (Han et al., 2001) or learning disabilities (Margalit and Raskind, 2009). The commercial forces at play in online environments, however, tend to reinforce the widespread use of larger sites (Rashley, 2005).

Since the beginning of this continuously growing and transdisciplinary body of scholarly work, scholars have been concerned with the question what parenting media ‘do’ for their predominantly female users. Frequently, engagement with and membership in parenting communities have been perceived as enabling the connection with other mothers across social (Friedman, 2010) and geographical locations (Niela-Vilen et al., 2014), a prominent theme being the overcoming of isolation and recognition to not be alone (Gibson and Hanson, 2013; Moravec, 2011), which has been thought to be of particular relevance for new mothers who can experience this time as mentally and physically distressful (Leigh and Milgrom, 2008). While virtual sociality in parenting forums has been welcomed as ‘a revolution’ by some (Samuel, 2011: xii), others remark that the support found and relationships established online

supplement (rather than replace) offline communication and resources, suggesting that virtual forms of interaction complement offline practices (O'Connor and Madge, 2004). Chan's (2008) study from the late 2000s on the way that a group of Hong Kong-based working mothers use the virtual space to 'do' motherhood (via Internet access at their workplace, thus 'doing' motherhood whilst being physically separated from their children) is particularly interesting in this regard as it emphasises the development of a particular online mothering space 'beyond its technology-mediated nature into a community of face-to-face friendships and social and emotional support'. She concludes that the digital space plays a key role for working mothers and dual-earner families because it enables 'working mothers who use the website to perform roles in production and reproduction respectively' (ibid.).

There is however broader consensus among this early strand of research on parenting media that the Internet and the virtual communication and exchanges it enables via various platforms play an important – and predominantly positive – role in the lives of mothers that help fulfilling their *domestic* role, especially in light of changes in kinship networks, which have traditionally been drawn on as support for new mothers (Brady and Guerin, 2010; Drentea and Moren Cross, 2011; O'Connor and Madge, 2004). Relatedly, a number of scholars have suggested that parenting websites and the communication in these spaces – in view of and response to these changes – provide female users with reassurance of the 'normalcy' of their parenting (Brady and Guerin, 2010; Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005; Hall and Irvine, 2009; Pedersen and Lupton, 2018) and pregnancy experiences (Moravec, 2011; Song et al., 2012). However, some research on the website Mumsnet has extended this concern surrounding the negotiation of norms beyond the realm of parenting, with Pedersen (2014) suggesting that virtual exchanges on Mumsnet can also offer validation that the own experiences are within the 'norm' even when discussing taboo topics such as sex on Mumsnet (Pedersen, 2014). And Liz Moor and Shireen Kanji (2018: 2) have recently shown that communication on Mumsnet can serve to 'clarify and sometimes contest the content of social norms regarding money and relationships' in families. They argue that in online communication, posters develop skills and practices to negotiate financial aspects of their (offline) relationships, holding each other accountable for their decisions but also naming, and shaming, what they see as 'unacceptable behaviour'.

More generally, much has been said about the potential positive effects of virtual communication on the life of women, and mothers in particular. Lorna Gibson and Vicki L.

Hanson, in their attempt to ‘identify where technology and motherhood meet’ (2013: 314), state that the ‘potential for technology to provide interaction, information and support is immense’ (2013: 313). They suggest understanding ‘social networking sites as community builders’ and ascribe positive effects of technology use more broadly, such as an increase in confidence and helping mothers negotiate the identity changes that becoming a parent involves (2013: 321). Similarly, it has been suggested that online social activities allow mothers to test out and legitimise ‘new’ mother identities (Phillips and Broderick, 2014; Madge and O’Connor, 2005).

In a related manner, yet allowing more room for complexity, the idea the Internet could be an empowering tool of resistance continues to be explored in more recent studies. As such, Jai Mackenzie’s research (2017; 2018; 2019) has highlighted the capacity of technology and its use via parenting forums to assist in negotiating, challenging and subverting prevalent social norms such as enduring ideologies of ‘good’ and ‘intensive mothering’ – although it remains difficult for users of parenting sites to completely escape overarching discourses of gendered parenthood and child-centric motherhood. And as Pedersen (2016) suggests, such problematic ideals can be partially rejected and to some extent re-worked into alternatives like the ‘good-enough’ mother. Thus, Mumsnet users may prefer the idea of the ‘good-enough’ mother over the good-mother ideal, resisting to some extent the cultural imperative to provide intensive maternal care (*ibid.*). Similarly, it has been suggested that users of Mumsnet allow the expression of feelings such as maternal ‘ambivalence, resentment, anxiety and anger’, yet only ‘to a certain degree’ (Pedersen and Lupton, 2018: 57). A relatively large body of literature has also noted that online forums, in particular Mumsnet, function as outlets for the sharing of parenting and pregnancy-related experiences, conditions and feelings that cannot be articulated in ‘real life’, such as the taboo of maternal regret (Matley, 2020) and silenced experiences of postnatal depression (Jaworska, 2018). This functioning of digitally mediated communication as a sphere in which women can challenge dominant mothering narratives and norms as well as break certain ‘taboos’ in relation to their mothering practices, is – in part – due to the liberating role affordances such as anonymity can play in these virtual environments.

Indeed, a large number of researchers continue to highlight the important role of anonymity in Internet-based communication. Anonymous online spaces – such as most parenting websites including Mumsnet – can enable users to express themselves more freely and talk unconstrained by norms and expectations of face-to-face interactions (Schoenebeck, 2013)

while ‘cross[ing] social and normative boundaries without suffering great social consequences’ (Chan, 2008: 172). At the same time, anonymity may have ‘negative and positive implications’ (Christopherson, 2007), and can, for instance, be a factor in both the occurrence and response to cyberbullying (Macaulay et al., 2022). In the specific case of parenting forums, anonymity tends to be perceived positively by researchers, and is seen, for example, as involved in facilitating the creation of non-judgemental ‘safe space[s] in which to interact’ (Madge and O’Connor, 2004: 363) and ‘express intense socially-proscribed emotions that flout the conventions of feeling rules for mothers that may exist in less anonymous spaces’ (Pedersen and Lupton, 2018). Consequently, flaming and abrasive online behaviour are described as uncommon and, as suggested by several scholars, only rarely occur in parenting forums (Moravec, 2011; Mulcahy et al., 2015; O’Connor and Madge, 2004). Yet, some researchers have more recently observed that the anonymity of mothering forums can also lead to ‘critical and injurious’ commentary (Meyer and Milestone, 2016: 191) – a theme I will return to later (see also chapter 9).

An emerging body of work looks at the ways that parents, but especially mothers, manage their children’s online identities and what is shared about their children online, drawing attention to the work mothers do online as they perform a ‘third shift of online work’ – in addition to their paid work and home as well as parental responsibilities (Ammari et al., 2015). In particular, the recent discourse around the digital (and gendered) practice of ‘sharenting’ (posting and sharing pictures of one’s children on social media platforms) both extends earlier pessimistic, dystopian perceptions and implications of the Internet and social media while providing evidence for the continuous scrutiny of mothers and mothering. ‘Sharenting’ is a deeply ‘contested genre’, ‘decried in the mass media as exploitative, narcissistic, or plain naïve’ (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017: 110-111), with not only the popular press but also a burgeoning body of scholarly work considering ‘the dark sides of sharenting’ (Siibak and Traks, 2019) and voicing reprimands such as ‘[c]hildren want parents to ask for permission before “sharenting”’ (Sarkadi et al., 2020). While Ranjana Das (2020: 134) comments that ‘a mediated communicative framework has consistently drawn us away from approaching technology through lenses of either unqualified hope or hype, away from panic and euphoria alike’, scholarly and public discourse in particular is not always immune to reproducing anxieties about practices that, like ‘sharenting’, are situated within an enduring history of mother-shaming. And yet, for some mothers, posting about their children online provides an opportunity to express their parenting experiences, access advice and support as well as build

communities, whilst balancing the ethical issues surrounding the digital display of aspects of their children's lives (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017). This helps explaining how parents imagine and prepare for their children's 'digital futures' (Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020). At the same time, the pressure on mothers to curate their parenting successes via digital media, perched between parental pride in relation to 'good mother' practices and critiques of oversharing, ties in with prescriptive discourses around motherhood that work to judge and regulate mothers and their digital as well as offline parenting practices (Orgad, 2019: 111; Lazar et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Reproducing inequality: the privatising tendencies of online parenting forums

The previous section has traced the way that especially early scholarly debate on mothers and digital media has been characterised, with notable exceptions, by a bifurcation, with celebratory accounts on the one hand, and dystopian ones on the other. In regards to online parenting websites in particular, it was noted that certain dimensions and affordances have frequently and continuously been framed in rather positive terms, such as the liberating role attributed to anonymity. However, some scholars have cautioned against overemphasising the liberating potential of online communication by focusing on its privatising and individualising tendencies, and capacity to reproduce or even reinforce rather than challenge inequalities that shape 'offline' aspects of life.

This comparatively small group of researchers from the U.K. and the U.S. takes a critical feminist stance towards overly idealistic views of digital engagements and practices, offering analyses of the online parenting sphere through the lens of some of the large corporate parenting websites. In engaging primarily with the American sites Babyworld and BabyCenter, its British sister site BabyCentre and the U.K.-based site Mumsnet, these studies look critically at the depictions of gender roles, examine processes of individualisation and privatisation, and explore critically the sites' embeddedness within sociocultural discourses of 'good motherhood' as well as class formations. These accounts are explored in this section in order to look at studies that align with the theoretical orientation of this project.

Many studies within this strand of critical feminist research on gendered discourse in relation to parenting websites have found that these sites are likely to replicate unequal parenting arrangements that are pervasive in 'offline' life (Brady and Guerin, 2005; Madge and

O'Connor, 2006; Meyer and Milestone, 2016; O'Connor and Madge, 2004; Rashley, 2005; Worthington, 2005). Clare Madge and Henrietta O'Connor (2006: 212), in their pioneering study of the British website Babyworld, found that it reinforces stereotypical gender roles, particularly with regards to parenting and childcare. In this particular online space, Madge and O'Connor (2006: 211) note a 'culture of mothering ... emerged which was generally speaking traditional and conservative'. Yet, at the same time they observe that, in a paradoxical manner, the site 'was *both* liberating and constraining to women' – on the one hand the social benefits of being a member of the virtual Babyworld community translated into feelings of empowerment 'through increased knowledge, non-judgemental support and the development of online friendships available exactly when the women needed them', but on the other hand use of the site reproduced ideas of the nuclear, heterosexual family whereby the female part was constructed as main carer (2006: 214, 208, my emphasis).

Similarly, by analysing British mother-focused social media sites, especially Mumsnet, critics note that the 'status quo' of gender relations is rather maintained than challenged (Gambles, 2010; Jensen, 2018 [2013]; Meyer and Milestone, 2016; Pedersen and Lupton, 2018). The Mumsnet site, these researchers argue, promotes self-responsibility and individual solutions within a context of increased expectations to follow ideals of 'good' motherhood (Pedersen and Lupton, 2018) and intensive parenting (Meyer and Milestone, 2016). In this way, social media are perceived as a 'vehicle for intensive parenting' (Meyer and Milestone, 2016: 194). An important factor here is the observation that major U.K. parenting sites such as Mumsnet or Netmums are targeting mothers instead of addressing both parents in equal measure (Mackenzie, 2018; Meyer and Milestone, 2016). This address is evident through the titles of these sites, which already assume a female audience and membership, and extended through many of the site 'women-oriented' articles and sections, e.g. on breastfeeding and beauty. Because parenting websites are in fact mother-focused, social media is perceived to legitimise and reproduce intensive mothering practices – the 'intensive parent is mostly the intensive mother: positioned as the one who knows about her child's abilities and problems, who worries, who seeks advice, who takes action' (Meyer and Milestone, 2016: 193). A similar argument has been put forward by Gina Masullo Chen (2013) who critically takes on the perception of mommy blogging as empowering (see e.g. Lopez, 2009 who positions it as a 'radical act') through her critique of the term 'mommy' itself. Chen (2013: 510) uses a techno-feminist lens to argue that 'the term itself reinforces women's hegemonic normative roles as nurturers, thrusting women who blog about their children into a form of digital domesticity in the

blogosphere'. While her rhetorical analysis focuses on blogs and the specificity of 'mommy' (versus mother), there is value in extending this critique of 'digital domesticity' to other forms of women-specific online activity, such as 'mothering forums', and Mumsnet in particular.

The 'responsibilised mother', although receiving support through participation in online parenting discussions, remains therefore an 'atomised agent' who is ultimately referred back to her self-optimising capacities (Pedersen and Lupton, 2018). As Meyer and Milestone (2016: 188) suggest, the focus is on 'individuals making things happen/helping themselves', exposing the structure of social media sites as individualistic (Meyer and Milestone, 2016: 188). In a similar vein, Tracey Jensen (2018 [2013]) highlights that the architecture of Mumsnet interpellates users as unconstrained, enterprising subjects through consumerist discourses and the exchange of reflexive parenting expertise, which she discusses in association with neoliberal parenting culture. In this way, the site fosters self-reliance and entrepreneurialism, while replacing class politics with discourses of reflexive individualism (ibid.).

Indeed, notions of classed privilege pervade the Mumsnet space. Pedersen and Smithson argue the site reinforces 'middle-class mothering values' (2013: 104) and 'existing societal power relations' (2010: 98) through the demographically privileged social status of the majority of its members. Yet, class structures remain invisible and are not an openly discussed matter; the reproduction, and prominence, of privilege is effectively possible through its evasion, as Jensen (2018 [2013]) points out. The omission of social class, she suggests, is instrumental in creating the middle-class Mumsnetter, and the architecture and structure of the site play an important role in this process: 'the website itself initiates and petitions its contributors to approach, account and understand their family lives and parenting "choices" as classless, meritocratic and underpinned by expertise that has been carefully reflected upon' (ibid.: 49). Tracing the reproduction of class privilege and social division between women on the site, Jensen argues that the site's structure offers a 'space to "vent" – to affectively manage the impossible demands of contemporary intensive parenting' (Jensen, 2013: 131), and concludes that negotiations of best parenting practices generate strong 'classed affects' such as 'disgust, envy, irritation and anger at different kinds of classed Others' (Jensen, 2013: 137).

2.3.4 *Mumsnet and the functioning of parenting forums as (feminist) publics*

Complicating the notion that privatising tendencies suffuse parenting websites which are simultaneously seen as reproducing rather than challenging inequalities pervasive in the ‘offline’ world, indeed in contrast to this outlook, some researchers have considered the extent to which Mumsnet functions as a feminist public that can politicise personal issues. In other words, this scholarship considers the way that Mumsnet offers space for personal and political issues to not only be discussed and taken up, but also connected. While the body of literature considering mothering forums and Mumsnet in particular through this lens is somewhat diverse and offers multiple perspectives on this political or politicising potential, it is on the whole underpinned by the idea that participating online in communities of support contributes to making mothering itself more visible, within a societal context that assigns parenting to the private realm.

Explorations into the emergence of feminist voices on Mumsnet have led to demonstrations that online behaviour is increasingly de-gendered and diverse, suggesting a shift in gender norms towards the formation of ‘new forms of femininity’ online (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). This is evidenced through ‘a robust posting style, a tolerance of behaviour such as flaming and swearing, and an appreciation of witty entertainment, all of which have previously been identified as male online behaviours’ (Pedersen, 2015: 249).

Most recently, Mumsnet has been discussed in terms of its increasing reputation as a space where dissonant views can be articulated and mundane concerns and affects may become politicised, including women’s anger at the U.K. government during lockdown (Pedersen and Burnett, 2022), their use of news media throughout the pandemic (Pedersen and Burnett, 2021), and discussion of Donald Trump’s presidency (Pedersen and Burnett, 2018). This ties in with earlier accounts that have explored the ways in which the web may provide opportunities for the emergence of distinctly feminist online communities (see also section 2.3.3). For example, Amy Koerber (2001: 226) has discussed how ‘radical mothering websites’ may open up ‘rhetorical spaces for feminist mothers’ on the Internet. In regards to Mumsnet, and continuing this outlook, Louise Pennington (2014) has described the ‘Mumsnet phenomenon’ as the creation and development of ‘sisterhood online’. She understands this as characterised through the mutual support of women, for instance when discussing and sharing experiences of abusive partnerships, miscarriages, infertility or a diagnosis of disability on the forum. Drawing on second-wave-feminist ideas of Mumsnet as a ‘consciousness raising group’ where intimate

experiences are being taken up and possibly become part of the public agenda, her account links to the 1970s slogan ‘the personal is political’. Echoing similar findings that extend this beyond Mumsnet, Susan Berridge (2019: 661) has suggested that testimonials on the website of the U.K. activist group Raising Films can be read as ‘a kind of consciousness-raising, akin to that of second-wave feminist practices of the 1970s, in which the personal is rendered political’. The testimonials Berridge studied centre on women’s digitally negotiated experiences of reconciling work with caring responsibilities in a particular sector, the film and television industries. However, her findings may be relevant to the study of parenting forums. Referring to the architecture of the site, which resembles in some ways the architecture of parenting forums (e.g. the non-hierarchical organisation of text – see chapter 3, section 3.3.), she argues that the ‘collective presentation of the testimonials – published next to one another – foregrounds the structural nature of these gendered inequalities even if the individual content does not’ (ibid.: 652-653).

The conceptualisation of virtual mothering spaces as (alternative) publics that offer room for the discussion and debate of issues that have been excluded from the traditional public sphere has animated several studies in fields as diverse as digital health research and communication studies. ‘Intimate mothering publics’, as Sophia Alice Johnson (2015: 247; 239) suggests, ‘allow for the circulation of reconfigured expertise and subjugated knowledges’ and as such are ‘important not only because they allow candid discussions of intimate health and mothering concerns, but also because they are central to how women strategically gather both professional and lay knowledge in their negotiation of early-motherhood.’ While she notes that ‘virtual counterpublics could potentially expand mothering discourse, particularly for mothers who have traditionally sat outside the norm’, the more health-concerned publics she analyses ‘generally do not rally against the social organisation of parenting’ (ibid.: 239).

In turn, Richenda Gambles’ (2010) account focuses on parenting discourse in relation to Mumsnet as a public. In it, she cautions against an overly optimistic conception of Mumsnet as a (feminist) public that contributes to raise awareness of the political relevance of personal, intimate experiences. While her account analyses the multiple and blurred facets of publicness that are engendered through and articulated on Mumsnet, she highlights the privatising and individualising effects of the discussion of personal parenting matters. Mumsnet, argues Gambles (ibid.: 37), ‘does appear to encourage and enable personal disclosure in a way that promotes self-responsibility through an emphasis on personal empowerment and the

therapeutic’. The very focus on individual empowerment contributes to the privatisation and thus disguise of gendered and socio-economic constraints and requires a careful evaluation of whose voice is being articulated. Gambles (ibid.: 39, original emphasis), contending that a ‘particular voice’ is formed by and encouraged on the site, has stressed the need to think of ‘*whose* personal this is, *how* the personal is re-articulated and *what* might be marginalised or silenced in this process’.

Pedersen’s recent monograph exploring *The Politicization of Mumsnet* (2020) is also informed by the notion of Mumsnet as a public, yet offers different insights and conclusions. Her focus on politics means a consideration of the way that communication on Mumsnet enables the voicing of particular issues and positions that remain silenced in mainstream politics, media and ‘offline’ contexts more broadly (but can translate into ‘real world’ activism). Pedersen builds on Fraser’s (1990) concept of ‘subaltern counter publics’ to argue that

the feminism talkboards of Mumsnet allow gender-critical women, who have been alienated from the dominant public sphere because of their beliefs that differentiate between the biological basis of sex and the social construct of gender, and concerns about the impact of a move to uncritical acceptance of gender self-identification on the rights of women and girls, to form an alternative public sphere. Within this they can support each other, circulate counter discourses to those in the dominant public sphere and plan agitational activities, which can occur both on and offline (Pedersen, 2020: 14-15).

Examining the relationship between users, site owners and advertisers, Pedersen notes some limitations of this counterpublic due to moderation policies, the requirement to not put advertisers off and efforts on the side of the owners to ‘balance the needs of all its users – including those who feel unhappy at the dominance of the trans debate on its feminism boards’ (Pedersen, 2020: 15). In discussing broader issues in relation to mothers’ – women’s – use of Mumsnet to discuss political issues, Pedersen continues a key strand of her work that has conceived Mumsnet as a feminist site offering space for the emergence of ‘new forms of femininity’ (e.g. Pedersen and Smithson, 2013), and for the expression of women’s anger at the U.K. government during lockdown (see above). However, Pedersen’s (2020: 93) focus on and seeming embrace of the ‘growth of a more radical feminism on Mumsnet’, along with some sections of the media, has contributed to a perception of Mumsnet as a flagship for

‘gender-critical’ trans exclusionary feminist positions. Indeed, the book sits within, and responds partly in controversial ways to, the recent debate on trans rights and trans inclusion in the U.K. This debate has been catalysed by the proposed Reform of the Gender Recognition Act (2018), which aimed to ‘replace the current medicalized process of gender recognition with one based on self-identification and self-declaration’ (Zanghellini, 2020: 1). So called ‘gender-critical’ feminists voiced the most prominent concerns about this reform and its implications in relation to, e.g., trans women’s access to women-only spaces. (In 2020, the government announced that the legal criteria underpinning the Gender Recognition Act would not be changed - House of Commons Library, 2022). At the same time, ‘gender-critical’ interventions must be situated within a ‘series of increasingly fraught disputes over how feminism should conceptualise and respond to trans identities and experiences’ (Pearce et al., 2020: 677; see also Hines, 2019) – a controversy that has largely taken place outside academic outlets (including on the mailing list of the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association), with those writing ‘under the banner of gender-critical feminism’, including some academics, using social media enthusiastically (Zanghellini, 2020: 1).

My own research chimes with Pedersen’s (2020) in that discussions on Mumsnet go indeed beyond constructions and negotiations surrounding motherhood and are to an extent politicised, as I show for example in chapter seven where I discuss the role of wifehood, associated labour and constructions such as the ‘manchild’ in visibilising divisions of care, highlighting the way that it enables women posting to ‘feel differently’ in regards to experiences of domestic inequality. This shows how communication on Mumsnet can endow posting women with affective-discursive resources that are not available to them in offline talk, i.e. the interviews I conducted with users (chapters 5 and 6). However, my research also draws attention to the limitations of mediated communication on Mumsnet, which I argue is curtailed in key ways through its limited political effectiveness offline, pointing to the difficulties of translating politicised practices and affects into the offline world.

Crucially, the findings from my year-long fieldwork on Mumsnet as well as the interviews I conducted with users of the site (see chapter 3) challenge the idea that ‘gender-critical’ discourse on Mumsnet can be equated with Mumsnet in its entirety, or even shapes a substantive portion of the discussions taking place in this space, which is also reflected in the varied incentives for engaging with Mumsnet (see chapter 9). Rather, my findings strongly suggest that discussion and discourse occurring in this multifaceted space are much more

diverse than portrayed by Pedersen (2020). Indeed, what makes Mumsnet a particularly fascinating site of analysis is that the complexion of feminist positions circulating on Mumsnet goes far beyond those supporting ‘gender-critical’ trans exclusionary arguments. Nevertheless, further unearthing of Mumsnet’s gender politics in relation to ‘gender-critical’ feminism and what has become known as ‘TERF’ (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist) is needed.

2.3.5 *Beyond the digital vacuum: the social context of the digital*

I turn now to review literature that goes beyond what I call the digital vacuum (see also chapter 9) and offers contextualising accounts and analyses of the ‘networked mother’. Although this corpus is not always exclusively engaged with mothering forums, but mothers’ complex relationship with digital media and online spaces more broadly, it brings out important themes in research on the digital mediations of maternity. This helps to frame this study in key ways. As Das (2020: 11) has recently remarked, ‘as yet, poor understanding remains, on the brighter and darker sides of the digital mediation of the maternal and the deeply contextual ways in which this needs to be approached’. However, several studies have adopted a perspective on the digital mediation of motherhood that takes seriously how the digital and the social are deeply intertwined, highlighting the way that mothers’ lives and their work are embedded in digital media as they navigate parenthood in contemporary neoliberal societies.

A number of scholars have evidenced substantially now that the online and offline parenting sphere and activities taking place across these two sites are increasingly merged, extending earlier accounts that perceived online support as merely supplementing offline communication and resources (e.g. O’Connor and Madge, 2004), as discussed. As Lucy Bailey (2022: 2) in her very recent study highlights, ‘online activity is not something that somehow happens after the tasks of mothering ... but is actually part of doing mothering per se’ (Bailey, 2022: 2). Thus, what she calls ‘virtual mothering’ fuses both online and offline aspects of mothering and figures participation in online parenting forums such as Mumsnet ‘as part of mothering’ (ibid.). Rose Capdevila *et al.* (2022: 336; 352) in their study on ‘constructions of mothering online through an analysis of posts about mothers on Mother’s Day’ similarly acknowledge that ‘a huge amount of relational work is now done online’, yet they argue that in particular the sites they looked at – Instagram and Twitter – ‘facilitate shared productions that are resonant with, but different to, everyday offline practice’. However, how exactly this relationship, or

distinction, between online and offline practice is constituted remains somewhat unclear in studies that focus exclusively on the online sphere.

The work of Das (2017; 2018; 2020), drawing on a range of online case studies as well as interviews with new mothers, productively carves out and illuminates the juxtaposition of two deeply connected discourses or narratives that she sees as characterising the mediation of early motherhood and childbirth in digital spaces such as Mumsnet's online discussion forum, amateur YouTube videos and a Facebook group. On the one hand, she suggests, there are positive and empowering dimensions of mother's engagements with digital media. Benefits and agency are being offered to mothers through instances of camaraderie online and the sharing of positive (birthing) experiences, but also through the emancipatory potential associated with certain levels of resistance to the (often male) medical community and oppressive aspects of medicalised birthing culture more broadly. On the other hand, Das observes the silencing and exclusion of birthing narratives and experiences that do not correspond to what she calls the 'perinatal ideal'. Building on Hay's (1996) notion of 'intensive mothering' and subsequent scholarship, as well as connected scholarship on the self-regulating and individualising discourses that shape constructions and practices of motherhood in the contemporary neoliberal U.K. moment, she conceptualises the normative 'perinatal ideal' as 'a mediated, responsabilising, individualising set of conditions' (Das 2020: 22). Taking a stance she aptly calls 'cautious optimism', Das cautions convincingly against assumptions that 'all peer support spaces online are uniform or uniformly useful' (ibid.: 18).

Julie A. Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim's (2017) *Mothering through Precarity* is a further example that offers a contextualising, nuanced account of the relationship between the online and offline through a focus on mothers' work which is entangled with digital media. Drawing on interviews as well as further ethnographic data derived from their media ethnography, Wilson and Chivers Yochim (2017: 5) followed their participants through their everyday lives to 'hear their own stories about life as women in the recessionary Rust Belt' in Pennsylvania (U.S.), setting out to 'tell a story about how media are interwoven into domestic scenes' that are deeply shaped by advanced neoliberalism. Indeed, the situated stories told in *Mothering through Precarity* paint a complex picture of the role of digital media for the work of mothers who must take on personal responsibility for their families' emotional and material security and wellbeing. The book centralises the 'digital mundane' to capture the 'banal entanglements of media and everyday life through which mothers ... strive to stabilize their families' (ibid.:

15). In particular, what they call the ‘mamasphere’ – a ‘network of networks’ comprising social media platforms, mommy blogs, corporate mothering websites, and more – is embedded in mothers’ everyday lives:

For mothers, the digital mundane figures as a highly gendered atmosphere. The churning updates of Facebook feeds; the endless flows of recipes, coupons, and warnings; and the unrelenting streams of maternal advice all work to constitute the digital mundane as a mamasphere that is constantly percolating with information, inspiration, and opportunity for mothers (ibid.: 16).

While the ‘mamasphere’ may be inseparable from mothers’ ordinary lives and affects, Wilson and Chivers Yochim show how the women in their study inhabited it with ambivalence – since it is here that they find an array of technologies, strategies and tools (e.g. ‘mamapreneurial’ opportunities offered through small business platforms and support and reassurance through participation in online communities) to sustain everyday family life in the face of the anxiety-inducing insecurities and precarity that threaten it. At the same time, Wilson and Chivers Yochim’s participants negotiate new and long-standing tensions such as continuing binaries of good/bad motherhood, maternal competition and newer, privatising forms of happiness for themselves and their families via the ‘mamasphere’. For instance, posting family pictures on social media makes these women’s lives ‘brimming with happy potential’, enabling them to classify ‘everyday precarious life as happy’ (ibid.: 111; 125), and thus engendering the kind of resilience needed to mother through precarity.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the centrality of motherhood in cultural accounts of classed and racialised notions of female success and failure that occurs against the backdrop of women’s perceived occupational achievement and widespread notions of accomplished gender equality. It has traced not only the success that is now attributed to some women with children, but also how this mainstream success narrative is increasingly being challenged by more complex representations of mothers. At the same time, social divisions between maternal femininities that are regarded as achieving and valued, and, on the other side of the spectrum, failed and despised, continue.

A range of culturally prominent and exemplary maternal subject positions were investigated through a focus on each figure's relationship to work, as well as relations between the mediated figurations and representations of motherhood that increasingly broaden and complexify the maternal landscape. The balance between waged and caring labour was explored as the key marker of the hegemonic, ideal(ised) bourgeois mother who is also a worker. The chapter examined how the production of today's successful bourgeois maternal femininity hinges on the construction of her cultural counterpart in the U.K. media and public discourse, the lone lower-class mother, as abject subject whose deviant positionality outside the workforce 'haunts' the idea of successful middle-class maternity. It was noted that this framing has striking parallels to the pernicious trope of the Black 'welfare queen' in U.S. public discourse. In examining the assemblage of 'retreating' figurations, the focus was on the bourgeois stay-at-home mother and her home-working counterpart, the 'mumpreneur', who exhibit traits of the two other maternities, yet surface as subject positions that are constructed as culturally accepted.

While the balanced mother's maternal trajectory, through her embodiment of neoliberal values of choice and personal responsibility, was described as normative, it was highlighted that increasingly images and experiences that contribute to destabilising and fracturing the idealised bourgeois (heterosexual, white) 'balanced' mother are in circulation. This was shown in particular through a discussion of the abundant representations of 'aberrant', 'badly behaving' mothers in anglophone television as well as the heightened popular and scholarly interest in representations and experiences of Black (middle-class) motherhood, and broader public discourse surrounding 'non-normative' (i.e. LGBTQ) parent identities. These, the review has endeavoured to demonstrate, go well beyond the image of the white, cisgender, biological mother and challenge idea(l)s of 'good' parenting, thus expanding the maternal or parental landscape in several ways. At the same time, the discussion showed how mediated representations tend to paint a fragmented, incomplete picture of mothers and trans parents that simultaneously risk contributing to reinforcing traditional norms surrounding parenthood (particularly in terms of gender and whiteness), at least within mainstream culture.

The second half of the chapter mapped theories of the contemporary digital parenting landscape. This was undertaken through a review of sociological, digital health, communication and feminist research. It first paid attention to gender segregation in parenting forums, then discussed fathering forums. Thereafter it discussed key theorisations of the

extensive field of women-centred parenting media, in particular mothering forums. In doing so, it mapped continuities and shifts by not only presenting key themes such as support, sociality and the value of anonymity that are foregrounded in early research, but highlighting how several aspects and outlooks continue to shape the debate until today, such as an emphasis on the liberating and supportive potential of online communication on the one hand, and on the other hand, a framing of digital engagements as disempowering, risky and involved in shaming and blaming mothers for their parenting. Against this background, the chapter then mapped accounts that centralise the privatising and individualising forces at work in digital parenting media, and expound the forums' tendency to reproduce traditional, unequal gender roles, especially with regards to childrearing. In contrast to this outlook, I then discussed research on the functioning of parenting forums as (feminist) publics by reviewing literature that explores the potential of online parenting spaces to politicise by connecting the private and the political. Finally, the chapter discussed recent research that looks beyond the 'digital vacuum' by adopting a perspective on the digital mediation of motherhood that takes seriously how the digital and the social are entangled. These studies highlight the way that mothers' lives and their work are embedded in digital media as they navigate parenthood in contemporary neoliberal societies, and offer substantial evidence that the online and offline parenting sphere and activities taking place across these two sites are increasingly merged. This helps to frame this study in key ways, and I explore these complex links in my analysis chapters. But before then, the next two chapters turn to discuss my methodology, and the issues involved in researching women's negotiations of work, motherhood and equality across the digital and offline sphere.

Chapter 3 METHODS: GENERATING ONLINE AND OFFLINE DATA

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Doing feminist qualitative research

If research has to change the way that people look at things, to challenge the structures which determine the conditions of existence which [...] women [...] inhabit, then it has to be convincing. (McRobbie, 1982: 54)

This chapter is the first of two chapters that outline and invite a critical engagement with the methodological decisions made. Taking a perspective that correlates with the critical feminist orientation of the project, it not only discusses the choices and strategies underpinning this research, but also the ways in which dilemmas and emerging questions were navigated. The feminist methodological framework it uses to choose, describe and explain the methods of data generation approaches the feminist research process critically and as an ‘emotional, political endeavour’ (Letherby, 2011: 13).³ Of course, there is ‘no universal definition of what is or is not feminist’ and what *is* constituted as feminist is dependent on variable social, cultural, political and historical locations, experiences and concepts; however ‘the point of doing feminist social research’ is ‘to give insights into gendered social existence that would otherwise not exist’ (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 146-147).

Feminist methodologies are rooted in feminist activism and in critiques of positivist, ‘standard’ male-centric principles and procedures that have invisibilised or marginalised women’s lives, experiences and female-associated realms such as caring labour (e.g. DeVault, 1996; Doucet-Mauthner, 2006; Harding, 1987). While there is no specific ‘feminist’ method, there is wide agreement that feminist methodologies are united by a set of principles, focusing on the centrality and diversity of women’s lived experiences in ‘real life’ and online contexts, the ‘unearthing [of] subjugated knowledge’ (Hesse-Biber, 2012: 3), and a political orientation that seeks to contribute to rendering visible and improving women’s status (DeVault, 1996; Hesse-

³ I draw on Harding’s (1987: 2-3) definition of methodology and method: ‘A *methodology* is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed’; and a ‘research *method* is a technique for (a way of proceeding in) gathering evidence’.

Biber, 2012; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Challenging ‘malestream’ lenses, feminist researchers, as Letherby (2003: 4) puts it, ‘start with the political commitment to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women’s lives through social and individual change’. As McRobbie (1982: 54, original emphasis) reminds us, ‘there remains the vital question of *who* we are writing for and *why*’. Thus, choices of research topic and methods are not only academic concerns, but ‘political acts’ (Letherby, 2003: 4).

At the same time, reflexive practices enhance the integrity of feminist research by recognising the deep involvement of subjectivity and emotion in claims to ‘know’. A feminist methodology thus requires attention to the complexity and shifting nature of power relations in the research process (Finlay, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2012). By acknowledging the role of emotions and the intersubjective dynamics at play in the researcher-researched relationship, the feminist researcher’s engagement with her own subjectivity invites others to challenge processes of conceptualising power and claiming knowledge (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Indeed, the ability to acknowledge one’s own positioning within the research process is in line with the poststructuralist viewpoint that (feminist) ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are themselves discursively constituted rather than clear-cut ‘reality’ (Hekman, 1997). This necessitates reflection on the practices, background and perspectives that I bring to the research process in order to support a stance that promotes transparency in these regards. These methodological aspects all feature in this research, and this chapter contributes to making these components transparent.

3.1.2 Overview of the chapter

This chapter therefore offers a reflexive account of the research design of this multi-sited study of working mothers’ lived experience of reconciling work and home life, drawing on relevant theoretical scholarship but also using empirical data to illustrate why certain strategies seemed appropriate and particular choices were made. To begin with, I discuss the different methodologies chosen to generate and collect offline and online data, and the relationship between them. I then discuss how and why particular parts of Mumsnet were focused on; the specific affordances and features of Mumsnet; the process of designing semi-structured interviews; issues of recruitment, selection and anonymity. The following chapter after this one extends the discussion, as a more ‘reflexive’ chapter considering my practice and research encounters in relation to feminist methodologies, as well as detailing the frame used in the analysis of my data.

3.2. Two research sites: juxtaposing online discussion forum contributions and interview accounts

In line with the focus of this project on the exploration of constructions of work-family reconciliation and the ways in which these are navigated by mothers in the Mumsnet space and offline, two integrated methods of generating online and offline data were employed (Sade-Beck, 2004). This dual-sited study draws on data obtained from the Mumsnet Talk forum (discussion forum data; 3.5) and interviews conducted with users of the site (3.6). Investigating the phenomenon under study across two spaces, such a combination of data provides multidimensional insights into the ways in which the Mumsnet population negotiates work-family issues. The approach I regard as most appropriate for this research aims at studying ‘the online, the offline, and the connections between them’ (Orgad, 2008: 5), aiming to understand women’s lives comprehensively, and not just offline parts *or* “digital slices” (Varis, 2015: 60). Collecting and obtaining both online and offline data, and using these two types of data in an integrative fashion (I elaborate on this later), is therefore essential for this study on the experiences of working mothers across the interwoven online-offline sphere and informs its research design in key ways. At the heart of this study then are the connections between the lived experiences of site users as they are being constructed in the interviews *and* articulated in talk on Mumsnet. Indeed, one of the central questions this study aims to address is: What is the *relationship* between the discussions of gendered forms of inequality on Mumsnet and in the accounts of the interview participants?

This research approaches the Mumsnet Talk board and the interviews with some of its users as *complementary* spaces in which women make sense of their experiences as working mothers. The analyses offered in the following chapters therefore present a *juxtaposition* of the online conversation contributions of users and my interview accounts, rather than a comparison. More specifically, I do not attempt to make a comparison between online and offline accounts for two related reasons. First, the ethical conduct established between the users on the site prohibits any attempts to trace and compare the interviewees’ online contributions (3.4; 4.4) and secondly because the analyses focus on recurring discursive patterns, rather than practices of individual users or interview participants (chapter four, section 4.2).

Research that spans the online and the offline is has been particularly well established in ethnographic online research as a fruitful way of more fully capturing the complexity of different sociocultural phenomena and how these play out across multiple sites (e.g. Hallett

and Barber, 2014; Hine, 2000; 2015; Kozinet, 2010; Postill and Pink, 2012). I sympathise with approaches that argue for ‘a methodology that can reflect the always interwoven thread of on and offline life that forms part of “ordinary” online participation’ (Driscoll and Gregg’s 2010: 19); or view social media ethnography as ‘bring[ing] new routes to knowledge which are specifically opened up through online/offline engagements’ (Postill and Pink, 2012: 126).

However, my methodological focus differs from at least some of the virtual ethnographic approaches to the online/offline intersection,⁴ in that I do not assume a hierarchy between the offline (interviews) and the online (forum contributions and interviews) component. In this study, the offline element is not viewed as an ‘associated’, ‘co-present’ and therefore subordinate context (Postill and Pink, 2012: 125; 131), but one of two main data corpora. Thus, I have aimed to reach a mutual, contextual understanding, using the two types of data as reciprocally contextualising *each other*.

There is a further aspect that distinguishes my approach from the way in which some online ethnographers configure the online-offline relation. Kozinet (2010: 15) in his ‘netnography’ approach for instance assumes that online communities often migrate to the offline, continuing their relations in a face-to-face manner. As I argue in 3.4, the online/offline community membership of Mumsnet users is somewhat more complicated, and along with this the transition from online to offline for users: online membership does *not* necessarily translate into offline ties between posting online community members.

Although this study is not a ‘total’ online ethnography in the ways explained, ethnographic observation was the starting point for my engagement with and ‘way into’ the virtual research site (see 3.5). At the same time, this project has of course a deep interest in the relationships and connections between online and offline. The Internet has ‘increasingly become a part of us’, to an extent that Internet use may now be ‘mundane and unremarkable’ (Hine, 2015: 14). As Hine (2015) argues, going and being online is not an exceptional experience any more, but one that has become integrated into our daily lives and routines: it is ‘embedded, embodied and everyday’ (ibid.). This study provides ample evidence of the fluidity between virtual and ‘real’

⁴ Online ethnographers increasingly value offline spaces. For instance, Hine (2015: 87) makes a case for the revocation of an online-only ethnography in view of the embedding of online practices in ‘diverse frames of activity and meaning making’. Others, for instance Hallett and Barber (2014: 306), argue that ‘studying a group of people in their “natural habitat” now includes their “online habitat”’.

life, and the everyday embeddedness of online practices and computerised communication into offline life. My interviewee recruitment journey traversed online-offline contexts. All initial contact with the interviewees started online and moved, in the case of face-to-face interviews, beyond the screen, however was also often transformed into an encounter facilitated through other media (video calls and telephone calls) (3.6). Face-to-face and mediated meetings with members of the online community being studied can be a ‘key turning point’ for researchers, enabling a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the community and bring to light new questions and insights (Orgad, 2008). Indeed, this was the case for my online-offline fieldwork. Online and offline data generation overlapped temporally, which yielded interesting insights and had a range of methodological implications. As I discuss in 3.5, this concurrent, dual-sited fieldwork contributed to sampling decisions regarding the online conversation threads selected for in-depth analysis. In this way, the different research sites and contexts informed each other.

Orgad (2008: 13) advocates for a recognition of ‘the distinct character of online and offline contexts [...], while at the same time accounting for the inextricable connections, similarities, and continuities between the two’. Consistent with this outlook, I seek to highlight the interfaces and intersections, but also distinctiveness of each of the two spaces throughout this chapter and the analytical chapters (5 to 9). Thus, the following sections that contour key aspects of my online fieldwork trajectory are interspersed and enriched by insights gained from the interviews with users. I first focus on Mumsnet’s online forum as one main research site.

3.3 Mumsnet Talk

3.3.1 *The ‘beating heart’ of Mumsnet*

Typical for parenting websites (e.g. Lupton et al., 2016), and in contrast to for instance women’s magazines that focus their online presence on editorial content rather than user-produced content (Favaro, 2016), the online discussion board of Mumsnet is *the* essential part of the Mumsnet website. The interviews I conducted with users of Mumsnet provide ample evidence of this. Indeed, the respondents consistently stated that none of the editorial content provided on the website would be of interest to them. All participants claimed that engagement with the site be focussed almost exclusively on the Talk board. Some interviewees however mentioned they participated, apart from in the forum discussions, in competitions and product reviews. This parallels a further, significant development: about one year into the research,

Mumsnet restructured the editorial content sections available on the site. In the wake of this restructuring, work-related content was completely removed from the editorial pages, with the focus now solely on parenting-related topics and commercial components including product reviews and more general product ‘recommendations’ – a strong indication of the commercial orientation of the site (I discuss this commercial logic of the platform in relation to the circulation of affect on it in chapter 9).

These contingencies, and, one should add, the ephemeral nature of the online space, had implications for the research design. Initially, the analysis included work-related editorial content, beside the online forum discussions and interviews. However, as a result of these interrelated circumstances, as a) work-related content that would present the key source for the study of work-parenting culture on Mumsnet was retracted, and thus b) editorially authored content appeared to be of little relevance to the Mumsnet population, I excluded the editorial content largely from the analysis. Focusing the analysis on the online discussion and interview data, I established the lively discussion forum hosted by the site as the ‘beating heart’ of Mumsnet.

3.3.2 The communicative architecture of Mumsnet: affordances and features

Several affordances and features characterise the Mumsnet Talk context and shape interactions and communication in this virtual space. These are: the textual (rather than visual) including the significance of opening posts; the linear, non-hierarchical structure of both threads and posts; the use of abbreviations and acronyms; and anonymity as well as the absence of user profiles. In this subsection, I will discuss each of these in turn, but explicate the role of anonymity and the absence of user profiles in relation to issues of membership in the subsequent subsection (3.3.2).

The forum is set up in a conventional forum format that focuses on *text*. Visual cues play an inferior role, though a range of emojis are commonly used in conversations. When occurring, these were included in the extracts from individual user contributions in the analysis since emojis are affectively and socially significant (Stark and Crawford, 2015) and can be a unique and context-specific element of ‘compensation strategies for the loss of face-to-face nonverbal cues’ in digital interactions (Giles, 2016: 486).

Registered users can create opening posts (OPs) and place posts on existing threads if they wish to interact. Threads are online discussions including an initial post (OP) and any replies to it by various users. OPs hence start a discussion on an individual topic; however thread initiators have to select a ‘Talk topic’ from a pre-existing list, within which they place their OP. These Talk or discussion topics are part of the digital site architecture and thus set by Mumsnet. During the time of fieldwork, there were 27 main topics, ranging from conception and parenthood to political topics including feminism, human rights, Brexit and the intimate and mundane including relationships, television, pets, style and beauty, etc. The multitude and range of discussions taking place on Mumsnet’s fora is indicated by a plethora of sub-topics.

All OPs appear in the selected Talk topic, but also in the ‘active’ threads section, which, as many interviewees told me, is frequently used to ‘browse’ by those who identify as regular users. It is noteworthy that there is *no hierarchy between threads*, which show one after another on the forum homepage, ordered by the time a thread ‘goes online’ and, after this, the time it received the last response. Likewise, *posts on threads follow this non-hierarchical, linear structure*; they appear one by one, with each individual post carrying a time stamp. Despite, or perhaps (in parts) *due to*, the conventional forum format, Mumsnet Talk is a very fast-paced environment. Popular threads frequently generate the maximum number of responses (1,000) within short periods of time, and sometimes discussions spill over into follow-up threads. As Giles (2016) notes, discussion forum threads are asynchronous and not bounded by time, with the possibility to post on threads at any time, even years later, make explicit reference to previous posts and cite from other threads. Mumsnet contributors indeed refer to and cite other posts and threads (particularly if they have gained a particular ‘reputable’ status, see for instance my discussion of the ‘facilitated men’ threads in chapter 7) and therefore make use of the archiving function afforded by the site’s architecture. Following this understanding threads are asynchronous.

I suggest however that there is a further dynamic at play on the busy Mumsnet forum, pointing to what I term the ‘near-synchronous’ nature of certain thread discussions. On Mumsnet, an important factor to consider is that the popularity of threads determines their visibility, and vice versa. Of course the likelihood of threads to receive responses is higher the more discussants find it appealing, but this likelihood is also tied to the threads’ visible circulation on the ‘active’ threads section. Thus, both the popularity and visibility of individual threads impact their ‘lifespan’ (or ‘live span’), and make certain high-traffic discussions ‘near-synchronous’. When

speaking about her use of Mumsnet, one of my interviewees for example told me that popular threads with numerous responses frequently attract her attention, and she does feel inclined to engage with the thread to check ‘what the fuss is about’, potentially further increasing the thread’s visibility by placing a post. This cumulative aspect of Mumsnet’s virtual ‘attention economy’ (boyd, 2011) then highlights the way in which the popularity and visibility of certain threads amplify each other. These facets revolving around the high-traffic nature of the talk board significantly impacted the recruitment of interview participants through the forum (3.5.1), and had a range of implications for thread sampling decisions (3.4.2) (which I will discuss after some observations on issues of online/offline membership in relation to anonymity).

Abbreviations and acronyms are a phenomenon typical of Mumsnet and occur frequently in user postings. Indeed, a continuously updated glossary of frequently used and at times highly specific acronyms is available via the platform, ranging from AIBU (Am I being unreasonable?), DH (dear husband) and LTB (leave the bastard) to PITA (Pain in the a**e), RTFT (Read the f**king thread) and WTAF (What the actual f**k?). Knowledge of these linguistic specifics evidences a level of insider status; as Mackenzie (2019: 24) highlights, ‘Mumsnet Talk may be relatively inaccessible to outsiders because of its users’ language practices’ including the frequent use of distinctive acronyms which demands ‘in-group knowledge’. This for instance played a role for my own fieldwork and recruitment of interview participants through Mumsnet (3.5.1; and see section 3.4.1 where I discuss the process of becoming familiar with these linguistic specifics as part of my ethnographic fieldwork journey). Moreover, in my analysis of talk on Mumsnet I explore the complex affective and contextual functioning of several acronyms including the LTB trope (a shorthand for ‘leave the bastard’) and ‘AIBU’ (for Am I being unreasonable) in a range of communicative contexts on Mumsnet’s forums (chapter 9). As such, AIBU represents the most-liked subforum on Mumsnet, but at the same time invokes a particular style that is well known to users and has a range of implications for user interactions and the ways in which gendered forms of inequality become speakable in this specific communicative setting. In turn, the LTB trope operates, *inter alia*, as a *lingua franca* among posters, which allows to understand the humour the abbreviated trope conveys in particular contexts. These practices and constructs and what they reveal about the ‘speakability’ of particular inequalities and the ‘unspeakability’ of others are further explored in chapter nine. Next, I discuss issues of membership in relation to two further,

interrelated features characteristic of Mumsnet's communicative architecture – anonymity and the absence of user profiles.

3.3.3 *Who is a 'Mumsnetter'? Membership and the value of anonymity*

In line with my ethnomethodological approach to online data generation (3.2; 3.4), I follow Pedersen and Smithson's (2010: 91) understanding of membership who define a member as 'someone who sees themselves, and is acknowledged by others, as "belonging" to the site'. However, as my fieldwork across two sites (interviews with users and the online forum) suggests, this definition is limited to the online space. While many respondents I spoke to described themselves as regular users (especially those recruited through Mumsnet, 3.6.1), the vast majority of participants rejected the term 'Mumsnetter'. In the interview setting, they constructed themselves as users, yet not as community members.

Resonating with research on other online fora (e.g. Giles, 2006), Pedersen and Smithson's (2010) observed different membership categories on Mumsnet, allowing a distinction between frequent posters, 'newbies' (new posters) and lurkers. These are based on the status and popularity of some posters and enmeshed with interactional features such as posting style (ibid.). Although Pedersen and Smithson's (2010) exploration into the dynamics of membership on Mumsnet is somewhat dated, these findings still seem relevant and chime with the findings of my ethnographic online observations. Yet, this differentiation, along with an (acknowledged) sense of membership and community belonging, seems to collapse in offline contexts. One key finding of my transversal fieldwork across the online and offline sphere then is that the Mumsnet community is distinctively an *online* community.

These insights gained from the fieldwork guide my analysis of user interactions. They for instance contribute to an understanding of why certain politicised issues such as domesticity and divisions of labour at home are afforded visibility in online discussions on Mumsnet (chapters 7-9) in ways that is not reflected in the interviews (chapters 5 and 6). The paramount importance of *anonymity* on the Talk board along with the *absence of user profiles* sheds some light on why this virtual on-site membership is predominantly disclaimed in other, off-site contexts (like interviews). Mumsnet is an anonymous space, and indeed, anonymity is highly valued by users (as by users of other parenting fora, see chapter 2) who select their own

pseudonymous usernames rather than setting up user profiles⁵ and are careful not to overshare identifiable information (Mackenzie, 2016). This was echoed in some of my interviews with Mumsnet users. Nicole told me that she oftentimes debates or has a laugh with some of her friends about discussions they have been following on Mumsnet; yet, she emphasised that she would ‘never, ever’ try and trace her friends’ potential contributions on the Mumsnet Talk board. Similarly, Alessia explained that while both she and her sister use Mumsnet and frequently exchange views on trends and issues that have come to their attention through Mumsnet, she does not, and does not want to, know her sister’s username or read any of her posts. Alessia and her sister protect, and respect, each other’s privacy in relation to Mumsnet postings. Thus, while few interviewees were happy to share certain information about the nature of their postings, or sometimes lurking habits, the interviews were by no means the place to inquire into participants’ posted content.

One deterring example of being recognised on Mumsnet by a person in their ‘real life’ was recounted by several interviewees: the ‘penis beaker’ post. The post that (humorously) described a post-coitus practice of cleaning the male genital in a beaker kept beside the bed went viral across a multitude of platforms and outlets. Crucially, some interviewees’ told me that as a consequence of the excessive (mediated) attention devoted to what was deemed ‘bawdy’, ‘sleazy’, ‘obscene’ yet also ‘funny’ (Pedersen, 2014), the poster’s offline identity was eventually established and outed, causing huge distress and embarrassment for the poster as well as her family in their offline life. There is plenty of evidence of the media hype, leading to a huge increase in the site’s traffic (e.g. Barnett, *The Telegraph*, 2013), yet the ‘real life’ identity exposure seems speculative and anecdotal rather than verifiable.

However, what *is* pertinent here is the participants’ evaluation of this case as vividly illustrating the need for anonymity, especially because of the public, open-access nature of the forum. At the same time, the ‘penis beaker’ case points to the interwoven complexity of anonymity and acknowledgement of (or rather: reluctance to admit) Mumsnet membership across and between ‘real life’ and this particular online space. Indeed, the interviewees’ aghast perceptions of this case of offline identity revelation and their statements express the strong wish to maintain a

⁵ Users can set up a profile page with personal information such as their gender, location and age. However, as Mackenzie (2019: 24) confirms, ‘[i]n most cases, [...] the only information available about users is contained in what they post to threads’.

separation between online and offline life. This helps understandings of the ‘contrast between the frequency of use, and the strong affiliations which many posters (and lurkers) feel for the site, and the reluctance by many to admit to group membership’ (Pedersen and Smithson, 2010: 9).

Therefore, and crucially, attempts to trace the interviewees’ online contributions would have been deeply unethical since these present a breach of the informal conduct established by users. So, in order to ‘eschew the “unjust” exercise of power’ (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 147), no such ventures were undertaken in this study. This is in accordance with the Association of Internet Researcher’s recommendations of ‘a case-by-case or process-based approach to ethical decision making’ in online environments (Markham and Buchanan, 2015: 611). However, what several of the interviewees did find appropriate to share with me in relation to Mumsnet were their feelings about (9.4) and general use of the discussion board. Next, I outline my approach to the selection and collection of online discussion forum data.

3.4 Collecting online forum data

3.4.1 Adaptive ethnographic online observation

Ethnographic approaches are not uniform or stagnant (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) and have been used for the exploration of a plethora of social phenomena (Silverman, 2018), and increasingly in diversified, adapted ways to the study of online communication and practices (Varis, 2015). When entering the spaces of their participants, on and offline ethnographers conduct ‘first-hand empirical investigation’ of people’s interactions, practices and accounts in everyday, ‘natural’ settings (Hallett and Barber, 2014; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Research occurs thus ‘in the field’, placing (overt and covert) participant observation at the heart of ethnography (ibid.).

My approach to the online research site, Mumsnet Talk, has aspects in common with what Hine (2000; 2015) terms ‘adaptive ethnography’. In this vein, ethnographic research is methodologically adaptive and flexible – it is adaptive to the increasing digitisation and widespread use of technologically mediated means of communication (Hine, 2015), and, relatedly, ‘does not confine itself to following specific procedures, but rather remains open to issues arising from the field’ (Varis, 2015: 61-62). In drawing on ethnographic approaches, I follow Hine’s (2015) understanding of ethnography as a *set of strategies* that are characterised

by an ‘ongoing adaptation [...] to emerging circumstances’ (Hine, 2015: 16). Varis (2015) similarly perceives ethnography as an *approach* rather than a strict method or a technique. Ethnographic approaches thus lend themselves well to the study of digital social spaces.

However, as already indicated earlier, this study is not a ‘full’ or ‘complete’ ethnography; for instance, I do not reach full immersion in the Mumsnet culture (however ‘culture’ is understood in this context). Rather, I utilise the concept of ethnographic observation as an adapted, purposeful tool in the research process, which is a recognised use of ethnographic approaches in the wider field of gender and Internet research (e.g. Barton and Lee, 2013; Hine, 2015; Mackenzie, 2019). More specifically, I employed observation as a point of departure for researching the virtual-collaborative Mumsnet space and drew on the ethnographic commitment to reflexive fieldwork, as these components are pertinent to my study and consistent with its goals.

Ethnographic observation then was an entry point for my engagement with and ‘way into’ the Mumsnet forum (see also Mackenzie, 2019: 33). Performing ethnographic field observations meant virtually traveling to the Mumsnet site. As part of this immersive experience, I visited the site daily, took field notes and, at a later stage, identified predominant patterns and key themes. I also gained familiarity with linguistic specifics including the very common use of a variety of acronyms that are particular to the virtual interactions occurring on Mumsnet’s forums (see also the previous section 3.3, in particular 3.3.2). This familiarity with the site contributed to establishing common ground for the interviews in which I asked interviewees about their relationship and engagement with the site (3.3; 3.5.2) and enabled me to create a recruitment post that eventually garnered attention while also identifying suitable places where to place the post (3.5.1).

In line with ethnography’s embrace of and commitment to reflexivity, I took detailed field notes after each site visit and paid reflexive attention to my own position during this period of observation (Hine, 2000). Similar to Mackenzie (2019) in her linguistic study of contemporary mothering discourses in relation to Mumsnet, I realised over the course of my observations that, in several respects, I am a characteristic Mumsnet user (see 1.2; 3.4; 3.6), although I do not have children: I am white, middle-class, well-educated, in my thirties and identify as a feminist. Not surprisingly, during the period of online fieldwork, I came across plenty of postings that reflected my own thinking (and humour) on particular topics (obviously not

limited to, but certainly including debates about the ‘correct’ way of hanging the loo roll or how to deal with family members that eat your stash of sweets!). Positioning myself as an “observer-participant”, this ‘intermediary position between complete participant and complete observer foregrounds the researcher’s observational role [...]', yet also ‘acknowledge[s] the participatory aspect’ (Mackenzie, 2019: 37). My participation did not only include an increasingly felt engagement and affinity with the site and its users, but shifted significantly towards a more active stance when I started to recruit interview participants through the forum (3.6.1). I used the talk board in ways that may be similar to many regular users by browsing the ‘active’ threads for approximately two hours per day. During the period of overlap between forum observation and interviewing, I was to an extent able to ‘see’ the Mumsnet space through the eyes of the users that I interviewed. Observing Mumsnet Talk and drawing on insights from the interviews, for instance, enabled me to understand the complexity of online-offline membership (3.4).

3.4.2 Thread sampling: considerations and practice

Crucially then, online observation, interviewing and thread sampling processes were intimately related. After a period of initial observation beginning in August 2017, I set out to recruit interview participants through Mumsnet Talk in spring 2018 and started interviewing (see 3.6). Given the high-traffic nature of the forum, the extensiveness of discussions and the associated extreme variety in thread length (between 1 and 1,000 posts), I thought hard and for a long time about the number of threads and postings on these that I could realistically analyse within the scope of this project. To address this and produce a manageable dataset of discussion threads that aligns with my discourse analytical approach (4.2), I established delimitations, restricting the online fieldwork period to one year and the volume of online data to a maximum of 100 threads. The following section details the two-stage process of online data collection.

Following Mackenzie (2019), the one-year period of ethnographic observation was a stage of probing and exploration, which, crucially, facilitated the building of the principal data corpus of discussion threads from Mumsnet Talk. Again consistent with Mackenzie’s (2019) approach, the discussion threads forming the main data corpus were selected through purposive sampling (e.g. Oliver, 2006). My sampling strategy involved an iterative process of identifying concepts and themes over the course of my observations (ibid.). Since the decisions regarding the materials and ‘individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher’ and are thus ‘based upon a variety of criteria’ (ibid.: 244), I explain in the following the twofold

considerations that guided the building of the main data corpus, that is how and why I selected discussion threads and postings on such.

First, my selection criteria for the strategically sampled main corpus of threads were guided by the aims of this study. To recap, the focus of this study is on the relation between paid work in the public realm and unpaid caring labour in the domestic home sphere. I was in particular interested in exploring empirically the intersections between these two spheres and the ways in which these are discussed across the online Mumsnet space and in interviews. Thus, my question pertained to how women's experiences of the ideology of domesticity play out in relation to their opportunities to participate in the public-work sphere. At the same time, I wanted to explore how contemporary workplace culture relates to mother's sense making of work-life 'balance'.

Second, my thread sampling decisions were in important ways informed by the concurrence of interviewing and online fieldwork. Given that I conducted the interviews at the same time as observing Mumsnet Talk, I was struck by a marked difference in emphasis on the private-domestic realm and the public sphere of work between the interviews and online discussions. Indeed, over the course of the interviews and contemporaneous online observation period, I established that different topics and sentiments were foregrounded in each of the sites (forum discussions and interviews).

I sensed an openness on the part of my interview participants to speak freely about workplace-related inequalities (chapter 6), but, on the whole, inequalities that are situated in the private-domestic sphere were largely absent in the interviews. Of course, there were moments in the interviews when the home sphere emerged as a locus where inequalities surfaced, but these moments were rare. In other words, many interviewees accounted for inequalities in the sphere of work in multiple ways, but seemed to carefully avoid framing their experiences of reconciling paid work and parenting in terms of any domestic issues. There was then a noticeable silence around domesticity in the interviews.

This contrasted acutely with my observations on the Mumsnet fora: Mumsnet appears to be a space in which domestic matters are openly and frequently discussed, oftentimes in highly affective ways. Indeed, a key observation pertained to the ways in which the domestic sphere and associated reproductive labors (the totality of household and caring labors) are pronounced

and rendered visible on Mumsnet (chapters 7 and 8). Informed by the literature that finds a contradiction between the ‘unspeakable’ drudgery of mundane domestic chores (McRobbie, 2013) and the continuing existence of domestic inequality, understood as the gendered division of labour in the home (e.g. Bianchi et al., 2012), the threads that I selected for analysis for this study then were to account for both the visibility and ‘speakability’ afforded to domestic inequality on Mumsnet *and* the silence around domestic inequality in my interviews.

Apart from purposive sampling during the observation period through which I had determined that domestic themes and associated sentiments were accentuated in discussions on Mumsnet, I proceeded to complement my dataset of threads by identifying a stable set of themes centered around domesticity and domestic inequality. This additional approach to data collection on and through Mumsnet was modelled on the utilisation of Mumsnet by several scholars (Hine, 2014; Jaworska, 2017; Pedersen 2014; 2015; 2016). I conducted a systematic keyword search spanning the observation period (1 August 2017 to 31 August 2018), using the ‘advanced search’ facility on the website to identify relevant thread titles with the terms ‘housework’, ‘chores’ and ‘household’, the phrases ‘mental load’, ‘wifework’, ‘manchild’ and ‘LTB’ and variants such as ‘wife work’ and ‘man child’. Reflecting broader discourses on the site, the latter four phrases I employed for this search were built on the characteristic insights I developed during the observation period, drawing on my knowledge about specific subject content circulating on the site (see also Etikan et al., 2016). After discarding duplicates and irrelevant threads, such as children’s remuneration for chores and exchanges about cleaning products, I settled on a corpus of in total 85 threads, ranging from 14 to 1,000 posts each: a total of 10,474 posts. I then generated data samples for each chapter that uses discussion forum data as primary source (chapters 7 to 9). More detailed information about the respective data corpus is included at the beginning of every analysis chapter.

This multi-layered, flexible and data-driven sampling strategy allowed to pay particular attention to concepts and notions that are prominently negotiated in domesticity discussions on Mumsnet. Its emergent and inductive design arguably allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the issues that Mumsnet users discuss in relation to their domestic lives than the kind of snapshot that can be derived from solely using the search function (e.g. Pedersen, 2014; Pedersen and Lupton, 2018), without previous engagement with the interactions occurring on Mumsnet Talk. In this vein, chapter eight, exploring the construction of (some) men on Mumsnet, came into being due to the frequent occurrence of the ‘manchild’ construct

across thread discussions. All online discussion threads were downloaded from the website and saved as PDF files, which enabled maintaining the original formatting and all idiosyncratic context including emojis. This was a protracted process since each page displays no more than 100 posts, thus threads with the maximum amount of posts amounted to 10 pages.

3.5 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

For this study of women's constructions of their subjective experiences as working parents and views of gender (in)equality, and their relationship with Mumsnet, the qualitative interview form was most suitable. More specifically, the chosen method to obtain interview data was the semi-structured in-depth interview. As noted earlier, there is no intrinsic 'feminist method' since 'any method can be used in a pro-feminist or non-feminist way' (Letherby, 2003: 5; see also Harding, 1987). However, the semi-structured in-depth interview has the potential to study women's accounts of their experiences, foregrounding the participants' voices by allowing respondents to recount what they regard as most important or challenging in their own words (Oakley, 1981). At the same time, this approach gives participants the chance to ask questions back, mitigating some hierarchies in the research relationships (ibid.). Distinctly involving participants in the production of knowledge (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 155), this much-applied research tool is therefore often considered the 'paradigmatic "feminist method"' (Kelly et al., 1994: 34).

For all the reasons outlined, and also because it enables comparison across several interviews, this method was deployed. After I had conducted two pilot interviews, I embarked on recruitment and revised the interview topic guide. The guide comprised topics ranging from the interviewees' personal life trajectory and life planning (in particular, education and career); their decision to become a parent and to continue, or to re-start working after becoming a parent; their experiences with the reconciliation of work and family; characteristics of their life as a female working parent; their attitudes towards images of working mothers; their views on gender (in)equality and gender roles; on the perceived connections between gender (in)equality and life as a female working parent; and their use of, and thoughts and feelings about, Mumsnet (Appendix D).

3.5.1 Recruitment

The affordances of the particular online environment that Mumsnet presents had a significant impact on the recruitment of participants, and led to several modifications of the recruitment

strategy. The vast majority of the interview participants were recruited through posts placed on Mumsnet's Talk forum (23), three through snowballing and six through social media (Facebook). Overall, my decision to recruit (primarily) through Mumsnet enabled me to speak to women who use the site to actively post. At the same time, it allowed access to women who may potentially be invisible on Mumsnet, yet still use the space by choosing to 'lurk' and read posted content as their means of participation. All recruitment posts (see Appendix A) outlined my research interest and recruitment criteria and included my contact details so that interested respondents could get in touch directly, preserving prospective participants' anonymity.

I initially placed the study advertisement post on the Non-Member-Requests topic on the discussion forum. Yet this yielded only one response. Being an academic herself, the respondent stated during the interview that, when reading the recruitment post, she felt that this was a 'proper academic study', indicating that an 'academic' tone may prevail.

This interviewee's feedback and my increasing familiarity with the site assisted me in several ways to widen access to participants through the Mumsnet Talk board. First, I altered the recruitment post. The adapted post was characterised by what I would describe as a more informal tone, including the use of emojis that are well-established in Mumsnet conversations (😊 and 🌸) and a significantly condensed text with less use of paragraphs. I identified the NFP (not-for-profit) Survey topic as a suitable venue for placing the adapted post. The high-traffic nature of the Mumsnet Talk board means that opening posts are only visible for a brief period of time in the 'active' threads – if they do not receive responses in the form of posts placed on the thread. This happened to my recruitment post since it effectively appeared as exactly such an opening post. Therefore, in order to increase the visibility of my recruitment post, I addressed this fact, and the habit of many users to browse the Active Threads (as I had learnt from the interviewees I had already spoken to) in two interrelated ways: first, by posting at different times, and second by 'bumping' the recruitment post, and thread, by placing further posts on the thread, given that any post placed on a thread brings it back into the Active Threads.

Despite the large Mumsnet membership, and the inclusive design of my participant criteria, recruitment stagnated after more than 20 women had contacted me. While I do not have a fully conclusive idea as to why this recruitment strategy ceased to be successful, I believe that the Mumsnet cohort felt in some way 'saturated' by my recruitment request. Indeed, during the

course of my conversations with participants about their use of Mumsnet, many regular users indicated that they at times feel a sense of ennui when topics re-appear time and time again – an observation that chimes with the entertainment focus associated with usage of this particular Talk board (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013).

Hereafter, I opted for diversifying my recruitment strategy and used my social media (Facebook) to gain access to participants. I used both a specifically created research profile to place posts in several Facebook groups and my personal profile. Interestingly, also in this case the initially more ‘formal’ attempt at getting in touch with interviewees proved to be of relatively little success, with one interviewee contacting me via my research profile, compared to ten interviewees expressing interest in participating as a result of seeing my post that was widely shared by my personal Facebook contacts. Recruitment via friends – i.e. ‘warm’, or personal connections – was therefore a very helpful strategy.

Unsurprisingly, the participants recruited through this ‘secondary’ strategy seemed, on the whole, somehow less invested in Mumsnet, and mostly did not identify as regular users, but rather purpose-oriented users who only approached Mumsnet with a view to gaining specific information, mostly related to parenting and/or conceiving, and to a lesser extent for seeking entertainment. This different level of investment, and sometimes different usage, of the site was not a disadvantage, but rather a reflection of the diverse ways of using the site by a range of participants. In other words, there were different categories of Mumsnet users: those heavily enmeshed in the online community who used it frequently and for entertainment (and beyond), and more sporadic users who tended to occasionally consult Mumsnet for advice and information (see also chapter 9, section 9.3, in which I discuss some of the distinctions between the different cultures of Facebook on Mumsnet, from the perspective of self-identified regular users of Mumsnet).

The prospective participants that had gotten in touch via email or by using the messaging service on Mumsnet or Facebook were sent the participant information sheet (Appendix B) and informed consent form (Appendix C) via email. Once a respondent agreed to participate in this study, a suitable time and place (face-to-face or online/via telephone) to meet were agreed.

3.5.2 *The interviews*

London-based respondents were asked to participate in face-to-face interviews, at a time and place convenient to them. Between February and October 2018, I met 10 research participants for face-to-face interviews in London. In all but one case I was invited to respondents' workplaces. I also tried to accommodate the participants' temporal preferences, which meant that many face-to-face interviews took place during the respondents' lunch breaks, and sometimes after work or in between meetings. The invitations to the interviewees' workplaces enabled me to become a little familiar with – and even at times, to an extent, involved in – the work routine and environment of the respondents. I certainly admired and marvelled at some of the chic facilities and office buildings that I was invited to. Frequently I was offered coffee, cake and cookies, and sometimes lunch; and fleetingly saw the curious looks of colleagues. While I appreciated these insights, I was initially concerned whether the immediate location and spatial proximity of colleagues, line managers and superiors would have implications for the interview atmosphere. However, there was no noticeable difference between face-to-face interviews and those conducted remotely regarding the respondents' openness and what I perceived as their willingness to share their experiences as working mothers and users of Mumsnet, their life course and attitudes towards gender equality. This, I believe, was in parts also helped by the fact that I asked participants in the email exchanges prior to the interview whether we could conduct the interview in a room where we would be undisturbed; highlighting that I would, with their agreement, record the interview to have an accurate record of what was said. In most cases, interviews took place in meeting rooms (with only the participant and me present).

Interviews with participants who were based in the U.K. but outside London, or in other European countries, were conducted online or on the telephone. I conducted in total 19 interviews remotely between April and November 2018. While the decision to meet only respondents for face-to-face interviews who resided in London was a sampling consideration that was driven by my budget limit and time schedule, both the online and telephone interviews I conducted produced rich accounts. In order to widen and diversify research participation, interviewees were given a choice as to what mode of interview, via a conferencing software (Skype or FaceTime) or telephone, be used (Hope, 2016). Many participants were familiar with Skype and suggested a Skype video call, which mostly took place in the evening, after the children's bedtime. Most participants, and myself, were at home during the Skype or FaceTime and telephone calls, which made for a somewhat intimate atmosphere, offering glimpses of the

participants' lives when their children stormed into the room, for example, or babies woke up crying from their naps. I felt very appreciative of the respondents' willingness to spend their limited leisure time talking to me, in the evenings after an oftentimes long day of work and commute, at times over a glass of wine (the interviewees!). Equally, some participants suggested talking to me on bank holidays or at the weekend, taking time out of their busy work-family lives for the interviews.

The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours, with the average duration being approximately one hour. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with permission, removing identifiers such as names, workplaces and exact locations, instead using pseudonyms and replacements to protect the interviewees' anonymity (e.g. small town in England). This seemed particularly pertinent with regards to the fact that some of my participants were high-level professionals in fields that are dominated by males, such as accountancy and law, and could possibly and easily be identified by means of location and industry, especially if outside the metropolitan area of London.

Apart from one, all interviews were conducted in English. One participant spoke my mother tongue (German) and we therefore agreed to talk in German rather than in English (interspersed with a range of anglicisms, since we both work/study and live in the U.K.). I translated the interview during the transcription process. Apart from this singular case of translating from 'Britishized' German to English, the process of transcription was an opportunity to immerse myself in the interviews. While I did not wish to consider the level of detail some conversation analysts take into account in their analysis, I found it useful to capture some details in the transcripts, in particular interruptions and laughter. The transcription conventions used are based on an adapted version of the transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson (2004; see Appendix F).

3.5.3 Selection criteria and overview of respondents

Although, given the demographics of Mumsnet, the sample of interview participants was expected to be congruent with what is perceived as the contemporary desirable 'maternal feminine' (white, middle-class; McRobbie, 2013; see also Rottenberg, 2018), my selection criteria only pertained to respondents' gender (female), parental status (having at least one child), employment status (being in employment or self-employed), age (over the age of 18) and residence (in the U.K, or other European countries). A more diverse range of research

participants was considered desirable inclusion criteria rather than exclusion criteria. Accordingly, interview participants had to:

1. Identify as women
2. Be a user of the website Mumsnet.com
3. Have at least one child
4. Be over the age of 18
5. Live and work in London ('offline', face-to-face interviewees)
6. Live and work in the U.K. or other European countries (online/phone interviewees)

The ultimate criterion (6), initially only focusing on participants who reside in England due to ethical insurance procedures, was altered and received ethical approval after several expats contacted me and expressed their interest in participating. Following this, several respondents who lived in Scotland and Wales and two expats who previously resided in the U.K. and relocated to Austria and Denmark respectively were included. Mumsnet, as evidenced by existing research (Pedersen and Smithson, 2010; 2013), is predominantly used by mothers who reside in the U.K., primarily England. However, according to the sole census conducted by the site itself (Mumsnet Census, 2009), five per cent of those using the website live in other countries. This change in recruitment was not thought to change the overall outlook of the project, since the focus remained on U.K. residents. Rather, the inclusion of interview participants who live in other European countries (Denmark, Austria) reflects the increasingly transnational make-up of the website users and, in this way, was thought to contribute to gaining a deeper and more accurate understanding of how working mothers use the website.

In the following, I provide a brief overview of the research participants' positioning in terms of age, social class, ethnicity, relationship status and children, education and occupation. While the age range of the participants was 31 to 58, the overwhelming majority of the interviewees were in their thirties (24). I invited participants to self-define their class positioning and ethnicity in the interviews, which produced a sample that is broadly in line with previous (survey-based) research on Mumsnet (Mumsnet, 2009; Pedersen and Smithson, 2010): 28 of 29 interviewees said they perceived themselves as middle-class; 25 identified as white, one as Pakistani, one as Black English, one as British Bangladeshi and one as Latin-American. In equal measure complying with expectations about the demographic makeup of the participants was the fact that 26 of the interviewees stated they were heterosexually married, one participant

was heterosexually engaged, one cohabiting with the father of the child and one divorced (ibid.). The overwhelming majority of the participants had young children (under ten years) that required childcare, with a large number (11) of two-year-olds and younger toddlers and infants. This is unsurprising since reconciling waged labour with caring responsibilities is more challenging for mothers of young children (Miller, 2012). Only one respondent had more than two children, and the rest of the sample is evenly divided in participants having either one (14) or two children (14).

All but two of the participants were educated to at least degree level, with 20 holding a postgraduate qualification. One respondent was embarking on a first degree, and one did not have a degree. Related to the large number of participants holding a postgraduate qualification, my sample is slightly skewed in terms of a relatively high number of research participants working in academia (eight participants), which can partially be accounted for by my own social network that I used for snowballing (including via Facebook, see above). Though within this field the interviewees had different roles ranging from teaching and research to administration and research support, and indeed three were recruited through Mumsnet, and not through snowballing. Apart from these specifics, the majority of the respondents worked in the private sector in fields as diverse as information technology, marketing research, accountancy, finance, banking and financial services, law, media, construction, engineering, pharmaceuticals and agriculture. Four participants worked in the public sector (education, public services and healthcare), and one respondent worked in the third sector (charity). A detailed breakdown of interviewees' by demographics and occupation can be found in the table in Appendix E.

In this chapter I have provided a rationale for juxtaposing online forum contributions and interview accounts and explained why I focus on Mumsnet's talk forum. This was followed by a detailed outline of the practicalities, choices and considerations involved in generating online and offline data including a discussion of my adaptive approach to online ethnography, the practice of thread sampling, and the process of designing and conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. In the following chapter, I extend my discussion of methodology by expanding in depth on the role of affect and reflexivity in the research process.

Chapter 4 AN AFFECT-CENTRED APPROACH TO ANALYSIS AND REFLEXIVITY IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I demonstrate the analytical potential of a reflexive approach in relation to the researcher-researched relationship and data analysis. Engaging in the practice of ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ (Pillow, 2003), I explore the fruitfulness of practices that do not shy away from the ‘messiness’ of emotions and interpersonal dynamics in the research process. I outline how these facets structured my research into Mumsnet and beyond. The chapter begins by discussing the analytical frame used in the analysis of my data, and then moves on to discuss my affective-discursive approach, central concepts such as affective practice and subject position, issues and difficulties that arose during the generation of data, and ethics.

4.2 Analytical frame: discursive psychology and a cognate approach to the study of affect

This section details the frame used in the analysis of my data. I propose a hybrid approach to discourse analysis that marries insights from critical discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) with the affective-discursive approach developed by Wetherell (2012). Key considerations for choosing and developing this analytical frame include the emotional tone that characterised both the interviews and the online accounts, and the different environments in which each of these two sets of texts are situated. Underpinned by an understanding of affect as multidimensional and involved in the production and regulation of gendered mediated subjectivities, in this section I show how a discursive approach that encompasses affect offers an appropriate and generative analytical frame for my study. To begin with, I briefly present my understanding of discourse and the treatment of the empirical data in relation to this.

4.2.1 Discourse and online-offline data as discursive, textual resources in two distinct communicative spaces

As Willig (2013) notes, the popularity of ‘discourse’ mirrors the ‘turn to language’ across the social sciences and humanities since the 1990s, with the currency of ‘discourse’ generating a ‘varied intellectual geography of discourse analysis’ that is reflected in a multitude of approaches and styles under the umbrella term discourse analysis (Hepburn and Potter, 2003: 181). Discourse analysts are, on a broad level, concerned with how language constructs our

social and psychological worlds, reflecting the influence of (and consistence with) poststructuralist thinking (e.g. Gavey, 1989).

Despite the heterogeneity of discourse analytic approaches, a range of common key themes can be identified, which Gill (2018) usefully brings together: First, the entirety of texts and talk is treated as discourse. This emphasises discourse analysts' interest in 'texts in their own right', and simultaneously alludes to a conviction in language being constructive and constructing social life as a second theme. That is, 'we deal with the world in terms of constructions, not in a somehow "direct" or unmediated way' (ibid.: 25), pointing again to the social constructionist perspective of discourse analysis. Third, discourse as social practice is embedded in social contexts; thus, there is an analytic focus on 'action' to attend to the ways in which people use discourse to accomplish and 'do' things. Fourth, due to their rhetorical nature, discourses attempt to make themselves persuasive in order to instal their preferred version of the world drawing attention to the contradictoriness of different discourses that incessantly compete against each other. In this vein, 'discourse analysis involves identifying patterns in discourse, being able to highlight recurrent themes or ideas or tropes – particularly when looking across a corpus of data' (ibid.: 26).

In line with the discourse analytic interest in 'texts in their own right', this thesis treats online forum contributions and interview accounts as *social texts* that are created online and offline respectively. Crucially, this facilitates the *integration of the two datasets at the analytical level*. Clearly, the act of writing and publishing a post on the Mumsnet's forum is a different experience than speaking to me during the interview, and there are differences in the 'speakability' about gender inequality in the two sites (see below, and my exploration of these differences throughout the analysis chapters). And yet, as social texts, both online posts and interview accounts are embedded in the same wider sociocultural discourses that play out across the domestic and public sphere, and which, for instance, position women as primary caregivers (see especially chapters 5 and 7).

In this way, both posters *and* interview participants are products and producers of discourse (Edley, 2001). As speaking subjects, they are equally enabled to position themselves *in* discourses, whilst also being positioned *by* wider discourses (ibid.). Thus, the women whose online and offline 'spoken' accounts are being explored in this study position themselves in

relation to multiple discourses which they may challenge, resist or subvert, or reinscribe and reinforce.

By suggesting treating both forum posts and interviews as texts, I do not mean to presume that the respective environment (online forum or interview) does not matter. On the contrary, it is my conviction that recognition of the *distinctiveness of each of these social communicative spaces*, and the *communicative possibilities* these may open up or close down, is important. As I argue in chapter seven for example, the relationships women form in the Mumsnet space may allow to articulate dissonant views and feelings about their domestic roles and associated divisions of care – these relationships may enable ‘feeling differently’ (Hemmings, 2012: 150) and, crucially, to an extent politicise. In turn, I show for instance in chapter six that in the interviews, gender inequalities were largely located in the public sphere of work and only rarely in the private realm, giving rise to a sense that any form of inequality in the home was not regarded as a political matter. Thus, as distinct communicative spaces, the specific formats of *academic interviews* as well as the *Mumsnet forums* shape the ‘speakability’ of specific inequalities through their particular affordances and consequential practices – such as the important role anonymity plays in the online environment as discussed in chapter 3, section 3.4, versus for example the co-constituted nature of interview data. Indeed, in this context I also acknowledge, as I will discuss in much greater depth in section 4.3, that the interview is interactively co-constituted between researcher and researched and thus a ‘joint product’ that bears the imprint of the researcher presence (Finlay, 2002). This is addressed by my discursive approach to the data analysis in that the analysis pays attention to and incorporates my own presence.

This study takes inspiration from the ‘critical’ orientation of some strands of discourse analysis that have predominantly emerged in linguistics (e.g. Fairclough, 2001; Lazar, 2005; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak and Meyer, 2009), and is similar to Gill’s (2009) synthesised approach in her analysis of women’s magazines. I have found the explicitly political emphasis on uncovering the ‘complex workings of power and ideology in discourse’ (Lazar, 2007: 141) useful for thinking through ways of decrypting the hegemonic, everyday imperatives of motherhood which are created and expressed in these discourses. The political stance found in feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), as developed by Lazar (2005; 2007), resonates with the aim of my feminist analysis that is stimulated by the ‘desire to understand how images and

cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression’ (Gill, 2007b: 1). According to Lazar (2007: 142), the aim of FCD studies is

to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities.

To an extent, I share the ‘political critique for action’ and academic “‘analytical activism’” as well as the ‘critical praxis orientation’ of FCDA (Lazar, 2007: 144-146). However, I remain sceptical in the face of a range of preconceived demarcations and binaries between different groups; for instance, the general broad-brush dualism between oppressed and oppressor that emanates from accounts of critical discourse analysis, implying women’s uniform positioning as the oppressed/underprivileged (see also van Dijk, 2008). This is in particular an issue for this study since I research women who in some regards must be regarded as privileged (chapter 1; and 4.3.1), yet do nonetheless experience forms of inequality and oppression. In parts, Lazar (2007: 148-150) acknowledges differences among women, however this perspective appears to not pull through. Moreover, there seems to prevail an assumed yet unexamined distinction between women and feminists (‘to speak from the position of a “woman” is not the same as speaking from the political perspective of a feminist’ [ibid.: 145]). As this study argues, the contemporary complex landscape of feminism, and the associated multiple feminist identities available, make it indispensable to complicate and specify for instance what ‘the political perspective of a feminist’ actually entails. On a related, more practical level, the focus on linguistic micro-level processes that characterises the procedures and analysis produced when using this type of discourse analysis was not deemed suitable for this study, concerned as it is with discerning affective-discursive patterns in texts and their connection to wider socio-emotional shifts and cultural formations. For these reasons, I support a different discursive approach to the analysis of my data, while remaining stimulated by the impetus to ‘understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality’ (van Dijk, 2001: 352).

4.2.2 An affective-discursive approach to the analysis of online and offline data

A discursive approach lends itself in equal measure to the analysis of online postings on Mumsnet’s Talk board and the interviews I conducted with users. As Hine (2015) notes, discourse analysis, in fruitful combination with ethnographic approaches, is suitable for the

analysis of online forums. Similarly, Jowett (2015) argues that online forums allow to access naturalistic data on social phenomena that are particularly useful for discursive psychological approaches interested in the construction of self and others and the subject positions being made available in digital contexts. Likewise, discursive psychology is a widely field-tested approach to the analysis of interview data (e.g. Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Scharff, 2012; Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

At the same time, I wanted to account for the emotional nature of my empirical data. The Internet provides not only a ‘storehouse’ of available data and information (Sade-Beck, 2004: 46), but online communication enables the development of social connections and relationships between users, facilitating the expression of emotions and affect (Sade-Beck, 2004). Within online communities such as the Mumsnet ‘population’, forms of belonging are generated, with intimacy and associated affective modes being ‘the currency of community’ (Driscoll and Gregg, 2010: 16). However, affective registers simultaneously infuse social formations across the online and offline space. For example, I show how contemporary scripts of maternal working femininities can involve feelings of suffering and pain, which characterise the ‘benchmark self’ in its relentless striving for perfection (chapter 5).

Given that one aim of this study is to explore the relations between sociality, technology and emotion, I draw on Wetherell’s (2012; 2015) affective-discursive approach, which is distinctly shaped by an understanding of affect as carrying discursive meaning. Viewing affect as inseparable from discourse, Wetherell (2012: 20) argues that

human affect is inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic (broadly defined) and the discursive. [...] [T]he main things that an affective practice folds or composes together are bodies and meaning-making.

Indeed, from the standpoint of a discourse analyst, Wetherell (2012: 21) notes ‘how applicable some of the key concepts of eclectic social psychological discourse analysis [...] remain’ for analysing affect. She cautions against a formulation of ‘affect as a kind of extra-discursive and uncanny excess’ (Wetherell, 2015: 84). This parallels Wetherell’s earlier (2005) insistence on the psychic and the social sphere as inextricably linked, and therefore of affect as *not* going ‘beyond’ discourse.

Crucially, I was also drawn to Wetherell's (2012: 3) approach as it offers a 'pragmatic way of thinking about affect and emotion as a basis for social research, especially new empirical research'. I found this practice and discourse-oriented perspective on the study of affect convincing, particularly in light of some accounts that celebrate affect as "the new cutting edge" by theorising it as 'offering an alternative model of subject formation' while lacking explanatory power and/or applicability as analytical tool, as Hemmings (2005: 549; 550) argues in a well-informed, sceptical account. Equally important for my analysis is Hemmings's observation that in particular Sedgwick's (2003) and Massumi's (2002) preoccupation with 'the good affect that undoes the bad' disables critical forms of analyses: they overlook that there are 'affective responses that strengthen rather than challenge a dominant social order' (Hemmings, 2005: 551). This critique aligns in notable ways with my understanding of affect as multidimensional, social and involved in both the production and regulation of gendered mediated subjectivities.

In the next section, I will first offer an overview of what I regard as the key dimensions of an affective-discursive approach that suits this study. I will then show how this approach, and the corresponding concept of affective practice, can be productively combined with the concepts provided by discursive psychology, offering appropriate analytical tools for my analysis.

4.2.3 Analysing mediated maternal working subjectivity through the cognate notions of affective practice, interpretative repertoire and subject position

While recognising that 'affective phenomena can often remain simply ineffable' and are continuously dynamic (Wetherell, 2012: 16), the affective-discursive approach advocated by Wetherell (2012; 2015) is characterised by a view of affect as *social*, *patterned* and *contextual*. These three dimensions of affect have guided my analysis in important ways. Reflecting a 'desire to recognize the way the world moves us' (Wetherell and Beer, 2014), Wetherell (2012: 4) emphasises the social dimension of affect, similar to discursive psychology's focus on the social nature of psychological processes (e.g. Billig et al., 1988); in this line of thinking, affects are always embedded in social practices, moving along and through everyday activities: for '[a]ffective practice focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do'. Importantly, affect does not exclusively operate on an individual level, but reaches beyond individual 'feeling states' and becomes imbued with power, bearing some resemblance to what Williams (1977) referred to as 'structures of feeling', and to what Ahmed (2004) theorised as the 'affective value' that is repetitively attached to certain emotional

subjects rather than others. In ‘affective economies’ (Ahmed, 2004), emotions are indeed not private, but material, social and psychic, characterised by their circulation and (temporal) attribution to various kinds of bodies and objects.⁶ This brings me to the second and third facet of affect in Wetherell’s (2012) conceptualisation: its patterned and contextual nature.

Indeed, at the heart of the analysis of affect Wetherell advances is an understanding of affect as patterned, contextualised and intersubjective: ‘the study of affect is inextricably to do with the study of pattern’ since affect is ‘practical, communicative and organised’ (ibid.: 16; 13). In addressing *how* such an analysis of affective-discursive meaning making can proceed, Wetherell (ibid.: 24) usefully suggests focusing on the concept of practice as the “‘smallest” or most coherent unit of analysis possible for the social science of affect’. She argues that

In affective practice, bits of the body [...] get patterned together with feelings and thoughts, interaction patterns and relationships, narratives and interpretative repertoires, social relations, personal histories, and ways of life. These components and modalities, each with their own logic and trajectories, are assembled together in interacting and recursive, or back and forth, practical methods (Wetherell, 2012: 13-14).

As noted earlier, the view of discourse as practice is a key feature in discourse analysis, resonating in particular with an understanding in discursive psychology of psychological processes as social practices (Wetherell, 1998). Thus, this approach of configuring affect as practice reflects its affinity with discourse, offering a way of analysing participants’ emotional attachments and patterns of investment as forms of discursive meaning making.

When envisioning affect as a form of practice, it is precisely its patterned, contextual and social-interactive nature which aligns, methodologically, with some of the core concepts of discursive psychology. Most prominently, it aligns with a key concept of discursive psychology: ‘the interpretative repertoire’ (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Interpretative

⁶ Illustrating this argument about the way in which emotions are publicly mobilised (through repetition) is for example the work of Tyler (2008) on mediated forms of middle-class disgust and abjection towards differently classed ‘others’, in particular young working-class mothers (see chapter 2, 2.2.2, see also Lawler (2005) and Skeggs (2005) for explorations of the relation between affect, class and norms).

repertoires are 'broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images', constituted by recurrent themes, tropes or formulations that structure accounts as units or patterned meanings (Wetherell and Potter, 1992: 90). Thus, an interpretative repertoire is a 'recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterisations of actors and situations' (Edley and Wetherell, 2001: 443). Compared to other traditions of discourse analysis that view 'discourses' as their analytical units, interpretative repertoires as discursive patterns allow for more flexible, dynamic analyses, recognising that participants' talk can be fragmented and may draw on, combine and move between a range of discursive resources available to the researched (Edley, 2001: 197-198).

The analysis, then, focused chiefly on identifying such repertoires as discursive patterns in the participants' language use and the operation of affect(ive practices) in posters and interviewees' talk. In addition, I draw on the concept of subject positions (Davies and Harré, 1990). Subject positions are fluid rather than fixed locations in talk and as such, positioning is understood as a dynamic discursive activity both facilitated and restrained by culturally available discourses (Davies and Harré, 1990; Edley, 2001). In chapter seven, for instance, I identify the subject position of the 'facilitating wife' through which Mumsnet posters frame caring discourses and address divisions of care, showing how this position becomes imbued with affect. Focusing on who is being hailed or implied by particular discourses (or repertoires), the concept of subject positions 'connects the wider notions of discourses and interpretative repertoires to the social construction of particular selves' (Edley, 2001: 210). There is then a close-knit nexus between subject positions, interpretative repertoires as patterns structuring the participants' accounts and, arguably, affective practices. I therefore suggest that the tools provided by discursive psychology and Wetherell's (2012) notion of affective practice and her corresponding affective-discursive approach can be brought together to productively analyse the interviews and forum discussions.

4.2.4 Coding

My analysis of both the discussion forum threads and interview transcripts started with a phase of close and repeated reading of each of these sets of texts. This iterative process enabled me to become gradually familiar with the whole data corpus, developing my analytical insights progressively (e.g. Wiggins and Potter, 2017). Indeed, this non-formulaic approach to searching, coding of the data and analysis in a recurrent fashion was key to the sense-making

of the data, as I will explain. Throughout the coding stage, the 'precursor to the analysis', I was oriented towards the organisation, construction and action orientation of discourse rather than a rigid (and passive) step-by-step process (Wiggins and Potter, 2017: 17).

Akin to a more grounded coding procedure, I sifted through the entire data corpus multiple times, undertaking a process of coding and re-coding. Hepburn and Potter (2003) note how the sifting and coding process itself can result in analytical routes evolving or wearing off. This was the case with the – seemingly peripheral – issue of certain childcare-related questions (such as 'Who is looking after your children?' or 'How will you cope with these children?') many of my interview participants were being asked by their colleagues and employers. Whilst I was, informed by the literature, initially looking for *explicit* instances of maternity and pregnancy discrimination across my dataset, the recurring pattern of these 'uncalled-for' questions alerted me to the way in which maternity discrimination may often play out in such *subtle* yet significant ways. Thus, I returned to the interview transcripts and searched the data corpus for both variability and consistency in regards to this phenomenon. Indeed, the repeated searching and coding confirmed my analysis (see chapter 6), and developed a new analytical route. This, of course, also meant abandoning, or rather drastically altering and rethinking the notion of 'explicit' maternity discrimination as a way of coherently making sense of the entire data corpus.

This discourse-oriented approach to coding that is guided by the construction and operation of discourse is well-captured by what Potter has termed 'the spirit of skeptical reading' (Potter, 1996, cited in Gill, 2018). Underpinning the entire coding procedure, this 'spirit' enabled me in particular to challenge the taken-for-grantedness of commonly held assumptions and beliefs such as the idea that flexible working conditions and companies' 'family-friendliness' are self-evidently a 'good' thing for working mothers. Indeed, as I argue in chapter 6, women's need, desire, and even *gratitude* for flexible working arrangements may tighten exploitative structures in the contemporary workplace. This finding was generated because, in a discursive psychological vein, I moved 'beyond the explicit features' of participants' talk and 'inquire[d] into normative constraints that cause[d this] particular conversational pattern to occur' (Scharff, 2011b: 211).

4.3 Practising ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’

4.3.1 *A note on the quandaries of representativeness and representation*

The aim of this study is not to produce generalisable findings, or gain a representative sample of working mothers or users of the website Mumsnet. Rather, this research focuses on personal sense-making and the subjective views of women who seek to combine waged work with parenting. Foregrounding a concern with women’s constructions of these aspects of their lives, at the heart of this study is an interest in producing rich research that says something meaningful about working mothers’ experiences in this particular spatial/geographical, contemporary context. Thus, in terms of representativeness, this study asks: what do *these* women’s accounts represent? (see also Orgad, 2003: 105).

By posing this question, it becomes evident that questions of representativeness are entangled with the intricacies of representation. Issues of representation have been widely debated by feminist scholars in epistemological discussions, attempting to address questions such as ‘Who can be a knower?’ (Code, 1991), ‘Whose knowledge?’ (Harding, 1991), ‘Who speaks for whom?’ (Mohanty et al., 1991; in Doucet and Mauthner, 2006: 40) and, famously, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (Spivak, 1988). Here, Spivak (ibid.) shows how acts of representing and ‘speaking for’ subaltern, oppressed cultures and groups involves the risk of muting and appropriating their voices, rather than turning them into agentic ‘producers of political discourse’ (see also Mohanty, 1991 for a similar argument concerning the representation of ‘third world women’ in western feminist discourse. See e.g. Code, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2012 and Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 83-104 for a more extensive discussion on feminist epistemology).

I do not consider my sample of interviewees as disempowered; indeed, as I have shown, my participants are in socioeconomic terms privileged. Yet, issues of representation apply in this (as, of course, in all) research. As researchers, and especially feminist qualitative researchers, we do speak about our participants, but aim to produce not only research ‘on women, but *for* women and, where possible, with women’ (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006: 40, original emphasis; see also Fonow and Cook, 1991; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). This draws attention to theoretical, methodological and very practical representational complexities in relation to

differences between (groups of) women (e.g. Lorde, 2001 [1984]; Collins, 2000 [1990]), as well as differences between the position of the researcher and the researched.

Advocating a political-pragmatic approach, I share Letherby's view (2003: 78), building on Kelly *et al.* (1994). Letherby acknowledges her privileged position as a 'knower', conceding that this 'may involve some misrepresentation of respondents' words/ meanings/ experiences', yet maintaining that 'a final decision is necessary if feminist research is to say anything at all, have any effect at all, and not be concerned solely with issues of representation rather than "reality" itself'. In my opinion, the emphasis here is on the need to speak *about* our participants in order to speak *out*, and for feminist research to be politically effective.

In line with this, a focus on the subjective, that is, acknowledgement of subjectivity as a key element of 'claims to know', is 'practicable, desirable and necessary' since it contributes to enhancing the integrity of feminist research (Letherby, 2011: 10-11). By taking a reflexive approach towards subjectivity in the research process, the next sections offers a reflexive and critical discussion of some components of my relationships with the interview participants.

4.3.2 *Emotions and the researcher-researched relationship*

The researcher-researched relationship is socio-politically complex and dynamic (e.g. Oakley, 2016) and research is co-constituted, viewed here as a 'joint product of the participants, the researcher, and their relationship' (Finlay, 2002: 531). In 'attempting to make explicit the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process' (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 118), feminist researchers routinely engage in reflective practices. Reflexivity comprises 'continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself' (Finlay, 2002: 532). According to Finlay (*ibid.*: 531), '[t]hrough the use of reflexivity, subjectivity in research can be transformed from a problem to an opportunity', increasing the integrity of qualitative research. Reflexivity and, very relatedly, emotion are thus sources of insight for feminist researchers (Letherby, 2003: 73) who aim to make their practices transparent so as to 'become vigilant about [their] own practice' (Spivak & Grosz, 1984-85: 184). At the same time, and equally important, feminist reflexivity is also an 'invitation to other voices' to call into question the researcher's conceptualisation of power and knowledge claims (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 119), since, of course, 'making positions transparent does not make them unproblematic' (Spivak, 1988: 6 cited in Pillow, 2003: 183).

To mitigate, however, the risk to engage in infinite navel-gazing and ‘excessive self-analysis’ to the detriment of the research participants (Pillow, 2003: 532), I have found Pillow’s (2003) writing on what she terms ‘messy’ and ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ useful. By ‘exposing the difficult’ and engaging with the ‘unfamiliar’, Pillow (ibid.: 177) suggests we ‘explore *how* it is we go about talking about our positions, that is how we practice reflexivity’ (ibid., original emphasis). In order to address this call, I want to illustrate the ‘uncomfortable realities’ of doing feminist qualitative research, by talking about some ‘messy’ and difficult examples of my research practice in relation to emotions in the research process (Pillow, 2003: 193).

Challenging ‘malestream theory’ and the positivist exclusion of affect and emotion (Letherby, 2003: 63), feminist research has included the study of emotion. Several feminist scholars have argued that emotion constitutes data in itself (e.g. Hochschild, 2003 [1983]; Wetherell, 2012; see also 4.2 for further exploration). Emotions are equally an important part of the research process (Jaggar, 1997; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Keeping a detailed research diary enabled me to ‘attend specifically to the role of affect in the production of knowledge’ (Fonow and Cook, 1991: 9), and enhanced the critical, ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ that was a key practice throughout my research trajectory (Pillow, 2003).

I experienced a range of emotions during interviewing. Reflecting on the experience of conducting the interviews, I felt excited about, and even thrilled by, the human connections and relationships that developed during the interviews; yet at other times also tired of having to maintain this excitement in the face of recurring topics and ideas. Occasionally, I felt distressed and uncomfortable when participants openly challenged or criticised my research topic (rare), made derogatory remarks about feminism or (more often) voiced discourses and positioned themselves in ways that I regard as problematic. I felt pressure to stick to timings so participants could return to their work or attend to their children and families; and I felt relief when the power ‘flow’ during the interview did not focus intensely on my role of the ‘authority’. Pain and anger, but also feelings of powerlessness, sadness and frustration surfaced when participants told me about their experiences of discrimination and their unrealised desires (chapter 6), which led to feelings of confusion — will my research be in some way useful to women? Can I live up to my own objective not to be an exploitative researcher but conduct research that is ethical and reflexive (see also 4.4)?

Engaging in critical reflection on the interpersonal dynamics in the research process meant the development of increasing awareness of my social location as a researcher. While it is difficult to understand exactly which element of identity and social positioning affect research relationships (Phoenix, 1994), and certain power relations may remain hidden (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002: 119), in the following section I attempt to discuss how my position as a non-native speaker, the topic of my research and my role as a PhD candidate, along other factors, influenced my fieldwork relationships with the participants, focusing on emotion and power (relations and differences).

Multilateral power dimensions – for instance, in that the researcher is not always and necessarily the most ‘powerful’ in a setting – flow through fieldwork relationships. For example, some individual interviews generated feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. My role as a PhD student had implications for several interviews, yet bore particular relevance during interview situations with participants who had already completed a PhD, two even in the very same discipline where I situate my research (cultural and gender studies and sociology). Although I have experience in carrying out interviews, the similarity of our backgrounds, and their academic advancement, made me feel quite insecure in regards to my interview schedule and research: Were the questions ‘to the point’? Could they be better? And, I wondered, what were these respondents’ motives for participating? (I discuss this further in the next section). A further related circumstance that at times contributed to feelings of insecurity on my part was entwined with the fact that even though I conducted all but one interview in English, and consider myself a fluent speaker, English is not my mother tongue. This was a particular issue in one of the interviews that I want to focus on here. The encounter with this respondent started with her critiquing or rather correcting the wording of my recruitment post on Mumsnet’s Not-for-Profit forum. She ‘bumped’ the post by posting the following message on the thread:

I am bumping this for you as you may not get very many responses on the NFP [not for profit] forum. ~~obviously it would be naughty of you to post it anywhere else, like AIBU for example~~

When you say 'having children' do you mean mothers who are pregnant? or do you mean mothers who *have* children?

While my recruitment thread had previously received responses from prospective participants, these stopped abruptly after this ‘public exposure’ of my unclear language. Mumsnetters are known for their vigilance in regards to grammar and language use (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). Needless to say, I felt extremely embarrassed – a feeling that was further amplified because the respondent’s posting style, using strike-through and referring to the AIBU forum in a funny-witty way (see chapter 9), indicated her position as a regular, experienced user of Mumsnet. Nevertheless, I contacted her via the personal messaging function, thanked her and tried to clarify my recruitment criteria, inviting her to take part in the study. Her subsequent responses were:

I am happy for you to send me information but I think you misunderstood my post. I wonder if English is not your 1st language? You have phrased your request as 'mothers who are having children'. This means mothers who are pregnant, ie in the process of having children. If you mean mothers who already have children you need to say "mothers who have children", otherwise the implication is that you are only interested in hearing from pregnant females.

Please don't think I am being super-critical about your English, it's simply that my daughter is doing her finals dissertation and I know how important it is to be completely clear in what you say.

I was grateful for this (rightful) correction, yet my position as a non-native English speaker put me in a particularly vulnerable position during the interview that was arranged and conducted after this exchange. Indeed, my feeling of discomfort played out in the interview in several ways. Throughout the interview, I felt uncomfortably as if my language skills were being tested, which made me feel quite stressed and hyperaware of the wording of any utterance during this interview. Due to this focus on my own emotions and oral fluency during the interview, the battery of my recording device run out just before the end of the interview without me noticing it, thus the last minutes of the interview were not recorded. While there obviously is no linear or even causal relation between the malfunction of the recording device and the emotions I experienced during the interview, I believe that my emotions (and the deactivated recorder) indicate her powerful position as a native English speaker, but also an experienced Mumsnet user. This conjuncture may also be evidenced by the effective ‘shut

down' of my recruitment post, as it did not receive any further responses after this respondent's intervention.⁷

This case of participant's exercising of power in the research process was not singular, and the next section discusses a range of motives for research participation as another interrelated aspect of the shifting nature of the researched-researcher dynamic.

4.3.3 'Giving (back) to research'?

A further component of the complex researcher-respondent relationship that I found intriguing concerns the motivations of respondents for participating in the research. Motives for research participation are certainly varied, ranging from a 'combination of altruism and selfishness' (Oakley, 2016: 208), experiences of the interview as therapeutic, a space where one's story is being heard and where one is considered valuable and knowledgeable (Skeggs, 1995) and can experience 'a sense of flattery' (McRobbie, 1982: 56) to an opportunity to air complaints (Olsen and Shopes, 1991).

According to Oakley (2016: 196), more attention should be paid to 'the notion of the "gift" as a framework for research participation'. Here she builds on and expands her earlier (1981) argument suggesting that non-hierarchical interview situations could generate friendship between the researched and the researcher. I would not go to such lengths, and I do not characterise my relationships with all the participants in such a way. Indeed, the idea of an equal relationship between participant and researcher has been challenged, and the powerful position of the researcher highlighted in regards to multiple stages of the research process, including the selection of data and issues of representation post fieldwork (Letherby, 2003: 75-78). Yet, participants do donate their time, and, quite literally, research material, without control over the use of the 'gifted' material (Oakley, 2016). The concept of the gift relationship also usefully highlights the 'dependence of researchers on what research participants are willing to contribute from the memories and stories of their lives' (ibid., 209).

I found this a fitting way of starting to think through the motivations of some the interviewees to participate in this research project. While the respondents' motives were diverse, some

⁷ As I discuss earlier, also the affordances of the forum played a role in the recruitment process, which led me to alter and diversify the recruitment strategy.

participants expressed, implicitly or, sometimes, in direct ways, the hope their accounts would constitute ‘good data’. One interviewee tried to check with me throughout the interview if she was fulfilling my ‘expectations’, or answered my questions in the ‘correct’ way. She asked for instance: ‘Is that the kind of detail that you want?’, suggesting she wanted to be a ‘good research subject’ by donating the ‘right’ kind of materials and accounts in her endeavour to be ‘helpful’. This raised questions in relation to my intention to enter into non-exploitative relationships with participants, and my being in the uncomfortable role of the researcher ‘authority’ who evaluates, selects and determines what constitutes ‘valuable data’.

Other participants tried to connect with me and the research in distinct ways. I shared academic interests and background with some participants, with one interviewee telling me she was writing an advice book on motherhood, drawing on interviews with new mothers. We quickly built rapport during the interview, and for several hours had what felt like a kind of well-informed ‘peer-to-peer’ conversation. Another participant who worked in academia implied, light-heartedly, she hoped for spiritual reciprocity:

This is all karma for me, you see, it's all about giving back to the other side of research in the hope that I get some kind of karma [...]. It's the general karma, if I participate in somebody else's research then people will participate in mine heh heh

In a much more practical way, yet another respondent was interested in establishing a kind of mutuality. She was looking to do a PhD and indicated in our email exchange prior to the interview she wanted to ‘pick my brains’ to find out more about the PhD journey and work involved in writing a proposal.

By highlighting these motives (which of course may not be the exclusive motives), I do not suggest that interviewees who were hoping to contribute to my ‘successful’ data generation or aimed at ‘recovering’ something from participating, offered accounts that would constitute ‘bad’ or ‘good data’. Rather, the motivations and motives discussed here reflect some of the ‘uncomfortable realities’ and ‘messiness’ of interviewing (Pillow, 2003) and the complex and dynamic sociopolitical nature of the relationship between researcher and researched. The power dynamics which characterise (and sometimes drive) this relationship are, as I have briefly demonstrated, not unilateral. As Letherby (2002: 116) highlights, it is important to ‘recognize that [the] respondents may not necessarily feel that they need to be empowered by

[the researcher]. So it is important not to over-passify [sic - over-pacify] respondents within the research situation' by automatically viewing them as vulnerable.

4.4 Ethical considerations

While I have touched on several ethical issues in the preceding sections, I wish to give a fuller account of the ethical issues considered in association with conducting this research. Ethical considerations relating to the use of interviews and user-generated online data in this study were informed by ethical guidelines (franzke et al. and the Association of Internet Researchers, 2020; British Sociological Association, 2017; British Psychological Society, 2021), and as such this project received ethical approval from the relevant Research Ethics Committee at City, University of London (School of Arts & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee). Here, I will first focus on considerations that pertain to the use of online communications from Mumsnet's open-access discussion forum, and then discuss ethical issues arising in relation to face-to-face and online interviews. The last part offers some reflections on the ethics of analysing and writing research.

4.4.1 Reproducing online communications from Mumsnet's discussion fora

Respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons and minimising harm are basic ethical principles, which apply in equal measure for the study of online *and* offline contexts (British Psychological Society, 2021). The fundamental question whether the connection between a person's online data and her physical person may cause psychological or emotional harm has guided my ethical research practice with regards to the use of online user-generated data (see also Markham and Buchanan, 2012).

Internet(-mediated) research is, at the current time, considered heterogeneous and dynamic (franzke et al. and the Association of Internet Researchers, 2020). Consequently, as indicated above, my approach to ethical decision-making in the virtual Mumsnet environment aligns with the Association of Internet Researchers' recommendation of a 'process approach' or case-by-case approach that is context-oriented and bottom up (ibid). In this vein, Varis (2015: 58) argues that 'the online environments studied cannot be taken as self-explanatory contexts, but need to be investigated for locally specific meanings and appropriations'. Following the approach of other researchers who have previously conducted research on online forums (e.g. Favaro, 2017; Seale et al., 2010; Venäläinen, 2020), and Mumsnet in particular (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013; 2016), I regard Mumsnet's open-access forum as a public space and forum

contributions as being in the public domain, thus usable for research purposes. I will expound the underpinning ethical considerations in relation to the particular case of Mumsnet in the following.

A key ethical complex that is particularly applicable to online research presents the assessment of public-private boundaries (British Psychological Society, 2021; British Sociological Association, 2017), with a common observation being discrepancies between user expectations of privacy and usage of highly accessible online spaces like the Mumsnet forum (e.g. Markham and Buchanan, 2015). Thus, forum contributors may have perceptions that their postings, despite being in the public domain, are of a more private nature, and the intended public is possibly not congruent with those who are effectively in the position to access posts.

With regards to the Mumsnet forum, these public-private concerns are alleviated through two substantial and distinct features. First, access to Mumsnet's online discussion forum is open, and contributions can be read without restrictions. Users are however required to register in order to post on the forum. Upon registration users are asked to agree to the Terms of Use, which state that their contributions may be used outside the forum without further consent requested: 'We have the right to publish, edit or reject any User Content that you send us either via email, via the site or in writing via post for any purpose whatsoever, commercial or otherwise, without payment to you' (Mumsnet Terms of Use, 2021). For instance, Mumsnet uses forum content in the form of direct quotes in book publications (see e.g. Gambles, 2010; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013), in email newsletters to registered users and on publicly accessible editorial website content pages.

Second, while both my own and existing research on Mumsnet highlight that anonymity is an 'extremely strong value' (Mackenzie, 2016: 12), the forum allows posters to use a pseudonymous name of their own choosing. Moreover, users are taking their own measures to protect their anonymity, in particular through selective sharing of demographic or personal information such as names or places (ibid.; Hine, 2014: 582). Furthermore, identifiable details such as the gender of their children are commonly altered (Mackenzie, 2016: 12). In this research, usernames are removed for two reasons: First, to further preserve the anonymity of those posters whose contributions form part of the data corpus; second, because pseudonyms can be a vital element of posters' digital persona (boyd, 2014).

In line with my process-based ethical research practice, I was mindful to respect and adapt to the ethical conduct established between the users of Mumsnet. As outlined in chapter three (section 3.4), the value of anonymity on Mumsnet is bound to an online-offline (membership) segregation. Thus, it would have been unethical to try and connect the interview participants' offline identity with their online persona. I have therefore abstained from any attempts to determine or locate the online contributions of my interviewees.

While I hold that undisclosed observation and the unobtrusive collection of data may not cause harm to those posters whose communications I reproduce in this research, I acknowledge that (most) contributions are searchable, even 'googleable'. Yet again, users are advised and well-aware that their anonymous postings are publicly accessible and may potentially be used outside the forum, for instance by the popular press. This was confirmed by many of the users I spoke to in interviews (see chapter 3, section 3.3.3). However, other than the 'penis beaker' incident where the poster's 'real life' identity was possibly revealed, in the research context here the focus – in a discourse analytical manner – is on prevalent, recurring patterns and themes rather than specificities or practices of individual users that could contribute to exposing posters' offline identities.

4.4.2 Interviewing working mothers

As a researcher conducting interviews I inevitably entered into social relationships with those participating in the study. Crucially, and as highlighted by the British Sociological Association (2017: 5), these 'research relationships should be characterised [] by trust and integrity'. My responsibility towards those studied entails, fundamentally, the protection of privacy and ensuring that participation may not have damaging effects on the psychological or social well-being of interviewees. This emphasises the significance of gaining the informed consent of interview participants. To this end, all interview participants were sent the information sheet and consent form (Appendix B and C) via email prior to the interview. The sheet clearly explains the nature and purpose of the research and how it is to be disseminated and used. I asked face-to-face interviewees to bring the signed consent form to the interview, and additionally also provided printed copies on location. In the case of online interviews, I asked participants to email a signed and scanned or photographed copy of the consent form.

When conducting on- and offline interviews, I asked the interviewees if they have understood the information on the information sheet and the form, and if they have any remaining questions

before the interview begun. At the start of each interview I emphasised that participation in the study was voluntary, re-advising interviewees of their right to terminate participation at any time without explanation. Few participants (on- and offline) sought confirmation that our conversation would be anonymous and confidential, typically before the start of the interview. In these cases, I reassured the participants of the anonymising measures in place in this research, comprising the withholding of personally identifiable information from the transcripts and all publications arising from this research.

Accordingly, as indicated above, I do not disclose identifiers such as names, workplaces or the exact location/residence of participants, but use pseudonyms or replacements instead. These considerations of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality are fully in line with the ethical guidelines outlined by the British Sociological Association (2017). Careful anonymising measures were of particular relevance since many participants shared with me experiences of discrimination at their present and/or previous workplaces, with likely damaging effects on the women's lives if their identities be revealed through my research. Equally importantly, I was extremely mindful that some of the interviewees were working at senior levels in male-dominated fields such as law, accountancy and consulting, where women are significantly underrepresented in high-level positions. I have therefore used (more) generic post and location/residency denominations when it seemed appropriate in order to protect the participants' anonymity.

In accordance with my recruitment criteria (3.6.1), I assumed that the women that I recruited for this research were, as adult professionals, physically and mentally fit to fully understand what participation in the study involves, and thus able to take part in the interviews. In addition, the interview questions were not intended to cause psychological discomfort. To the best of my knowledge, none of my participants was emotionally distressed, uneasy or upset during the interview. It was therefore not necessary to interrupt or reschedule any interview, or signpost interviewees to professional help or relevant services (e.g. through counselling or relevant organisations such as the work-life balance charity Working Families or the relationship support charity Relate).

4.4.3 Analysing women's online and offline voices

Ethical considerations follow through into the analysis. Despite my position of relative power as the researcher who designs the research, chooses the methods and questions and selects the

data presented in the analyses, I have sought to use my interview method, the semi-structured in-depth interview, in a collaborative way, allowing scope for interviewees' construction of their meaning. I have attempted to be true to both the online accounts reproduced and the accounts my interview participants shared with me. Yet, in the face of the messiness that empirical data inevitably represents, I am aware of the semblance, or illusion of coherence that I produced when I coded the data and wrote the analyses. Moreover, I fully acknowledge that the analyses presented in the following chapters constitute *one* possible interpretation, inextricably connected with what I bring to the research, both in terms of academic disciplines and associated epistemological context as well as my (personal) background and perspective.

I characterise my stance as a respectful and critical listener, building on Gill's (2007c) notion of 'critical respect' that was developed as an orientation to help navigating dilemmas in feminist discussions of agency and choice in research. She (2007c: 77) argues:

The role of the feminist intellectual must involve more than listening, and then saying 'I see'. Respectful listening is the beginning, not the end, of the process and our job is surely to contextualize these stories, to situate them, to look at their patterns and variability, to examine their silences and exclusions, and, above all, to locate them in a wider context.

In thinking through the difficulties of critically contextualising the voices of the women whose accounts appear in this study, I found Orgad's (2016: 478; 490, original emphasis) emphasis on the potential of feminist research to help articulating 'the lived experience of gender inequality' particularly valuable:

Listening to women's voices and the stories they tell, should help to inform accounts of the social structures of inequality that condition their subjectivities, and how these *structures*, rather than *women*, might be re-invented.

Thus, returning to my stance as a respectful and critical listener, I use the qualifier 'critical' to centre on the structural issues of gender inequality that shape women's lives. In so doing, I orient to women's voices as a way of contributing to unveiling how both subtle and explicit

structural forces impact on women's experiences of inequality and sense making of their social worlds.

Finally, in the following analytical chapters, I seek to enable the reader to evaluate and assess the reliability and validity of my analyses by including extended passages from both the interview transcripts and forum discussions, allowing 'readers to make their own checks and judgements' (Hepburn and Potter, 2003: 190). It is to this analysis that we now turn.

Chapter 5 THE BENCHMARKED SELF AND THE ILLUSION OF BALANCE: MOTHERING AND MANAGING TO PERFECTION

A neoliberal version of feminism, scholars have argued, has emerged in the context of family life and maternity (McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2018). At the heart of this formation is the cultural ideal of the ‘balanced woman’ which primarily focuses on the professional middle-class mother, as discussed in chapter two. The ‘balanced woman’ ideal promotes the key message that creating ‘a felicitous balance between public and private aspects of the self’ is desirable and attainable (Rottenberg, 2018: 14; see also Adamson, 2017a), promising that conflicting expectations to mother ‘intensively’ and simultaneously achieve professional success can be overcome. At the same time, exhortations to confidence circulate as ‘a distinctive expression of neoliberal and postfeminist culture’ (Gill and Orgad, 2015: 339), similarly suggesting that women’s success in various domains of life can be accomplished if only women and girls work on their inner selves. These intersecting, gendered incitements unfold in this particular time and place, and emerge against the background of an increasingly demanding neoliberal workplace culture and continuing inequalities in the home (e.g. Gregg, 2011; Hays, 1996; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). Integral to both the ‘balanced woman’ ideal and the hailing of woman and girls as confident then is that these both call forth a female subject that looks inwards, to her own psyche and behaviour, to overcome any obstacles to her flourishing in the workplace or at home, resonating more broadly with neoliberal feminism’s emphasis on handling structural issues and impediments individually and through self-management (Gill and Orgad, 2015; 2017; Rottenberg, 2018).

In this first analysis chapter, I explore the lived experiences of these pervasive idea(l)s through three key facets that seem to constitute the neoliberal maternal self. These are successful family management; perfection in the realms of mothering and work; and confidence-instilling parenting. Each of the three main sections of this chapter hones in on one of these particular facets of the maternal subjectivity incited by neoliberalism, and explores how the particular dimension of subjectivity is lived out and navigated. To this end, I draw on 29 interviews with users of Mumsnet who are professional working mothers. My research participants, by the majority, are part of the group of privileged women that, due to their socio-economic circumstances – being aspirational, well-educated, heterosexually partnered, in employment (often in senior roles) and firmly middle-class – may be understood as successful neoliberal

subjects. As I will show, these putatively positive notions of success, perfection and confidence-instilling parenting are operative for the participants, albeit in complex and sometimes painful ways. I analyse the research participants' accounts in line with the discursive psychological approach I discussed in chapter four. Accordingly, my analysis aims at identifying patterns in the interviewees' language use over how they talked about combining parenting and paid work, and their parenting approach. Throughout the following analysis, I present extracts from the interviews to illustrate such patterns, and discuss individual accounts with a view to also make sense of the larger data corpus. This approach enables me to analyse how contemporary discourses of balance and confidence contribute to constituting gendered subjectivities and shape individuals' experiences of working and parenting, as they are being discussed in the interviews. The constitution of gendered subjectivity in relation to balance discourses is equally central to my discussion of Mumsnet and is therefore also considered in later chapters (7 and 8).

Indeed, given that the three issues under discussion in this chapter connect in a number of ways to the lived experiences of maternal working femininity, several themes that emerge in this chapter are further explored in subsequent chapters. Due to the dual-sited nature of this study, some themes are linked to both the interview accounts of the research participants and Mumsnet postings. For instance, in this (interview-data) chapter I show that domestic inequality plays a role as linchpin of women's 'dual manager' positioning across both the home and work sphere; I also discuss inequality in the home in depth in chapters seven and eight, where I focus on posted accounts to Mumsnet. While the women I spoke to *are* Mumsnet users, I make the argument that domestic inequalities in particular are discussed differently in the online communicative space of Mumsnet and the interviews, pointing to the different communicative possibilities in these two sites. I will return to this aspect in subsequent chapters, and turn now to outline how this chapter will proceed.

First, I explore how a calculative logic informed the research participants' attempts to maintain and 'fix' their family lives in response to their role as 'dual manager' in both work and home contexts. With their capacities stretched between their jobs and homes, participants were finely attuned to technologies, strategies, and, crucially, a financial literacy attitude that would help to 'optimize' their home routines and time-squeezed family schedules. Yet, they also often spoke in an offhand manner of how the implementation and application of such calculative logics did not bring about work-family balance.

The second section examines the way that contemporary normativities around the ‘balanced woman’ ideal inveigled participants to lean towards a self-sacrificial approach to mothering, whereby they bore and accepted the costs of an intensification of pressure and working conditions. Analysing how the notion of the ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker is so widespread in the interviews, I explore how interviewees tended to benchmark themselves against such internalised, unattainable ideals of perfection. Their accounts were imprinted by distress, inner-directed competition and self-criticism because they were unable to be the ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker they felt they were expected to, yet had failed, to become. While the first and second main section deal with various dimensions of the lived experience of ‘balanced femininity’, in the final section, I explore how, by instilling confidence in their daughters, similar forms of self-regulation and self-work play out in the research participants’ approach to parenting.

5.1 Managing the neoliberal maternal self and the family: ‘fixing’ things for herself

Several commentators have pointed out that neoliberalism as a governing rationality percolates into the domestic realm as part of the expansion of neoliberal values into ‘the nooks and crannies of everyday life’ (Littler, 2018: 192; see also Brown, 2015; Fraser, 2009; McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2018). ‘In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it’, writes Wendy Brown (2015: 10), ‘we are only and everywhere homo economicus’ since ‘all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics.’ The domestic sphere then is not exempt from a neoliberal market rationality, but remodelled according to this logic.

The extension of market values into the domestic domain has been discussed in relation with the complicity, or ‘elective affinity’ (Fraser, 2009), between recent variants of (corporate) feminism and neoliberal economic agendas (e.g. Farris and Rottenberg 2017; McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2018). By evoking and incorporating feminist themes, McRobbie (2013) argues, neoliberalism’s accrual revolves around an increased attention to family life and maternity that casts the family as an enterprise to be managed, worked on and invested in. Rottenberg (2018) analyses how an economic logic reshapes and infiltrates the most intimate relationships that were once outside the market logic in a range of popular publications. This neoliberal family management becomes palpable through the ‘refiguring of motherhood in managerial terms’ (ibid.: 150). Care and reproductive work in the family then has become part of the overall

economisation of life, encouraging temporal and affective investments in family life for outputs or returns such as ‘memorable moments’ (ibid.). Undergoing a transformation into the ‘self-as-firm’ (ibid.: 136), the neoliberal family manager constantly works on the self in attempting to achieve success by integrating the realms of work and family. ‘Successful’ balance then is accomplishable in a market-oriented, efficient manner, presupposing a calculating, rational and ‘productive subject in all spheres of life’ (Adamson, 2017a: 317). As Rottenberg (2018: 15) argues, a ‘felicitous work-family balance [has] become a normalizing matrix that helps govern women by shaping their desires, aspirations, and behavior’; Orgad (2019: 72) calls this, after Berlant (2011), the ‘good life fantasy of work-life balance’. I turn now to examine the ways in which this notion ‘trickled down’ into the experiences of the research participants, and affected how they made sense of their lives.

5.1.1 *Dual managers*

In the interviews, I asked the research participants how a typical work day looks like for them. This almost always led to long accounts that strongly emphasised their organisational and managerial skills, echoing neoliberal family management discourse which normalises the re-envisioning of all social roles and spheres in rational, calculative terms. Crucially, they were often *dual managers*, holding significant managerial responsibilities for both public and private aspects of their lives. I do not suggest that parenting and paid work are necessarily comparable (in many ways they clearly are not). And yet, the psychological effects of the demands of the contemporary neoliberal workplace and the continuously prevalent ‘intensive mothering’ ideology can be usefully juxtaposed, focused as these both are on the relentless and exclusive dedication of time, labour and emotions to the job/child(ren) at the expense of the other domain (e.g. Gregg, 2011; Hester and Smicek, 2018; Hays, 1996):

The practicality is the project doesn't stop for a day, it doesn't stop over the weekend even anymore. So there's an expectation that you're going to be available, and if you're not available (3.0)

(Rachel)

24 hours a day. Seven days a week. I'm always on call. As a mother, you're number one.

(Katharina)

It is in this context of the ‘always on call’ mother-employee that most women did not only seem to be managers in the paid work context, but simultaneously appeared to envision the home sphere in managerial terms. Indeed, many participants stated the main responsibility for coordinating and managing various key elements of their private lives, such as the organisation of childcare, meal planning, the scheduling of various children’s leisurely and school-related activities, would lie with them. As such, some women referred to themselves as the ‘project manager’ in charge of supervising home operations. Opal, a 42-year-old senior manager in the healthcare sector with two school-age children, told me:

The way I describe it is I'm the pro(h)ject manager of the family. I manage most things with the children, he [husband] is great when he's here, but I organise everything, I know where everybody is, I know what [chuckling] things they need, you know. [...] When he's around, he's fabulous, but he's not here very much. He's away a lot of the week. And sometimes I get a bit resentful about that. And I do say I would never take a job that took me away from the children three nights a week.

Here, her husband’s frequent absence due to work-related travel is registered as contrasting with what she constructs as her responsibilities as ‘project manager of the family’ – organising day-to-day family life and being present at home. Her statement that she ‘would never take a job that took [her] away from the children three nights a week’ marks her emotional and temporal investment in the family. At the same time, her account implies it is her husband’s absence during the work week that plays a significant role in her positioning as family manager, which she ‘gets a bit resentful about’. Among my interviewees, Opal’s subtle expression of disappointment about her husband’s frequent absence was rare. However, alongside their often professional managerial roles, the family management as *their* job rather than their partners’ was a recurrent theme in the accounts of most of my research participants. Comparing motherly and fatherly contributions to the organisation of family life, legal researcher Sarah reported her belief that the vast majority of mothers in heterosexual couples would be in charge of the family timetable: ‘I’m sure you’ll find talking to people, 90% it’s going to be the mum doing the timetable.’ When I asked how this played out in her own life where she juggles two small children and a full-time job, she told me: ‘it feels like the family admin is me, much more than him. He just sort of turns up and the kids are somewhere and it’s fine’.

Likewise, the partner of Rachel, a 42-year-old project manager of a construction company and mother to a toddler, emerges from her account as having a relatively easy ride in terms of home responsibilities and organisation, compelling Rachel to be a dual manager across the public and private sphere. While the family mainly relies financially on Rachel's income, her partner is a chef who works shifts and comes back home tired from work and 'just wants to sit down'. Accordingly, Rachel constructed herself as responsible for 'the vast majority of everything', and even implied it is her fault that this unequal home situation reflects the domestic status quo:

I do the vast majority of the childcare and stuff like that. I definitely do all the house admin, I think I do the vast majority of everything. I think what I've done is I have probably enabled that over the years [...] I created this situation a little bit myself. [...] But then partly it's because of our hours of work, you know, it's circumstantial.

I was struck by her statement, partly because, as I discuss later, Rachel told me how she felt an enormous pressure to be both the 'perfect' employee and mother, which caused feelings of insufficiency and failure and filled her with anxiety. Since these feelings pertained in equal measure to both her work and home life, this tension was likely exacerbated by her primary responsibility, and associated strain, as sole family manager *and* main earner. 'But just one question I'm having', I probed in the interview, 'you said you're the main breadwinner, and have been for some years, did you and your husband ever consider paternity leave, because he's the partner who's earning less?' In her response, Rachel emphasised that she 'wanted to be with the baby for that first year', thus paternity leave, which would have meant returning to work earlier than her husband, was not an option. However, my question did touch on an issue that the couple had discussed just before she went back to work:

We did discuss it then maybe when it came to me going back to work, perhaps he could go part-time or even do the childcare, but I think he didn't really like that as an idea. [...] Obviously it's quite expensive childcare but (2.0) he just didn't want to not be working, which, you know, I understand.

Because 'he doesn't get paid like very much really', and Rachel is the 'major breadwinner', an arrangement in which her partner would have taken on a greater role at home by going part-time or becoming, perhaps for the pre-school years, a stay-at-home father would have made

financial sense, and clearly, could alleviate some of the work and responsibility that weigh on Rachel's shoulders. However, Rachel's account indicates that he adheres to a traditional identity as earner, privileging the public sphere of work over the private, even though the 'primacy of the breadwinner model of fathering' does not apply (Braun et al., 2011: 33). In foregrounding her understanding and acceptance of his job attachment, further discussion of this issue is dispelled.

To be sure, Rachel's role as main earner was rather exceptional than the norm among my interviewees. Similarly, not all partners of the women I spoke to were physically absent from the home for periods as prolonged and frequent as in Opal's case, and some of my participants were also traveling for work. Of course, as I discussed in chapter three, the research participants also worked in a range of different sectors and industries, with varying work hours and levels of flexibility (see chapter 6). However, like Rachel, Sarah and Opal, many of my interview participants did seem to have something in common: their partners were frequently on the periphery, taking up their places on the sidelines of everyday domestic and childcare activities rather than at the centre. Likewise, their high-demand workplaces were often built around the idea of the wholly committed 'ideal worker' whose inbuilt work ethos entails a clear prioritisation of paid work over unpaid caring responsibilities.

I explore a range of implications that arise from these incongruities of and disparities between the home and the workplace over the next chapters. For example, in the next chapter, I document how workplace inequalities often manifest in widespread instances of *maternity* discrimination, and played a crucial role for the majority of the participants' paid work experiences. Further, flexible working conditions – the 'panacea' to mothers' workforce participation – were frequently referred to as a matter of exceptional luck rather than the norm, instilling in the participants a sense of gratitude, which, I will argue, can give rise to subtle forms of exploitation. In turn, in chapters seven and eight, I focus on the public discussion of otherwise silenced inequalities in the private-domestic sphere through the lens of Mumsnet, focusing on a number of implications of the high visibility afforded to 'domesticity talk' in this space that enables posting women to feel political to an extent.

5.1.2 'Fixing' family life via a 'cost-benefit calculus'

What I want to focus on in the remainder of this section are the means and coping strategies the research participants devised and applied to their lives as 'dual managers'. In particular,

many interviewees told me about the way they invested significant amounts of time, energy and mental resources in the development of skills, techniques and planning that would enable them to balance family and work life. In ‘project managing’ both their jobs and families, they constantly worked on and to improve themselves and their family routines. As I argue, the participants’ constant attempts to ‘fix’ their family lives were often informed by a calculative approach that, imbued with a ‘financialized market lexicon’ (Rottenberg, 2018: 160), foregrounded the optimisation of resources such as time and various forms of labour and the associated maximisation of familial productivity and value. In drawing on transferable work skills such as project and time management skills, and perusing the online talk board of Mumsnet for strategies and tools to apply to their families⁸, the research participants constructed themselves as self-reliable subjects, constantly *en route* to maintaining and ‘fixing’ family life. Despite the fact that some interviewees self-critically told me ‘I think we just scramble’ (Deborah), many of the women I interviewed for this study constructed themselves as extraordinarily well-organised and disciplined, in accordance with the constitution of the maternal self as a family- and self-managing subject. At the same time, and as I will explore towards the end of this section, ruptures and dissonances with a calculative approach to parenting came also to the fore in research participants’ accounts, breaking with their conduct as managerial maternal subjects.

Resonating with what Wilson and Chivers Yochim (2017: 15) call the ‘digital mundane’, that is the ‘banal entanglements of media and everyday life’, the ‘online mamasphere’ and Mumsnet in particular offered inspiration for everyday tools and resources to help the interviewees accomplish busy family routines and master the family timetable. ‘The digital mundane’, Wilson and Chivers Yochim (2017: 16) note, ‘circulates a vast array of tools for “good” living, helping to make hard lives feel livable [...], while also mirroring and multiplying the threats of advanced neoliberalism’. As described by several research participants, ideas to make the day-to-day combination of family and work life feasible by using time and money efficiently, were found on Mumsnet.

Thus, in the face of the dual manager role many participants inhabited, and the associated time and labour constraints that characterised their lives, the interview participants resorted to a

⁸ As I will demonstrate in chapter nine, this is not the only way in which the participants engaged with Mumsnet, and, as indicated, chapters seven and eight discuss ‘domesticity talk’ on Mumsnet, considering its implications for the ‘speakability’ of domestic inequality.

range of techniques and tools including shared Google calendars, Excel spreadsheets, digital shopping lists and constantly updated to-do lists. In large parts because of their current jobs and vocational training, the familiarity with and mundane use of these tools and technologies was a matter of course. Notably, the application of such (work-sphere) techniques to their families then served to make family ‘work’ at the level of day-to-day life, aligning to some degree with Wilson and Chivers Yochim’s (2017) observation that women increasingly assume responsibility for underwriting the viability of their families by honing their capacities to govern the home.

In this vein, the 34-year-old financial analyst Ana, when showing me her weekly updated ‘household planner’, told me: ‘I’m super organised’, because ‘otherwise heh heh I(h) go crazy, it’s too much to remember’. Thus, the family timetable in the form of an online shared Excel spreadsheet includes not only the weekly meals for all family members, including healthy after-school snacks, but also childcare arrangements and pick-up timings, and upcoming administrative events such as doctor’s appointments and parent-teacher meetings. Her initial incentive to devise a running, detailed family schedule stems from the Mumsnet forum. Crucially, due to her familiarity with the software as a financial analyst, using Excel to plan and monitor in an all-encompassing manner her family’s activities seemed self-evident. And yet, applying both a technology and, more broadly, a highly rational, ‘financial’ literacy to her family life indicates how the domestic realm is rewritten in accordance with the neoliberal logic of market rationality. As Adkins (2016: 3) observes, under the new or post-Fordist sexual contract, domesticity, ideals of intensive mothering and paid work are placed ‘on the same continuous plane’. Ana’s account, and those of other research participants, suggest that this convergence between public and private aspects of life is a highly gendered process. While Ana’s husband has access to and benefits from the indispensable family spreadsheet, he, like the majority of the male partners of my participants, rarely contributed to keeping this important file updated. Managing the family schedule then enables Ana to control and calculate her family’s needs and activities, however, at the same time, it entrenches the ‘neoliberal regime of family government’ as gendered self-governmentality (Wilson and Yochim Chivers, 2017: 28).

Apart from the ubiquitous investment in list making, which for many interviewees was a key element of familial ‘task management’, meal planning was a popular strategy among the interview participants. Elizabeth, a 45-year-old private equity adviser and mother to one

primary-school-age child, told me she took inspiration to meal plan from Mumsnet: ‘I read a thing [thread] and it said meal plan so I was like, okay I’m going to meal plan. But I don’t think there are many of us that plan a month [chuckles]’. Now meal planning ‘really carefully’ on a monthly basis because ‘it makes sense, it saves so much time’, she feeds her experiences back to the online talk board on Mumsnet: ‘I recommend people meal plan and things’. Since the vast majority of Mumsnet users are employed women with children (Mumsnet, 2009; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013), the ‘people’ Elizabeth refers to here are most likely women and especially working mothers. With their capacities stretched across the public and home sphere, professional mothers, such as many users of Mumsnet, may find the idea to rationalise and therefore ‘optimise’ the everyday family feeding enticing. Alongside efficiency and innovation, what Rottenberg (2018) names a ‘cost-benefit calculus’ appears to inform Elizabeth’s enthusiasm for meal planning. Meal planning, as an aspiration to calculate time, resources and family routines via long-term scheduling and organisation, ‘requires constant self-surveillance and evaluation’ alongside an ‘optimizing of personal resources’ (Rottenberg, 2018: 73-74), and Elizabeth seems to be attuned to such thinking. In asserting that meal planning ‘saves so much time’ (indeed she plans her family’s meals and associated activities such as shopping on a monthly basis), Elizabeth’s account indicates the attraction of this approach in terms of reconfiguring this aspect of her home life into a fully rationalised regime, demanding a thoroughly self-responsibilised, managerial subject.

The participants’ endeavour to plan and schedule their families’ meals in a project or business-like manner ties in with a range of other disciplining discourses that link to the constitution of a self-responsibilised neoliberal maternal self. Drawing on discourses of frugality and environmentalism, Sarah highlighted that meal planning may be ‘a good economiser’, and Ana pointed out that ‘we end up reducing our grocery bill and avoid food waste, which is really a big problem’. At the same time, meal planning enabled some participants to fulfill their aspirations to provide healthy, home-cooked food rather than ‘fries and ketchup’ (Sonia), simultaneously drawing on middle-class norms and elements of a ‘good’ mother discourse. By providing healthy, ‘ethical’ food, the research participants performed forms of maternal labour that may have become part of their intersecting ‘maternal social and environmental responsibility’, preserving their children’s health while contributing to protecting the environment through conscientious consumption practices (Cairns et al., 2013: 101).

5.1.3 *'Productive' family time*

This managerial attitude was also reflected in the ways in which participants made sense of time. A heightened awareness of temporality and time scarcity reflects a 'neoliberal philosophy of time' that favours a value-adding discourse, which comprises the necessity to reframe all activities in productive terms, emphasising a productivity-oriented ethos (O'Flynn and Petersen, 2007). 'Neoliberal time', write Davies and Bansel (2005: 49) in relation to academic workers, 'ties individuals and organisations to the chaos of the market [...] and, in the interests of driving those individuals and institutions in directions favourable to the market, it regulates, controls, standardises and pressurises'.

Arguably, the participants were caught in such a view of time. In particular, efficient time use through appropriate management was constructed as vital in the interviews. 'It feels like you've got to make sure [...] that you spend your weekends having quality time, family time with them [her two children]', Laura, a senior trial manager and research fellow at a university with two primary-school-aged children, told me. The meaning of 'quality time' here, I suggest, implies the measurable nature of the time spend together as a family, with the 'outcome' of such quality time being the production of "'memorable moments'" (Rottenberg, 2018: 151). As such, the 'value' of quality time figures as "'correct investment" for eventual returns in the form of future memories' (ibid.). In this sense, the notion of quality time in relation to caregiving appears to chime with the 'directives about how to better *manage* the care-giving role' provided by neoliberal feminist manifestos (ibid., emphasis in original). Many participants shared with me stories that offered glimpses into such 'memorable moments': their children's 'funny laughs', special birthday parties and post-it notes saying 'mummy is the best' – the latter proudly curated on the office door. They were constructed as both signs of and rewards for their temporal and affective efforts, investments and unwavering commitment as mothers, but may also signify the increased emotional value attached to these 'memory tokens', arguably creating a form of affective maternal 'currency'.

In this vein, Lauren, a mother of two toddlers who is in her late thirties and works as a director of an insurance company, stated: 'It's about making the best use of your time when you're not working. So the weekends, the mornings when we have together, the evenings and really being there for your children'. This sense of a strenuously 'productive' family time and a feeling of time scarcity in everyday work-family routines also came to the fore in Ana's statement that she only spends two hours each day with her two children on a regular week day. Crucially, it

is time, and a lack thereof, that is perceived as the issue, rather than ‘the neoliberal system that generates the impossible workload and expectations’ and does not allow her to spend more time with her children (Davies and Bansel, 2005: 49). Due to this time shortage, experienced as turned against the individual, efforts to try and make the most of the time available were often emphasised, as in Ana’s account:

So we do homework on Saturday and I try to be balanced, on one weekend we do housework and another weekend we go have some fun. So this weekend we're going to do cleaning and we're going to stay home, next weekend we're going to get a car and go somewhere and do something fun so try to balance, you know, housework and life [chuckles slightly]

Ana’s statement points to the way in which also the weekends and ‘fun times’ are subject to a rigid schedule, drawing on the neoliberal rationality of managing and using time appropriately and effectively that by implication frames being idle as wasteful. Noteworthy is here how in Ana’s account the balance motive is re-inserted into the private sphere, as balance between domestic tasks and pleasurable experiences with the children. Spending time with her children ‘productively’, Ana’s account seems to suggest, has become a matter of calculation.

5.1.4 *Dissonances with calculative logics*

As I have demonstrated, a calculative approach to care work underpinned time use considerations and more broadly the gendered discourse of neoliberal family management. However, there were also moments of rupture in the research participants’ accounts, pointing to the way in which dissonances with such calculative logics became manifest. Childcare arrangements, costs and the implications of these for women’s employment were a frequently discussed topic in the interviews, and, crucially, often constituted a site where discordances with the idea of the private realm as a site of investment came to the fore. As McRobbie (2013) has discussed, this notion of the family as a ‘small business’ is underpinned by a neoliberal rationality in a way that erases earlier feminist calls for and efforts to implement socialised childcare. Contrasting the ‘nursery as socialist ideal’ (as a way of earlier feminist thinking about the organisation of reproductive labour) with contemporary neoliberal ideas of corporate family life management, she argues that contemporary neoliberal rationalities preempt possibilities for state-funded childcare (ibid.: 124). Indeed, the near absence of publicly provided and funded childcare manifests in soaring costs in the U.K., with services costing

‘around 30% of the income of dual earner couples on median incomes and around 20% for 1.5 earner couples’ (WBG, 2017). Thus, one of the key policy issues in regards to childcare is affordability, along with supply, access and quality (ibid.). While childcare costs in the U.K. are amongst the highest in the world (BBC, 2018), they are also ‘exceptionally high’ in London (London Assembly, 2012: 8), making the affordability of childcare a particular issue for Londoners, even the middle-classes.

This resonated in the accounts of the women I met for interviews in London. In relation to her current childcare arrangements, Deborah, a director of a television channel, who lives with her husband and two pre-teen children in an affluent area in London, told me: ‘we’ve got a real patchwork (.) we’re really only paying you know in a very *ad hoc* sort of way. It’s quite cheap actually.’ Her current complex childcare arrangement, consisting of a nanny share, semi-formal childcare provided by a student, some working from home days and relatives that live abroad and take care of the children during school holidays, allows to save money that in the past was spent for a full-time nanny. Organising childcare rationally and in orientation to economic parameters as to save money resonates with a self-motivating, calculating ‘investor spirit’ to all life spheres (e.g. Adkins, 2016; Gill and Scharff, 2011).

In contrast, Rachel, the 42-year old project manager who works in central London, expressed stark discomfort with the idea that childcare may be a matter of calculation and investment. This unease with a calculative approach to parenting seemed to pertain not only to the circumstance that her three-year-old son spends around nine hours in childcare on her work days – ‘I miss my son and he has been since he’s eleven months he’s been quite long hours in the childminder’s’ – but also to the transactional character childcare takes in neoliberalism, alongside the sheer expense. She told me about the moment when she receives her monthly bill from the childminder, saying: ‘every month it’s like these many hours and it’s like this much per hour and then so over a month it’s like 120 odd hours, seeing it in black and white, I was just like, oh my god!!’ Rachel’s expression of unease about counting childcare in hours reminds of the ‘measurability’ of childcare and the assignment of financial value to it; ‘seeing it in black and white’ serves as a visual illustration, and discomfiting reminder, of the way that the private domain is refigured through market metrics in this neoliberal moment.

Some of the most disturbing moments during the interviews were when several women told me that the combination of high childcare and living costs in London drove them to reconsider

having more than one child or children in general. For example, Sarah who has two children, with a deliberately planned five-year age gap, told me she would have considered a termination if she accidentally became pregnant earlier as she felt that for her going to work and paying for pre-school childcare would not have been affordable:

P: We couldn't have made it work with two children and full-time (.) yeh so we deliberately (.) have the five-year-gap so that we could afford for me to still go to work because I wanted to keep working and have a career. It was always very consciously there that (.) we actually had a pregnancy scan like after two years, sort of a very normal age gap, but we were like, well, even if I am pregnant we're not [3.0]

I: You would have considered a termination because the timing was wrong?

P: Yes, yes.

A similar calculation was prevalent in Ana's account. Having migrated to London from a large city in Brazil where she felt she was 'upper-middle-class', she experiences her work-family life with a toddler and a primary-school-age child as 'too complicated', stating 'I'd never have a child in London'. Ana, who works in the financial markets, implied she had some regrets about having children in this context since the complex work-family setup can only work for her if she employs a nanny who 'takes like 75 per cent of my earnings after taxes'. In particular the age difference between her two children, she said, 'knowing all the costs (.) adds five years of childcare, additional childcare. And that's way too much money and I'm not willing to pay this money'. While Sarah and Ana's accounts give an idea of how privatised, expensive childcare contributes to the financial struggles of even dual-earner, middle-class families, and indicate dissonances with the calculative market logics childcare is subjected to in neoliberal times, they do not break completely free from such logics, as their (inevitable) 'calculations' regarding the cost of childcare and its impact on their and their families' lives suggest. Their statements may even be read as concerned with the question of whether it is 'worthwhile' to have children under such (marketised) circumstances.

Overall, many of the professional mothers I spoke to felt that it is up to them to manage their families, on their own, or with little help from their partners. In response to the staggering, near impossible workloads associated with their roles as dual managers across the work and home sphere, they resorted to various technologies and strategies they were already familiar with through their managerial paid jobs, and applied these to their families' routines and lives. In

emphasising organisation, discipline and self-management as ways of coping ‘effectively’, they tended to embrace a productivity-oriented, calculative approach and ‘fix’ challenges to the viability of their jobs and families for themselves. This meant that, on the whole, the research participants worked on and to improve themselves, rather than challenging the social and material contexts their lives were embedded in and in large parts conditioned by. However, one key question has remained unanswered up to now – whether and to what extent the (extensive) embrace of the calculative logics I described so far yield a ‘successful’, even satisfying work-family balance, or how the research participants *felt* about ‘living’ the balancing act. In the next section, I therefore continue to explore the lived experiences of a ‘balanced femininity’, that is how the current ideal of a successful balance is negotiated on a subjective level, through its entanglement with the idea of the perfect.

5.2 Perfection: the benchmarked self

The idea of the perfect, cultural scholars have argued, is a key facet of neoliberal feminine subjectivity (Kanai, 2020; McRobbie, 2015; 2020) that can be situated amidst the wider context of the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism (Gill, 2017; Scharff, 2016). Prominently revolving around inner-directed competition and a ‘constant benchmarking of the self’ (McRobbie, 2015: 10), the quest to excel simultaneously in the private sphere as ‘perfect’ mothers and in the public realm as successful workers converges into a normative, disciplinary discourse of perfection directed overwhelmingly at working mothers rather than working fathers. This regulative formation intersects intimately with discourses of ‘intensive mothering’ (Hays, 1996) and ‘ideal worker’ ideologies (e.g. Acker, 1990; Christopher, 2012). Working mothers today still face ‘cultural contradictions’ – in a sociocultural context that emphasises economic productivity through waged labour while retaining ‘good mothering’ as an important aspect of normative femininity (Hays, 1996; see also Ennis, 2014). Although women have increasingly been recruited into the paid workforce, ‘intensive mothering’ prevails as the dominant cultural ideology mothers in Western countries are held accountable to (ibid.; Douglas and Michael, 2004; Sevón, 2012). The script of ‘intensive mothering’, coined by Hays (1996; see also e.g. Cappellini et al., 2019; Meyer and Milestone, 2016), stresses the need for mothers to be child-centered, unselfish and willing to devote time, labour and emotions to their children, but there are also hegemonic sociocultural scripts surrounding paid work. Many workplaces continue to be modelled on the ‘ideal’ male full-time worker norm that presupposes a putatively ungendered subject with few (if any) family responsibilities (Acker, 1990; Christopher, 2012). At the same time, mothers value the benefits that accrue to themselves and

their children through employment and feel rewarded and valued at work (Christopher, 2012) – sometimes even more than at home, where a second shift of household labour and a ‘third shift’ of emotional labour awaits them (Hochschild, 1989; 1997; see chapter 7).

The normative ideal of the ‘balanced woman’, Rottenberg (2018: 40) argues, rests precisely on the notion that it is both desirable and feasible to chart ‘a path between norms of “intensive mothering” and professional success’. In other words, ‘[i]t is possible to craft a happy equilibrium between work and family, and between the private and public aspects of oneself’, Orgad’s (2019: 56) reading of the ‘well-rounded woman’ ideal confirms. Promising that work and home life can be reconciled and a felicitous balance accomplished (signified as ‘success’ in both realms), these notions of perfection and success as key elements of contemporary maternal working subjectivity came to the fore in the research participants’ talk. As I argue here, the interviewees, on the whole, measured and self-evaluated themselves against the benchmark of the successful worker and the ‘perfect’ mother aka the ‘balanced woman’ – a benchmark which in part is being established and reinforced by Mumsnet, as my analyses in chapters seven to nine unpack. This benchmarking was characterised by the participants’ attempts to live up to this ideal of ‘well-roundedness’ and achieve the balancing act. In the following section, I will demonstrate that it entailed: a leaning towards a self-sacrificial, child-centred approach to mothering; an acceptance of the invasion of their *own* well-being and time and an intensification of work and pressure on themselves; and the production of distress, suffering and self-criticism due to not being able to be the ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker they wanted, and felt they had, to be.

5.2.1 ‘Perfect’ mothers (make self-sacrifices)

Many participants exhibited a perceptive knowingness, awareness and clear self-reflection in identifying pressures and expectations to excel and be ‘perfect’ in both their careers and as mothers. Opal framed her sisters’ decision to quit their careers as lawyers in terms of internalised standards of perfection:

We do, don't we, as women, generally, whatever we're doing, we will try to be the best at it, you know. I know for example my sisters, they were career ladies, and they didn't feel that they could be the best at being a mum or being, they were lawyers, or being a lawyer so they decided: right, we're mums now. You know, they gave up because they had to. Whatever they're doing, they have to do to perfection heh heh. So I reflect on

that and think you know we expect that of ourselves don't we. [...] We've got that in ourselves I think, and you can't fail as a mother, you can't fail in your career because you built that before they were born.

The legal profession is notoriously known to be especially 'family-unfriendly' due to extremely long working hours and practices presupposing a professional (white, male) subject with few, if any, caring responsibilities, and thus may present a particularly difficult terrain for female working parents (Sommerlad, 2016). However, Opal broadens this picture to the wider ideological and social context, suggesting a striving for perfection is 'inbuilt' in *women* more generally ('We do [...] as women, [...] we will try to be the best at it'). By stating 'we've got that in ourselves [...] you can't fail as a mother, you can't fail in your career', she suggests that internalised ideas of perfection shape her own feelings and thoughts and perhaps those of other mothers who, in contrast to her sisters, remain in employment.

Unlike her sisters who exited from the workforce because they felt 'they had to', Opal's home and work trajectory is a different one. Her dream was, she told me, 'that I would be a part-time mum, part-time work'. She quickly added: 'But I think I was kidding myself i(h)n th(h)a(h)t I think working is my identity. I love my kids. But I think I'm quite career-driven. That took me a little while to accept that.' In order to advance her career in the healthcare sector, she had to give up on this dream, in large parts due to the inability to hold a more senior position on a part-time basis:

I think I'm quite ambitious. While I was working part-time I couldn't go anywhere, does that make sense? I was kind of stuck in my position, it was stagnant. And then I had to go back to full-time to kind of progress, which is sad. (.) It's really sad, but I definitely needed to do that for myself I think. So we had a really big discussion. And I said I won't be able to do the 30 hours. I do the pick-ups and all of that and, you know, it's really sad, but actually something I was willing to sacrifice. That was a choice that I made, that wasn't financially driven, that was actually I want that next job.

In this account, Opal states that her progression (from middle to senior management) required her not only to consider going back to full-time work hours, but also triggered a 'really big discussion' with her husband who 'luckily' told her: "'Whatever you want to do, we'll work round it'". Though she describes her husband as 'really supportive' in this context, I have

discussed (section 6.1.1) how Opal's husband is, during the week, largely absent from the home and does relatively little to contribute to home life, positioning her in the role of 'project manager of the family'. This implies that working out the feasibility of negotiating this new home-work situation is a task that, either way, falls primarily to her. While she has renounced the dream to be the 'perfect' mother who works part-time, she refers multiple times to feelings of sadness about this desire to realise her career ambition, and, as she told me, her willingness to sacrifice the hours for the more senior job – hours that the 'good', child-centred mother would spend with her children. Her implicit feelings of guilt about this prioritisation of her career, I suggest, are reinforced by the circumstance that the choice to increase her working hours was not primarily 'financially driven' but a result of her aspiration to get 'that next job'. Later in the interview, however, Opal told me about a recent development:

Last year I reduced my hours to 30 hours a week, because I needed to support my son [...] So he's in year eight now, he was going up to senior school [...] And that was the first time when he didn't want a childminder, you know, so I really had to be there for him. So I was able to reduce my hours to 30 hours a week, but all that happened is that I had the same workload.

Resonating with Orgad's (2019: 99) observation that 'as the children grow up they need their mothers (no mention of fathers) more, not less', here, Opal constructs herself as needed for her son's development and his academic and social achievement. In order for her son to 'make it' in senior school, the implication is, she the mother, rather than the childminder (or the father who remains completely absent here), had to be more present. The educative and emotional support of her pre-teen son, importantly, occurs at the cost of a worsening of her employment situation where the reduction of her hours and salary is not matched to a decreased workload: the 'expectations of me are the same'. This 'sacrificial approach to parenting' (Vincent, 2017: 544) has been referred to by Lareau (2003) as 'concerted cultivation', a parenting style whereby the child becomes a 'project' that affluent middle-class parents, especially mothers, engage in.⁹ Other than the working classes, whose parenting approach Lareau (2003) describes as being led by a belief in 'the accomplishment of natural growth', middle and upper-middle-class

⁹ While Lareau's research context is the U.S., see also Vincent (2017), Vincent and Ball (2007) and Orgad (2019: 99-102) for how this childrearing practice plays out in the U.K., and Karsten (2015) for the Chinese context.

parents are viewed as pre-occupied with ‘concerted cultivation’. Cultivating their children’s skills and abilities in a ‘concerted fashion’ means aiming at augmenting their children’s “cultural capital” (i.e., skills individuals inherit that can then be translated into different forms of value as they move through various institutions) for the future’ (ibid: 7).¹⁰ For the sake of their children’s future, middle-class parents’ lives therefore revolve around their children’s organised school, leisure and extracurricular activities, encouraging children to ‘acquire skills that could be valuable in the future when they enter the world of work’ (ibid.: 4).

Because of this prioritisation of the child’s development, Lareau (2003) emphasises that there are costs for parents entailed, especially mothers, such as time, effort and intense labour demands that are placed on busy parents, in particular mothers. In the example above, these costs for Opal are high. Opal makes the sacrificial decision to accept a rather adverse employment situation that involves more stress for less pay, despite the fact that she describes herself as ‘quite career-driven’, ‘ambitious’ and invested in her career. (Indeed, as cited above, Opal stated ‘working is my identity’). According to the discourse of intensive mothering, this would suggest that, ultimately, the worker identity is ‘an addendum to that of mother’ (Vincent, 2017: 546). While this may be the case, I want to advance a further reading: I suggest that this is *not* a clear privileging of the private (her children) over the public (her job), but rather a situation where Opal is shown to invade her *own* well-being and time in order to ‘balance’ job demands and parenting, intensifying the pressure on herself.

This was not uncommon. Lauren, the director of an insurance company and mother to two toddlers, told me with pride, ‘I don’t work at all on the weekends’. However, since she started a family, she ‘squeeze[s]’ all of her frequent overseas business trips into the working week. Pre-children, she would have been away for seven days. Now ‘doing three cities in three days, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver’, she has a ‘really, really hectic week’, but, she emphasised, this way her ‘trips don’t infringe on the weekend’, which she can spend with her children. She ended her statement by saying:

¹⁰ Aspects of the concerted development of children also resonate with McRobbie’s (2013: 130) observation that, as part of the ‘professionalisation of domestic life’ and motherhood, the middle-class mother ‘endorses the “intensification of mothering” as a mode of investment in the human capital of infants and children’ by directing ‘her professional skills to ensuring the unassailable middle class status of her children’.

I think it's worth it doing it that way rather than having any down time on the trip, because I want to still be there for both weekends either side of the trip. You have to change sometimes, some of the things you do, because you've got priorities, and my family is obviously my priority, but I still got to do my job [lower voice] and I got to do my job properly too.

In order to be at home at the weekends, Lauren also embraces a huge increase in stress and time pressure during the periods of her work travel, with profound implications for her life quality during 'the Monday to Friday'. However, like Opal, Lauren is not a 'complainier' who would locate and name the problem (Ahmed, 2021). In some contrast, in later chapters I explore Mumsnet as a space that not only allows, but arguably encourages, maternal complaint and anger, for instance through the 'Leave the Bastard' (LTB) trope (chapter 9), pointing to some of the differences in the communicative possibilities in online and offline sites. Indeed, Lauren's statement is characterised by the absence of any mention of these implications for herself (apart from using the verb 'squeeze', connoting – in this context – time pressure, and the acknowledgement to have a 'really, really hectic week'). Instead, she emphasises personal change, which does not only include changes in the way she organises her trips, but also extends to herself: By saying 'you have to change sometimes, some of the things you do', she accepts full responsibility for this work intensification under extremely pressurised time conditions, locating self-transformation and change as the 'solution' to combine a high-powered job and family. And yet, despite undergoing this change in self by taking on the cost of time and stress, as I discuss later, she still felt like not doing either working or parenting 'one hundred per cent'.

In both Opal and Lauren's accounts, their respective male partners are conspicuously absent, and so is social criticism that would for instance point out the deeply problematic working conditions that seem to characterise both Opal's public-sector and Lauren's private-sector job. Their focus is on themselves and the personal changes they felt they had to make, in order to support their children's achievement, and fulfil both workplace demands and parental responsibilities. Rather than fostering comparison between motherly and fatherly contributions to family life, or challenging workplace practices, this individualised turn to self-change renders any accounting for male privileges in the private realm and markedly family-unfriendly, possibly exploitative practices in the work world obsolete and surplus. Therefore, in accepting and taking on the responsibility for the consequences of such identified expectations to excel as 'perfect', intensive mothers (and successful workers), individuals, like

Lauren, Opal and her sisters, tend to follow the call to transform themselves and adapt their very own lives in accordance with a neoliberal feminist outlook, and not the socioeconomic and political conditions in which they work and parent. Drawing attention to the specific format of the interview, I consider in later chapters whether, and to what extent, the communicative architecture of the Mumsnet online space opens up the possibility for a more politicised outlook on these matters.

The dictate of ‘perfect’ mothering also emerged in other contexts. The accounts of the majority of the research participants foreground how practices of ‘good’ mothering were preserved, but also in parts reframed. A shift in emphasis on managing and organising, rather than performing, childcare and further aspects of family life, has been noted in the motherhood and employment literature. The employed middle-class mothers in Christopher’s (2012) study performed what she calls ‘extensive mothering’ by delegating childcare and hiring paid domestic help. Taking at least a slightly distant stance to the imperative of intensive mothering, they ‘redefined good mothering as being “in charge” and responsible for children’s well-being when mothers are not providing that care’ (ibid.: 91). This resonates broadly with the way in which many research participants in this study made sense of their caregiving arrangements. However, many of the women I interviewed portrayed themselves as a ‘delegatory mother’ out of necessity rather than by choice, suggesting that being a delegatory mother was a compromise they made partially because of their mostly long-hours work commitment.

Ana’s account is especially illustrative of these phenomena. She told me that she usually returns from work after the children’s dinner time. Since it is important to her to be in control of what her children eat on a daily basis (and due to a disdain for ‘all this hyper-industrialised food’), she pre-cooks food for her children every night after their bedtime, despite her time-pressured schedule: ‘from 8.30 p.m. to until it’s needed I cook the next day’s food’. Enabling her to retain involvement in an aspect of parenting that is of importance to her, she delegates only part of the work – the actual feeding – to the nanny: ‘So it’s kind of she finishes up, I do the core of it.’ Thus, Ana’s account may be read as an instance of reframing an intensive mothering discourse, but not rejection of such discourse. This dedication of the few free hours she has during the evenings of long workdays to arrange her children’s meals, despite the help she has through the nanny, points to the sacrificial dimension of this mothering practice. As I have indicated above, the demands of the ‘perfect’ may cause distress for working mothers, and it is to this aspect that I now turn.

5.2.2 Perfection as a realm of suffering or the ideal of the ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker

Some effects of this internalised compulsion to excel also manifested as feelings of insufficiency and inadequacy, which relates in interesting ways to the popularity and prominence of the AIBU (short for Am I Being Unreasonable) subforum on Mumsnet (I explore these links in chapter 9). The sense that they were not living up to what they felt was expected of them in terms of being the perfect mother-worker frequently came up in the interviews I conducted with professional mothers:

‘The feeling that you've never quite done anything right so either with the kids or with work or whatever else, it's always quite difficult’.

(Gemma)

‘It's not a choice about one or the other [...] I think you can do both [...] But you have to make some compromises in order to do that, in your job and with your children. So it could be the difficulty of you feel like you never do one of them one hundred per cent, because you've made these compromises. And that's a challenge I guess, yeah, a challenge’.

(Lauren)

Perfection emerges in Lauren's account as the ‘one hundred per cent’ the ideal successful worker and ‘perfect’ mother would be able to dedicate to both the home and work sphere. While she assures ‘I think you can do both’ (having a family and engage in paid work), she recognises ‘the difficulty’ and ‘challenge’ associated with this in accordance with her experience, requiring her to make ‘compromises’. As I have discussed above, these ‘compromises’ meant Lauren accepted an extreme intensification of her work that took a toll on and compromised her own well-being. Yet, despite all these ‘compromises’ of changes in self, orientation and use of time, there was a sense of failure. By saying ‘you feel like you never do one of them one hundred per cent’, the cited idealised version of a femininity that does *both* mothering and working ‘one hundred per cent’ is denoted as unattainable – and yet desirable: it haunts her sense-making of her identity as mother-worker that becomes a site where she measures herself against the perfectly ‘balanced woman’ ideal.

Such striving for yet failure to achieve the ‘perfect’ balance featured in some of my participants’ accounts as a site of suffering and pain, pointing to a punitive underpinning that was felt as *self*-criticism rather than a social critique. Such internalisation, Gill (2003) has argued in relation to the shift from ‘sexual objectification to sexual subjectification’, may signify ‘a higher or deeper form of exploitation’, one in which a ‘new disciplinary regime’ is formed that ‘makes [social] critique much more difficult’. This painful level of internalised self-criticism was especially acute for Rachel, a main earner with a partner unwilling to step up his domestic game:

I did actually have a bit of an issue, a bit of a wobble back sort of last September. I’ve been here [company she works for currently] for about four, five months. Basically I just (.) I didn’t have a break down, but I suffered really badly with anxiety and had to have a few weeks off because I was just I can’t (2.0) I cannot do this anymore, it’s just too much from all sides. [...] I can’t be all things for all people. It’s really hard.

McRobbie (2015: 17) notes that the trope of the perfect manifests a ‘pleasing femininity where any aggression is entirely inner-directed’. Resonating with this contention, Rachel described a feeling state of suffering ‘really badly with anxiety’ when she started her then new job as a project manager whilst she tried to be pleasing and ‘all things for all people’. She continued:

You spend a hundred per cent at home and then it’s like (.) you’re one hundred per cent at work and you should be at home, and then if you’re in this kind of bit between [...] I’m no longer giving a hundred and ten per cent at work, but also I’m somehow letting down my child and my husband, and I can’t be a proper wife and mother [...] We’re now we’ve almost got the position that we actually are giving more of ourselves than we possibly, just more of ourselves than we ever did before, but we still feel like we’re not kind of achieving (.) we’re not fulfilling everything, you know, you’re letting everybody else everybody down a little bit.

One reading of this struggle to achieve the unachievable ‘one hundred and ten per cent’ in relation to fulfilling home and workplace expectations is an interpretation as self-directed competition. This manifestation of inwards-turned competition in neoliberalism, Scharff (2018: 131) argues in a different context, suggests that ‘power dynamics [may be] working at a “deeper” level where competition is not only directed at others, but also at the self’. Indeed,

Rachel framed being a working mother in terms of self-competition that was felt as an inevitable failure: ‘once you’ve got a child and you’re a working mum, you can’t win’.

Research suggests that for women whose role of stay-at-home mother becomes their ‘occupation’, the benchmark of the perfect mother turns parenting (and other home-sphere related) ‘mistakes’ into grave failures (Orgad, 2019: 97). While this can suggest that the benchmark for employed mothers may be lower, my participants’ accounts indicate that the idea of the perfect was not necessarily tempered. Indeed, the internalised ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker ideal played a disciplinary role in both Lauren and Rachel’s accounts and suggests the logic of the perfect still dominates their thinking and feeling.

Laura, the academic with two primary-school-aged children whose account I cited above, similarly evaluated herself against the unreachable ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker benchmark:

Particularly this year I had a lot of work to do and I’ve worked a lot of weekends to try and catch up, you know, with sick days and snow days. I feel like I’ve missed a lot of work so I have to go and catch it up [...] And it’s the look that [daughter] has on her face, she goes ‘Where are you going?’ And I’m like ‘I gotta go into work’, and she’s this ‘oh’. But she does say about my husband as well, she says ‘You and daddy work very hard’. And she understands that as a concept, but I also feel that she shouldn’t need to understand that as a concept. So I don’t feel I parent particularly well and I get short with them and I lose my temper when I shouldn’t necessarily lose my temper with them. All of that sort of I would say normal parental guilt. But then when I’m at work I don’t feel I can do my job particularly well because there’s always stuff that I haven’t got done and I need to get done and it just rolls over and over and over. Yeah and there’s no time to get your workload done and contribute to the group. And yeah it can be at times insanely difficult to please everyone and I think (.) that’s what you have to realise is, you just cannot do that. It’s too much, too much.

In this breathless account of the struggle Laura feels she is caught up in, ‘the look’ on her daughter’s face when she goes to work reminds Laura of her discomfort with the ‘concept’ that she has to be away from home for work for periods of time that sometimes include the weekends. She tries to normalise this as ‘normal parental guilt’, suggesting that feelings of guilt

are presumably applicable to all (working) parents. In the turmoil of endlessly catching up with paid work however, work ‘just rolls over and over and over’. Important to my argument here is how the relentless demands of the workplace and conflicting parenting responsibilities persist and, *on their own*, produce distress and a level of suffering for Laura. I suggest that in the face of the illusive goal to create a satisfying ‘balance’ between the home and paid work, these feelings of insufficiency may be felt in an even more intense way, precisely because there is an incongruence between the ‘happy balance’ ideal and her own home-work life. By stating ‘what you have to realise is, you just cannot do that. It’s too much, too much’, Laura seems to recognise the elusiveness of the ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker ideal. At the same time, this statement indicates a level of anguish and self-criticism for failing to live up to it.

Importantly, these everyday pressures Laura invokes in the account above occurred, as she told me in the interview, in a context where a range of significant life events meant, for her, ‘a lot of competing stresses and trying to do things’. Equally breathless, Laura told me – ‘to give context’ – about the events she and her family had been wrestling through that year, including deaths of close relatives including her father (which made her the ‘closest relative to [her] recently bereaved mother’), the suicide of a friend and academic colleague ‘who had struggled with the whole lifestyle of like constantly trying to find funding and publishing and proving your worth all the time’ and a promotion that put her ‘in a really weird transition of doing half of one job and half of another and trying to fit it all in’.

Notably, these coinciding events, in particular her extended caring responsibilities in regards to her mother and an intensification of her workload, if not also the devastating suicide of her friend and colleague who also works in academia (see also chapter 6, section 6.4 where I discuss the neoliberal work ethic in academic institutions), put the ‘re-envisioning of *progressive* womanhood as a balancing act’ into perspective (Rottenberg, 2018: 27, original emphasis). While the felicitous balance is not in reach, Laura cannot afford to prioritise the public or the private aspects of her life. Valuing one domain – family or profession – over the other, in accordance with either, respectively, the ideal worker figure or the good mother script, is not an option. While she now has an ‘open-ended’ rather than a short-term contract as was the case in the past, still her salary depends on bringing in grant income, so ‘a funding hole’ puts her own job at risk and pausing or reducing her work commitment is therefore off the table. Likewise, the support of her now widowed mother who needs to be re-housed is not something she can postpone. Crucially, these contextualising attachments, unstable

employment, and family relationships emerge alongside and in addition to her already everyday ‘busy existence’ (to use her words) as a professional mother. Making any reference here to the notion of a ‘successful’, ‘well-rounded’ femininity that is shown to be on such an utterly collision course with the exceptional yet also all too familiar challenges framing Laura’s complex work and private life seems almost absurd.

5.2.3 *Forced priorities: ‘you’re not just an island’*

The accounts of some of the interview participants pointed to fissures in the discourse of the ‘perfect’ balance. By this I mean that, as indicated throughout this section, there was a recognition of the elusiveness of the balance promise, centred as it is on the affirmation that excelling in both the paid work and the home sphere as perfect, intensive mothers and fully committed workers is possible. As I argue, these ultimately *contradictory* expectations were sometimes explicitly made sense of as *forced priorities* that were imposed on them. While the accounts I present here indicate that the women still benchmarked themselves against these pervasive ideals of perfection directed at working mothers, they also capture moments of rupture, owing to, as one participant worded it, the feeling that the ‘juggling pot’ is full to the brim (if not overflowing).

Michelle’s account is included here at length as it provides a vivid illustration of how the competing demands of ideal worker norms and ‘good’ mother scripts, which concurrently converge in and are played down by the ‘balanced woman’ ideal, are experienced as intense and contradictory pressures on a subjective level:

Sometimes you feel an expectation around (.) even though a lot of mothers do go back to work, sometimes you feel guilty about the fact that you wanted to and you don’t actually want to stay at home. And is that a bad thing to feel? So I think there’s those pressures. I think there’s also going back to work the pressures of that when you go back to work you should just be immediately like switched on, back at work, still doing long hours, plus looking after your children and things. Whereas actually maybe you want your job to be more just a part of your life than the whole thing. I guess the person you’re working for has a right to expect you to be kind of very attached to your job, but I think that’s a difficult thing to do, because you’ve got this other whole load of responsibility that takes up a lot of your time and your thoughts. [...] I think it probably

has an impact on how sort of I guess kind of how ambitious I feel in my job, I feel like it's had an impact on that. I feel maybe less attached to my job than I did previously.

In this candid account, the 'good', intensive mother imperative, associated with prioritising the children by staying at home, emerges as a site of unduly expectations that yet causes discomfiture, but the feeling of guilt for wanting to return to work is refuted ('And is that a bad thing to feel?'). Likewise, constructions of the ideal worker have reached into her thinking, and yet are described as not matching her own feeling, saying 'actually maybe you want your job to be more just a part of your life than the whole thing'; 'I feel maybe less attached to my job than I did previously'. Though these unrelenting demands emanating from workplace norms and mothering scripts affect Michelle's thinking and feeling, her account indicates that they are recognised as forced priorities that are imposed on working mothers.

While Michelle admits that being the committed, focused worker her employer expects her to be is a 'difficult thing to do' in light of 'this other whole load of responsibility', Nicole's account shows a more critical engagement with an individualist outlook that she feels prevails in contemporary work culture:

I just feel like there's such a divide between what a career expects of you, the individual success, the individual (.) commitment to that role and the reality of your life, because you're not just an island. You've got care responsibilities, you've got relationships with lots of different people, people that need you, people that you need. But for a job, you're expected to not really mention that you're needed. I just think there's such a huge gap between what careers expect of you as an autonomous individual and the reality of everybody's lives.

Nicole's account highlights the forceful contradiction between the 'individual success, the individual [job] commitment' to the point of the 'autonomous individual' constructed by the contemporary workplace, and the 'reality of everybody's lives'. Emphasising mutual connections, vulnerabilities and relationships that she feels are violently excluded from the sphere of work, her statement brings these out as essential key conditions for life: 'you're not just an island'. This desire for a changing workplace culture that runs through Nicole's statement resonates with Rachel's account, which focuses not only on the world of work but captures her ideas for alternative childcare arrangements:

I think in an ideal world you'd be able to work you know, creatively in something that fulfilled you, around childcare. And there would be perhaps more of a village around your childcare [...] A village, you know, like a village of people. Like, you know, maybe two or three generations, your grandma, your mum would be up the road and you would share childcare maybe with your friends. [...] A way to kind of yeah get your children socialising while you're doing something that has a value or meaning to you, hopefully brings you some money.

Outlining her 'ideal world' where there is a 'village around [...] childcare' and paid work feels fulfilling and meaningful rather than being on a financially and status driven treadmill, her account hints at the value of collaborative childcare provision and a model of employment that is less based on the 'productivist and consumerist values' characterising the contemporary dominant work ethic (Weeks, 2011: 51). This cautiously optimistic if idealised draft of an alternative way of parenting, working and living, alongside Nicole and Michelle's recognition of the forced priorities that condition their work and home lives, is hopeful. In the next section I explore how the counteracting force of 'confidence culture' shaped women's approach to parenting, aiming at bracing their children, and daughters in particular, for a gender-unequal future via self-transformative confidence.

5.3 'You can be anything you want to be!' Raising confident daughters

5.3.1 *Confident parenting*

In this chapter so far, I have investigated different facets of neoliberal maternal subjectivity and their relation to the normative ideal of a felicitous work-family balance: noting in particular the emphasis on the private realm as a site of investment, inciting a self-managing and productivity-oriented ethos, and the idea of the perfect as an internalised compulsion to excel as mothers and workers that may be lived as a site of suffering. Crucially, I have also shown moments of rupture with these injunctions – where dissonances with calculative logics regarding childcare emerged and the conflicting demands of the perfect balance were sometimes made sense of as forced priorities. This section examines the research participants' approach to parenting and considers how the practice of 'confident mothering' (Gill and Orgad, 2017) constitutes the maternal working self. Gender and gender inequalities played a significant role when the research participants talked about their children. When I asked the

interviewees about their views of gender (in)equality, they often spoke about their children and parenting approach. Indeed, in some interviews, sexism and gender discrimination were most fervently discussed in relation to the interviewees' children. Participants voiced concerns that their young daughters, and sometimes also their sons, were exposed to stereotyped and sexist messages from school and nursery settings and more generally the world beyond the own family. By consciously avoiding gendered toys and instead rather purchasing 'books that sort of promote female role models', '*Rebel stories for rebel girls*' (Laura), 'only books about strong girls' (Ashley) and 'feminist books for children' (Ana), and challenging narratives that drew on stereotypical representations like the female-nurse/male-doctor image, there was an emphasis on providing a 'gender-sensitive', non-stereotyped education at home. However, the key approach to brace their children for a gender-unequal (work) world was by cultivating confidence via conveying the message 'you can be or do anything you want (to be)'.

The raising of confident daughters, and as I argue, nurturing 'gender-sensitive' sons, who have developed the 'right' dispositions and are 'prepared' for dealing with structural forms of discrimination (see also Scharff, 2020), is in line with what Gill and Orgad (2015; 2017) have called 'confidence cult(ure)'. Inciting women to work on their inner selves (and those of their children) so as to be confident, there is an emphasis on affective and psychological self-transformation in order to find the 'solutions' to ongoing structural problems 'within a newly upgraded form of confident subjectivity' (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 26).

The notion of overcoming inequalities through transforming the inner self chimes with neoliberal feminism's emphasis on managing inequalities on an individual level (Rottenberg, 2018), and has also been looked at in the U.K. education policy context where work on one's (children's) character has become a site of government investment. This 'turn to character', as Bull and Allen (2018) name it, involves 'character education', 'with "character strengths" such as optimism, resilience, and grit located as key factors shaping academic and other life outcomes' (Bull and Allen, 2018: 392).

If there is a presumed link between character and life outcomes, then parents are increasingly held responsible for building the 'right' kind of characters to achieve such life success and thrive in the current neoliberal moment. As Vincent (2017: 542) notes, 'parents, mothers in particular, are firmly positioned as the individuals responsible' to 'deliver both the school and

home setting which will provide “the best” for their children’ (Vincent, 2017: 542). This parental responsibility to ensure children’s success and raise the ‘future “citizen-workers”’ as it is presented in U.K. policy, with its underlying assumed ‘causal relationship between parenting and outcomes’ (Vincent, 2017: 543, see also Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), can be neatly connected with gendered exhortations to ‘confident mothering’ (Gill and Orgad, 2017). ‘Crucially’, as Gill and Orgad (2017: 24) describe, ‘women are demanded to not only be confident themselves, but also to instil in their children, especially daughters, confidence and resilience.’

5.3.2 *Cultivating confidence*

Lauren explained how making children feel confident enables to overcome future inequalities in the workplace:

Of course I want my daughters to feel as though they could do anything they want. They could be an engineer, they could. But I think that's the world we're actually living in now. And I think it's important to make your children feel as confident as possible and just not to sort of have limiting views on gender-specific roles and jobs. Maybe quite interestingly my stepdaughter, her view is she wouldn't necessarily have to go to university because she is a girl. Because her mother didn't. And she might want to do a job like an interior designer, which to me would be quite a female type of job.

The stepdaughter’s ‘limiting views on gender-specific roles and jobs’, manifest in her disinclination to go to university, and leaning towards a ‘female type of job’, emerge in relation to the mother who has failed to cultivate the ‘right’ dispositions in her, prominently confidence and the conviction she could succeed in any job. This resonates with a neoliberal feminist outlook that, as Rottenberg (2018) has argued, presupposes a responsibilised subject that undergoes a process of self-transformation to handle inequalities individually. Here, mothers as ‘incubators of children’s character’ (Bull and Allen, 2018: 397) ensure that girls transmute into confident subjects and internalise the self-assured belief they ‘could do anything they want’ to achieve success that, arguably, is equated with the ‘male norm’ (as the implicit disdain for the ‘female’ job choice of interior designer, and conversely, the seeming appreciation of the male-connoted engineering path, suggest).

A narrative that recurred several times in different interviews drew on the stereotypical female-nurse/male-doctor image. Laura told me about a recent incident:

In terms of gender and societal gender equality, it just [...] doesn't exist. When my daughter was three she came home from nursery and said "When I grow up I want to be a nurse". Okay that's great. She went "Because I can't be a doctor because I'm only a girl". She's three years old and she has already formed an opinion that she cannot do some things because she is only a girl!

Framing this in terms of an absence of gender equality, she narrated her and her husband's reaction, continuing:

It was horrific, absolutely horrific. And this is all through female influence. All of the people that looked after her at nursery are female and it wasn't till we turned round and went "Well, granny's a doctor isn't she." "Yeah." "And you know daddy's friend", pointing out all of her dad's female colleagues: "You know they're all doctors, your auntie [female first name], she's a doctor." "Really?" "Yes! You can be anything you want to be if you're prepared to put the work in!" And she's just "Yeah". And my husband was really angry with her! He's like "Don't ever ever say that again!"

Countering sexist gender role and job attributions with the positive message 'you can be anything you want to be' is in accordance with confidence culture's focus on raising confident daughters (Gill and Orgad, 2017). Noticeable in the account analysed here is her and her partner's outrage: 'It was horrific, absolutely horrific'. Thus, in narrating her partner's reaction as being 'really angry with her', sexism is constructed as a matter of serious concern – in particular as it appears in this context to be communicated by the female nursery staff that, it is implied, in this way collude in girls' and women's oppression. Strenuously addressing their daughters lacking self-belief, Laura's statement may be read as a case of attempting to inject confidence as a potent antidote to such sexist job role assignments, which are rhetorically banned: "Don't ever say that again!"

5.3.3 Correctives: holding patriarchal privileges at bay

Some interviewees, like Laura and Lauren, positioned themselves as responsible for cultivating confidence in their daughters as a response to (anticipated) structural discrimination. At the

same time, some mothers I interviewed tried to make sure that their sons would also be part of this particular ‘girl empowerment’ discourse that is built around notions such as ‘nothing holds girls back’ and ‘girls are capable of anything’. If confidence was instilled in girls as an individualising way of bracing them for inequalities they were likely to encounter in the work world and beyond, then boys’ character education seemingly aimed for ‘correcting’ asymmetric and patriarchal gender power relations within the home sphere.

Ana positioned herself as very determined to raise her two sons in line with her feminist outlook. When I asked if she would describe herself as a feminist, she replied: ‘Totally, oh my god yeah. Completely. It got so bad at one time that I only started buying these feminist books for my children.’ Not wearing ‘anything pink on purpose because I don’t want them to associate pink with women’, she sees her efforts partially undermined by the gendered marketing principles of toys along the pink-blue and other binaries (e.g. Auster and Mansbach, 2012), with which her three- and five-year-old sons identify. Drawing on the same female-nurse/male-doctor stereotype Laura spoke about, she said:

And most concerning, one day, and I don't know where he heard it from, he said “Mummy, we're playing”, he had a teddy bear that had like, how do you call this thing to listen to your heart, stethoscope, and I said “I play the doctor”, and he looked at me saying “Mummy, you cannot be the doctor.” I said “Why not?” “Because you're a mummy!” I said “Why can't mummies be doctors?” “No, mummy, it's because you're a girl, girls cannot be doctors.” “Why can’t a girl be a doctor, [son]?” “Because they don't have penises.” Where he heard that from I have no idea, he already started like, girls are weak, or girls cannot do that.

Similar to Laura, Ana positioned herself as responsible to intervene in deeply stereotyped, sexist views of job role assignments. However, rather than nourishing self-esteem in preparation for such issues as was the case with daughters, this aversion to traditional gender norms and sexism was channeled into efforts to make boys part of a conversation in which they would be socialised into ‘gender-sensitive’ beings and would not take patriarchal privileges for granted.

Equally, Ashley who has a daughter and a son positioned herself as adamant to prevent her four-year-old son from exhibiting sexist attitudes. Involving him in routine household chores

that are traditionally feminine-associated (e.g. Kan et al., 2011) like cooking, cleaning, setting the table and doing the laundry, she told me:

So now I have I have a daughter and a son I'm just (.) in some ways I can already see it happening with my boy that he almost expects women to do things for him and I will not tolerate that. I was like "no no no no no!" So actually he's become an absolute demon at separating laundry into lights and darks. He is really good at it heh heh.

In telling me that she 'will not tolerate' that her (four-year-old!) son 'expects women to do things for him', she articulates her conviction that boys' privilege ought to be directed into the 'right' channels. Coming back to the notion of girl's self-assured belief they could do anything, Erin told me she nurtures and educates especially her son's character in accordance with her belief that 'men should help with raising children and everything'. Setting her daughter a 'good example' by working, she emphasised in relation to her two-year-old son:

I'm more conscious, I would be keen for him [son], you know, for him to have a positive attitude to women and think that that they can do anything. He's not quite two yet so [chuckles] the(h)re's plenty of time, but I wouldn't want him to have kind of sexist opinions or anything like that.

I suggest that a version of feminism is articulated through this aspect of confident mothering, and more precisely one that intends to hold boys' 'life advantage' associated with patriarchal privileges at bay. As I have demonstrated, these efforts made to thwart male privilege by raising 'gender-sensitive' boys contrasted with the interviewees' endeavour to cultivate self-esteem in their daughters to brace them for anticipated forms of structural discrimination, which they saw as likely to affect them. In this way, one would assume that the gender-sensitised boys coming out of this process support their female counterparts' striving for building up the confidence to realise doing 'anything' they want. Importantly though, both of these parenting approaches focus on their children's interiority as the key site of transformation, at the expense of disregarding wider sociopolitical issues and structural disparities. The remainder of the chapter considers more deeply some of the ways in which this 'feminist character education' of both boys and girls may be limited and curbed.

5.3.4 *The ‘family incubator’*

Bull and Allen (2018: 394) have noted that ‘character education constructs the family as the primary unit responsible for incubating children’s character’. This came to the fore through the way in which the family, across the accounts analysed in this section, was constructed as the primary sphere in which the ‘right’ gendered dispositions (predominantly female confidence and male gender sensitivity) are being acquired. In contrast, social and institutional settings beyond the family like schools, nurseries, other parents, but also media discourses including advertisement targeted at children emerged as potentially negative influences that may promote adverse messages, spoiling mothers’ investments in the work on their children’s dispositions.

Ashley commented on her and her husband’s endeavor to provide an equal-treatment education at home saying: ‘We try our damn hardest to treat them [daughter and son] absolutely equally but if – outside influences are really difficult’. By telling me about their (and sometimes their partners’) high level of outrage about gender stereotyped and sexist remarks that were transported into the family from the ‘outside world’, some participants were calling out patterns of gender discrimination in the interviews, as shown above. Primarily, however, these were constructed as something that could, or should, be dealt with in the private sphere of the home, by purchasing ‘feminist books’ that promote female role models for their (male and female) children (Ana and Laura), or by involving her son in everyday domestic tasks (Ashley). Indeed, Ana nourished a fantasy to ‘get all the parents from the class together in the living room and say [chuckling] “Do you understand that what you say to your child is affecting my child?”’. However, she immediately objected ‘it’s a little bit too much’. This anecdote shows not only that the issue of social parenting remains a fantasy to be laughed off, in favour of the nuclear family unit, but also points to the way that character education remains limited to each and every one’s individual family.

5.3.5 *Building confident, feminist characters?*

Deborah proudly told me how her 11-year-old daughter had responded to what could be called a ‘feminist character education’. The following account evokes a scene in which Deborah’s daughter appears to radiate confidence in her role as a kind of ‘spokesperson’ for gender equality at her school:

I guess for my children they would definitely see good role models I think from us in terms of (.) I mean my daughter she's very very very (.) without me encouraging her at

all, on the 8th of March, Women's Day, she made her own little placards with gender equality heh heh. My husband sort of send me a photo saying she made her best friend go with one as well, they stuck all these sticks together, these little things, and went into school and then the headmaster made them do a talk, but that was totally her own thing. [...] She will pick people up if they say any (.) you know, if you assume a doctor is a man, she's like "No, it could be a woman".

This account is almost emblematic of the 'successful' outcome of a 'character education' geared towards the production of a confident, 'feminist' subject. It points to how Deborah has raised a confident daughter who, outwardly and visibly, carries the 'message' gender equality. There also is an emphasis on the daughter's independence when Deborah repeats 'without me encouraging her at all [...] she made her own little placards [...] that was totally her own thing'. Indicating that a successful outcome of her character education is reached, Deborah's daughter knows how to 'adequately' interpret omnipresent, stereotypical notions such as the female-nurse/male-doctor image that strikingly re-occurred in this context. However, whilst Deborah's daughter is positioned here as an outspoken advocate for gender equality, and her highly visible 'feminist' confidence becomes installed as the embodied success of her 'character education', I suggest that the raising of self-assured, feminist characters may at times be based on an occlusion of social contexts. In this sense, Deborah's daughter is empowered to critique 'obvious' gender stereotypical notions such as the 'ever-male doctor', similar to the way in which feminism is embraced and 'held up as an obvious "good"' in confidence culture (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 28), yet wider socio-political issues remain absent.

Interestingly, a more doubtful perspective on the success of cultivating feminism in children was articulated by the middle school teacher Samantha. Working with children between the age of 9 and 12, this mother of a toddler and a preschooler told me in response to my question about her views of gender equality:

I'll certainly be teaching both my boys about the role of women and the power of women and have you. And we're a force to be reckoned with, but (2.0) mmh I don't know, we try it in school, we'll be doing a huge thing about the role of women in politics and in the arts and in sport, you know, we're really trying to profile women and to bring it to their [students'] attention really that we're equal, but I don't know whether that message actually is going in, don't know.

The skepticism regarding the outcome of teaching children about ‘the power of women’ in Samantha’s statement pertains to both her own sons and the school where she teaches. According to Samantha, despite attempts to ‘profile women’ as ‘a force to be reckoned with’, the message ‘we’re equal’ may potentially not be ‘going in’; implying deep uncertainty as to whether the kind of confident, feminist characters are actually being built both in home and school settings amidst a more problematic and multifaceted social context.

Having looked critically at the ‘feminist character education’ that emerged in my interviews as one key aspect of the participants’ parenting approach and formed part of their educational goals, this preparation of their daughters for a gender-unequal (work) world worked predominantly through the cultivation of confidence and belief in the uplifting message ‘you can do or be anything you want’. Yet, I have shown that this call to self-transformation presents an individualising antidote to broader forms of gender inequality that works through changing their children’s psyches and behaviour rather than the social environments and external, material realities in which they parent. While I argued that the participants displayed efforts to raise ‘gender-sensitive’ sons who would support their female counterparts’ internal journey towards confidence, also here the boys’ interiority was primarily addressed as the site of transformation. The motherly work of building their daughters confident characters then is not only a psychological project that almost exclusively takes place at home, it also remains largely limited to individual family members; no mention was made, for example, of conversations with other parents or nursery staff.

Moreover, while many interview participants seemed to embrace confident mothering, their accounts centred on a strikingly similar set of themes. Thus, I demonstrated that the critical force of this approach is limited through a focus on ‘obvious’ gender stereotypical notions such as the repeatedly occurring ‘ever-male doctor’ image. In this vein, wider socio-political issues and in particular, the workplace inequalities and maternity discrimination that shaped their *own* experiences as mothers in the workplace (chapter 6), and possibly condition their daughters’ future (work) lives, were largely not included in the conversations they had with their children, at least as they were talked about in the interviews.

5.4 Striving for balance and gender-equal futures

This chapter set out to investigate the construction of neoliberal maternal working subjectivity through an analysis of the interplay of three facets of this subjectivity at the level of everyday

life. Centring on successful family management, perfection in the realms of work and parenting and confidence-instilling parenting, I drew on the interview accounts of Mumsnet users – women who are positioned as successful neoliberal subjects – to explore how these contemporary intersecting injunctions were lived and negotiated.

My analysis has not provided a comprehensive portrayal of neoliberal maternal subjectivity and is not exhaustive. Rather, it highlighted aspects that were foregrounded in my interviews in relation to talk about combining mothering and work and the parenting approach. Some dimensions are of necessity only touched on briefly, were rather absent, or require further exploration. The interviewees' feminist attitudes, for instance, were discussed here in connection with their children and to a lesser extent in relation to their own lives; they will be considered in more detail in the next chapter. In turn, chapters seven to nine discuss posting women's accounts of (domestic) inequality to explore the complexion of feminism, anger and politicising connectivity and the different communicative possibilities offered in the online sphere of Mumsnet.

Resonating with the literature in a number of ways, the research participants' accounts pointed to a managerial mindset and calculative coping strategies in regards to their complex family-work lives. By adopting a calculative attitude towards home management that aligns with a neoliberal rationality, they engaged in 'all-encompassing' scheduling and planning activities in order to rationalise and 'optimise' mundane family routines in innovative ways such as long-term meal planning. This highly rational attitude and the associated use of technologies and tools such as digitally shared spreadsheets was often experienced as banal and a matter of course, precisely because the participants were all too familiar with them through their paid jobs. Yet, I argue that these empirical examples illustrate the way in which a market metrics has taken hold of the private sphere. My main argument here was that these techniques and the calculative logic underpinning them were in large parts responses to the interviewees' positioning as dual managers across the paid work and the family sphere and the entailed inequalities in the home, shaping in particular their approach to and view of resources that have become increasingly scarce such as time – family 'quality time' and the creation of valuable, memorable moments under such constrained circumstances increasingly produce a form of affective maternal 'currency'.

Crucially, my research has demonstrated that such reconfiguration of the home sphere in managerial terms and associated calculating ways of organising their family lives often did not yield a ‘successful’ or satisfying work-family balance. Overall, the requirements of the neoliberal workplace and intensive mothering scripts were experienced as contradictory, strain and frequently stress-producing forces rather than as balanceable and leading to happiness. Arguing that the participants invaded their own lives and wellbeing in order to live up these conflicting socioeconomic expectations, I showed that they tended to accept high personal costs such as an intensification of and deterioration in working conditions. Significantly, my analysis has emphasised how such individualised change in self, orientation and disposition was accompanied by a relative absence of accounting for possibly exploitative, forthright family-unfriendly work practices and male privileges in their homes. While I showed that the contemporary demands around a felicitous work-family balance were inextricably intertwined with the idea of the perfect in the interviews, the ideal of the ‘one hundred per cent’ mother-worker was operative as an unattainable benchmark for the participants. Following the call to transform themselves in accordance with a neoliberal feminist outlook, they directed criticism for failing to achieve such standards of perfection in the realms of work and parenting towards the self rather than the political and socioeconomic conditions in which they work and parent (chapters 7 to 9 consider the possibilities for redirecting such criticism towards gendered expectations and the structural bases of gendered forms of inequality more broadly).

As the last section has shown, also the research participants’ approach to parenting was shaped by the neoliberal feminist context. As such, many interviewees’ positioned themselves as confidence-instilling parents, and aimed to provide a feminist character education – one that would prepare their daughters for anticipated structural inequalities especially in the world of work, and turn boys into ‘gender-sensitive’ beings who will support their female counterparts’ striving for a gender-equal future. However, similar to the way in which many participants resorted to managing and disciplining their inner selves in regards to making waged work and parenting ‘work’, the confidence-instilling approach to parenting is an individualising antidote to structural inequality precisely because it signifies mothers’ and daughters’ interiority as key site of transformation, inhibiting rather than encouraging to change anything else than the self.

In the next chapter I discuss these formations in relation to the paid work context, documenting how the interview participants talked about their experiences of inequalities at work.

Chapter 6 THE ‘DRIP, DRIP DRIP’ OF DISCRIMINATION: THE TEXTURE OF GENDER INEQUALITIES AT WORK

This chapter explores how the professional women I interviewed made sense of inequalities. Focusing on the work context, it contours continuities and changes in the research participants’ negotiations of feminist matters in relation to their experiences, views and feelings as female working parents. Against the background of a heightened visibility and popularity of feminist discourse and feminist activism (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018) that marks a shift from previous widespread repudiations of feminism (McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2012; see chapter 2), I document how inequalities at work were discussed by the participants. I draw on the corpus of 29 interviews I conducted with working mothers in the U.K. to chart these changes in relation to the way that women talk about structural workplace issues, and consider their responses to such identified inequalities.

The first section of this chapter offers important insights into the continuous depreciation of motherhood in the workplace. I begin by attending to distinct changes in the interviewees’ negotiations of workplace inequalities. I show how in some accounts gender in work contexts was explicitly disarticulated, mirroring earlier trends, and then move on to map the participants’ more open discussion of work inequalities. By drawing on a number of recent reports and surveys, I situate the research participants’ accounts of their discriminatory paid work experiences within a larger context that demonstrates the extensiveness of pregnancy and maternity-related disadvantage and discrimination in the U.K. workplace. While the reports I draw on are largely quantitative, this chapter, by focusing on employed mothers’ lived experiences and sense making of inequalities at work, contributes to understanding the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace at the level of subjectivity.

To be sure, my research participants worked in a wide range of industries and fields, spanning the private, public and third sector, as discussed in chapter three (see also Appendix E). And yet, almost all interviewees shared experiences of having been disadvantaged or discriminated against when being pregnant, on or after maternity leave, or having young children. This points to the prevalence of maternity-related work inequalities in the contemporary U.K. workplace, corroborating existing research. At the same time, the ‘speakability’ of such inequalities,

though rarely discussed by my participants in explicit connection with feminism, indicates a notable shift in the awareness and sense-making of gendered power relations.

However, by locating gender inequalities largely in the public sphere of work, and only rarely in the private realm, there was a sense that any form of inequality in the home was not regarded as a political matter. This speaks to the contemporary ‘uneven feminist visibilities’ that accord attention to select feminist issues ‘in a way that does not necessarily pose any kind of challenge to existing social relations’ (Gill, 2016: 615, 619). The question of if, and if so, how, domestic inequality is afforded more visibility, and is discussed differently, in the online space of Mumsnet will be explored in chapters seven and eight.

The next two sections of this chapter make sense of the participants’ responses to identifiable and overwhelmingly openly discussed workplace inequalities. While many of my research participants demonstrated significant awareness of gender inequalities in work contexts, responses to these were frequently individualist and entailed a repudiation of structural interventionist schemes (such as positive discrimination) and a recourse to fatalism, especially in relation to ‘natural’ disadvantages surrounding early motherhood and pregnancy at work and frequent difficulties of getting ahead in the work world. As such, the findings point to the way that change and continuities in women’s sense-making of gender hierarchies in work contexts are inextricably intertwined. What my analysis in these two sections makes clear is that even though the participants had knowledge of structural workplace inequalities, they often did not see themselves in a position to effect change. I will investigate later on whether, and if so, how, a more political perspective and sense of collectivity in relation to gender inequalities surfaces via the intricate virtual engagements in the context of Mumsnet (chapter 9).

The final section of this chapter investigates some of the dynamics present in workplaces that contribute to both disincentivising the envisioning of change and sustaining unequal workplace structures. My analysis demonstrates the way in which flexible work arrangements were frequently made sense of as a matter of personal, exceptional luck rather than the norm. I argue that this ‘inoculated’ the participants with a sense of gratitude, for which they were willing to pay a ‘price’. Overall, I show that flexible working practices, the ‘panacea’ to mothers’ workforce participation, tend to not only reinforce women’s role as primary caregiver, but can give rise to subtle forms of exploitation. This is one explanatory factor in the endurance of workplace inequalities.

As in the previous chapter, I used the discourse analytical approach I outlined in chapter four to analyse the interview participants' accounts, focusing on patterns in the interviewees' talk in relation to inequalities in work contexts. When analysing the research participants' recourse to fatalism (section 6.4), my analysis in this chapter, to a lesser extent, is also informed by the more recent development (Wetherell, 2012; 2015) and application of this approach (e.g. Calder-Dawe et al., 2021) to the social study of affect and emotion, as discussed in chapter four. Thus, this approach enables me to analyse socio-emotive patterns in the interviewees' talk and their social and political consequences.

6.1 Continuities: disavowing gender at work

Previous research has demonstrated that gender and systemic inequalities were largely disavowed by workers in fields such as the cultural and creative industries (Gill, 2014b; Scharff, 2018) and professional services including technology consulting (Kelan, 2014). A sense of 'gender fatigue' (Kelan, 2009) was prevalent that underpinned the construction of work environments as overwhelmingly gender neutral, gender egalitarian and meritocratic (Gill, 2002). Indeed, gender invisibility was 'a big feature of daily organizational practices' (Kelan, 2009: 199), characterised by 'a strong individualization in which the onus was on women to overcome any gender discrimination they might encounter' (ibid: 206).

In some statements gender was explicitly disarticulated in work contexts, perhaps most acutely in the interview I conducted with Katharina. Katharina, a 36-year-old senior analyst in the finance sector with two pre-school children, told me she finds the term 'working mother' – which I used in the recruitment post and the information sheet I sent to each interviewee – 'quite derogatory': 'I would never refer to myself as a working mother ever because I'm not a working mother, I'm just a working person'. This repudiation of the relevance of gender in her professional life was also reflected in her insistence on a strict separation of spheres in which events, activities and responsibilities associated with the outside-paid-work world must not disrupt the reputation of her 'professional capacity': 'when you're in the office you've got to be (.) in the office, not one foot at home, you know'. She explained her attempts to 'exude a serious business persona' (Lewis, 2006: 461) saying: 'you don't want to be perceived as that person that's obsessed with your kids [...] I'm quite careful'. Gill (2014b: 516) describes this psychosocial operation of power as an 'internalisation of a felt knowledge of workplace culture' that plays into the shunning of a gendered subjectivity at work in order to sustain the

required self-image as ‘gender neutral’ worker. This may entail the avoidance of issues conventionally defined as relevant to women, such as children’s sickness:

P: You think you got to sort of prove yourself and (.) you know, I would never ever (.) ever use any kind of child-related excuse.

I: Do you think people are doing this actually? Using their child as

P: Well, not an excuse, but I just think if you come in “Oh I’m late today, sorry I’m late” or, you know, “my daughter is ill”. Touch wood, I’m very blessed, my kids have just never been ill heh heh

Here, caring responsibilities are constructed as something that cannot penetrate the work sphere under any circumstances. In distancing herself from using ‘any child-related excuse’ to be late for work that is later reframed as the (highly unusual and potentially improbable) claim that her ‘kids have just never been ill’, can be made sense of as proactively colluding in the disguise of the masculine norm present in her workplace (e.g. Lewis, 2006). Katharina’s statement implies the fear, perhaps even danger, involved in making gender and gendered home responsibilities an issue at work, showing a hyperawareness that her professionalism and competence may be challenged. However, there were also distinct changes in the interviewees’ negotiations of workplace inequalities, as the following section discusses.

6.2 ‘Careers in limbo’: acknowledging gender inequalities at work

6.2.1 ‘It’s because I’m a woman with young children’: maternity discrimination

Based on survey interviews with more than 3,000 mothers and 3,000 employers, a 2016 government-commissioned report demonstrated the extensiveness and nature of *Pregnancy and maternity-related disadvantage and discrimination* in the U.K. workplace (BIS and EHRC, 2016). The report shows that 77% of working mothers had at least one negative or discriminatory experience, with one in five women stating they experienced harassment or negative comments from their employer and/or colleagues, and 54,000 mothers (11%) each year feeling forced to leave their job (ibid.). Nearly one fifth of employers believed that mothers and pregnant women were taking less interest in promotion and career progression compared to other employees (ibid.), a finding corroborated by earlier research suggesting that pregnant women and mothers in the U.S. context are perceived as less competent and less committed to their jobs compared to nonmothers and fathers: motherhood functions ‘as a devalued status

characteristic in workplace settings’ (Correll et al., 2007: 1305). This resonates with a range of other recent reports and surveys (e.g. Maternity Action, 2020; WBG, 2021), including the 2019 Mumsnet survey of 1,000 users showing that 96% of respondents felt that having children affected their career negatively. This is a situation that has exacerbated since the start of the pandemic, due to the increased burdens on mothers to make up for the lack of childcare, school closures, and the disproportionate number of women’s redundancies (e.g. Pregnant Then Screwed, 2020, see conclusion chapter 10). Even before the pandemic, with childcare provision in place, maternity continued to contribute significantly to an array of issues, in particular the widening of the gender wage gap, which is, amongst other factors, closely associated with a lack of women in senior positions and poorer levels of pay progression and overall progression in part-time roles (IFS, 2016). Women thus suffer what has come to be colloquially referred to as the ‘motherhood penalty’, including career stagnation and an overall reduced earning potential (Correll et al., 2007; Corinaldi, 2019). The equality-gains women have made by joining the workforce, in other words, do not translate into equality in the workplace (Miller, 2012).

My research participants’ accounts chime with these appalling statistics. Almost all the interviewees talked frankly, and sometimes very angrily, about instances where they felt disadvantaged or discriminated against when being pregnant, on or after maternity leave or due to having young children. Maternity and pregnancy-related inequalities thus were on the whole discussed openly, and workplace-related gender inequalities were acknowledged. This section contributes to understandings of the persistence of gender inequalities in the workplace by focusing on employed mothers’ subjective experiences and sense-making.

In line with the findings of the report *Pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage* (BIS and EHRC, 2016), the most frequently discussed forms of discrimination were harassment and negative comments from employers and colleagues. Erin works for a Scottish council and shared her impression that: ‘it’s not that I feel discriminated against because I’m a woman, I sometimes think it’s because I’m a woman with young children’. She went on:

And it’s not in an explicit way, but for example where I applied for promoted posts, everyone’s really surprised and will say “oh how will you look after the children” or whatever. Not actually people on the interview panel would say that, but other

colleagues that know that I've gone for that position would say "oh how will you fit it all in, don't you have enough on your plate". And the only thing that I would say, when I was applying for promoted internal posts, there definitely has been some surprise that I've put myself forward. [...] I don't think men get that same kind of (.) assumption that they won't go for posts because they've got children. [...] There is a bit of an assumption that you'd be quite happy with your lot, that you're just working a job to support your family rather than actually being ambitious in your career.

Erin's statement foregrounds some of the key features of the research participants' discussion of harassment and negative comments in relation to maternity, which are inextricably connected to perceptions of mothers being the primary caregiver and therefore less ambitious and committed to a job. In this account, Erin implies she felt her chances of success at interview were impaired by the fact that she has children, since, presumably, she is 'quite happy with [her] lot' and not actually serious about achieving a promotion. Crucially, these (oftentimes) *assumed* tensions between ideal worker norms and notions of the 'good', child-centred mother (see also Correll et al., 2007) that lay the ground for harassing comments were commonly intangible, and voiced 'not in an explicit way'. As Erin stated, 'not actually people on the interview panel' would deny her the ambition to advance her career. Rather, 'other colleagues', as she put it, expressed 'surprise' and, by commenting on her presumed primary caregiver role, 'remind' her of her caring responsibilities as a mother.

Aside from implicitly being seen as less suitable for a promotion, the elusive way in which discrimination occurs surfaced in other contexts. Several interviewees pointed out that work meetings appeared to be deliberately scheduled for outside-regular working hours so as to make it difficult for parents of young children to attend:

It's more of the subtle things like, you know, they would know that I couldn't stay (.) and work till 7 o'clock at night, far away from my children, I wouldn't be getting home to pick them up from nursery.

(Erin)

Meetings weren't planned to accommodate the fact that you need to leave by 5:00 to pick up the kid from nursery, I just couldn't attend. And I said this, but (2.0)

(Laura)

This negative impact on opportunities and participation was palpable in other statements. Laura works in academia as a senior trial manager and research fellow and spoke about how a previous employer justified excluding her from grant applications based on an assumed change in ‘priorities’ following her maternity leave:

We were talking about applying for grants and there's a section in the form you had to fill in where it said, you know, I kind of like to do this, and I basically got told “Well there's not much point in supporting you to do that because you won't be able to do that because your priorities have changed now”. And I've been told that I wanted to change because I'd had a baby so I was like no, I'm still perfectly capable of do(h)ing the wo(h)rk, it's just your attitude that I can no longer do it. And that was very prevalent throughout that job, and I'm glad I'm not in it any more, let's put it that way.

In this statement, Laura constructs her previous boss's ‘attitude that [she] can no longer do’ aspects of the job due to a presumed lack of commitment and capability as being in stark contrast to her own unchanged commitment to the job role (and of course continual competence!). Thus, her line manager at the time (‘a middle-aged white man’) penalised her for being a mother and for a perceived change in priorities, giving rise to the operation of the motherhood penalty as a depreciation of motherhood in workplaces.

Challenges to the research participants’ job commitment also emerged from other statements. In particular, negative, hurtful comments in relation to maternity leave were not uncommon, with the television channel director Deborah recalling a previous boss's reaction to her five-month leave:

And I sent my boss an email saying okay, it's all perfectly fine with HR and everything, you know, plenty of notice, I'll be coming back in March and she sort of emailed me back, just one line, saying “I can't pretend I'm not disappointed”, meaning, you know, you've taken five months of (.) maternity leave.

Here, her leave was registered with deep disapproval by her superior as it did not conform to the normative ‘ideal worker’ who is willing to sacrifice all outside-work matters for the job

(Acker, 1990; Christopher, 2012), despite it being in full accordance with the company's maternal leave policies.

Given the extensiveness and severity of the discriminatory mechanisms at work, it is unsurprising that Katharina, a senior financial analyst who plans to apply for promoted posts in the future (see section 6.4), hides the fact that she has children and works part-time in her CV: 'I have quite a good CV, and, obviously, no one can see in my CV that I have children and that I was at home and work part-time. I can hide this quite well, which of course is good for me'.

6.2.2 *The 'drip, drip, drip' of discrimination*

Several other research participants talked about the association between motherhood and the role of primary caregiver at work. In particular, the divide in perception between mothers and fathers in work contexts was expressed through unsolicited, 'impertinent' questions asked to women.

The educational psychologist Lisa posed the rhetorical question: 'Could you ever imagine someone asking a father, how will you still continue doing your job [and looking after the children]?', thus straightforwardly juxtaposing the different perceptions of mothers and fathers in workplace settings. Victoria's statement below is included here at length as it not only discusses this gap in perception between working mothers and working fathers incisively, but also mocks its normalisation:

It's kind of the drip, drip, drip of, you know, what people are actually saying. You know, we had a team meeting yesterday, right, and joking about some of the things like, so who's looking after the kids. Who do you think is looking after the kids? Like, really? Like oh shit, I completely forgot, I've got no idea who's looking after the kids. And of course my husband wouldn't be doing it because like he's a man and, you know, like how would he possibly know how to look after our children [...] That does make me laugh, like genuinely, who do you think is looking after my children apart from their father like. You know what I mean, if I'm traveling like the ferry hehe heh (1.0) No-one has ever asked my husband when he travels hey who's looking after your kids? Nobody asks a man who's looking after your kids, nobody ever asks that. It's not a question you ask right.

Victoria is a consultancy manager with a London-based firm, and, strikingly, her husband works in the same sector in a similar role. Victoria's and her husband's workload, work responsibilities and travel commitments are therefore similar, as she told me – yet not the way traveling especially is viewed in their respective workplaces. This resonates with Correll *et al.*'s (2007) finding that not only were fathers advantaged over mothers in various ways in the workplace, but sometimes even benefitted from being a parent. Being a good father, in contrast to the harsh tensions working mothers are perceived to face, is not viewed as incompatible with being a good worker, but on the contrary segues with the still-present 'male breadwinner' role (ibid.). I would like to suggest that what Victoria refers to as the 'drip, drip, drip of what people are actually saying' indicates the trickle, over time, towards discrimination.

A potential effect of the accrued questions working mothers are exposed to was also captured in Lauren's account. Lauren, a director of an insurance firm, felt that 'There's a lot of questions asked to women (about) how will you cope when you've got these two children', and explained that underlying that is 'the perception (that) as a female, you're the primary care provider'. Lauren's statements are part of a larger narrative in which she started her response to my question 'Has having children affected your career path or is it still affecting your career?' by saying: 'I think the period before you start having children and then while you're in the duration of having them, it sort of puts your career a little bit in limbo. That was my personal experience'. While she acknowledges that having children personally affected her career (I discuss later on how she was denied a promotion), she subsequently took a position that seems to fluctuate between her employer's view and her own possibly discriminatory experience:

So because it creates a lot of uncertainty for your employer, rightly or wrongly, because they don't know how you're going to manage, they don't know if you're going to come back. [...] When I came back post my second child, again, I don't know if this was what I should have had to do, but I felt like it was what I had to do, I sort of made clear that I've had two wonderful daughters now and I'm very much back to work, we're not planning on extending our family any further, because I felt by saying that, that would give me the most opportunity to be able to progress my career. (1.0) I'm not sure if that should be necessary or not.

Lauren here appears to undertake discursive attempts to understand and reassure her employer to strengthen her positioning as a promotable employee, dispelling any doubts about ‘is she coming back, will she be able to cope’. However, the obligation she felt to provide her employer with the details of her family planning in order to be perceived as promotable is understood as discomforting. Indeed, her unease is expressed twice in the statement: ‘I don’t know if this was what I should have had to do, but I felt like it was what I had to do’; ‘I’m not sure if that should be necessary or not’. In the context of the negotiations and experiences of maternity-related discrimination in the workplaces of the interviewees, this was a unique positioning. Yet, it is one that illustrates the way in which the ‘drip, drip, drip’ of the ‘questions asked to women’ in work contexts have, over time, a discriminatory effect.

6.2.3 Making sense of compulsory redundancy and denied promotions

Apart from harassment, negative comments and uncalled-for questions, other forms of discrimination that were talked about include maternity-related dismissal and the failure to gain promotions. While these forms of discrimination are both related to financial loss (EHRC, 2016), they were discussed differently. Three research participants stated they were on temporary, fixed-term contracts before and during their pregnancy. Though the interviewees were working in different fields (planning policy, voluntary sector and academia), they consistently described the process of securing maternity pay as ‘difficult’ (Erin), ‘complicated’ (Ashley) and ‘confused’ (Claire). None of them had a job to come back to after their leave. Maternity rights including parental leave policies in the U.K. are difficult to navigate and subject to complex legislation, especially for those employed in precarious, casual contracts (Maternity Action, 2020; WBG, 2021). While this intersection of fixed-term work and redundancy, when it overlaps with pregnancy, may be difficult to establish as a case of compulsory redundancy, Erin’s account does indicate the discriminatory nature of such employer practices:

It was all very difficult, because my contract before my daughter was born, it was a temporary contract that I was told would be extended, but of course as soon as I announced I was pregnant [scoffs], you know, it did seem to change things, and I wasn’t offered any extension.

Erin’s case is not a singular one and mirrors the experiences of other women employed in insecure work. As research into the impact of insecure work on pregnant women and new

mothers conducted by the maternity rights charity Maternity Action (2020: 5) found: ‘once their employer became aware of their pregnancy [...] extensions to fixed term contracts were difficult or impossible to obtain’. As a result of this stressful financial insecurity, Hilary found herself ‘quite desperately needing a job’, and re-started applying almost immediately after her daughter was born.

Having been on a full-time, permanent contract when she returned to work from maternity leave, the private equity adviser Elizabeth experienced compulsory redundancy and told me no others were made redundant: ‘I was the only female, I was the only one with children, and I was made redundant. They had to pick somebody, and they picked, not one of the four, you know, males, childless males’. She felt that ‘that is really out of order’ and took action by going to an employment lawyer who advised her to refrain from taking legal steps against her previous employer: ‘And then she saw how much the settlement was and she said “Actually, don’t bother, just take it because they know”. They knew so they offered just enough for me to refrain from suing them’. While she followed the lawyer’s advice and took the settlement money and embarked on a new job, she shares her experience on Mumsnet to speak out about how this incident had affected her personally, but also how it connects to and ties in with larger systemic workplace issues:

I hope I bring some of that experience onto Mumsnet when, you know, you’re hearing about the gender pay gap and you’re hearing about how women are still discriminated against. And people are saying “we’re all equal, it’s all good, it’s all good”. Well actually it isn’t, there’s still quite a lot of work to be done.

In contrast, Lauren’s sense-making of a discriminatory experience she discussed in the interview is shaped by a much more individualist framework. She said that, against her expectations, she had been overlooked for promotions for the past four years – precisely the time since she started a family:

I was brought in nine years ago with exactly the same title [...] So I built a team and there’s 15 people in the team now. So it’s developed, the role, but what I would say actually is (.) since I started a family, my role has not developed and not grown. So before that I was getting promotions and I was achieving more. Since 2014 I’ve not had a promotion. I don’t know if it’s (.) to be perfectly honest, it’s probably not linked

whatsoever with having children, it's to do with the mentality and the division where I work and just (.) other things. But, you know, I would like to do a broader role actually, but I don't think it's related to the fact that I've got children that I haven't got to the next step. But hopefully I still will and I'll push for that.

This director of an insurance company is uncertain whether to attribute the failure to gain a promotion she feels she deserved to structural discrimination or to the department, the prevailing mentality or 'just other things'. Her statement oscillates between acknowledging the experience as a discriminatory employer practice by pointing out the correlation between the timing of family formation and onset of role stagnation, and accounting for it by referencing, extremely vaguely, 'other things'. She ends her statement by saying 'I'll push for that', constructing career progression as primarily a matter of individual effort and responsibility.

6.3 Not 'propelling women in there' but 'asking' chairmen: rejecting positive discrimination – embracing unconscious bias and merit

While maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage was discussed openly on the whole, and many of my research participants demonstrated significant and sizeable awareness of gender inequalities in work contexts, I identified two ongoing responses to these workplace inequalities: i) a repudiation of structural policy interventions that contrasted with the participants' endorsement of individualist approaches, prominently unconscious bias training; and ii) a recourse to fatalism. In this section, I will discuss the first dynamic, focusing initially on the participants' views on unconscious bias training.

Amongst my interviewees, *unconscious bias* training was often favoured as a means of addressing workplace inequalities, specifically regarding recruitment and promotions. The popularity of unconscious bias training amongst many of my research participants reflects a wider trend towards 'diversity management' as one core element of contemporary women leadership development discourses (e.g. Madsen and Andrade, 2018). Crucially, the psychology-influenced shift towards unconscious bias training resonates closely with incitements to work on the inner self in order to respond to inequalities in neoliberalism, addressing women's interiority as the site of transformation (e.g. Gill and Orgad, 2015; see chapter 5). A key criticism of unconscious bias training is that its focus is on 'changing the behaviour of individuals rather than exploring the structures and context that might produce and reproduce bias' (Noon, 2018: 204). Efforts to tackle the unconscious biases of individuals

are a lean diversity intervention, described as ‘pointless’ from a critical diversity perspective, since these are based on the assumption that ‘changes in *individual* behaviour will eliminate discriminatory treatment’ (ibid., my emphasis). As Noon (2018: 198; 206) puts it, ‘knowing about bias does not automatically result in changes in behaviour by managers and employees’, and as such, unconscious bias training ‘is not necessarily bad if it gets people talking about discrimination, but it is yet another distraction from the embedded, structural disadvantages within organisations’.

This focus on the individual, and, arguably, the risk to overrate the agency of single organisational members in bringing about structural change at the workplace were foregrounded in the research participants’ discussion of unconscious bias training. Lauren told me that ‘unconscious bias workshops are really popular in the City [London]’. Building on the idea of unconscious bias, one example she supports, she said, is Helena Morrissey’s The 30% Club campaign, where ‘you encourage chairmen to look at a wider diversity of candidates. So it's not propelling women in there. But it's asking them, look, consider. And I think that’s a good way of trying to do it’. Similarly, Sara J who also works in London, valued the ‘programme on hidden bias’ that her company runs, stating: ‘[it] is quite interesting in trying to get people to think about, you know, the main thought is that everybody has biases, you're better off knowing what they are than pretending you don't’. These initiatives, as the two extracts from the interviewees show, rely on *individual* chairmen’s discernment and understanding, ‘encourag[ing]’ and ‘asking’ them to ‘try[.]’ and ‘consider’ and ‘think about’ addressing inequalities and ending discrimination in decision-making processes, rather than tackling inequalities in a more structural manner.

While many participants supported unconscious bias training, more radical interventionist schemes on the policy level, in particular forms of *positive discrimination*, were frequently rejected. Lauren’s statement below reflects this dismissive stance on positive discrimination, demonstrating its intersection with elements of neoliberal feminist and meritocratic discourses:

I mean I think we've come a really, really long way. And I think if I've managed to get to the level I have, there can't be gender discrimination. [...] So I think there doesn't need to be any gender inequality. And I think inequality is really what you decide to make of it, and if you don't push yourself forward because there's every possibility for women out there and that's only going to grow and grow and grow I think. I don't

actually like I don't like positive discrimination [...] So I did encounter it once because I was involved with politics so I actually stood to be an MP for [U.K. political party]. And it was a time when they were encouraging female shortlists. So they would put forward more women, which and that could be women who didn't have the same strength of CV, but they would be put forward because they are women.

Here, Lauren who worked as a director of an insurance company at the time of the interview, fiercely distanced herself from an approach that promotes gender equality by 'encouraging female shortlists', insisting she would not want to be elected for a position under positive discrimination regulations. I focus on Lauren's account here as it presents one of the most remarkable instances of neoliberal feminist rhetoric in my sample. In concert with Sandberg's (2013) feminism, the individually empowered woman evoked in Lauren's account works to 'push [herself] forward'. Her statement fluctuates between constructing inequalities as non-existent — proven as improbable by her own success ('if I've managed to get to the level I have, there can't be gender discrimination') — and as somehow a superfluous frippery ('there doesn't need to be any gender inequality'). At any rate, occurring inequalities ought to be resolved by the responsibilised, individual woman: 'inequality is really what you decide to make of it'. This view is accordingly entangled with a rejection of interventionist approaches that aim to rectify forms of structural disadvantage. Her account of the positive discrimination scheme she encountered in the sphere of politics touches on a range of common assumptions (and misconceptions; see Noon, 2010 for an extensive discussion). Here, I want to focus on the presumption that positive discrimination may lead to the selection of a less qualified candidate: 'women who didn't have the same strength of CV' that are put forward purely 'because they are women'. In fact, as Noon (2010: 731) highlights, the positive discrimination system included in the U.K. Equality Act 2010 is 'restricted to situations where candidates are equally matched'. Thus, the initiative Lauren dismisses would most unlikely be supporting women who lack the qualifications and capabilities, but help to redress women's underrepresentation in British politics (e.g. Mackay, 2004).

At the same time, Lauren's statement invokes a meritocratic ethos: the idea to 'push yourself forward because there's every possibility for women out there' emphasises hard work and merit as the way to climb up the ladder of professional success. Indeed, meritocracy encourages the belief 'that if we try hard enough we can make it: that race or class or gender are not, on a fundamental level, significant barriers to success' (Littler, 2018: 2). 'The "fair" neoliberal

meritocratic dream', Littler (2018: 3) argues, 'rests on the idea of a level playing field, conveniently ignoring systematic inequality, social location and the head start accrued by the children of those at the top or high up the social ladder.' While Lauren's account draws on elements of meritocratic discourse, she had also talked about the way in which having children had put her 'career in limbo' (6.2), showing her experience and awareness of gender-related discrimination at work. This illustrates how stances can shift, and sense-making of inequalities and responses to such may be fraught with contradictions in participants' talk.

A meritocratic logic was also foregrounded by the consultancy manager Victoria who spoke at length about her aversion to positive discrimination, in particular quotas. She told me:

I think quotas are really divisive. I don't agree with quotas. [...] I think it should be based on merit under the acknowledgement that we all have biases. [...] I don't think quotas are an answer. I think it makes everybody's progression questioned, I think you start then 'othering' people. And so that's something we're struggling with is like this dynamic between how do we support people [read: women] to recognise that they have a future career at the same time as not trying to say oh women over here, men over there, you're fundamentally so weirdly different, which is just not true.

In both Lauren and Victoria's account, positive discrimination interventions are stigmatised as going against meritocratic ideas of opportunity and mobility, creating deep-seated discomfort. The undermining of meritocracy, according to Noon (2010), is amongst the main objections to positive discrimination. Fear that her skills and capabilities would be called into question, but also her own position may be regarded as 'gained through a non-meritocratic process' (Noon, 2010: 734) came to the fore in Victoria's statement: 'it [quota rules] makes everybody's progression questioned'. In line with a meritocratic outlook that dovetails with the continuing disavowal of gender explored above, the idea that gender should not matter in the work context was expressed by Victoria. She rejected approaches (like quotas) that in her view promote an 'untrue' differentiation between 'oh women over here, men over there'. Arguably, this points to a reinstatement of the 'gender-neutral' worker in a new-old neoliberalised fashion. As Littler (2018: 2) makes clear, there is an important linkage between the language of meritocracy and neoliberal culture: 'the language of meritocracy has become an alibi for plutocracy and a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture'. In accordance with this, the elements of meritocratic discourse in the research participants' talk constitute a site where neoliberal

rhetoric is identifiable (see also Scharff, 2020). Resonating with a neoliberal feminist view, many research participants demonstrated an awareness of inequalities in work contexts (6.2), yet overwhelmingly did not embrace structural, more interventionist policy approaches like quotas or regulation to address such inequalities and instigate transformative change.

6.4 Being content and “happy with what you have”

Another identifiable affective response by the research participants to inequalities in the neoliberal workplace was what I term ‘a fatalist mood’, building on Orgad’s (2019) analysis of women’s responses to lived inequalities as well as Scharff’s (2021) analysis of the fatalist sentiment that can characterise discussions of inequalities. By this I mean that participants demonstrated or voiced a defeatist disposition to workplace inequality, resigning to the apparent ‘fact’ that it could not be changed. While, on the whole, almost all the research participants expressed that their work life had in some way been adversely affected by having children (section 6.2), a fatalist sentiment was especially pronounced in relation to ‘natural’ disadvantages surrounding early motherhood and pregnancy and what some participants described as the sheer impossibility of progressing their careers.

6.4.1 *Accepting ‘natural’ disadvantages: the disruptive female body*

A sense of fatalism came to the fore in relation to a downbeat acceptance of ‘natural’ disadvantages around pregnancy and early motherhood. Several research participants took recourse to this discourse. The accountant Gemma, whose career-progression narrative is explored further in section 6.5, told me:

At the end of the day there’s the physical differences around pregnancy. I was pregnant and that physically holds you back. because physically it’s a massive change to your body and giving birth is a massive physical change to your body which is something that a man can’t [...] There will never be true gender equality, because the man can never have a baby heh heh. But, you know, I was promoted to partner at the same time as two other fellows so I’ve kind of (.) we’ve started off on the same level [...] it was very hard to slow down while I was pregnant because you physically can’t [...] I guess, you know, they’ve been able to continue at the same level whereby I’ve had a bit of a dip in my career, but I’m back now [...] It’s affected life, but that has had to happen.

[...] But there is no (.) for that period of life there is no parity between the two of us, because I'm physically growing another human being heh heh

In this statement, Gemma orients to, and compares her progress with, male colleagues who were able to follow their career trajectory and achieve the sought-after partner status unencumbered by the physical changes induced by a pregnancy. Strikingly, these 'physical differences around pregnancy' are framed as evidence of the non-realizability of gender equality: a sense that nothing can be done about this status pervades her account. Indeed, Gemma stated that what she experienced as a 'dip' in her career was something that 'has to happen'. Her statement is suffused with laughter, which may further point to a perception of pregnancy-related discrimination as taken for granted, or self-evident, and therefore inexorable.

Similarly, Michelle, the director of a pharmaceutical consultancy, reflected on this discourse on the 'natural limits' of gender equality:

I think at work, I think women are definitely at a disadvantage because of having children. [...] You know, some people say that if we had proper parental leave that you could share the time off work 50:50. But does that always necessarily work because, you know, like I said, in my situation I was feeding my daughter so I needed to be the person at home. So I don't know if there is a way to solve that, I mean maybe that is just (.) because women have babies, that's automatically going to put them at a disadvantage.

In this statement, Michelle entertains the idea of the changeable nature of inequality by considering policy changes in relation to an expansion of parental leave. Yet, she subsequently dismisses this: in retreating to an essentialist view – 'just (.) because women have babies' – maternal 'disadvantage' is naturalised and constructed as inevitable, and thus emerges as something women may have to accept and put up with in Michelle's account. Michelle and Gemma's statements point to a lacking workplace accommodation of breastfeeding women and pregnant women's needs. This works to effectively punish women (e.g. with a career 'dip' as in Gemma's case) for not being the ideal worker who is essentially constructed as a subject with little (if any) reproductive responsibilities that interfere with an untainted job commitment (e.g. Acker, 1990; Christopher, 2012). Such talk about difficulties in reconciling embodied

maternal practices and waged work is unsurprising. The clashing of embodied forms of care work and pregnancy with rigid workplace norms is demonstrated for instance by the complexities of enfolded breastfeeding (or the expression of breast milk) within the space and time of waged work — a situation that is ‘extractive for working mothers’ (Boyer, 2014: 282).

However, Gemma and Michelle do not consider policy, the workplace or their individual employers as sites of viable change. They look to themselves and their pregnant/lactating bodies that are for the time they carry the baby/breastfeed incompatible with male workplace norms, generating a feeling of insufficiency that arguably connects to and mirrors to an extent the feelings of inadequacy I discussed in chapter five in relation to many interviewees’ sense they were not living up to the perfect mother-worker ideal. As Gemma put it, she felt forced to ‘slow down’ and ‘held back’ by her pregnancy, rather than looking to change the forms of social organisation around it.

These findings resonate with Orgad’s (2019) research on middle-class working mothers who exited the workforce to care for their families (see also Gill and Orgad, 2017: 31-32). Orgad (2019: 176) detects ‘a sense of fatalism about the very possibility to effect any larger, structural change’ in current messages of women’s self-empowerment, which she sees inextricably connected to contemporary discourses of popular and neoliberal feminism. These promote intense self-work because ‘challenging inequalities is too daunting a project’ (ibid.: 175). This sense of fatalism also featured in my interviews with professional mothers across the U.K., reverberating with the accounts of the London-based stay-at-home mothers Orgad interviewed as part of her study. This suggests that a fatalist sentiment prevails not only in current discourse and stay-at-home mothers’ accounts, but also plays a significant role in working mothers’ sense-making of workplace inequalities. Such pessimism frequently continued in relation to their failure to achieve promotions.

6.4.2 Postponing promotions and enacting self-care

Ana, a corporate analyst in the field of finance, explained that she is not pursuing a promotion at present, since in order to progress her career, she would have to ‘put way more hours into it’. Having children, she said, ‘derailed original plans of having a senior position’. Ana firmly stated:

It's impossible to have a senior position with children. At least the way my life (.) maybe when they get older I might feel differently, but at the moment (.) because you need to dedicate, you already spend x amount of hours doing your job, and to be promoted, you need to spend extra hours in politics, corporate politics.

When I asked her to elaborate what she meant by corporate politics, she explained:

The hours, but be visible. You know, be visible not just to your manager, but your manager's manager and your manager's manager's manager. So doing things like happy hours and talking to (.) spending more time just chatting, you know, just like people know you exist [...] Something that I don't I can't at the moment.

She concluded her contemplation by saying, slightly chuckling: 'It is what it is'. Ana candidly shared her struggle with sexist, deeply inappropriate remarks she had been exposed to in previous job roles – these sometimes clearly went even beyond sexual innuendo. Indeed, in the interview she called herself a feminist, and told me 'I cannot not be a feminist, I work in the financial markets, it's fucking sexist'. Yet, despite her outspokenness about sexism at work (that led her to change jobs several times) in the interview, it appears to Ana that the realisation of her career goal is an endeavor that has to be adjourned. Her statement indicates the futility and impossibility to 'play the male corporate game' of presentism and high visibility in the office and especially during after-work get-togethers in contention for promotions – as a female working parent to young children.

Countering her defeatist view was however her impression that 'I see that actually people who end up getting promoted aren't really the best people, just the people who end up spending more time in politics'. Interestingly, she framed this as a 'positive side', reassuring her focus on sustaining financial independence through a stable income (modified post children) that allows her to provide for herself and her children, rather than attempting to reach a more senior level.

A sense of fatalism also featured strongly in Katharina's account. Like Ana, Katharina has given up on the idea to advance her career as long as her children are little. Katharina works as a senior analyst in the finance sector in a part-time role. While her part-time work arrangement reflects a wider trend, with women being far more likely to work part-time hours than men

when they become parents, and a ‘knock-on effect’ on women’s earnings – the ‘part-time wage penalty’ (IFS, 2016; ONS, 2013; Yarwood and Locke, 2016), Katharina described a feeling of being in a ‘trap’ she cannot get out of. ‘Really it’s like a trap, the part-time trap. The self-chosen part-time trap. But. I guess that’s just how it is. Could be better, could be worse.’ She explained why she feels this way:

Having children has affected my career in the sense that (.) there was no progression in the last years. Simply because I’ve only worked part-time and I wouldn’t have been able to do the job full-time at all, because it would have been even more than nine to five, weekends and nights, working in the evenings, which is what I now also do sometimes but yeah. [...] The next promotion I can only get (.) the bottom line is that I have to do extra stuff. I don’t know at all when I am supposed to do these extra bits of work, because I now already have a lot going on.

Apart from not being able to achieve a promotion, she reported protracted pay-rise negotiations due to a change in management that coincided with her maternity leave. Upon her return, she said, she felt ‘exploited’ and downright ‘punished’ since instead of the agreed pay rise she received ‘new objectives’, meaning an increase in her workload. Two pregnancies and juggling paid work and parenting left her too exhausted and overwhelmed to sue her employer or quit and look for another job, but she surmised: ‘Of course, without children, it wouldn’t have been like this, but this is just how the system works and that’s just how it is’. Her fatalist, depoliticised spirit, conveyed also by the repeatedly used word ‘just’, is understandable. Rather than achieving self-realisation through a fulfilling job, which is what she was hoping for before having children, she told me she now carries a ‘mother stigma’ (‘Mütter-Stigma’): ‘The mothers who deliver everything and do everything well, but (.) everything else on top is always a little bit difficult’.

The prospect of an improved future work situation also characterised Claire’s account. A change for the better was deflected to a vague point in time in the future when she would be able to work in the role she figured she would ‘really really enjoy’. The early-career academic Claire is currently on her second temporary contract: a part-time, project-based research position at a U.K. university, but told me that ‘if I hadn’t had a baby when I had my baby I was kind of moving up to the next position, which would be kind of a full-time lecturing position’. Claire is the primary caregiver to her one-year-old baby boy, and a full-time job, she said, ‘just

doesn't fit the schedule kind of (1.0) I just don't, at the moment, feel like I could manage that'. Rather than consulting with her partner (who works full-time, erratic hours) how a more equal childcare-waged work distribution could look like, her decision, she told me, is to 'just cut myself some slack, it might be a bit slower than my original career path, my intended career path, but that's okay, I'll still get there'. Her soothing 'solution' is to enact 'present-oriented self-care' (Rottenberg, 2018: 133) and 'just cut [herself] some slack' in order to remain content with this diversion of her 'original career path'. Claire is well aware of the 'extra work you do that's beyond your contract', and:

with the increasing pressures about the pace of publication that you need to maintain in order to get a full-time role or to stay in your job, there's a potential for that to creep into a lot of your kind of family time or home time.

Claire's account registers the high demands of the U.K. academic work culture and the way that these can percolate into and affect family and life more generally beyond paid work. Nonetheless, and perhaps inevitably, she constructs herself as the enterprising and passionate-labour driven subject that, arguably, is required by contemporary academia: 'I just enjoy everything about it, I really love teaching, I like research'. Passion persists as an ideal about working in academia and is felt as a deeply personal quality, structuring a scholar's relationship to her work (Cannizzo, 2016; 2018). The concept of passionate labour and the 'unofficial work mantra for our time' do what you love (DWYL) (Tokumitsu, 2014) 'transfers the battleground from society onto the self' (Sandoval, 2018: 120), with parallels between the passionate attachments to work manifest in the work cultures of academia and the U.K. cultural sector (Gill, 2014b). In both fields, the meaning and pleasure for (or gained from) one's work coexist with precariousness, difficult working conditions (especially for career early staff), intensified work pressure and workloads and associated rising levels of stress and anxiety (e.g. Gill, 2014b; McRobbie, 2016; Sandoval, 2018).

As Tokumitsu (2014) indicates, a discourse of passion in which DWYL is embedded distracts from the aforementioned systemic problems. If work becomes an 'act of self-love', then the following individualising logic can take hold: 'If profit doesn't happen to follow, it is because the worker's passion and determination were insufficient. Its real achievement is making workers believe their labor serves the self and not the marketplace' (ibid.). DWYL and the neoliberal work ethic it is part of is problematic because it is based on 'the assumption that this

can be achieved on an individual basis, rendering social and political change obsolete' (Sandoval, 2018: 120). Having completed a PhD in gender studies, Claire considers herself 'quite an avowed feminist'. However, similarly to Ana, she does not directly relate her stagnated career that is bound up with her primary caregiver role and the working conditions at current academic institutions, to feminist ideas, nor does her account display a critical questioning of any aspect of neoliberal work culture.

As an early-career academic, Claire is likely to be especially affected by the prevalence of casualised employment including a shortage of permanent part-time posts in academia (to name just a few key problems that characterise the working conditions at the contemporary U.K. university). Yet, in constructing herself as a hopefully passionate, self-managing and responsibilised neoliberal academic subject, she – understandably – remains deeply invested in the idea of building a career in academia – at a later date: 'I haven't had any gaps yet [in her CV] so fingers crossed, it'll work out alright for me'.

In contrast to Ana, Katharina and Claire who consciously ruled out career advancement while their children are young, middle school teacher Samantha had just been interviewed for a part-time senior leadership role when we met for the interview. Her job interview had been unsuccessful, partly due to the reason that, as she told me, part-time senior leadership roles in her field 'never ever come up, they're so rare', and 'so many women want them'. Part-time working hours can be 'a parenting "strategy" to manage the dual demands of paid work and care' (Yarwood and Locke, 2016: 366). However, when telling me about her job interview, another facet emerged:

So I went for the interview [...] I didn't get the job, I'm okay with that, the internal candidate got that, but it was interesting, because the job was 45 minutes away, and my husband was really worried about the impact that was going to have on our family. And, actually, deep down inside of me I knew that that would have a huge impact on our family as well, just that extra, you know, hour commute every day.

Her husband's worries about the effect *her* longer commute would have on the children contrasted sharply with her own view, as she told me subsequently: 'I thought, you know what, I will sacrifice and do the drive just to kind of go up the ladder a bit'. Swayed by her husband (who is on the exact same career path as her) to focus her job search on very 'rare' part-time

posts, she described the impasse: ‘I discussed perhaps him going down to four days, which he is not willing to do, which is fine, I understand that’. Against the background of a work culture that discourages men from job sharing in education (‘it’s always women that are job sharing’), her husband is reluctant to be a trailblazer and step down to four days. Confronted with a situation where another part-time senior leadership role in commutable distance is unlikely to come up, and her husband’s unwillingness to prioritise the family and reduce his working hours and days, acceptance of, and making peace with, the status quo appears to be the only viable option:

So it’s almost [exhales] can we have it all and I don’t think that (.) I can have it all at the moment so I’m trying to make sure I’m content with (.) I have a good job, it’s well-paid, I’ve got some degree of responsibility, but I still get to have that time with my children and I kind of resign to the fact that my time will come in the future I guess, whereas my husband, if he decides to become a deputy head then he could just do it like that really [snaps fingers].

Here, she constructs herself as patiently waiting for the children to become older in order to advance her career, and, in the meantime, as trying to achieve a level of contentment with the present work-family arrangement: ‘I’m trying to make sure I’m content [...] I resign to the fact that my time will come in the future I guess’, as she put it. In neoliberal feminist discourse, as Rottenberg (2018: 130) demonstrates, living in and valorising the present ‘institutes an affective investment in the status quo’ and ‘encourages women to focus on their own well-being in the here and now’. This turn to the here and now ‘helps render the difficult work of imagining alternative political and temporary horizons increasingly impossible and, just as important, *undesirable*’ (ibid.,: 133; original emphasis). This is echoed in Samantha’s statement.

However, moments of rupture were palpable in the interview. Later, Samantha admitted: ‘it is frustrating that he [husband] gets to (.) do more and has that flexibility to do more than I have’. She appeared unconvinced by the primary caregiver role assigned to her by cultural imperatives and her own partner:

It feels like that (.) we both can’t be (.) driving our careers forward and having children, that it would be to the detriment of our children. So one of us needs to (.) stand still

and step back that bit and (2.0) as the mother that's me, you know, I feel I'm the primary caregiver and I'm the one who (1.0) I guess I want to be with my children (.) at home.

What Samantha seemingly feels as the dissatisfying impossibility to drive her career forward is inextricably connected to her husband's insistence on driving *his* career forward *and* remaining a 1.5 worker family (Sayer and Gornick, 2012), with consequential gendered expectations to 'stand still and step back' – a 'choice' that is bolstered by cultural narratives of child-centered, 'good' motherhood (Hays, 1996). However, her identification with the primary caregiver role is expressed tentatively and hesitantly (indicated by the multiple, notable pauses in her brief account), suggesting her potential alienation from such an attributed role: 'I'm the one who (1.0) *I guess* I want to be with my children (.) at home' (my emphasis in italics). The fluctuation between acceptance of and resistance to the sacrificial career standstill that seems so pronounced in Samantha's account re-emerged later on:

I had this discussion with a friend the other day, it is the price that I pay and we pay as women to have children, but and then it's like, well, why should I have to pay this price and why can't my husband pay that price as well??

Revealing a level of dissatisfaction that breaks with the calm content displayed earlier, in a figurative sense, one could almost hear her grinding her teeth in view of the prospect to sit tight, 'stand still and step back' whilst waiting for her 'time to come'.

'[I]magining alternative political and temporary horizons', to use Rottenberg's (2018: 133) words, does not seem entirely impossible, and most of the women I spoke to had an idea of how a more equal work and home life would look like. Yet, as the analysis has suggested, its realisation in the here and now is impeded by three key factors that often appeared in tandem: workplace conditions and cultures that privilege the 'male' childless worker; women's primary responsibility for childcare (and their desire to spend time with their young children); and general household responsibilities (see chapters 7 and 8 where I discuss the negotiation of these through the lens of Mumsnet and the modality of users' 'domesticity talk'). As this section has begun to show, in the absence of viable alternative scenarios, the difficulties around confronting unequal situations at work *and* in the home place a heavy and unfair burden on women to embark on a two-front 'battle'. The next and final section of this chapter sheds light

on some of the dynamics present in workplaces that contribute to disincentivising the imagining of change and holding unequal workplace structures in place.

6.5 Feeling lucky or the gratitude for being able to work (flexibly)

6.5.1 Luck and flexibility

Many research participants told me they were content with their – often ‘flexible’ – working practices, but I was struck by the frequent framing of working conditions that were perceived as satisfactory as a matter of luck, and the implications this seemingly involved. The notion of luck has primarily been looked at in research on career success: exploring, for instance, ‘the luck factor’ in creative (Janosov et al., 2020) and scientific careers (Pluchino et al., 2019), with writers pointing out that such luck is not meted out equally yet seldomly acknowledged as playing a role in the accumulation of wealth (e.g. Frank, 2016). In drawing on the topos of luck, participants in Wagner and Wodak’s (2006) study on how highly professional women perform and understand success denied the ‘hard work’ involved in building their careers, evoking coincidental ‘luck’ to account for their success. In a different context, Scharff (2018) observes that the female classical musicians in her study frequently employed the trope of ‘luck’ as a rhetorical tool that served to disarticulate their class privilege. Similarly, Brook *et al.* (2021) show that the idea of ‘career luck’ was used to explain the continuing success of white, middle-class men in the cultural and creative industries, which effectively contributes to disavowing privilege and maintaining inequalities. In my sample, the trope of luck was employed in a variety of contexts; however it was mostly utilised in association with a sense of gratitude for being able to work and have different kinds of flexibility in their working arrangements that many participants viewed as key to maintain their career credentials.

The language of ‘flexibility’ and its presumed ‘family friendliness’ was pervasive in the research participants’ accounts. Emma, a 37-year-old analyst at a marketing research agency with a one-year-old son, told me she believed ‘this is quite relevant I think to your work [my thesis], the reason that things have been so good for me is [company’s] flexibility and their willingness to be flexible for me’. After her return from maternity leave, she told me, the company had adapted her working hours according to her wishes since, as she believed: ‘they seem to think that I’m a very valuable employee’. There was a sense in Emma’s account that this adaptability was felt as a personal favour.

‘[W]ork-life balance and its sister term “flexibility”’ Orgad (2019: 54) notes, ‘are equated with generous and progressive workplace arrangements’, yet they ‘also reinscribe women’s “natural” preference for flexible work’ (Gregg, 2008: 287). Attempts to erase the implied focus on women were for instance made in regards to a linguistic shift from ‘work-*family* balance’ and ‘family friendliness’ to ‘work-*life* balance’, which rhetorically also opened the concept up to childless individuals (Gregory and Milner, 2009). Yet, despite their gender-neutral and inclusive veneer, flexibility and work-life balance discourses obscure the ongoing gendered address since work-family combination continues to be constructed as a woman’s issue (Lewis et al., 2007). Heralded as a solution and ‘panacea’ to women’s participation in the workforce, the twin discourses then create conditions that allow women to maintain primary childcare and homemaking responsibilities, leaving the female primary caregiver role largely unchallenged. As Gregg (2011: 4) argues, in the face of an absence of a broader critique of the long-hour work culture and the underpinning gendered assumptions, women are made to ‘feel grateful for so-called “flexible” work arrangements’.

6.5.2 Repayments

In the accounts of the research participants, workplace flexibility was oftentimes rhetorically bound to the topos of luck, which pointed to a sense of personal gratitude. The trope of luck was employed in relation to a range of working-hour arrangements. With regards to a part-time role she held when her daughter was about one year old, Sonia told me that finding a job as a female parent of a small child ‘was just a lot of luck’. The prestigious consultancy that hired her on a part-time basis was a ‘great arrangement’ for her which enabled her to drop off and pick up her toddler from the nursery. At the same time, the job helped to sustain the ‘occupational narrative’ which she felt ‘is very very important and I was just very very lucky to find something that fitted’. She told me that she felt ‘panicked’ to be out of the labour market for too long after the birth of her child, and recalled thinking: ‘I just remember thinking I just take whatever I get (.) I would work for free, like heh heh I would still do it’. Discussing her former boss’s outlook on the ‘different hours’ she felt she would need now having a child, she said: ‘there was this really nice guy and I think when you’re a mum you’re really relying on people being nice and understanding’.

The reliance on individual relationships and ‘people being nice and understanding’ was also discussed in the larger context of companies’ ‘family-friendly’ policies. The legal researcher Sarah told me that ‘luckily my employer is good [...] they’re a very nice firm here and I’m

lucky that they're quite big on flexible policies'. Anne's account brought out the benefits for the law firm in relation to flexible working arrangements. Thus, she expressed the belief that being allowed to work more flexibly and not being discriminated against for working part-time 'makes you work harder'. She also pointed to the firm's gains in female employee retention, as a way to retain employees perceived as 'valuable' and highly skilled by accommodating (some) needs for flexible practices (Cady, 2013; see also Tilly, 1996).

I think the fact that the firm is doing really well is a reflection that lots of women stay here, lots of women are allowed to work a bit more flexibly and they're not discriminated against for working a few days a week. And that makes you work harder.

Being in full-time employment herself, this potential intensification of work in exchange for a more flexible work schedule was reflected in Sarah's account. She told me that she is 'quite happy' to work 'the odd evening', noting that this allows her to 'leave a little bit earlier' when needed due to her partner's erratic work schedule and unavailability to pick up the children: 'the pay-off is if I say I really have to go at four o'clock today then that's fine'.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Michelle who voiced the impression that 'if you give people flexibility then obviously they repay that'. Michelle is a 37-year-old mother of a two-year-old daughter, working as a director of a pharmaceutical consultancy. She changed jobs while she was on maternity leave and told me that 'being able to have a more flexible work life and work fewer hours was a big part of it [the reasons for the change]'. Now working four days a week, Michelle leaves the office on time to collect her daughter from nursery every working day and knows that family emergencies such as the sickness of the child are accommodated. However, for her, 'repay'[ing] the company

means that sometimes on my days that I'm not working while my daughter is having her nap I might sit and do a bit of work and I reply to emails in the evenings and things. So I think it works in both directions.

Gregg (2011: 2, original emphasis) calls this 'use [of] online networks in the home to catch up on work that can't be finished in the office' the '*presence bleed* of contemporary office culture, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply'. She notes how this 'explains the sense of responsibility workers feel in making themselves ready and

willing to work beyond paid hours' (ibid.). I build on and expand this notion here to highlight how, in Michelle's account, conducting parts of her workload from home and outside her regular working time and even work days, including days off, is constructed as part of a trade-off: a way of 'giving back' for the 'received' flexibility and understanding for her outside-work caring responsibilities.

Like Sarah and Michelle, financial analyst Ana framed her employer's understanding for family needs as a matter of individual luck. In particular, she indicated she was grateful that, so far, 'there was no backlash' for leaving the office due to family emergencies, yet simultaneously highlighted that this can only happen on a 'sporadic basis':

I have to say that my bosses are really nice, I'm very lucky. Every time we had an emergency and I had to run, I always ran and there was no backlash for doing so. And obviously if something happens in the morning and you're a little bit late and it's like on a sporadic basis it's fine, but if you're not able to show up at 8 a.m., then you should be looking for another job.

The topos of luck also featured in Deborah's – the director of a television channel – account. Of her and her husband's employers, she told me: 'they're very very great, they're very flexible so we're both quite lucky'. Working in the international part of the company, Deborah 'travel[s] quite a lot' for her work, as she later told me. It was then that the notion of coincidental luck was erased from the flexibility narrative, and her employer's flexibility couched in different terms:

[Company] is very flexible and understanding, but I think it's because I work bloody hard heh [hard brief laugh] and they know that. And there's been periods where I've literally been away Monday to Friday four weeks in a row so that's been difficult. So that's not typical, but they know that I'm committed to the job so I think therefore they're more prepared to be flexible.

In this statement, Deborah acknowledges that in fact her employer's flexibility and 'understanding' are conditional on her commitment to the time-intensive role, and have very little to do with luck ('it's because I work bloody hard [...] and they know that'). Having two school-aged children and 'ageing parents who are quite ill as well', Deborah does require a

level of flexibility from her employer to accommodate her multiple caring responsibilities. Yet, the interdependence of flexibility and job commitment includes embracing an intensified, long-hours work culture, through which she suggests she has ‘earned’ this flexibility. Such earning of individual flexibility and merit also came to the fore when Deborah told me about a colleague who – deservedly – was permitted to work completely from home in the context of the spouse’s relocation to another country: ‘they have to value you, I mean if they don’t think you’re any good they’re not going to bend over backwards for you’.

6.5.3 *Felicitous working environments*

The association of flexible working ‘solutions’ with women and tendencies to reinforce women’s role as primary caregiver became palpable in a variety of ways. However, the ambiguity and the ‘gender’ of workplace flexibility emerged especially in relation to other women in the working environment. Several participants told me they felt lucky to work primarily with women. This was shaped by the idea that flexible working practices would be naturalised within a female-dominated working environment where the experience of being a female working parent was shared. Arguably, this ‘double bind’ naturalises flexible work as a ‘female preference’. Laura, the senior trial manager and research fellow at a university with two primary-school-aged children, said:

I’m just very lucky in the setup that I’ve got at the moment, it’s predominantly female with a lot of people who got small children. And I think that benefit of experience filtering down through the management style and management system makes a massive difference, that level of understanding.

The marketing research analyst Emma shared this sentiment, stating:

There’s always been a certain amount of openness to flexibility because the company was founded by women and a lot of the female staff are women in their childbearing years and they work, including the CEO and all the directors.

Similarly, Michelle who endeavors to ‘repay’ her employer for being allowed to work more flexibly as explored above, told me that ‘the industry I work in, there are a lot of women in very senior roles, a lot of my clients are women’, explaining that in this way she felt lucky that at work being a woman is not ‘a disadvantage or an issue’. On the whole, research participants

expressed satisfaction with their flexible working practices, and as I have shown, they often felt lucky for their work arrangements. Importantly, marking these situations as ‘lucky’ registers that they are to some degree the exception in the wider work context, which simultaneously renders them matters of *individual* luck. One possible implication is the silencing of any criticism of their employers.

6.5.4 *Foreclosing criticism*

Criticism of individual employers was noticeably absent from the interviewees’ accounts. Inequalities, Gill (2014) has argued in relation to cultural work, are at least difficult to articulate if not rendered unspeakable in a neoliberal and individualist climate in which for subjects to be intelligible structural discrimination has to be disavowed. Arguably, the focus on personal luck in relation to flexibility, that is, being in the ‘lucky’ position to work for a company that offers flexible working practices, follows a similar logic of evading structural restraints. In particular, it worked to avert and foreclose criticism in research participants’ talk.

This relation between ‘fortunate flexibility’ and silenced criticism came especially to the fore in Deborah’s account. Deborah told me that she perceives her company, a large television channel, as ‘very enlightened in terms of being a working parent’. Amongst the services provided by her employer, she listed a ‘very active family forum’ offering get-togethers and talks, a ‘nanny emergency service’ and an annual children’s day. While she praised her company for offering such support, she distanced herself from a tone she perceived to prevail in the family forum:

There’s this “ooh we’re all working mothers, it’s so hard”. And I just think we work in a fantastic company that is incredibly flexible, it’s not actually that hard, you know [withholds laughter] (.) I just think it’s much harder if you work in the City or somewhere else.

Deborah registers the importance of supportive work environments for working parents, acknowledging that such environments can be changed and organised in more equitable ways. Yet, the reference to flexibility here precludes the voicing of any structural ‘complaints’ of her own working environment. (In the chapters following this, I consider the voicing of women’s complaints, and its ambivalent consequences, in the virtual environment of Mumsnet, in relation to domestic inequality specifically.) Deborah’s account suggests that since there is the

opportunity to work flexibly, being a working mother cannot be ‘actually that hard’. In telling me subsequently about her sister who works as a lawyer in Central London, she intimated how law firms traditionally involve what Sommerlad terms ‘a professional identity unencumbered by responsibility for social reproduction’ that is ‘premised on the construction of the domestic sphere as irrelevant to the professional environment’ (2016: 61; 68). Thus, the legal profession functions as an adverse benchmark for Deborah:

She [her sister] said she was closing a deal once and the lawyer on the other side, his partner had died, and they were closing the deal, and he moved his partner’s funeral so that they could finish the deal. [...] But, you know, it’s nothing like that here so I think really there’s nothing (.) to complain about. You got great working conditions, generally people are paid well, and as I say there’s that flexibility on the whole.

By comparing working practices established in the legal profession with the ‘great working conditions’ present at her company, due to their flexibility, she holds that being a working mother is much harder elsewhere, averting any kind of criticism: ‘it’s nothing like that here so I think really there’s nothing to complain about.’

6.5.5 Fortunate promotions

Some interviewees used the trope of luck and an associated sense of gratitude in relation to career advancement. This was especially the case when promotions within the company coincided with family extensions. Sarah, the legal researcher, employed the notion of luck when she told me that she was being promoted while she was pregnant: ‘I felt very very lucky when they did that’, framing this as ‘quite unique in law firms’. Against the background of widespread pregnancy discrimination including job loss, compulsory redundancy or harassment (BIS and EHRC, 2016; see section 6.2 in this chapter), and the ‘masculine’ work culture that characterises the legal sector, she portrayed this event as *exceptional* and the received promotion as a matter of *coincidental luck*.

A more implicit yet consequential sense of gratitude came to the fore when Gemma told me about the time when she was offered a promotion while planning a second child. Gemma, aged 35, is an accountant and tax adviser and partner in the firm, along with four other (male) partners. When she was offered the partnership, which for her presented a crucial step in her career, she felt she had to be transparent in her plan to extend her family:

They [partners] offered me [the role] and I said “well, yeah, I accept, but you do realise that (.) I’m not finished with the family, I want one more child.” And thankfully they were really understanding and said “well this is about the next 20, 30 years of working life, if we need to do maternity leave in the next couple of years then we’ll do that and that shouldn’t hold you back”. So they were really good about it.

The novelty of the situation was in parts owed to the circumstance that she is the first female partner in the firm: ‘this [maternity leave] was all new to them, they’re all men heh’. However, in framing the partners’ understanding as something she was grateful for, her statement evokes maternity leave as not taken for granted, but as needing approval. This was echoed later in the interview: ‘when I accepted the role they told me that they would kind of take a little bit on trust that it would work out well’. Crucially, this sense of gratitude for the ‘trust’ and hence for being able to take on the partnership despite her maternity leave appeared to shape her decision to shorten the leave to three months: ‘I had six months off, but I guess I went back part-time-ish kind of after three months, but it worked out for us. It’s what I wanted to do.’ By returning to work much earlier than formally agreed, she proves her commitment to the role and corroborates the ‘trust’ placed in her, yet framing this as her own choice: ‘It’s what I wanted to do’.

6.5.6 *The price of flexibility?*

Like Gemma, many research participants were prepared and willing to pay a ‘price’ for their employers’ accommodation of outside-paid-work responsibilities. They valued flexible work arrangements as a ‘solution’ to their work and care responsibilities. Yet, their framing of employer flexibility as a matter of individual luck rendered subtle forms of exploitation invisible. Thus, even if anchored in companies’ policies, the possibility of working flexibly (or take maternity leave that coincides with a promotion as in Gemma’s case) often incited a sense of gratitude. Accordingly, accommodations were sometimes felt as a personal favour that had to be repaid in some way, by ‘work[ing] harder’, on days off or by agreeing to extensive business trips, constantly demonstrating a high level of job commitment to ‘earn’ flexibility. The acceptance of a potential intensification and worsening of working conditions then became a way of compensating for being allowed to work more flexibly – a trade-off that lay quiet in the cloak of ‘luckiness’.

6.6 Anti-maternal workplace cultures, change, continuities and luck

This chapter has explored the research participants' talk about their experiences of workplace inequalities and discrimination and their responses to these identified issues. Having engaged in detail with the accounts of the professional working mothers I interviewed, my analysis has highlighted that work-related inequalities shaped the participants' work experiences not only in relation to gender, but specifically in relation to maternity. I have demonstrated how having children continues to raise doubts about women's job commitment, ambition and sometimes even capability in the contemporary, neoliberal U.K. workplace, penalising women for being mothers. In particular, the analysis has brought out how subtle comments and questions from employers and colleagues (such as 'Who is looking after the children?' or 'How will you cope with these children?') worked as unsolicited, inappropriate and constant 'reminders' of women's presumed primary caregiver role, denying women career commitment and ambition right up to promotions in sometimes severe ways. While I also discussed 'hard' cases of maternity-related discrimination including compulsory redundancy and issues associated with insecure, fixed-term work, the almost omnipresent 'questions' that so many participants were exposed to reflect, like no other, the deeply problematic perceptions of women that have children at work. Centred in large parts on an *assumed* prioritisation of the home sphere and children over the job (and, associated, assumed tensions between the two spheres), such harassing comments illustrate the trickle, over time, towards discrimination. Crucially, the near-intangible, often implicit nature of such ultimately discriminatory remarks makes it difficult to pin down, prove and address the extensive disadvantages that can result from a perception of women who have children as less committed and competent workers, such as lacking opportunities, participation and failures to gain promotions. I argued that such insidious forms of discrimination starkly point up an *anti-maternal workplace culture*, which seems to affect working mothers' experiences in spite of maternity rights including parental leave being in place in the U.K. (though difficult to navigate and in parts offering significantly insufficient support, as I showed in particular in relation to casual employment).

It is these deeply entrenched, enraging yet often subtle forms of discrimination that were frankly and often angrily talked about in the interviews. Thus, my analysis has provided evidence for changes in the way that discussions about inequalities in work contexts occur. While gender at work was disavowed in some statements, many participants were very conscious of the discriminatory nature of their experiences, and willing to share these with me in the interviews.

At the same time, as I have demonstrated, this significant awareness of gender inequalities at work coexisted with individualist solutions that frequently intersected with elements of neoliberal (feminist) and meritocratic discourses. As such, the interviewees' responses to how and if these issues could be addressed and change generated pointed to continuities in mothers' talk about inequalities at work and beyond. Examining the frequent endorsement of unconscious bias training as a popular diversity management strategy by the research participants in section three, I have shown that this response to gender inequalities in work contexts relies on the 'goodwill' and discernment of individual organisational members (still all too often senior white men) in bringing about change at the workplace. Moreover, the endorsement of this individualist approach often went hand in hand with a rejection of structural, interventionist policy approaches such as positive discrimination, prominently quotas, which were sometimes repudiated out of fear that the interviewees' own progression, skills and capabilities would be called into question.

The research participants' desistance from advocating approaches that could hold out the prospect of transformative change abounded in relation to a fatalist sentiment that pervaded many accounts. As section four shows, although the participants had knowledge of structural inequalities at work and, to a lesser extent, in their homes, their accounts were structured by a lacking sense of agency in that they often did not see themselves in a position to effect change – they tended to accept the status quo. While my interviewees are Mumsnet users, I consider in the following chapters if and how more agentic subject positions are enabled in the communicative space of Mumsnet. In other words, I will discuss in detail if, and if so how, and with what consequences and implications, specific gendered forms of inequalities are 'speaking' in the online conversational context of Mumsnet.

At the same time, the research participants' responses were not uniformly connected to feminism. For instance, I discussed how Ana vehemently identified as a feminist in the interview. Concurrently, her account was illustrative of the way that an awareness of structural issues at work – sexism – coincided with a fatalist sentiment towards the impossibility of career advancement. While she explicitly referred to herself as a feminist, she evaded (not reported) the sexual harassment she encountered in several workplaces by changing jobs, and did not see a way to develop her current role as long as her children were small.

I also gestured towards the intertwined aspects that inhibit the realisation of equality in the here and now – some of which I will consider in much more detail over the next chapters that shift the focus to the digital sphere and to how these issues are being negotiated in the online space of Mumsnet: the impact of women's assigned, assumed and/or actually taken primary responsibility for childcare and general household responsibilities (see chapters 7 and 8), and ongoing workplace conditions and norms that hinder rather than facilitate the reconciliation of caring and domestic labour and waged work. Indeed, it is both public-sphere work inequalities as well as private-sphere domestic inequalities that condition women's lives and therefore merit exploration (negotiations of domestic inequalities in Mumsnet talk are considered in detail in the following two chapters).

The latter section provided further evidence of the tendency that workplaces and cultures continue to be built around the 'male' childless worker by looking at the interlacing notions of 'luck' and gratitude in relation to flexible working conditions. Many research participants viewed flexibility in work arrangements as key to maintain their career credentials *and* take care of their families. However, if women are made to feel grateful for so-called flexible working practices that are far too often framed as a matter of personal luck, an unequal system is reinforced that continues to call on women to individually work out the complexity of achieving that 'balance', while subtle forms of exploitation are increasingly rendered invisible.

So, what are we to make of this open talk about maternity discrimination and inequality at work that exists side-by-side with individualist responses, a fatalist sentiment and personal gratitude for being able to work flexibly? I argue for the usefulness of thinking change and continuities in the discussion of gendered forms of inequality together, rather than assuming that new understandings merely displace older ones. In this sense, my analysis supports the idea that remaining cautious rather than overly optimistic in light of this increased awareness and more open discussion of inequalities in work contexts is required to avoid falling into the pitfall of heralding a truncated narrative of progress that stops short of envisioning social change as a possibility (Gill, 2016; Mendes et al., 2019; Orgad, 2019; Scharff, 2021). My analysis in this chapter has also begun to show how in the face of a lack of viable social and political alternatives, challenging unequal situations at work, especially if cloaked by the language of 'luck' and 'flexibility', *and* in the home presents a quandary – one that places an unfair and heavy burden on women to confront such structural inequalities and deep tensions via a difficult two-front 'battle'.

The next chapter turns to Mumsnet and marks a twofold shift – from the exploration of the interview accounts I conducted with Mumsnet users to the online sphere, and from the investigation of discourses surrounding the workplace to a detailed examination of discourses on domesticity within the private realm. In examining online accounts, and focusing on the theme of domestic inequality, the following chapters (7 – 9) both connect to and differ from the previous ones in several key ways. Chapters seven to nine reconnect to the theme of domestic inequality that figured in the interviews as a matter that was rather silenced than openly addressed (as discussed in detail in chapter 5). As such, they retain a focus on negotiations of inequalities, but consider these in, and the role played by, a different communicative setting and the different implications. Indeed, the next chapter will bring out how these domestic issues were discussed differently in the techno-social Mumsnet sphere. Thus I will explore in the next chapter how the communicative context of Mumsnet, along with its particular architecture and affordances (see chapter 3) plays an important role in the way that domestic issues not only become highly visible but render certain, elsewhere silenced, inequalities that are situated in the private sphere ‘speakingable’, drawing attention to the differences in the communicative possibilities in the specific Mumsnet space and user interviews, and online and ‘offline’ sites more broadly. The visibility and ‘speakingability’ of domestic inequality is an important issue as it potentially enables to address such forms of inequality and that therefore warrants detailed examination. Thus, the next chapter considers the digital gender politics of domesticity as they come to the fore in talk on Mumsnet.

Chapter 7 VISIBILISING DOMESTIC INEQUALITIES: THE 'FACILITATING WIFE' IN DOMESTICITY TALK ON MUMSNET

This chapter examines the striking visibility of domestic inequalities in talk on Mumsnet and its contrast with the silences around this issue among women – Mumsnet users – I interviewed. Taking my cue from the literature that points to a contradiction between the ‘wildly unspeakable’ oppressive drudgery of mundane domestic chores (McRobbie, 2013: 128) and the continuing existence of domestic inequality, understood as the gendered division of labour in the home (e.g. Bianchi et al., 2010), this chapter accounts for the visibility and ‘speakability’ of domestic inequality on Mumsnet. The issue of shared domestic work was a salient topic with feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, but is arguably less visible in contemporary versions of feminism. What I call ‘domesticity talk’ refers to precisely this visibility that is endowed to domestic issues in discussions in the Mumsnet space.

This chapter is the first of three chapters that explore the affective-discursive assemblage of constructions, interactions and practices circulating and coming into existence on Mumsnet, drawing on online postings to the site’s discussion boards. Attempting to make sense of this disparity in meaning-making over inequalities that are located in the domestic sphere, it poses the question of whether, and if so, how the domestic realm may be understood through this platform as a political arena which endows posting women with affective-discursive resources that are not available to them in offline talk (i.e. the interviews I conducted with users). Arguing that women’s experiences of domestic inequality may become ‘speakable’ to a certain degree on Mumsnet, it mobilises the notion of affective dissonance, as developed by Hemmings (2012: 150), to map out how the relationships that women form in the Mumsnet space may enable them to ‘feel differently’, allowing them to articulate and share dissonant views and feelings like disappointment, anger and indignation in relation to divisions of care. Hemmings (2012) argues that dissonance must be felt in order to register gaps ‘between an embodied sense of self and the self we are expected to be in social terms, between the experience of ourselves over time and the experience of possibilities and limits to how we may act or be’ (Hemmings, 2012: 149). This incongruence between experience or sense of self and social expectations can generate an orientation towards social change – the possibility to imagine alternative, more equal domestic arrangements.

In exploring posters' positioning within work-care discourses, I am building on the arguments made in chapter two about the contemporary sociocultural context in which maternal working femininities are situated. Emphasising economic productivity through waged labour while retaining 'good mothering' as an important aspect of normative femininity, this is reflected in the prominent conflict of motherhood versus career. In this context, I argued that there is a heightened visibility of motherhood in the U.K. media and public sphere as well as in other parts of the West. As research on the depiction of heterosexually partnered stay-at-home mothers in the U.S. (Douglas and Michael, 2004; Kuperberg and Stone, 2008) and more recently in the U.K. (Orgad, 2019) has suggested, this cultural ascendance of motherhood masks another common female domestic role: that of wife. Whilst this is of significance for some women who 'opt out' of the workforce, here I argue that these culturally marginalised discourses – or the discursive absence of women's position of the wife, and associated work in the domestic sphere – also play a crucial role for the many women who attempt to remain in or return to the labour market after having children. Moreover, as I discussed in chapter two, these ambivalences surrounding working women's partially invisible, conflicting roles are to some extent obscured by prominent cultural messages promising women that they can 'have it all' if they 'lean in' (Sandberg, 2013). Drawing upon these insights, this chapter argues that in order to better understand the nuances and complexity of domestic inequality in heterosexual dual-earner arrangements, we need to hone in on the set of multiple domestic roles (posting) women occupy and associated workloads.

By considering working women's talk about divisions of care on Mumsnet, this chapter interrogates the site's increasing reputation as a space where dissonant views can be articulated and everyday concerns may become politicised (chapters 1 and 2). It develops the argument made about the role of parenting forums in presenting both common ways to share experiences, emotional support, advice and solace *and* sites of conflict and dissent where mothering practices and identities are contested and renegotiated. In particular, it builds on research highlighting the ways in which women's lives are embedded in digital media as they navigate motherhood and work, and expands arguments about mothering forums as outlets for the sharing of parenting and pregnancy-related experiences that cannot be articulated in 'real life'. While previous research has then indicated the potential of mothering forums to voice dissonances with contemporary hegemonic ideas of parenting, here I will argue that, in domesticity talk on Mumsnet, women draw on a culturally marginalised yet consequential

gendered discourse that positions women as ‘wife’ alongside their roles as ‘good’ mother and ‘ideal’ worker to account to some degree for experiences of domestic inequality.

Taking the affective-discursive approach I outlined in chapter four, the data I draw on in this chapter comes from 40 threads posted to Mumsnet’s discussion fora, totalling 3,490 posts. Identifying the subject position of the ‘facilitating wife’ as a key construction through which posting women frame divisions of care, I investigate first how posters construct divisions of care in terms of dissonances with an unequal professional and domestic life situation. I then move on to look at the affective arsenal in posters’ talk, focusing on how a potentially politicised, angry register comes into existence in their accounts.

In the second section of this chapter, I explore further facets of posters’ ‘domesticity talk’. In particular, I hone in on a key component of ‘the wife’s workload’. Focusing on the construction of the mental and managerial dimension of reproductive labour in posters’ talk, I revisit my argument about the structuring role of neoliberalised family management discourse in the interviewees’ accounts (chapter 5). Unlike in the interviews, where a hegemonic discourse of self-responsibilised family management was drawn on by the research participants as part of their attempts to live up to ideals of bourgeois ‘balanced’ maternity, I argue that Mumsnet’s domesticity talk frequently disrupts such dominant discourses, drawing out important differences in the communicative possibilities in the digital Mumsnet sphere and in the interviews. In developing my broader argument that domesticity talk can expand the affective and interpretative resources available to posting women when discussing divisions of labour at home – some of which women do not have available in the interviews –, I argue that such an extension of the discursively intelligible may reframe divisions of care by enabling consideration of some taken-for-granted, often invisible and oppressive aspects of the gendered division of the managerial or ‘mental load’.

The latter part of this final section looks at two different discursive responses to women’s cognate roles of wife and family manager and associated workloads. Considering critically posters’ frequent talk about outsourcing caring, particularly domestic tasks such as cleaning, I point out that shifting part of the domestic workload to paid workers does not straightforwardly resolve the struggle of coping with unequal labour divisions, and women’s mental labour overload in particular, even for this group of socio-economically privileged women whose physical workload lessens if help is ‘bought in’. Finally, I analyse the way that the role of wife

appears in a fantasy discourse that deconstructs ‘wifework’ to some extent, yet, paradoxically, somehow renders more equitable divisions of labour at home a *reductio ad absurdum*, hinting at how women’s lives appear to be continuously embedded in patriarchy.

7.1 Unequal (domestic) lives

Posting women on Mumsnet talk about their home setups in diverse ways. However, several patterns emerge within and across the narratives women share in instances of domesticity talk. The entanglement of male privileges across the private-domestic and the public work sphere, and their own collusion in enabling such privilege is a recurrent consideration in discussions. In particular, the theme of male ‘facilitation’, which originates from an extensive thread posted to the Feminism board¹¹, captures distinctively this contradiction between recognising injustice in relation to their own lives and reflecting upon how this unequal status quo is maintained through their implicit positioning as ‘supportive/facilitating wife’ which intersects with their mothering position.

7.1.1 The ‘facilitating wife’

There is consistency among posting users that the ‘facilitation’ of male partners is effectively about ‘wives ... who manage the household and make lunch for their DHs [dear husbands] and do all the childcare and prop men up’. The opening poster of the original thread goes on to describe the consequence of this support as creating ‘an absolute imbalance in life but also in the workplace, with men given much more freedom to dedicate to work and devoid of many domestic responsibilities that burden women.’ Although the three slightly more extensive extracts provided below are taken from responses to just one thread, they are presented here to set the scene of how posters construct their own and their male partners’ domestic and professional lives as markedly different. Articulated in retrospect, the accounts capture, simultaneously, dissonances between ideal and the actual parenting, caring and paid work arrangements.

We have 2DC [dear children] and both work FT [full-time]. At first we shared pickup/drop offs roughly 60:40 (me:DH [dear husband]). DH does shopping and

¹¹ The thread generated the maximum number of responses (1,000) in less than a week. The lively discussion led to a follow-up thread that run up to 651 posts. Both threads were posted to the Feminism board, however the term ‘facilitated men’ has become a common reference in subsequent discussions that draw on wider discourses of caring across different fora on Mumsnet.

cooking. I do all the mental load and a lot of the childcare and all the night wakeups. We have a cleaner. [...]

However, over the years DH has been promoted several times and now can hardly do any drop offs or pick ups. I on the other hand was so overloaded with work, waking up with DC at night plus my recurring migraines and all the mental load that I burnt out. I lost all ambition and interest in my career. I side-stepped into an easier job which could lead to promotion but I don't want to put the energy into it. I want to see more of my DC. I want to spend less time in the office.

So it's logical for our family that DH continues to shine and advance and I facilitate that.

However this thread has made me question - if things hadn't been so uneven at the start with DC (me doing the nights for 6 years!) and if I too like DH had had time to exercise instead of being too exhausted and never a moment to myself. [...] maybe I wouldn't have lost interest in my job?

I felt inadequate, bewildered why I can't manage, after all I am a reasonably bright woman with a Masters degree. [...] Crunch point came when I realised I was burnt out [...] There would have been no conflict if I had a wife and if I could essentially live a man's life: work, relax, spend time with the kids. Sounds ideal. My downfall was the 'household/family load', this is what dragged me down, not my job. Having to effectively do a second job after hours. AND spend a meaningful time with the children.

So H [Husband] worked about 55-60 hours a week. All paid. Very well paid. He worked away a lot, staying in lovely hotels and flying business class. As befits an Important Man with an Important Job. I worked about 120 hours a week, of which 35 were paid. Of course I didn't think of it all as work, I thought of it as being a mother and spending time with my children. But it didn't [sic] make me any less exhausted. But as all we women know, I was The Lucky One, who was able to have it all by having kids and a career.

As established mothers, the largest group of mothers using Mumsnet (Mumsnet, 2009; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013), the women in these extracts juxtapose their present professional and family situation with the life trajectories they hoped to follow prior to motherhood. The hunch that there 'would have been no conflict if I had a wife and if I could essentially live a

man's life' indicates the complex gendered terrain against which the responder in the second extract constructs her experience. Interestingly, the notional script 'if I had a wife', in other words, someone who would take on the primary responsibility for the organisation and performance of childcare and household labour, signifies the deep-seated social mechanisms of assigning domestic labour to women as part of their positioning as 'wife'. I will return to this point later (7.2.4).

According to the status quo invoked here, women and men's home and work lives are not interchangeable but fundamentally disparate. Similarly invoking an alternative scenario, the account provided in the first extract denotes how a more equal domestic and parenting arrangement would have potentially enabled her to sustain an interest in pursuing her career ambitions: 'if things hadn't been so uneven at the start with DC [dear children] ... maybe I wouldn't have lost interest in my job?' In contrast, the male partners' domestic and vocational lives, as they emerge in the women's posted accounts, are described as largely unaffected by the transition to parenthood. As such, their lives are constructed around leisurely themes and unhindered engagement in paid work: they were able to 'work, relax, spend time with the kids', had 'time to exercise' and progress their careers. But why are women and men's lives constructed as so unlike in these accounts?

There is of course ample evidence to suggest that domestic inequality – the gendered division of labour in the home – does not only pertain to women's larger contribution to parental care work accompanying the role of the 'good' mother, but also extends to aspects of work that are attributed to the position of the wife, such as household chores and the organisation of family life more broadly. Marked out as a structural barrier to gender equality, there still is a perennial gender gap in relation to parental care work, as well as in the distribution of housework (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010; Lyonette and Compton, 2015), with significant implications for mothers in heterosexual relationships in the U.K. who, on average, still carry out twice as much household chores and childcare as their partners (ONS, 2016).

Ideas of 'good' mothering, as noted in chapter two, have been discussed extensively in relation to online mothering forums like Mumsnet (e.g. Mackenzie, 2019). Pedersen's research (2016) has demonstrated that Mumsnet users may prefer the idea of the 'good-enough' mother over the good-mother ideal (Hays, 1996), resisting to some extent the cultural imperative to provide intensive maternal care. This is evidenced across the extracts in interesting ways, being

noticeably articulated as an orientation that was more important in the past when children were small. Noting that she used to work around 120 hours per week, and just a fraction of this in her professional role, the poster in the last extract recalls how she ‘didn’t think of it all as work, I thought of it as being a mother and spending time with my children’. Similarly, the contributor in the first extract invokes her mothering role alongside her status as worker, asserting: ‘I want to see more of my children. I want to spend less time in the office’. Most explicitly articulated as a societal expectation of ‘good’ parenting she felt on her, the poster in the second extract articulates dissatisfaction with the pressure she experienced as ‘Having to .. spend meaningful time with the children’, as part of what she calls the “household/family load”, and in addition to her paid work responsibilities. This suggests that these accounts can be seen as an attempt to contest the ideal of the ‘good’ mother by locating mothering activities in relation to paid work, drawing attention to the embeddedness of the mothering position in the complex set of roles they occupy.

Research has indeed shown that domestic inequality impacts on women’s employment. In particular, the transition to parenthood as a major life course event is associated with a reversion towards a more traditional separation of public work and private-domestic sphere in heteronormative families, with women often taking the lead as primary carers (e.g. Argyrous et al., 2017; Bianchi et al., 2012; Dermott, 2008). The arising negative consequences of this ideology of domesticity for women’s opportunities to participate in the political and professional sphere are well known, and colloquially referred to as ‘motherhood penalties’, as I discussed in chapter six.

Thus, unequal gender relations in the private sphere are meaningful beyond the domestic realm. They may impact on women’s employment considerations and career success. Mothers rather than fathers are expected to, at least implicitly, adapt their work patterns and work flexibly or part-time to reconcile work-family needs and accommodate caring responsibilities (Miller, 2012). Indeed, the contributors’ draw on elements of this work-care discourse when constructing accounts of ‘side-step[ping] into an easier job’, not pursuing promotions and changing their working hours to part-time or exiting the workforce altogether for as long as caring demands were high, as the contributors in continuing posts explain. What is interesting here is that they also seemingly facilitated and supported their partners’ careers in making these changes in relation to their employment status (see also Orgad, 2019), pointing to how their positioning as wife is an important factor. Indeed, the posters’ accounts draw attention to their

partners' ability to devote time to and focus on career progression precisely because they continue to be unencumbered by caring and household responsibilities: 'over the years DH [dear husband] has been promoted several times' and 'continues to shine and advance'; 'H [Husband] worked about 55-60 hours a week. All paid. Very well paid'.

The conflicting domains of paid work and childcare, akin to scripts of the 'ideal' worker and the 'good' mother, have been widely discussed as root cause of difficulties for working mothers (e.g. Christopher, 2012; Miller, 2012). In the first parts of the first two extracts, the posters recall feeling 'burnt out' and 'overloaded with work', indicating a relationship between multiple workloads including domestic responsibilities and health status. Across the excerpts, it becomes clear, however, that neither societal scripts of motherhood and associated gendered expectations to parent intensively (Hays, 1996), nor expectations surrounding the 'ideal' worker (Acker, 1990; Christopher, 2012) are constructed as the sole source of stress and exhaustion for these working mothers. Rather, what posters construct as "'household/family load'" and 'mental load' alludes to the totality of gendered, unpaid work taking place in the home that accompanies both their roles as 'supportive/facilitating wife' and mother (see section 7.2 for a detailed discussion of the labour associated with 'wifehood'). This fortifies arguments that the gendered division of care work and parenting and household labour need to be researched in tandem (Bianchi et al., 2012), but also suggests that cultural discourses surrounding women's roles as worker and mother may not entirely account for and reflect the complexities surrounding women's domestic responsibilities and roles.

A powerful affective dissonance appears in the accounts above, which – voiced retrospectively – reverberates as incongruity between a hoped-for trajectory where ideas of maternal femininities could be reconciled with identities as committed workers, and the lived experience of the "'household/family load'" that the contributor in the second extract refers to as her 'downfall', led the poster in the first passage to take up an 'easier job', and makes the poster in the last extract feel so 'exhausted' that she quit working during the onset of parenting, which research indicates may be the most challenging time for parents (e.g. Miller, 2012). Presenting clear instances of non-fulfilment of the 'have it all' narrative, this dissonance between their actual and an ideal domestic and paid work situation is framed by a range of contradictory cultural themes: The posters in these extracts would have liked to develop their career rather than downscale, but they would also like to care for and spend time with their children, pitting ideas of normative worker identities and expectations to participate in waged work against

cultural narratives of intensive motherhood. However, besides this prominent conflict of motherhood versus career, they also admit to ‘facilitating’ their male partners by taking on the majority of the domestic burden and changing their employment situation, whilst desiring a more equal arrangement. This hints at how discourses of egalitarianism and shared parenting (e.g. Sevón, 2012) frame these accounts; at the same time, posting women (implicitly) invoke the position of the ‘supportive/facilitating wife’ to account for their unequal setups. My critical reading of the excerpts then suggests that the posters take up a mothering role alongside another home role constructed as ‘supportive/facilitating wife’. Thus, motherhood emerges as only part of the entwined domestic position of mother/wife which posters occupy, and to some degree critique.

7.1.2 ‘Feeling differently’: the affective register of domesticity talk

Whilst the position of the ‘facilitating wife’ who takes on the bulk of domestic responsibility then is an adopted role, some posting women on Mumsnet can be seen as developing and articulating a language and a consequent awareness of the way in which their positioning may incur and reinforce domestic inequality. One important aspect of this process, I suggest, is a shared affective register of anger and discontent that works as a common denominator in domesticity talk and propels momentary, feeling-based relationships between posters. These come into being through the use of particular affective-discursive resources, which, as my analysis in previous chapters has suggested, may not be available to them in offline talk including for instance the interviews I conducted with users.

Indicating how the ‘facilitated men’ thread discussion works to galvanise posters (and potentially lurkers) into ‘feel[ing] differently’ (Hemmings, 2012: 150), re-thinking, and in some cases even challenging, their own experiences, multiple posts read: ‘this really has been a galvanising thread. My brain is fizzing.. It created a useful prism though which to understand a lot of tiny personal decisions/ trade-offs/ over the years..’; ‘[the thread] has been so helpful at helping me articulate some of the thoughts I've been having for a while now’; ‘This thread has been excellent and enlightening (if depressing)’; ‘It's really got me thinking’. Indeed, exposure to domesticity discussions on Mumsnet arguably raises a feminist consciousness, not least being shown by a 2013 survey that found users’ identification as feminist increased by 12% to 59% since they started using the site (Cochrane, 2013). Some contributors to the thread, for instance, state that ‘we're talking about something that is STRUCTURAL and that we take

for granted in society and that will require a major shift to change. So it's not a magic wand kind of problem!' And later on:

this thread .. [is] to highlight the fact that in ALL aspects of their lives, not just their work life but their personal life, the RELENTLESS SUPPORT that men get is SILENCED, UNACKNOWLEDGED. And that this is a structural problem.

we're all fed fed FED up of doing this invisible role regardless of whether we work or not [...] no-one despises the facilitators that we're talking about - we despise the system that functions to ensure that this facilitating role almost always falls on women. It's the structures at fault, not the people within them.

These passages highlight how some of the relationships that women form in the Mumsnet space enable to 'feel differently'. By excavating and naming the larger structural base of inequalities underpinning the work of 'propping up' men, these bonds, however fleeting, allow to articulate and share dissonant views and feelings about their co-existing domestic roles of wife and mother and associated divisions of care. The angry and openly discontent registers of posters' talk, as identified in the series of posts discussed in this section, propel this connection between posters, hinting at how dissonance with the status quo is expressed through feelings of anger and indignation. This angry register of domesticity talk appears to emerge in contrast to the more depoliticising effects of positivity imperatives, which have gained significant currency within the larger cultural and media landscape (e.g. Calder-Dawe et al., 2021; Gill and Orgad, 2018; 2021). Importantly, within the context of domesticity talk considered here, these dissonant affects are viewed as socially 'appropriate' emotions (Shields, 2005; see also chapter 9 on the circulation of affect on Mumsnet). I therefore suggest that domesticity talk may expand the affective resources available to posting women as they discuss the 'facilitation' of male partners.

7.2 Family management: reframing gendered divisions of care

So far, I have explored Mumsnet users' positioning in the culturally marginalised role of 'wife' and associated repertoires. Furthermore, drawing on Hemmings's (2012) notion of affective dissonance, I have examined incongruences and frictions between posters' sense of self and the social expectations they orient to in relation to the position of the 'wife', which I proposed

is bound up with their sense-making of domestic inequality and gives rise to potentially politicising emotions of anger and indignation.

Here, I argue that in talk of their domestic lives – what I have suggested can be called ‘domesticity talk’ – posting women often position their cognate roles as family manager and ‘facilitating’ or supportive wife alongside their role as mother to account for domestic inequality, making use of particular affective-discursive resources that are available to them in the techno-social environment of Mumsnet, but arguably to a lesser extent in other communicative spaces such as the interviews. By investigating the discourse of family management in domesticity talk on Mumsnet, I juxtapose posters’ accounts with the accounts of my interview participants discussed in chapter five. Importantly, like many Mumsnet posters, interview participants saw themselves as family managers. However, as I have demonstrated, interviewees’ accounts drew on a discourse of *self-responsibilised* family management, silencing a critical stance that would challenge their role as primary domestic organiser. Indeed, in their attempts to live up to ideals of bourgeois ‘balanced’ maternity, interviewees, on the whole, made considerable investments in a positive outlook that would allow them to sustain their conduct as *successful* managerial maternal subjects, alongside their roles as ‘perfect’ mothers and confident parents.

Exploring the ‘contradictory-yet-patterned’ nature (Favaro and Gill, 2019: 155) of family management discourse across different sites, I develop this argument about interviewees’ affirmative stance towards family management here. I suggest that in discussions on Mumsnet, the discourse of family management is sometimes reworked into the associated concepts of ‘wifework’ and ‘mental load’, alternative designations which can carve out more potent positions for posters. As I will show, this further supports my broader argument that domesticity talk on Mumsnet expands the interpretative and affective resources available to posters, enabling the development of a language that renders the acknowledgement, and sometimes critique, of unequal domestic arrangements possible.

Feminist scholars have long argued for a twofold conceptualisation of household labour and childcare as involving both physical and emotional work (Hochschild, 1979; 1989). Yet, reflected in the cognate concepts of ‘wifework’ and ‘mental load’, there are further gendered components of unpaid labour in the home. Research shows for instance that female working parents often take the major responsibility for performing *and* organising care (e.g. Gatrell,

2005; Miller, 2012). Of particular relevance to the analysis presented in this chapter are the findings of some sociological studies that have started to consider elements of household labour and childcare going beyond physical tasks and emotional work, centring mental/cognitive and managerial aspects (Daming, 2019; Offer, 2014; Robertson et al., 2019). Pervasive and highly gendered yet understudied, the mental work of ‘family management’ may be a fundamental dimension of domestic gender inequality for working mothers (see Daming, 2019), suggesting a need to reframe gendered divisions of care to account for this component of private sphere labour.

Focusing on the construction of the mental and managerial dimension of reproductive labour, the associated role of the family manager, and its ongoing assignment, here I consider two re-occurring responses to this mental family management work.

7.2.1 Wives as family managers: of ‘wifework’ and the ‘mental load’

There is a broad consensus among many posting women that they take a larger share than their usually male partners of what Mumsnet users construct synonymously as ‘wifework’ and ‘mental load’. In Hochschild’s (1989: 276) concept of the ‘second shift’ of domestic work women perform at home, the ‘management of domestic life’ is sketched as being a separate category of work alongside housework and parenting, encompassing ‘remembering, planning, and scheduling domestic chores and events’. This chimes with how posters to the forum discuss and construct the mental work of family management on Mumsnet:

Work, the things you need to do, want to do, that the kids have on at school, the shopping lists, your diary dates, etc etc. How do you manage it all? It’s one of the biggest things that exhaust me. Thinking all the time. I need to find a way to get it out of my head so I can focus more / sleep better.

I just feel sometimes like my brain never gets a break from thinking.

The planning is a real millstone around my neck. Who is going to be where, when, what time people need picking up (and whether it is me or nanny picking up), what’s for dinner that day. [...] I feel as if I sort of imploded trying to manage everything and dh [dear husband] and I had real arguments about housework and childcare, which did improve the situation but it is not 50/50. Every career choice I have made in the past

few years has been with the family foremost in my mind. [...] All of this is taking its toll on my health.

The ubiquitous mental work of life and family management as it emerges in the accounts above is a type of labour that, much like other aspects of reproductive labour, remains by large invisible and unacknowledged (Federici, 2012). However, due to its diffuse nature of being spatially and temporally unrestricted, it extends beyond the domestic realm, and is therefore constructed as especially stressful and exhausting ('my brain never gets a break from thinking'), with potentially negative effects on mental wellbeing: 'I need to find a way to get it out of my head so I can focus more / sleep better'; 'All of this is taking its toll on my health'. Notably, the 'planning', as the poster in the last passage above remarks and as has been shown in section 7.1.1, can extend to career considerations.

In contrast to physical housework and childcare, this type of labour – *thinking* about family and work – has received only scant attention in qualitative literature on family work and household labour. Robertson et al.'s (2019) and Daminger's (2019) recent qualitative sociological research with American middle-class couples present notable exceptions. Daminger (2019: 611; 628) theorises what she terms 'cognitive labour' as a 'distinct dimension of household life', comprising four main activities: 'anticipating needs, identifying options for filling them, deciding among these options, and monitoring the results'. Similarly, Robertson et al., (2019: 184) identify six forms of 'mental labor', revolving around '(a) planning and strategizing, (b) monitoring and anticipating needs, (c) metaparenting, (d) knowing (learning and remembering), (e) managerial thinking (including delegating and instructing), and (f) self-regulation'. Both studies highlight that this managerial aspect of domestic work is highly gendered and particularly prevalent in dual-earner families who need to balance multiple, often conflicting routines, responsibilities and timetables at home and work (see also Offer, 2014). Despite the strenuousness of the mental work they performed, participants in Daminger's (2019) study 'often experience daily life as a chaotic churn but lack the language to explain why' they felt constantly stressed and overwhelmed; indeed 'cognitive tasks fell into a gray area for many participants, who were unsure whether they constituted "work"' (Daming, 2019: 620-621). This is because, Daminger argues, the mental work remains *invisible* to other family members and even the labourer, typically the mother (ibid.).

7.2.2 *'You should've asked!' Gendered divisions of the 'mental load'*

A key finding of my research is that Mumsnet users do appear to have a language available that allows to recognise and share constructions with each other across a number of threads. Significantly, my analysis in previous chapters has indicated how this language does not by all means travel across the online-offline context. One main topic of discussion in digital domesticity talk presents the gendered nature of this type of work, as the Mumsnet term 'wifework' already implicates:

It's - almost always - women who carry the burden of knowing everything about how the house and family are run, men sit around waiting to be given a task and that's called 'helping'.

Constructing themselves as unintentional 'family managers' who 'carry the burden of knowing everything about how the house and family are run', some of the gendered dynamics underlying the ceaseless *assignment* of domestic management to women also appear to be easily understood by a number of participants across different threads. These come to the fore in frequent comments on the lacking initiative of male partners to proactively do chores, as these extracts from opening posts show:

So, I get annoyed with DH [dear husband] that he doesn't notice the mound of recycling waiting to go outside, the washing on the line that needs to come in, dishwasher that is full, things that need putting away... need I go on..? [...] He accuses me of nagging and the cheeky bugger said if I just "asked nicely" he would willingly do these things. I say I shouldn't have to ask. [...] It is one of the biggest issues to cause friction at home.

He is very helpful around the house when I ask, but doesn't often use his initiative to do housework by himself. In the past he's told me 'Men just don't think about these things.' And 'I need to tell him what to do' when I ask him why he doesn't see things that need doing.

In these typical extracts, the notion of putatively 'not noticing' or 'seeing' what needs doing in terms of domestic work since 'Men just don't think about these things' positions women as the manager of domestic chores while male partners, as exemplified in the extracts above, are constructed as performing certain tasks as per instruction ('I need to tell him what to do'). In

this construct, when expecting to be asked to carry out particular tasks, men view women as being in charge of family and household management. Male household contribution is construed as ‘help’ in accordance with task allocation rather than an equal partaking in the domestic load, reinforcing traditional divisions of labour. A similar example has been analysed by Petrassi (2012: 521) who interprets the position of the ‘selfless mother’ she found her interviewees to occupy as ‘wronged and frustrated’, since they value equal parenting and the sharing of domestic responsibility, but find this to be in conflict with their lived reality, where the ‘shirking father’ refuses to be sufficiently involved. This dissonance between lived experience and social expectation becomes palpable in the extracts above as a point of consistency expressed by posters who feel ‘they shouldn’t have to ask’.

The term ‘mental load’ has recently been popularised by the French cartoonist Emma (2017), and has equally attracted the attention of the popular press (e.g. Hogenboom, 2021; Silverman, 2018b). Aptly registering some of the core gendered dynamics underlying the ceaseless re-assignment of the ‘mental load’ to women, Emma’s (2017) widely circulating comic is tellingly titled ‘You should’ve asked’. Encapsulated in Mumsnet thread titles such as “‘Why didn’t you just Ask?’”, the cartoon had a significant uptake on Mumsnet and in the wider anglophone digital social sphere since its reprint in *The Guardian*. (The comic is ‘an awesome explanation of wifework’, as one poster comments). Describing a scene where a mother to a new-born attempts to ‘do it all’ – baby feeding, cooking, hosting friends, etc. –, the situation culminates when the pot quite literally starts to overflow, prompting the idle male partner to demand ‘You should’ve asked! I would’ve helped!’. The following comment dissects the flippant nature of the male statement by explaining: ‘when a man expects his partner to ask him to do things, he’s viewing her as the manager of household chores’ (Emma, 2017). Well-known on Mumsnet as ‘the famous words “why didn’t you just ask me, I would have done that”’, contributors draw on (and frequently recommend as reading) this popular media resource to illustrate and make relatable an emblematic phrase that seemingly resonates with their experiences. The ironic, knowing takeup challenges the gendered allocation of domestic management that is cited. Its reverberation on the forum as a reference point for a shared understanding of ‘wifework’ and the ‘mental load’ crystallises in forum post extracts such as ‘he is definitely guilty of saying ‘just tell me what needs doing and I’ll do it’ and, more impatiently, ‘why the fuck should we have to ask. I bloody hate the ‘you should have said’.

Arguably, it is specifically the position of ‘family manager/wife’ and the associated mental work that women are driven to assume through patterned dynamics like the ones delineated above. Pinpointing the inequality between the wife/family manager and the husband/assistant is, however, intricate since male partners may signify their apparent readiness to accomplish (physical) tasks, if they are being assigned. Epitomised in numerous thread titles, the emblematic citation ‘Why didn’t you just ask? I would’ve helped’ illustrates precisely this ‘willingness’ on the side of the male partner. The female partner is invited to ‘just ask’ for help which implies the perceived ordinariness and self-evidence of the issue (Edwards, 2007) as she may be able to delegate particular tasks to her cohabiting partner, hinting that the mental work of managing and instructing the male ‘assistant’ may not constitute work at all.

However, in analysing these processes on the forum, I argue that posting women’s talk extends the discursively intelligible by enabling consideration of some taken-for-granted, often invisible and oppressive aspects of the gendered division of the ‘mental load’. Expanding the interpretative resources available to posters, this offers opportunities to visibilise and uncover the mental work of domestic management and potentially, at least discursively in posters’ talk on the forum, challenge its gendered assignment. In the following sections, I critically consider two frequently occurring responses to women’s role of ‘wife/family manager’ and associated mental labour overload.

7.2.3 *Outsourcing domestic tasks*

Apart from the delegation of tasks to their male partners (or attempts to do so), which I have shown is constructed as part of the family management role many posting women report taking up, outsourcing various home tasks to paid workers presents a frequent topic of discussion. The idea that outsourcing substantial amounts of domestic tasks and childcare resolves the mental labour (over)load in dual-earner setups is however largely rejected across my dataset. Constructing scripts of what Christopher (2012: 83) in her study of American working mothers terms a ‘delegatory mother’ allowed many of the women she interviewed to be ‘both a committed mother and worker’. However, while many of the postings on Mumsnet indicate that employing others as an effectively implemented way of redistributing labours at home can help ‘keep[ing] the domestic show on the road’, as one poster put it, it may not absolve women of the ‘wifely thinking work’. Consider the following series of extracts from responses to threads addressing a number of issues surrounding divisions of labour at home:

Housework is easy to delegate. Other stuff - planning, admin etc - less so.

I still feel it takes way too much energy to keep things in any way equitable. Part of the problem is we've got enough cash to outsource. So instead of arguing about the cleaning, we have a cleaner, but it's still my job to book her (obviously, her), ensure she's paid, has the stuff she needs etc. If I take my eye off the ball things backslide and sometimes I just haven't got the energy.

You can hire cleaners and order food but someone doing all the “wife work” thinking/planning/remembering is invaluable.

We outsource where we can. What gets me though, is the fact that the general household organisation [...] always falls back to me as a default.

These accounts reveal that many contributors construct themselves as still being left with the ‘invaluable’ work of ‘thinking/planning/remembering’, despite having outsourced large parts: ‘Housework is easy to delegate.. Other stuff – planning, admin etc – less so’. As such, organising and coordinating domestic help and childcare is constructed as part of household and family management itself: ‘the general household organisation [...] always falls back to me as a default’; ‘it’s still my job to book her (obviously her), ensure she’s paid, has the stuff she needs etc’.

Indeed, a pattern of gender imbalance appears to prevail although assistance with particular domestic and caring tasks is ‘bought in’. This resonates with some strands of quantitative literature on divisions of care that indicate how outsourcing domestic and caring tasks does not suffice as a strategy to reduce women’s time and overall workload (e.g. Sullivan and Gershuny, 2013; Sayer, 2007). However, these studies frequently sideline the question of *why* domestic outsourcing may not be directly related to a decrease in women’s workload. Instead, my analysis indicates how outsourcing as a means of coping with the *mental* labour overload figures, on the whole, as an incomplete strategy in posters’ accounts, highlighting that time and mental, organisational efforts need to be continuously applied (e.g. the work involved in planning, managing and supervising paid domestic assistance, see 7.2.1-7.2.2), even if parts of the physical labour are outsourced.

Such findings align in interesting ways with my broader argument about the way that many Mumsnetters as a group of women who (allegedly) have the resources to seemingly afford paid help still construct themselves as being positioned as overburdened household manager, and may experience their domestic arrangement as deeply unequal. In making the argument that shifting part of the domestic workload to paid workers does not resolve the struggle of coping with the mental labour demands, I do not mean to suggest that posters do not *acknowledge* the importance of paid assistance in contributing to enable the reconciliation of paid work and family life. However, in many postings that emphasise the significance of paid domestic help, in particular cleaning, for configuring a career alongside motherhood and retaining mental wellbeing, contributors' financial ability to afford such help ('we've got enough cash to outsource') foregrounds their often economically privileged middle-class status. This is further exemplified in the posts below:

I got a cleaner. She comes once a week and it costs me £20. ... It has totally saved my sanity.

If you want to stay with this man [...] and keep your sanity, pleas [sic] do as others have suggested – get a cleaner, have some ready-made meals delivered, send all sheets etc to the laundry

From your profession i [sic] imagine you would earn in one hour what it would take to oay [sic] a cleaner for at least 5 hours. So work for 2 hours that you enjoy[,] get a cleaner for ten hours and relax safe in the knowledge domestic drudgery is not your problem.

The cleaner in these accounts is constructed as a dehumanised 'tool' enabling to sustain working mothers' mental health (their 'sanity'), alluded to as de-individualised 'it' and being an item on a list of various other domestic services ('get a cleaner, have some ready-made meals delivered, send all sheets etc to the laundry'). Indeed, some Mumsnet posters construct themselves as members of a privileged group of high-earning professionals, as the 'calculation' in the third passage above suggests. Such derogatory middle-class disregard and ignorance that effectively constructs cleaners as classed 'others' fits well with Jensen's (2013: 137) observation of the production of social divisions amongst differently classed mothers on Mumsnet. Similarly, Orgad and Higgins (2021: 15) in their study of domestic cleaning and cleaners in Mumsnet discussions observe that classist discourse and racist undertones are

selectively rendered visible and pointed out by posters, yet overwhelmingly not subject to closer interrogation; rather, critical interventions that can challenge the ‘power inequalities inherent to the employer-cleaner relationship’ are for the most part censured or even censored.

The practice of outsourcing domestic labour, in particular cleaning, to other, less privileged and oftentimes migrant women through ‘global care chains’ (Hochschild, 2000) deflects yet does not solve the complex issues surrounding social reproductive labour. Focussing here on the beneficiaries of such ‘care chains’ that also exist in the U.K. (e.g. British Cleaning Council, 2021), posters’ frequent discussions of outsourcing cleaning tasks then highlight that this does not present a straightforward resolution to unequal labour shares for this group of privileged women. Lessening some women’s labour demands around domestic task *performance*, this shift to delegating such labour to paid female help – other women – does not release posters from the *mental and managerial* aspects of organising this outsourcing of tasks. Of course, it neither presents a ‘solution’ that is available for or extends to all (posting) women: how can the female cleaner achieve ‘work-life balance’ and create her ‘have it all’ narrative? While outsourcing fractions of household labour then emerges as a helpful yet insufficient means of coping with the overburdening for women who can afford this easement, it can also relate to posting women’s retreat to the imaginary as a further response to women’s co-existing home roles of ‘wife(worker)’ and ‘family manager’.

7.2.4 *Fantatising a wife*

As I have shown, many discussions draw attention to posting women’s dissonances with their cognate positionings as wife and family manager’, the ingrained social and psychological mechanisms of assigning domestic management and labour to women, and their concurrent overburdening. In this final section, I want to focus on a related script that I have already referenced above: to ‘want a wife’. Fairly common across my sample, the fantasy circulates in the domesticity talk context considered here as a second response to posting women’s positioning in the role of ‘wife’ and ‘household manager’ and associated mental labour overload. Crucially, it functions simultaneously as a retreat to the imaginary, and as a pivot point around which a critique of divisions of labour is assembled, deconstructing ‘wifework’ to some extent. The following extract of an opening post is illustrative of this notional script:

Title: To want a wife?

I love my DH [dear husband]. I really do. But just now and then I wish I was married to someone who did for me half of the emotional labour I do for him. All the work that's just seen as woman's work, so that men don't feel they have to reciprocate?

The extract above exemplifies that abandoning relationships with men altogether is not quite embraced by posters to the Mumsnet forum who would like to have 'a Wife to make life easier'. Rather, posts that invoke this implied role reversal via the fantasy of 'having a wife' can be seen in line with thinkers such as Campbell (1980) and Segal (1994) who suggest that it is gender roles and men's behaviours in heterosexual relationships that need to be challenged. Indeed, the quest for a 'wife' is less of a critique of heterosexual practices but a tongue-in-cheek, yet also seriously meant, thought-experiment advocating the de-gendering of 'wifework', as the following posts reveal:

It's the old 'women having it all' conundrum isn't it? Men get to have careers, 2-3 happy, well cared for children, a nice home and a social life. What would women need to have all the above? They would need a wife!

I say that tongue in cheek because they don't need a female wife, they need a partner who would take on the wife work. And men just don't seem prepared to do that.

I've often ~~half~~ jokingly said to dp [dear partner] that I'd rather have a wife.

I'm high up in a very male dominated field and people have often joked that I 'need a wife'.

The (half) joking desire for a wife expressed here resonates closely with a classic piece of the U.S. women's movement, first printed in the 1971 premiere issue of *Ms.* magazine: In her feminist satire 'I want a wife', Judy Brady (then Syfers) candidly lists the numerous physical, socio-emotional and managerial labours of wives, exposing their taken-for-grantedness and invisibility. To give just a few examples:

I want a wife to keep track of the children's doctor and dentist appointments. And to keep track of mine, too. I want a wife to make sure my children eat properly and are kept clean. [...]

My wife must arrange to lose time at work and not lose the job. It may mean a small cut in my wife's income from time to time, but I guess I can tolerate that. [...]

I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean. A wife who will pick up after my children, a wife who will pick up after me. [...] I want a wife who will care for me when I am sick and sympathize with my pain..

I want a wife who will take care of the details of my social life. When my wife and I are invited out by my friends, I want a wife who will take care of the baby-sitting arrangements [...] I want a wife who will have the house clean, will prepare a special meal, serve it to me and my friends..

My God, who wouldn't want a wife?

Echoing the rhetorical style as well as resonating with the tenor and topic, the following examples from my sample of Mumsnet discussions read like a comeback of Brady's essay:

I want a wife. So they plan my birthday the way I plan theirs. I plan weeks in advance. I get decorations balloons personalised cards take lots of photos. I get a 50p card and nothing else.

how lovely it would be to have a wife who did all the school runs, sorted the kids out in the morning and evening, made sure homework got done, took time off work when the kids were ill, could look after them when I went on business trips etc.

Some emotional Labour I wish my spouse would do:

Replying to texts on HIS family whatsapp so that my MIL [mother-in-law] and FIL [father-in-law] dont start texting me separately asking for responses to things they've asked him

Meal planning so that it's not always me having to come up with ideas and so that he can't then wriggle out of cooking because he 'doesn't know' how to cook what I planned Thinking about what clothes we are both going to need for specific events in the immediate future that he knows about and washing those clothes instead of random clothes

Realising what housework needs done without having to be told every time

The striking resemblance between the cutting essay from 1971 and the contemporary discussion thread extracts is eerily astonishing (if not scary) in view of how they excoriate male partners' missing contributions to 'wifeworky elements': little seems to have changed (!), indicating the continuous embedding of women's lives in patriarchal structures. The implied ungratefulness, ignorance and idleness of men is remarkable. Further foreshadowing the construction of male partners as a 'feckless manchild' (chapter 8), male behaviour is often condemned as being outrightly self-centred: 'I'd feel guilty leaving all the Wifework to my Wife, i.e. I couldn't do what many men on here seem to do and shove the vast majority of the childcare/chores onto the woman without a second thought. I'd feel bad about not doing my share'. Posting women on Mumsnet, through their semi-humorous suggestion that what is needed to improve women's lives is a 'wife', therefore make an important (if unwitting) connection between a key theme of 1970s feminism and the status quo, centralising reproductive labour and, as suggested by the postings, its largely unchanged gendered nature.

7.3 'Speakable' experiences of domestic inequality

In this chapter, I have explored several facets of posting women's domesticity talk on Mumsnet. Arguing that women's experiences of domestic inequality cannot be entirely accounted for by the prominent conflict of motherhood versus career, I have suggested that researching women's meaning-making of the gendered discourses that position women as 'wife' (and, related, as 'family manager') may offer a more nuanced understanding of how women make sense of divisions of care and ensuing domestic inequalities, drawing attention to taken-for-granted, often invisible, oppressive aspects of domesticity. The chapter suggested extending an understanding of the cultural tensions between 'good' mother and 'ideal' worker to include the culturally marginalised position of the 'wife', against the background of highly visible discourses of motherhood.

Mumsnet, this chapter has argued, is a space where the marginalised discourse of the wife is drawn upon to account to some degree for experiences of domestic inequality. Through a detailed discursive analysis of postings on the Mumsnet forum I identified two cognate constructions (the 'facilitating wife' and the 'family manager') through which posting women predominantly framed divisions of care. Focusing on the theme of male 'facilitation' in the first section, I explored how women's positioning in the role of wife produced a number of affective dissonances in posters' accounts. Specifically, posters' framed unequal divisions of care to an extent as an outcome of their positioning as 'supportive/facilitating wife'. Thus, a profound

difference in their own and their male partners' home and paid-work lives was registered in these accounts. Recognising this as injustice, there was also a palpable dissonance between an ideal trajectory where maternal/domestic and worker identities could be reconciled, and the actual domestic and paid-work arrangements where posting women viewed themselves as enabling their partners' careers to the detriment of their own vocational achievement and mental wellbeing – a clear-cut renunciation of the 'have it all' narrative that echoes my discussion of how these themes were negotiated in the interviews with Mumsnet users in chapter five (and to a lesser degree in chapter six) in key ways, yet also points to differences in 'speakability' of gendered forms of inequality in these two sites.

These incongruences and frictions between posters' sense of self and the social expectations they oriented towards, in relation to the position of the wife, frequently gave rise to politicising emotions of anger and indignation in discussions on Mumsnet, which, on the whole, contrasts with the way in which for instance feelings of insufficiency in relation to this dissociation and a sense of failure and self-blame were foregrounded in the interviews I conducted with users of Mumsnet. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, posters' affective arsenal comprised an alternative register to contemporary positivity and 'balance' discourses, and in some instances exposed the structural inequalities underpinning their 'wifely' work of 'propping up' men. As such, domesticity talk was oftentimes conducted in an angry register that propelled (even if) fleeting bonds between posters, enabling the articulation and sharing of dissonant views and feelings about an unequal status quo in relation to their co-existing domestic roles of wife and mother and associated inequitable divisions of labour at home.

My concern in this chapter has therefore been to map out some of the ways in which working mothers in the digital space of Mumsnet make sense of divisions of labour through their multiple home roles, which I see as all embedded in a conflictual sociocultural terrain that pertains of course to both the online and offline context. And yet I make the broader argument that Mumsnet's communicative architecture comprising for instance anonymity (see chapter 3; 3.2 – 3.5) and the ambivalent implications of virtual connectivity, sociality and affect (chapter 9) structures virtual engagements with domestic forms of inequality in complex ways. In particular, I pointed out that the arsenal of affective-discursive resources that I showed are available to posters online (this chapter and chapter 8) may not by all means be equally available in offline sites such as the interviews (chapters 5 and 6). In the second section, I investigated the discourse of family management in posters' accounts, drawing attention to the

gendered division of the ‘mental load’. Arguing that the mental work of family management was constructed as part of the workload related to the role of wife, I showed that this component of domestic labour puts a strain on working mothers that is particularly stressful and exhausting. While managerial and mental aspects of home labour often remain invisible – perhaps even more than for instance physical aspects of housework and childcare – I argued that domesticity talk on Mumsnet helps to illuminate the ceaseless re-assignment of this labour to women in the position of the ‘family manager/wife(worker)’. This contrasted to some degree with the accounts of the interviewees who are Mumsnet users (explored in chapter 5) and took an affirmative stance towards self-responsibilising incitements to live up to the idea of the successful family manager, in which, on the whole, they remained invested in the interviews. This points in important ways to the way that engaging in the Mumsnet sphere may enable posters to break away from such hegemonic logics to some extent (chapter 9 examines the ambivalent consequences for the potential of the digital to address and challenge – let alone overcome – the wider structures underpinning inequalities both at home and at work).

An important dimension in the analysis was the complexity involved in actually changing such domestic inequalities and the underpinning patriarchal structures. In looking at two frequently occurring responses to women’s domestic work overloads, I first considered outsourcing, especially cleaning, which was presented as a helpful yet insufficient solution to reduce some working mothers’ labour demands, leaving women with the mental work involved in organising and managing such shifting of domestic tasks. Crucially, I highlighted that the power imbalances and classed divisions between women who can afford to pay for such labour decrease and those poorer women who often perform the outsourced work were often taken for granted in my sample.

Posters’ investment in the fantasy of having a wife to ease their excessive domestic burden pointed up the paramount importance of realising more equal domestic arrangements, and highlighted the desire for such a change. At the same time, by showing that this fantasy discourse builds on a largely unchanged historical narrative since at least the 1970s, I argued that it draws attention to the difficulties of resolving the embedding of women’s lives in ongoing patriarchal structures. Domesticity talk can then contribute to exposing the taken-for-grantedness and invisibility of women’s work, yet frequently stops short of envisioning how larger social change could be engendered.

Overall, my analysis has highlighted that instances of domesticity talk on Mumsnet often produce and encourage dissonant views and feelings in relation to women's multiple, conflicting home roles and related workloads that contrast in several ways with how certain dimensions of domestic inequality were negotiated in the interviews with Mumsnet users. Visibilising domestic labour components and divisions that are literally invisible, partly because they are subject to *self*-management as part of a neoliberal rationality prescribing to solve such issues internally and individually (chapter 5), these dissonances in posters' *online* talk contribute to not only recognise but sometimes challenge and critique ensuing domestic inequalities. Yet, rather than offering more sustainable solutions to change such unequal domestic relations, outsourcing and retreating to the imaginary figured prominently as deflective responses to women's overload in posters' talk.

Continuing to examine posting women's domesticity talk as a locus where domestic inequalities are pronounced and rendered visible on the Mumsnet platform, the next chapter will explore how posters' further attempt to manage and address dissonances with the role of wife and associated unequal domestic arrangements through invoking their partners' as an abject 'manchild'.

Chapter 8 MANAGING DISSONANCES: CONSTRUCTING THE FECKLESS ‘MANCHILD’ PARTNER

In this chapter I explore the depiction of men in what I have suggested to call domesticity talk on Mumsnet. The feckless ‘manchild’ is the most common construction of male partners in my data corpus, rendering the ‘manchild’ a highly visible figure. Analysing the way in which women talk about and construct men in the Mumsnet space is insightful for a number of reasons. First and foremost, I argue that the construction of men as ‘manchildren’ complements the ‘wife’ position explored in the previous chapter. More specifically, I conceptualise ‘manchild’ as a response and discursive strategy (Edley and Wetherell, 1999) to manage dissonances with women’s positioning as ‘wife’ and associated gendered divisions of care. Arguing that there is an intimate relationship between women’s positioning in the role of ‘wife’ and the emergence of the ‘manchild’, this chapter continues my exploration of how gender inequalities that relate to the uneven distribution of caring and specifically household labour are negotiated and discussed by Mumsnet users. It situates this in relation to the existing work on the private realm as one key site where ongoing gender inequalities play out as discussed in chapter two. In so doing, this chapter further illuminates the way in which domestic themes and associated sentiments are accentuated and navigated in discussions on Mumsnet, which I have argued differs from the ways in which these issues are rather silenced than ‘speaking’ in the communicative space of the interviews I conducted with users of Mumsnet and discussed in chapters five and six. Drawing on a figurative approach, I attempt to provide an explanation for the emergence and wide spread of the trope that so frequently appears in women’s domesticity talk on Mumsnet. The discussion threads forming the data corpus used in this chapter amount to 20 threads, which consist of 2,780 posts in total.

I will begin by outlining the theoretical background to this chapter, providing a brief contextualising overview of contemporary fathering culture and masculine cultural scripts in the first section of this chapter. In the second section, I will analyse the emergence of the ‘manchild’ construct across five reciprocal domains in posters’ talk against the background of these discourses of masculinity and fatherhood. I pay particular attention to the powerful positions that domesticity talk presents for posters by demonstrating, in the third section, that the corollary strategy of faux incompetence renders domestic inequality discursively illegitimate in posters’ talk, indicating the potential to redress gender-power relations. While

sections two and three locate ‘men behaving badly’ within the realm of the ‘manchild’, section four reconceptualises the figure of the ‘manchild’ by investigating its capacity for betterment and reform, considering the emergence of the trope in a space beyond Mumsnet. This integration of a contemporary example of the appearance of manchild in a different mediated context facilitates an exploration of how the manchild construct found in the posters’ accounts circulates in (social) media other than Mumsnet, and the ways in which such multi-sited constructions overlap, deviate and differ. By way of conclusion, I present a discussion of the place of the ‘manchild’ figure in relation to the dynamics of changing and continuing scripts of masculinity. This last section advances my argument about the sidelining of gendered divisions of care in contemporary fatherhood discourses, and argues for an evolving understanding of masculinity and fatherhood that does not single out fathers’ involvement in childcare as the exclusive site for changing gender relations. In developing my broader argument that posters’ accounts of divisions of domestic labour are mediated by the ‘manchild’ trope, this chapter demonstrates that this construction lends itself to a critique of such unequal sharing practices and associated patriarchal privilege. This mode of critique allows us to circle back to my claim that the construction of partners’ as ‘feckless manchild’ in domesticity talk on Mumsnet figures as a discursive attempt and strategy to manage their domestic burden.

8.1 Shifting masculine priorities or ‘cherry picking’?

Research suggests that broader shifts surrounding masculine subjectivities and gender role attitudes have occurred in the wake of the late 1960s feminism and women’s increased labour market participation (Crompton and Lyonette, 2008; Segal, 1990). Over the recent years, there was ‘an outpour of literature exploring increased father involvement’ (Hunter et al., 2017: 1). However, as this section will show, an expanding understanding of masculinity and fatherhood has not in equal measure focused on men’s contribution to housework. Fathers have become ‘more visible figures on the parenting landscape’ (Dermott and Miller, 2015: 183). Yet, they may “‘cherry pick’” and nourish meaningful relationships with their children, leaving mothers often with the main responsibility for unpalatable domestic chores (Gatrell and Dermott, 2018: 5).

A traditional separation of spheres then continues to apply more to the gendered division of household labour than to parenting and men’s roles as fathers in heterosexual households. Thus, while higher expectations for paternal investment and the active involvement of fathers in child rearing constitute a move away from primary breadwinner identities (Beck and Beck-

Gernsheim, 1995), these shifts are uneven and pertain more to the expectations surrounding men's involvement as fathers (Marzano et al., 2009; Wall and Arnold, 2007) than to their contribution to household labour, which remain 'strikingly unequal' (Daminger, 2020: 806; see also Kan et al., 2011; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010).¹²

This complex interplay between change and continuity in relation to fatherhood, masculinity, caregiving and household contributions is reflected in cultural representations of masculinity. The 'new man' script of the 1980s, 'generally characterised as sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook', has absorbed and apparently addressed feminist criticisms of hegemonic masculinity as uninvolved, dominant and unemotional (Gill, 2003: 36; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Indeed, the new man centralises care and is 'more than willing to pull his weight when it comes to routine domestic chores' and childcare (Edley and Wetherell, 1999: 181). In contrast, the 'new lad' as a formulation of masculinity that emerged in the 1990s is predominantly understood as a response to the 'new man' with his egalitarian outlook and caring attitude (Gill, 2003; Littler, 2019). Oriented towards hedonism and juvenile pleasure seeking, the new lad's indulgence in leisure and pleasure may be seen as implicating a critique of or rebellion against the traditional breadwinner role and male adult responsibilities (e.g. Segal, 1990). Contrary to hegemonic or traditional versions of masculinity, retro-sexist new lads are 'self-consciously aware that they offend against contemporary norms of good taste and "reasonable" attitudes to women' (Littler, 2019: 5-6). Indeed, the new lad figure exudes a form of (postfeminist) knowing sexism, therefore representing 'a nostalgic revival of old patriarchy', if not a backlash against feminism playing out across numerous sites (Whelehan, 2000: 5, see also Faludi, 1991).

In turn, the new manhood discourses of the 1980s, construing men as perceptive, gentle and egalitarian, may appear as a cultural relic (in particular in light of the emergence of the sexist new lad), yet key elements of these discourses arguably carry forward in recent discussions surrounding involved fathering (e.g. Hunter et al., 2017; Wall and Arnold, 2007), and potential new subject positions for fathers such as a 'caring masculinity' (Elliott, 2016). Thus, this in large parts theoretical body of work has theorised that caring masculinities can 'embrace the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care' and reject more traditional

¹² A relatively large body of literature explores the disjunction between couples embracing egalitarianism on a rhetorical level yet, on a practical level, continuing to divide household labour along traditional gender lines (e.g. Bittman and Lovejoy, 1993; Daminger, 2020; Nyman et al., 2018).

masculine traits such as distance and emotional detachment, without relinquishing their maleness (Elliott, 2016: 252).

Importantly, much of this scholarship centralises men's roles as father as a paramount vector of changing masculine gender roles and is therefore underpinned by an understanding of masculinity and fatherhood as deeply entwined: 'to study fathers is to study masculinity' (Hunter et al., 2017: 2). In this way, constructions of an evolving (caring) masculinity are viewed as enmeshed in depictions of more involved fatherhood. The rise, or at least sheer cultural existence of caring masculinities then signifies a broadening of hegemonic masculinities, embedding care and a version of involved fatherhood in masculine identities (Connell, 2000; Doucet, 2004; Hunter et al., 2017). This is for instance evidenced in some popular parenting texts suggesting that 'it is deemed appropriate for men to take on primary caregiving' (Hunter et al., 2020: 150). Being an involved and nurturing father is considered reconcilable with masculine identities and indeed it has been suggested that we are 'moving toward a social ideal of father as coparent' (Craig, 2006: 261).

The extent to which the *practices* of fathers match this *ideal* of father as coparent and the sociocultural expectations it entails has however been questioned by a number of scholars. For instance, similar to the way in which the 'real life' existence or 'authenticity' of the sensitive and caring new man figure has been challenged (Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Gill, 2003), in early research on fatherhood ideals and male caregiving practices LaRossa (1988: 451) observed an 'asynchrony between the culture and conduct of fatherhood'. In other words, does the new, involved father/man actually exist? (Involved) Fatherhood discourses then may envisage fathers as more nurturing and caring than the level of responsibility they in fact take (LaRossa, 1988), an issue that is a contentious subject of debate in subsequent literature (e.g. Dermott, 2008; Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Hunter et al., 2017; Wall and Arnold, 2007).

Literature on contemporary representations of fatherhood indeed complicates this gap between a more progressive culture of fatherhood and father's de facto caregiving responsibilities. Studies on parenting media demonstrate for instance that parental advice texts reproduce a 'part-time father' discourse, portraying fathers as 'bumbling assistants' (Sunderland, 2000), and depictions of fathers-to-be in new technologies like apps undermine, even trivialise fathers' role as an equal parent and depict fathers as 'secondary parent' (Thomas et al., 2018). Similarly,

cultural messages found in U.K. ads and government discourses underline men's 'involvement in the fun and educational aspects of parenting' (Orgad, 2019: 59).

Critical accounts have indeed questioned the pitting of putatively *new* against *traditional* father constructs (Dermott, 2008). In this vein, figures such as the 'new man', the 'new or involved father' or the 'new lad' are 'competing cultural *ideals*' rather than static types that map neatly onto the lived identities of real men (Edley and Wetherell, 1999: 182). My analysis of the configuration of the 'manchild' in Mumsnet discussions is informed by an understanding of a coexistence (rather than a displacement) of different discourses and ideals of masculinity and fatherhood, viewing both fatherhood and masculinity as complex ideological and cultural constructions that are continually (re)constructed and negotiated (Gill, 2003; Hunter et al., 2017). As I will show in the following, the manchild figure draws and is constituted from a range of the cultural themes and subject positions I have outlined above.

8.2 'Manchild'

The following analysis focuses on the constitution and circulation of manchild across my sample. I show how the manchild is discursively constructed and simultaneously fits into and contradicts wider discourses of masculinity and fatherhood by investigating the discursive function this figure fulfils in posters' domesticity talk. My analysis of the manchild construction is guided by Tyler's 'figurative methodology' (2008: 18). In this vein, I understand the manchild as a figure that is employed to 'describe the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments specific "social types" become over determined and are publicly imagined (are figured) in excessive, distorted, and caricatured ways' (ibid.). Such figures, Tyler emphasises, are 'expressive of an underlying social crisis or anxiety' (ibid.), which, as the analysis will show, is in the case of manchild domestic inequality.

Key traits of the inept, emotionally immature and irresponsible manchild, as they appear in my sample, can be organised into five interconnected themes, which the following analysis will unravel: lacking responsibility; hobbies as escapism; emotional and sexist detachment and mother-blame. The analysis concludes with an exploration of 'strategic incompetence' as a corollary strategy, further entrenching the wretchedness of the manchild figure, and possibilities of betterment and reform through an analysis of depictions of the manchild in (social) media other than Mumsnet.

8.2.1 *Lacking responsibility*

As stated previously, research indicates that shifts in masculinity and fatherhood pertain more to expectations regarding men's involvement as fathers than to an increase in male household contributions (Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010; Wall and Arnold, 2007). Hunter et al. (2017: 4) note in this context that 'caring and hegemonic masculinities often appear to sit alongside one another, rather than the former superseding the latter'. This bifurcated formation resonates across many forum discussions, and accordingly there are accounts that construct their partners as 'good father[s]', consonant with a version of a caring masculinity (Elliot, 2016), yet do not 'pull [their] weight' in terms of household labour which is 'less on [their] radar'.

Indeed, studies highlight that in contrast to domestic labour, childcare seems to be somewhat less gendered (Lyonette and Crompton, 2015). For instance, quantitative studies show that fathers do spend considerably more time with their children than before, yet still less than their female partners (Coltrane, 2000; ONS, 2016). However, there is evidence to suggest that both men's household contribution and parenting activities remain gendered in particular ways and leave women with the bulk of unpaid work deemed unrewarding. While many men nurture relationships with their children, research suggests that, as stated above, they often "cherry pick" when it comes to domestic chores. This may be because childcare tasks are perceived as more enjoyable, meaningful and rewarding than the drudgery of housework (Gatrell, 2007). In relation to paternal care, findings from Craig's (2006) time-use study highlight that fathers' caring may not be synonymous with fathers' sharing. That is, the childcare activities fathers mostly engage in are more pleasant and 'the more fun ones' (Craig, 2006: 275), for instance playing, reading or recreational activities, compared to mothers' activities. Further evidence for men's cherry picking comes from research on gendered differences in household contributions and tasks. Men's contribution to non-routine housework, perceived as traditionally masculine (e.g. DIY, 'fixing' more generally, outside work), has increased, while contributions to mundane domestic work (e.g. cleaning, cooking) rather plateau (Bianchi et al., 2012; Kan et al., 2011).

Echoing these findings, rather than constructing their partners' role as father and involvement in childcare as their point of critique, posters' accounts then often highlight a lack in male contributions to housework and family responsibilities as the foregrounded reasons for commonly expressed sentiments of feeling stressed and frustrated. However, opening posters'

dissonance regarding their partners being a 'good' father in contrast to their scant housework contributions are frequently challenged by other posters. Responding posters thus often argue that a man is precisely *not* a 'good' father if he is allowing his female partner or wife to suffer by not contributing equally to housework, as the following extract from a responding post illustrates:

If he sees your distress, exhaustion, frustration and still does not engage - he is NOT a nice kind husband and is actually a horrible Dad as no good father would treat the mother of his children so badly. But these guys cover up their shit by being "Mr Nice Guy" - to children, family and friends.

Indeed, the manchild may not be a consistently neglectful father, yet the force and familiarity of irresponsible 'manchild' behaviour that causes suffering on the side of the female partner is demonstrated by numerous posts. The naming of this dimension of domestic inequality mostly works cathartically to call out unfair situations in the home where commenters position themselves as bearing the brunt of the labour: 'him not pulling his weight is really bringing me down'; 'I honestly have never been so stressed in my life'; 'I'm knackered constantly'; 'How hard is it. I feel stressed and so pissed off at having to do everything ... I'm shattered'. Showing the severity of such concerns within forum discussions on Mumsnet, the following two extracts are from initiating posts where the posters are looking for advice on the possibilities of betterment and reform of 'manchild' behaviour.

Usual story, I'm drowning in responsibility while husband merrily gets on with his hobbies, works a pretty low stress job and regularly "forgets" to put the bins out. I know it's as much my fault as his that I've let him get away with it, but is there any hope he can grow up and take responsibility like an actual adult?

So I've been with him for 5 years total (4 years dating and 1 year married) we are pregnant with our first child and I honestly have never been so stressed in my life. He has always been a "manchild" but I guess I thought he would grow up a little bit when he started getting so much responsibility...

By manchild I mean I do EVERYTHING! I cook, clean and work ...

In these extracts, the posters delineate a clear relation between their own high domestic load and their partners' failure to contribute equally. Interestingly, the poster in the first extract above invokes her positioning in the role of 'facilitating wife' (see chapter 7) by indicating that she recognises her own doing in enabling her partners' irresponsible 'manchild' behaviour: 'it's as much my fault as his that I've let him get away with it'. There is however a palpable tension between the partial blame the poster takes as 'facilitating wife' and the construction of an equal contribution to household labour as 'adult' responsibility. Framing an equal sharing as a matter of taking 'adult' responsibility effectively locates fair sharing beyond the normative gender binary, strongly implying contributors' expectation of domestic equality.

Notably, there is a clear expectation to contribute to household tasks and caregiving, being considered part and parcel of being a 'grown up', which is thwarted and ignored by the 'manchild'. This anti-essentialist 'adult' responsibility is then not met by the manchild partners constructed in the extracts above ('is there any hope he can ... take responsibility like an actual adult?'), thus requiring the posters to compensate for their partners' skirting: 'By manchild I mean I do EVERYTHING!' Thus, the 'social crisis' Tyler (2008) argues is expressed via excessive cultural figures is, in the case of the 'lazy manchild', domestic inequality. By constructing a partner as inadequately indolent, feckless and childlike, posters discursively address this dissonance between the experience of unevenly distributed home labour, intimately connected to their position of wife, and the domestic equality expectation implied in (unmet) 'adult' responsibility.

A variant of the manchild that shifts the focus to financial irresponsibility is epitomised by what posters sometimes refer to as 'cocklodger'. This feature of the manchild appears less often yet with regularity across my sample, and emphasises incapability in terms of not contributing his fair share of money to the household (see also Moor and Kanji, 2018). Paralleling the new lad's reluctance to be a family provider (Gill, 2003; Segal, 1990), this particular type of manchild is mostly a 'lovely cuddly fun guy', a 'happy-go-lucky beach bum'. Crucially, the infantile behaviour of the 'cocklodger' manchild entails a deeply unstable, insecure lifestyle that has ripple effects on the entire family household, as exemplified in this extract: 'Problem after problem with the bank. Scraping by, money troubles, fell 5 months behind in rent.. his lifestyle is just one financial crisis after the next'.

8.2.2 *Hobbies as escapism*

The second, interrelated theme the manchild construction is frequently associated with is leisure. There is an implicitly assumed physical and emotional availability of women to take on the bulk of unpaid work in the home, leaving little time for the leisurely pursuit of activities besides the home and workplace. ‘Leisure time equality’ has been conceptualised by Fraser (1994: 598) as one of the key normative principles essential to the complex of gender equality. There is indeed evidence for a ‘gender gap in leisure’ that is widely seen in relation to the division of labour at home and is important for women’s quality of life (e.g. Yerkes et al., 2020). Thus, although women continue to increase their paid work time, they spend more time with the house and children compared to their male counterparts (Hochschild, 1989; Sayer, 2005). The gendered division of unpaid work therefore plays out as unequal leisure time, and as Sayer (2005: 285) put it, ‘access to free time has emerged as an arena of time inequality’.

Indeed, discussions on Mumsnet are routinely concerned with unequal leisure time: Women report spending ‘non-baby time doing housework where he spends his non baby time relaxing’, not having ‘similar time off’ or having ‘the same level of downtime/fun time’ and demand ‘equal undisturbed hobby time at home’. In a still remarkable inversion of the traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker model, an unfair distribution of free time is even a common topic in discussions in which posters describe arrangements whereby fathers have taken on the role as primary caregiver and stay at home full-time. Frequently, posters laude their partners for being ‘great with the children’, yet at times point out that some stay-at-home-dads, in relation to housework, are ‘just not doing basic things’. This aligns with copious evidence from quantitative time-use studies that, as mentioned above, consistently highlight the continued existence of traditional ‘female chores’ which are ongoing, routine and particularly time-consuming (such as cleaning, cooking and laundry), compared to ‘intermittent tasks’ that are more likely associated with and taken up by men (e.g. repair works, lawn and car maintenance) (e.g. Kan et al., 2011; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard, 2010).

With this in mind, I turn now to examine aspects of recreation that appear pertinent to the manchild construction. In particular, the ‘manchild’ invoked in numerous posts is said to engage excessively in hobbies such as gaming and sport as hedonistic leisure activities that promote avoidance and escapism. Seeking refuge in leisure, this male indulgence in pleasure seeking and an infinite male adolescence, and the associated eschewing of domestic responsibility are exemplified in the following extracts from two initiating posts:

He spends all his time gaming. ... He games, sometimes even waking me up at weekends at 5.30am or into the evenings talking on a headset. He literally comes downstairs to eat, even then sits on his phone, checking gaming forums. No conversation.

Monday: Sport 1

Tuesday: Sport 2

Thursday: Sport 3

Saturday/Sunday alternate or both according to schedule: Sport 3

Presenting her partner's free-time schedule, the opening poster in the second extract above asks for 'thoughts' on the forum as her male partner suggests she is 'massively unreasonable/needy' for questioning his input to homemaking and childcare, which puts her in a position to justify the quest for her partner's greater contribution to home life. In emphasising her partner's pursuit of his sporting hobbies in disregard of responsibilities and tasks at home, the account portrays an extreme case of gender difference in leisure time and male pulling-back from household tasks (Sayer, 2005), given that the poster positions herself as taking the major domestic responsibility. This is a construction that shows the 'manchild' partner as neither a 'beta male' who after all establishes a heterosexual family unit and matures into a child-rearing, *responsible* adult (Greven, 2013, see 8.4), nor as the 'new man/father' investing time and emotions in his family (Edley and Wetherell, 1999; Gill, 2003). In this way, the poster is positioned as the weary but admirable wife who compensates for her partner's vices.

The 'manchild's' (over)use of hobbies as escapism matches key tropes of the 'new lad': 'Release and escapism', Littler (2020: 503) notes, 'was a hallmark of the "new lad" from the mid-1990s'. A frequently reported sport-related hobby is cycling, and this is captured by the much-used image of the 'avid cyclist' who pursues his time-consuming hobby during holidays or at the weekend (as desired), as conjured up in this anecdotal account:

As I drive the country roads I go past huge swathes of cyclists and 95% of them are men. So it's more than likely the men have been at work all week and it's also more than likely they have a female partner who has done the lion's share of domestic work and childrearing during the week. So these women probably need a break, right. But NOPE

says the DH [dear husband]. Sunday mornings are for me to fuck off and spend 4 hours cycling through the countryside!!

The same commenter remarks: 'there's something irksome about just seeing the flock of men, free and racing down hills' since they know 'full well that a woman is keeping the home fires burning and that it's highly unlikely she's had 4 free hours of delightful cycling herself that week'. More directly offering an agentic position for the poster by pointing out the sacrifice involved in her presumed 'around the clock' availability, the following extract provides a vivid illustration of male 'time' entitlement:

I told him [husband] I would like to go to an event on Thursday night which a friend is hosting and it's local. He kind of huffed and puffed and said he'll see what he can do to get home for 7. What he will do now is not confirm until the day. This makes it hard to plan anything and why I don't go out in the evenings hardly at all because it's hassle finding babysitters. ... there is an imbalance there for sure because he goes all over the place at the drop of a hat and never has to wonder whether I'll be home.

The 'imbalance' constructed around the husband's detachment from family life in this extract makes reference to both paid work and leisure which are signified as more pertinent to the partner's time considerations than unpaid work and family commitments, prioritising breadwinning over home responsibilities. Implicit here is the male focus on paid work as a traditional masculine source of identity (Doucet, 2004), enacting a hegemonic form of masculinity that runs counter to ideas of involved fathering (Wall and Arnold, 2007).

8.2.3 *Emotional detachment*

The third theme centres on the emotional unavailability of the 'manchild'. As I have shown, the 'manchild' evoked in Mumsnet discussions strings together negative qualities. Amongst the distressing emotions harnessed to this figure (earlier I touched on feelings of exhaustion and frustration expressed by some of the posting female partners, resulting from irresponsible male behavior in view of domesticity and posting women's related lack in leisure), it is primarily emotional detachment that emanates from this trope. Widely used as a derogatory term on the Mumsnet forum, potential positive traits of those interpellated as 'manchild' such as guilelessness, charm or allure are mostly refused, as in a post where a poster insists that 'a

40 year old man child is pathetic not endearing’, or exposed as a strategy for exploitation: ‘He’s charming enough to screw what he wants out of the women in his life’.

Instead, constructions of men as indifferent to family-related matters point to the severe hurt some women state they feel. For instance, an opening poster who reports being annoyed that her husband ‘never puts family first’ describes a situation where her partner is not happy to adapt his work schedule to family needs, despite such allowances on the part of the employer: ‘he has told me point blank that he will never do it. Son is sick? I have to take time off work. Family emergency? Arranging childcare is my responsibility. .. the message is clear: Not his problem.’

The ‘[n]ot-his-problem’ attitude speaks to the emotional detachment of the manchild, and moreover appears to present a resumption of hegemonic masculinity commonly associated with emotional distance, un-involvement and apatheism, as noted above. Indeed, women who report feeling hurt and let down in the face of uncaring behaviors share narratives that are marked by an absence of concern and emotional investment in relationships, and sometimes the entire family, as exemplified in this extract: ‘He comes on days out with us [her and the children] and doesn’t interact at all. ... He’s just completely disinterested’. This continuation of longstanding traditions of stereotypical masculine emotional and social illiteracy (e.g. Edley and Wetherell, 1999) are often pointed to as an example of forthright sexism against women, which I explore next.

8.2.4 Sexist detachment

This rejection of an affective register is actively turned against women when it comes to the depiction of women as ‘nags’, as frequently reported in my data. Nagging, a feminised speech mode that is associated with the domestic and private context, denigrates women’s talk as ‘repetitive, jealous, tedious, and something that it is both entirely reasonable not to listen to and to walk away from’ (Kay, 2015: 83). As Kay argues, ‘nagging is typically understood as a woman’s tenacious and complaining address to *men*’ (Kay, 2020: 120). Nagging, then, as an ineffective complaint that continues to remain ‘unheard’, is characterised by repetition: it ‘requires a prior request and a reminder, and sometimes these are repeated more than once’ (Boxer, 2002: 51). Importantly, as Kay (ibid.: 120; 121) explains, ‘women who “nag” are accused of creating, and locking themselves into, problems through their own language use’,

thus, 'it is women's complaining, and not the thing they are complaining about, that is construed as the greater problem'.

Nagging as an insidiously stereotyped, gendered mode of talk, and the sexist labeling of women as 'nags', can be contextualised and located within the realm of the manchild. Here, I argue that the futile, repeated request for more domestic involvement *and* its stigmatisation as nagging reflect a particularly sexist form of emotional detachment and indifference that ties in with the retro-sexism of the 'new lad' (Gill, 2003; Whelehan, 2000). Far from simply being an immature attempt at avoiding to carry out unpleasant household tasks, recourse to nagging in this context presents a form of gendered abjection and a vicious rejoinder to constructions that criticise male behaviors such as that shown by the manchild.

As such, prompts to be more involved and take on more responsibility at home by upping household contributions are met not only with failure to comply but with sexist defiance, as reported by an opening poster whose partner puts her in the position of 'the nagging shrew who's spoiling his fun'. To offer another example, the initiator of a thread entitled 'AIBU to be a nag' incites a discussion on her being attributed as 'nag' by her husband for being 'the one whose [sic] always pointing out his behavior': 'I am at my wits end with DH. We've been married 8 years and fight incessantly. He maintains this is because I'm a "nag" who is perpetually arsey. I'm always looking for faults and it's entirely my doing that our relationship is so rubbish.' In her account she describes herself as being on her own with two toddlers without 'support network or childcare' for periods of time when her partner goes on business trips and holidays with his family; importantly, she provides a narrative of him being similarly detached and absent(minded) when he is physically at home. Amongst the overwhelmingly supportive responses posted on this thread, the following three extracts of responding posts seem particularly lucid in terms of pinpointing the sexist workings of 'nagging', simultaneously rejecting the castigating label:

'Nagging 'is a word used to dismiss and silence women for their usually entirely valid requests for sharing the load of life choices.

Telling you you are a nag is just another way of keeping you in your place and making you feel bad about yourself.

Using the word 'nag', only used to describe women, is a nasty trick. It trivialises the request and puts you in your place. Makes women scared to ask to be treated like human beings in case we're seen as nagging. Could you just imagine if your husband did any of those things at work? Walked in and emptied his bag on the floor, shat all over the toilet and fell asleep in a colleague's chair? He'd be pulled up on it right away; he'd be rightly embarrassed; and if he had to be asked twice, the focus would be on him being messy/rude/lazy, not on the colleague being a nag.

In her insightful analysis of the 'televisual nag', Kay (2015; 2020) maps out how the trope of the 'nagging wife' is mobilised to denigrate women's talk in the public, mass-mediated arena. Demonstrating how much of the criticism of gendered talk in feminist television talk shows like the 1970s *No Man's Land* aligns with wider cultural vilifications of the deeply gendered speech genre of nagging, Kay asks whether we can reframe nagging as a feminist practice. She reminds of the consciousness-raising potential of 'speaking bitterness' – if we rethink nagging, she suggests, this may have political value due to its 'capacity to reveal the insufferability of a situation' (Kay, 2020: 121). I suggest that some Mumsnet posters, by discursively addressing their insistence on more domestic involvement and re-negotiating the 'nag' label in this space, may be viewed as undertaking a parallel endeavour. In speaking of and re-evaluating the sexist label to some degree as in the extracts above, they might be taking a step towards breaking free.

8.2.5 Mother-blame

The ultimate theme I identified as characteristic for the figure of the manchild is mother-blame, or more broadly the role of female relatives in enabling immature behaviours that reach into male adulthood. The relationship with parents and in particular mothers is at times drawn on by posters to explain the genesis of their partners' irresponsibility in domestic life matters. Adult men who 'get babied' by their mothers or sometimes sisters appears to be a well-known stereotypical notion that draws from developmental psychology highlighting the significance of the mother-child relationship (Athán and Reel, 2015; Roper and Capdevila, 2020). Here, based on a mother-son relationship that is structured by perpetual maternal nurture and continuous co-dependence, such psychological discourses 'offer highly gendered ideas of parenting and hold mothers responsible for the way their children turn out' (Roper and Capdevila, 2020: 13). Indeed, some accounts contextualise the manchild in this manner as 'namby-pamby boy'.

What seems of interest in terms of this recourse to the ‘mummy’s boy’ discourse is the blame attributed to female relatives of the partner’s family of origin as those being responsible for the not-so-well turned out male offspring, as this poster explains: ‘his mother babies him and has done everything for him which is why he’s turned into a big man child’. Talking about her brother-in-law, another poster claims: ‘[his parents] facilitated his life for him with the result that he has to do nothing and actually cannot do anything relating to being an adult in the real world’. And an identified female parent to a newborn who describes her partner’s contribution as amounting to ‘do[ing] the bins and mow[ing] the lawn’ receives, amongst others, the following explication: ‘Presumably his own mother in particular ran around after him and his dad and these sets of values has rubbed off on DH now’. Male adult immaturity is constructed as the result of upbringing and (wrongful) socialisation during the partners’ childhood, but is also constructed by some as being continuously re-enacted, as these extract show: ‘Mother and sister baby him, goes to one of their houses to eat ... Sister texts me to check is he up and awake in the mornings ffs [for fucks sake]’; ‘He has never grown up and the women in his life won't let him.’

Women ‘putting up’ with a manchild are constructed as requiring a disposition or willingness to continue to ‘mother’ the man: ‘The manchild often ends up with women who for their own reasons willingly continue to mother them and or otherwise put up with them.’ In shifting the blame for the manchild’s domestic irresponsibility and ineptness to *another woman*, a separation is created between women who enable manchild behavior (the manchild’s mother and potentially the manchild’s partner) and those who take a critical stance in their postings (see chapter 9 that considers individualised and responsibilised aspects of postings on Mumsnet). The sentiment or sensibility that I however attempt to capture in analysing the manchild can be described as *not* ‘willingly’ accepting a life on the side of a manchild partner: the manchild construction arguably assembles a critique and is evocative of posting women’s dissatisfaction with male shortcomings in terms of family and in particular domestic labour.

At this juncture, the theme of mother-blame may be seen as contrasting with the manchild’s irresponsibility, indulgence in leisure and detachment as explored above, since it identifies the culprit behind these ‘bad’ behaviors as another woman: the overly caring, spoiling (and sometimes controlling) mother of the manchild. For a start, I suggest that this shifting stance on manchild behaviour, and in particular *who* is to be held accountable for the suffering this

causes, is testament to variability in talk. In accordance with my discourse analytic approach, this shift in attitude towards the *source* of the manchild's primal feature – irresponsibility – demonstrates the complexity of such constructions, pointing up a moment of rupture and veniality of the manchild traits – how can he behave like a responsible adult 'if the women in his life won't let him'? In this constellation, the culpability of the manchild's mother enables to let the manchild momentarily off the hook, directing anger at the partner's family of origin, rather than the manchild in question.

At the same time, the blame-shifting to the manchild's mother, I want to argue, does not let either of them (the 'manchild' *and* his mother) off completely. Here, I would like to put a reading forward that emphasises the sheer extremeness and excessiveness of the manchild figure with its grotesque features of being feckless, inconsiderate, immature and detached to the point where others are being hurt and feel shattered as contrasting in acute ways with the way in which the posters position themselves: as the responsible adult in the relationship. Recourse to the 'mother's boy' discourse that cites a not fully grown up who is still tied to his mother's apron strings and therefore subject to motherly dominance, I suggest, offers a potent position for the manchild's partner by implicitly reversing traditional gender roles associated with male domination and independence (Elliott, 2016).

Highlighting their partners' child-like dependence and need of perpetual nurture and support may then allow posting women to position themselves as the sensible, mature and 'grown-up' person in the partnership, potentially redressing gender-power relations. This aligns to an extent with Roper and Capdevila's (2020) findings regarding stepmothers' work at repairing their troubled identities through construction of their partners as 'needy', and Petrassi's (2012) insight that mothers may attribute a high status to the large share of their domestic work. Being a 'namby-pamby boy' then makes the 'manchild' even more hopeless and weak: an emasculated, pathetic and wretched figure that is resoundingly dysfunctional and powerless. It is precisely for these reasons that constructing their partners as 'mummy's boy' presents a powerful position for the posters who may be discursively empowered, in contrast to the assumed weakness of their partners.

8.3 A corollary strategy: 'strategic incompetence'

The 'myth of male incompetence' (Tichenor, 2005) has been discussed in the literature as a strategy to excuse male partners' insufficient domestic contributions, mollifying women's

frustrations (e.g. Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). Contrastingly, in Mumsnet discussions, the ‘myth of male incompetence’ is sometimes reworked into ‘strategic incompetence’. If the construction of male partners as manchild builds on the excessive infantilisation of men to manage dissonances with the position of the ‘facilitating wife’ and associated unequal divisions of home labour, then strategic incompetence can be made sense of as an intentional strategy that further entrenches the absurdly ludicrous disposition of manchild.

In the following series of extracts the commenters cite and simultaneously reject gender essentialism, again invoking the idea that contributing to domesticity is part of ‘adult’ responsibility, rather than associated with a ‘natural’, *a priori* sexual difference. This I suggest renders inequalities discursively illegitimate.

why can't you expect the same from a man as a woman? Of course another functioning adult can [do] their fair share, he's choosing not to!

men pretend not to know how to do stuff as they know women will whip in and do it if they act useless for long enough. ... Imo [in my opinion] the majority are doing it on purpose. The prioritizing category of fuckwittedness is because they just don't give a toss.

Closing his eyes to the obvious ways he can help is yet another classic example of learned helplessness.

Here, the construction of the ‘manchild’ is identified by means of attributing *knowingness*. Particularly notable is the charade whereby the ‘manchild’ acts helpless and regressive, which is called out and framed ironically as ‘learned helplessness’. This shameless yet quiet refusal of equal involvement whilst attempting to uphold (patriarchal) privileges through ‘act[ing] useless’ differentiates the version of masculinity performed here from some contemporary masculine scripts that presume a greater participation in and contribution to family life, at least aspects that relate to parenting (e.g. Hunter et al., 2017). At the same time, *knowing* about expectations to contribute equally at home distinguishes the ‘manchild’ construction from traditional models of masculinity that remain primarily connected to the public sphere (e.g. Doucet, 2004).

One interesting illustration of this male knowingness is an extensive discussion entitled ‘Husband requiring "full assistance" in the mornings?’. The following opening post extract describes the peculiar situation:

My husband told me last night that he will "require full assistance" to get out in the morning as he has some important meetings etc. He often says things like this and I don't take much notice. I have 3 DC [dear children] to get out to school as it is. Last night I put everything by the door for him, keys, phone headphones and some documents I "must not let him forget". I even hung his suit out and put his shoes by the door because I can't be doing with him asking me where Particular items are in the morning. Only for him to get up and have a flap because no, he's actually cycling to the meetings and apparently wanted a bag packed.

In her initiating post the thread initiator already states that her husband is ‘a man who employs hundreds of people’, indicating the blatant contradiction between a proven capacity to fulfill a high-demand job role and lacking aptitude for getting ready and out of the house in the morning. Responders do not only mock the reported quest for ‘assistance’ (““Require full assistance"?! Pahaha!’), they identify this inconsistency in terms of capability across the home and work sphere, as evidenced in this extract: ‘If he can adult at work, he can adult at home.’ Interestingly, a logic of equalising the public work and the private home sphere is drawn on to lever out any notion of domestic incompetence, which is shown as inadequate. This same irrefutable logic is detectable elsewhere. Comparing men’s capacities at work to their enacted ineptness in domestic matters, a commentator explains:

they can run incredibly complex military campaigns over decades, create political policy, undertake advanced research in mathematics, colonise the world, run businesses, maintain social lives, etc.

Weird eh? Gosh it's almost as if they feign ineptitude when it comes to the donkey work... Occam's razor and all that

Constructed in the post above as a case of ‘Occam’s razor’ – the precedence of the most obvious, simplest explanation –, this ‘feign[ed] ineptitude’ in relation to domestic ‘donkey work’ is demonstrated in further discussions, showing an analogous argumentative structure by fixating on a comparison between the public and private sphere:

They're perfectly successful and capable at work, but at home they are suddenly incapable 'assistants' who need direction? Um, no.

... if he's holding down a career successfully enough to support his family I can't believe for one second he's actually incapable of remembering things he needs to do.

The notion of 'strategic incompetence' lays bare that some posting women construct men as *knowing* that they should be picking up the slack, yet frequently *choosing* to not do so in an egalitarian fashion, which is perceived as inexcusable and unacceptable. This unmasked ironic sexism is evocative of the 'new lad' (Whelehan, 2000; Littler, 2020), and arguably an enactment of a version of (postfeminist) knowing sexism (Gill, 2007). In other words, some men's mythical incompetence in the realm of family life, as made sense of in existing research (Tichenor, 2005; Lyonette and Crompton, 2015), is demystified as a deliberate and wilful choice. This exposes gendered structural deficits of male domestic responsibility and debunks incapable manchild attitudes as a knowing, impudent strategy to evade the drudgery of domesticity.

The manchild construction as it emerges in Mumsnet users' accounts then accomplishes important discursive work by encapsulating a contradiction between 'false' immaturity/infantilism and at least a partial continuation of traditional masculine scripts. As such, the invocation of male partners' as abject 'manchild' may offer a critique of such scripts and associated privileges, thus holding manchild partners discursively accountable for stepping up their domestic game.

8.4 Betterment and reform? The 'manchild' in the media

It is evident that the 'manchild' figure does not only 'have a life' on Mumsnet, but also appears within other mediated contexts. Apart from the broader sociocultural influences outlined in the first section of the chapter, I suggest that Mumsnetters are likely influenced in their discussion of the manchild, and by extension themselves as the weary but admirable wife, by the wide number of mediated depictions of the 'manchild's' cultural twin in popular cultural texts: the 'beta male' (e.g. Greven, 2013). A fictional archetype may be the forever-child Peter Pan, invented by the writer James M. Barrie (1911) at the beginning of the 19th century. Living up to his notorious motto 'All children, except one, grow up' (ibid.: 3), Peter Pan's emblematic

lack in adult maturity and responsibility has found its way into popular psychology literature where it is being scrutinised as a stereotypical (and stereotyped) male pattern of problematic emotional behaviour (e.g. Kiley, 1983).

The ‘beta male/manchild’ has also become a ‘cinematically beloved’ paradigm (Campbell, 2020: 20), mostly as the playful, guileless protagonist of comedies, sitcoms and cartoons. As a cinematic construction of heterosexual masculinity in films such as *Knocked Up* (2007) and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005) (also including the cartoon anti-hero Homer Simpson), ‘beta masculinity’ is often situated within discourses of an ostensible crisis of masculinity and the erosion of male privilege, capturing male disaffection (Albrecht, 2015; Greven, 2013). Sometimes discussed in relation to the caring and perceptive ‘new man’ script (e.g. Marzano et al., 2009), the beta male figure exposes to an extent some of the traditional ‘alpha male’s’ flaws, including dominance and a rejection of vulnerability. Rather than offering a critique of hegemonic forms of masculinity, the protagonists of such ‘beta male’ comedies, however, often retain access to enduring male privileges, leaving the gender privileges underpinning the versions of masculinity at the core of these representations mostly unexplored (Greven, 2013). Importantly though, while typically male homosocial friendship squads (and hobbies, see 8.2.2) provide a temporary means of escape from domesticity and the home for ‘beta male’ figures, they ultimately follow a pattern of progressive development towards maturing into a responsible, (married,) child-raising adult (ibid.).

Here, I want to consider one contemporary example of the appearance of manchild in social media, other than Mumsnet, in greater detail. As Tyler (2008: 19) argues, figures ‘accrue affective value in ways that have significant social and political impact’ through their repetition across different media. In order to avoid giving an overly deterministic account of the construction of men on Mumsnet, and to explore the idea of progression in relation to ‘manchild’, I concentrate on a noteworthy narrative of betterment and reform that is endorsed and frequently referenced and cited by contributors to Mumsnet: the blog entry ‘She divorced me because I left dishes by the sink’, written by the self-proclaimed manchild and divorcee Matthew Fray (2016). Fray’s blog entry is not only popular on Mumsnet, but circulates fairly widely in the blogosphere (Fray claimed three million readers in 2016) and has so far sparked over 4,000 comments and several reprints in U.K. newspapers. Indeed, Fray has monetised his public (and publicised) account as a remorseful divorced husband, and to date runs a relationship coaching business.

The reflective blog account presents an interesting case because it provides a male point of view that is in significant ways pervaded by regret and repentance on the reasons behind the breakdown of the blogger's marriage. Here, Fray takes the mundane incident of leaving a glass repetitively by the sink (instead of putting it in the dishwasher) as a starting point to explain: 'Every time she'd walk into the kitchen and find a drinking glass by the sink, she moved incrementally closer to moving out and ending our marriage.' (Fray, 2016) As a married man, it becomes clear, he lived the carefree life of a 'manolescent' that created a dynamic in which his wife at the time was the involuntary, default home manager and sole responsible adult (Fray 2016; original emphasis):

Men Are Not Children, Even Though We Behave Like Them

I remember my wife often saying how exhausting it was for her to have to tell me what to do all the time. **It's why the sexiest thing a man can say to his partner is "I got this," and then take care of whatever needs taken care of.**

I always reasoned: "If you just tell me what you want me to do, I'll gladly do it."

But **she didn't want to be my mother.** She wanted to be my partner, and she wanted me to apply all of my intelligence and learning capabilities to the logistics of managing our lives and household.

She wanted me to figure out all of the things that need done, and devise my own method of task management.

Men Can Do Things

'Men Can Do Things', the blog entry insists, yet they need to stop putting their female partners in a position where they are obligated to take on the domestic responsibility for the entire household. Epitomised in the seemingly insignificant habit of leaving a dirty dish by the sink, the entry is precisely made so persuasive through its detailed zooming in on this specific account of domestic banality and a gendered mundane routine. In so doing, it offers a vivid illustration of the significance of equitable contributions to everyday housework, which resonates with what posters invoking the manchild construction appear to criticise first and foremost. At the same time, through its focus on the blogger's confession of remorse and regret, it can be understood as containing posting women's anger.

It is then telling (yet perhaps unsurprising) that it is in particular the account of a reformed and rehabilitated divorcee that gained currency on Mumsnet, pinpointing the deep-seated if at times

subtle impact of ‘uncaring’ manchild behavior (to use the wording of one poster). While the account overall is highly individualised and psychologised, and in large parts divorced from considerations of the broader structural bases underpinning domestic inequality and displays a lacking capacity to address them in politically meaningful ways, it does highlight the possibility of individual betterment – although this has happened ‘too late’. A crucial theme foreshadowed here is the complex relation between relationship breakdown/divorce and domestic inequality. As explored in depth in the next chapter, domestic inequality (and by extension un-involved fathering) is discursively constructed as unacceptable through the deeply ambivalent trope of ‘Leave the Bastard’. Indeed, we may read the remorseful account of this divorcee as precisely that ‘bastard’.

8.5 Visibilising a ‘pattern of “uncaring” behaviour’

Constructions of men, and the production of new gendered subjects more generally, are always ‘*occasioned*’ – that is, produced for particular purposes in specific interpretative contexts’ (Gill, 2003: 37, original emphasis). As such, the manchild is a representation of masculinity pervasive in domesticity discussions on Mumsnet.

Building on the previous chapter, I conceptualised the feckless manchild as a discursive device to manage dissonances with women’s positioning as ‘supportive/facilitating wife’ and associated unevenly distributed domestic workloads and responsibilities. Through a detailed discursive analysis of postings on Mumsnet, I identified the manchild as a complementary construction to women’s positioning in the role of ‘wife’ and argued that it is through these two constructions that posting women predominantly framed divisions of care.

By analysing how the manchild is constructed in Mumsnet talk, I showed that this figure interlinks with and simultaneously contradicts a range of discourses of masculinity and fatherhood. In the first section of the chapter I set out the sociocultural background to the discourse of the ‘manchild’, highlighting that traditional scripts of masculinity and more progressive ideas of involved fathering that centralise care coexist. In discussing several bodies of literature on recent representations and theorisations of masculinity and fatherhood, I drew attention to the scant focus on fathers’ contributions to housework and further domestic life, noting that much of the public and academic discourse appears to revolve around men’s seemingly increasing parenting practices. While I discuss later why this collapsing of fatherhood and masculinity may be problematic, I emphasised that, overall, this section does

not attempt to describe a broader sociocultural shift in masculinity. Rather, the aim here was to map out the discursive backdrop against which the ‘manchild’ imagery occurs.

In the second section of this chapter, I traced the production of the manchild discourse across domesticity discussions on Mumsnet. As my analysis has demonstrated, there was broad consensus about what characterises the manchild. Emerging chiefly across five interrelated domains, the manchild’s excessive engagement in leisure (and paid work) was set against a lack of domestic contribution. Crucially, I argued that the manchild’s irresponsibility in domestic life matters did not necessarily point to neglectful fatherhood. Further, I showed that the inscribed emotional detachment of ‘manchild’ references a hegemonic version of masculinity, which culminated in what I termed sexist detachment. In exploring posters’ discussions on the labelling of women as ‘nags’ I drew attention to an openly sexist element of the manchild construction that posting women discursively addressed, re-evaluating their demands for more domestic involvement as a valid request. An ultimate trait of the manchild was captured by the ambivalent theme of mother-blame. Here, the blame for the manchild’s vices (in particular his primal features: domestic irresponsibility and incompetence) were shifted to another woman, namely the mother of the manchild. While this theme contrasted with previous themes, I argued that it also ascribes continuous motherly dependence to the ‘manchild’, augmenting his assumed weakness.

In the third section, I demonstrated that the notion of ‘strategic incompetence’ points to the way in which men are constructed as knowing that they should be picking up the slack, yet frequently choosing to not do so in an egalitarian fashion. This corollary strategy of faux-incompetence performs critical discursive work by revealing a contradiction between ‘false’ immaturity/infantilism and a partial continuation of traditional masculine scripts, attesting the manchild knowing sexism. I argued that, like the new lad, the manchild evoked on Mumsnet can be read as firmly postfeminist, even as sexist-anti-feminist, regarding his cognizance and knowingness yet seeming complete dismissal of expectations of equal domestic contributions. The last section of this chapter situated the manchild figure in a trajectory of fictional archetypes, suggesting that these present further influences on the construction of the ‘manchild’. In so doing, this section explored in detail an exemplary narrative of betterment and reform that, while being referenced on Mumsnet, provided a discursive counterpoint to the otherwise negative qualities that the ‘manchild’ strings together.

It may come at little surprise to find such a construction in a space that is characterised by the refusal of a traditional feminine posting style and association with feminism (Pedersen, 2013). In a curious parallel to the laddish features of the ‘manchild’, the irreverence, boldness and swearsy language used to construct and condemn certain manchild characteristics approximate ‘ladette’ like behavior, traits that are appropriated more broadly in recent cultural mothering texts (e.g. Littler, 2020). As the female counterpart to the vociferous lad, the ladette (or ‘phallic girl’ [McRobbie, 2009]) is an equally raucous and transgressive figure, yet ultimately limited through her affirmative stance towards hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal power that she takes up in exchange for her partial adoption of masculine capacity. I suggest that posters involved in the interpellation and production of the manchild on Mumsnet go a step further than the ‘kind of licensed mimicry’ the phallic girl/ladette represents (McRobbie, 2009: 83). Unlike the phallic girl, manchild commenters do not hold back critique of their male counterparts (‘Patriarchy and being fed up to not be important enough for our wishes to be taken into account. Fuck that!’) as a compensation for being allowed a taste of hedonism, but instead offer at least a vague critique of hegemonic forms of masculinity and certain associated privileges, prominently through the figurative form of ‘manchild’.

This chapter has shown that a range of discourses of masculinity, as culturally prevalent ways of sensemaking of masculinity, framed posters’ evocation of the ‘manchild’. In line with my understanding of a coexistence rather than a displacement of different forms of masculinity (see above), the post-/anti-feminist new lad as well as the gender equality-imbued new man and its contemporary cultural reincarnation – the involved father – were implicated in the construction of ‘manchild’, albeit in complex ways. What I have tried to demonstrate overall is that the trope of the manchild, as it emerges and is constructed in domesticity discussions on Mumsnet, leans towards a partial renunciation of the idea of the egalitarian new man and more recent, related concepts such as a caring masculinity (Elliott, 2016). Instead, I have argued that the manchild parallels, for example, laddish attitudes and behaviours, including his pleasure-seeking indulgence in hobbies, emotional detachment and a remarkable level of sexism as has become especially apparent in my discussion of the abject labelling of women as ‘nags’. Therefore, my analysis of the production and circulation of the manchild speaks to the ‘long shadow of hegemonic masculinity’ (Doucet, 2004: 279) that continues to play a role in masculine practices and identity constructions.

Clearly, the excessively abject ‘manchild’ trope points up posters’ critique of such attitudes and practices. Of relevance to understanding the discursive function the feckless ‘manchild’ fulfils in posters’ talk is the trope’s repetition across discussions, as shown in section 8.2. Some posters indeed explicitly remark that the ‘manchild’ occurs ‘time after time’; it is a ‘usual story’ that is being told on the forum. This iteration speaks volumes about the way in which the figure gains force through its citation of sets of behaviors that many posters can relate to, enhancing its affective value (see Tyler, 2008). It also points to a potentially cathartic effect of constructing their partners’ as ‘manchild’, finding release through the articulation of difficult feelings such as frustration and exhaustion arising from the stresses of being positioned as the ‘facilitating wife’, ‘nagging wife’ or ‘family manager’. Just as a discourse of wifehood is drawn upon to account to some degree for experiences of domestic inequality (chapter 7), I suggest that constructing their partners’ as irresponsible manchild may relieve some of the tensions arising from dissonances with the position of the ‘wife’ and related overburdening.

At the same time, the invocation of the irresponsible ‘manchild’ challenges and complicates some of the main foci and premises entailed in the contemporary cultural emphasis on involved fathering (e.g. Wall and Arnold, 2007) and contrasting presumptions that fathers’ point of focus lie in the ‘fun’ aspects of parenting (e.g. Craig, 2006), which I discussed at the beginning of the chapter. Similar to the contemporary highly visible discourses of motherhood (see chapter 2) that deflect attention away from the complexity of domestic inequality and women’s positioning in the role of wife (chapter 7), these foci on fatherhood arguably obscure rather than visibilise unevenly distributed domestic workloads and ensuing domestic inequality.

That is, much of this scholarship, along with public discourse, envisions an increased father involvement in childrearing as the key vector of changing masculine gender roles. This, I suggest, presents a risk to sideline men’s unequal contribution to housework and associated responsibilities that contribute to overburden women and reinforce their positioning in the role of the ‘nagging’ and ‘facilitating wife’. Indeed, my empirical analysis of women’s constructions of men in the Mumsnet space has highlighted that it is *not* their partners’ role as fathers that invokes posters’ utmost criticism. Rather, my analysis has shown that one key impetus behind the configuration of the manchild, as an instance of ‘men behaving badly’, is posters’ dissatisfaction with unequal divisions of labour and lacking responsibilities in the domestic sphere.

This is not to minimise the value of integrating longstanding feminist concerns, research and theories of care in scholarship and thinking about masculinity and fatherhood. To the contrary, adopting ‘the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care identified by feminist theorists of care’ can move us closer to a model of masculinities that rejects domination and embraces the indispensable nature of care (Elliott: 2016, 252; see also The Care Collective, 2020; Tronto, 2017). As the work of Connell (2000: 13-14) highlights, masculinities consistently evolve and change: ‘Masculinities are created in specific historical circumstances and, as those circumstances change, the gender practices can be contested and reconstructed’. She further notes that masculinities are neither fixed nor ‘homogenous, simple states of being’; rather, different versions of masculinity are ‘often in tension’, and ‘such tensions are important sources of change’ (ibid.: 13). Fundamentally, the discursive work accomplished by the manchild figure is its contribution to visibilising ‘a pattern of “uncaring” behaviour’, as one poster succinctly put it. In attempting to carve out this pattern and its implicated vision of change, this chapter then argues for *extending* our understanding of care in relation to fathering practices to include attention to male domestic contributions and associated labours for a multidimensional understanding of caring fatherhood. Moving beyond Mumsnet, the next and concluding analytical chapter will take a close look at the transgressive and transient nature of these digital, affect-laden outbursts, exploring in depth both the opportunities and limitations of the intricate engagements and sense of collectivity in online-offline contexts.

Chapter 9 AMBIVALENT CONSEQUENCES: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF MUMSNET'S FABRIC OF RAGE AND COLLECTIVITY

This chapter considers the ambivalent consequences of Mumsnet posters' domesticity talk, juxtaposing women's posted online accounts with the interview accounts of regular Mumsnet users. I explored the visibility of inequalities in domesticity talk on Mumsnet in the previous two chapters (chapters 8 and 9) through analysing posters' positioning in the culturally marginalised role of 'wife' and the constructions of their partners as feckless 'manchildren'. Here I argued that posters recognise unequal divisions of domestic labour as injustice; and, through their talk on Mumsnet, express dissonant views and feelings, rendering these inequalities 'speakable', to some extent. I further pointed out that this marks an important shift from the 'unspeakability' of domestic inequality which is entangled with a cultural emphasis on motherhood rather than wifehood and associated labour in the domestic sphere. This chapter seeks to build on these analyses by examining some of the consequences of this visibility of inequalities in domesticity talk. In her recent critical analysis of the popularity of feminism, Banet-Weiser (2018: 23, original emphasis) develops the concept of 'economies of visibility', arguing that such formations are not equivalent to *politics* of visibility; rather, she suggests

Economies of visibility fundamentally shift politics of visibility so that visibility becomes *the end* rather than a means to an end. In this way, political categories such as race and gender have transformed their very logics from the inside out, so that the visibility of these categories is what matters, rather than the structural ground on and through which they are constructed.

Banet-Weiser's notion of 'economies of visibility', where the visibility of sociopolitical categories and the inequalities attached to them is '*the end*', rather than an avenue or a route to politics, cues us in to the potential limitations of domesticity talk on Mumsnet. While rendering inequalities visible does not by all means result in political change, *anger* has a potential to politicise. In developing the argument I made in chapter seven about the angry register of poster's domesticity talk, this chapter aims to investigate both the possibilities *and* limits of women's digitally articulated outrage at domestic inequalities on Mumsnet. In particular, I focus on the relationship between transgressive rage and forms of resistance and collectivity on Mumsnet and beyond.

The visibility of women's anger in the Mumsnet space relates in interesting ways to the 'extraordinary new visibility of women's anger' in the wake of #MeToo, the online movement against sexual harassment (Kay, 2019: 591). This public expression of female anger presents a 'qualitative shift in the affective rules that govern public culture' (ibid.), departing from previous depictions of 'angry women' as pathological and breaking with the 'good conduct' of normatively pleasing femininity (e.g. Traister, 2018). Yet, nowadays, individual women's rage at sexual violence, Kay (2020: 42) argues, may be 'corralled into individualized trauma narratives' – an observation that resonates with Orgad and Gill's (2019) argument that the media carefully regulate and contain female anger via 'safety valves' that largely 'undo' the collective-politicising possibilities of anger. While the articulation, even 'celebritisation' of anger (Kay, 2019) then may be beneficial and serve justice in certain circumstances, its enlarged visibility might as well present a cul-de-sac, an 'end in itself' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 22). I therefore agree with Kay (2020) that we need to pay close attention to the conditions that enable and frame the modalities of women's anger.

Such conditions for the articulation of anger on Mumsnet, I argue, are to a large extent bound to the emotive-digital affordances, conventions and norms at play in this space. Unlike the sudden unleashing of anger at sexualised violence through #MeToo, the complexion of anger and feminism on Mumsnet arguably resembles a 'slow-burn resurgence in feminist thought' (Martinson, 2013; see also Pedersen, 2020) that manifests in significant ways through Mumsnet's longstanding acceptance of invective on its discussion boards (Pedersen, 2020) which spiked during the pandemic (*The Economist*, 2021). In this context, this chapter asks what work seemingly transgressive, affect-laden notions *do* in the Mumsnet space, and how these are perceived in the offline world.

To address these issues, and in line with my affective-discursive approach that I discussed in chapter four, the following analysis aims to 'connect the dots between individual affective practice and the prevailing "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1979) within which they take shape' (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021: 553). I take affective practice as an organising concept linking 'the general (discourses and cultural logics of emotion) with the particular (personal embodied experiences and affective routines)' (ibid.: 555). Based on analysis of 25 threads (in total 4,204 posts), I identified two 'rage practices' in posters' talk, which for many posters reflect the 'feminist vibe' of the site: i) relationship breakups articulated in the form of the trope 'LTB'

(an abbreviation for ‘leave the bastard’) and ii) negotiations and announcements of domestic strikes. In analysing strategies of affective resistance, I suggest that these practices signify what I term a ‘combative online culture of feeling’ in the Mumsnet space.

I also consider the accounts of regular Mumsnet users I met for interviews in relation to the figure of the ‘raging Mumsnetter’ that so often traverses the online accounts. In this study, regular users are understood as users who engage with the site several times per week and look not only for specific information but engage with the site in a variety of ways. Typically, this includes the browsing of the ‘active’ threads at least once per day and following (and contributing to) trending discussions, which to a considerable extent, of course, depends on personal interest. Most often, users in my sample started using the site around the time of conception or during their first pregnancy, and stayed on after that, with a gradually shifting interest from conception/pregnancy and parenting-related advice (mainly until after the pre-school-years) to a much larger variety of debates and topics, often including, but never limited to feminist and political issues. This resonates to some degree with the trajectory encapsulated by the poster citation used by Pedersen (2020): ‘Came for the babies – stayed for the feminism’. In accordance with the findings of this study, and as this chapter will further demonstrate, this succinct descriptor should however be rephrased: Came for the babies – stayed for the captivating entertainment, curiosity, politics, feminism – and possibly quit, or embed Mumsnet more in ‘real life’.

Drawing on 10 interviews with self-identified regular users of Mumsnet, I identify three affective-discursive repertoires that, as I will show, structured interviewees’ talk about their engagement and contradictory relationship with the site, inviting us to think through how the ‘raging Mumsnetter’ figure may be situated within regulatory systems of digital collectivity. By examining both online forum posts and Mumsnet user interview accounts, this chapter then pursues two aims: it explores if, and if so how, a digitally expressed recognition of injustice in the domestic sphere transpires and expands into women’s offline lives; and, more broadly, it seeks to open up questions around the translation of online outrage into the offline sphere.

This chapter has three sections. In the first and second section, I map the affective-discursive terrain surrounding the two rage practices: ‘Leave the bastard’ and ‘mini-rebellions’. I show that different forms of rage animate these practices, which I term ‘mandatory rage’ and ‘palatable rage’ respectively. Registering prime tensions invoked by these digital performances

of anger, I demonstrate how the ‘LTB’ notion works as a collective practice that spotlights injustices while at the same time acting angry surfaces as an affective expectation within the structure of the Mumsnet architecture that spawns a range of consequences. In this context, I draw attention to the symbiotic relationship of online rage with other affective modes, in particular humour, and examine some of the (de)politicising intricacies resulting from this intertwinement in a deeply ambivalent combative online culture of feeling. The third section turns to the interview accounts of regular Mumsnet users in order to contextualise the online postings and examine their anchoring in ‘real life’. Here I investigate several affective-discursive repertoires structured around dissociation, damage and cruel attachments in interviewee-user talk. While the figure of the ‘raging Mumsnetter’ animates posting women’s accounts in a number of ways, I argue in this section that this figure is only too often limited to the digital space. I conclude by arguing that the juxtaposition of the online forum posts and the accounts of interviewees illuminates, overall, the way that transgressive communicative practices in the digital Mumsnet space are not only limited to this online sphere but are frequently felt as injurious and hurtful in ‘real life’.

9.1 ‘Leave the Bastard’: the intricacies of a combative online culture of feeling on Mumsnet

The affectively charged ‘Leave the Bastard’ (abbreviated to LTB) trope is a frequently advised course of action that has gained traction on Mumsnet. While not restricted to talk of domestic issues, in discussions where women express dissatisfaction about an unequal distribution of the ‘mental load’, physical aspects of housework and childcare, as discussed in the previous two chapters, the LTB trope surfaces as an oft-cited response to perceived inequalities in heteronormative family arrangements. The acronym ‘leave the bastard’ appears to signify a normalisation of the ending of relationships, and indeed LTB has found its place on Mumsnet’s acronym list and is ‘[c]ommonly used on the Mumsnet site’, as the UrbanDictionary notes. In her discussion of what she calls the politics of irreverent rage, Wood (2019: 610) remarks that “‘Fuck you” is an embodied, transgressive response that is truncated and catchy in the current hyper-affective social media climate’. Similarly, I suggest thinking of ‘Leave the Bastard’ as a vessel putting forward an ambivalent yet deliberate celebration of the transgression of regulatory norms. Clearly, ‘bastard’ is a forceful word because it is taboo – an outlawed, offensive term of abuse that gains even more power when used in relation to the own partner.

It does not only connote a forged or spurious, false provenance, but also carries and signifies inferiority and deep contempt.

I am interested in exploring the question of why LTB is so commonly used on Mumsnet, but also how this seemingly transgressive injunction to leave the unpleasant behind is mobilised. What does it call forth, and what can it reveal about women's expressions of anger in online domesticity discussions on Mumsnet? What does it enable, or foreclose? Given the potential to harness anger productively, can we read it as a form of individual yet collectively invoked resistance to contemporary scripts of gendered domestic relations? And does the ubiquity of LTB and the combative culture of feeling it summons indicate a significant shift in the digital display of female anger?

Despite its taboo-breaking nature, or perhaps precisely because of it, LTB has morphed into a stock phrase on Mumsnet's discussion forum. In the following, the prevalence of LTB in Mumsnet's domesticity discussions, and its potential as an articulation of a resistive, transgressive consequence is explored through three key dynamics: LTB as a normalised, imaginary resource and possibility, articulating expectations to share the domestic burden equitably through the 'production of a collective female voice' (Pedersen and Burnett, 2022: 261); the mandatory nature of rage as it is attached to LTB on Mumsnet's AIBU forum; and the humorous contexts in which LTB appears, becoming manifest through postings that foreground an ironic, playfully entertaining and reflective tone. While, for analytic purposes, I discuss these dynamics separately, it is important to note that often in the environments where LTB occurs they do intersect. It is through this continuous interplay and oscillation that LTB gains currency on Mumsnet. By analysing LTB through these dynamics, I pay particular attention to the socio-affective rules that govern how LTB is comprehended and used, and the discursive functions it serves in Mumsnet users' talk.

9.1.1 'You can always leave!' LTB as a normalised imaginary resource

Most commonly in my sample of domesticity discussions, the practice of LTB conveys the stark affective expectation to share domestic responsibilities evenly (see also chapter 7). In this way, it is constructed as an inevitable consequence resulting from 'bad behaviour' that is drawn on as an imaginary resource: 'Things have come to a head with DP [dear partner] not pulling his weight at home, and I'm desperate for a resolution before I have to LTB'. Considerations

of LTB over perceived domestic inequality also come to the fore in responding posts on the thread ‘Old Chestnut - DH [dear husband] does no housework’. For instance:

I’d flat out tell him to pick up his game or I’ll LTB. I won’t be anyone’s maid, no matter how much I love them. It’s a clear sign of disrespect and having no interest in whether all the extra work makes your life harder and less enjoyable.

Oftentimes, LTB and ending existing relationships more generally is constructed as an ultimatum – the necessary outcome if domestic efforts on the side of the (male) partner continue to be insufficient, resembling what Hemmings (2012: 157) understands as a way of harnessing affective dissonance: ‘if you continue to treat me like this, I will leave you’. The following extracts illustrate this:

I am definitely prepared to walk out on him if he doesn't start showing me (and therefore our DD [dear daughter]) more respect.

I’m giving it until Xmas for him to buck up his ideas. We shall see. I haven’t ruled out separating.

In instances in which LTB is deployed as ‘advice’ offered to fellow posters who narrate dissatisfactions in relation to care and domestic labour distributions, anger appears to be offloaded on to the poster’s partner whose lacking contribution is deemed unacceptable:

‘Kick him to the curb, all of your lives will be better for it’

‘Get rid of the H[usband]. It is not possible to change a man whose core belief is that women exist to service men’

‘just leave’

‘tell him to go fuck himself’

‘Fucking hell. He's a first class wanker. LTB’

‘He sounds a delight OP. LTB’

‘He is a selfish controlling bastard. I don't often suggest this but I would say to LTB’.

Notable is also the use of imperatives by responders who express what they perceive as either-or-situations – picking up the domestic slack or exiting the relationship: ‘Tell him to sort the

fuck out or fuck the fuck off'; 'divorce him if he won't change his ways'. This mutual instigation to not put up with domestic inequality but consider 'leaving' culminates in a pattern that frequently occurs; using direct speech, contributors suggest how to phrase the demand for domestic equality: "'It's your house too, your child too, your job as well as mine. Pull your weight or fuck off'". Exhorting each other to 'undo' inequality, a collective female voice emerges through the mantra-like repetition and circulation through a variety of threads that arguably sustains feelings of togetherness amongst the community of posting users: 'Tell him: Pull your weight or fuck off'; 'Leave, leave, leave!'.

Offering a form of affective connection, LTB's ubiquity indicates its normalisation in the particular context. Indeed, LTB emerges so frequently that it manifests as the 'default position' (as one poster put it) taken up in Mumsnet's domesticity discussions. We might consider the surfacing of LTB, and exiting relationships more broadly, over perceived domestic inequality, as a *notional* resource that harnesses anger to help bolstering posting women's collective sense that a fairer, more equal distribution of labour at home is a possibility. LTB talk is an affective expression of the demand for more equal domestic relations, offering the potential for producing a collective voice on the issue.

This reading of LTB also sheds light on why renegotiations of the division of childcare labour and chores on an interactional level are largely dismissed. The option to 'retrain Husbands after having children', as enquired by one poster, is rejected; as another contributor asserts, to try and 'work out the magic button that will make the lazy sexist bastard do his share' is perceived as a futile endeavour, precisely because, I argue, LTB in the context considered here functions as a fictitious trope used to 'vent': to affectively manage dissonances with the unequal sharing of domestic roles (see also Jensen, 2013: 45-46). The discursive recourse to LTB, I suggest, signifies an articulation of the desire for egalitarian labour distributions at home: and its strategy of ending relationships as a means to resolve domestic inequality feature as an *imaginary* possibility that enables to 'feel' energetic, agentic, 'in charge' and to some extent political.

Indeed, what LTB is 'doing' on Mumsnet, for those users who see the usefulness in, and need for, discussing domestic inequality, is offering a denominator or reference point around which to organise a critique of certain aspects of heterosexual relations. The quote below, taken from

Ahmed's (2015: 8-9, original emphasis) discussion on the value of naming sexism to make it discernible to others, speaks to this:

When we put a name to a problem, we are doing something. [. . .] To give a problem a name can change not only *how* we register an event but *whether* we register an event. [...] Making sexism and racism tangible is also a way of making them appear outside of oneself, as something that can be spoken of and addressed by and with others. It can be a relief to have something to point to, or a word to allow us to point to something that otherwise can make you feel alone or lost.

I argue that LTB, by naming the unpleasing, can be theorised as a collective practice that registers and spotlights unfair domestic situations, declares these as unacceptable and offers a notional way of resolving them. An important consideration, however, pertains to both the potential and risks involved in LTB's digital community-forming work. Thus, whilst LTB may enable some posting women to feel to an extent political, its catchy brevity, and the decontextualised nature of the anonymous online conversations in which LTB is articulated, involve the risk of omitting and/or obscuring the complexity of individual microsocial relations. At the same time, by constructing male partners as the foe, LTB prioritises heteronormative relations and concerns in an attention-getting way that risks glossing over the nuances of oppression that shape individual posters' – women's – lives.

9.1.2 'Why aren't you furious?' Mandatory digital rage

'LTB' therefore does some important discursive work as a vessel that foregrounds and transports a kind of instantaneous affect-driven resistance to inequalities at home, within the particular delimitating affordances of the anonymous Mumsnet space. Bound by digital outrage, LTB can create a form of (ephemeral) socio-affective togetherness, highlighting Mumsnet's capacity to operate as a communicative space for women to articulate their frustration and anger at domestic inequality collectively. In this section, I take a closer look at how *rage* circulates through LTB to examine in particular what it enables and simultaneously forecloses, focusing on one specific space that has particular meanings and affective conventions for its users: the subforum AIBU.

9.1.2.1 'AIBU to LTB?'

Rage, as it is attached to the LTB trope, comes especially to the fore on the popular sub-forum AIBU, an abbreviation for Am I Being Unreasonable. AIBU is the most-liked sub-forum on Mumsnet (Pedersen and Smithson, 2010), and discussions occurring here frequently reach the maximum thread length of 1,000 posts. Threads from the AIBU forum are not only popular, but invite posters, in varying degrees, to engage in emotive considerations of opinion, attitude, appropriateness and acceptance, 'with a distinctive style', as Mackenzie (2019: 25) has pointed out. As Giles (2016: 488) has noted in relation to his linguistic-interactional analysis of one thread from the AIBU forum, AIBU requires posters' engagement with normative values in the situated digital context, and stimulates consideration of the 'boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable within the community'.

Clearly, the myriad of posts demanding 'LTB' in the AIBU context convey the message that disproportionate divisions of care and ensuing domestic inequalities are unacceptable. Given the affective charge of the acronym construct, LTB articulated in this particular digital space appears to challenge the wider sociocultural focus on positive affects that dovetails with gendered injunctions to be confident and resilient, inciting women to 'laugh off' and ban difficult feelings as 'unproductive' since they may 'have a damaging and negative impact on women's success' (Orgad and Gill, 2021). Indeed, the AIBU space seems to structure and afford affects that may not be permissible in other contexts in 'real life' or even in other sub-fora on Mumsnet¹³, opening space for the articulation of culturally outlawed negative feelings.

Enabling to challenge disciplinary feminine norms, LTB in the AIBU context can be said to be mobilised as an 'antidote to wider society', as one poster put it – indicating its perceived potential to instigate change by revolting and using anger as a tool for liberation: 'channel that anger at the true case, use it to break out of this surrendered [sic] wife jacket'. The toughness, 'straight talking' and 'don't take any shit' attitude reflects the often cited 'feminist vibe' of Mumsnet, and there is a wider sense that women may be too 'nice', 'meek', 'demure', 'soft'

¹³ In relation to the expression of pregnancy and parenting-related *experiences*, a similar argument has been made by previous studies, see Brady and Guerin (2010); Jaworska (2018); Pedersen and Smithson (2013). Pedersen and Lupton's (2018) research on maternal feeling on Mumsnet presents a notable exception that distinctly investigates *emotional* expressions on a parenting forum.

and ‘timid’: ‘women are raised to be nice obliging creatures’, and supposed to be ‘accommodating, pleasant etc’. In the face of a critically viewed ‘women need to be nice’ vibe that has always run through society at large’ (considered as ‘really put up and shut up’, which is to be countered with ‘the Mumsnet “NO is a complete sentence” norm’), certain Mumsnet discussions on AIBU may be seen by users as providing a much-needed ‘kick up the arse’ or a ‘necessary setting-straight’.

9.1.2.2 Policing ‘niceness’ in a combative culture of feeling

At the same time, there is a highly individualised element to what I name a *combative culture of feeling* playing out on Mumsnet’s AIBU forum. I want to suggest that in this particular context rage is summoned as a *mandated* affective mode – a normative, affective response both in relation to (male) partners *and* vis-à-vis (female) posters deemed too ‘nice’. Imploring the individual affective ‘management’ of domestic inequalities, this regulatory function surfaces in postings that are characterised by mutual incitements and impulses to be ‘tough’ and assertive: ‘stick to your guns’, ‘stand your ground’, ‘DON’T back down’ and under no circumstances be a ‘downtrodden doormat’, ‘skivvy’, ‘servant’, ‘maid’, ‘martyr’, or ‘pander to the expectation that my uterus makes me accountable for all this stuff!’. The LTB trope regularly emerges in this precise context.

Indeed, AIBU is frequently described as home to the ‘LTB brigade’ or the ‘LTB patrol’. This disciplinary operation of AIBU points to the ways in which ‘niceness’ in this space is policed by fellow posters. Drawing attention to the complicity of women in regulating femininities, I think of Mumsnet’s AIBU forum in this sense as a ‘gynaeopticon’, a space ‘where the many women watch the many women’ (Winch, 2015: 228), though anonymously. The ‘gynaeopticon’, writes Winch (2015: 231), ‘can be a useful metaphor through which to understand the ways in which [digital sites such as Mumsnet] are technologies of peer-driven surveillance.’ Affects too are subject to homosocial group regulation in digital spaces and members of these ‘communities of feeling’ (Kuntsman, 2009) develop conventions of conduct through which the articulation of particular affects is normalised and disciplined (e.g. Kanai, 2015).

Amongst the affects that are embedded in AIBU, it is most prominently anger that animates discussions in this space. If a kind of peer-regulated rage plays a particular and significant role

on the AIBU forum, then thinking about the query ‘Am I being unreasonable?’ in relation to female anger invites to consider longstanding historical depictions of female anger as unreasonable, irrational, even hysterical and pathological – certainly as allegedly unfeminine and inappropriate (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2018b; Kay, 2019; Traister, 2018). In citing this historical trajectory, the query AIBU, and the space it opens on Mumsnet, turn this relationship between women’s anger and ‘unreasonableness’ on its head: rage, ferocious anger and self-presentations as ‘tough’ are not only permissible and legitimate, but form a normative affective expectation towards perceived inequalities in the domestic realm. Here I make an argument for understanding rage and toughness as requisite affects considered appropriate within the affective structure of AIBU (Shields, 2005). While running at odds with exhortations to positive affects in neoliberal culture, there still seems a distinctive injunction to work on displaying a particular psychic disposition that is deemed subject to emotional work and peer-regulation. I suggest that the articulation of rage on AIBU is subject to a double bind – working as a mutual exhortation to ‘get angry’ at inequalities (as a kind of transformational rage) while being prescribed as an affective regulatory mode through which posters are required to demonstrate capability to ‘manage’ inequalities individually: the articulation of rage becomes mandatory, and contingent on peer-regulation in Mumsnet’s combative culture of feeling.

Accordingly, opening posts on threads that do *not* exhibit this affective orientation receive fierce criticism: ‘I am so angry on your behalf’; ‘You sound so bloody *nice*. Why aren’t you furious?’ (original emphasis); ‘[Get] the rage’; ‘You being too nice’ [sic]; ‘You must get tougher’; ‘You need to start standing up for yourself and getting angry.’ This type of ‘combustible commentary’ (Thomson et al., 2011: 146) can be found across domesticity threads on AIBU in my sample. Importantly, it extends not only to male partners who, for example, are frequently referred to, and condemned as ‘sexist pig’, ‘lazy arse’, ‘selfish cunt’, ‘horseshit’, ‘entitled arsehole’ and ‘lazy fucker of a husband’, but is also directed towards women – fellow posters – who ‘just allow themselves to be mugged off by a lazy bastard and don’t do anything about it’. To give another example of the ways in which this kind of normalised, peer-driven digital outrage erupts among, and is mandated by the heteronormative homosocial groups in the AIBU space, the opening poster of a thread entitled ‘AIBU to think that judging by AIBU, 80% of society (women...?) is made up of gumption-less, unassertive wet blankets?’ states:

So many dilemmas I see posted here could be solved by the OP [opening poster] displaying just a little bit of backbone, worrying about rocking the boat a little less, asserting themselves even just a tiny bit, etc? ... I think I've got to the stage where I don't even see a lot of 'nice women' (in my real life) as nice - more like spineless doormats who can't bear to be disliked.

Holding each other accountable for enduring inequalities that, as I have suggested in chapter seven, are in many discussions recognised as systemic injustice, there is an affective requirement to display the impetus to confront and resolve inequalities and displeasing domestic situations via rage and assertiveness. In line with the refusal of a traditional feminine posting style (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013), this affective requirement entails a critique of normative femininity as being pleasing, empathetic, 'soft', relationship-oriented, etc. However, it also apportions blame to women who may be 'pushovers' and are 'too nice', as the following two extracts from responding posts demonstrate:

[...] the pushovers on here are so frustrating. They post about a problem, get 50 different suggestions for dealing with it, and knock back every one of them with a, "Oh, I couldn't do that, the person making my life hell might get upset!"
I know not everybody is confident and assertive but Christ, don't whinge about your problems if you aren't prepared to do anything to solve them!

There just seems to be such a huge sense of dissatisfaction and grievance but what do you actually want to do about it?

Disciplinary affectivity here ('don't whinge about your problems if you aren't prepared to do anything to solve them!') becomes palpable as discursively performed readiness to resolve frustratingly unjust domestic arrangements. Indeed, the display of affective capability to be combative and outraged can transmute into mutual exhortations to resilient individuality: to 'grow some ovaries!', as posters using the fairly popular phrase request. A sense of having drawn the appropriate consequences by demonstrating aptitude and capacity at managing, confronting and resolving situations that are perceived to be unacceptably dissatisfying comes to the fore in the following typical accounts:

I was married to someone who didn't work much of the time and also assumed I was the household fairy. he's gone now, it's much better.

I don't have time for that kind of fuckery.

I get the hump at any relationship where "wife work" and "man child" behaviour is apparent - been there, left that. If it's an issue for you then address it.

These performances of implementing LTB and relationships breakups more generally, along with a zero tolerance for 'meekness', I argue, are to be understood as part of the combative culture of feeling prevailing on AIBU. Here, the appropriate affective response to concerns like gendered, disproportionate distributions of care and domestic labour ('wife work' – chapter 7) and irresponsible male behaviors in heterosexual family arrangements ('manchild' – chapter 8) is to toughen each other up: '...been there, left that. If it's an issue for you then address it'. Self-responsibilising incitements like this can seem especially cruel since, as I have shown in chapter eight, these dynamics are in many discussions recognised as political concerns that go beyond individual experiences of gender injustice. Stopping short of connecting an incipient feminist consciousness to a fully-fledged social-transformative critique, then, feelings of struggle, strain and being overburdened in relation to domestic situations appear resolvable if anger, outrage and toughness at injustice, and appropriate consequences like 'leave the bastard', are performed online.

9.1.3 'I need to LTB over a chip': humour and playful excess

So far, I have examined different facets of the LTB trope – its operation as a fictitious practice used to 'vent' in the face of unequal domestic arrangements, and its role as a conduit for a kind of mandatory rage in the combative culture of feeling that prevails in particular on the sub-forum AIBU. In this sub-section, I examine the constructions and use of humour and playful excess in relation to LTB.

In this turn to humour, I take inspiration from recent feminist work on the operations of humour and affect in (anti)feminist Internet memes (e.g. Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018; Hill and Allen, 2021). While scholarship on online parenting forums has emphasised that entertainment is the main source of satisfaction gained from Mumsnet (Pedersen and Smithson, 2010; 2013), less attention has been paid to the intertwining of humour and anger. Memes, of course, unlike tropes such as LTB are image-text based. Still, I suggest that memes and constructs like LTB

share certain communicative features: as concise, peer-created textual objects and cultural practices, they are highly spreadable and circulate among online communities and as such are embedded in participatory Internet culture (Miltner, 2014). Similarly, in order for the transported meaning and/or joke to be understood, memes and acronym constructions rely on a ‘shared literacy’ (Kanai, 2016), mobilising connectivity between readers/users that is often emotion-based and humorous. As studies show, humour in (feminist) memes is utilised to cope with social injustices in a way that is both political and fun (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015), to deflate antifeminist claims and articulate feminist rage (Lawrence and Ringrose, 2018), and facilitate online community building processes (Hill and Allen, 2021).

Given the affective force of LTB, my focus here is in particular on the relation between anger and humour. Exploring the interlacing of humour and anger, Lawrence and Ringrose (2018: 215) in their mapping of ‘misandry memes’ find a ‘veering between humour and anger’. They ‘theorize ironic misandry comedy as a way of allowing women the space and tools necessary to be angry’ and comment that this shifting between comedy and indignation ‘presents an interesting challenge to researchers when exploring if it condones violence or is merely an effective visual outlet for legitimate anger’ (ibid.: 223; 215). I agree with the affective ambivalence embedded in humorous messages, but advocate for adding excess(iveness) as an analytical focus to better account for the transgression entailed in ‘bastard’. I suggest reading humorous LTB postings as a satirical response to the combative culture of feeling and the normalisation of LTB advice I have discussed.

LTB appears in a myriad of satirical, playful threads dealing with funny micro (‘cheeky-fuckery-related’) transgressions, for instance the ‘stealing’ of favourite food or snack items, deviant opinions on chocolate taste, biscuits and the pronunciation of particular words or squabbles about the ‘correct’ use of cutlery or even the loo roll. These jocular anecdotes denote and celebrate, as posters put it, ‘minor marital transgressions’, and clearly are a ‘good laugh’. Indeed, comedic LTB threads are fairly popular, given that for instance narrated ‘LTB situations’ such as foraging the poster’s stash of sweets, or musings such as ‘Is taking an After Eight and leaving the paper behind in the box an LTB offence?’, can receive more than 150 responses. I suggest that the humour here lies in the knowing nexus between the harmlessness of the ‘offence’ and the grave act of ending a relationship, amplified by use of the outlawed, abusive term ‘bastard’.

Importantly, the humorous celebration of such micro-transgressions is based on the shared understanding that ‘this is hilarious!!’. The jocular use of LTB, I argue, strongly points to a ‘shared literacy’ that is required to ‘get’ the joke by aligning context and meaning (Kanai, 2016). Drawing from a range of similar communicative practices between memes and notions like LTB, shared literacies are developed through the relationships readers/posters have to digital artefacts (ibid.). Humour may be at the heart of the meme-audience relationship and is regarded as vital for a meme’s success (Miltner, 2014). I suggest that indeed the same may apply to a digital product like LTB whose success and spreadability is indicated by its manifold repetition across multiple fora, threads and posts. Thus, on Mumsnet, humour operates as a collective lens that enables users to understand the modalities of engagement, and deploy them adequately.

To offer a further example of this shared literacy, in a thread entitled ‘I need to LTB over a chip’ the opening poster documents ‘the greedy b*stard [the husband] he stole my last chip’, concluding ‘Obviously, I need to start divorce proceedings’. This playful satire on the ways in which LTB is constructed and employed across Mumsnet’s forum is well understood as a ridiculing gesture by the vast majority of the commenters on this thread. Accordingly, responding posts mimic some of the commonly expressed affective modalities at the opening poster’s partner, ironically commenting: ‘I’m angry just reading this!’; ‘What on earth attracted you to such a pathetic excuse of a human being?’; ‘I have never heard anything so awful. Divorce would be too good for him’; ‘OP i literally just gasped and sat open mouthed for a good 20 seconds’; ‘Definitely ltb material that’; and ‘So sorry Op 🤔 Have you got any RL [real life] support? At least you've found this out now before further damage is done’. Sending up the combative culture of feeling associated with LTB in other places on Mumsnet, as discussed above, jokey postings like these invite to share in the exposure of the excessive nature of LTB. Indeed, I suggest that humour reveals the fact that posters are very well aware of the exaggeration embedded in LTB here, and by implication, in other contexts on the discussion board.

The knowing excess surrounding ‘LTB territory’ is sometimes expressed via the use of laughing and smiling emojis in contexts that are less explicitly marked as lighthearted. For instance, a contribution to a discussion on ‘be[ing] a nag’ (see also section 9.2.4 on the depiction of women as ‘nags’ in chapter 9) reads: ‘If my partner treated me like that he'd have

my foot so far up his arse I'd be wearing him like a shoe. Sorry to be MN [Mumsnet] predictable but I'd LTB 😊'. This post presents being 'Mumsnet predictable' and recommending LTB as an in-group joke (or 'in-joke'), facilitating "'in-group-ness" through the assumption of exclusively shared knowledge' (Miltner, 2014). Indeed, those posters/readers who understand LTB's contextualised meaning draw on their 'in-group' knowledge to participate in the joke, which signifies LTB as exaggerated and confined to the Mumsnet space as a specific trope that is understood and collectively amusing in this digital-communal environment.

The functioning of the LTB trope as a *lingua franca* among posters who 'get' the jokey humour, similar to the operation of memes within specific online communities (e.g. Massanari and Chess, 2018), comes also to the fore on threads that I suggest to call reflective threads. Through humorous exposure of the excessive nature of LTB, reflective threads such as 'Mumsnet Vs Real life', 'To think LTB is trotted out far too readily by many...', or 'Did you LTB after seeking advice on MN?' offer discussions on the differences between online and 'real life' and draw attention to particularities of digital communicative practices and affordances.

LTB advice is for instance mocked in a popular, high-traffic thread with the title 'Mumsnet Vs Real life' which run up to the maximum thread length of 1,000 posts within a week. This reflective thread parodies in an ironic manner recurrent 'Mumsnet pearls of wisdom' by comparing the affordances and routines of the Mumsnet forum with 'real life'. Drawing attention to what can, and is being said on Mumsnet's forum, the tone is lighthearted and humorous:

I've also seen it on a few threads where posters point out that only mumsnet would you be given this advice and never in real life.

So what advice/tips do you see mentioned on Mumsnet that you just don't think would be said in real life.

I'll start!

You can guarantee a poster will give the advice that OP needs to pack his bags and kick him out, on something really minor. They don't suggest being an adult and have a conversation first, it's straight away pack his bags and show him the door.

What other Mumsnet pearls of wisdom do we have?

The buoyant tone is kept in responding posts, and several contributors confirm the impression that ‘Only on mumsnet do you see the perennial threads claiming that ltb advice is routinely given out for minor, easily resolved issues.’ And in a similar vein: ‘Had a minor argument? LTB. Let your hungover husband look after the kids and have a spa day.’ As a responder on a further reflective thread that offers reflection on the contingencies between online and offline life (entitled ‘Did you LTB after seeking advice on MN?’) concludes, ‘the wisdom has to be taken with a pinch of salt’.

Revealing its over-articulated character, the jocular use of LTB denotes the knowing excess inscribed in LTB. Built on a shared literacy among users that enables to participate in the joke, the humour simultaneously marks a distinct online-offline boundary by asserting LTB’s significance as limited to the specific digital context.

Clearly, as the analysis of LTB has shown, the same trope can be used in greatly different, almost antithetical ways. The humorous LTB postings, I argue, can be made sense of as a satirical response to and reaction against the combative culture of feeling that pits posters against each other by prioritising individual ‘toughness’ over cooperative ‘niceness’. By poking fun at the affective mandate to display ‘combat-readiness’, these amusing posts show that, ultimately, LTB is a *digital* phenomenon that serves entertainment purposes and offers opportunities to engage in fun and playful exchanges. This distinctly relegates the LTB trope, and the associated practice of ending relationships with those digitally perceived as ‘bastards’, to the online context.

However, I also suggested that LTB operates as a notional resource to affectively manage unjust home arrangements that can provide, to some degree, an instrument of critique of certain forms of domestic oppression. Considering this politicised, socio-affective function of LTB in relation to its appearance in humorous contexts, I follow Rentschler and Thrift’s (2015: 351) conclusion in that the humour of the meme they analysed ‘reveals a collective effect that is both political and fun’: pleasure and politics are *not* mutually exclusive but can work in tandem, building a shared affective experience that is deeply ambivalent in its resistive potential.

9.2 Mini-rebellions: palatable, ‘bite-sized’ rage and micro-change?

A further affective practice, or strategy, of resistance I want to consider in the context of Mumsnet concerns constructions of domestic strikes. Here, posters harness what I call

palatable rage to negotiate ways of effecting micro-change. There are three entwined motives for considering the affective and sociopolitical complexities surrounding strike notions as they come to the fore in my sample. First, strike practices are a notoriously articulated form of resistance in domesticity discussions on Mumsnet. Second, they are, in contrast to the excessively legible rage that circulates through the LTB trope, remarkably *inoffensive* and a less revolutionary threat as leaving. Finally, while their significance does not reside in transgression, they do suggest a form of domestic reform via rearrangement of domestic relations on an individual level. Thus, looking more closely at this particular, widespread strike practice can deepen our understanding of the range of affects being mobilised in relation to resistance, and possibly widen our understanding of how potentially transformative, digital anger is consolidated and expressed in the space of Mumsnet.

In strike proclamations on Mumsnet's forum, posting women narrate their plans to walk out of their homes, announce they will (or have) withdraw(n) their labour at home, or advise each other to do so. In so doing, they articulate a desire to raise their male partners' awareness of the significance and value of their work and request changes to its distribution. Domestic strikes have a historical lineage that is rooted in collective feminist activism. Demands for the recognition (and redistribution) of unpaid reproductive work found one of their most prominent expressions in the 1970s through the International Wages for Housework campaign, founded in 1972 by Selma James. The remuneration of reproductive work at home is controversial, given that it can reinforce and institutionalise housework and care labour as women's work, shoring up the distribution of labour along gender lines (James, 2012). Concerns with economic injustice, however, continue to be on the agenda of recent activist movements such as the Global Women's Strike in 2017, announcing on its website: "The Women's Strike is about refusing all the work that women do – whether paid work in offices and factories, or unpaid domestic work in homes, communities and bedrooms" (cited in Littler and Rottenberg, 2021: 8), making 'palpable the extent to which women are simultaneously depended upon and exploited' through coordinated collective action in a particular time and place (ibid.).

On Mumsnet, this lineage is moulded into an individual endeavour while being discussed collectively on the forum. Posters advise each other, for instance, to 'stop doing things for him, ie cooking, washing, ironing', or ask: 'has your DH ever seen what happens when you don't pick up the pieces either? ie chaotic house and no food in the fridge etc? Like if you went on strike ;-)' . Apparently bold and firm expressions of individual notions of resistance include

posters stating they ‘had enough’, ‘say “ENOUGH!”’, ‘draw the line’, and ‘refuse to do housework anymore’ or are ‘determined not to return home until I’m sure the little ones are fast asleep’. But what is affectively at stake here, and what kind of changes are actually proposed?

A sense of refusal to continue to put up with domestic situations that are perceived as unjust comes to the fore in many discussions in my sample. Notable is size: the minuscule character that marks what posters often refer to as ‘*mini*-rebellions’, for instance ‘My mini rebellion is to refuse to do wifework to do with school stuff, eg baking, xmas fair.’ The following extract provides another example of resistance and rage being articulated as a minor rebellion:

Ladies, I think I might be on the verge of having a mini-rebellion. [...] AIBU to say "Enough is enough!" I will continue to try to balance his hours/wage with mine by doing more than a 50% share of the housework, but if he wants to do these extra events, then it's up to him to take on 100% of the work associated therewith? He can also look after his own family cards and presents. I'm not going to remind him, nag him, or do that work for him any more.

In these examples, the diminutive mode of resistance is reinforced through its non-extensiveness; the announced ‘mini rebellions’ do not suggest substantial changes to the posters’ domestic situations, but target solely a fairer distribution of the workload associated with ‘extra events’.

The inoffensiveness and ultimate benign nature of this particular mode of affective resistance becomes palpable through two further, often linked features: its temporal restriction and humour. These are recurrent elements in notions of domestic strike so commonly articulated in discussions on unpaid care and domestic work on Mumsnet. The following extract from an opening post exemplifies this temporal-affective entanglement:

I feel like I'm constantly promoting, nagging, checking, second prompting and reminding. I've had enough. I left Home tonight (for about 90 minutes 🤪).

In her opening post, the poster states that her ‘husband forgot to pick the baby up from nursery’, which she describes as ‘not an isolated incident’ but an example of continuous unsupportive

behavior at home. Yet, the conveyed message of ‘this is unacceptable’ is almost entirely revoked by the lighthearted tone and the humorous self-depreciation implied in the near inconsequential action to have left her partner ‘for about 90 minutes’, knowingly marked as self-deprecating by the laughing emoji. A similar extract from another opening post documents ‘Currently sat in Tesco car park with two newly purchased magazines and a bag of goodies, determined not to return home until I’m sure the little ones are fast asleep’, as a response to her partner’s failure to get involved in their children’s bedtime routine this particular evening. What is palpable in these minor acts of resistance is the sense that they are primarily articulated as short-lived, impermanent bursts whose probable evanescence is already implicated.

Domestic strike practices and threats therefore take up and render visible heterosexual women’s concerns about the unequal gendered distribution of labour at home, expressing a level of discontentment with their personal status quo that can point to and effect changes in domestic power dynamics. At the same time, there appears to be a tendency for posters in this context to cover their anger in humour, which may be understood as diffusing potentially transformative anger into palatable, self-deprecative micro-‘outbursts’ that contain rather than clearly voice posters’ critique. ‘Mini-rebellions’, I want to suggest, simultaneously reflect the difficulty of making actual socio-affective changes, in particular as they pertain to our intimate lives. The palatable, ‘bite-sized’ rage that I tried to capture in this section (characterised by an ambivalent fusing of inoffensiveness and anger) may be rather depoliticised, and not quite connecting personal dissatisfactions and frustrations to a broader political critique of gender injustice. And yet, discussions of domestic strikes highlight the possibility and importance of sharing, and laughing collectively about, mundane domestic struggles. Cautiously drawing on Segal’s (2017) notion of ‘radical happiness’, I suggest that recognising domestic struggles as *shared* struggles has the potential to make posters happier by foregrounding their ties to one another. This recognition can offer a window into ‘moments of collective joy’ that are elusive yet can move posters to go beyond themselves (ibid.). These fleeting moments of communal joy then may not effect instantaneously larger social change, but, as Segal (2017) suggests, they shelter to some degree from the neoliberal pull to atomised individualisation. The sharing of the quotidian then can have a positive if short-lived impact on individual women’s lives, doing *motivational work* by recognising our mutual interdependence, attachments and vulnerability (The Care Collective, 2020). To what extent feelings of commonality and dissent explored thus far such as anger, toughness, joy and pleasure actually transpire into, and how

they are made sense of in the offline world, will be explored in the next and concluding analytical section.

9.3 Dismantling the figure of the ‘raging Mumsnetter’

In this final section, I consider the ways in which regular users of Mumsnet as those engaged in Mumsnet’s ‘mamasphere’ actually experience the relationships and digital space they co-create. Specificities of techno-social affordances such as anonymity, the absence of user profiles and the spatial separation between users evoke the question of what kind of intersubjective connections these generate in both the online and offline world. How does Mumsnet actually function for its users in online-offline contexts? What are their perceptions of this communicative space and the collectivity it offers? How do they feel about engaging with Mumsnet? And how do they relate to the figure of the ‘raging Mumsnetter’ that, as I have shown above, animates the online user accounts in a number of ways? Drawing on 10 semi-structured interviews with self-identified regular users of Mumsnet’s online discussion forum, I aim to address these questions. Thus, by bringing in the interview accounts of regular users, this section offers a contextualisation of the online forum accounts, focusing on the character and the limits of the collectivity that Mumsnet offers.

9.3.1 Anonymity, rage and collectivity from an offline perspective

In this subsection I explore the way in which regular Mumsnet users in the interviews made sense of anonymity and the obscure nature of the type of collectivity offered by Mumsnet, through examining Mumsnet as part of a wider social media ecology that for several users I spoke to involved the platform Facebook. While the interviewee-users’ perceptions of the implications of anonymity are not homogenous, this offers a foundation for thinking about the ways in which the anonymity of the Mumsnet environment may be involved in the facilitation of expressions of rage that are frequently experienced as distortive and hurtful. This is a key insight that threads through the following subsections (9.3.2-9.3.5).

While almost all (nine of ten) of the regular users I interviewed stated they valued Mumsnet, in particular the sub-forum AIBU, for being entertaining, none of them had sought to make connections or attempts to communicate with other users *beyond* the Mumsnet space. As Aurelie noted, ‘you don’t really become good friends with anybody’. Two interviewees, however, told me that meeting women with similar due dates on antenatal threads on Mumsnet

had been the point of origin for still existing ‘real life’ friendships. Yet importantly, before meeting in person, they moved over to private Facebook groups where ‘suddenly you get names and faces and then we’ve met in real life’. Both participants told me that their respective Facebook ‘mum friends’ groups continue to be active several years after their start, with ‘really really close relationships’ built over the years, as Ashley remarked.

Importantly, the more personal connections facilitated by the Facebook group were described as fundamentally different compared to those prevalent in the anonymous, ‘unsafe’ Mumsnet space: on Facebook, the participants valued the warm and friendly tone, and the intimate connection with relatable ‘friends that live in your phone’, as Ashley put it: ‘sometimes you feel like you need an online community of basically friends that live in your phone, aren't they [...] It's become, you know, a genuinely very supportive, friendly group’. When I asked her what she likes about the Facebook group and how she would compare it to Mumsnet, she told me:

P: You can see people [on Facebook], you can share photos I think it feels, you know it's personal. It's a completely safe space.

I: You feel more like you actually know them?

P: Yeah, no-one can join the group without being allowed. [...] It feels very it's private, it's secure, you can go on there and say if you've had a row with your husband and you just want to vent. And if you vent on Mumsnet about having a row with your husband, then it's like your relationship is awful and you should leave him and don't you know he's abusive and you're like No! We just had a bad day. Facebook is more realistic.

Here, Ashley offers an account of the private Facebook group she is part of as a personable, safe, comprehensible and ‘more realistic’ space that, for these precise reasons, traverses the online-offline intersection. In sharp contrast, the public-anonymous Mumsnet forum is perceived as distorting and sensationalising. Indeed, the anonymous nature of the interactions occurring on Mumsnet plays a key role in understanding users’ relationship with the site and the collectivity it offers. Nicole’s outlook on Mumsnet aptly captures its operation as an anonymous collective:

P: You don't talk about being on Mumsnet. It's kind of a secret because people, I don't know, like we never say to other people, oh we are on Mumsnet, because people are funny about it, a lot of people really don't like it

I: In what way? What are they saying?

P: They just think it's, I don't know, it's just a weird thing, it's almost like what is said on Mumsnet stays on Mumsnet, it's almost like a secret society that nobody actually admits being part of [...] Nobody admits that they're on it, it's weird. It's the anonymity.

In referring to Mumsnet as a 'secret society', Nicole's statement points to both a sense of coherence and commonality *and* the unspeakability of membership and belonging beyond the digital sphere: 'nobody actually admits being part of' it. The obscure nature of the type of collectivity offered by Mumsnet had a variety of implications for the users I spoke to. In line with existing research on online parenting fora (e.g. Jaworska, 2017; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013; Schoenebeck, 2013), anonymity was seen by some participants as playing a liberating role that facilitates the sharing of pregnancy and parenting-related experiences that cannot be articulated in 'real life'. Aurelie for example saw in Mumsnet's anonymity an opportunity to 'be really honest about your struggles without being recognised by your close friends'. Citing the notorious 'cuddly' Netmums versus 'scathing' and upfront Mumsnet tone (see chapters 1 to 3), she also appreciated the 'more sort of swears and we're all a bit of fed up and we're not going to hide or pretend that we're all okay' mood she found characteristic of Mumsnet. Another participant, Elizabeth, valued the anonymous nature of the political discussions on Mumsnet, stating 'I think it's a bit clearer, I think people don't waste time, I think they just write it. If that's what they think, they just write it'. For her, engaging with Mumsnet as an anonymous, yet politically diverse and 'less inhibited' space is a way of getting more varied opinions on a multitude of topics than would be possible in offline life: 'it's quite an interesting way of breaking out of your own echo chamber', as she put it.

Crucially, anonymity, secrecy and the gaping interstice between 'real life' and Mumsnet played a very different role for a number of regular users I talked to. I identified three affective-discursive repertoires that interviewee-users drew on: Mumsnet as dissociative; Mumsnet as injurious and damaging; and cruel attachments. I begin with the ambivalent dissociations that characterised several users' relationship with Mumsnet.

9.3.2 *Dirtiness, disgust and guilt: dissociations*

Ambivalent dissociations, closely linked with feelings of disgust and guilt, shaped several participants' relationship with Mumsnet. 'Guilty pleasure' is perhaps the phrase that best captures Lisa's feelings about using Mumsnet, which comes to the fore in the slightly longer extract below:

So I find myself drawn into it, and I agree with bits and disagree with bits, but I never really [chuckling] want to engage with it, I don't know why. [...] Other people's relationship problems, it's like reading a problem page, it's nothing that, you know, it's not very intellectually stimulating stuff, but it kind of I think it's an unwinding thing [chuckles]. [...] I'm probably thinking about stopping using it altogether again because I do have a tendency just to when I'm struggling to concentrate and I'm losing concentration, the phone will be picked up and I'll be like scrolling down through stuff going oh I'm wasting my time again. So I think when I'm trying to study again, I probably have to block the site [chuckles] [...] I mean it can be quite funny at times, I think what I find funny is that people get drawn into stuff that I just wouldn't get drawn into.

Fraught with contradictions, it is notable how her statement oscillates between attempts to make sense of her habit to engage with Mumsnet (she is 'drawn into it' without knowing 'why'), and despising it as an unintellectual 'problem page'. Culminating in the consideration to 'block the site' to avoid 'wasting' time, this indication of her ambivalent attraction to Mumsnet contradicts the claim that what *is* ultimately 'funny' and entertaining is that other 'people get drawn into stuff', not herself. A similarly ambiguous sentiment was echoed by Laura. When she spoke about her relationship with Mumsnet, an association with dirtiness was foregrounded:

It's kind of like [laughs briefly] my dirty hobby in a way, I read it a lot. If I'm on a train, sometimes I have to travel for work so I'd be on a train, and it's just quick and easy to read. And it's not something I would use for (.) I don't really use it for advice or gauging an opinion or something, I find I generally I find it quite interesting as a sort of a barometer of issues that other people face.

Laura, like Lisa, attempts to downplay or even dismiss her investment in Mumsnet. While she says she ‘read[s] it a lot’ when commuting, engaging with Mumsnet is her ‘dirty hobby’, which implies that there is something ‘wrong’ with using Mumsnet. This shamefully ‘dirty’ use of Mumsnet may be seen in relation to her partner. Several times during the interview, Laura referred to her engagement with Mumsnet as a ‘laugh’ that she at times shares with her husband when they read entertaining threads together. This collusive laughter with her husband about certain ‘extremely funny’ Mumsnet discussions may help to explain her dissonant stance. I note in this context that it remains unclear if Laura and her partner laugh *along* or laugh *at* (in the sense of ridiculing) the postings since, of course, Mumsnet indeed offers witty and hilarious discussions, as I have shown. What this laughter, however, does seem to illustrate is that Laura and her husband co-construct Mumsnet as very entertaining. Taking a distant stance, Laura maintained that her interest lies in the ‘issues that other people face’. Rather than searching for advice or an opinion over matters of concern, the trope of the ‘dirty hobby’ implies an uncomfortable feeling of guilt and shame because of her curiosity and laughter about other people’s lives as they are being talked about on Mumsnet.

A sense that the male partner’s perception may play a role in the way participants felt about Mumsnet and their relationship with it also came to the fore in Rachel’s account. I discuss later how Rachel did feel connected to Mumsnet, in the main due to ‘real-life’ friendships with other women who use the site. However, her husband, she told me, ‘is not massively keen on Mumsnet’, which hints at the way in which men are constructed as taking a distant stance from Mumsnet, invoking disgust:

P: I do know people who don't use it, I wouldn't probably discuss certain things that I've seen on there with them because it, I don't know, it's certainly a valid resource, but I think the fact it's called Mumsnet makes most guys just go eww

I: Is it embarrassing in some ways?

P: Sort of. It seems like they do think it is just prams and nappies really. Maybe that's good that they don't know.

In this account, Rachel suggests that the presumed deprecatative male view on the feminine-maternal-associated imagery of ‘prams and nappies’ is in fact strengthening Mumsnet’s role as a powerful female-dominated space and resource where women talk about issues that go well beyond stereotypical mothering topics: ‘Maybe that’s good that [men] don’t know’ what is

actually being discussed on Mumsnet. Still, a more positive relationship with Mumsnet may in some cases be forestalled by male partners' perceptions of Mumsnet as 'dirty' entertainment, as in Laura's case.

9.3.3 *'It just dragged me down and down': the injurious nature of LTB*

Other participants highlighted the injurious and damaging dimensions of using the forum, offering insights into *why* the participants felt dissociated from Mumsnet. In the two accounts below, the trope of LTB is referenced as a key paradigm of a prevalent communicative practice on Mumsnet that can be especially hurtful:

I had a very bad depression period where I was more active into like this support type of thing that Mumsnet has, but then I realised it's just helped to drag me down [...] I think when you go into this vicious cycle where my husband did this, and you have like 300 people saying he's a bastard [...] it's not doing you well. And it's very easy for people to say what you should do. But they're not wearing your shoes, that's something we say in Brazil, they don't wear your shoes [...] And so I just felt like .. it just dragged me down and down because then you start going to a very dark place. [...] I don't see Mumsnet or at least the threads that I was in with .. like people genuinely wanting to help, it felt more like a gossip magazine rather than genuinely people trying to help each other.

(Ana)

People get too invested in it [...] In terms of time and in terms of emo- I think a lot in terms of emotions and I've had moments in my life where I've done it too. [...] So I think people do think it's much friendlier and more real than it actually is. It's still a bunch of strangers on the Internet who don't know you and don't really care, they just want you to leave your husband so they get a thrill out of that thread.

(Sarah)

In the first extract, Ana compares Mumsnet to a 'gossip magazine', a space that 'dragged [her] down' and reinforced her depression, adversely affecting her mental health. In her statement, Ana alludes explicitly to the LTB notion as a deeply unhelpful pattern ('you have like 300 people saying he's a bastard') that triggers a 'vicious cycle' and is 'not doing you well'. By

saying she started ‘going to a very dark place’, the reference to LTB in this context illuminates its detrimental impact on an individual user’s life.

Like Ana, Sarah refers to the LTB trope to illustrate her claim that Mumsnet can be harmful, emphasising the distortive perspective of ‘a bunch of strangers on the Internet who don’t know you’ and have a sensationalist interest in the lurid details of other people’s intimate relationships: ‘they just want you to leave your husband so they get a thrill out of that thread’. Rather than being ‘friendly’ or ‘real’, or encouraging the expression of empathetic care or helpful support, Mumsnet emerges here as a space that is imbued with spite and venom. In particular, these statements voice an open critique of LTB as a characteristic and widespread yet profoundly injurious cultural practice on Mumsnet, articulating a warning that getting ‘too invested’ in Mumsnet is harmful and damaging.

An outright critique of Mumsnet’s affective sociability also came to the fore in Jennifer’s account. Mumsnet, Jennifer’s statement suggests, distorts ‘real life’ by amplifying domestic inequality:

We feel we do pretty much half and have an equal relationship, he does all the cooking and all the shopping and everything and I do a lot of the housework. [...] I find Mumsnet a lot less equal than my real life I think. [...] So my impression, just from what I read on Mumsnet, and it may just be what I click on, is that it's less equal. It's more posts of women saying ‘I'm doing everything’, or just complaining. You know, ‘oh I do all the cooking, I take the kids to the classes, and my husband just comes in at 8 o'clock at night.’ [...] So there's a lot on Mumsnet which doesn't tally with what I know from real life. I still know plenty of women who do everything and husbands who do nothing. But yeah, it seems far more prevalent on Mumsnet, I would say, than it does in ‘real life’.

Starting her statement by describing her own relationship as equal in terms of the division of domestic and caring labor, Jennifer suggests that uneven labor shares are played up on Mumsnet. For her, a situation where women are responsible for the bulk of work at home ‘seems far more prevalent on Mumsnet’ than in her ‘real life’ experience. Jennifer continued her statement by reflecting on how ‘the constant complaints on Mumsnet can be very negative, that it’s always the woman doing everything’, concluding that Mumsnet is ‘quite .. insidious

... It just drip-feeds these little things into your head sometimes'. According to Jennifer, Mumsnet infiltrates 'negative' thoughts in an 'insidious' manner by repeatedly misrepresenting 'real life' relationships, suggesting this presents a further damaging aspect of the socio-affective interactions on Mumsnet.

A final manifestation of the harmful effects of digital communication on Mumsnet unfolds, again, in connection to the LTB trope. In her excoriating evaluation of two of the most popular talk fora on Mumsnet, the subforum AIBU and the 'relationship' board, Tracey's statement also points to the distorted and decontextualised counsel that prevails in these spaces:

Mumsnet is very drastic sometimes, over little things as well, you should just leave. It's really vicious, it's a viper's nest. I don't think I would ever ask for relationship advice, because they will take the littlest thing and turn it into something huge and most of the time it's not, you know. You've just fallen out over one thing. It quite often .. I think in 'parenting' it reflects 'real life'. So you have lots of people giving very realistic descriptions of what you should probably do and how to help. But in 'relationships' and 'AIBU', it doesn't reflect 'real life' if that makes sense.

By characterising Mumsnet as 'really vicious' and a 'viper's nest', Tracey highlights how she experiences the forum as spiteful, hostile and sardonic. In her engagement with the site, she positions herself as consciously avoiding posting about her relationship, 'because they will take the littlest thing and turn it into something huge and most of the time it's not'. This chimes with Sarah and Jennifer's accounts in that she too perceives Mumsnet as an amplifier of relationship-(in)equality issues that in 'real life' are perceived as rather ordinary and unexceptional. Prising open the detrimental components of the 'digital vacuum' that Mumsnet appears to be, Tracey's account illustrates vividly the detachment of certain communicative practices on Mumsnet from offline life.

9.3.4 'Cruel' attachments and 'fast anger'?

So far, I have argued that numerous user accounts reflect a deeply ambivalent attraction to Mumsnet. In this context it is critical to re-emphasise that all interviewee accounts looked at in this section are from self-identified regular users, thus are users who used the site, at the time

of the interview, with frequency and often every day. So, why do they stick with it, rather than staying away, when their relationship with the site is shaped by such contradictory feelings?

Openly talking about her affirmative attraction to Mumsnet, Stephanie referred to Mumsnet as a ‘real lifeline’ in challenging life situations, saying ‘I go back to Mumsnet as a sort of familiar place’. Yet, at the same time, she felt she somehow had to explain why she felt that Mumsnet is important and close to her. Justifying her everyday engagement with Mumsnet, Stephanie compared her consumption of Mumsnet content to her husband’s habit of ‘watch[ing] crap on TV’, stating that for her reading on Mumsnet is ‘like flicking through a magazine’. By saying ‘I do try and minimise my use, it’s very difficult’, she implies though that she views her relationship with the site as an unhealthy one, requiring regulation, limitation and self-discipline.

This ambiguous nature of users’ orientation to the site, as I have shown, was characteristic for the majority of regular users in my sample of interviewees. As discussed, numerous accounts displayed a feeling of being drawn (in)to Mumsnet, acknowledging the frequent use of the site, sometimes emphasising moments of pleasure and entertainment. But simultaneously, interview participants often constructed their use of Mumsnet as inappropriate, even problematic, by articulating a sense that there is something ‘wrong’ with this often secretive, intense engagement. Indeed, several accounts detailed the risks involved in getting emotionally ‘too invested’ in a space that frequently offers distortive, truncated interpretations and counsel.

Borrowing from Berlant’s (2011) notion of ‘cruel optimism’ to make sense of this contradictory quality of Mumsnet use, I want to suggest that many of the accounts of the user-participants considered thus far reflect some kind of ‘cruel’ attachment to Mumsnet. ‘A relation of cruel optimism exists’, writes Berlant (2011: 1), ‘when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’. In this vein, the user-participant accounts articulate a desire to quit, take a distant or critical stance or downplay their engagement, whilst continuing to partake in (and of) Mumsnet – they remain ‘hooked’ and appear to derive pleasure and satisfaction from Mumsnet but keep their ambivalent commitment secret.

It is useful here to consider the commercial logic underpinning Mumsnet and the way that it conditions and shapes users’ complex relationship with the platform. ‘[W]omen’s publicly expressed rage’, notes Boyce Kay (2020: 33) in a different context, ‘is no longer incompatible

with dominant communicative norms or commercial media logics'. If rage is compatible with the commercial logics underpinning Mumsnet as a platform, then we may argue that the rage articulated in the contemporary online environment of Mumsnet is likely to be what William Davies (2020) calls 'fast anger'. Online rage or anger, in Davies' (2020) account of the different chronologies of anger, tends to be fast anger. While he recognises that anger can be 'an "action" emotion' that 'has the capacity to mobilise people around a sense of injustice' (ibid.: 170), *online fast anger's* key properties are speed and hostility, meaning it is not a purposeful and empirically based mode of anger, yet one that 'has the capacity to travel furthest and fastest' (Davies, 2018). When online fast anger prevails, 'claims of injustice and harm are reduced to their mere appearance' (Davies, 2020: 179-180), precisely because of fast anger's leaning towards explosive hatred and violence. In this way, fast anger I suggest serves the commercial orientation of the Mumsnet platform, by incentivising its use and keeping users, in highly ambivalent ways, attached to it. Indeed, users like Lisa constructed themselves as finding it difficult to stop using Mumsnet, to some degree, despite perceived negative, damaging effects. Likewise, several accounts also pointed to the harmful effects of Mumsnet, particularly in terms of the way LTB advice can act on the psyche – by reinforcing feelings of depression and being dragged down as was the case for Ana, or by experiencing Mumsnet as 'insidious' (Jennifer) and 'vicious' (Tracey). Nonetheless, they continued taking part in and using it. In the next and final subsection I offer some reflections on a potential 'way out' of the antagonistic, deeply ambivalent and 'cruel' relationship with Mumsnet.

9.3.5 An affirmative sense of community via offline relations

Unsurprisingly, how participants felt about and oriented to Mumsnet had an impact on their perception of online community membership. While most interview participants disavowed being so-called Mumsnetters, Rachel was one of very few participants who stated she felt to some degree as part of a community of Mumsnet users. Intriguingly, she attributed her feeling of belonging in parts to the fact that she talks about certain Mumsnet discussions with offline friends:

I: Do you feel as part of a community, do you feel like you're a Mumsnetter? Or how close is the relationship?

P: Yeh. I think a little bit I do. Like I like the fact that the friends that I know are on Mumsnet, we sort of we can talk about stuff that we know that each one of us has seen.

Here, an affirmative emotional connection to Mumsnet is reinforced, perhaps even established, via her ‘real life’ friendships with other women who read and use the site. Similarly, Nicole acknowledged her identification as a Mumsnetter in connection with a ‘real life’ friend:

I: So you say it's a community, do you call yourself a Mumsnetter?

P: Yes, I do. Me and my friend, she lives in [small town], she does. And we quite often talk about the threads, I like it.

Both Rachel and Nicole’s accounts indicate that their sense of online collectivity is tied to offline friendships. They present cases where the online and offline reciprocally and most immediately contextualise each other, suggesting that ‘real life’ relations can potentially act as conduits for a meaningful and ‘healthier’ (guilt-free) connection and belonging to the Mumsnet space. By bringing Mumsnet content into ‘real life’, online activities become embedded in frames of offline meaning making (Hine, 2015), in this way enhancing a sense of online community membership that is moored in ‘real life’ practices. Similar to the way in which private Facebook groups invite to bridge the online-offline intersection, the Mumsnet online community and its interactive and affective practices may need anchoring and talking about in ‘real life’ in order to be relatable and function as a less ambivalent and less injurious space of online collectivity that can be meaningful beyond the digital.

9.4 Digitally legible rage

When I started my fieldwork on Mumsnet around the same time as #MeToo gained traction, I was intrigued by the idea of placing the figure of the ‘raging Mumsnetter’ alongside the figure of the ‘feminist killjoy’ as one that embodies the ‘good anger’ directed at the systemic structures that largely induce our struggles (Ahmed, 2010). As such, the figure of the angry feminist troubles gendered scripts of happiness that predefine women’s lives in narrow terms: ‘Feminism involves a sociality of unhappiness’, writes Ahmed (2010: 589), ‘by generating talk about the collective nature of suffering’. However, as my research progressed, I realised that posting and reading on Mumsnet’s fora does not inevitably turn users into ‘feminist killjoys’.¹⁴ Rather, my analysis has prised open a more ambivalent relationship between unhappiness, rage

¹⁴ As critical analyses of #MeToo suggest, also #MeToo does not straightforwardly induce a ‘feminist killjoy’ mindset and rather provides a platform for the individualised anger of privileged women (e.g. Kay, 2020; Phipps, 2019; Rottenberg, 2019).

and the kind of collectivity encouraged by Mumsnet, which this chapter has sought to explore. Juxtaposing online forum posts with the interview accounts of regular Mumsnet users, the *direction* this online rage takes, and its *implications* for posters' offline lives, were key points this chapter has examined. I have tried to frame and structure the analysis in a way that registers the contradictoriness as well as the nuances characterising posters' and interviewee-users' talk, including a focus on the complex affective life of the dominant 'raging Mumsnetter' figure in talk on Mumsnet and beyond.

Examining two popular strategies of resistance on Mumsnet tells us about both the galvanising possibilities *and* limitations of the rage and collectivity offered by and in this digital space. Rage, as this chapter has demonstrated, is not 'all the rage' on Mumsnet, but has been visibly present in this space for longer than the anger of (privileged) women that has recently entered the public sphere via #MeToo. This does not make Mumsnetters' anger more, or less, politically productive. Indeed, I have highlighted, from various angles, that there is both value and risk entailed in these public and celebratory yet ambivalent performances of online fury on Mumsnet, as displayed in relation to domestic themes.

Arguing that resistive and transgressive digital affective practices such as domestic rebellions and LTB may do *motivational work*, I sought to demonstrate that these practices register domestic inequality and validate rage that was previously 'illegible' or taboo (McRobbie, 2009). One key point I make in this chapter then is that on Mumsnet, rage is digitally legible, and in particular its ubiquitous expression is indicative of a shift in the digital display of anger. Asserting the value of naming problems for making them tangible and 'appear outside of oneself' (Ahmed, 2015; see the full quote above), I have argued that the LTB practice and the anger it summons lend itself, to some degree, to an instrument of critique by providing a *notional* resource and reference point from which unfair domestic relations can be spotlighted, evaluated as unacceptable and, to an extent, challenged. This may enable posters to feel their contributions play a role in the development of a collective voice on these issues, making them feel agentic and political in a sense.

At the same time, anger, as it flows through the 'raging Mumsnetter', is often directed at individual partners and fellow posters – each other – rather than the structures that cause their suffering. Especially through the widespread LTB practice, individual male partners are constructed as the foe to – rhetorically – stand up against. Further, as I have demonstrated

particularly in relation to the subforum AIBU, posters are frequently pitted against each other in a relentless struggle to display the affective capability to confront and resolve inequalities via individualised anger (mainly at their male partners), which is deemed appropriate in this antagonistic space. By participating in this combative culture of feeling, Mumsnetters get to articulate their anger at certain aspects of domestic inequality in transgressive ways, yet the potential to transform this anger into claims for structural transformation remains curtailed in significant ways by the direction this anger often takes: at individual posters and their partners who are incited to self-responsibly manage and solve dissatisfying domestic setups through resilient individuality.

Of course, as I demonstrated in chapters seven and eight, posting women's talk about their positioning as wife and family manager and associated work overload points up important dimensions of domestic inequality that were often recognised as larger structural concerns in urgent need of addressing in order to improve women's home and work lives and mental health. Here as well as in this chapter, I made the broader argument that domestic inequalities are graphically articulated and protested against in certain discussions on Mumsnet. Notably, however, the *consequential responses* to such visibilised inequalities, I argue in this chapter, are overwhelmingly atomised, and anger rarely harnessed to establish a political agenda that would more likely contribute to the realisation of equality by effectuating sustainable change of the issues so markedly accentuated. While it offers potential for the production of a collective voice, the common use of the acronym construct LTB as shorthand for domestic dissatisfaction may deflect, rather than stimulate 'real-life' fitted engagements with how such discontent can be more productively, and politically, addressed. The visibility of inequalities, to borrow from Banet-Weiser (2018: 22), is then 'restructured to stop functioning as a qualifier to politics', and not necessarily part of a political struggle.

Crucially, I also demonstrated that LTB appears in humorous, lighthearted contexts. Here, my main argument was that these humorous postings reflect some posters' satirical take on the combative culture of feeling that plays users off against each other by prioritising individual 'toughness' over collective 'niceness'. Based on a shared literacy between posters that enable them to 'get' the joke, humour marked the inscribed excess in LTB as *knowing*, which I argued relegates LTB distinctly to the digital sphere. In this contextual intertwinement of humour, anger and excess, LTB signifies an in-group joke that may offer moments of belonging, amusement and pleasure for posters. But humour does not only send up this combative culture

of feeling, it also disguises posters' fury. As I have demonstrated in relation to the practice of mini-rebellions, Mumsnet users in this context tend to cover their anger at unevenly distributed home responsibilities in humour, diffusing transformative anger into palatable, self-deprecatative micro-'outbursts' that contain and potentially trivialise rather than clearly voice posters' critique.

In the last section, I attempted to account for what is happening with this ambivalent anger *outside* the Mumsnet space, focusing on the implications for poster' offline lives. The user-interviewee accounts explored in this final section contextualise and complement the analysis in key ways as these details and experiences could not be obtained by analysis of online discussions. What the participants told me in the interviews about their engagement and relationship with Mumsnet, indeed their connection with, and dissociation from, the site, both corroborates as well as complicates and extends the forum data analysis. On the whole, I have shown that what is acceptable, and even expected in terms of displaying outrage on Mumsnet is often experienced as unacceptable and hurtful in 'real life'.

In dismantling the 'raging Mumsnetter' figure that takes shape across Mumsnet discussions, the interviewee-user accounts drew attention to the ways that this figure is squarely situated within, and limited to, the digital sphere. Extending my previous argument about transgressive practices being digital phenomena that serve a range of purposes including the development of a collective voice, the interviews foregrounded a further implication: it is crucial to remain alert to the ways in which this transient, anonymous online sociality is curtailed by its lacking attention to the nuances of oppression that shape individual posters' lives. Indeed, the interviewee accounts shed light on some crucial dimensions of how hyper-affective, catchy and truncated digital constructs such as LTB are actually experienced beyond the digital. I argued that the user-interviewees' emphasis on the decontextualised and distortive nature of some of the counsel prevailing on Mumsnet, and its harmful and injurious effect as it unfolds especially in relation to LTB, are not mirrored in the online discussions. Unlikely to translate into life beyond Mumsnet, the overly legible (and in parts individualised) rage that animates certain Mumsnet discussions then does not only remain illegible offline, but such a combative culture of feeling that offloads rage on to partners and/or oneself can frequently be experienced as insidiously 'viperish', dissociative and damaging. My analysis has also implied that women's digitally articulated rage may perhaps even be subject to male ridicule by posters' partners who participate in Mumsnet discussions indirectly through their wives. Concluding that at least

certain online practices such as LTB are significantly detached from ‘real life’, I suggested that re-embedding Mumsnet’s ‘digital vacuum’ into frames of offline meaning-making is needed to contribute to restoring a more *collective* feminist rage – one that has the potential to be meaningful beyond the digital, and harnesses users’ attachment to the site in ways that perhaps incite more real-life suited engagements with the multifaceted material burdens of working motherhood, rather than focusing primarily on the construction of individual male partners’ as the foe.

Chapter 10 CONCLUSION

This thesis opened with reflexive remarks on my personal motivation for studying working mothers' experiences. I reflected on the importance of finding new answers to the longstanding question of why having children continues to present a challenge to gender equality for women even in times of a heightened visibility of feminism. I wondered how women navigated the complex and contradictory expectations to 'do it all' in the face of pronounced inequalities in the workplace and the multiple labors they shoulder as parents, partners and workers. At the same time, I wanted to know whether they remained invested in the female success story: 'leaning in' to be professionally and economically successful yet not to the detriment of the family – or what other consequences there were for women's occupational and maternal sense of identity. Given the ordinary entanglement of our everyday lives with digital media, I highlighted that, accordingly, I wanted to explore how these formations play out on and beyond the online discussion boards of Mumsnet as a virtual go-to place for British working mothers. This thesis is the result of my endeavour to capture, evaluate and contextualise the answers that have crystallised during my research journey exploring professional mothers' work-parenting negotiations across the online-offline sphere.

I start this concise concluding chapter by situating it within both the structure of the thesis and several strands of sociocultural enquiry more generally, sustaining my reflexive, contextual approach. The following main sections of this conclusion therefore have two aims: to revisit and reflect on the central arguments and contributions of the project, pointing to their implications for different areas of research; and to discuss more broadly future directions for analysis that emerge from my study, including reflections on its limitations. I highlight the overlaps, flows and sometimes synergies between, and across, different sections and arguments within the thesis.

This doctoral research on professional mothers' negotiations of their parenting and working experiences on, through and beyond Mumsnet was an ambitious project. I wanted to examine the ways in which employed women with children talk about and make sense of their lived experiences and (in)equality in and across two research sites: the digital sphere of Mumsnet's discussion boards and the interviews with users of the selfsame site. As part of this quest, I also sought to establish whether, and if so, how the particular digital environment of Mumsnet makes a difference to the ways in which these experiences are discussed; and how they are

connected to wider social and cultural sensibilities, or forces, with a particular interest in how working mothers' on- and offline talk relates to feminism. As outlined in the introduction, my specific research questions were: How is the navigation of various forms of labour, in particular paid and care work, discussed and registered by maternal subjects on and beyond Mumsnet? How do working mothers make sense of inequalities at work and in the home, and how, if at all, has the new visibility of feminism affected their sense-making? How do mediated images of working mothers relate to and conform with the lived experiences of site users, both on- and offline? What is the relationship between the discussions of gendered forms of inequality on Mumsnet and in the accounts of the interview participants? How can we account for the social significance and affective specificity of the online conversational space of Mumsnet?

The focus of this study was thus dual-sited, and as such drew on original empirical research in the form of 29 interviews, 85 online discussion threads and insights from a one-year fieldwork period on Mumsnet. This is a rather large amount of data to consider for a qualitative project that needs to adhere to word limits. Clearly there are then issues that I was not able to address. Nonetheless, the five analysis chapters, along with the two methodological chapters that integrate empirical elements, do bear testament to what I was able to chart. Throughout this thesis, my focus was on the workings and constructions of gendered inequalities in the accounts of the interview participants and posters. However and importantly, I did not seek to provide a complete catalogue of the gender inequalities that shape and affect contemporary working mothers' lives. Rather, I have discussed dimensions that were foregrounded in my data. Thus, I view my research as part of, and contributing to, continuous feminist sociological and cultural conversations about the persistently thorny issue of gender, work and parenting. In equal measure, this research is part of scholarly discussions of changes and transformations – alongside residual formations and continuities – in the way that women talk about gendered inequalities on- and offline, at the current moment of a revived yet complex feminist landscape.

10.1 Central arguments and contributions

10.1.1 Thinking across the online-offline and understanding the affective-discursive landscape of working mothers

This thesis, based on original empirical research, set out to make both a theoretical and methodological contribution to our understanding of work-parenting negotiations across the online-offline spheres. A central emphasis when I set out to design this study was that

researching a particular social phenomenon in the contemporary digital era needs to account for the ways in which going, and being, online is a mundane yet crucially significant part of our everyday lives. Indeed, much scholarship confirms my conviction that our lives are inseparable from, or even ‘lived *in media*’ (Deuze, 2012; see also e.g. Hine, 2015, and chapters 2; 2.3; 3 and 4). Thus, the analysis presented in this thesis reflects this aim to research and trace the issues under study across the online-offline spheres. My endeavour was therefore to think these realms together and to conceive them as intertwined in each individual’s life, while also remaining attuned to the *dissimilarities* in the way that communication, expression and emotions differ in articulation in the online and offline realm. In contributing to the study of the ways in which women negotiate motherhood in and across the digital realm and their ‘offline’ lives, this research joins an emerging body of work that has developed and contributed to this approach (see chapter 2; 2.3.5; in particular Das, 2020; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017). Mumsnet as my primary research site was chosen due to its popularity and reach amongst working mothers in the U.K., making it a digital prime locus for British working mothers.

In this thesis, I have adopted an original approach to studying Mumsnet by integrating analyses of user-interviewee accounts and online forum accounts. Indeed, my research has offered evidence of the value of researching and thinking together the on- and offline in cultural and sociological enquiries. By juxtaposing online and interview accounts, both of which visibilise inequalities in the private-domestic and the public-work sphere, respectively in the five analytical chapters, I was able to paint a complex and detailed picture of the ways in which inequalities are discussed by female working parents.

In addition to adopting a new approach to the study of Mumsnet, this thesis has developed and employed an approach to discursive analysis in digital and offline contexts that reflects my focus on discourse and affect and their involvement in the production and regulation of gendered mediated subjectivity. As I outline in chapter three, this hybrid approach to discourse analysis, marrying insights from critical discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) with the affective-discursive approach developed by Wetherell (2012; 2015), lends itself to analysing the affective modes that characterised the interviews and the online accounts. Throughout chapters five to nine I explored affective and interpretative patterns and practices across the interviews and online postings, demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach for understanding the affective-discursive landscape of working mothers.

10.1.2 *The affective modes of inequality*

This thesis advances our understanding of everyday sense-making about inequalities in work and domestic settings, in relation to affective responses to and negotiations of them, joining a rich body of work that has explored this important theme for some decades¹⁵. It does so by drawing out the contemporary key affective modes of inequality that structured my participants' accounts – from the 'drip, drip, drip' of maternity discrimination to the 'benchmarking self', the angry register of the 'facilitating wife' to the construction of the feckless 'manchild' partner and the fabric of rage on Mumsnet. In the following sections, I will recap and discuss my key arguments and contributions to existing research on 1) continuities and changes in feminist discourse, 2) the interstices between the digital and the offline including a reflection on what this juxtaposition of the two sites has yielded, 3) online rage and collectivity on and beyond Mumsnet including a discussion of the way that the thesis with its focus on Mumsnet 'speaks' to the current cultural moment of feminism.

10.1.2.1 *Continuities and changes in feminist discourse*

One set of debates that this thesis contributes to relates to continuities and shifts in the way that women talk about gendered inequalities, in the context of a heightened visibility of feminism. As such, I have documented the discursive patterns and tropes that were recurrent in interviewees' open talk about work-related experiences of gender inequality. For instance, I showed how frequent harassing comments from employers and colleagues illustrated the '*drip, drip, drip*' – *the trickle, over time – to discrimination* and pointed out that such negative experiences were often related to motherhood and pregnancy rather than gender, contributing to understanding the experience of discrimination based on motherhood. However, my analysis did not merely document the pervasiveness of maternity discrimination that characterises the U.K. neoliberal workplace and shaped the participants' work experiences. It also offered explanations of why such structural issues endure. For example, I explained that the intertwined notions of 'luck' and gratitude in relation to flexible working arrangements worked to not only re-cement women's primary caregiving responsibilities, but silenced potentially exploitative employer practices. I argued that if women are made to feel grateful for so-called flexible working practices that are far too often framed as a matter of *personal* luck, an unequal system is reinforced that continues to call on women to individually work out the complexity of

¹⁵ This is the case since at least Hochschild's (1989) discussion of how women draw on notions of luck and gratitude to make sense of lived gender inequalities.

maintaining their career credentials *and* taking care of their families. As such, my analysis has provided a nuanced account of aspects of contemporary workplace culture that affect mothers' experiences adversely in several ways. Crucially, I showed how the open discussion of gender and especially motherhood-related inequalities at work corresponds to the shifting feminist landscape towards the 'speakability' and acknowledgement of inequalities.

However, I also showed how being able to critique gendered forms of injustice does not necessarily translate into changing them. As such, I identified a number of affective practices as a way of locating the ways in which affect and feeling are involved in the contemporary construction of maternal working subjectivities. Thus, as part of a wider turn to the affective and psychic life of neoliberalism (Gill, 2017; Scharff, 2016), I showed the ways in which defeatist sentiments in relation to career stagnation and mothers' affective investments in raising confident daughters and gender-sensitive sons surfaced as responses to experiences of gender inequality. I argued that these affective configurations contain broader critiques by reinventing solutions to structural problems as inner psycho-emotional endeavours. My findings therefore enrich our understanding of the way that contemporary feminism is shaped and lived partly through injunctions to engage in confidence-instilling parenting practices as an inner- and self-directed way of addressing (anticipated) structural inequalities as well as exhortations to enact present-oriented self-care rather than imagining social change in the here and now.

This focus on self-work also came to the fore in what I termed the *benchmarked self*. In showing how the perfect operates psychically, my analysis demonstrated how contemporary scripts of maternal working femininities can involve feelings of suffering, pain and self-criticism, which characterise the 'benchmarked self' in its relentless striving for perfection. Harnessing the research participants' positioning as successful neoliberal subjects, my analysis drew out the disparities between idealised images of successfully reconciled working and caring identities and the lived experiences of working mothers. As such, I furthered our understanding of neoliberal feminism at the level of subjectivity by going beyond media and cultural analysis to show how the cultural ideal of the 'balanced woman' is lived and experienced by individuals that are positioned as prime neoliberal feminist subjects. As I have shown through the notion of the 'one hundred per cent' mother-worker, the participants, while often acutely aware of pressures and expectations to excel and be 'perfect' in both their careers and as mothers, often measured and self-evaluated themselves against the benchmark of the successful worker and

the ‘perfect’ mother aka the ‘balanced woman’. In this sense, I find that awareness and critique of such gendered incitements and norms do not equate to evading these expectations, or to a reconfiguration of the underpinning unequal gender power relations. In fact, I showed how high-demand workplace cultures and norms and ‘intensive mothering’ imperatives were experienced as contradictory, stress and strain-producing forces (that women sought to resolve via self-change), rather than as happily balanceable. Indeed, one important finding of my research is that despite individualised change in self, orientation and disposition, including acceptance of high personal costs such as a deterioration in working conditions, many participants still felt that they were not living up to and achieving the arguably unattainable ideal of a felicitous work-family balance.

My exploration of the lived experiences of several key facets of the maternal subjectivity incited by neoliberalism also involved an investigation of how working mothers make sense of the productivity-oriented ethos underpinning the gendered discourse of neoliberal family management. I showed that this played a particular role for the approach to and use of resources that have become increasingly scarce such as time. My analysis enriched our understanding of the texture and lived experience of neoliberal time by showing how it remodels professional mothers’ perception of time. For instance, I highlighted how the notion of ‘productive’ family time structured the participants’ accounts. Time spent with the family emerged as imbued with ‘value’ that yields ‘measurable outputs’ such as memory tokens, which I argued creates a new affective maternal ‘currency’. While the participants’ view of time pointed to complicity with a neoliberal rationality, I also showed that there were palpable dissonances with calculative logics. I highlighted the way that childcare emerged as a site where such discordances with a managerial, calculating rationality became manifest. Crucially, the figuring of childcare as a matter of rational investment produced deep discomfort, and yet I showed that entirely escaping such logics through which neoliberal discourse operates was unfeasible. By pinpointing these complexities, my analysis has demonstrated that the dimensions of neoliberal ‘balanced femininity’ are not uniformly lived, but instead may be experienced in multifarious ways.

10.1.2.2. *Gaping interstices – juxtaposing the online and the offline*

My analysis was based on two distinct sites – the online discussion forum context of Mumsnet and interviews with users of the same platform. Offering links between the two sites throughout my analytical chapters to show how online and offline relations, practices and affects relate to and mutually contextualise each other, the analysis started with two chapters that were based

on interview data, then moved to two chapters that drew on the online accounts and ended with a chapter that combined analysis of both online accounts and accounts of the interviewees. By juxtaposing these two spaces, and paying careful attention to the specific digital and interview contexts, my analysis thus offered a nuanced and situated account of the relationship between the online and offline that showed its complexity. In particular, my analysis highlighted differences and similarities between these two sets of data in relation to the question of whether, how and to what extent these communicative spaces shape, afford and hinder the *speakability* of inequalities. While there were congruities in how inequalities were discussed across the online-offline spheres, such as an awareness of inequalities, my analysis drew out *site-specific* modulations. In fact, my analysis has brought to light a twofold disjuncture between the interviews and the online postings. First, I identified a gap between these two sites in terms of how what I call ‘domesticity talk’ about home inequalities was framed in each of the settings. ‘Domesticity talk’ accentuates my specific contribution to our understanding of how domestic inequality is pronounced and constructed discursively in the online social context of Mumsnet. Second, I detected different affective intensities and expectations circulating across the digital and interview accounts. I therefore argued that, as could be expected, the issues and conditions that frame the interviewees and posters’ lives are not different – given as the women I spoke to *were* Mumsnet users – but that the Mumsnet online context does affect the way that women affectively negotiate and make sense of their experiences of gender inequalities in the private-domestic sphere. My analysis highlighted how the heightened *visibility* afforded to domestic themes on Mumsnet contrasted with the *silence* around domestic inequalities in the interviews. Concurrently, dissimilar affective practices were foregrounded, with the mandate on Mumsnet being for a highly visible display of anger and rage, and inwards-turned criticism and painful self-benchmarking characterising the accounts of the women I spoke to.

I drew on several theoretical frameworks to make sense of these incongruences. As such and as I discussed above, a hegemonic discourse of self-responsibilised family management reverberated in the *interviews*, which, in a neoliberal (feminist) fashion, tended to enjoin women to solve prevalent work-family reconciliation issues internally and via self-change. To be sure, gendered workplace inequalities were talked about openly, and thus inequalities were situated in the public work sphere rather than in the domestic realm. I argued that this ‘speakability’ of gender inequalities at work resonates with the shifting feminist discourse that put some feminist matters back on the agenda. However, despite the near-ubiquity of fragments of feminist discourse in talk about the workplace, my analysis pointed to the limited reach of

such feminist sensibilities by not extending in equal measure to the private sphere. Significantly, inequalities at home, such as those associated with women's dual family manager role, were framed as markedly separated from feminism. At the same time, and concerning both work and domestic settings, many of the women I interviewed provided accounts in which they constructed themselves, their own and their children's dispositions, rather than the social conditions in which they worked, lived and parented, as sites of change.

In analysing the *techno-social space of Mumsnet* in chapters seven to nine, I showed that 'domesticity talk' on Mumsnet disrupts such dominant discourses to some extent by both visibilising several dimensions of social reproductive labour and expanding the interpretative and affective resources available to women posting in this anonymous, collective space. This is an important finding in light of the relationship between the online and the offline and how the online realm facilitates the 'speakability' of certain domestic inequalities that were not voiced in equal measure in the interviews I conducted with users. In some contrast to earlier claims that Mumsnet tends to encourage a depoliticised, individualist outlook that aligns with broader neoliberal rationalities (Jensen, 2018 [2013]; Gambles, 2010; McRobbie, 2013), I argued that certain affective practices and elements of work-caring discourse on Mumsnet break away from such hegemonic logics. I therefore drew attention to some of the ambivalent effects of affective practices in constituting subjectivity as they come into existence on Mumsnet, with a somewhat positive view. For example, I investigated how individuals online become simultaneously invested in *and* resist the subject position of the wife. Mobilising Hemmings's (2012) notion of affective dissonance, I elaborated how the relations that women build and engage in through mediated communication on Mumsnet enable the articulation of dissonant and transgressive views and feelings in relation to women's positioning in the role of wife and associated divisions of home labour. These findings then both support and extend previous research on mothering forums as sites where culturally hegemonic mothering practices and identities are partially contested and renegotiated, by homing in on the *set* of common domestic roles women occupy. Against the backdrop of the culturally highly visible mother figure and the luminosity of the 'balanced woman' ideal, the angry register of the 'facilitating wife' captured how engaging in discussions on Mumsnet can enable to 'feel differently' (Hemmings, 2012) – at a time when divisions of labour and associated domestic inequalities arguably do not figure prominently on the agenda of emergent feminisms, but women's anger at certain forms of gendered injustice is visible in the mediated public sphere.

While a range of affective and discursive registers came to facilitate such recognition of injustice, I also showed how particular socio-affective expectations *regulate* and *mandate* the expression of rage in this space, drawing out how normative and disciplinary aspects of affect-infused communicative practices mark the boundaries of community and belonging on Mumsnet. In doing so, I demonstrated how *Mumsnet's fabric of rage*, or the practice of expressing outrage, is intimately connected to the kind of affective subjectivity that is encouraged to come into being on Mumsnet – one that plays a decisive role as ‘raging Mumsnetter’ in the online sphere, yet obtains a significantly less valued, even abject status in ‘real life’ (see my discussion of this in the next section 10.1.2.3). My research then adds not only to research on inequalities in domestic labour and contributes to a body of work looking at gendered discursive use of online spaces. It also offers a far more *nuanced, qualified and ambivalent reading of Mumsnet* against feminist studies that either celebrate digital spaces as empowering and liberating *or* critique the ways they inhibit communicative justice and feminist progress by framing digital engagements in dystopian ways as involved in for instance shaming mothers for their parenting.

At the same time, this thesis extends understandings of the *specific site of Mumsnet* in particular, which is an important location for studying a) publicly marginalised discourses on domesticity and reproductive labour other than, but also including, those centred around motherhood more broadly; b) the interplay and at least partial subversion of the multiple (domestic) roles many women occupy more specifically; and c) the force of peer-regulation, discipline and digital conventions, with ambivalent implications for the politicising potential of the in parts transgressive interactions occurring on and constructions assembled on this platform. Taken together, this project has expanded our understanding of the *cultural specificity of Mumsnet as a platform* by showing how it affects the nature of the communication, and highlighting that what is ‘speaking’ in this specific communicative socio-affective context may remain ‘unspeakable’ in offline contexts (see also the next section).

In addition, my findings indicate that we need to consider and analyse constructions of femininity and masculinity together, and account for their entanglement with norms surrounding motherhood and fatherhood. For example, chapter eight with its focus on the construction of (some) men as *feckless ‘manchild’* traced instances of ‘men behaving badly’ in Mumsnet users’ domesticity talk. My analysis suggests that the ‘manchild’ construction can lend itself to highlight and work through some of the complexities and problems of some

contemporary masculine/fathering scripts that centralise aspects of care and men's roles as fathers, yet do not match insufficient male household contributions, as constructed and broached in discussions on Mumsnet. Indeed, one crucial point observed in the review of the contemporary literature on masculinity and fatherhood was the frequent overlap of these two discourses. While I would argue that there is much to welcome in regards to this greater visibility of fatherhood, there are also problematic aspects involved. Much scholarship, in concert with public discourse, envisions an increased father involvement in childrearing as the key vector of changing masculine gender roles. I argued that this presents a risk of sidelining men's unequal contribution to housework that contribute to overburdening women and reinforce their positioning in the role of the 'nagging' and 'facilitating wife' – a development which seems to parallel the centrality and visibility of motherhood in mediated public discourse at the expense of women's further domestic roles and associated labours and responsibilities. My analysis of the 'facilitating wife' and the 'manchild' construct challenges this focus on motherhood/fatherhood by pointing to the way that the very constructions of masculinity and fatherhood as well as femininity, wifehood and motherhood are intertwined. In other words, my analysis hints at the need to conceive domestic contributions, fathering practices, the multifaceted realm of care and masculinity as complex sets of relations vital for an evolving understanding of masculinities and the realisation of more equal domestic arrangements, suggesting that in thinking about gender roles we must include attention to the overlaps, synergies as well as contradictions between these constructs – rather than singling out fathers' involvement in childcare as the exclusive site for changing gender relations.

10.1.2.3 Online rage and collectivity on and beyond Mumsnet and the current feminist moment

My research also connects with empirical and theoretical work on the relationship between digitally articulated female anger and the way that this anger is experienced in 'real life' (Kay, 2019; 2020; Mendes et al., 2019; Wood, 2019). Clearly, these findings apply to the anonymous and *distinct space of Mumsnet* and especially the domestic themes that were under discussion here. However, my dual-sited findings are not only relevant to the discussion of domestic themes on Mumsnet; they can tell us something about the complex process of translating digitally articulated rage into the offline sphere, and offer insights into how the relationship between these two realms is constituted. My research has pushed these understandings forward by offering some answers to the questions of what digital anger actually does in particular on- and offline contexts, and whether and how notions of online collectivity and virtually expressed

dissonant views and feelings transpire and expand into women's offline lives, or are as digital phenomena confined to the virtual sphere.

For instance, in chapter nine the exploration of the different forms of rage and collectivity circulating in the Mumsnet space took centre stage. Examining the public and celebratory, yet politically ambivalent performances of anger on Mumsnet through several strategies of resistance, I highlighted the importance of charting the *direction* this anger takes as well as its *implications* for the offline world. I argued that in what I termed a 'combative online culture of feeling' on Mumsnet rage is not only ubiquitously legible but only too often offloaded on to individual partners, and/or oneself for not speaking (out) in adherence to the emotive-digital affordances, communicative conventions and norms that govern this environment. Throughout chapters 7 to 9, I argued that Mumsnet does provide a platform for the graphic articulation and protest against certain dimensions of (especially domestic) inequality, offering some potential for the production of a female collective voice on these issues. However, the *affective responses* to such visibilised inequalities that Mumsnet facilitates are overwhelmingly atomised, and do not inevitably suggest a meaningful transformation into claims for structural change, precisely because of the – misled – direction that anger often takes: at each other, and at individual men (or the 'bad apples', as some critics of #MeToo have it [Kay, 2020]), the 'bastards' that posters often impel each other to leave behind.

In some parallel with hashtag outcries such as #MeToo and further sites of digital activism such as feminist memes, the digital-affective constructs that were under study here, including the spectacular notion of LTB (shorthand for 'leave the bastard'), work through their catchy brevity, enhancing digital circulation and participation through the explosive 'fast anger' (Davies, 2020) they carry forth. At the same time, I showed that these online phenomena are truncated in several ways, not least through the decontextualised nature of the (anonymous) online conversational environment in which they appear, and which involves the significant risk of omitting and/or glossing over the nuances and complexity of oppression that shape individuals' lives.

My analysis has offered insights into how these virtual phenomena are experienced and perceived beyond the digital. As I have shown by juxtaposing online accounts with the interview accounts of regular Mumsnet users, the implications for posters' offline life point to the way that transgressive communicative practices and the individualised anger these carry

forward tend to not only be limited to the digital sphere, but they are frequently experienced as injurious and dissociative rather than galvanising, emotionally helpful or politically effective in ‘real life’. These dual-sided findings therefore have implications that go beyond the boundaries of discussion on Mumsnet and may apply to the ways in which other sites of digital feminist activity are negotiated, especially given the wider interest in the potential of digital social spaces to challenge patriarchal oppression and sexism in the (post-)#MeToo era.

The study with its focus on Mumsnet and its critical examination ‘speaks’ to the current cultural moment of a revived yet complex feminism by highlighting the unevenness of feminist activity and expression across the online-offline spheres. My findings caution against celebratory accounts of online spaces as uniformly positive and empowering, even if they allow for the ‘speakability’ of certain inequalities – such as the pronounced visibility of domestic inequality on Mumsnet. Indeed, speaking out online, in itself, cannot serve as evidence of feminist progress towards social and gendered justice, nor can anger be understood as inevitably serving justice. The ‘rise of neoliberal feminism’ (Rottenberg, 2018) with its centralising of a felicitous work-family balance exhorting women to achieve such balance via individual self-empowerment and transformation clearly focuses on positive affect and attitude. As Rottenberg (2014: 156) suggests, finding ‘happiness through a balancing act ... itself becomes the sign of women’s progress’. In contrast, I argued that the specific complexity of feminism circulating on Mumsnet is inextricably bound up with rage and works through at least a fleeting sense of online social collectivity. However, Mumsnet’s turn to anger remains, on the whole, individualising and fragmented and therefore rather unfit to serve as an antidote to structural inequality.

In order for digitally expressed anger to be meaningful beyond the digital, we need to work towards restoring a more *collective* feminist rage (e.g. Kay, 2020; Rottenberg, 2019). My findings suggests that in order to do so, we need to go beyond the ‘digital vacuum’ – one where ambiguous figures such as the ‘raging Mumsnetter’ come into visibility – and re-embed the online expression of rage into frames of offline meaning-making. Few studies have explored the experiences of using for instance hashtags and digital campaigns to discuss experiences of sexual violence and share feminist views (Mendes et al., 2018; 2019). I look forward to further scholarship that looks at the ways in which gendered forms of injustice are negotiated through digital platforms, combining on- and offline analyses. This will enable us to understand better how, and if at all, we can harness the potential of the digital to speak out, get angry, and

challenge gendered unequal practices in ways that do not lose sight of the real-life, material forms of oppression – revolving around motherhood and beyond – and its systemic causes.

10.2 Future directions for analysis and research

10.2.1 Crises collide: women, care and other equality issues during the COVID-19 pandemic

The final stages of my thesis writing coincided with the global COVID-19 pandemic, which meant particular challenges for the thesis writing, although it did not affect my primary data. The pandemic built on and exacerbated many of the gendered inequalities discussed in my thesis. Globally, and in the U.K., women with children have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, with their responsibilities for unpaid childcare, home-schooling and housework exceeding those of men significantly (e.g. Allen et al., 2020; WBG, 2020a). Due to the discontinuation of childcare provision, classroom-based schooling and cleaning services in lockdown conditions – and longstanding gender inequalities in the home sphere –, mothers were more likely to reduce their working hours in order to meet the growing caregiving, educational and household demands (e.g. Collins et al., 2020; Garcia, 2021), which in the U.K. affected around 70% of mothers (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2020). Mothers were also more likely to have been made redundant or quit their job in lockdown times, often due to lacking childcare provision (ibid.; IFS, 2020). In tandem with women's overrepresentation in occupations and sectors that have been mostly affected by pandemic measures such as part-time/insecure/frontline-facing jobs (Warren et al., 2021), these severe, adverse impacts on women's employment have arguably induced a 'she-cession'. Women's primary responsibility for unpaid care – the gendered social reproductive dynamics – may be 'the only Coronavirus constant' in a pandemic culture that has turned so many dimensions of social (and economic) life upside down (WBG, 2020b).

If COVID-19 spreads not only a pathogen but also inequality, then so too has it reinvigorated pressing conversations taking increasingly place over these issues, including a proliferation of research on intersecting gender gaps in childcare, housework, leisure and employment across a variety of disciplines; a seeming increase in mainstream media reporting on the gendered divergences in the domestic division of labour within (heterosexual) families; and visionary concepts and ideas such as how we might use and retool the current focus on domesticity and the private home for exploring 'utopian impulses for change' (Kay, 2020b: 887; see also

Ceuterick, 2020), as well as The Care Collective's (2020) manifesto on a caring society where care becomes a universal value beyond the nuclear family unit and across the social, economic and political spheres. In periods of crisis, the organisation of social reproduction undergoes shifts – it is then that, according to Fraser (2016: 103), 'social actors struggle over the boundaries delimiting "economy" from "society", "production" from "reproduction", and "work" from "family", and sometimes succeed in redrawing them'. Such 'boundary struggles' between social reproduction and production – what my analysis has mapped as the gendered discursive landscape of family and work –, may provide an opportunity for imagining how we can mobilise feminist work and activism to reorganise lives for the good of 'the 99 per cent' (Arruzza et al., 2019).

As this thesis has shown, the pandemic is tilting a playing field that has not been level in pre-coronavirus times. My findings therefore feed into many of the issues that, though not new, have been split open by the pandemic and have come into greater visibility. My analysis of women's negotiations of and affective responses to the inequalities affecting their home and work lives in the Mumsnet space and offline lends itself to being developed in several ways. In particular, the arguments developed in this thesis could be taken further by examining questions such as:

- How might individuals, during and beyond the pandemic, negotiate and sustain new ways of caring, sharing and working, both on- and offline (see also Allen et al., 2020)?
- With offline life beyond the nuclear family 'on hold' during periods of lockdown and social distancing, how have (private) digital interactions, practices and discussions been transformed and impacted by, for instance, 'pandemic positivity imperatives' (Gill and Orgad, 2021)? And is there a shift from the 'combative culture of feeling' I detected on Mumsnet to 'warmer' attachments and connectivities?
- How do women with children experience the re-shaping of 'flexible' working arrangements in times of a vastly increased yet 'involuntary transition to working from home' (Garcia, 2021)?

- What does it mean for feminism if, during the pandemic, we are experiencing yet ‘another mutation’ of financialised capitalism rather than coming closer to ‘reinventing the production-reproduction distinction and reimagining the gender order’ (Fraser, 2016)?

I look forward to future research, which, along these and other lines, enquires further into the lived experiences of working mothers across the on- offline spheres and the shifting landscape of work, motherhood and equality these experiences will continue to be situated in – so we can understand the long-term impacts and effects of the pandemic for working mothers.

10.2.2 Widening the lens: going beyond the dual-earner, heterosexual, cisgender context

My focus in this study was on heterosexually partnered, socioeconomically privileged women, which I have justified in two interrelated ways. First, I argued that middle-class maternal subjects that combine waged work with motherhood are hailed by contemporary cultural discourses as successful and embodying the currently desirable form of feminine subjecthood. Second, drawing on Hochschild (1989) and Orgad (2019), I argued that privileged women’s lives are not free from oppression and inequalities, and that in fact the structural problems and barriers that these women face may affect less advantaged women in even more adverse ways. Thus, researching the lived experiences of this privileged, supposed successful group of women can point to broader societal issues of gender, work and parenthood. Throughout the analysis, I have discussed multiple examples that provide evidence of the complex ways in which gender inequalities in the domestic sphere sat alongside maternity discrimination in work settings and as such shaped and conditioned the lives of the highly educated, materially advantaged women that contributed to this research as interviewees and/or posters. This substantiates Orgad’s (2019: 16, original emphasis) claim that ‘oppression can be experienced *alongside* privilege’. Still, of course, there is value in considering a number of issues raised in this thesis in relation to different demographics and other contexts. The following suggestions are not exhaustive, but draw from my analysis.

Power imbalances, privilege and multifarious exclusions on and off Mumsnet

Although the anglophone cultural sphere has undergone recent shifts towards a broadening of representations of motherhood and mothers, I have argued in chapter two that contemporary ‘successful’ mother figures continue to be predominantly characterised by middle classness, heterosexuality and whiteness. I highlighted that research on ‘non-normatively’ racialised (e.g.

Dow, 2019), sexualised (e.g. Goldberg and Allen, 2020) and classed maternities (e.g. Gillies, 2007) strongly suggests that the experiences and identities of mothers are by far more diverse and complex than implied by the bourgeois, white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied norm, even if this ideal is increasingly being fractured and challenged. Normalised parenthood is not only associated with the female gender but also has a particular sex, class, ethnicity, body and gender identity.

Unlike many of the online and interview participants in this study who position themselves as heterosexual, white and middle-class and are therefore perceivable as to some degree aligned with the bourgeois white mother ideal, there are voices that are rather absent and/or silenced in the Mumsnet space. For example, in chapter seven I argued that some posters' talk about outsourcing elements of domestic labour to paid workers such as cleaners draws attention to the socioeconomic divisions between women who can afford to pay for such domestic assistance and those poorer women who often perform the outsourced work. I emphasised that such power imbalances were often taken for granted in my sample, and not challenged or critically examined, pointing to the way that discussions on Mumsnet can reinscribe classed discourse as such privilege is not continually acknowledged and recognised. Furthermore, precisely because having paid help was constructed as a helpful yet insufficient solution to reduce privileged working mothers' labour overload, this finding raises important questions such as: how can the domestic worker (often a female cleaner) achieve 'work-life balance' and create her 'have it all' narrative, if this ideal seems impossible to achieve by more privileged women?

Future research, in broader terms, might more extensively investigate the (re)production of privilege and exclusions that arise in association with or even from the idealisation of bourgeois white maternal femininity, through an exploration of the discursive effects on differently classed, racialised and gendered maternities. These much-needed, nuanced studies could analyse for instance if, and if so, to what extent Mumsnet can be perceived as a forum for white, middle-class, heteronormative, cisgender agendas that is involved in the production of exclusions and privilege – an endeavour which seems particularly urgent in light of the recent rise of at least in parts evidently highly problematic transphobic discussions on and off Mumsnet and in other online spaces (see chapter 2, section 2.3.4 and 11.2.5 below).

One aspect that has not been considered in the analysis presented in this thesis is the discursive terrain of single motherhood. While the analysis of domesticity talk on Mumsnet (chapters 7 and 8) focused on posts by heterosexually partnered women, some of the social and economic implications of relationship breakups are apparent in posts by women who identify as single mothers. In this context, the posted accounts of single mothers often point up their increased childcare burden and reduced earning potential including ensuing financial struggles in those cases where women supported their husbands' careers rather than advanced their own (see chapter 8). While I could not develop a discussion of this issue within the scope of this thesis, the terrain of single mothering, as portrayed and discussed on Mumsnet, would present a valuable avenue for future research on the site in relation to the issues pointed to above and beyond.

10.2.3 Researching and addressing women's repudiation of positive discrimination measures

As I have argued in chapter seven, while many of the interview participants acknowledged and talked openly about gender inequalities in their workplaces, there was a strong tendency to reject structural interventionist approaches such as quotas and regulation to tackle and address these inequalities. I have offered some explanations for the repudiation of quotas, such as women's fear their own progression may be questioned if quota rules would be introduced; and rather widespread misconceptions of quota regulations including the idea that under- or unqualified women could be elected. Crucially, my analysis has suggested that these dismissive views and ideas of quotas work in tandem with, and are likely being shored up by, the prevalence of neoliberal feminist and meritocratic discourse and rhetoric that presuppose a female subject that manages structural workplace issues individually and claims her own seat at the table. However, given my argument that inequalities at work were on the whole openly discussed, with many of my participants being aware of and interested in changing the structural nature of work inequalities, there seems scope to further research and address many women's rejection of quotas, alongside the wider issue of regulation. We need structural solutions to address structural inequalities at work, as quotas, amidst and alongside wider forms of regulation, can provide.

This line of enquiry could be developed empirically to explore in more depth, and under consideration of the current neoliberalised climate, the reasons why especially senior women repudiate quotas, and how workplace cultures in particular industries and sectors may

contribute to this rebuff. Talk about rejection of quotas emerged in my sample often in relation to diversity management strategies such as unconscious bias training, with the latter being welcomed as an unintrusive means to potentially positively impact individual organisational members' decision-making practices. Yet unconscious bias training often seems to align with an individualist outlook that relies on individuals' 'goodwill' and discretion to bring about change at the workplace. A systematic analysis of the ways in which some diversity management initiatives, such as unconscious bias training, are played off against the benefits of quotas could explore the detail of how this happens on a rhetorical level. This could help to identify ways of addressing misconceptions of quotas and better understand the barriers that impede women from endorsing quotas as a meaningful interventionist tool to address the underrepresentation of women and minority groups in work settings.

10.2.4 Mumsnet as a habitat: ethnographic research

While this thesis draws on a considerable amount of online data stemming from Mumsnet's discussion fora, and is informed by a year-long virtual fieldwork period on the site, I acknowledged that the study is in no way a full or complete ethnography of Mumsnet. This clearly is in parts owed to the limitations of this study in terms of time and personnel. But at the same time, this study's focus on work-parenting discourse and its dual-sited orientation implicated a different research design and particular emphases (in content and corpus building, see 3.5). As such, I conducted interviews with Mumsnet users that sought to combine paid work with having children as part of my innovative methodological design, and approached the site with a genuine interest in understanding users' negotiations of work-caring inequalities, rather than attempting to map the totality of discourse operating in this space. Future research on Mumsnet could be expanded by exploring the site, its architecture and user interactions in more strictly ethnographic terms – an endeavour that, given the extent of postings at all hours, would likely require a larger team of researchers and funding.

10.2.5 Digging deeper into and unearthing Mumsnet's gender politics

During my fieldwork, I became aware of an increase in discussion on issues surrounding transgender, transgender rights and gender identity on Mumsnet, in particular on sections of the feminist discussion boards. In the wake of this, especially in 2018, some sections of the media have referred to Mumsnet as a 'hub of online transphobia' (Woodland, *huckmag.com*, 2018) and a 'toxic hotbed of transphobia' (Livingston, *Vice*, 2018), with subsequent accusations directed at the online community for being a 'transphobic swamp' and 'an echo

chamber for trans-exclusionary feminism’ (Morgan, *An Injustice!*, 2018). While some suggest the site has failed to take a clear stance against transphobia (e.g. Woodland, *huckmag.com*, 2018), Mumsnet has made efforts to update its talk guidelines and thus changed its moderation policy, yet has not banned, or been able to ban, transphobic rhetoric. A role here for sure continues to play the post-moderated, open-access nature of the forum, which means that any postings are readily accessible to any Internet user but also enable any user to create a profile and post without restrictions – until other posters report offending posts to the moderation team. This *post*-moderation approach has been maintained by Mumsnet, which some commenters saw as proof that the site, at least implicitly, allowed this discussion to take place on its talk boards (e.g. Waterson, *The Guardian*, 2018). At the same time, Mumsnet moderators’ role as the ‘gatekeepers’ or ‘arbiters’ of the forum (who, according to the site, are often attacked) was foregrounded and their stance for example described as ‘struggling to find a line between free speech and transphobia’ (Tait, *Wired*, 2018). Further fanning the flames, Mumsnet’s CEO, Justine Roberts, has publicly criticised the transgender ‘thought-police action around speech’ and was portrayed as determined to let discussions perceived as transphobic continue despite dwindling advertisers (Gilligan, *The Times*, 2018).

This discourse is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, during the interviews that I conducted with Mumsnet users in 2018, the topic emerged on rare occasions, yet was not one with which any of my participants identified in the interviews. Most typically, the discourse was seen as limited to a specific section of the Feminism talk board, which implies that the interviewees’ motivations for engaging with Mumsnet were of a different nature. My data thus cannot speak to any aspect of this controversial discourse, other than point to the diversity of discussion and discourse occurring in this multifaceted space, and varied incentives for engaging with Mumsnet. The diversity and multiplicity of the discourses circulating on Mumsnet is certainly corroborated by the insights I gained during my own one-year fieldwork on the site, with my growing expertise and understanding of Mumsnet thus chiming with the interview participants’ idea that explicit expressions of so-called ‘gender-critical’ feminism is an issue that concerns a minority of users and is therefore rather limited to certain sections of Mumsnet. While Pedersen’s (2020) book (discussed in chapter 2, section 2.3.4) so far seems to be the only publication on this strand of Mumsnet’s gender politics, and has itself been controversial, these developments urgently beg further, detailed research and critical scholarly attention.

10.2.6 The challenge of it all

My thesis has shed light on the reconciliation challenge British middle-class working mothers face, exploring their negotiations of equality, gender and work on Mumsnet and beyond. It has provided a contribution to multiple forms of feminist, digital and cultural sociological literature by foregrounding women's affective negotiations with and responses to inequality across different sites. As such, I was able to map a shifting terrain at a time when gender is on the agenda, showing how inequalities at work and in the home were variously rendered 'speaking' in the digital Mumsnet and offline contexts. At the same time, I have highlighted how the affective responses to such structural forms of gendered injustice often worked at a psychic level to curb rather than incite transformative change. In this vein, I have emphasised the importance of exploring how digitally articulated rage and transgressive online practices are felt and experienced by user-participants, as part of attempts to more fully understand the affective-discursive landscape of working mothers, which includes the digital. And yet, my research has shown how the ongoing visibility of women's anger at gendered domestic injustices on Mumsnet sits side by side with mandates to speak out and perform such anger online in highly circumscribed, often individualised ways. It remains to be seen whether the most recent, dramatic rise in structural inequalities and the visibility of their gendered dimensions in the wake of the pandemic brings about the extensive societal changes so urgently required for female working parents as those that are amongst the most adversely affected. Indeed, the question of how we can engender and sustain lasting social, institutional and political changes that end the structural disadvantages of working mothers in the home and at work remains the challenge of it all.

Appendices

Appendix A Recruitment posts (study advertisements)

a) Post on the Non-Member Requests topic on Mumsnet's discussion forum

Talk 

Advanced search

[Active](#) | [I'm on](#) | [I'm watching](#) | [I started](#) | [Last 15 minutes](#) | [Last hour](#) | [Last Day](#)

Talk » Non-member requests

[Start](#) new thread in this topic | [Flip](#) this thread | [Refresh](#) the display

[➔ Add a message](#)

This is page 1 of 1 (This thread has 1 message)

This topic is for non-members looking for MN users' input; there is a £30 fee.

To ask how you balance parenting and work? Participants needed for PhD research (1 Post)

MEDIA: Yvonne Ehrstein Tue 20-Mar-18 13:17:57

[Add message](#) | [Report](#)



To ask how you balance parenting and work? Participants needed for PhD research

In the Department of Sociology at City, University of London, I am researching Mumsnetters' experiences of combining work and motherhood and their views of gender equality as part of my PhD. I would like to carry out interviews with Mumsnet users who are currently in paid employment.

While the interplay between working and parenting has been researched in various contexts, the experiences of Mumsnet users with regards to work-family combination, and how notions of gender equality play out in this dynamic, have not received scholarly attention thus far.

If you are a working mother (employed or self-employed), please consider being interviewed for this important research.

What is the research about and why should I take part?

The aim of this research is to understand what it is like for working mothers to balance a paid job with family responsibilities, and what Mumsnet users think of gender equality.

This project will raise awareness of what reconciling parenting and paid work is actually like for working mothers in the UK. Findings from the study will aid to inform family and potentially employment policy changes aimed at tackling gendered inequalities in the distribution of domestic and waged labour. By taking part in this research, you will make an important contribution to that process.

Who are you looking for and what does the project involve?

I am looking to speak to Mumsnetters who are having children and are in employment or self-employed. You should be over the age of 18 to take part. I am hoping to interview approximately 30 Mumsnet users about their experiences of combining working and parenting, including their thoughts and feelings about gender equality. I will then analyse the transcripts of the interviews and write up my findings in my PhD thesis and other publications like academic articles and presentations.

What will happen if I choose to take part?

You would be sent an information sheet with further information regarding the course of the research. If you decide to take part, you would arrange a time to meet with me for an interview, which will last between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview can take place face-to-face or online (via Skype or email, as convenient to you) if you are living in London **or** online if you are based somewhere else in the UK. All interviews will be completely confidential and anonymised.

To receive further information on the research, and to arrange a time to meet with me, please get in touch by email: yvonne.ehrstein@city.ac.uk

Thank you for thinking about taking part in this research!

**I am looking forward to hearing from you,
Yvonne**

Recruitment posts (study advertisements)

b) Post on the NFP (not for profit) topic on Mumsnet's discussion forum

mumsnet
by parents for parents



Log in



Menu



Talk

Talk » NFP Surveys

How do you balance work and family life? Interviews for PhD research (4 Posts)

YvonneChristine Fri 23-Mar-18 17:31:08

Hi working mums,

My name is Yvonne and I am a sociology PhD researcher in London. My thesis is on mothers' experiences of balancing paid work and parenting and thoughts and feelings about gender equality. I am especially interested to hear from you, the Mumsnetters! Hence, I'd like to conduct interviews with users who are having children and are currently in paid employment. If you are interested to participate in the study, or have further questions, please do get in touch! You can message me here or email directly at yvonne.ehrstein@city.ac.uk. Interviews will last around one hour and can take place face-to-face, online or via telephone.

I am very much looking forward to hearing from you! 😊

Many thanks, Yvonne

Recruitment posts (study advertisements)

c) Public post from Facebook research account



Yvonne EhrsteinResearch
New member · Just now

...

Please share widely if you can! Thanks 😊

Hi working mums!

My name is Yvonne and I am a sociology PhD researcher in London. My thesis is on mothers' experiences of balancing paid work and parenting and thoughts and feelings about gender equality.

I'd like to interview mothers who are currently in paid employment/self-employed. Whilst I am especially interested to hear from users of the parenting website [Mumsnet.com](https://www.mumsnet.com), I'm also looking to speak with you if you don't use the website regularly.

If you are interested to participate in the study, or have further questions, please do get in touch! You can message me on FB or email at yvonne.ehrstein@city.ac.uk. Interviews will last around one hour and can take place face-to-face, online or via telephone.

I am very much looking forward to hearing from you! 😊

Many thanks for reading and sharing!

Yvonne

d) Public post from personal Facebook account

Hi everyone, I'm currently recruiting a few more working mums for my PhD study on balancing parenting and working. I am a sociology PhD researcher in London and my thesis is on mothers' experiences of combining both paid work and parenting and thoughts and feelings about gender equality. I'd like to interview mothers who are currently in paid employment/self-employed. While I am especially interested to hear from users of the parenting website [Mumsnet.com](https://www.mumsnet.com), I'm also looking to speak with people who don't use the website regularly. If you are interested to participate in the study, or have further questions, please do get in touch! You can message me on FB or email at yvonne.ehrstein@city.ac.uk. Interviews will last around one hour and can take place face-to-face, online or via telephone. This is my research profile <https://www.city.ac.uk/arts-social-sciences/sociology/culture-creative-industries/research/research-students/yvonne-ehrstein>

Many thanks for reading and sharing! x

Appendix B Participant information

Working mothers' experiences and representations on Mumsnet.com

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.



What is the purpose of the study?

This is a PhD research project funded by the Department of Sociology at City, University of London. The 3-year study explores Mumsnetters' experiences of combining professional work and childrearing, and their perceptions of gender equality.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to take part in this research because you indicated that you are a female working parent and user of Mumsnet. Approximately 60 people will be interviewed for the study.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is entirely voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. Once findings have been published, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study. For this reason, by deciding to take part, you consent to recall your participation up to four months after the interview.

What will happen if I take part?

You are being asked to participate in one interview (a face-to-face interview if living in London, *or* an online interview if based outside London), which is expected to last between 45 and 60 minutes. Face-to-face interviews will take place at a suitable place and time, as agreed by you and the researcher (Yvonne Ehrstein). Online interviews will take place via Skype or email, at a time that is convenient to you.

In the interview, you will be asked questions pertaining to your experiences as a working mother and user of Mumsnet, your life course, and attitudes towards gender equality.

With your agreement, the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed afterwards so that Yvonne has an accurate record of what was said.

If you decide to take part in the interview, you will be asked to sign a consent form confirming that you understand what it would involve for you and agree to take part.

You can contact Yvonne via email after the interview (see below for contact details) in case you have remaining questions, or change your mind about taking part in the research.

What do I have to do?

You are being invited to share your experiences as a female working parent and user of Mumsnet. If you decide to participate, you should contact Yvonne to arrange an interview of no more than one hour at a time that is convenient to you.

You will be given the opportunity to approve the transcribed interview before it is included in the final write-up of the research.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

As the study aims to achieve a better understanding of working women's experiences of combining a paid job with parenting, and interview questions are not intended to cause discomfort, it is not expected that study participants will be disadvantaged by taking part. However, there is a possibility participants feel concerned or distressed due to issues brought up during the interview.

It is therefore important to highlight that there is no pressure to answer questions, and you can refuse to answer questions without any adverse consequences. The interview can be stopped at any point if you should feel the need to do so.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

This research will have considerable benefits, as it addresses the timely and important socio-political issue of reconciling waged labour with caring responsibilities.

Your input to this project is valuable as the findings from this study will raise further awareness of issues encountered by working mothers in the UK. This will aid to inform family and potentially employment policy changes aimed at tackling gender(ed) inequalities in the distribution of domestic and waged work.

What will happen when the research study stops?

Research data arising from the interview will be stored in a secure location, and only used for the purposes of research. The data will not be kept for longer than necessary, and will be disposed of subsequently.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Everything you say in the interview will be treated with strictest confidentiality, and you will remain anonymous. When Yvonne is writing about your experience, she will use a pseudonym that you can choose. The information you give will not be shared with anyone else. Yvonne and her academic supervisors will be the only persons who have access to the audio record and transcript of the interview.

What will happen to results of the research study?

The information you give in the interview will be used in the PhD thesis and other possible follow-up publications. Yvonne may also share some of the findings at conferences. Quotes will be fully anonymised. You are welcome to request to be sent the PhD thesis and/or a summarising report of the results.

What will happen if I do not want to carry on with the study?

You can withdraw at any stage of the project without having to give reason, or being penalised or disadvantaged in any way. Yvonne will be available to talk about any concerns you have at all stages, and you can change your mind about taking part at any time. The information you provide in the interview can be withdrawn and destroyed as long as you let Yvonne know up to four months after the interview when she will start publishing findings.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through City's complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: *Working mothers' experiences and representations on Mumsnet.com*.

You could also write to the Secretary at:

Anna Ramberg
Research Governance & Compliance Manager
Research & Enterprise
City, University of London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

City holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City Senate Research Ethics Committee

Further information and contact details

Researcher: Yvonne Ehrstein, PhD candidate at City, University of London. Email: yvonne.ehrstein@city.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Jo Littler, Reader in Cultural Industries at City, University of London: Email: jo.littler.1@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix C Consent form

Working mothers' experiences and representations on Mumsnet.com

Yvonne Ehrstein

PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at City,
University of London

Email: yvonne.ehrstein@city.ac.uk



Please initial box

1.	I confirm that I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve: • be interviewed by the researcher • allow the interview to be audiotaped	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purposes: The interview will be transcribed and re-examined by the researcher (Yvonne Ehrstein) in order to have an accurate record of what was said. I understand that the information I give in the interview will be used in the PhD thesis and other possible follow-up publications. The researcher may also share some of her findings at conferences. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that no information that could lead to the identification of any individual will be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation. I understand that I approve of my gender, approximate age and sector I work in to be used in publications and reports arising from this research. I understand that I will be given a transcript of data concerning me for my approval before it is included in the write-up of the research.	
3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage up to four months after the interview without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.	
4.	I agree to City recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out	

	in this statement and my consent is conditional on City complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

Name of Participant Signature Date

Name of Researcher Signature Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

Appendix D Generic topic guide for interviews

Before the interview

Introducing the project and thanking for participating; Clarifying/checking consent and recording of the conversation; Ask if there are remaining questions

Lead-in

What does a typical (work) day look like for you?

How has your life changed since you have children?

Life as a female working parent

How would you describe your role as a parent and your role as an employee/entrepreneur/worker?

How does the combination of working and parenting ‘work’ for you? What are key factors that make it work?

What are the joys of combining both parenthood and working? What do you like about doing both working and parenting?

What do you think are the challenges mothers face when they are working, if any?

Does/has having children affect/ed your career path/ trajectory? If yes, in what way? Has being a mother ever limited/held you back?

Have you ever considered not to return to work (after maternity leave)? What does (waged) work mean for you?

Was becoming a parent a conscious, planned decision? If yes, can you remember what were some of the things you (and your partner) considered or thought/talked through?

Are your experiences similar or different to those of dads? In what way?

If you are partnered, how are home responsibilities distributed between you and your partner?

Attitudes towards images of working mothers

What do you associate with the term working mother?

What would you say is the current ideal of a mother? Is there any aspect that you disagree with?

How would you define the ‘ideal mother’? Change to previous generations?

Where do you think your ideas about (working) motherhood come from? Mumsnet? Other websites/social media? Media, e.g. TV, books? Family? Friends?

Do you feel pressured to be a particular kind of mum?

The use and views of Mumsnet

Can you recall when you have started using Mumsnet? What made and makes you use Mumsnet?

What do you like best about Mumsnet?

How do you use Mumsnet?

Do you use it regularly, or for particular purposes?

Do you have the app on your phone and use it? How often do you check in?

How does it feel to use Mumsnet?

Do you feel as part of a community?

Do you feel connected to other Mumsnet users?

What do you think about the editorial websites and the articles on Mumsnet?

Is the site helpful in terms of retrieving information about combining working and parenting?

Do you think Mumsnet is a feminist space?

Thoughts on gender (in)equality

What are your thoughts about gender (in)equality?

Do you think of yourself as a feminist?

Demographic and occupational information

- Age and child(ren)'s age(s), childcare arrangement
- Relationship status (partnered/married/single)
- Workplace, sector, type of employment and working hours
- Class and ethnicity – self-positionality

Concluding the interview

Is there anything else you would like to discuss, ask or tell me?

Appendix E Interview participants by demographics and occupation

Name	Age	Ethnicity and nationality	Highest education	Residence	Sector/industry	Type of employment contract and employment status	Number and age of children	Status of relationship	Interview mode and place
Alessia	31	White Maltese	PhD	Denmark, small town	Engineering/Manufacturing	Open-ended; employed	2 (3 years and infant)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Ana	34	Latin Brazilian	MSc	London	Banking/Finance	Open-ended; employed	2 (3 and 5 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Ashley	37	White British	PhD	England, large city	Charity	Fixed-term; employed	2 (4 and 7 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via Skype
Aurelie	38	White French	Vocational qualification and A-levels	England, city	Academic administration	Open-ended; employed	2 (5 and 7 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via Skype
Christina	early 30s	White British	MA/MSc; PhD in progress	London	Academia	Fixed-term; employed	1 (2 years)	Cohabiting with father of child	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Claire	31	White British	PhD	England, rural area	Academia	Fixed-term; employed	1 (infant)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype

Deborah	50s	White British	BA	London	Media/television	Open-ended; employed	2 (11 and 13 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Diana	38	White Hungarian	MSc	Austria, city	Freelance writer	Self-employed	1 (6 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Elizabeth	45	White British	BA	London	Finance/Equity Advisers	Open-ended; employed	1 (6 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Emma	37	White British	MA/Msc	England, city	Marketing Research	Open-ended; employed	1 (1 year)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Erin	32	White British	BSc	Scotland, city	Public Services - Town Planning	Open-ended; employed	2 (7 and 2 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via Skype
Gemma	35	White British	BS	England, city	Accountancy	Open-ended; employed	2 (4 years and infant)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Jane	58	White British	BA/BSc	England, town	Information Technology	Open-ended; employed	3 (19, 20 and 23 years)	Divorced	Via telephone
Jennifer	33	White British	PhD	England, rural area	Agriculture	Self-employed	1 (infant)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Katharina	36	White German	MA	London	Banking/Finance	Open-ended; employed	2 (3 and 5 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via Skype

Laura	37	White British	PhD	Wales, city	Academia	Open-ended; employed	2 (6 and 3 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via Skype
Lauren	late 30s	White British	BA	London	Financial Services/Insurance	Open-ended; employed	2 (2 and 1.5 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Lisa	33	White British	MSc; about to start PhD	Scotland, town	Public Services - Educational Psychology	Open-ended; employed	1 (10 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Martina	31	White Maltese	PhD	England, small city north of London	Academic Research Support	Open-ended; employed	1 (infant)	Married and living with partner and child	Via telephone
Michelle	37	White British	MSc	England, small city	Pharmaceuticals/Consultancy	Open-ended; employed	1 (2 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Nicole	37	White British	BA in progress	Greater London	Maintenance and Creative Arts	Zero-hour; employed and self-employed	1 (7 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Face-to-face in a public space
Opal	42	Bangladeshi British	MSc	England, city	Healthcare	Open-ended; employed	1 (9 and 12 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via FaceTime
Rachel	42	White British	MA/MSc; looking to do a PhD	England, small city north-west of London	Construction/Manufacturing	Open-ended; employed	1 (3 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Samantha	37	White British/Australian	BA	England, small city	Education	Open-ended; employed	2 (4 and 1.5 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via Skype

Sarah	30s	White British	MA/MSc	London	Law	Open-ended; employed	2 (6 and 1.5 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Sonia	early 30s	Pakistani	MA/MSc; PhD in progress	London	Academia	Fixed-term; employed	1 (5 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace
Stephanie	31	White British	MA; PhD in progress	England, large city	Academia	Fixed-term; employed	1 (2 years)	Married and living with partner and child	Via Skype
Tracey	30	Black English	MA; PhD in progress	England, city	Academia	Fixed-term; employed	2 (2 and 6 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Via Skype
Victoria	35	White British	MSc	London	Management Consulting	Open-ended; employed	2 (4 and 1.5 years)	Married and living with partner and children	Face-to-face, interviewee's workplace

Appendix F Transcription conventions

Adapted from Gail Jefferson's (2004) transcription system.

[...]	Parts of sentence omitted.
[text]	Additional comments or information, e.g. context, intonation, or significant, hearable exhalation or inhalation. Sometimes altered to ensure anonymity of research participant.
<u>Underline</u>	Denotes a raise in volume or emphasis.
(.)	A micropause – a notable pause but of no significant length.
(2.0)	A timed pause – the length of a pause, in seconds.
Hum(h)our	Laughter in the speech.
heh heh	Voiced laughter.

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